

ABSTRACT

Moms on a Mission: A Case Study Exploring the Socio-ecological Impact of a Pre-trial Intervention Program on Participant Self Agency

Ann J. Griffin Ed.D.

Mentor: Leanne Howell, Ph.D.

Oklahoma incarcerates women with children at a rate much higher than most other states in the United States. Many Oklahoma children endure more adverse childhood experiences than children living elsewhere. The results of these circumstances are seen in Oklahoma's economic, health, academic, and social statistics. Private entities, such as ReMerge, have established pre-trial diversion programs for mothers to combat these conditions. ReMerge of Oklahoma County is a pre-trial diversion program serving high-risk, high-need mothers facing non-violent felony offenses. Women with children under 18 charged with felony crimes selected for the program can avoid jail time by successfully graduating. The purpose of this single case study was to employ the socio-ecological system framework (Bronfenbrenner, 1992) to investigate how the ReMerge program impacts the sense of agency of mothers involved in the justice system at each layer of her socio-ecological system.

This qualitative case study examined how agency develops in ReMerge program graduates across different levels of the socio-ecological system. This study included five

ReMerge graduates who provided basic demographic information, completed an individual interview, and participated in a focus group. Data analysis, based on socio-ecological systems theory, included exploring themes found in the responses to determine implications. This involved a deep dive into the patterns, relationships, and interconnections between different elements of the socio-ecological system, the experiences of the participants and their development of agency.

I discovered that individuals participating in the ReMerge program were able to establish agency throughout all levels of the socio-ecological system. The participants provided examples of the interpersonal skills they developed during their time at ReMerge. Improving their interpersonal skills positively impacted their relationships with their families, enhanced their connections with their children, and increased their chances of maintaining employment. The study emphasized the importance of relationships developed among the participants and the importance of after-care in maintaining their progress and growth. The participants revealed their belief that individuals with recovery experience should be included as staff in treatment programs. They expressed the desire to reduce the stigma around recovery in society and the impact of stigma on their recovery journey and development of agency.

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Pre-trial Intervention Program on Participant Self Agency

by

Ann J. Griffin, B.S., M.S.

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Trena L. Wilkerson, Ph.D., Chairperson

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Approved by the Dissertation Committee

Leanne Howell, Ph.D., Chairperson

Jennifer Guerra, Ed.D.

Nicholas R. Werse, Ph.D.

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J. Larry Lyon, Ph.D., Dean

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DEDICATION

To the women of ReMerge.

CHAPTER ONE

Background and Needs Assessment

Introduction

In Oklahoma, numerous families encounter daunting obstacles to success, particularly when the mother has been involved with the criminal justice system. According to data from the Bureau of Prisons (2021), 11% of Oklahoma children will have a parent in jail during their childhood, and nearly 50% of women in prison are mothers. When mothers are involved with the justice system, the results are often poor outcomes for their children (Copp, 2020; Kailaheimo-Lönnqvist et al., 2022; Solomon, 2012; Thomas, 2020). Criminal justice involvement in families is also a source of trauma for children (Mersky et al., 2013). However, successful intervention with justice-involved mothers that avoid their impending incarceration changes the future for mothers and children (Forrester et al., 2020).

Programs tailored to address women's needs have proven effective in preventing the harm caused by involvement in the criminal justice system (Forrester et al., 2020; Goodson et al., 2020). To contribute to the scholarship that documents this proven effectiveness, this single case study investigated the development of personal agency for women about their socio-ecological systems after completing a pre-trial intervention program. I explored how women graduating from one specific program, ReMerge in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, developed personal agency and changed their relationship with the system where they live. The study included mothers who had graduated from the program at least one year before the study began, were financially stable, had avoided

further justice system involvement, and had custody of their children. The following section outlines the problem's relevance and demand for the study.

Statement of the Problem

Oklahoma's economic ranking, health statistics, and quality of life indicators suggest the state is falling behind in human well-being. This creates an environment where antisocial behaviors, poor health outcomes, and economic insecurity can reoccur in families. Oklahoma is in the bottom ten of all 50 states for educational attainment, and only 27% of Oklahoma adults have a bachelor's degree or higher (McCann, 2021). Mersky et al. (2013) found that adverse outcomes in adulthood can be linked to adverse experiences in childhood. Trauma influences occur across generations and demographics, creating cycles of trauma within family groups (Kailaheimo-Lönnqvist et al., 2022). Evidence of the trauma cycle exists in many Oklahoma families.

Oklahoma has one of the highest incarceration rates in the United States, contributing to the cycle of family trauma. The Prison Policy Initiative (2021) reports an incarceration rate of 993 per 100,000 adults, and approximately 26,000 Oklahoma children have a parent in jail, ranking Oklahoma in the top five states for incarceration. According to the U.S. Bureau of Prisons (2021), Oklahoma has jailed women at twice the national average over the last several decades. The most common reason for high incarceration rates was non-violent drug offenses (Sawyer & Wagner, 2022). Eighty percent of incarcerated women are mothers with children under 18 (Thomas, 2020). The statistics for Oklahoma City, the site of this research, mirror those of Oklahoma and the rest of the nation.

The impact of the challenges families face in Oklahoma City can be observed in the children. According to the Annie E. Casey Foundation Kids Count Factbook (2022), children in the state of Oklahoma rank 42nd overall in child well-being. The Center for Disease Control (2022) also ranked Oklahoma 47th for food insecurity, 16th for severe housing problems, 43rd for behavioral health issues in children, and 42nd for access to social support services. Data from the state of Oklahoma indicate it has the 12th highest number of child abuse and neglect cases (Statista, 2020) and a per capita family income of \$34,500, well below the national average of \$45,760 (Center for Disease Control, 2022). Even with an unemployment rate below the national average (U.S. Department of Labor Statistics, 2022), Oklahoma families are less likely than most other states to be economically stable (Kids Count Data Center, 2022). One in five Oklahoma children lives below the poverty line, and 44.4% of Oklahoma children are born to unwed women (Centers for Disease Control, 2022).

Various socio-ecological factors can increase the chances of a child being exposed to adverse experiences (Albanese et al., 2019; Clark & Stubbeman, 2021; Hunt et al., 2017). Due to a high rate of domestic violence, untreated substance abuse, natural disasters, incarceration rates, and other factors, Oklahoma children experience one of the nation's highest adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). Research links negative ACEs to poor health and mental health outcomes, increased destructive behaviors, and shortened life expectancy (Petruccelli et al., 2019). Socio-ecological factors also influence caregiver stress and the challenges of caring for children and retaining employment (Lipscomb et al., 2019). Social support for families in socio-ecological systems with significant barriers requires increased support to establish the skills and economic stability needed to provide

constancy for children (Ribar, 2015). Caregiver hope (Hellman et al., 2018), family income (Lipscomb et al., 2019), and other factors found in the socio-ecological system significantly impact child well-being.

According to research on the socio-ecological environment, Oklahoma ranks among the least favorable states for women to reside in (McCann, 2021). Oklahoma women have a higher poverty rate than men, and if current trends continue, they will not reach wage equity until 2076 (McCann, 2021). World population review ranks Oklahoma first among American states for domestic violence, reporting that 49.1% of Oklahoma women have experienced intimate partner violence, rape, or stalking. More women with children go to jail in Oklahoma than in most other states (Widra & Herring, 2021). As such, the challenges Oklahoma families face are a culmination of socio-ecological factors and are especially difficult for women involved with the criminal justice system. Considering the data above, the problem at the heart of this study is the cyclical impact on the families of incarcerated mothers in Oklahoma.

Literature Review

In this chapter, I examine the available literature connecting various levels of the socio-ecological system and the development of individual agency among mothers involved in the criminal justice system. Furthermore, I analyze the potential effects on women and their children. There are connections between the socio-ecological environment of children and their prospects for academic, economic, and social achievement (Afifi et al., 2009; Baxter et al., 2017; Mersky et al., 2013). However, most programs designed to change outcomes for children focus on services for the children themselves, not their caregivers. This review includes exploring the development of

personal agency for parents, especially mothers. Agency is the belief in personal power to determine the future. Agency in parents is linked to children's outcomes (Albanese et al., 2019; Sanders et al., 2019).

This literature review includes four areas of study relevant to the proposed problem. First, I offer research on the socio-ecological systems model (SES), how the factors influence child development and the occurrence of adverse childhood experiences. Second, I review the personal attributes of agency and their impact on parenting and employment. In the third section, I investigate the link between available community resources and family life. The final section I explore literature regarding women's involvement with the criminal justice system and the connections between the socio-ecological system, incarceration, and outcomes for children, including what can work to stop the cycle for women and children.

Socio-ecological Systems Model

The socio-ecological systems model places the individual at the center of an expanding system of influential factors. The system shapes and molds interactions and promotes or inhibits healthy development (Albanese et al., 2019). The individual is at the center of the system. The microsystem, which includes others in the home, immediate neighborhood, and perhaps a classroom, is the closest ring of influence to the individual. The individual is nested within the circles of the socio-ecological system (Kim et al., 2020).

Kim et al. (2020) say that when the individual at the system's center is a child, the health, coping skills, and characteristics of those surrounding the child can predict the likelihood that the child at the heart of the system flourishes or fails. However, the family

microsystem is not the extent of socio-ecological influences. Qualities and circumstances within the exosystem and mesosystem influence individuals' feelings about themselves and their future. Bronfenbrenner (1992) outlines the layers of the socio-ecological system to include factors of the mesosystem, such as the city where someone lives, the services available, and their place of employment if it is a large entity. He further describes the ecosystems as the media and political climate. The macrosystem includes generally held beliefs and cultural norms. Oishi et al.(2019) find that socio-ecological system variances, such as housing affordability, community climate, pollution, transportation availability, and support for education, play a role in the self-perception of those within the system.

Social and environmental factors indirectly impact individuals' cognitive abilities and future health and economic indicators (Engelhardt et al., 2019). Influences also accumulate with time. The longer an environmental factor, including cultural influences like preferences and social norms, persists, the greater its impact on individuals, families, and societies. Schact et al. (2018) find that factors in the macrosystem, such as cultural influences on parenting norms, gender roles, and corporal punishment, produce changes in the microsystem as families adapt to the world around them. Bronfenbrenner (1992) defines the macrosystem as geo-political factors and general societal expectations. Changes in labor patterns in the home and the community also change the socio-ecological system. An example of a macrosystem influencing the microsystem is advancements in the technologies used for routine tasks. These advances free time for added interactions between parents and children. Global changes impact the day-to-day interactions in a family by changing available time, priorities for family life, and the resources available in the community.

The inverse of positive socio-ecological factors are negative aspects of the socio-ecological system at any level in the system's continuum. Poverty, violence, low academic achievement, separation from the community, and weak support systems are risk factors for children (Oishi et al., 2019). It is essential that children's lives be understood as they relate to the socio-ecological system to intervene or disrupt the cycles of trauma exposure that occur within family systems that are linked to negative outcomes and antisocial behaviors (Lopez et al., 2021; Pells et al., 2018).

Socio-ecological systems and child development. How one interacts with people, objects, and culture throughout one's lifetime can shape one's parenting style and ultimately impact the dynamic between parent and child (Albanese et al., 2019). The quality of relationships between a parent and child influences outcomes for children across social, academic, and behavioral domains (Lansford et al., 2018). A family's socio-ecological system and environmental and social factors affect the parent/child relationship. Financial concerns, housing issues, employment, and transportation are examples of the socio-ecological system components that can affect the role of parents (Baxter et al., 2017). Most parents are aware that these issues, many out of their control, impact how they parent (Lange et al., 2017). Regardless of the circumstances or challenges in their environment, parents use the resources available to provide for their children (Brown et al., 2020). The messages parents receive from their socio-ecological system affect their effort and, therefore, their ability to parent (Sawrikar et al., 2020). When opinions about parenting are congruent with social norms, parents feel more confident in their ability to meet the social expectations of parenting (Ishizuka, 2019;

Lange et al., 2017). However, parenting norms can change with training and adjustments in external and internal thought processes (Davidson Arad et al., 2020).

When parents become more confident in their skills, they are more likely to avoid harsh punishment that damages the parent/child relationship (Sawrikar et al., 2020).

However, the desired strong attachment needed for children to navigate the wider world is not necessarily a result of parental skills but rather of secure attachment created when parents feel confident in their parenting skills (Blizzard et al., 2018). Still, the impact of the environment can vary regardless of the relationship between parent and child.

According to Bronfenbrenner's theory (1992), the environmental factors surrounding children have a more significant impact than genetic or parenting factors. However, these factors also affect the adults who care for the children within the system. Raising children can be quite difficult and can make life complicated. Social pressure from the socio-ecological system plays a role in the beliefs about parenting skills, even for parents not living in poverty or struggling economically (Luthar & Ciciolla, 2015). Parents receive cues and inputs from the socio-ecological system surrounding them that shape their beliefs and their children's future. When a child at the center of a system experiences adverse events, those events influence the development and can have long-lasting consequences, often referred to as adverse childhood experiences. I explore this phenomenon in the next section.

Adverse childhood experiences. The family system also affects the exposure of children to negative experiences. Adverse childhood experiences are a collection of events identified to correlate with health and behavioral issues later in life (Giano et al., 2020). Divorce, family member incarceration, maltreatment, substance abuse, and

exposure to violence are some identified experiences of later psychopathologies (Baxter et al., 2017; Cross et al., 2017; Munoz et al., 2021).

When multiple adverse childhood experiences occur, individuals have an additive or cascading effect across their lifespan (Cross et al., 2017; Giano et al., 2020; Petruccelli et al., 2019). The stress of prolonged exposure alters the brain's biology and increases cortisol levels, resulting in morbidity and increased levels of antisocial behaviors (Cross et al., 2017). Even though most individuals have at least one ACE, Giano et al. (2020) find that a history of ACE exposure impacts demographic groups with dynamic characteristics, such as income, educational attainment, and employment. The impact of cumulative adversity is more important to outcomes than other demographics like poverty or minority status (Petruccelli et al., 2019). Experiences of hardships in childhood also have an impact on hope and the development of personal agency.

Prolonged trauma from ACE exposure creates chronic fear that diminishes the development of solid interpersonal attachments needed to develop agency or the ability to see oneself as successful (Munoz et al., 2021). However, the adverse effects can be mitigated when interventions are designed to develop protective factors with ACE exposure in mind (Giano et al., 2020). Targeted interventions reverse the negative effect of ACE exposure (Cross et al., 2017; Hunt et al., 2017). Developing protective factors through intervention can improve the cognitive flexibility needed to establish a sense of agency, resulting in improved outcomes for the individual and strong interpersonal relationships necessary for effective parenting (Cross et al., 2017).

Conclusion. The outcomes of children are influenced by various factors, such as the relationship they form with their caregiver(s), the socio-ecological environment they

are raised in, and their experiences during childhood. It is suggested that successfully raising healthy children requires more than avoiding negative experiences, commonly known as adverse childhood experiences. Personal attributes also play a significant role. Parents who receive support are likelier to establish a solid emotional bond, leading to well-adjusted children who exhibit positive social behaviors. In the following section, I delve into agency and how it contributes to healthy parenting practices and behaviors.

Agency as a Personal Attribute

In this section, I explore agency development, its influence on parenting, employment, and overall well-being, and how it may be associated with children's outcomes. Hope is a crucial indicator of the probability of individuals exhibiting pro-social behavior (Corn et al., 2020; Hellman et al., 2018; Snyder, 2002, 2005; Touza & Rand, 2021). The two components of hope are agency and pathways (Corn et al., 2020; Snyder, 2002). According to Snyder (2002) and reiterated by Corn et al. (2020), agency is the belief that one can successfully reach goals. Pathways are the availability of the means to success. The primary focus of this section of the literature review is agency. Agency is also referred to as motivation or self-efficacy. Developing a sense of agency in an individual includes external socio-ecological system factors, personal attributes, and behavioral characteristics (Bandura, 2018). Positive attitudes and outlooks are strongly linked to agency development, serving as the antithesis of negative adverse experiences (Chang et al., 2019). Agency is more critical than pathways in predicting well-being (Li et al., 2021) and results from an interplay between external and internal determinates (Bandura, 2018). Positive psychological adjustment and skill development produce agentic thinking (Chang et al., 2019). The interpretation of socio-ecological system cues,

experiences, and feedback internalized by the individual builds or inhibits agency development in individuals (Bandura, 2018; Snyder, 2002; Yoon, 2019).

Socio-ecological systems supply cues and inputs that affect an individual's agency development. Individuals' sense of self and the development of personal agency involves the intersectionality of their internal characteristics, external forces, and each level of the socio-ecologic system (Chung et al., 2020). Agency increases when achieved goals are personal and meaningful (Duncan et al., 2022). Developing internal agency and mastery of positive self-talk leads to higher levels of hope (Baxter et al., 2017). Additionally, agency grows by borrowing or learning agency from others (Bazzani, 2022). "Agency is a crucial dimension of social dynamics" (Bazzani, 2022, p. 14). Collective agency, or proxy agency, supports the value of group interventions (Yoon, 2019) and suggests that duties or tasks performed with a partner or group result in a stronger sense of individual agency. In one study conducted with individuals living in homeless shelters, Duncan et al. (2022) found value in group interventions on agency development due to collective and cumulative forces of shared experiences and similar socio-ecological systems. In groups, the person's system exerts amplified influence on the development of agency in the individual. Likewise, the development and understanding of capabilities allow for a move from a focus on self to broader issues found beyond the microsystem of the socio-ecological system (Chung et al., 2020). Personal agency development is vital for the development of the skills needed to be able to care for others.

Agency and parenting. Parenting can be complex and challenging, particularly for those lacking a strong sense of self. People learn and grow by experiencing success and failure, which helps them develop new skills and competencies (Shankar et al.,

2019). Self-agency is different from having control over circumstances. It is a skill achieved without a set ability in an individual (Bazzani, 2022). Parental self-efficacy, or beliefs about parenting abilities and agency development, are closely linked (Chau & Giallo, 2015). Still, external factors from the socio-ecological system significantly impact the power of parents to build a sense of agency. Parenting becomes more challenging when stressful situations lead to parental fatigue. Parental fatigue can result in hostile parenting and the loss of the interpersonal relationship needed for effective parenting (Chau & Giallo, 2015). Socio-ecological system factors such as income and stress are connected to agency development. The addition of resources leads to improved hope (Aram-Fichman & Davidson-Arad, 2017) and increased capacity to build strong relationships with others.

Parents' beliefs about parenting skills play a significant role in their behaviors and directly affect their children's development, academic success, and pro-social behaviors. The correlation between parent agency and child outcomes is as significant as other factors in the child's socio-ecological system (Albanese et al., 2019). When exploring a parent's sense of agency, three factors are vital: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Schüler et al., 2016). An individual develops agency when proper interactions across time result in a sense of well-being. For parents, this often begins with the ability to provide for the basic needs of the microsystem.

