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Understanding Adolescents' Unique Experience of Happiness Within the Family: Bridging Multiple Perspectives of Adolescents, Parents, and Siblings

Marsha Cohen

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UNDERSTANDING ADOLESCENTS’ UNIQUE EXPERIENCE OF HAPPINESS WITHIN THE FAMILY: BRIDGING MULTIPLE PERSPECTIVES OF ADOLESCENTS, PARENTS, AND SIBLINGS

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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This Dissertation by: Marsha Cohen

Entitled: *Understanding Adolescents’ Unique Experience of Happiness Within the Family: Bridging Multiple Perspectives of Adolescents, Parents, and Siblings*

has been approved as meeting the requirement for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in College of Education and Behavioral Sciences in Department of Applied Psychology and Counselor Education, Program of Counseling Psychology

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ABSTRACT


The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the essence of middle adolescents’ unique experiences of happiness within the family system from the multiple perspectives of adolescents, their parents, and their siblings. Another goal was to make thematic comparisons between and within families in order to better understand the complexity and development of the phenomenon for adolescents. Seven families participated in this study. Each family consisted of a middle adolescent, a parent, and a sibling, yielding a total of 21 participants. A semistructured interview was conducted with each participant. Data were analyzed using Moustakas’s (1994) modification of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method. In addition, happiness experiences between and within families were compared. Nine themes emerged from the data: quality time, family support, outside influences, independence, family mood, humor, external expressions of happiness, more engaged when happy, and family has a big influence on happiness. Findings are discussed in relation to prior research. Theoretical, practice, and research implications are provided. Practice implications include specific suggestions for approaching therapy from a systemic perspective and conducting strengths-based,
preventative care. Research implications include expanding the research to include more diverse populations and ideas for future research that builds on this study’s findings.

*Keywords:* adolescents, family, happiness, qualitative research
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I am also very appreciative of my family for their constant love, care, and encouragement. I would like to especially thank my parents. They have supported me throughout challenging times by listening, seeing my strengths, and sharing their wisdom. They have also celebrated my successes with me and expressed joy and pride in my accomplishments. I am grateful that they were able to see me graduate and attend my dissertation defense. Finally, I am very appreciative of the supportive family environment they created. This led me to have many happy experiences in my family as an adolescent, likely influencing my interest in and passion for this research.

I would like to conclude by thanking the families who participated in this research. I appreciate the time they spent talking with me in depth about their experiences. I am honored they were willing to share their stories of strength with me. I was touched as I listened to the ways these families supported each other, and I also learned a lot from hearing how they contributed to adolescents’ happiness in the family. I am hopeful that their stories will help advance the counseling psychology field.
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION TO THE RESEARCH PROBLEM

Brief Overview

Using phenomenology, I explored the essence of the middle adolescents’ unique experiences of happiness within the family system. I explored this topic by conducting semistructured interviews with adolescents, their parents, and their siblings in order to provide multiple perspectives on this phenomenon. Through this study, I delineated the essence of middle adolescents’ experiences of happiness within their family systems. I also compared perspectives between and within family units.

In this chapter, I discuss the background and context for the study, including the positive psychology and positive youth development movements. I provide a statement of the problem, the purpose and major research questions, the rationale for the study, the theoretical framework, assumptions guiding the study, and potential limitations of the study. I also define key terms in the present study.

Background and Context for the Current Study

When mental health professionals try to help people with their problems, they may often focus on how to eliminate what is wrong or decrease the negative aspects of people’s lives (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). This critique that psychology has traditionally focused more on negative than on positive aspects, such as virtue and
potential, was first made by Maslow in 1954 (Lopez & Gallagher, 2009). He noted that focusing on strengths and virtue could provide a full picture of human nature (Lopez & Gallagher, 2009), which is consistent with the field of counseling psychology (Lopez & Edwards, 2008). This idea that much can be gained through focusing on people’s strengths and what makes them happy has developed into the growing field of positive psychology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). While the term positive psychology was first used by Maslow, what is new about the current positive psychology movement is Seligman’s creation of a network in which both researchers and practitioners with a “common mission” can focus on strengths and positive characteristics (Diener, 2009, p. 7). The positive psychology movement gained momentum when Seligman was president of the American Psychological Association (Lopez & Edwards, 2008). He believed mental health had been shifting toward a focus on pathology, as indicated by which projects received research funding and the establishment of new hospitals for mental health treatment (Lopez & Edwards, 2008). His positive psychology initiative aimed to regain a focus on human strength (Lopez & Edwards, 2008).

Rather than focusing only on treating disorders, which is more consistent with clinical psychology (e.g., Barlow, 2008; Nathan & Gorman, 2007), counseling psychologists of the 21st century have started to examine ways to help people develop their strengths and increase their happiness levels, from researching what factors influence happiness to what intentional activities one can do to increase happiness (Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005). The focus on people’s strengths and helping them use their resources is an important philosophical view that counseling psychologists have held for over 50 years (Lopez & Edwards, 2008). This view complements the
philosophical underpinnings of positive psychology, and counseling psychologists have contributed greatly to the positive psychology literature (Arbona & Coleman, 2008). While counseling psychology and positive psychology have similar roots, positive psychologists focus more specifically on positive emotions, traits, and institutions (Lopez & Edwards, 2008). Their interventions include specific activities, such as writing gratitude letters and learning how to fully use one’s signature strengths (Lopez & Edwards, 2008). Strengths-based treatments used by counseling psychologists often rely on common factors and do not include specific techniques for increasing happiness (Lopez & Edwards, 2008).

Social relationships have been found to be a key influence on subjective well-being (SWB) and are considered a requirement for high happiness levels (Diener & McGavran, 2008). In fact, over 35 years ago, Campbell, Converse, and Rodgers (1976) found that the most important domains contributing to life satisfaction were social relationships, including familial, marital, and platonic relationships. In addition, current researchers focusing on adolescents discovered that family factors (such as family structure, time spent together, and quality of relationships) were found to be more important contributors to happiness than nonfamily factors (such as school and work activities, self-esteem, and socioeconomic status; Gray, Chamratrithirong, Pattaravanich, & Prasartkul, 2013).