Agency and well-being diminish when there is a failure to meet the family's basic needs. In some families, essential need attainment can result in pathologies, such as depression. Depression in parents, especially mothers, often results in harsh parenting practices, contributing to adverse childhood experiences (Wolford et al., 2019). External

cues from the parent's system can also result in negative parenting behaviors (Albanese et al., 2019). Mothers experience an increased influence from the socio-ecological system and stronger tendencies to conform to social norms for parenting (Bazzani, 2022), resulting in increased stress often associated with increased negative behaviors from children (Sawrikar et al., 2020). Children are not passive participants in parenting. As children's behavior problems increase, parents' self-esteem tends to decrease, erasing parental agency (Albanese et al., 2019). The family structure, which often varies from the traditional cisgender married mother and father, may experience the same impacts. Same-gender parents and intentionally single parents supply evidence that the family structure is less important to child outcomes than the quality of the parent/child relationship and the stability of the family (Imrie & Golombok, 2022). However, macrosystem factors can negatively affect parenting agency and child outcomes (Bornstein, 2019). Laws or policies that conflict with or support a family structure, such as maternity and paternity leave, are macrosystem factors impacting parenting and family life (Ayers-Johnson et al., 2018). These outside influences must be considered significant to the individual, the community, and the entire system where families reside. Macrosystem factors can strengthen or challenge family systems.

Parental agency, self-esteem, psychopathology, and support availability all contribute to developing the parent/child relationship, strong or weak, which is the critical determinant of childhood outcomes. Still, families do not exist in isolation, and their surrounding socio-ecological system influences child outcomes as well. In the next section, I explore how socio-ecological system factors influence the family and how

support can change how parents relate to their environment and build relationships with their children.

Agency and employment. Work, home, and community are the building blocks of family life and the determinants of well-being in children and the adults who care for them. “Analysis of work, home, and community brings together the three vital domains where economic production and social reproduction occur in a tight, mutual embrace” (Pocock et al., 2012, p. 396). According to Pocock et al. (2012), work and family relationships are reciprocal. It fluctuates between imbalanced states of priority influenced by the power available to make decisions, time, space, and life stage. Other factors, including economic conditions, political climate, culture, infrastructure investment, and policy, influence the community where the family is a subsystem (Albanese et al., 2019). Families living in neighborhoods generally share many characteristics, including their socioeconomic status. Therefore, communities likely comprise families with the same resources, stressors, and conditions (van Minde et al., 2021). Families living in suppressed neighborhoods or with deprivation often see issues expand throughout the layers of the socio-ecological system. Without change, the effects of a lack of resources and stressors intensify with time.

A family’s economic situation indicates the potential for psychopathology, academic challenges, and other detriments to well-being (Nieuwenhuis et al., 2018). The impact goes beyond the need for financial resources to meet basic needs and is a function of the cumulative effect of income and time (Agostinelli & Sorrenti, 2021). Most children live in households where one or both parents work outside the home. According to Heinrich (2014), 40% of children live in a house with their mothers as the primary source

of income. However, employment alone does not provide stability. Low-wage workers are less likely to have the resources needed to balance needed income from work with the time required for parenting. Hourly, low-wage work rarely includes paid time off, benefits, and flexibility. Benefits such as time off contribute to financial stability. Additionally, those families with higher incomes are more likely to live in neighborhoods with more plentiful and higher-quality resources such as libraries, parks, and businesses (Agostinelli & Sorrenti, 2021). This is especially true for childcare, a vital asset for work and child development. Employment, as an asset for a family, exists in context with the surrounding community and other factors of the socio-ecological system that support or inhibit opportunities for family stability.

Conclusion. Developing a solid sense of self is essential for individuals to become positive and supportive parents. This sense of self is closely linked to the agency required for productive employment. Work-life and parenting mutually influence each other, and income from work provides crucial resources for effective parenting. Additionally, the self-efficacy associated with labor is a vital component of the socio-ecological system.

Community Resources and Family Life

The link between child outcomes, family situation, parenting, neighborhood resources, and economics is well established (Engelhardt et al., 2019; Kim et al., 2020; Lopez et al., 2021; Oishi et al., 2019). As these factors permeate the socio-ecological system, the cumulative impact of resources is increasingly significant. “A community asset is anything that can be used to improve the quality of life within a community. This includes organizations, people, partnerships, facilities, and infrastructure, among other

things” (Ayers-Johnson et al., 2018, p. 15). Assets such as childcare, safe places to play, available family activities, and high-quality schools are found in clusters where they can mitigate socioeconomic challenges (Ribar, 2015). Unfortunately, under-resourced communities often lack the resources to reduce or reverse the negative factors associated with stressors found in families (Nomaguchi & Milkie, 2020). Links between community assets and school resources are evident. Supportive school communities encourage family engagement and create community cohesion. Community cohesion, cultural identity, and religion are other community assets that positively impact socio-ecological system microsystems (Gartland et al., 2019). Other community assets have associations with improved family outcomes and can support the family and parent/child relationship. Access to preschool and after-school programs, medical services, behavioral health services, and services designed to help senior citizens support positive interactions within the family exosystem (McPherson et al., 2020). Community factors can have a significant impact on families.

The healthy development of children includes more than just skilled parenting (Golombok, 2000). It requires physical and psychological assets. Economic conditions alone do not decide a child’s outcome (Heinrich, 2014). Still, work conditions impact family income and parental agency and enhance or diminish the quality of life, leading to quality parent/child relationships (Heinrich, 2014; Pocock et al., 2012). Assets within the community can improve the quality of life within the exosystem and mitigate some of the challenges families face. When a family member is involved with the justice system, many of the community assets needed to support healthy development in children are unavailable, resulting in poor outcomes for those children. Next, I offer a review section

focusing on a subset of children, families, and women involved with the criminal justice system.

Women's Involvement in the Justice System

Women accused of crimes in the United States face a system not designed to meet their needs, which treats them harshly. McConnell (2017) finds that the patriarchal nature of the American criminal justice system is inequitable in treating women accused of crimes. In domestic violence cases, women reporting their victimization often receive treatment as harsh as the offender (McConnell, 2017). Women often receive harsher sentences for not protecting children from abuse than the sentence received by the child abuser (Mahoney, 2019). Women charged with crimes or jailed have needs and vulnerabilities different from men (Forrester et al., 2020). Van Wormer and Bartollas (2000) state that women act on the alternatives they see before them. Those alternatives are limited to the resources available in their socio-ecological system.

Forrester et al. (2020) observes that many incarcerated women have been diagnosed with mental health disorders. Forrester et al. (2020) also finds that 44% of incarcerated women had co-occurring disorders, combining substance abuse disorders with a mental illness. The intersection of negative experiences from early trauma and self-stigma from current behaviors results in an internal devaluation in some women (Moore et al., 2020), which may be one of the justice system's goals (Brew et al., 2022).

Rarely do incarcerated women improve their health while behind bars. An estimated 80% of incarcerated women are mothers, which results in hundreds of thousands of American children having a justice-involved mom (Widra & Herring, 2021). As the number of women sentenced to jail time increases, the challenge of holding

and caring for pregnant women taxes a system not designed for childbirth (Thomas, 2020).

Impact of jail time on family. Research findings are mixed as to the effectiveness of incarceration as a crime deterrent, but evidence exists that the effect on welfare is significant (Roodman, 2017; Rose & Shem-Tov, 2018, 2021; Schanzenbach et al., 2016a). Research on the stigma of incarcerated individuals notes that the implementation of sanctions for those released from prison or jail, such as limitations on voting rights or business licensing, is intended to maintain the separation of the adjudicated criminal from society, even after a sentence is fulfilled (Brew et al., 2022). In practice, incarceration of individuals, both male and female, results in lasting damage not only to the psychosocial factors of the individual but also to the person's entire socio-ecological system (Copp, 2020; DeHart et al., 2018; Harner & Riley, 2013; Lalonde & Cho, 2008). Due to societal stigma, formerly incarcerated individuals are seen as less likable, worse parents, bad neighbors, and other anti-social labels. The stigma extends to the entire microsystem of the individual, including their children (Brew et al., 2022). It is the intention of society for incarceration to defer threats to society, but the cost versus benefit of imprisonment is not commonly considered. Copp (2020) finds public support for alternatives to sentencing for specific crime types even though the results are similar when incarceration or an option is utilized regardless of the crime type. The results are consistent for those who are incarcerated.

Neither the prison system nor the network of jails across the United States is consistently equipped to meet the needs of incarcerated individuals, especially women (Brew et al., 2022; Harman et al., 2007; Harner & Riley, 2013; Tadros, 2021).

Incarceration builds physical and systemic barriers to communication to form and keep healthy relationships (Copp, 2020; Feingold, 2021; Lalonde & Cho, 2008; Sawyer & Wagner, 2022). Complex visitation schedules, the cost of phone calls, lack of privacy, and other practical matters contribute to the difficulty of maintaining relationships (Harman et al., 2007). Incarcerated individuals are even more vulnerable and often feel invisible without supportive relationships. In research that involves women who are inmates, Harner and Riley (2013) notes that the loss of dignity, the guilt of absence from the family, and fear for the safety of themselves and their families led to frequent despair. Physical health also suffered from periods of incarceration due to increased stress, lack of adequate health care, and little support for a healthy lifestyle. These effects are also present in children with at least one parent in prison.

As previously explored in this review, children's most critical need is a solid parent/child relationship. Incarceration impedes the development of this relationship in several ways. Limited physical contact with children, the economic strain on the caregivers for the child while the parent is away, the destabilizing effect of a family member going to jail on the child's exosystem, and the stigma of a parent in prison decrease the stability of the child's SES (DeHart et al., 2018). ACE research lists the incarceration of a parent as a factor included in the list of adverse experiences (Tadros, 2021). There are ways to mitigate these negative impacts of incarceration on the family. Some even find that the life structure in jail allows for a focus on personal growth and increased stability. Quality health services, animal interaction programs, and a focus on spirituality improve incarcerated individuals' outcomes (Collica-Cox & Furst, 2019). However, removal from a socio-ecological system is a social network issue, and

successful harm reduction focuses on the reparation of the social network. Collica-Cox and Furst (2019) find that prisoners who keep strong relationships with family have more success upon release. Support for the individual based on family and social network restoration helps the entire socio-ecological system. Those with solid community systems, a developed sense of agency, and the means to be economically stable fare much better after incarceration, helping their microsystem, exosystem, and socio-ecological system.

Jail and employment. Employers' policies and practices and the stigma of incarceration result in economic difficulties for justice system-involved individuals. Emmert (2019) finds that incarceration negatively impacts employment outcomes. However, Goodman (2020) discover that the support available could mitigate and even eliminate the disparities in employment. The influences of post-incarceration and post-criminal charges are highly complex and involve factors other than the correlation between jail time and employment opportunities. The demographics of Americans in the justice system include populations with other pre-existing disadvantages in the workforce (Bureau of Prisons, 2021).

The incarcerated are less educated than the general population and are predominately members of minority ethnicities or races (Emmert, 2019). For women, these statistics are especially relevant (Cobbina-Dungy, 2022). On average, women earn less than males in the same position and qualifications (Blau & Kahn, 2017). The workforce also disadvantages women with a motherhood penalty when they must be absent from the workforce to care for children. Like women, all justice-involved individuals have periods of absence from the workforce, negatively impacting economic

opportunity and employment. Training programs and support during and following incarceration mitigate workplace disadvantages (Cobbina-Dungy, 2022; Rose & Shem-Tov, 2021; Sawyer & Wagner, 2022). When the justice system includes training, supervision, and support for those accused or convicted of crimes, outcomes for the individual and their socio-ecological system improve.

Interventions for criminally charged women. For many women, involvement with the justice system results from their relationships with others in the microlayer of their socio-ecological system. Changing the outcome trajectory for mothers and their children needs interventions that address the unique needs of justice-involved women and address the formation of relationships. The most promising intervention practices for pre-sentencing diversion programs are gender-specific (Brady et al., 2022; Ribar, 2015; Thomas, 2020; van Wormer & Bartollas, 2000). The development of a sense of agency for mothers is closely related to their role as a parent (Luthar & Ciciolla, 2015); therefore, the needs of children must also be included when designing programs for mothers (Robertson et al., 2020). There is also support for programs that address agency by exploring past trauma (Brady et al., 2022). Pre-booking intervention programs are most effective for individuals who have not committed a crime harming another person and are not for those with acute mental illness or in active psychosis (Coffman et al., 2017).

The health needs of participants, including their mental health, must be part of the treatment, but building agency often does not require intense therapy (Bazzani, 2022). Brief interventions, such as visualization and storytelling, show promise and a focus on building connections with the community through employment, social networks, and community experiences are effective (Brady et al., 2022). Pre-booking diversion

programs for women produce better outcomes for women, their children, and their socio-ecological system than incarceration (Brady et al., 2022; Coffman et al., 2017; Leifman & Coffey, 2020).

Synthesis of Literature

Based on the available literature, it appears that socio-ecological systems play a significant role in shaping behavior, which can sometimes lead to antisocial actions (Brown et al., 2020; Engelhardt et al., 2019; Oishi et al., 2019; Pells et al., 2018). However, other researchers indicate that parenting (Albanese et al., 2019; Blizzard et al., 2018; Giano et al., 2020) is the primary indicator of potential child outcomes and prosocial behaviors. While these theories appear contradictory, when considered simultaneously, they indicate the importance of caregiver experience and influences in the socio-ecological system on both parent behavior and child outcomes. For mothers, the primary caregivers for most children, personal agency coincides with parenting skills (Agostinelli & Sorrenti, 2021; Baxter et al., 2017; Blizzard et al., 2018; Petruccelli et al., 2019) and is heavily impacted by socio-ecological system factors (Kim et al., 2020; Lopez et al., 2021; Pells et al., 2018; Schacht et al., 2018).

Scholars widely agree that an individual's socio-ecological system determines exposure to adverse childhood experiences (Cross et al., 2017; Hunt et al., 2017; Munoz et al., 2021). However, there is conflicting evidence in the literature regarding the efficacy of programs designed to mitigate the impact of adverse experiences. Many researchers agree that parents with a high sense of self-agency build the firm bond needed to diminish the long-term effect of trauma occurrences (Aram-Fichman & Davidson-Arad, 2017; Hellman et al., 2018; Merolla & Kam, 2018). Children with justice-involved

mothers are one of the most vulnerable populations of children with outcomes indicating significant challenges (Fry-Geier & Hellman, 2017; Kailaheimo-Lönnqvist et al., 2022; Rose & Shem-Tov, 2021; Solomon, 2012). The impact of intervention programs varies, but evidence of change is seen in programs provided for women involved in the justice system, which address both socio-ecological system changes and skills development leading to improved self-agency (Brady et al., 2022; Robertson et al., 2020; Thomas, 2020). Research suggests that environmental factors and parenting agency are critical for the vulnerable population of children with mothers involved in the criminal justice system. Evers et al. (2022) describe the difficulty of improving personal agency without addressing the social environment, indicating that change requires both strategies. Children and their parents are part of complex social systems. Criminal justice involvement and the resulting emotional and social impacts can have negative results. Successful interventions consider the social context (Albanese et al., 2019; Brown et al., 2020; Chang et al., 2019; Forrester et al., 2020; Golombok, 2000).

The literature available provides insight into the impact of socio-ecological systems, the impact the system can have on children, and how intervention may change outcomes. However, a gap exists regarding how and why intervention, as well as avoiding time in jail, can change the relationship of a mother to her socio-ecological system. When programs show promise for intervening in criminal behaviors, the literature does not explore how behavior changes are related to the surrounding world. This gap sets the stage for me to examine the impact of a pretrial intervention on mothers through the socio-ecological systems lens to explore potential changes for the mom and her children.

In the following section, I detail the theoretical framework that underpins this research and explain the aim of my case study. Specifically, I delve into how socio-ecological systems theory can offer a structure for examining the impact of the ReMerge program on the development of self-agency among its graduates.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical basis for this research is Bronfenbrenner's socio-ecological theory. Figure 1.1 graphically represents the layers of the socio-ecological systems model. SES places the individual at the center of a spiraling system from macrosystems to microsystems, influencing the individual (Bronfenbrenner, 1992). Four levels comprise the model: microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem.

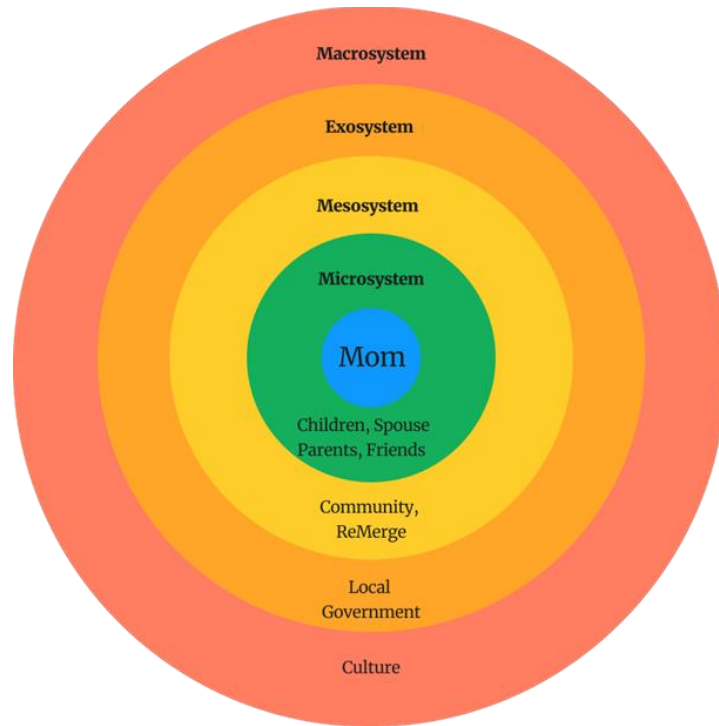


Figure 1.1. Bronfenbrenner's socio-ecological system model (Bronfenbrenner, 1992).

The socio-ecological method explores many attributes, behaviors, and responses to an individual's environment. A complex influence system must be studied to understand the individual (Bronfenbrenner, 1992). The socio-ecological systems model (SES) is an evolving model reflective of the continual search for answers to societal problems (Rosa & Tudge, 2013).

Tudge et al. (2009) suggest that investigations can be conducted considering the socio-ecological system components Bronfenbrenner described: process, person, context, and time. He further described the system as the connection between the individual at the center and the people, places, and shared language of others. Tudge et al. (2009) describe the interdependence of humans and individuals' reactions to their surroundings. Context is the proximity or relevance of a phenomenon to the individual, and time includes the length of time any stimuli or circumstance lasts. Each system component is represented in the layers of the model moving from the individual at the center to progressively more remote influences (Koller et al., 2020)

Bronfenbrenner's socio-ecological model emphasizes the ecology of human development (Rosa & Tudge, 2013). According to the model, ecology refers to the environment surrounding an individual and forming a system (Bronfenbrenner, 1992). The socio-ecological system has the individual at the center and progressively moves outward through the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystems (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). The model's layers illustrate the proximity of influences on the individual at the center. The layers of influence range from those closest to the person to those less directly connected. This approach "simultaneously emphasizes both the individual and contextual systems and the interdependent relations

between these two systems” (Eriksson et al., 2018, p. 416). The microsystem comprises the individual's immediate family, cohabitants, neighborhood, and regular contacts such as classmates. The mesosystems are the next level of proximity, encompassing communities, churches, schools, or other groups with frequent interaction. Factors that are part of the exosystem may not necessarily involve direct interaction with an individual but are available in extended proximity, such as state politics, public community spaces, and extended family. Macrosystem factors globally impact society, including worldwide politics, media, culture, and the environment.

Since Bronfenbrenner introduced the socio-ecological systems theory in the 1970s, the theory has transformed how human development is approached (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998; Koller et al., 2020; Tudge et al., 2009; Vélez-Agosto et al., 2017). The theory highlights human development's synergistic and interdependent nature. When the interactions throughout the system are considered, interventions with individuals result in the best outcomes. Costanza (2014) theorizes that individuals establish socio-ecological regimes to navigate the complex systems of life resulting in behavior change when a “tipping point” is reached. Using the socio-ecological systems theory to explore change in behavior systems theory has evolved since its introduction (Rosa & Tudge, 2013), and debates occur around using the different versions of the theory and the included components. As the model has evolved, Koller et al. (2020) theorize that an approach known as ecological engagement methodology is more robust than socio-ecological theory. Others criticize the theory’s placement of culture as part of the macrosystem without regard for microsystem cultural choices for individuals (Vélez-Agosto et al., 2017). Another debate is the exclusion of proximal processes and the

importance of time when utilizing the theory (Merçon-Vargas et al., 2020). However, the theory is widely used and is considered valid (Christensen, 2016; Costanza, 2014; Eriksson et al., 2018).

Conclusion: Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

The purpose of this case study is to employ the socio-ecological system framework (Bronfenbrenner, 1992) to investigate how the ReMerge program, an alternative to imprisonment in Oklahoma City, impacts the sense of agency of mothers involved in the justice system. More specifically, one question guided this study: How does participation in the ReMerge program help mothers develop personal agency in relation to each layer of the socio-ecological model?

The ReMerge program assists mothers at risk of incarceration. Eligible individuals can participate in the program before charges are filed. ReMerge graduates can avoid jail time and may have their charges dropped or expunged. The program aims to provide a positive outcome for those involved. As a researcher, I explored the experiences of five individuals who graduated from the ReMerge program and attained self-sufficiency for at least one year. Throughout the study, these participants were self-reliant without any assistance from the government and took care of their children independently. They were gainfully employed and had no pending charges or probationary status with law enforcement agencies.

Various government and nonprofit organizations offer aid to address societal concerns and family needs differently. This assistance may be direct financial support, such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), food stamps, or rental assistance, or indirect help, such as healthcare, substance abuse treatment, case

management, or other non-tangible aid. Nonetheless, programs that aim to enhance parental agency within the family may have a more significant impact (Agostinelli & Sorrenti, 2021). According to Snyder (2005), agency refers to an individual's ability to recognize that achieving something is feasible. Therefore, it is crucial to consider the development of agency as a program component.

The research findings of this study have the potential to provide valuable insights to policymakers, program managers, criminal justice reform advocates, and the community regarding the effectiveness of this support program. The results can also help shape other similar programs across the state. The evaluation sheds light on the program outcomes within the socio-ecological system of the participants. Chapter Two overviews the research design, procedures, and its relationship to the theoretical framework.

CHAPTER TWO

Methodology

Introduction: Research Questions

In Chapter One, I presented data and literature that shed light on the challenges faced by women in the criminal justice system. I also highlighted the negative impact on their children and the influence of their environment. The chapter investigated the development of personal agency and how the socio-ecological system affects families. Although the literature supports the link between parental incarceration and adverse effects on children, it lacks a comprehensive analysis of how mothers' personal agency changes when they receive support that addresses their agency development within their socio-ecological system. In this Problem of Practice dissertation, I explore the experiences of five mothers who completed the ReMerge program to reveal how they interact differently with the different elements of their socio-ecological system after finishing the program.

Within Chapter Two, I present the research design for this case study. I designed this study to understand the experiences of mothers who graduated from ReMerge, a particular alternative to incarceration in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. In this segment, I provide an overview of the participants, the chosen site, the data collection procedures, the analysis methods, and the rationale behind my approach. Furthermore, I outline the correlation between socio-ecological systems theory and my data collection techniques. One primary research question guided this study: How does participation in the ReMerge

program help mothers develop personal agency in relation to each layer of the socio-ecological model?

Researcher Perspective and Positionality

In each research study, the researcher's perspective affects the research design process (Creswell & Poth, 2018); therefore, it is essential to understand how my experiences shaped this particular research. Qualitative research explores participants' lived experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). As someone who has worked as an educator, lawmaker, and policy influencer, I have witnessed how every aspect of the socio-ecological system can either benefit or harm families. The decisions made by policymakers, institutional leaders, and philanthropists directly impact the lives of children and adults who care for them. My goal is to influence policy and practice to create programs that have practical, lasting results. With my experience in business, education, and government, I strive to effect change in the world by promoting better policies, inspiring institutions, and fostering companies with strong cultures.

In my research, I use interpretive methods and focus on real-world situations to understand the socio-ecological theory that explores how individuals interact with their environment. I taught for eight years in a suburban district, teaching life skills classes to middle and high school students. During this time, I gained insight into my students' home lives, including their difficulties. I learned that a student's academic performance is rarely affected solely by school-related issues. As I moved into nonprofit management, I worked with needy families to provide parenting education, mental health services, drug treatment, and other interventions. I saw firsthand how positive outcomes resulted from

parents who were healthy, employed, and stable. I notably witnessed the success of a drug court program that allowed individuals facing incarceration to participate in therapy, support groups, and accountability programming. This experience taught me how policy, education, and support intersect to produce meaningful change. As a policymaker and elected official in Oklahoma, I better understood how policy decisions impact outcomes.

My home state faces numerous challenges, particularly regarding childhood outcomes, where we rank among the lowest in the nation. Shockingly, we also lead the country in the incarceration of women. Unfortunately, many policymakers, philanthropists, and community stakeholders fail to recognize the critical link between family support and indicators of childhood success, as well as the impact of systems on families. Despite our efforts to improve the lives of Oklahoma children, there is still much work to be done. However, we can take hope in identifying promising areas to replicate and build upon.

Drawing on my experience as an educator, nonprofit professional, and policymaker, I have witnessed the successes and failures of various programs and approaches to improve children's outcomes. My passion for supporting mothers facing incarceration stems from my personal experiences as a mother of two and my dedication to enhancing the lives of children. The ReMerge program, which is the focus of this study, has a reputation for creating lasting change and transforming the lives of both mothers and their children. I have been involved with the program as a volunteer, donor, and supporter, and even authored legislation to secure state funding through public-private partnerships. Through this study, I aim to gain insight into how specific program elements impact participants' relationships with different layers of the socio-ecological

system. By doing so, I aim to inform the design of new intervention programs and improve outcomes in existing ones.

Through my experience, I have found that practical solutions are the most effective in providing results for families. This approach garners support from policymakers, funders, and service professionals. My belief in pragmatism aligns with this viewpoint. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), pragmatism is a philosophical foundation for research. Growing up in rural Oklahoma, my pragmatic worldview was influenced by my parents and the generations of families around me who believed in the "bootstrap" mentality. This mentality ingrained in the rural culture instilled the belief that everyone is responsible for their future regardless of circumstances. My past experiences have shaped my perspective and approach to this research.

Theoretical Framework Application

The theoretical framework for this research was Bronfenbrenner's socio-ecological theory. This theory probes the interdependent relationship between individuals and the system around them, as well as the impact of the system on individuals (Bronfenbrenner, 1992; Costanza, 2014; Koller et al., 2020; Rosa & Tudge, 2013). Crawford (2020) summarizes this theory as system layers encompassing the individual, with each layer having a significant influence. Socio-ecological systems theory is used to investigate how program participation affected participants' self-agency regarding each layer of their socio-ecological system. I chose this theory because it captures the intricate balance between personal choice and environmental factors. People's lives are not lived in isolation. Their environment impacts them, the people around them, the community services available, media, policies, and the entire socio-ecological system. The actions

that could lead to involvement with the criminal justice system are influenced by personal choice and the systems an individual inhabits (Sawyer & Wagner, 2022). Through the socio-ecological systems theory, I explored the cyclic pattern of antisocial behaviors and criminal justice involvement that affects families. This theory offers insight into how mothers facing incarceration can receive intervention to break this pattern. Furthermore, using this theory helps to analyze the process and reasons behind the change occurring during ReMerge's intervention.

The ReMerge program has an impact on the personal agency development of mothers. However, this change is not isolated and is linked to the connections between the individual and the surrounding world. To examine agency development, I used the socio-ecological systems theory framework. This framework enabled me to analyze the thoughts, perceptions, and experiences of the participants in the different layers of the program. Socio-ecological systems theory places the individual at the center of spiraling layers of influence (Bronfenbrenner, 1992). The layers move from forces closest to the individual to factors of influence more removed from the individual at the center. Creswell and Creswell (2018) state that research questions should investigate the variables' relationships. The research process allowed me to develop data elements to help participants reflect on the socio-ecological system's layers within the model's context. This approach "simultaneously emphasizes both the individual and contextual systems and the interdependent relations between these two systems" (Eriksson et al., 2018, p. 416). Through this research, I explored the lived experience of mothers who faced possible incarceration and how successful interventions affected their relationship with and understanding of their socio-ecological system in their own words.

This research aligns closely with Bronfenbrenner's socio-ecological systems theory, which posits that individuals are influenced by their surrounding environments and the various interconnected layers within those environments. In accordance with this theory, I collected essential participant information, recognizing the significance of individual characteristics within the broader socio-ecological context. Furthermore, my one-on-one interviews delved into personal agency and the participants' relationships with different elements of the socio-ecological system, reflecting the theory's emphasis on how individuals interact with their immediate and distant surroundings, such as parenting, community, and the global environment. Additionally, the focus group interview provided a different context to explore participants' emotions, shedding light on how they navigate and experience the multi-layered socio-ecological systems in their lives, as proposed by Bronfenbrenner's theory.

The framework also guided data assessment by providing the terminology I used a priori codes from the theory supplied initial codes for data analysis. Then, the themes, categories, and patterns found through case study data analysis produced generalizations (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Although each participant's socio-ecological system is unique, I used a standardized language consistent with socio-ecological theory in their responses through a priori coding. For instance, the term "community" may differ for each participant. However, it corresponded with a layer of the model and allowed me to identify common themes in their responses. Furthermore, the participants' shared language and terminology, developed during their participation in the program, provided valuable insights into the significance of each layer of the socio-ecological system in achieving program outcomes. In summary, the theoretical framework guided all study

aspects from beginning to end. The theory set the stage for the research design, informed the research question, and provided the language and initial codes for data analysis.

Research Design and Rationale

I used a qualitative approach informed by socio-ecological theory for this single case study. Qualitative research places the observer within the participants' world to allow interpretation of the data within the natural setting (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Creswell and Poth (2018) further describe qualitative research's purpose as giving voice to populations that might otherwise not be heard. The participants in this study are bound together by their shared experience in ReMerge and as women living in the community after completing the program. According to Baxter and Jack (2015), case study design explores a phenomenon when research questions ask how and why something occurs. I selected this design to examine how program participation impacted the participants' agency and wanted to tell their stories. Case studies provide in-depth descriptions and analyses of individuals' lived experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). At the same time, the case study design has limitations in demonstrating the relationship between interactions and process impact on the socio-ecological system (Villamayor-Tomas et al., 2020). I chose a case study design to understand the participants' experiences and represent their thoughts and ideas using their own words.

According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), a case study is a detailed examination of a limited system, such as a program. This research focused on five individuals who had participated in the ReMerge program and were the primary subjects of analysis. The objective of this case study was to create a forum for a specific group of participants who

had finished the program to express their experiences. As Yin (2017) points out, case studies can provide a voice to the lived experiences of people, while Creswell and Poth (2018) describe the case study as a real-life depiction of a specific time and place for an individual or group of people. I selected the ReMerge program for this case study because it offered a limited system. This case study allowed participants to drive the process using natural communication methods and incorporating the subject's language. According to Yin (2017), the case study design is appropriate when there is no control over the subject, and the focus is not on historical but current conditions. Case studies benefit from a clearly stated theory behind the inquiry (Yin, 2017), and I was able to apply a socio-ecological systems approach to the study. As a researcher, I included the various layers of the socio-ecological system in my interview and focus group questions, which allowed me to gather data from multiple perspectives on how the program benefited the participants. The collective phenomenon in this research, graduation from the ReMerge program, is the same among all participants. Case studies often focus on relationship patterns (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) and produce a logical scenario for replicating results (Yin, 2017). For my case study, I utilized three data sources: demographic data, individual interviews, and a focus group, and followed the data analysis spiral to conduct a thorough review. To gather information, I administered a demographic questionnaire to each participant, conducted individual interviews, and organized a focus group interview with participants.

Site Selection and Participant Sampling

In selecting a research site, I considered my concern with Oklahoma's mass incarceration of women and my desire to explore programs making a difference in the

lives of children by serving mothers. I selected the ReMerge diversion program in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma from the several Oklahoma nonprofit organizations working to reduce the negative impact of criminal justice system involvement. ReMerge is a nonprofit providing a pre-trial diversion program for mothers accused of non-violent offenses. To conduct this study, I narrowed my focus on those who had completed the program a minimum of a year before the study, attained financial stability, and cared for their children without state assistance or oversight.

Site

I selected ReMerge as the site for this study to explore the program's impact on mothers' sense of agency in relationship with their socio-ecological system. At the time of this study, the program curriculum deployed a collective impact model that included employment training, counseling, and other support for participants' agency development. The collective impact model requires incorporating multiple treatment domains and support through a collaborative and coordinated approach (Sargrestrano et al., 2018). The collective impact model breaks down barriers for individuals seeking social services and, instead, supplies support to the individual within their socio-ecological system.

ReMerge was designed to assist high-risk and high-need mothers in various aspects of their lives. The curriculum included comprehensive treatment and training to address mental health, substance abuse, parenting, personal development, employment training, education, and basic needs. ReMerge mothers are assigned a treatment team that includes a case manager, therapist, health and wellness program manager, child reunification program manager, education and employment coordinator, and a peer recovery support specialist. The treatment team guided the participants through the

program. The program consisted of four phases designed to address the conditions and behaviors that resulted in the participants criminal charges. Since most ReMerge participants arrive at the program with a history substance abuse treatment and recovery are woven into each phase of the program. Mental health and substance abuse services are key throughout the program. The first phase begins with stabilizing the mothers with safe housing, food, clothing, and transportation. As ReMerge mothers advanced through the program, they acquired they focus on the development of essential skills for coping, parenting, and practical life situations needed to rebuild their lives and families. As program participants reached milestones in skill development and completed training, they advanced by “phasing up.” The final two phases of the program focused on stability with job skills training and job placement. Following graduation, participants were allowed to participate in continuing care services and have access to program staff for support as long as they avoided involvement with the criminal justice system and did not re-offend.

The program was in the heart of urban Oklahoma City and served mothers from communities within central Oklahoma. ReMerge was a non-profit organization that relied on funding from private donors and contracts with the state. All services are free of charge to participants. Since its inception and at the time of the study, ReMerge had graduated 182 women responsible for 455 children. Program leadership reported a goal of 33% participation in the post-graduation after-care program. However, this metric had been exceeded, with 50% of program graduates remaining engaged with support through alum activities and follow-up services. It is worth noting that, as of this research, only

two of the 166 graduates have been charged with additional crimes. These statistics are represented in Figure 2.1.

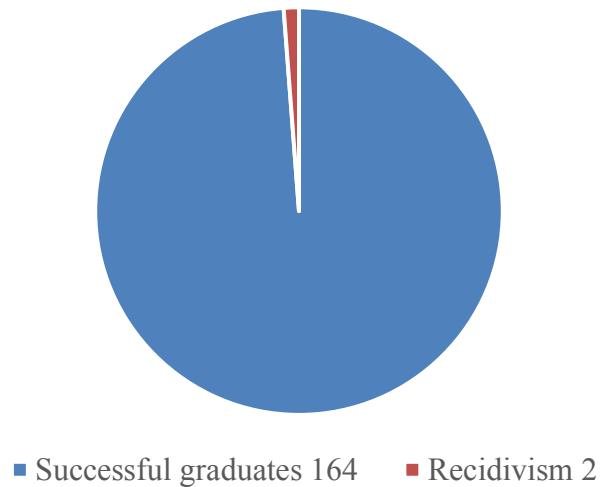


Figure 2.1. Program results.

Participants

In this study I used purposeful sampling to identify participants. I purposefully selected five program graduates from the ReMerge program who lived independently, had full custody of their children, were employed and financially independent. The purposeful sampling provided a large enough sample of participants to provide a variety of perspectives (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). ReMerge administrators kept close contact with program alumni and maintains a database of graduates. Program leadership provided me with a list of ten potential participants and their contact information. I emailed the alumni an invitation to participate in the research (see Appendix A). Respondents responded to me by text or email. Follow-up conversations allowed me to identify those meeting the criteria and each qualifying participant returned a signed consent form prior to beginning data collection (see Appendix B).

Data Collection Protocols and Procedures

Following the guidance of Creswell and Poth (2018), I collected data using a demographic survey, interviews, and a focus group. In Table 2.1, I outline the data collection, analysis, and final report timeline.

Table 2.1

Research Timeline

Time Frame	Action	Purpose/Focus
Summer 2022 Term	Obtained determination for research and research sites	Receive non-human subjects' determination
February 2023	Informal Conversations	Engaged in informal conversations about the study.
March 2023	Collected program demographics	Obtained consent, administered participant questionnaire
April 2023	Conducted focus group interview	Obtained consent and collected qualitative data.
May to June 2023	Conducted qualitative data analysis	Interpreted findings
June to September 2023	Interpreted findings	Wrote qualitative results and discussion

Participant Demographic Questionnaire

To begin data collection, I collected responses from participants with a questionnaire. After receiving consent forms from each participant, I emailed a short questionnaire in Appendix C. This questionnaire provided primary data regarding the participants' age, employment status, living arrangements, children's ages, and housing location in Oklahoma City. Table 2.2 provides information regarding the participants selected.

Table 2.2

Participants Selected

Participant	Age	Children	Employment Status	Job Held
Cathy	30	4	Full-time	Community Health Worker
Sarah	37	1	Full-time	Alcohol & Drug Counselor
Faye	36	2	Full-time	Case Manager Drug & Alcohol
Jackie	39	1	Full-time	Drug Court Case Asst.
Alice	38	3	Full-time	Shipping Clerk/Student

Note: Participant Demographics $n = 5$.

I analyzed the demographic information provided by each participant, looking for similarities and emerging themes. Additionally, I made sure that each participant met the selection criteria established. These data elements helped me prepare for the interviews by providing insight into several micro-system aspects of the socio-ecological system. I gained insight into the participant's neighborhoods and communities by including zip codes, which framed the individual interview discussions.

Individual Interviews

I conducted semi-structured individual interviews with each participant during the second data collection phase. These interviews were essential to the case study process. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), semi-structured interviews offer the researcher flexibility to guide the discussion and gather specific data from each participant. The interviews involved establishing a structured interaction between the researcher and the participant, using a protocol that provided a common framework for all five participants.

Yin (2017) notes that case study interviews resemble guided conversations rather than structured queries.

I utilized Zoom technology for each interview and followed the questions in the Appendix D protocol. The interviews lasted about an hour. Before starting the interview, I asked for and received permission to record and review the consent forms and confidentiality agreement with the participants. I ensured that each participant verbally verified their consent before beginning the interview. I asked the initial question during the interview and allowed the participants to lead the conversation. When necessary, I asked follow-up questions to clarify their answers. After the interview, I reviewed the rest of the research process with the participants and encouraged them to contact me with any questions or concerns. Lastly, I used the transcript feature of the Zoom recording to create a transcript of each interview, replacing the speaker identification with the relevant pseudonym assigned to the participant.