Family-centered positive psychology (FCPP) and the positive youth development (PYD) movement focus on increasing childhood well-being by building on strengths (Kirschman, Johnson, Bender, & Roberts, 2009). Family-centered positive psychologists work from a systemic perspective, increasing the entire family’s functioning in order to
help the individual adolescent (Kirschman et al., 2009). Having families identify their own needs and building on family strengths are hallmarks of this movement (Sheridan, Warnes, Cowan, Schemm, & Clarke, 2004). This approach has been applied to therapy and is called *Positive Family Therapy*, a treatment that “combines systems theory and positive psychology to drive an approach that builds upon the strengths of a family to enhance the growth of each individual member” (Conoley & Conoley, 2009, p. 1).

The PYD movement aims toward enhancing general skills rather than solving specific problems (Kirschman et al., 2009). Those advocating for this movement believe that childhood intervention can prevent future problems, which will help increase children’s current and future quality of life (Kirschman et al., 2009). This approach is especially seen as effective given that many competencies are best learned in childhood (Peterson & Roberts, 1986).

In sum, the positive psychology, FCPP, and PYD approaches all focus on building on and promoting individuals’ strengths as a key way to enhance well-being and prevent future potential problems. Family-centered positive psychology builds on positive psychology by incorporating a systemic focus, and the positive youth development movement specifically focuses on fostering well-being in children and adolescents (Kirschman et al., 2009). All three movements provide a foundation for the present research, and the PYD perspective served as the major theoretical framework informing the current study.

**Statement of the Problem**

In previous research that has used qualitative methods, family was an important theme influencing adolescents’ happiness levels (e.g., Edwards & Lopez, 2006;
In addition, a number of researchers conducting quantitative studies have examined how various family factors are related to adolescent happiness. Flouri and Buchanan (2003) found that father and mother involvement had a positive effect on the adolescent child’s happiness. Rask, Åstedt-Kurki, Paavilainen, and Laippala (2003) found that feeling emotionally close to and having stable, secure relationships with family members predicted high life satisfaction. Offer (2013) used hierarchical linear modeling to examine the relationship between adolescent emotional well-being and family activities. She found that eating meals and engaging in leisure activities as a family were positively related to adolescents’ emotional well-being. These studies are useful in providing information about family factors that may be important to adolescent happiness, but they do not reflect the complexity of how systemic factors work together as a whole to influence happiness levels for the unique individual (Joronen & Åstedt-Kurki, 2005). In addition, the qualitative studies have provided a more holistic and complex picture of what influences adolescent happiness, yet they have rarely specifically focused on family factors.

Joronen and Åstedt-Kurki (2005) addressed this concern and explored how family influences adolescent SWB by conducting semistructured interviews with adolescents in seventh and ninth grades. This study provided a good start to exploring systemic influences on adolescent happiness holistically. However, this study took into consideration only the views of adolescents and not those of other family members, such as parents and siblings. In addition, the researchers inquired about family factors and elements, and they provided themes, but they did not depict the holistic essence of the
adolescent happiness experience. Studies that holistically explore adolescents’, parents’, and siblings’ multiple perspectives related to happiness are missing from the literature.

**Significance of the Problem and Rationale for the Study**

Because researchers have found family dynamics have a significant influence on adolescent happiness (e.g., Campbell et al., 1976; Edwards & Lopez, 2006; Gray et al., 2013; O’Higgins et al., 2010; Sargeant, 2010), it is valuable to explore in depth how the family influences adolescents’ happiness. The fact that family factors were found to be more influential than nonfamily factors (Gray et al., 2013) on adolescent happiness suggests that by learning how to increase happiness within the family, counseling psychologists could have a significant impact on adolescents’ overall happiness levels.

In addition, the fact that family has consistently been a theme in the qualitative research on adolescent happiness (e.g., Edwards & Lopez, 2006; O’Higgins, et al., 2010; Sargeant, 2010) indicates further exploration of family dynamics would valuably contribute to the literature on adolescent well-being. Finally, even though adolescents are in a developmental period in which they are spending more time with peers, they still must coexist with their families. Therefore, it is valuable to know how happiness in the family system can be maximized. Furthermore, even though adolescence is a time of individuation and gaining independence from parents, how adolescents separate from parents has been found to contribute to their well-being (Balk, 1995).

In this study, I explored adolescent happiness within the family system from multiple perspectives, which provided additional insight into how adolescents’ families systemically influence their happiness. Rask et al. (2003) and Ohannessian, Lerner, Lerner, and von Eye (1995) called for research that explores how all family members,
including siblings, view family dynamics in order to gain a more complete understanding of the phenomenon, yet to date, researchers have not examined this area. Qualitatively investigating happiness with adolescents, parents, and siblings provides a more holistic view of how family affects adolescent happiness. This information may allow counseling psychologists to better design systemic interventions targeted at increasing adolescent well-being, as it will help them understand this complex picture of adolescent happiness within the family system in its entirety.