The data I collected allowed the exploration of the participants’ experiences within the context of the theoretical framework. Table 2.3 associates the interview questions with the theoretical framework.

Table 2.3

Individual Interview Questions and Theoretical Framework

Interview Question	Corresponding Element
Q1, 2, 3,4, 5, 6, 7, 17, 23	Microsystem Element
Q 8, 9, 10,11,12,13,18	Mesosystem Element
Q 14, 15, 16,19, 22	Exosystem Element
Q 20, 21, 24	Macrosystem Elements

Focus Group Interview

I used one focus-group interview with all five participants as the third data collection method, utilizing the questions listed in Appendix E. This interview approach helped me gain a more profound insight into the current circumstances of the participants, the program's impact on their lives, and its capacity to bring about change. The group setting fostered social interaction and facilitated a rich dialogue among the participants. Following the same procedure as individual interviews, I used Zoom technology to conduct the interview, and participants were granted permission for the meeting to be recorded. I began by outlining the confidentiality requirements and addressed any queries before asking the initial question. Each participant could respond to other answers and pose clarifying queries. The session lasted approximately one hour and concluded with a reminder of the research process, the approximate timeline, and my contact information for any questions or concerns.

For the focus group, I based the questions on the theoretical framework and aligned with the different layers of the socio-ecological system. By framing the questions this way, I gained valuable insight into how the participants related to their environment and the relationships formed within the program. A breakdown of the correlation between the focus group questions and the components of the socio-ecological system theory model is illustrated in Table 2.4.

Table 2.4

Focus Group Questions and Theoretical Framework

Focus Group Question	Theoretical Framework Element
Questions 1 and 4	Microsystem element
Questions 2, 6, and 8	Mesosystem element
Questions 3, 5, and 7	Exosystem and Macrosystem element

Through the data collection process, I gained insight into the personal thoughts and feelings of the participants. This insight increased my understanding of the program. As Stake (1995) notes, case studies should focus on particularization rather than generalization . I utilized demographic questionnaires, interviews, and focus groups to evaluate changes in participants' socio-ecological systems and their relationships with each component. Following Creswell and Creswell's (2018) approach, collecting multiple forms of data enabled me to explore the whole dimension of the data collected.

Data Analysis Procedures

Qualitative data analysis includes enquiring, experiencing, or examining elements of the social world (Bergin, 2018). Throughout each phase of the analysis process, I considered the integrity of the data, ensured the secure storage of files, and was mindful of ethical concerns. The steps to analyze data include developing systems for managing and organizing information, creating notes of emergent ideas, discovering themes, interpreting those themes, and creating a representation of the findings (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Figure 2.2 illustrates these steps.

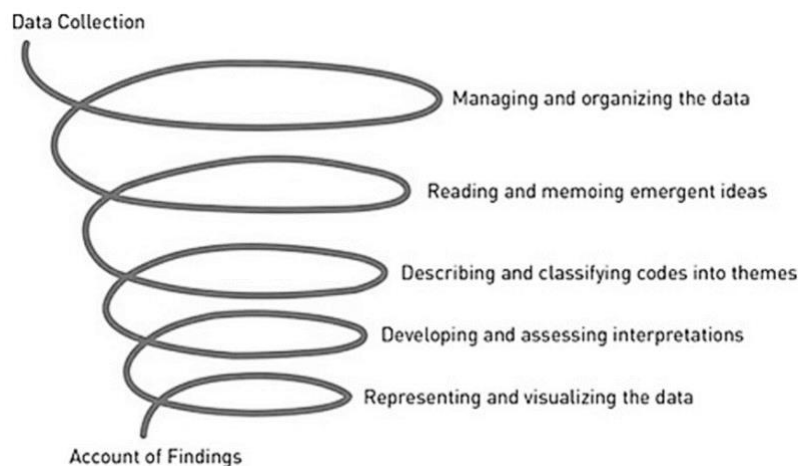


Figure 2.2. Data analysis spiral (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

To begin the data analysis for this research, I first had to organize the data into more manageable files. I started by creating an Excel spreadsheet where I recorded all the responses to the participant questionnaire. I assigned pseudonyms to each participant and coordinated them with their responses. Next, I organized the transcripts of the five individual interviews and the focus group and reviewed the Zoom-generated transcript. I replaced the speaker identification with the appropriate pseudonym and corrected any errors. Once I organized the transcript I sent it to each participant for review. I proceeded to the subsequent analysis phase only after they confirmed that the transcript accurately represented their words.

Ensuring the accuracy of the data was the next step in the analysis. I listened to the recorded interview while reviewing the written transcript to examine the data thoroughly. This allowed me to ensure the transcript's accuracy and take note of any relevant details for deletion such as pauses, facial expressions, or laughter. As Bergin (2018) points out, it is also essential to consider the non-verbal aspects of an interview. I added missing information to the transcript whenever necessary by including notes in the margins. These notes included details such as the ages of the participant's children, their place of employment, living arrangements, and other information from the questionnaire that was relevant to the interview but not explicitly stated. I saved each file with a pseudonym and backed up on One Drive storage for safekeeping. After managing and organizing the data, I read through each transcript to understand my collected data and highlight notable quotes. I then began to search for emerging ideas by coding the data to the theoretical framework.

According to Roberts et al. (2019), initial codes should include themes gathered from the literature, theory, quantitative data available, and those identified during data. The initial codes I selected corresponded with the layers of the socio-ecological system. I used the qualitative data analysis software NVivo to code the data. Roberts et al. (2019) say the coding process is inductive and requires the researcher to use multiple data points and create cross references. I employed a hermeneutical approach to analyze my data and tested my initial codes on one interview. The results indicated correspondence between the layers of the socio-ecological system and the data.

Other codes emerged while reviewing the initial codes, and I used the same process to designate additional codes. Bergin says, “Coding can help you focus on the most important insights in an expansive dataset” (2018, p. 155). The supplementary codes consisted of in vivo codes, the precise terms the participants utilized. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), the objective of data analysis in a case study is to identify themes and patterns by utilizing categorical aggregation. To achieve this, I repeatedly read the transcripts and used NVivo to note words and phrases corresponding to each data element and then categorized them accordingly. This process, known as pattern matching, included a review of the data from NVivo to evaluate the frequency of different data elements and aggregate the connections between the participants’ responses. To analyze the data, I identified patterns and grouped them into themes through coding. These themes are the result of the data evaluation process. I devised a codebook that adheres to the criteria set by Creswell and Poth (2018) and includes the emergent themes, their definitions, appropriate usage, and examples for reference. Additionally, I have grouped similar themes to facilitate further analysis.

The final steps of the data analysis process were developing interpretations and representing the data discovered. “Interpretation in qualitative research involves abstracting beyond the codes and themes to the larger meaning of the data” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 195). Understanding the data interpretation is crucial for comprehending the learnings and establishing relevance to the presented information. I interpreted the data in the context of the research question: How does participation in the ReMerge program help mothers develop personal agency in relation to each layer of the socio-ecological model?

Trustworthiness and Authenticity

To ensure the reliability of qualitative research, consistency and accuracy are essential. As per the guidelines of Creswell and Creswell (2018), documenting the research process steps in detail and adhering to reviewable protocols are crucial for achieving reliability. I conducted this study with these principles in mind, maintaining the expected standards of qualitative research.

When reviewing data, I paid close attention to every detail and thoroughly checked the collection process for consistency, accuracy, and uniformity. I used the participants' words to ensure the authenticity of the presented data in a case study. This approach helped me provide the "thick, rich descriptions" that Stake (1995) considers crucial to this methodology. Through recordings and participant verification, I could confirm the accuracy of the documents used for data collection.

I acknowledged potential biases and personal beliefs to ensure my research's trustworthiness. My dedication to promoting practical solutions through socio-ecological theory motivated my involvement in this study. Although familiar with the ReMerge

program and its objectives, I prioritize pursuing meaningful change and impact. Whenever my familiarity with a participant could have influenced their responses, I disclosed our relationship to them. I emphasized that the participants' personal experiences were crucial to the study's accuracy. They were allowed to review the document's interview transcripts and final drafts before submission, a practice known as "member checking," according to Creswell and Creswell (2018).

In qualitative data gathering, triangulation is a useful method to ensure reliability (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This study employed three distinct data collection phases: individual interviews, one focus group interview, and a participant demographic questionnaire. Using multiple data sources provided triangulation, which increased the data's reliability. Using three data collection methods made the convergence of content analysis possible. Renz et al. (2018) state that convergent content analysis involves utilizing multiple data sources to address the same research questions. For research to be valuable, readers must be confident that the methods used were sound, the researcher was trustworthy as a representative of the participant's truth, and the results accurately reflect the meaning of the participant's experience.

Ethical Considerations

A desire to find real-world solution drives my work as a professional, policy influencer, and researcher. During my research, I relied on Bronfenbrenner's socio-ecological theory as a guiding principle throughout all project phases. This approach required me to consider society, problems, and solutions within the context of the individual at the center of the socio-ecological system. I remained mindful of the

reciprocal impacts that socio-ecological factors have on the participants and their surroundings throughout the research process.

It is difficult to eliminate personal bias from research, as individuals have unique perspectives shaped by their experiences and position within their socio-ecological system. To minimize bias in my research, I followed specific protocols, maintained professionalism when interacting with participants, and used validated methods for case study analysis. Creswell and Creswell (2018) suggest that communicating with participants transparently and using neutral language can also reduce bias during data collection. To ensure consistency, I maintained the same demeanor with all participants and avoided building rapport until after data collection. Despite my interest in their stories, I remained focused on the script and interacted with participants consistently and impartially.

Discussing criminal activity and drug abuse situations with participants requires special care and consideration to protect the identity of participants and to reduce the opportunity for additional trauma. I am fully informed of the relevant state and federal laws regarding the confidentiality of mental health and substance abuse services and took them into consideration at each phase of the research. Additionally, I took precautions with the participants to reduce the opportunity for triggering previous traumatic experiences. Each of the participants volunteered their participation and have access to the after-care program at ReMerge. They were informed to contact program support services if discussing the events of their past caused stress. During the process, participants were informed frequently that they could stop the process at any time. Participants were provided a copy of the data created from their responses and requested

to review for accuracy and any elements they wished to be deleted. To further protect their identify demographic data was reported in broad terms regarding places of residence and employment. I also reported income utilizing ranges and avoided the use of specifics.

I conducted this study following the protocol of Baylor University. I submitted to Baylor's IRB and received a non-human subjects research (NHSR) determination. After this determination, I began collecting data. I recruited participants from a list of ReMerge program graduates interested in participating. Participants used pseudonyms to protect their identities. Each participant signed a consent form that outlined all aspects of the study, and I informed of all aspects of the research and that they could withdraw at any time with no consequence. All participants included in the study did so without coercion, payment, or reward.

Limitations and Delimitations

This research also had limitations and delimitations. Limitations refer to missing elements or weaknesses in the study design and implementation that may restrict the generalizability of the results (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Stake, 1995). In this study, there were inherent limitations in the design and process. The most significant limitations were associated with the case study design. A case study generates results that apply to a specific place and time, making replicating and establishing reliability difficult. Moreover, a single case study has limited potential to generalize the results. Finally, the case study methodology has the potential to be influenced by my bias.

Another limitation of the study was its sample size. With only five participants, the sample may not accurately reflect all program attendees and may not include a diverse range of ethnicities, ages, or other demographic factors. Additionally, the sample

is limited by the convenience of engaging program participants willing to volunteer for the project. Further, the participants are all learning community members and have expressed their advocacy for the program, which may have influenced their perceptions and the data collected.

It is important to note that the study's data collection procedures had certain limitations. Tools designed by a researcher may contain undetected bias, limiting the participants' responses. I utilized a questionnaire constrained by my understanding of the program, the theory employed, and my personal experience. Furthermore, I relied on the honesty of the participants and did not incorporate any measures to verify the accuracy of the information provided. Additionally, during the focus group, some participants may have been hesitant to disclose information due to the presence of other program graduates. The tools and limitations of the inquiry method produce results that may not reflect a complete picture of the results.

As the researcher, I set certain limitations for this study, known as delimitations. In total, this study had five delimitations. The first delimitation was selecting a single site, ReMerge, in Oklahoma City. While several pre-trial diversion programs offer treatment and intervention services in the area, they are not included in this study. I selected this site because I am familiar with its leadership and reputation. Moreover, the study only includes graduates who meet specific criteria. During the study, participants confirmed they were employed, living in stable housing without government assistance, and raising their children. I excluded graduates who did not fulfill these criteria from the sample. The third delimitation for the project was the selection of participants from a pool provided by program leadership. The roster only included graduates who attended

the program alumnae meetings. Those who completed the program but did not stay in touch were not invited to participate. Additionally, the timeframe for completion was limited, so participants were chosen based on their availability within that timeline.

The final delimitation was the selection of Bronfenbrenner's socio-ecological systems theory to drive my research. I developed the research procedures and protocols within the bounds of this theory, excluding other factors that may influence program participants and their experiences. It did not include mental health diagnoses, health factors, or background information that may be relevant to each participant and relied on the socio-ecological system as the basis for evaluation.

Conclusion

In this case study, I utilized the socio-ecological systems theory to analyze the impact of the ReMerge program in Oklahoma on five participants' sense of agency. I investigated how the program influenced their agency by examining the relationship between the mother participants and their socio-ecological system layers. The research design, data collection, and analysis were all informed by this theory, which I discussed in this chapter. Additionally, I have provided information about my positionality, ethical considerations, and study limitations. In the next chapter, I outline the findings of this case study.

CHAPTER THREE

Findings and Implications

Introduction

I conducted a qualitative single case study to explore agency development for graduates of the ReMerge pre-trial intervention program for women in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. My research involved gathering information through a demographic questionnaire, semi-structured interviews, and a focus group. I gathered data from five ReMerge graduates who fit the determined criteria. Each participant graduated from the program at least one year before the study began, held a full-time job at the time of the study, and was parenting her children without supervision from the state. I considered the theoretical framework central to the study's design throughout the data collection and analysis. In this study, I aimed to evaluate the program's impact on the development of agency of the graduates with a focus on each of the layers of the socio-ecological system. The central research question was: How does participation in the ReMerge program help mothers develop personal agency in relation to each layer of the socio-ecological model? The study showed that graduates from the ReMerge program gained agency in each layer of the socio-ecological system, which affected their behavior and decision-making. In this chapter, I report the analysis of the collected data, identify themes, and compare the findings to existing literature.

This chapter presents the case study's findings in four stages. In the first section, I provide a detailed overview of each embedded unit of analysis within the case, including a comprehensive case description. The case description aligns the data collected with the

layers of the socio-ecological system. Moving on to the second section, I apply framework analysis and outline the codes that emerged from data analysis aligned with the framework. In this section, I also identify the three themes found in the data. The following section discusses the themes within the existing literature. Finally, I reveal the findings and make recommendations for three key stakeholder groups.

Case Description

For this study, I interviewed five ReMerge program graduates who were participants in this study. Each participant served as an embedded unit of analysis in this single case study. Each participant had at least one pending felony charge at the time of their program entry, although the specific charges varied. All five participants graduated from the ReMerge program between 2014 and 2020 and resided in the Oklahoma City metro area. Four participants were employed in the substance abuse treatment and recovery field at the time of this study, and all the women had pursued higher education or career training since completing the program. To protect their identities, I used pseudonyms for the participants: Alice, Cathy, Faye, Jackie, and Sarah. In the following section, I share data from each embedded unit of analysis.

Embedded Unit of Analysis: Alice

At the time of the study, Alice was a 38-year-old married mother of three children ages 17, 15, and 12. Alice graduated from the ReMerge program in 2014. At the time of her entry into the program, she had three felony weapons charges. Following graduation, she spent time in prison on those charges. Alice lost custody of one of her three children, and another family adopted her from state custody. However, at the time of this study, they had reconnected and developed a relationship.

Alice reported that she began using drugs at the age of 12. Her father injected her with methamphetamine for the first time, and her life spiraled downward. She stated that her grandmother significantly positively influenced her life but passed away, and her mother was primarily absent from her childhood. Alice said, “And so like, I didn't have anybody. I didn't think I had anybody. And so, I would always turn to drugs, you know, drugs filled that void for me.” The absence of her caregiver when her grandmother passed away and the use of drugs by her father influenced Alice’s pattern of choices into her adulthood.

The research question in this study was: How does participation in the ReMerge program help mothers develop agency at each layer of the socio-ecological model? To answer this research question for Alice, I collected a demographic questionnaire, conducted an interview, and included Alice and the other participants in a focus group. In the sections to follow, I explore the answer to the research question for each of the layers of the socio-ecological system in the following sections.

Alice’s microsystem. During the interview, Alice described her current microsystem as herself, her husband, and her children. She grew up with her husband but began seeing him while they recovered from drug abuse. She described him as “loyal, faithful, and honest” and stated he was also in recovery from drug and alcohol use. She also reported close relationships with her father and mother-in-law. When asked about how ReMerge has helped her change these relationships, she stated:

Like, you do not have to be stuck right there in that same hole that you've lived your whole life, you know? And like, it just it changes you. It, you could be a better parent, you know, a better sister, mother, daughter, husband, whatever, wife.

During the focus group, Alice reported improved parenting skills after ReMerge. She stated that she is involved in her children's lives, establishes routines while setting boundaries, and knows how to appropriately respond: "If she does something that I don't like or disapprove of, explain to her why I don't like her doing it. And, you know, and giving her praises when she does do good stuff." Alice repeatedly used terminology such as coping skills, boundaries, and support during the interview and focus group. She said she learned this language and its meaning during ReMerge.

Alice's mesosystem. Alice described the importance of her surroundings in maintaining the lessons learned during ReMerge during the interview and focus group. The demographics collected regarding her neighborhood also provide insight into her community. According to the responses from Alice on the questionnaire, she resides in an Oklahoma City zip code with a median income of \$35,870 and an average home value of \$88,200. During the focus group, Alice describes her environment as key to her choices. She stated, "Because your environment is like key. If you wanna do something different, you gotta change your people, places, and things." In the interview, she stated:

When we go to South side, we just feel dirty and feel like we have to get in a mix of the drugs and the people and all that good stuff. But over here at our, on the north side, it's more it's more classy to me. You know, it's got, it's just, it's got, I don't know, there's nice houses, nice neighbors, you know, nice yards. You know, there's stuff that we can go do that's classy, I guess.

During the interview, she described areas of Oklahoma City that she avoids because they remind her of old behaviors and access to drugs. In the interview, she said, "Your environment is, it's everything." Alice relayed her strong opinions regarding the impact of the world around her on her past drug use and her ability to maintain recovery.

During the interview and focus group, Alice reported that her peers, including the ReMerge alumnae network, supported her recovery. She turns to other graduates as a sounding board on parenting, relationships, and other life issues. In the interview, she stated, “I do not feel ashamed of asking for help cause we're human.” She described ReMerge as her “number one support group.” Alice outlined the importance of a network of peers in her sobriety:

Because you being sober, like, there's a, like, okay, so when I'm on drugs, like friendship Mm. I really didn't care if I had friends or not, you know? But being sober now, friends are important as long as they're on the right track and want you to do better. And I learned that from ReMerge because, uh, it opened my eyes a lot because they were like when I was into in. And now that I'm sober, it's like there's a, there is a different kind of friend, you know, friends that actually care and care about your wellbeing.

She stated that “ReMerge is just a, a perfect program for women with children.” Alice describes the emphasis the program places on employment and the assistance she received in obtaining job skills as a factor in her current employment. Her enthusiasm for this aspect of the program was verbalized throughout the interview.

During the interview, she stated she worked full-time in a training program to become a cosmetologist. She has goals to have her own salon, “I wanna eventually open my own shop, but until I'm able to do that, I'll rent a booth and build my clientele and stuff up.” The interview further revealed Alice’s commitment to being part of her children’s community and school life.

We just went to the parent-teacher conference, what, two weeks ago?
Okay. I think it was two weeks ago. Oh my gosh. That was so crazy. I was like, babe, I've never done this. We've never done this before. We've never been in a parenting conference. But it was pretty cool. I felt responsible, you know, <laugh>, I felt like a mom.

Alice credits ReMerge for her financial stability, place in the community and ability to meet the needs of her family. She stated her belief that those providing services for individuals facing jail should have lived experience with substance abuse. When asked in the interview about what people should know about the program, she said:

Make sure that the people, uh, well obviously that there are people that have been there that's done that, you know, get therapists, get therapists or counselors that have lived that life that, that have faith in us, you know, that, um, want better for us. Um, that they just care, not just there for the money. You know, I think it should be a statewide program.

Alice reiterated that the policies around drug use need to be changed and that support should be more readily available. Her commitment to supporting policies that encourage individuals in recovery to support the program was heard in responses in the interview and the focus group.

Alice's *exosystem*. When asked to answer questions regarding services from the state and feelings about law enforcement, Alice stated that her feelings have changed since ReMerge. She relies on support from her network instead of public systems but uses public services such as parks and other places to take her children. When discussing how she copes with needs that are difficult for me, she provided this example of ReMerge as a resource:

I can honestly say that I was in a car wreck, and I reached out to ReMerge. And they did help me, but they put me on a payment plan. So like every month I made a payment. Like I've paid a little lot of time back. So they did help with that. I mean, it helps a lot of things. Not just that, but I'm just saying <laugh>.

When asked about her ability to advocate for herself and others, she again stated in the interview that ReMerge was her source of support in times of need. Alice stated that she does not vote or know who her elected officials are. She indicated mixed feelings about

public officials regarding drug use and assistance. She said, “I’ve got mixed emotions about that because like, just because we’re drug addicts, they automatically shame us, you know?” She also reiterated the importance of having leadership in programs and law enforcement who have personal experience with drug use and criminal activity saying, “get therapist or counselors that have lived that life.”

Alice’s macrosystem. Alice revealed in the interview that public perceptions regarding individuals facing incarceration are damaging but can be changed due to the success of programs like ReMerge. She revealed that harsh treatment of those facing drug charges damages them and their families. Her interview revealed her thoughts about public perceptions:

However, like, they would be like, you are a drug addict. You’re going to jail. You know, you, you deserve to go to prison. Well, no, we don’t, we don’t deserve to go to prison. We deserve help, you know. And um, that’s every time I’d get arrested, I’d go straight to jail and they’d tell me how, what kind of piece of crap I was, because I was a drug addict, you know, I have paraphernalia all over me.

Alice stated that individuals deserve treatment and that laws should be changed to provide more programs like ReMerge to improve the community and the individual’s life. She said society can “make her feel like she is still a drug addict.” However, her experience as a graduate of ReMerge included celebrations of her accomplishments and a “cheering squad” that helped her stay sober.

Summary for Alice. During the interview and focus group, Alice revealed her story leading up to her entry into the ReMerge program, her experience during the program, and how it impacted her life at the time of the interview. She stated how her upbringing and early experience with drug use led her down a path that ultimately

resulted in criminal behavior. She reiterated the importance of the program to her development of agency as an individual and how her relationships are different after graduating from ReMerge. In the focus group, she stated that without ReMerge, “I’d probably be dead. Honestly.” This statement revealed the connection she has to the outcomes of the program.

Alice's focus group and interview responses also connected her individual development during ReMerge and the systems she lives in. She understood the links between her community and her choices when discussing her surroundings. She connected laws, law enforcement, and the needs of individuals with drug charges. Alice discussed how public perceptions and the culture around drug use and those charged with drug crimes are disconnected from the world’s reality.

Embedded Unit of Analysis: Cathy

Cathy graduated from the ReMerge program in 2020 and, at the time of the study, was 30 years of age. In the questionnaire, she reported that she has four children and resides in an area of Oklahoma City. with average family income of \$40,000 to 50,000 and approximately half of the residents were renters, compared with 34% for the rest of the state. Cathy stated during the interview that she has an associate degree in addiction counseling and was employed as a community health worker at the Oklahoma City/County Health Department. She was also a certified peer recovery support specialist at the time of this study.

The research question in this study was: How does participation in the ReMerge program help mothers develop agency at each layer of the socio-ecological model? To answer this research question for Cathy, I collected a demographic questionnaire,

conducted an interview, and included Cathy and the other participants in a focus group. Below, I explore the answer to the research question for each of the layers of the socio-ecological system in the following sections.

Cathy's microsystem. Cathy's answers during the interview revealed that her family of origin includes a history of drug and alcohol use. She was the first member of her family to graduate from high school and attend college. She reported in the interview that she maintained a relationship with her father, even though he continued to use alcohol. However, she had no relationship with her mother because she was deep in addiction. During the focus group, Cathy also verbalized using skills learned from ReMerge to set boundaries in her current personal relationships, including her romantic relationship. At the time of the study, she had a "significant other" but did not live with him and reported "approaching the relationship slowly." Her interview revealed she previously endured an abusive relationship, resulting in periods of homelessness and used drugs and alcohol as coping tools. She said in the interview, "I think it became where like my values were so messed up that I didn't like who I was or how I was living." She went on to describe during the interview how ReMerge had changed her relationships:

I mean, it's, um, it's hard being a, a full-time employee and a mother of four and a friend, a girlfriend, and a daughter. But, you know, a lot of the, the coping skills and the, the things I learned in ReMerge, I still do to this day. Self-care is a big important thing. And I make sure to find time to, you know, stay up for an hour when the kids go to sleep and just read or listen to music and just be by myself.

Another microsystem element Cathy discussed during the interview and focus group was peer relationships. In the interview, she stated, "I do have good friends and support that will help with the kids when I actually need it. That's another big thing in ReMerge. I

learned was that asking for help is okay. Especially when I feel like I'm losing it.” Her interview also revealed that two of her best friends were ReMerge graduates. Cathy’s interview described a shift in her values after attending ReMerge and a change to prioritizing her role as a mother. She said, “We have good friends; they (her children) have good friends. They get to see me be in healthy relationships, and uh, I get to be there for them when they're struggling.” In the focus group, she further revealed her relationship skills shift: “I’m vulnerable and open about myself and my experiences, and I’m not as worried about what they think.” Cathy focused the discussion of her microsystem on friendships.

Cathy’s mesosystem. Cathy discussed elements of her mesosystem during the interview and the focus group, including how the network provided her with the needed support for her recovery. When talking about the program during the interview, she said, “Trying to, trying to figure out how to do all that without ReMerge would've been probably overwhelming. It could have pushed me right back into where I was before.” She mentioned how the program created accountability during her interview:

ReMerge at first is like when your parents are teaching you to ride a bike, they got their hands on the handlebars, and they're telling you exactly how to move your feet and uh, which way to go. But once you start going, they let go <laugh>, um, they are super accountable, which I think is really important in any program, having that accountability and not letting people do those old things that, that kept them from really being healthy or whatever.

Cathy highlighted her ReMerge community and discussed the wider recovery community as vital to her continued success. During her interview, she stated, “The coping skills that you learned, and how do you think that they made you someone who can advocate for yourself and others and your kids.” She discussed during both groups her need to

surround herself with others working through the same challenges. Her interview included this statement:

Yeah, like the recovery community here, although it is hidden, like I would've never knew about it being in addiction or not being a part of it, but it's huge. Like there's so many AA and NA and recovery events and people and communities and um, it's, I really feel like it helps with the stigma of addiction for me.

During the interview, she highlighted her desire to be part of the recovery community to influence others. Cathy said, "Like, no, everything that happened to me was supposed to happen because it's, it's gonna help somebody else get through something." She reported that her experience with ReMerge has made her more aware of the needs of others and how her story can be helpful to others in recovery.

Cathy also described the challenges of navigating the employment world while in recovery. During the focus group she said, "Not everyone is gonna be like, conscious of your trauma and your insecurities, especially at work. And like, they don't care <laugh>." During the interview, she expanded on her challenges at work: "I was expecting that my vulnerability and honesty would get me closer to my coworkers and bosses, and it's not a thing in the professional world." She contradicted this by discussing her current peer recovery support specialist job. During the focus group, she said, "I feel like my experience helped me get my job like <laugh> <laugh>, they were like, oh, you have a felony, and you did drugs, you need to be peer support." Cathy's descriptions of her community indicated community members' differing levels of understanding of the needs of those in recovery based on the experience of community members.

Cathy's exosystem. During the one-on-one interview with Cathy, she described an event that shaped her feelings toward the exosystem she lived in. She realized she

could no longer care for her children at a challenging time during her drug use. Cathy and the children were at a home owned by her mother that was without electricity or water and was in disrepair. She said, “I was like, I need help and I need, need to do something. I have to, I have to change this. I cannot do this anymore. I will die.” In that reported moment of desperation, she knocked on the door of a neighbor’s home. The story continued:

I’m like, no. She was just the closest person to me and I knocked on the door and I was like, I can I use your phone? I really need help. I need, I might need to call DHS, I might, I just need help. And she ended up calling the police and uh, I got arrested. They tried to charge me with abandonment, but I was clearly not trying to abandon them. I was trying to help. We were, I was trying to get us help.

Cathy was arrested for child neglect, and her children were sent to live with her father and stepmother. She stated that she did not have hard feelings toward the neighbor, “And um, so I went to the neighbor from this house that did not know I was a neighbor, I’ll give her that.” She expressed frustration that the local news reported the story of her arrest and dubbed her by a derogatory nickname. However, Cathy said ReMerge helped her address that experience positively by facilitating a follow-up story by the same news channel, highlighting her progress. In the interview, she stated:

Now it’s okay seeing “Mother in recovery, thanks to the stranger for helping her” (in reference to the story). That’s the next story that pops out right after the other one. So at least if I do get Googled there was some positive stuff with it.

Cathy reported that the support of ReMerge resulted in changing the narrative around her experience with the news story from a very negative experience to something she is very proud of.

She credited the experience with the larger community and the news story for expanding her influence. In the interview she stated, “Like my story happened to me so that I could share it and help other people get through the stuff they're going through.” Cathy also expressed a desire to influence other professions to understand recovery better. She said in the focus group, “It's not, we don't choose it. There's something wrong with my brain. <laugh>. And uh, so I think more education with the professionals in the world too. So, they're not so judgmental.” Cathy spoke of the scrutiny of others unfamiliar with recovery as a motivating factor for her desire to influence the stigma of recovery.

Another exosystem element that Cathy discussed was law enforcement. She reported having strong feelings about police officers. At the time of her arrest, “The police officers were awful, and they were mean, and they were rude. Um, so I didn't, I didn't really appreciate that, but I, I kind of, I can put myself in their shoes.” During the interview, she reported her feelings about law enforcement now that she works with them:

I still had problems with police officers for a while, but I mean, I work at the courthouse now and I know a lot of, uh, you know, county officers or guards or, uh, what do they call 'em? Deputies or mm-hmm. <affirmative>. And they're not, they're not all like the people that I had that arrested me. Like they, a lot of 'em are very empathetic too, or sympathetic. Um, a lot of 'em are respectful and so I have a a different view of it.

Cathy reported changed opinions of the elements of the exosystem after the ReMerge program. Her attitude and experiences with the local media and law enforcement were impacted by the skills she learned in ReMerge and the opportunities the program facilitated.

Cathy's macrosystem. The macrosystem element addressed by Cathy during the interview and the focus group was the issue of stigma around addiction and the lack of understanding regarding drug use. One focus group comment was, "The stigma is terrible." During the focus group discussion around societal issues, she provided a specific example regarding a medical procedure where she asked not to be given a narcotic pain reliever:

I was open about being in recovery and was kind of picky about what they said; I did not want fentanyl. Moreover, they basically told me that that's what I'm getting or they're not gonna do it. And it was terrible. And I was like, man, what <laugh> And like, it would've been better if I wouldn't have said anything cuz then I'm sitting here feeling embarrassed and put down because I was in addiction and like, man, I am almost four years sober, and you guys are making me feel like I'm not sober. Yeah. Like I, you know, am still doing it.

The concept of stigma around drug users and those in recovery was repeated during the interview and the focus group. Cathy reported hoping her story can change broad society, specifically with other professionals serving individuals with substance abuse disorders.

Summary for Cathy. Questionnaire responses, interview discussions, and focus group statements provided by Cathy provided a glimpse into her experiences before ReMerge and the changes in her since attending the program. She provided a detailed account of her family of origin and her current relationships as evidence of the influence of the microsystem on her past and present choices and behaviors. Cathy's interview responses and the interactions with her peers during the focus group provided evidence of her network of support and friends created by ReMerge's participation. She highlighted the accountability included in the program and how it impacted her choices. Cathy reflected on the importance of the recovery community to her continued success as a

program graduate. She revealed several challenges around employment created by the stigma around drug use and abuse.

Cathy saw the stigma that can be created when she was the subject of a news story by a local television station. She outlined how ReMerge stepped in to assist her in changing the narrative around her story and used that as a platform for creating change. She expressed concern about the stigma of drug use and abuse as the most critical macrosystem factor to her and her continued recovery.

Embedded Unit of Analysis: Faye

At the time of the study, Faye was a case manager for a drug and alcohol treatment facility. She graduated from ReMerge in 2016 and, at the time of the study, is 36 years old. She considered herself white, the daughter of an American mother and a father of Iranian descent. Faye's children were ages 14 and nine at the time of the study, and they resided in Yukon, a suburb of Oklahoma City. The area's median home value was \$143,200, and the average family income was between \$80,000 and \$100,000 in 2022, lower than the surrounding zip codes. Faye was employed full-time and was engaged at the time of the interview. While sharing a cell in county jail, she learned about the ReMerge program and wrote letters to the program director asking to be considered. Faye reported being a nine-time convicted felon. She was arrested for the first time at just 18 years of age.

Faye's microsystem. During the interview and focus group, Faye reported relationship changes based on skills she learned in ReMerge. In the focus group, she outlined the importance of surrounding herself with like-minded people, identifying

relationship red flags, establishing boundaries, and being open to constructive criticism as skills she developed while in the program. She described the process:

They helped me realize that I could be just a strong, independent mom standing on my own two feet, didn't need, you know, the man or anything at that time, that I was capable and able to do it on my own and, you know, be a good mom and take care of these kids and all of that.

Faye stressed her role as a mother during the interview and focus group and stated in the interview, "My family is my life." Her motivation for seeking a spot in the ReMerge program was partially the loss of one of her children to the state when the child entered foster care. However, she stated that the foster family had become part of her support network:

Like the foster parents that fostered [my son] for those 14 months when she's the little one. They are still, they're a part of our lives. We're really close and just, yeah, the relationships and all this is crazy and beautiful.

During the interview and focus group, Faye credited ReMerge for her financial and relationship stability. During the interview, Faye listed her sister, co-workers, and family as her most significant support when describing the rest of her support system. She says her friends are primarily from the ReMerge program. Faye also stated that her fiancé supports her recovery and that they have bought a home together and built a good life.

Faye's exosystem. During the interview, Faye outlined her involvement in the addiction treatment field. At the time of the interview, Faye was a case manager helping others with addiction. She reported enjoying watching others succeed and acting as a mentor. "But I show up every day for people like me. I mean, that's, that's why I'm there." She sees a career path before her: "I know it is actually a possibility, you know, and

hopefully, it's only going up.” Faye reported plans to continue working in the field and to continue her education in order to obtain additional credentials.

Faye also reported continuing to stay involved with ReMerge. In her interview, she said, “So yes, that is, I stay connected with ReMerge. I'm, I am currently, um, on the graduate committee board.” She says that the environment created by ReMerge continues to be important in her life and that the program's commitment to helping women succeed establishes a sense of community beneficial to them all. The program also encourages participants to give back to the community. Faye reported during her interview that giving back is particularly important to her, and she involved her children in activities in the community:

We love to give back. That is something ReMerge did teach us, um, at that in ReMerge we're, I think required to do volunteer time, but just in doing it, the filling that I got from giving back instead of putting in bad, you know, and ruining a community, um, is huge. So I've tried to instill that in my kids. Like, we drive downtown sometimes, you know, go pass out water gloves or things like that. Like, so just the, the feeling that my heart gets when I get to give back is crazy. And I got that from ReMerge, so appreciate that.

During her interview, Faye spoke of the program's impact on relationships with peers and the community. During the focus group discussion, she reported involving her children in community activities, remaining active in the ReMerge after-care program, and a commitment to her work in the addiction recovery field.

Faye's mesosystem. Faye's interview responses revealed her thoughts regarding her mesosystem element of law enforcement and the legal system. Faye stated that the threat of going to prison was part of why she was interested in the ReMerge program. In the interview, she said, “It was the going to prison knowing I knew in my heart and mind

that that, you know, that was not the life I was meant to live.” Even though she reported feeling ReMerge positively influenced her life, the circumstances surrounding her arrests shaped her thoughts about law enforcement. She said in the interview, “But the law, you know, the police officers, they don't really care.” Since completing ReMerge, she stated during the interview that her feelings about law enforcement had changed slightly, but she still feels that many of her charges should not be felonies or may no longer be felonies. She said, “(ReMerge) taught me to not only advocate for myself today but to be able to advocate for others.” In the interview, she expressed her growth as an advocate for herself and others from skills learned in the program.

Faye’s advocacy extends to becoming a voter and desiring to learn more about political leaders. She said during the interview, “I voted here for the last, I mean, for the first time. I didn't know it, I could vote yet. Um, I thought I would never be able to vote since I was a felon.” She reported that she intends to be a regular voter and to participate in elections whenever there is an election.

Faye’s macrosystem. The macrosystem element addressed by Faye was the stigma of addiction and people in recovery. In the focus group, Faye expressed hopefulness regarding the stigma of addiction in society; she said, “I think that society has grown as far as, you know, how they look at addiction and things like that.” She described a desire for others to succeed in their recovery through programs like ReMerge. She discussed a desire to see the program be in more places than just the large metropolitan areas in Oklahoma.

Summary for Faye. The interview, focus group, and questionnaire responses outlined the agency developed during Faye's participation in the ReMerge program. Faye reported maintaining healthy relationships and a solid connection to the program. She also described how the program helped her build a positive relationship with her child's former foster family. Faye attributed her interpersonal skills to ReMerge.