Rask et al. (2003) also noted there was little agreement between adolescents and their parents about family dynamics, including family roles, structure, and communication patterns, and that it was unclear if participants realized their differing perspectives. Ohannessian et al. (1995) found similar results and noted discrepancies between adolescents and parents on family cohesion and adjustment. In addition, they found that the more discrepant the view on family variables between adolescents and parents, the more depressive symptomatology adolescents reported. Through interviewing adolescents, parents, and siblings in the same family system, I addressed this gap in the literature, providing valuable information about how various family members see the phenomenon similarly and how they may differ in their perspectives. Thus, utilizing qualitative methods allowed for a holistic understanding of the specific areas in which the different parties have different perceptions that could be impeding adolescents’ level of happiness. Ohannessian et al.’s (1995) research suggests the discrepancies between adolescents and parents may be decreasing adolescents’ happiness, so increasing awareness of where adolescents and family members’ perspectives differ could help positively influence their happiness levels.
Finally, this research provides a contextual perspective. In critiquing how some positive psychologists have labeled various traits as “good” or “bad,” McNulty and Fincham (2012) noted the importance of context: “Psychological traits and processes are not inherently positive or negative; instead, whether psychological characteristics promote or undermine well-being depends on the context in which they operate” (p. 101). They emphasized that characteristics interact with the social environment to affect well-being and stated psychologists need to “determine when, for whom, and to what extent those factors are associated with well-being” (McNulty & Fincham, 2012, p. 106). This is consistent with the perspective of qualitative researchers. For example, Graue and Walsh (1998) have supported studying children in their context and have critiqued the fact that children are often instrumentally studied in order to provide information about universal phenomena, rather than for their own inherent value. They have noticed children are often studied as objects but rarely in their context, and they have noted that when context is a factor, it is usually a school setting. Through the present study, I focused on adolescents in the family context in social interaction with family members, thereby addressing this call for contextual positive psychology research. I also addressed the gap in contextual research with adolescents by studying adolescents in a setting other than the school. Rather than exploring which characteristics of adolescents are inherently positive, this research contributes to our understanding of adolescent happiness by also emphasizing the context of the family system.

**Theoretical Framework: The Positive Youth Development Perspective**

This research was guided by the PYD perspective, which includes strengths-based, developmental, and contextual components. Concerning the strengths-based
aspect, those using the PYD model believe young people do not need to be fixed and do not necessarily have problems that need to be fixed. Instead, they are viewed as having inherent strengths that they can further develop (Lerner, Almerigi, Theokas, & Lerner, 2005). Youths’ natural resources that can be developed are conceptualized through Lerner, Fisher, and Weinberg’s (2000) Five Cs: competence, confidence, character, connection, and caring.

Along with viewing youth as having inherent strengths, supporters of the PYD model also take a stance concerning how youth develop. According to the PYD theory, the “storm and stress” model is not an accurate way for conceptualizing adolescent development (Lerner, 2009). Instead, research indicates that adolescents are a diverse group who in general show positive development and do not necessarily go through a stressful period of development (Lerner, 2009). In fact, contrasting with the stereotyped depiction of adolescents as distancing from family and devaluing these relationships, adolescents often greatly value relationships with parents even though they are beginning to spend more time with peers (Lerner, 2009). Typically, as they separate from parents, they still maintain close ties with them (Balk, 1995).

Much of the diversity in how adolescents develop is due to contextual factors, such as family, peers, school, work, the community, the broader society, and culture (Lerner, 2009). Developmental systems theory is an important component of this model, in which development of youth is seen as “a consequence of mutually influential relationships between the developing person and his or her biology, psychological characteristics, family, community, culture, physical and designed ecology, and historical niche” (Lerner at al., 2005, p. 11). In the family system, all parts influence each other,
and the whole family must be explored in order to understand how part of the family works (Scabini, Marta, & Lanz, 2006). The focus is relational, and development is seen as an interaction of the person with his or her environment (Kelly, 2000; Lerner, 2009). Kelly (2000) has argued an ecological perspective that involves attending to context is required for understanding wellness. This idea of development being heavily influenced by reciprocal interactions between person and context originally comes from Bronfenbrenner’s (1997, 2005) bioecological model, which will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter.

In the current study, I followed the strengths-based, developmental, and systemic focus of the PYD model. The design of the study was formed by the beliefs that adolescents have inherent strengths, that family influences their development, and that they value family relationships throughout their development. During data analysis, I specifically attended to the strengths of the adolescent participants and how interactions between multiple family members seemed to contribute to adolescents’ overall happiness experiences. I also looked for data that disconfirmed my assumptions, and remained open to alternative points of view. I worked to set aside my biases about the role family plays in adolescent happiness (further discussed in this chapter and in Chapter III).

**Purpose**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the essence of middle adolescents’ unique experiences of happiness within the family system. I explored this by bridging the multiple perspectives of adolescents, their parents, and their siblings, which included understanding what factors these three groups thought contributed to adolescents’ happiness in the family. These research subquestions were aimed at helping
me answer the major research question because I was interested in the overall essence of happiness within the family system for the adolescents in this study, not in looking at the three perspectives separately. Another goal was to make thematic comparisons between and within families in order to better understand the complexity and development of the phenomenon for adolescents. For the purpose of this study, a middle adolescent was considered a high school student (9th through 12th grades) who was between 15 and 17 years old at the time of the study. During middle adolescence, individuals work to become more independent and begin spending more time with peers and less time at home (Balk, 1995).

**Major Research Questions**

**Primary Research Question**

Q1 What is the essence of the middle adolescent experience of happiness within the family system?

**Research Subquestions**

Q1a What family factors do middle adolescents view as influential to their unique experience of happiness?

Q1b What family factors do parents view as influential to their middle adolescents’ unique experience of happiness?

Q1c What family factors do siblings view as influential to their middle adolescent siblings’ unique experience of happiness?

Q1d What are the similarities and differences between and within family units related to influential factors on middle adolescents’ happiness?

**Research Approach**

I worked from an interpretivist-constructivist theoretical framework, which emphasizes the validity of multiple realities and truth as relativistic (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Ponterotto, 2005). I chose phenomenology to explore these research questions,
which is often used by counseling psychologists because of its focus on people’s lived experiences (Wertz, 2005). Phenomenology is based on the assumption that experiences have a shared essence that can be discovered (Patton, 2002). Phenomenological researchers focus on describing what people experience and the context of their experiences (Patton, 2002). They often collect data through interviews (Patton, 2002). The exact number of participants is determined when it appears that additional participants will not add more knowledge about the phenomenon (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), a concept referred to as saturation. By using multiple methods of data collection, and exploring the different perspectives of adolescents, parents, and siblings within each family unit, I achieved triangulation (Merriam, 1998). This approach also increased the breadth and depth of data (Morrow, 2005).