Faye reported relationship-building skills that significantly impacted her work in the addiction and recovery field. She strongly desired to serve others and had set clear goals to assist them in their recovery journey. Faye's commitment to helping others was further demonstrated by her active participation in voting and advocating for reducing the stigma surrounding addiction in the community. She was optimistic about the changing attitudes towards addiction and hoped to play a significant role in this positive change.

Embedded Unit of Analysis: Jackie

Jackie was an early graduate of the ReMerge program and completed it in 2014. At the time of this research, she was 39 and had one 20-year-old daughter. Jackie went to jail several times before turning herself in to face incarceration when offered participation in the program. She reported growing up with parents who used drugs and alcohol, and she smoked weed in her early teens. Jackie became a mother when she was 18 but completed high school and married. Jackie, her daughter, and her husband lived in an Oklahoma City suburb. At the time of this study, the average income for the area was between \$30,000 and \$40,000, and the average home value was \$85,600. Both statistics were lower than the surrounding zip codes. Jackie was a paralegal working in the Oklahoma County District Attorney's Office as support staff at the time of this research.

The research question in this study was: How does participation in the ReMerge program help mothers develop agency at each layer of the socio-ecological model? To answer this research question for Jackie, I collected a demographic questionnaire, conducted an interview, and included Jackie and the other participants in a focus group. Below, I explore the answer to the research question for each of the layers of the socio-ecological system in the following sections.

Jackie's microsystem. When discussing her microsystem during the interview, Jackie listed her daughter, husband, mother, AA sponsor, and the ReMerge continuing care program. She stated that her mother showed her unwavering support during her interactions with law enforcement and verbalized her commitment to Jackie with the phrase "because you are worth it." During the focus group, she said that after the program, she has a more authentic relationship with others and is intentional about spending time with friends. During the interview, she verbalized why the ReMerge continuing care program is essential to her nine years after her graduation:

RCC (ReMerge Continuing Care) kind of helped me stay with the community, um, because I get to see and engage with other people who have been through a similar experience. After all, that's the number one thing that nobody can understand what it's like to go through the program better than another part.

Jackie said her involvement with ReMerge taught her how to have relationships based on growth and trust. She stated that the skills she learned are essential in every aspect of her daily life.

Jackie's mesosystem. The mesosystem elements Jackie discussed included her employer, her desire to give back to the ReMerge program, and her concerns about the

abrupt end to services for program participants. Jackie worked for the Oklahoma County District Attorney's office at the time of this research. She stated it was important to her to work for an employer that understands addiction, saying during the interview, "I haven't relapsed yet. Um, but I needed a job that, in case I did relapse, will give the opportunity to go to rehab, first. <laugh>." The district attorney was familiar with her criminal involvement and offered her employment without a background check.

Working at the District Attorney's Office has allowed Jackie to remain close to others in recovery and to serve them while on staff. She also services participants in the ReMerge program, expressing a commitment to maintaining sobriety by teaching others the skills she has developed. During the interview, she stated:

I teach a class at ReMerge on every Monday because the only way I can keep what I have is by giving it away. And if anybody can see what a slice of this life can look like, I want them to see that. I want them to see that it's possible.

Jackie's concern for current program participants and the individuals she interacts with at the District Attorney's office was evident in her responses. During the focus group, she said, "I wish that the aftercare was more of a, uh, step down from program as opposed to just a, Hey, good luck. Call you if you need us <laugh>." Jackie's interview and focus group responses expressed her commitment to "giving back," a need for an employer that understands recovery and a continuing connection to the ReMerge program.

Jackie's exosystem. During the interview and focus group, Jackie articulated a belief that substance abuse is hidden in many social groups and has a stigma that inhibits recovery and support for those with addiction disorders. She stated during the interview that society pushes individuals with addiction to the side. She expressed frustration with

finding spaces where recovery is integrated into the community. During the interview, she said, “Well because nobody wants 'em in their neighborhood either. So, you can't get into a safe neighborhood where you can feel safe sleeping at night.” During the focus group, she articulated and understood areas of the city where she did not feel safe. Jackie mentioned areas of Oklahoma City during the focus group where she would not want to live because it does not feel safe. She expressed frustration with the portion of the exosystem that manages the response to criminal activity. Jackie felt that she should have been offered a treatment program much earlier in her experiences with law enforcement. During the focus group, she also expressed her concern for the classification of some charges, stating that minor violations could become violent felonies due to the circumstances. Jackie’s responses during the interview and focus group included a concern for safe spaces to live and earlier treatment options as exosystem elements.

Jackie’s macrosystem. During the focus group, Jackie expressed her views regarding the stigma associated with individuals involved with the criminal justice system and those in recovery. She also articulated the desire to see recovery become a more integrated part of society. She said during the focus group:

Well, I know the loss of the stigma attached to having had, uh, experience in the criminal justice system, you know, or having, you know, being a recovering junkie, like there's just so much stigma and negativity connotation attached with it.

During the focus group, she referred to recovery support groups such as AA being more readily available, stating, “People can make a meeting wherever they want. Like it doesn't have to be in a designated building.” Stigma reduction and access to support integrated

into the community were the macrosystem elements referred to in the interview and focus group.

Summary for Jackie. During Jackie's interview and participation in the focus group, along with information received from a questionnaire, Jackie provided insight into her experience with the ReMerge program. During the one-on-one interview, she revealed her story before participating in the ReMerge program. She stressed the importance of the support of her mother and improved relationships with her family since graduating from ReMerge. Jackie discussed her employment at the Oklahoma County District Attorney's office and her changing perception of law enforcement after ReMerge. She expressed a desire to see recovery programs include services after completion and the importance of the ReMerge after-care program to her continued sobriety and strong peer relationships. Jackie voiced concern with the macrosystem element of societal stigma around addiction and recovery and how integrating treatment into society could result in better outcomes.

Embedded Unit of Analysis: Sarah

Sarah was a 2014 graduate of the ReMerge program. At the time of this study, she was the 42-year-old mother of a 14-year-old daughter employed as a recovery counselor for a drug and alcohol treatment center. At the time of her entry into the ReMerge program, Sarah faced sixteen felony charges in two cases. Before program entry, she used methamphetamine, had dropped out of college, and had a child. Sara reported beginning drug use in her early 20s and said she had no family history of drug and alcohol abuse. She stated that she always felt disconnected from the culture in the community she grew up in after moving to Oklahoma from California as a child.

The research question in this study was: How does participation in the ReMerge program help mothers develop agency at each layer of the socio-ecological model? To answer this research question for Sarah, I collected a demographic questionnaire, conducted an interview, and included Sarah and the other participants in a focus group. Below, I explore the answer to the research question for each of the layers of the socio-ecological system in the following sections.

Sarah's microsystem. Sarah discussed a strong network of support included in her microsystem. She stated during the interview that after graduating from the program, she has a good relationship with her daughter and co-parents with her father. She credited her daughter's father and her parents with handling the burden of parenting while she was an active drug user. During the focus group, Sarah reported healthy relationships with her peers. She said, "I call them soul sisters that they're part of my tribe." She described her feelings about current relationships and the ReMerge program:

I would not be here without ReMerge, you know, which is why I still actively participate in our CC (continuing care). That's part of my self-care. You know, me and some of the other girls that graduate, like, we make a joke where we call ourselves, you know—OG's.

During the interview, she said of her fellow ReMerge graduates, "And these are real friendships, um, that I never even thought existed." During the interview, she said, "(I) tell the clients all the time that this version of Sarah that I am today, I couldn't have gotten here without those 12 years of addiction." Sarah credits her time in addiction and the resulting time in the ReMerge program with building her as a woman.

Sarah's mesosystem. Sarah resided in an area of Oklahoma City with a median income below the Oklahoma City median income of \$59,679. Average home values for

the region were between \$70,000 and \$80,000. During the interview and focus group, she spoke of the importance of the environment in choices and health behaviors. In the interview, she said, “Your environment is everything, especially for people in recovery.” Sarah revealed concern for the area of Oklahoma City where she resides. During her interview, she said, “I can't rest easy because of my environment that's around me.” She also revealed during the interview the importance of the ReMerge network to her ability to change her surroundings. A supporter of the program allowed Sarah to rent a house. She said, “An environment is a big deal. Like that is the that's huge. When it comes to your, your, your maintained recovery is where you work, where you live, all of those things.” Sarah reiterated during the interview an understanding of the importance of the environment for those in recovery. The interview revealed her concerns for former felons when securing housing.

Another mesosystem element Sarah discussed during her interview and the focus group was employment. During the focus group discussion on work, Sarah expressed that she feels like it is “fighting an uphill battle” to find a job with charges on her record. She stated she got an education to try to insulate herself from the negatives of her past when seeking employment. Sarah discussed the resources ReMerge provides to assist participants and graduates with employment searches. During the interview, she said:

That's what sets this program apart from other programs is that the graduates still can reach into their program and be like, help me. I need assistance with this A, B, and C. And the program's willing to do what they can to connect you to the resources they are connected to.

Sarah's understanding of individuals in recovery is seen in her expressions of concern for those she works with professionally and the relationships she demonstrated during the focus group discussion.

During the interview and the focus group, Sarah discussed her past and current observations about law enforcement. During the interview, she said:

A lot of people in recovery, especially the criminal justice involved. They have a really sour case in their mouth against our police officers. I do not. I can't really say a whole lot of negative things about the policing that we have here in our major metropolitan areas.

During the interview, Sarah said that she does not blame law enforcement for her arrests and supports them when they treat people well in the community. Sarah has a good relationship with her ReMerge peers and continues participating in the program. She credits the program for assisting her and other participants with housing and employment issues created by criminal history. She supports law enforcement and interacts with offices in her current role as an employee.

Sarah's exosystem. Sarah's interview revealed activities related to her exosystem, including advocacy work for her clients and interests. She stated during the interview, "I do a lot of advocacy work." Sarah sits on the parent partnership board for the Oklahoma Commission on Children and Youth. During the interview, she stated that she represents a parent in recovery with the group of state leaders reviewing and evaluating policy in Oklahoma. She discussed her understanding of political events and the relationship between policy and her life experience. During the interview, she stated, "Oklahoma is going backwards very quickly, and that does impact me." While visiting with the other focus group members, she said, "I feel like we should be letting people know that you cannot expect rehabilitation from people in recovery and then put all the barriers in the way." She went on to say:

And so, there is a societal expectation that we are to be productive members of society. But the way society is built, it is very difficult to do

that. And which you'll see a lot of recidivism for that reason. It's like you cannot expect people to reintegrate into society of society. It's not set up for success.

This comment was made when the group discussed how the community can be more supportive of individuals in recovery. Sarah said that her opinions are not just based on her experience. Her work in recovery provides insight into the challenges others face after drug addiction and criminal activity.

Sarah's macrosystem. During both the focus group and the interview, Sarah spoke of the stigma of individuals with criminal records and the stigma for those with drug use histories and how this macrosystem element inhibits recovery. During the focus group, she said:

And so it's just trying to get society to catch up to the fact that, you know, if you've got 10 of us standing in a line, I guarantee you eight of us have, you know, a recovery story and that it's more common than not. Um, and these, these things need to be talked about, um, because it is different for us.

She expressed frustration with how few resources are provided for prevention and how society wants to separate those with drug use from general society. She stated that there was a denial of the prevalence of drug use in society, contributing to the stigma.

Summary for Sarah. During her interview and focus group, Sarah shared how ReMerge positively impacted her life within the different layers of her socio-ecological system. After completing the program, the questionnaire provided additional context, and she reported improved relationships and parenting skills. Sarah considers the network of peers she gained from ReMerge her support system and refers to them as her "tribe." Though she initially struggled with finding employment, education helped her overcome

these difficulties. She believed that individuals with lived experience should staff the treatment field. Since completing ReMerge, her opinion of law enforcement has improved, and she now advocates for others using the lessons learned. Sarah also discussed the stigma associated with substance abuse and recovery and how society often denies its prevalence in specific segments.

Within-Case Analysis

In this section, I provide an overview of the analysis I conducted. I began analyzing this single case study by thoroughly reviewing the collected data. I checked the information provided in the questionnaire, read the transcripts of individual interviews, and watched the focus group recording several times. Baxter and Jack (2015) say that reviewing multiple perspectives on the same issue can be achieved by a review of embedded units.

The data I collected for this study from ReMerge graduates revealed 11 emerging codes related to agency development. The prevalence of the codes found from the theoretical code review appears in Table 3.1.

Table 3.1

Prevalence of Codes

Theory Code	Code	Alice	Cathy	Faye	Jackie	Sarah
Micro	Communication skills	x	x	x	x	x
	Coping skills	x		x		x
	Parenting skill	x	x	x	x	x
Meso	Environment	x	x	x	x	x
	ReMerge support systems	x	x	x	x	x
	Employment/career	x	x		x	x
	Providers/lived experience	x		x	x	x
	Giving to others		x	x		x
Exo	Law enforcement perception	x	x	x	x	x
	Advocacy			x	x	x
Macro	Stigma	x	x	x	x	x

The theoretical framework mesosystem produced five additional themes: environment or surroundings, ReMerge support systems, employment/career, treatment providers with lived experience, and giving back to others and the community. The exosystem code review created the two additional themes of law enforcement perceptions and advocacy work. Finally, the review of macrosystem elements indicated the other theme of the public stigma of drug recovery as the agency development influence on the participants.

Microsystem Themes

In a review of the microsystem element evidence of agency development, three themes emerged: communication skill development, coping skill development, and parenting skill development. Skill development in these areas is a key component of the program and is integrated into the treatment protocol, group sessions, and the individual participant's goals.

Communication skill development. The first theme to emerge was the development of improved communication skills. The participants reported developing additional vocabulary and demonstrated using shared language when discussing boundaries, self-care, and recovery. Each of the five participants spoke about improving their communication skills and the impact of those new skills on their relationships. Alice said during her interview, "And like, it just, it changes you. It, you could be a better parent, you know, a better sister, mother, daughter, husband, whatever, wife." Cathy also verbalized during the interview that she uses skills learned from ReMerge to set boundaries in her current personal relationships. In the focus group, Faye outlined the importance of surrounding herself with like-minded people, identifying relationship red

flags, establishing boundaries, and being open to constructive criticism as skills she developed while in the program. Jakie described her relationships as growing in trust through better communication.

Coping skill development. During the focus group, a lively discussion occurred, with the participants laughing over their use of buzzwords from the program, such as self-care and boundaries. The participants repeated the phrase “coping skills” during their interviews. Alice used the phrase coping skills when discussing her relationships, especially her family relationships. During the focus group, Jackie said that after the program, she has a more authentic relationship with others and is intentional about spending time with friends. During her interview, Cathy learned that asking for help was ok and had developed coping skills to advocate for her children.

Parenting skill development. Asking for help and improving parenting skills was another theme that emerged from the data collected. Alice reported improved parenting skills after ReMerge during her interview. When asked about her role as a mother, Cathy said, “We have good friends; they (her children) have good friends. They get to see me be in healthy relationships, and uh, I get to be there for them when they're struggling.” Faye and Cathy discussed specific feelings about their ability to be better mothers. Faye stated in the interview that ReMerge made her feel capable of caring for her children.

Each of the participants provided information about their children in the questionnaire. None of the participants were involved with the child welfare system, and they each reported having a parenting relationship with their children. At the time of the research, the participants were actively engaged in parenting children of varying ages.

Improved parenting skills and confidence in their ability as mothers also included a better understanding of the environment.

Mesosystem Themes

Environment. The participants disclosed that the ReMerge program enhanced their comprehension of how their environment and surroundings influence their decision-making and actions. Alice emphasized during her interview that one's environment is critical to making changes, stating, "If you wanna do something different, you gotta change your people, places, and things." Cathy and Jackie also expressed concerns regarding their neighborhood's safety and certain areas of the city that trigger memories of past drug use.

Insight into the environment the participants lived in during the study provided further insight into the importance of environment on recovery. During her interview, Sarah extensively discussed her living situation, emphasizing the importance of one's environment, especially for those in recovery, stating, "Your environment is everything." She went on to say that "environment is a big deal." She discussed how where you live and work impact her decisions.

ReMerge after-care support. The next emerging theme was the continued connection with the ReMerge program and the support received through after-care participation. Each participant reported participating in ReMerge's continuing care program, which they call RCC. Alice described ReMerge as her "number one support group" during her interview. Cathy said, "Trying to figure out how to do all that without ReMerge would've been probably overwhelming. It could have pushed me right back into

where I was before.” Jackie’s interview revealed a commitment to the program by teaching a class to current participants.

The participants described how the ReMerge continuing care program strengthens their support system. Faye stated that the environment created by ReMerge continues to be important in her life and that the program's commitment to helping women succeed establishes a sense of community benefits for them all. During the focus group, Sarah expressed her feelings about continued involvement with ReMerge by saying, “I call them soul sisters that they're part of my tribe.” The participants used various terms to describe a close group of female friends they rely on for support and encouragement.

Employment. The next theme from the data collection was ReMerge support for employment and the employment challenges for those in recovery. All the participants’ questionnaires indicated that they were employed full-time, and each had completed or attempted a higher education or specialized training program since graduating from ReMerge. However, challenges in the employment environment remained. During the focus group, Cathy said, “Not everyone is gonna be like, conscious of your trauma and insecurities, especially at work. And like, they don't care <laugh>.” During her interview, Jackie expressed a similar sentiment, saying that working for an employer that understands addiction was essential to her.

Four of the five participants worked in the treatment and recovery field, and Sarah expressed that this occurred because finding work outside of the field felt more difficult due to a lack of understanding of addiction and recovery for most employers. The participants indicated that those in the recovery field are friendlier to hiring individuals

with criminal charges and that exclusion from some career fields based on their criminal history seems unfair.

Providers with lived experience. Like the emergence of the concern around employment, another theme surfaced regarding the participants' opinions regarding treatment providers with lived recovery experience. Alice emphasized during her interview that programs should “get therapists or counselors that have lived that life.” Sarah verbalized her belief in the importance of lived experience in both the interview and focus group. She stressed that her experience is central to her work as an employee in a treatment program.

During the focus group, Cathy stated the importance of education for professionals in the treatment field, saying, “It's not, we don't choose it. There's something wrong with my brain. <laugh>. And uh, so I think more education with the professionals in the world too. So they're not so judgmental.” The participants' comments closely linked the themes of providers with lived experience and the stigma surrounding recovery and those living in recovery.

Desire to give back to the community. Another theme the data revealed was a commitment to giving back and supporting others developed during the program. During the interview, Fay reported joy in watching others succeed and acting as a mentor for others in recovery. She said, “We love to give back. That is something ReMerge did teach us, um, at that in ReMerge we're, I think required to do volunteer time, but just in doing it, the filling that I got from giving back instead of putting in bad.” Jackie teaches a

class for the ReMerge program and states, “the only way I can keep what I have is by giving it away.”

The participants revealed a belief that the events of their past contribute to their desire to be a positive part of the community. Cathy’s interview revealed her commitment to serve others when she said, “Like, no, everything that happened to me was supposed to happen because it's, it's gonna help somebody else get through something.” Each participant referenced helping others, supporting the community, and giving back during the interviews and focus group.