**Basic Assumptions**

A number of assumptions guided this study. The major focus of this study was to discover a common essence to the adolescent experience of happiness within the family system. Therefore, the main assumption was that there is a shared essence to this experience, which is an assumption that is made by those using phenomenological methods (Patton, 2002). Although adolescents and their family members provided diverse experiences (which are highlighted), the major aim was to find what is common to adolescents’ experiences in order to understand their perspective, as well as to inform interventions targeted at middle adolescents.

Based on previous research (e.g., Edwards & Lopez, 2006; Gray et al., 2013; Huebner, 1991; O’Higgins, et al., 2010; Sargeant, 2010) indicating family is an important contributor to adolescent happiness and based on adolescent developmental literature
(e.g., Balk, 1995; Scabini et al., 2006; Schlegel & Barry, 1991) indicating families radically influence adolescent development, another assumption was that the family system significantly influences adolescents’ happiness. The practical implications for this study were to find ways to identify and bolster adolescent happiness, and I assumed that exploring family dynamics would be one way to accomplish this broader goal.

A final assumption was that adolescents and their families could provide valuable information about what contributes to the adolescent’s happiness, based on the calls from previous researchers that it would be valuable to explore the perspectives of adolescents and their family members (e.g., Diener & McGavran, 2008; Rask et al., 2003). I interviewed adolescents, their parents, and their siblings because I believed they would be the most valuable informants on what contributes to adolescents’ happiness within the family. This assumption was also based on my belief that those experiencing and contributing to a phenomenon can provide the most valuable information about that phenomenon. This is consistent with the phenomenological perspective that reality is subjective and is created and known by those experiencing the phenomenon (Patton, 2002). Going along with this assumption is the assumption that because family members would have unique perspectives on some aspects of adolescent happiness within the family, it was important to interview multiple family members. This approach was supported by Rask et al. (2003), who found that adolescents and their parents often did not agree about family dynamics.

One concern for qualitative researchers is being aware of their assumptions so that they do not bias the findings (Merriam, 1998). Therefore, I took steps to help prevent the data analysis from being biased toward confirming my assumptions. One way I did this
is through keeping a researcher journal in which I wrote about my biases and reactions before and throughout the study. This awareness of my biases allowed me to guard against having them unduly influence the findings (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). In addition, I employed negative case analysis, in which I actively looked for data that disconfirmed my assumptions (Creswell, 2007). Finally, I used member checking and peer debriefing, in which I shared tentative findings with participants and a colleague and asked for their feedback (Merriam, 1998). These methods helped me set aside my biases and are discussed in more detail in Chapter III.

**Basic Limitations**

As adolescent happiness is a broad topic, some limitations apply to this study because it is targeted at studying one aspect of the human experience in depth. This study was confined to happiness within the family system, and as such, I did not interview other important influences (e.g., peers, school professionals) within the lives of these adolescent participants. Another limitation was that adolescent participants were required to be middle adolescents, meaning they were in high school and between 15 and 17 years old (Balk, 1995). Students in middle and high school students are at very different developmental points (e.g., Balk, 1995; Berk, 2010; Elliot & Feldman, 1990), so it is quite possible their experiences of family happiness would vary. Focusing on adolescents within a narrow age span allowed me to focus more deeply on a specific population, and find a shared essence to this experience. A final limitation concerns generalizability. The above limitations indicate that findings from this study may not generalize to middle adolescents’ happiness experiences outside of the family or to early and late adolescents.
Definition of Terms

**Happiness**: Multiple definitions have been offered for this construct, and happiness has been conceptualized as “both a trait and a state” (Diener, 1984, p. 550). “Unfortunately, terms like happiness that have been used frequently in daily discourse will necessarily have fuzzy and somewhat different meanings” (Diener, 1984, p. 543). In this study, the term was conceptualized as a state, and participants were invited to provide their own definitions. As a general framework, the following quotes highlight some of the previously proposed definitions: “a global assessment of a person’s quality of life according to his [or her] own chosen criteria” (Shin & Johnson, 1978, p. 478), “the ongoing realizing of a life plan” (Chekola, 2007, p. 62), and “a preponderance of positive affect over negative affect” (Diener, 1984, p. 543).

**Life Satisfaction**: “a global cognitive judgment of one’s life” (Suh, Diener, Oishi, & Triandis, 1998, p. 484).

**Middle Adolescence**: a period that “coincides with the majority of time spent in high school—namely, ages 15 through 17” (Balk, 1995, p. 6)

**Optimism**: “a goal, an expectation, or a causal attribution” that “concerns future occurrences about which individuals have strong feelings” (Peterson, 2000, p. 44–45).

**Positive psychology**: a field that “is about valued subjective experiences: well-being, contentment, and satisfaction (in the past); hope and optimism (for the future); and flow and happiness (in the present)” (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p. 5). “The aim of positive psychology is to begin to catalyze a change in the focus
of psychology from preoccupation only with repairing the worst things in life to also building positive qualities” (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p. 5).

Quality of Life: “a multidimensional concept and includes physical, mental, spiritual, and social aspects that contribute to one’s sense of well-being” (Kirschman et al., 2009, p. 138)

Subjective Well-Being: “a person’s cognitive and affective evaluations of his or her life as a whole” (Diener, Oishi, & Lucas, 2009, p. 187). “The literature on SWB … covers studies that have used such diverse terms as happiness, satisfaction, morale, and positive affect” (Diener, 1984, p. 542).

Summary

Increasingly, psychologists are focusing on people’s strengths and what makes them happy (Seligman et al., 2005). Relationships with family have a key influence on happiness (e.g., Campbell et al., 1976; Edwards & Lopez, 2006; Gray et al., 2013; O’Higgins et al., 2010; Sargeant, 2010). The FCPP framework and the PYD movement both emphasize strengths using a contextual lens (Kirschman et al., 2009). Focusing on context is important because it provides a more complete, holistic picture of the phenomenon of happiness.

Researchers have conducted both quantitative and qualitative research that contributes to our understanding of adolescents’ happiness experiences (e.g., Edwards & Lopez, 2006; Flouri & Buchanan 2003; Joronen & Åstedt-Kurki, 2005; O’Higgins et al., 2010; Offer, 2013; Rask et al., 2003; Sargeant, 2010). However, a holistic exploration of adolescent happiness in the family system from multiple perspectives is missing from the literature. This research is valuable because family dynamics play a key role in
adolescents’ happiness, and multiple perspectives from the adolescent, parents, and siblings illuminate the complexity of this phenomenon. Previous researchers have suggested future research explore multiple perspectives of family members and use a contextual focus (McNulty & Fincham, 2012; Rask et al., 2003), both of which were included in this study.

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand how the family unit influences middle adolescents’ unique experience of happiness, which I accomplished through bridging perspectives of adolescents, parents, and siblings. This included an exploration of the essence of the phenomenon, influential factors noted by the three types of participants, and a comparison of similarities and differences within and between family units.
CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter begins with a discussion of the history of happiness, including different types of happiness, happiness terminology, and the concept of happiness as a state versus a trait. I also briefly discuss contemporary research on happiness. I then move on to describe adolescent development and systemic theories. This chapter concludes with a synthesis of the research on what influences adolescent happiness both at an individual level and within the family.

A History of Happiness: Historical Roots to Contemporary Perspectives

Although the field referred to as positive psychology is relatively new, its ideas have been around for millennia (Diener, 2009). Ideas about well-being originated from ancient philosophy and religious leaders, who discussed the good society (Diener, 2009). Even though the positive psychology movement started gaining momentum in the late 1990s to early 2000s, positive psychology concepts were frequently studied before World War II (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Pre-World War II, psychology’s missions were curing disorders, increasing people’s productivity and fulfillment, and recognizing and supporting the talented (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). These second two missions focused on human growth and flourishing, making them positive psychology
topics. However, psychologists’ priorities shifted after World War II. In 1946, the Veteran’s Administration was founded, leading to an influx of funding to support treating mental illness (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). The National Institute of Mental Health was funded a year later and also provided funding for pathology-focused research (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). In this environment, psychology’s second two missions were neglected (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). A revival of positive psychology topics and an increase in scientific research on happiness began at the end of the 20th century and has continued throughout the 21st century (Ahmed, 2007; Lopez & Edwards, 2008; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). The establishment of the Journal of Happiness Studies in 2000 reflects the acceptance of happiness as an academic area (Ahmed, 2007). Although a defining feature of counseling psychology (Gelso, Williams, & Fretz, 2014), prevention emerged as a key focus area in the 1990s, and it was the theme for the 1998 American Psychological Association’s annual convention (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). A valuing of human strengths, health, and preventative care continues to define the counseling psychology profession (Lopez & Edwards, 2008). The strong empirical grounding that is being created for positive psychology is the most recent addition to this field (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

**Happiness Terminology**

According to Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi’s (2000) seminal article, positive psychology concerns “valued subjective experiences” (p. 5). Psychologists have used various terms to describe different aspects of happiness, including subjective well-being (e.g., Diener, 1984; Diener, 2000), psychological well-being (e.g., Ryff & Keyes, 1995; Ryan & Deci, 2001), and life satisfaction (e.g., Diener, 1984; Veenhoven, 1988).
Sometimes, researchers use the terms *happiness* and *subjective well-being* interchangeably (Diener, 1994). Therefore, quantitative research on happiness could be measuring cognitive or affective components or a combination of cognitive and affective components, depending on the study. Diener (1984) stated definitions of happiness/well-being fall into three categories. The first category is based on external criteria and involves activities that have a “desirable quality” (Diener, 1984, p. 543). This category includes people’s values (e.g., helping others), not their subjective states (e.g., being in a happy mood), and it has origins in Aristotle’s eudaimonia (Diener, 1984). The second category is life satisfaction, and the third category is affective (Diener, 1984).

**Life satisfaction.** Life satisfaction is a person’s assessment of his or her own happiness, making it a cognitively-based, attitudinal construct (Diener, 1984). Diener (1994) emphasized that life satisfaction is based on an evaluation of one’s overall life, not a particular experience at one moment in time. Because of this focus on an entire life, life satisfaction is past-oriented (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). The idea of happiness as related to the person’s own perception of well-being is consistent with the phenomenological perspective of the present study.

Chekola (2007) argued that an advantage of conceptualizing happiness in terms of life satisfaction is that it acknowledges that the person’s view, not objective pleasure, determines happiness. However, Chekola (2007) also saw a number of problems with attitudinal views. He thought it was unclear how strongly to interpret the idea of “satisfied with” or “pleased with.” Different people might have different descriptions of what it means to be satisfied, and objectively different happiness levels may be required for different people to report being satisfied with life. In addition, Chekola (2007) noted
that people who are currently having problems or who are working toward future goals might not report current satisfaction with life. However, they might be happy overall. This means assessments that measure happiness by strength of satisfaction with life could be underestimating happiness in certain populations.

**Subjective well-being.** Subjective well-being (SWB) includes both cognitive and affective components of happiness (Diener, 1994). According to Diener, (1984), this construct is subjective; includes the presence of positive emotions in addition to the absence of negative emotions; and is global, meaning it encompasses all parts of life. Diener (1994) conceptualized SWB as a sum of life satisfaction (the cognitive component) and the proportion of pleasant to unpleasant emotions (the affective, hedonic component). In 2000, Diener added to this definition by also including satisfaction with specific life domains in the equation. Both affective well-being and life satisfaction are influenced by people’s appraisals, and people constantly evaluate events in terms of good and bad (Diener, 1994). However, life satisfaction measures appraisals of life as a whole, while affective well-being is a hedonic assessment of the here-and-now (Diener, 1994).

Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) stated that well-being and contentment are past experiences, while happiness is a present experience. The SWB construct appears to be a combination of past and present experiences, as it contains components reflecting on both past life and here-and-now experiences.

**Optimism.** Optimism is related to happiness and involves positive experiences related to the future (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Optimism means expecting the future to be what one personally believes is desirable (Peterson, 2000). Optimism clearly involves people’s cognitions about the future, but it also contains emotional and
motivational components (Peterson, 2000). People’s emotions about future events often contain strong emotions (Peterson, 2000). In addition, people who are motivated to achieve their goals tend to expect they will do so, which would likely be seen as a desirable event (Peterson, 2000). Optimism has been conceptualized as a dispositional trait, as an explanatory style people use to describe success and failure, and as having hope for a successful future (Peterson, 2000). An optimistic explanatory style means believing bad events are temporary, specific (meaning they do not generalize to other events), and due to an external cause that is not one’s fault (Kirschman et al., 2009). People can learn to explain events optimistically, and this has been called learned optimism (Kirschman et al., 2009). Optimism is related to happiness because its benefits include increased positive mood, the prevention of depression, better physical and mental health, and success (Peterson, 2000; Seligman, 2006). Researchers have also found having optimism is positively related to life satisfaction and quality of life after stressful events (Carver, Scheier, Miller, & Fulford, 2009).

Conceptualizations/Types of Happiness

The concept of happiness and how to get, maintain, and regain it has been and continues to be a universal concern (McMahon, 2006). In Ancient Greece, philosophers devoted time to forming theories of well-being, which by modern day terminology could be considered theories of happiness (Brülde & Bykvist, 2010). Themes that have come out throughout the history of happiness that started with ancient philosophers include a hedonic view based on pleasure, a eudaimonic view based on meaning, and a view of happiness as a lifelong concept.
Hedonism. Happiness as a hedonic concept has come from multiple sources. The hedonic perspective involves the idea that happiness comes from pleasure (e.g., Ryan & Deci, 2001). This can involve both physical and mental pleasures (Ryan & Deci, 2001).

Ancient philosophy. Hedonism has early roots in Epicureanism, which focused on increasing pleasure and decreasing pain (King, Viney, & Woody, 2009). Epicureans considered pleasure to be good and pain to be evil, which was why they advocated for living a pleasurable life (King et al., 2009). They believed in keeping life simple and not engaging in activities such as heavy social responsibility, which could thwart pleasure seeking (King et al., 2009). However, they did not endorse immediate gratification and the pursuit of short-term pleasure but rather valued the long-term pursuit of pleasure (King et al., 2009). Aristippus, a Greek philosopher, also held a hedonic view. He believed the goal of life was to maximize pleasure and that happiness was equivalent to the total of all of one’s hedonic moments (Ryan & Deci, 2001).

Utilitarianism. A number of historians have mentioned utilitarianism as foundational in the hedonic view of happiness (e.g., Brülde & Bykvist, 2010; Kashdan, Biswas-Diener, & King, 2008; Ryan & Deci, 2001; Wierzbicka, 2010). Utilitarianism is the belief that humans should maximize pleasure and minimize pain (e.g., Brülde & Bykvist, 2010). Utilitarians discussed happiness from an ethical perspective and not from a scientific perspective, but their contributions are still relevant because they contributed ideas that have influenced how psychologists view happiness. For example, Bentham believed that people should do something if there is a possibility the resulting outcome will lead to a greater amount of pleasure than would other choices (Brülde & Bykvist,
2010). This belief came from an ethical perspective, with Bentham focusing on increasing happiness because it is morally right. Finally, from a psychological perspective, Bentham believed it is human nature to engage in pleasurable activities and avoid painful ones (King et al., 2009).

**Contemporary perspectives.** Today, scientists who study happiness from a hedonic perspective take a broad view, incorporating body and mind and believing such elements as reaching goals are relevant (Ryan & Deci, 2001). The modern-day construct of SWB is partially hedonic because it includes the proportion of positive to negative mood (Diener, 1994). Scales that measure SWB often contain questions related to the amount of pleasure and the lack of displeasure people experience (e.g., Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985; Diener, Wirtz et al., 2009).

**Eudaimonia.** Psychological well-being (PWB) has been used to refer to the eudaimonic type of happiness. This includes issues related to finding meaning and growing to one’s full potential (Fave, Brdar, Freire, Vella-Brodrick, & Wissing, 2011). It also includes acting virtuously (Chekola, 2007).

**Aristotle.** The concept of eudaimonia originated from Aristotle’s philosophy. Aristotle believed that true happiness comes from engaging in virtuous activity (Chekola, 2007). He saw hedonic happiness as distinct from PWB, believing that hedonic pleasures do not always increase overall well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2001). Unlike the utilitarians’ ethical focus, Aristotle’s view on happiness was not a moral one but rather a belief that human well-being would be increased through being virtuous (Chekola, 2007). He believed there was a reason to increase one’s own happiness but did not think it was our
obligation to increase the happiness of others or that increasing happiness should be the main goal of politics (Brülde & Bykvist, 2010).

**Contemporary perspectives.** Social scientists who discuss a eudaimonic view of happiness believe that happiness comes from self-actualization and the ability to fulfill one’s potential (Ryan & Deci, 2001). Eudaimonic happiness occurs when people take part in activities that are congruent with their values (Ryan & Deci, 2001). This engagement in value-driven activity makes people feel authentic, which increases their happiness (Ryan & Deci, 2001).