Exosystem Themes

Law enforcement interactions. When asked about criminal justice involvement during the interviews and focus groups, the participants revealed attitudes and opinions regarding law enforcement. These data became the following code and were a mesosystem component of the socio-ecological system. When discussing law enforcement, Cathy said, “Like they, a lot of 'em are very empathetic too, or sympathetic. Um, a lot of 'em are respectful and so I have a a different view of it.” When discussing her interactions with law enforcement, Jackie felt that she should have been offered a treatment program much earlier in her experiences with law enforcement. Sarah said that she does not blame law enforcement for her arrests and supports them when they treat people well in the community.

The discussions of law enforcement and the changes that have occurred in laws in many jurisdictions around the legalization of drugs did not indicate a direct link to the participant’s opinions about law enforcement. However, Faye stated during her interview

that the threat of going to prison was part of why she was interested in the ReMerge program. The participants' agency development and ability to evaluate their environment is reflected in their observations about law enforcement.

Advocacy. During the interviews and focus group discussions, the participants shared how ReMerge influenced their ability and willingness to advocate for themselves and others, particularly in the mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem layers. I labeled this emergent theme advocacy. Cathy hoped her experience with ReMerge could positively change society, especially among professionals working with individuals struggling with substance abuse disorders. Faye credited ReMerge for teaching her to advocate not just for herself but also for others. Sarah shared that she is actively involved in advocacy work.

Macrosystem Theme

The final theme revealed the stigma around drug abuse, addiction, and recovery. While exploring the macrosystem, this was repeated by each of the participants. Cathy expressed the group's thoughts during the focus group when she stated, "The stigma is terrible." In the focus group, Faye expressed hopefulness regarding the stigma of addiction in society; she said, "I think that society has grown as far as, you know, how they look at addiction and things like that." Alice stated that society can still make her feel like a drug addict. Jackie articulated the desire to see recovery become a more integrated part of society. Jackie said, "I feel like we should be letting people know that you cannot expect rehabilitation from people in recovery and then put all the barriers in the way." Stigma and the perceptions of society regarding to capacity of individuals in

recovery to reintegrate into society reoccurred throughout the interviews and the focus group.

Bronfenbrenner's (1992) socio-ecological systems theory provides a broad framework of the impact individuals have on their system and the impact the system may have on the individual. Each element that emerged as an influence on the participants' agency development corresponded with one or more of the layers of the socio-ecological system where they lived. Socio-ecological system layers are both tangible and intangible and influence individuals' experiences. I have identified three critical thematic interpretations of the participants' agency development by analyzing the themes from theoretical framework analysis. Figure 3.1 demonstrates the links between the theory and the emerging themes.

While analyzing the microsystem and mesosystem elements, I discovered the first thematic interpretation: the significance of developing personal relationship skills. Interpersonal skill development emerged when participants connected their roles as parents and communicators with their experiences and curriculum in the program. The curriculum of ReMerge included interpersonal skill training as a foundational element. The participants shared a common language regarding setting boundaries, practicing self-care, and communicating with others learned in the program. Participants also reported the opportunity to practice these skills with other participants, staff, and their personal lives. I derived the theoretical statement from this theme: ReMerge program graduates cultivate interpersonal skills, improving their agency.

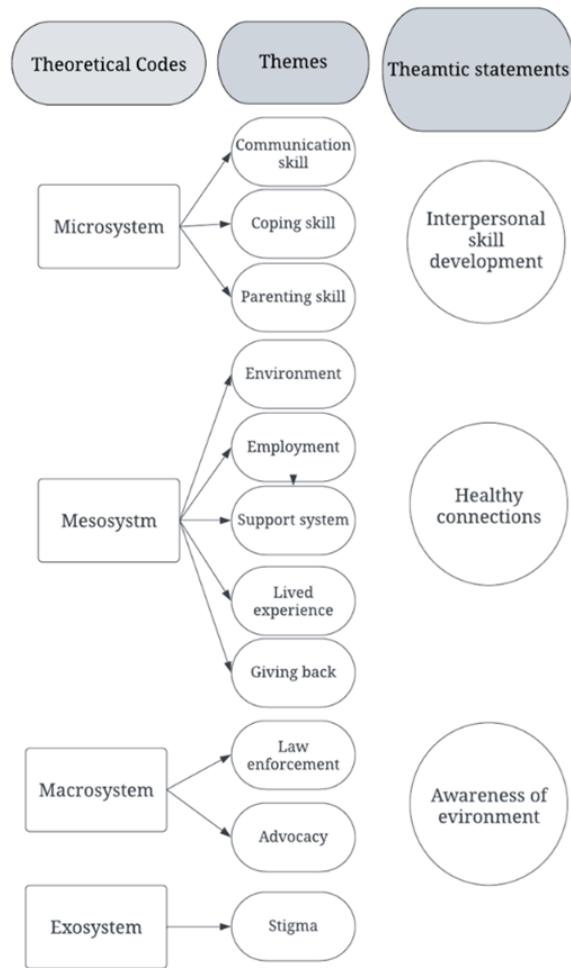


Figure 3.1. Flow chart from theoretical codes to themes.

I discovered that the second thematic interpretation was building healthy connections to the community. The theme of healthy connections was evident in the microsystem, mesosystem, and exosystem components. When participants discussed their roles as parents, partners, community members, and employees, the theme of building healthy connections with others emerged. The participants reported improved connections with microsystem elements of family, friends, and children. I developed the statement: Developing healthy connections supports the development of personal agency

for ReMerge graduates. Evidence of agency development for healthy relationships emerged in the descriptions of each participant's work relationships and ability to remain employed in a career. Furthermore, data I collected revealed the theme when participants spoke of their desires to advocate for others and to maintain connections with other graduates in the program. The participants described the individuals they chose to interact with as a support system and verbalized the development of agency in these choices. This theme was the most prominent in the data and each participant spoke of support systems at each layer of the socio-ecological system.

Lastly, the data revealed an awareness of one's surroundings and the ability to evaluate how the environment could impact the participants' choices. I developed the following thematic statement to summarize this theme: ReMerge graduates demonstrate agency when assessing the influence of their surroundings on their choices and behaviors. The skill to evaluate the environment emerged as a theme in the participants' responses across mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem elements. Participants verbalized the need for individuals in recovery to be able to live in the world while maintaining the capacity to place themselves in situations that support their recovery. The environmental evaluation was also evident in the perceptions of law enforcement verbalized by the participants and their desire for service providers to have lived experience with recovery. Agency development during the ReMerge program informed the participants of the stigma around recovery and how stigma can impact policy choices, law enforcement interactions, family systems, service delivery, and other influences on individuals' preferences and behaviors. Participants linked their ReMerge experience with their ability

better to understand their physical environment and the perceptions of others and to use their understanding when making choices.

Socio-ecological systems theory includes the evaluation of human behaviors as interactions with the world around them (Bronfenbrenner, 1992). In this study, the model provided a framework for exploring the participants' agency development in the ReMerge program. Several themes emerged that led to three thematic interpretations of the data. Participants developed agency through the development of interpersonal skills. Each participant in the study reported connections to their community, and during ReMerge, they began to evaluate their environment to determine the impact on their behavior. The layers of the socio-ecological system for each participant played a role in the development of agency during their time in the program and after graduation.

Discussion

In this section, I examine the relationship between the findings gathered from the data and the existing literature, focusing on three main themes. As per Creswell and Poth's (2018) recommendations, this research phase is crucial in comprehending the themes' significance and descriptions. The purpose of this case study was to utilize the socio-ecological system framework to investigate how the ReMerge program impacted program graduates' sense of agency. One primary research question guided this study: How does participation in the ReMerge program help mothers develop personal agency in relation to each layer of the socio-ecological model? Evidence emerged in my research linking agency development to each layer of the socio-ecological system. First, I discuss interpersonal skill development, which leads to better relationships. I also explore how interpersonal skill development relates to the available literature regarding improving

outcomes for women and their children. Next, I delve into the literature regarding community connections and agency development. Lastly, I review the literature on how the environment and surroundings impact behavior and decision-making.

Theme 1: Interpersonal Skill Development

In this section, I discuss the first theme: the impact of ReMerge participation on personal agency through interpersonal skill development. Much of the literature emphasizes trauma's effect on parenting skills and familial relationships. Moore et al. (2020) and Brew (2022) describe the intersection of negative experiences from early trauma and self-stigma impacting behavior and self-valuation. Additionally, much of the literature focuses on the negative impact of trauma on children without a focus on skill development to mitigate trauma, even though research states parents receive cues and inputs from the socio-ecological system surrounding them that shape their beliefs and their children's future. Sawrikar et al. (2020) outline the connection mothers receive from their surroundings as an influence on their parenting skills. Furthermore, research indicates that people learn and grow by experiencing success and failure, which helps them develop new skills and competencies (Shankar et al., 2019). In summary, research indicates that changing the outcome trajectory for mothers and their children needs interventions that address the unique needs of justice-involved women and address the formation of relationships.

The data in this study revealed that ReMerge interventions taught interpersonal skills and developed agency for the participants. The findings are consistent with Cross et al. (2017), which indicate that developing protective factors through intervention can improve the cognitive flexibility needed to establish a sense of agency, resulting in

improved outcomes for the individual and strong interpersonal relationships necessary for effective parenting. Chang et al. (2019) also iterate that agentic thinking is the product of positive psychological adjustment and skill development. The skill development approach to address trauma is consistent with the findings of Giano et al. (2020), who find that trauma-informed interventions can mitigate the impact of trauma.

Agency can be developed through training and by learning from others. Davidson Ared et al. (2020; 2013) and Bazzani (2022) support the development of agency through skill development. Literature also supports the impact of trauma-informed skill training on the development of agency. These findings are consistent with much of the available research.

Theme 2: Connection to the Community

Data analysis revealed that community connections are crucial in developing participant agency. This theme is supported by existing literature, which suggests that individuals' beliefs about themselves and their abilities are shaped by cues and inputs from the socioeconomic system surrounding them. Research conducted by van Minde et al. (2021), Albanese et al. (2019), and Engelhardt et al. (2019) indicate that environmental factors in the community influence cognitive ability and skill development in individuals. Strong interpersonal relationships are also supported by community assets, as found by Chang et al. (2019), Cross et al. (2017), and Ribar (2015). Duncan et al. (2022) find that due Group interventions are valuable for agency development due to the collective and cumulative forces of shared experiences and similar socio-ecological systems. Research also shows that strong community connections are crucial for developing agency. Socio-ecological factors such as financial struggles, housing

problems, employment, and transportation can negatively impact agency growth (Baxter et al., 2017). Experts like Sawrikar et al. (2020), Bandura (2018), Snyder (2005), and Yoon (2019) find that external messages and cues from the community can influence an individual's internalized messages, ultimately shaping their development of agency.

Previous studies have not found evidence to support the importance of agency development of the participants' strong bond with the community formed within the ReMerge program's Continuing Care. While some research, such as that conducted by Brady et al. (2022), Robertson et al. (2020), and Thomas (2020), show that self-agency can be developed through programs that focus on socio-ecological systems changes and skill building, the connection to the network formed within the program has not been highlighted in past findings. However, Bazzani's (2022) research indicates that building agency does not necessarily require intensive therapy. This reinforces the participants' revelation that their connection to the program and the network it provides is crucial to their recovery and agency development.

Theme 3: Awareness of Surroundings

The third theme that emerged was the participants' awareness of the importance of the environment and the impact of stigma on their recovery. Awareness of the stigma surrounding addiction and recovery was the macrosystem element that emerged and was the most prominent single theme among each participant. This theme is loosely related to previous research and supported by general findings in the literature regarding agency development and social systems. Schact et al. (2018) find that elements of the macrosystem, such as cultural factors, influence individuals. Bronfenbrenner's research establishes links between geo-political factors, general societal expectations, and the

themes of broad cultures as influences on individuals (Bronfenbrenner, 1992; Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998).

According to Van Wormer and Bartollas (2000), women are significantly impacted by the society in which they live and are influenced by societal norms. Bazzani (2022) finds that mothers experience an increased influence from the SES and stronger tendencies to conform to social standards, impacting agency development. Community assets positively impact agency development (Gartland et al., 2019), and mothers will use available resources to provide for their children (Brown et al., 2020).

The development of personal agency can be affected by macrosystem factors such as stigma, which can either strengthen or challenge individuals. According to Bornstein (2019), Ayers Johnson et al. (2018) also highlight the impact of these factors on families. While previous research emphasizes the significance of social influences on families and individuals, it fails to mention the role of recovery stigma. The participants' insights on how the macrosystem perceives drug use, criminal activity, and recovery distinguish these findings from previous research.

Implications and Recommendations

In the upcoming section, I delve into the implications and recommendations derived from the data analysis. The analysis revealed three main themes presented in three thematic statements. First, I found that ReMerge graduates improved their interpersonal skills during the program, which enhanced their sense of agency. Secondly, building healthy connections with the community can develop agency. Lastly, ReMerge graduates developed skills in evaluating and understanding the impact of their

environment on their actions and decisions. Additionally, I provide specific recommendations for each finding aimed at key stakeholders.

Key Stakeholders Group 1: Addiction Recovery Service Providers

While examining ReMerge, a program designed for women in the justice system, I discovered noteworthy results that could be applied to other programs. The program not only helped address legal issues but also aided participants in overcoming drug and alcohol addiction. My research revealed that substance abuse treatment programs should incorporate the approaches used in ReMerge's diversion programs. My findings build on existing literature exploring agency development's impact on parenting skills and employment (Agostinelli & Sorrenti, 2021; Albanese et al., 2019; Chau & Giallo, 2015; Pocock et al., 2012; Schüler et al., 2016). However, the literature I reviewed did not specifically examine the relationship between agency development and drug abuse recovery. The results from ReMerge participants provide evidence that the program's emphasis on developing agency could benefit other individuals receiving substance abuse treatment. Participants highlighted the importance of developing interpersonal skills, setting boundaries, and practicing self-care. These valuable skills should be integrated into treatment programs to empower individuals to maintain their recovery.

Another vital implication was the participants' emphasis on the importance of the ReMerge After Care program. Participants' connection to each other and the program contributed to their healthy support network needed to maintain sobriety and continue developing agency after graduation. At the time of this study, ReMerge reported a 50 percent participation rate in the alum's after-care program. Many substance abuse programs do not include after-care options following program completion. The low

recidivism rate and experience of the participants of this study indicate that after-care programs could improve outcomes for other programs and with different populations. Participants' ability to form healthy connections with other ReMerge graduates, strengthen their relationships within their community, and employment gains indicated the importance of maintaining a network of support for the years after program completion. This suggests that diversion programs should include after-care and maintain open-door connections for participants after completion. Further research is needed to determine the most beneficial after-care structures.

Another implication for substance abuse treatment providers is the participants' emphasis on the importance of service providers with lived experience. Four of the five participants in this study now work in the treatment and recovery field. Many services in the treatment and recovery field require significant education and training. This study supports including individuals in recovery as service providers. The practice could improve the connection between service providers and consumers of treatment services. Additional review is needed to determine the appropriate changes to enhance the role of those with lived recovery experience in the treatment field.

The findings of this study build on previous work regarding the improved efficacy of gender-specific diversion and treatment programs (Brady et al., 2022; Ribar, 2015; Thomas, 2020; van Wormer & Bartollas, 2000). Developing close connections between ReMerge participants and their improved capacity to maintain healthy relationships supports previous research regarding gender-specific programs. While this study did not explore the exclusion of men from the program, results indicate the efficacy of this approach. Previous research also finds that programs like ReMerge, explicitly designed

for mothers, have improved efficacy (Luthar & Ciciolla, 2015; Robertson et al., 2020). Additional research on program results would be beneficial.

Key Stakeholders Group 2: Policy Makers

The implications of the lessons learned from this study of ReMerge for policymakers at all levels of government are vast. The program's success rate and continued strong connection of participants to ReMerge after graduation, coupled with their status as employed taxpayers, indicate that the program is a worthy investment of funds. At the time of this study, ReMerge was a privately funded program and did not receive government investment. The literature supports reduced costs to the government and society when individuals are diverted from incarceration (Roodman, 2017; Rose & Shem-Tov, 2018, 2021; Schanzenbach et al., 2016b). Moreover, implications for policymakers can be seen in the capacity of individuals charged with felonies to change behaviors when given treatment as an option. The themes of this research, agency development in interpersonal skills, connection to community, and ability to evaluate the environment, should be further explored for alignment with current policy.

Another implication for policymakers is the current criminal justice trend of sentence reduction for crimes. In this research, I did not explore the details of the criminal charges participants faced, but each faced at least one felony charge when ReMerge was an alternative to jail. Further exploration of the optimal point for individuals facing criminal charges to receive alternatives should be conducted.

During the research, each participant reported the importance of service providers with lived experience in their agency development at ReMerge. Drug and alcohol service providers are subject to the credentialing of government entities. This research indicates

that reviewing these requirements might reveal that additional individuals actively in recovery may produce results in diversion programs superior to those provided by individuals without credentials without lived experience. Research in the area is needed, but government officials should consider changes in fee structures for treatment services and expanding access to peer recovery support.

Another important consideration for policymakers is the participants' ability to begin evaluating their environment's impact on their choices as they develop agency. The literature supports the importance of community assets in supporting healthy socio-ecological systems (Gartland et al., 2019; McPherson et al., 2020; Ribar, 2015). Participants in this study revealed their ability to evaluate their neighborhood and other areas of Oklahoma City and discussed how their physical surroundings impacted their choices. This finding indicates the importance of safe communities and public amenities to support individuals with substance abuse disorders. Community conditions affecting the quality of life can impact citizens' ability to maintain the benefits of substance abuse treatment. Further research would be beneficial on the impact on criminal behavior when communities improve public amenities and improve public safety.

Key Stakeholders Group 3: Intervention Program Funders

ReMerge is a privately funded diversion program that does not receive government funding. As funders search for ways to make meaningful changes in the community, my research findings could inform them of critical elements to include in other development of programs. As found in my research, developing healthy connections supports the development of personal agency for ReMerge graduates. Participants reported that including an after-care program in the program structure played

a significant role in their success after graduation, implying that other programs should adopt the structure to increase program effects. Program design that emphasizes developing connections with the community could also improve participant outcomes.

My research did not investigate the program's curriculum. However, the participants highlighted the emergence of interpersonal skill development as a recurring theme. Bazzani (2022) finds that building agency does not require intense treatment. My research supports that finding. Further research is necessary to determine the most effective ways to develop such skills and examine their impact on personal agency in greater detail.

Key Stakeholders Group 4: ReMerge Graduates and Families

Previous studies explored the negative impact of adverse childhood experiences on children (Baxter et al., 2017; Cross et al., 2017; Giano et al., 2020; Mersky et al., 2013; Petruccelli et al., 2019). Parent incarceration is included in the list of adverse experiences (Fry-Geier & Hellman, 2017; Harner & Riley, 2013). My research findings support the importance of pre-sentencing options for women with children and the significance of the continuing care program to the future of graduates and their families. Furthermore, the participants indicated that the ReMerge Continuing Care program was essential to their continued recovery and improved living conditions. This implies the importance of increasing participation in the after-care program to benefit additional graduates and their families. Further longitudinal study regarding program impact on family systems is warranted.

Key Stakeholders Group 5: Community Members and General Public

The participants in this study revealed the adverse effects of stigma surrounding substance abuse as an essential factor in their recovery. Research supports the harmful impact of stigma on those seeking full re-entry into society (Feingold, 2021). Individuals seeking treatment for substance abuse and dealing with legal issues often face obstacles in their recovery and reintegration into society (Harner & Riley, 2013; Lalonde & Cho, 2008; Roodman, 2017; Rose & Shem-Tov, 2021). More research is needed on effective methods to decrease stigma and minimize its detrimental impact on recovery.