Ryan and Deci’s (2000) self-determination theory is also a eudaimonic one. They found that PWB is associated with autonomy, competence, and relatedness. They believed humans are intrinsically motivated to seek out these characteristics. Ryff and Keyes’s (1995) research also ties in with self-determination theory. Ryff and Keyes (1995) tested a 6-factor model of happiness, which included Autonomy, Personal Growth, Self-Acceptance, Life Purpose, Mastery, and Positive Relatedness. They found this model better accounted for well-being than models that have considered only positive and negative affect and life satisfaction. Based on these results, they argued that increasing long-term well-being takes effort. From Ryan and Deci’s (2001) and Ryff and Keyes’s (1995) theories and research, it is clear that meaning and growth, not only simple pleasures, can increase happiness.

Finally, I believe Csikszentmihalyi’s (1999) flow theory could be categorized as a eudaimonic approach. Csikszentmihalyi (1999) described happiness as a process and believed engagement in meaningful activities can lead to happiness (Diener, Oishi, & Lucas, 2009). He defined *flow* as intense engagement in an activity that is intrinsically
rewarding (Csikszentmihalyi, 1999). This activity must optimally balance challenge and skill so that people do not become either bored or frustrated (Csikszentmihalyi, 1999). An example might be playing a difficult song on the piano. This idea that happiness is caused more by meaning than by pleasure is consistent with the eudaimonic approach.

Although scientists have often contrasted eudaimonic and hedonic approaches and argued for one approach versus the other, Kashdan et al. (2008) have presented a more integrated view. They argued the distinction between the two approaches is a philosophical one, not a practical difference for science. They also noted that eudaimonia has not been consistently measured or defined. Kashdan et al. (2008) have noticed that in practice, hedonia and eudaimonia overlap and work together. Another mistake researchers often make is assuming eudaimonia is causing hedonia (Kashdan et al., 2008). However, they are making this conclusion based on correlational research, and it is equally possible the relationship goes in the other direction, with experiences of pleasure leading people to act virtuously (Kashdan et al., 2008). Overall, the question is more complex than whether happiness is hedonic or eudaimonic, and an integrated perspective in research and practice seems warranted. Therefore, the present research allowed for a broad definition of happiness in which participants could define the concept as they experience it. This allowed for the incorporation of hedonic and eudaimonic components.

Global desire or life plan view. Chekola (2007) has rejected hedonic and cognitive views on happiness, arguing for a life plan view. People coming from this perspective conceptualize happiness as a long-term concept (Chekola, 2007). This has roots in ancient philosophy, with Herodotus’s belief that happiness was not a feeling or
state but rather something that can be understood only at death as one reflects on one’s whole life (McMahon, 2006). Chekola (2007) described the life plan view as the belief that having continuing successes toward one’s life plan leads to happiness. This life plan is composed of global desires, which are “permanent, comprehensive, and important” (Chekola, 2007, p. 62). Usually, these involve goals related to one’s career, personal relationships, and becoming the type of person one would like to be (Chekola, 2007).

Chekola (2007) stated that pleasure and attitude accompany happiness, but they are not the nature of happiness. In other words, pleasure and a positive attitude toward one’s life will likely occur if one has ongoing success striving toward one’s life plan, but that does not mean pleasure and positive attitude are at the root of happiness. For Chekola (2007), happiness is stable rather than dynamic and situational.

While this view appears to be compelling, there may be some problems with it. If happiness comes from success in achieving one’s life plan, we could assume that people who have had more successes and have come closer to achieving their life plans are happier. This would suggest that happiness levels would increase as age increases. However, there is no evidence indicating a significant positive correlation between happiness and age (Diener, Suh, Lucas, and Smith, 1999). Instead, when multiple studies are analyzed, it appears life satisfaction is relatively stable across the lifespan (Diener et al., 1999).

**Is Happiness a State or a Trait?**

Researchers have argued for happiness being a state, trait, or a combination of both, and there is empirical evidence that supports state and trait theories. Supporting a trait argument, Lykken and Tellegen (1996) conducted a twin study and concluded
happiness was about 50% inherited. Brickman, Coates, and Janoff-Bulman (1978) studied adaptation to major life events that are expected to have large impacts on happiness: winning the lottery and becoming someone with paraplegia. They found lottery winners were no happier than those who had not won the lottery. Those with paraplegia were less happy than controls, but their happiness levels still averaged above the midpoint of the happiness scale. Brickman et al. (1978) concluded that events do not influence happiness to the extent most people suspect they do.

Veenhoven (1994) has argued that happiness is reactive to circumstances, and he believes it is a state construct. When he compiled studies that assessed happiness over time, he found stronger short-term stability than long-term stability, and he noted Landua’s (1992) finding of significant changes in life satisfaction over a 4-year period. Veenhoven (1994) also found happiness was affected by situations. People living in adverse conditions were less happy, and bad events would cause happiness to immediately decrease but then recover. Finally, from his review of twin studies, he found a modest consistency in happiness among identical twins (Veenhoven, 1994).

Veenhoven’s (1994) findings provide compelling evidence that happiness is influenced by factors other than one’s genetic makeup. However, even though happiness fluctuates in reaction to environmental factors, it could be influenced by genetic factors as well. Stones, Hadjistavropoulos, Tuuko, and Kozma (1995) took a number of issues with Veenhoven’s (1994) research and conclusions, and they made the argument that happiness is both state-like and trait-like. They criticized Veenhoven’s (1994) false dichotomy that happiness must be either a trait or a state and argued that cross-situational consistency does not mean behaving the exact same way across situations. Just as other
traits are expressed differently in different situations, happiness could look different across situations and still have trait-like properties as long as it showed some consistency cross-situationally (Stones et al., 1995). Stones et al. (1995) noted that Veenhoven (1994) omitted some valid studies, and with their calculations, they found 40% stability for happiness over 10 years and 30% stability over 40 years. This suggests part of the variability in happiness could be due to temperament.