Understanding stigma will help service providers, policymakers, and the broad community better support individuals in recovery by providing them with tools for harm reduction.

Conclusion

In this study, I used the socio-ecological system framework to analyze the impact of the ReMerge program in Oklahoma City on the sense of agency of mothers involved with the justice system. I sought to uncover how participation in the program impacted mothers to develop personal agency at each level of the socio-ecological model. The research findings indicate that ReMerge graduates developed agency that affected their interactions with different layers of the socio-ecological system. They enhanced their interpersonal skills, which improved their role as mothers and strengthened their relationships. The findings also reveal that ReMerge graduates built healthy connections with other participants and the community, which boosted their sense of agency. Lastly, the study shows that ReMerge graduates were better equipped to evaluate their environment and understand its impact on their choices and behaviors.

Studies have shown that gender-specific diversion and addiction recovery programs can be effective without intensive therapy. My research supports these findings and highlights the significance of ongoing care once the program is completed. This has positive implications for policymakers, funders, and other stakeholders, indicating that programs like ReMerge can help improve outcomes for families, reduce incarceration rates, and enhance the socio-ecological system for individuals accused of crimes.

CHAPTER FOUR

Executive Summary and Distribution of Findings

Executive Summary

Oklahoma families rank near the bottom on numerous indicators of health and well-being; one of the most striking statistics is the high number of Oklahomans involved in the criminal justice system. Oklahoma's high incarceration rates contribute to poor outcomes for families. According to data from the Prison Policy Institute, 11% of Oklahoma children experience having a parent in jail at some point in their life (Widra & Herring, 2021), and more women with children go to prison in Oklahoma than in most other states (Widra & Herring, 2021). The Prison Policy Initiative (2021) reports an incarceration rate of 993 per 100,000 adults, and approximately 26,000 Oklahoma children have a parent in jail, ranking Oklahoma in the top five states for incarceration. The most common reason for imprisonment was non-violent drug offenses (Sawyer & Wagner, 2022). Eighty percent of incarcerated women are mothers with children under 18 (Thomas, 2020). Interventions designed to meet the needs of women facing a jail sentence show promise for mitigating the damage inflicted by criminal justice system involvement (Forrester et al., 2020; Goodson et al., 2020).

Interventions addressing the socioecological factors influencing mothers' sense of agency show promise. Addressing the needs of women facing incarceration can result in transformative learning. "Transformative learning is a process of making meaning of one's experience" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 84). Promising interventions allow participants to explore their socioecological system and find meaning in their lives. The

most promising intervention practices for pre-sentencing diversion programs are gender-specific (Brady et al., 2022; Ribar, 2015; Thomas, 2020; van Wormer & Bartollas, 2000). Interventions that provide structure, support, and a safe environment to explore the participant's socioecological system show promise for learning, resulting in positive outcomes and skill development.

The socioecological systems (SES) model places the individual at the center of an expanding system of influential factors. The system shapes and molds interactions and promotes or inhibits healthy development. A family's socioecological system and environmental and social factors affect the parent-child relationship and the quality of parenting (Luster & Okagaki, 2006). Socioecological systems supply cues and inputs that can affect an individual's agency development. Parents' messages from socioecological systems affect the ability to parent (Sawrikar et al., 2020). Interventions to develop protective factors can mitigate the adverse effects (Giano et al., 2020). Through the development of protective factors, interventions can improve the cognitive flexibility needed to develop a sense of agency, resulting in improved outcomes for the individual and interpersonal relationships necessary for the development of personal agency.

According to Snyder (2002), agency is the belief that one can successfully reach goals. As the inverse of trauma, positivity and attitude positively correlate with agency development (Chang et al., 2019). Agency increases when achieved goals are personal and meaningful (Duncan et al., 2022). Additionally, agency grows by borrowing or learning agency from others (Valle et al., 2006). Collective agency, or proxy agency, supports the value of group interventions (Yoon, 2019). When exploring a parent's sense of agency, three factors are vital: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Schüler et al.,

2016). However, macrosystem factors can negatively affect parenting agency and child outcomes (Ulferts, 2020). Laws or policies that conflict with or support a family structure, such as maternity and paternity leave, are macrosystem factors. Intervention, especially economic opportunity, can mitigate the family's negative impact and move them to a state where work, home, and community are assets for building their well-being. A family's economic situation indicates the potential for psychopathology. The link between child outcomes, family situation, parenting, neighborhood resources, and economics is well established (Engelhardt et al., 2019; Kim et al., 2020; Lopez et al., 2021; Oishi et al., 2019). The healthy development of children includes more than just skilled parenting. It requires physical and psychological assets. When mothers are incarcerated, these assets are not present.

Historical perspective regarding the incarceration of women demonstrates the impact the SES macrosystem can have on the individual at the center of the sphere. In the past, the criminal justice system in the United States oppressed women. Laws that determined women's place in society codified oppression into American law (van Wormer & Bartollas, 2000). An estimated 80% of incarcerated women are mothers, which results in thousands of children with mothers in jail. The practice of mass incarceration of individuals, both male and female, results in lasting damage not only to the psychosocial factors of the individual but also to the person's entire family. Thousands of American children have justice-involved moms and benefit when their mothers are provided an alternative to time in jail. When programs offer options other than jail, women's and children's outcomes are improved.

Overview of Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

I designed a single case study with five participants to explore agency development in the context of their socio-ecological system. I used three data sources: a demographic questionnaire, individual interviews, and a focus group. Yin describes a case study as an appropriate research design to give voice to a community (2017). This research provides the stories of ReMerge pre-trial intervention program graduates for women facing felony charges and prison time. Case studies often focus on relationship patterns (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) and produce a logical scenario for replicating results (Yin, 2017). I created protocols that guided the three phases of the research and allowed participants to use their voices through narrative and open-ended guided questions exploring each participant's socioecological system and sense of agency.

I utilized Bronfenbrenner's socioecological systems theory to guide the exploration of the participants' experiences in this case study. I collected narratives in semi-structured interview protocol and analyzed the data using a cross-case method to find themes and ideas shared between the participants through the socio-ecological systems lens, searching for themes associated with agency development. Creswell and Poth (2018) state that the goal of data analysis in the case study is to use categorical aggregation to establish themes and patterns and interpret the participants lived experiences. Data collection and analysis reflected each participant's lived experiences and provided a context for their development of increased personal agency.

Summary of Key Findings

I discovered that participants in the ReMerge program were able to develop agency throughout all levels of the socio-ecological system. The participants provided

examples of the development of agency at the microsystem level through interpersonal skills they acquired at ReMerge. Participants reported improved communication, coping, and parenting skill. Improving their interpersonal skills positively impacted the participants' relationships with their families, enhanced their connection with their children, and increased their chances of maintaining employment.

At the mesosystem level the study discovered the significance of the relationships developed among the participants and the importance of after-care in maintaining their progress and growth. Participants reported changes in agency in five areas related to their mesosystem. Included in their agency development was an improved understanding of the impact of the environment on their behavior and choices, and the importance of employment conditions to their recovery. The participants also revealed their belief that individuals with lived experience of recovery should be included as staff in treatment programs and a desire to have a positive impact on the community.

Exosystem and macrosystem elements also influenced the development of agency in the participants by a refined awareness of the environment and a desire to impact the world for others in recovery. Participants outlined their interactions with law enforcement and a desire for laws to better align with the needs of individuals in recovery. The group verbalized a desire to advocate for others in situations like their experience. As a global factor of importance each of the participants described the negative impact of the stigma surrounding individuals in recovery from drug and alcohol abuse and the harmful impact of beliefs around individuals involved with the criminal justice system on outcomes for those without support.

Implications and Recommendations

Based on my research, addiction recovery service providers can benefit from incorporating the approaches used in ReMerge's diversion programs. The study showed that the program's emphasis on developing agency can be useful for individuals receiving substance abuse treatment. Participants in the ReMerge program highlighted the importance of developing interpersonal skills, setting boundaries, and practicing self-care. The low recidivism rate and positive experiences of the participants in this study indicate that after-care programs could improve outcomes for other programs and populations. Therefore, diversion programs should include after-care and maintain open-door connections for participants after completion. This study also suggests the inclusion of individuals in recovery as service providers.

The implications of the lessons learned from the ReMerge study are vast, especially for policymakers at all levels of government. This research suggests that reviewing the requirements for individuals in recovery programs may reveal that those with lived experience are better suited to produce successful outcomes than those without credentials or experience. This finding underscores the importance of safe communities and public amenities that support individuals with substance abuse disorders. As funders look for ways to make meaningful changes in their communities, my research findings could inform them of critical elements to include in program development. It's not necessary to have intense treatment to build agency, which highlights the importance of increasing participation in the after-care program for more graduates and their families. Finally, more research is needed to find effective methods to decrease stigma and minimize its detrimental impact on recovery.

Proposed Distribution Method and Venue

Merriam and Bierema state that the community can be the site for transformative learning (2014). In this research, a transformation occurred within the participants and the socioecological systems where they lived. Both changing landscapes have the potential to change society. In this section, I address opportunities to influence the criminal justice system with my research results.

Key Stakeholders Group 1: Addiction Recovery Service Providers

Behavioral health stakeholders turn to several critical groups for information regarding trends and promising practices in criminal justice reform. I will submit the final research to the National Institute for Criminal Justice Reform for consideration for inclusion in their report on effective incarceration reduction strategies. Additionally, I will prepare a short presentation using slides and stories from the participant narratives appropriate for use with organizations such as the National Alliance for Mental Illness and the Association for Addiction Professionals. This presentation will also be suitable for funders and others interested in creating additional ways to expand the program and replicate the results in other populations.

Key Stakeholders Group 2: Policy Makers

As a former lawmaker, I understand the importance of providing the perspective of individuals impacted by social systems created by the government. I will present these research findings to lawmakers at interim studies of legislatures in partnership with elected officials and make the results available at national legislative conferences such as the National Council of State Legislators. Additionally, I will submit research findings to the American Enterprise Institute for consideration for publication. To further influence

lawmakers, I will produce a one-page synopsis of the findings suitable as a leave-behind during capitol visits and scheduled one-on-one meetings with key lawmakers.

Key Stakeholders Group 3: Intervention Program Funders

ReMerge is a privately funded intervention program supported by foundations, corporations, and individual donors. Expansion and replication of the program can come from additional private funds. Providing this body of research to the program for use in development activities will benefit the program. Additionally, I will distribute these findings through a presentation suitable for in-person and virtual meetings of funders. The Oklahoma Funders Roundtable, Oklahoma Communities Foundation, Oklahoma City Community Foundation, and other similar groups are appropriate venues to share the research results through email distribution lists, meeting presentations, and as ReMerge shares program information on their website.

Key Stakeholders Group 4: ReMerge Graduates and Families

I have the opportunity to share the results of this research with ReMerge graduates and their support networks through the continuing care program. The group meets regularly and is eager to learn of the impact of the program on the community. ReMerge hosts family events twice yearly for current participants, graduates, and their families and friends. I will develop a presentation suitable for the audience and summary material for distribution for their use to promote the program. Additionally, the group may use the materials as fundraising collateral.

Key Stakeholders Group 5: Community Members and General Public

The public will benefit from the information about addressing the stigma around recovery. I will prepare opinion editorials to submit to local and national press outlets as part of the distribution plan. Additionally, I will present the topic for consideration as a TEDx talk to the organization. Voters, taxpayers, and citizens public can demand changes for individuals involved in the criminal justice system. ReMerge is valuable for the socio-ecological system as a whole of the participants; therefore, the public also benefits from the program.

Conclusion

Oklahoma families face numerous challenges and rank low on key health and well-being indicators. One of the most concerning statistics is the high number of Oklahoman women involved in the criminal justice system. High incarceration rates negatively impact families, especially when the incarcerated is a mother. However, there is hope for improving this statistic found in interventions that address socio-ecological factors influencing mothers' sense of agency. The socio-ecological systems model places individuals at the center of influential factors. Agency, or the belief in one's ability to achieve goals, impacts interpersonal relationships, parenting, and employment.

To explore the impact of the ReMerge program on participants, I conducted a case study with five participants grounded in Bronfenbrenner's (1992) socio-ecological systems theory. Through demographic indicator review, individual interviews, and a focus group, I found that participants in the ReMerge program were able to develop agency at all levels of the socio-ecological system. They improved their interpersonal skills, positively affecting their relationships with family, connections with children, and

employment. Through data collection, I discovered the importance of the after-care program in maintaining participants' progress and growth. Participants also believed that individuals with lived experience of recovery should be included as staff in treatment programs, and they also expressed a desire to reduce the stigma around recovery in society. At the time of this study, participants disclosed the importance of the ReMerge program to their continued sobriety, improved relationships, and reintegration into society. They reported a belief that ReMerge was a model program for intervening with women facing incarceration.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

Recruitment Letter Example

<<*Date*>>

<<*Name of potential participant*>>

<<*Address*>>

<<*City, State, Zip*>>

Re: <<*insert the title of the study and the investigator's name*>>

Dear <<*insert name*>>:

I am writing to let you know about an opportunity to participate in a research study about graduates of the ReMerge program. AJ Griffin at Baylor University is conducting this study. The study will include three phases including the following:

- Personal demographic questionnaire. I will email you a few questions to respond to and email back to me.
- A one-on-one interview with the researcher. The researcher will ask questions about your participation in the ReMerge program and how it has changed how you make decisions and interact with your environment.
- Take part in a focus group. A focus group is a small group of people who participate in a discussion about a selected topic. The researcher will lead a focus group made up of graduates of the ReMerge program. You will have the opportunity to share your experience and how it shapes you today.

You were identified as a graduate of ReMerge by program administration and have indicated that you are willing to participate in research regarding the program. The purpose of this study is to provide policymakers and funders with evidence of the impact of the program on participants' lives.

If you are interested in exploring this opportunity further please contact me at [REDACTED] or [REDACTED]. Contacting me does not obligate you to participate I will answer any questions.

Thank you very much for your consideration.

Sincerely,

APPENDIX B

Interview Protocol and Consent Form

Baylor University

School of Education

Ed-D Learning and Organizational Change

Consent Form for Research

PROTOCOL TITLE: Interview Protocol

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Ann J. (AJ) Griffin MS

SUPPORTED BY: Baylor University

Purpose of the research: The purpose of this study is to explore how graduating from the ReMerge program has affected the personal agency of participants. We ask you to participate in this study because you are a graduate of the ReMerge program.

Study activities: If you choose to be in the study, you will take part in the following:

- Personal demographic questionnaire. I will email you a few questions to respond to and email back to me.
- A one-on-one interview with the researcher. The researcher will ask questions about your participation in the ReMerge program and how it has changed how you make decisions and interact with your environment.
- Take part in a focus group. A focus group is a small group of people who participate in a discussion about a selected topic. The researcher will lead a focus group made up of graduates of the ReMerge program. You will have the opportunity to share your experience and how it shapes you today.

Risks and Benefits:

You may get tired during the tasks. You can rest at any time.

You may feel emotional or upset when answering some of the questions. Tell the interviewer anytime you want to take a break or stop the interview.

You may be uncomfortable with some of the questions and topics we will ask. You do not have to answer any questions that make you feel uncomfortable.

The researchers will ask you and the other group members to use only first names during the group session. They will also ask you not to tell anyone outside the group what any particular person said in the group. However, the researchers cannot guarantee that everyone will keep the discussions private.

You will not be told about some of the study details as part of this research. If you were told these details at the beginning of the study, it could change the research results. If you decide to be part of the study, you will be explained what information was withheld at the end of your study participation.

Others may benefit in the future from the information that is learned in this study.

Confidentiality:

A risk of participating in this study is the possibility of losing confidentiality. Loss of privacy includes having your personal information shared with someone who is not on the study team and was not supposed to see or know about your information. The researcher plans to protect your confidentiality.

Authorized staff of Baylor University may review the study records for purposes such as quality control or safety.

By law, researchers must release certain information to the appropriate authorities if they have reasonable cause to believe any of the following:

- Abuse or neglect of a child
- Abuse, neglect, or exploitation of an elderly person or disabled adult
- Risk of harming yourself or others
- Alleged incidents of sexual harassment, sexual assault, dating violence, or stalking, committed by or against a person enrolled at or employed by Baylor University at the time of the incident

Questions or concerns about this research study

If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, or wish to obtain information, ask questions, or discuss any concerns about this study with someone other than the researcher(s), you may contact the Baylor University IRB through the Office of the Vice Provost for Research at [REDACTED] or [REDACTED]

Taking part in this study is your choice. You are free not to take part or to stop at any time for any reason. No matter what you decide, there will be no penalty or loss of benefit to which you are entitled. If you choose to withdraw from this study, the information that you have already provided will be kept confidential. Information already collected about you cannot be deleted.

By continuing with the research and completing the study activities, you are providing consent.

APPENDIX C

Demographic Questionnaire

Participant: _____

Zip Code: _____

Age: _____

Number and ages of children:

Describe who you currently live with:

What is your place of employment: _____

Do you work full-time or part-time? _____

APPENDIX D

One-on-One Interview Questions

Date: _____ Time of interview: _____ Participant Pseudonym: _____

Setting of interview: _____ Interviewee: _____

One-On-One Interview Questions: Participants 1–4

1. What is your name?
2. Where do you live? Who do you live with?
3. Tell me about where you live. What do you like about it? What don't you like about it?
4. Do you feel like you are healthy? If so, why? If not, why?
5. How many children do you have? How old are they?
6. Tell me about what it is like to be his/her/their mother. How is being a mother different after graduating from ReMerge?
7. Describe your romantic life. Has the nature of your relationships changed since the program?
8. Tell me about your neighborhood. What is important to you? What might be missing?
9. What are your day-to-day challenges about where you live? Is life easier, harder, or the same since going to ReMerge?
10. Tell me about your kid's school. How are they doing?
11. Do you have a religion you practice? Tell me why that is important to you.
12. Where do you work? Do you find it fulfilling? Did you work before you were part of ReMerge?
13. How has your family income been impacted by finishing the program?

14. What do you think about support from the state? Is this different than before ReMerge?
15. What support systems do you use now? Is this different than before the program?
16. What do you do for fun? Where do you go when you have free time with the kids? Where do you go without them?
17. Tell me about your friendships. How has being a friend changed since ReMerge?
18. Describe your place in the community. What roles do you play?
19. What do you think about law enforcement? Is this different than before the program?
20. Are you registered to vote?
21. What do you think about the laws you violated to become involved with law enforcement? Is this different after graduating?
22. Do you have an opinion about your elected officials? Can you name them?
23. Do you feel equipped to advocate for yourself and your kids?
24. Why do you think ReMerge worked for you?
25. What didn't we talk about that I should know?

APPENDIX E

Focus Group Questions

1. Let us talk about how ReMerge changed how you see yourself. What are you better at now?
2. Which part of the program was the most important to your development as a mother?
3. What is something you learned that makes life easier?
4. How have your relationships changed?
5. What didn't you learn in the program that you want current participants to know?
6. How do you feel about your community?
7. What do you think about how others like you should be treated?
8. What is the most important thing about the program?

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