As the literature on happiness expands, researchers have been providing more complex views on the state versus trait question. Eid and Diener (2004) stated SWB could be conceptualized as a state or a trait. The state component would focus on one’s mood and feelings, while the trait component would encompass positive and negative affect over time (Eid & Diener, 2004). Diener (2000) argued that there is support for adaptation because events immediately impact people’s happiness, but then people adapt to these events by returning to their natural set-point for happiness. Overall, there are low correlations between circumstances and SWB (Diener, 2000). However, Diener (2000) also noted exceptions to adaptation, such as marriage and widowhood. Luhmann, Hofmann, Eid, and Lucas (2012) recently conducted a meta-analysis of adaptation studies and explored specific adaptation patterns to various events. They examined how each event affected both cognitive and affective components of happiness. They found different effects depending on the specific event and that most events had stronger impacts on cognitive well-being. For example, after childbirth, affective well-being increased, while cognitive well-being decreased. For retirement, cognitive well-being initially decreased, but affective well-being was not affected. This research indicates happiness likely is affected by multiple variables. Schimmack, Krause, Wagner, and
Schupp (2010) proposed a model in which variance in well-being is due to trait variance, state variance, and error variance. They found that when correcting for unreliability, state and trait effects were about equal. Their longitudinal study of stability at 6 weeks, 1 year, and 15 years confirmed the finding that state and trait variance contribute about equally to well-being. Finally, in their literature review, Tay and Kuykendall (2013) argued for SWB as a stable and genetic construct that is “malleable” (p. 160). They presented evidence that situations, one’s environment, and interventions can change SWB.

Overall, the picture is complex, and it appears happiness is neither purely state nor purely trait. In this study, I will be conceptualizing happiness as a state because I am interested in exploring the state-like components of happiness. Although I recognize a portion of happiness could be due to biological factors (Lykken & Tellegen, 1996), my objective was to explore how the family system affects happiness, which is a question that specifically targets the state component of happiness. I am most interested in studying happiness as a state because I believe we have the most influence over the state aspect of happiness and can design promotion activities targeted at enhancing state variability in happiness.

**Overview of Contemporary Research on Happiness**

Over the last two decades, many researchers have examined factors that influence happiness. For example, Schueller and Seligman (2010) found that meaning, engagement in interesting activities, and pleasure were associated with greater SWB. Additionally, meaning and engagement were more strongly correlated with SWB than pleasure was. This suggests that finding meaning in life and participating in engaging activities contribute more to one’s happiness than pursuing pleasure. Schueller and Seligman’s
(2010) sample included adolescents; however, people under 20 years old made up less than 10% of all participants, so it is unknown how well these results generalize to adolescents. There is some evidence that these findings may apply to adolescents from my own brief qualitative research, in which I interviewed adolescents about how they define and experience happiness (see Appendix A). I found that meaning, engagement, and pleasure were all themes related to participants’ happiness, leading me to conclude adolescents’ happiness may be made up of much more than the presence of pleasure and positive affect and a lack of pain and negative affect (see Appendix A). Identified themes not related to hedonic pleasure included helping others and self-expression (see Appendix A). Therefore, it seems a purely affective approach to defining happiness is inadequate. The evidence for meaning and engagement as influences on happiness indicates cognitions and behaviors are also influential.

Researchers have also explored what affects happiness across cultures. Suh et al. (1998) conducted a large, cross-cultural study in which they examined how life satisfaction across cultures is influenced by internal emotions and cultural norms about what a satisfying life looks like. Participants came from nationally representative samples and included middle adolescents. Specifically, Suh et al. (1998) compared individualist to collectivist cultures. They found internal emotions were much more important than cultural norms in affecting the happiness of those in individualist cultures. However, those in collectivist cultures reported internal emotions and cultural norms contributed equally to their life satisfaction. This indicates what influences happiness could vary across cultures.
Researchers have also explored the nature/nurture debate around happiness. Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, and Schkade (2005) proposed a pie chart model (developed from past literature) in which three factors differentially influence happiness: Genetics accounts for 50% of happiness, intentional activity for 40%, and circumstances for 10%. Lyubomirsky et al.’s (2005) heritability estimate was based on Tellegen et al.’s (1988) and Lykken and Tellegen’s (1996) twin research. Lyubomirsky et al. (2005) also endorsed the conceptualization of a happiness set point.

Lyubomirsky et al. (2005) defined circumstances as experiences we have, identity markers, and where we live. They thought circumstances might have been relatively uninfluential on happiness because people tend to hedonically adapt to new circumstances. However, they noted that circumstances might have small effects only once one’s basic needs are met. They argued that fulfillment of basic needs allows people to reach a natural happiness set point but does not increase their happiness above this set point. Among people who have met basic needs and are able to reach their set points, circumstances likely play a small role in increasing long-term happiness (Lyubomirsky et al., 2005). In fact, Andrews and Withey (1976) found that when combined, a number of identity markers and circumstances (including age, family income, education, race, sex, and family life-cycle stage) explained less than 10% of the variation in life satisfaction. This idea that certain circumstances have very little effect on happiness is also supported by adolescent research, in which the relationship between life satisfaction and various demographic variables (e.g., age, gender, intelligence, parental occupation) is small (Park, 2004). In addition, Diener et al. (1999) conducted a review of the literature on SWB and emphasized how multiple researchers have found
situational factors make small contributions (ranging from 8% to 20%) to SWB. However, it should be noted that much of the research to support the pie chart model was conducted with nationally representative samples in the United States, and it is unknown if this model would generalize to other cultures. It is possible that circumstances have a larger effect on happiness in nonwestern cultures.

Finally, Lyubomirsky et al. (2005) described intentional activities as effortful activities that people must choose to complete. This part of happiness makes up a significant chunk of the happiness pie, and it is the part that people can actively influence. Research showing intentional activities contribute significantly to happiness has led researchers to develop and test interventions to increase happiness that target intentional activities. In one study, Lyubomirsky, Dickerhoof, Boehm, and Sheldon (2011) found that interventions using optimism (through thinking about one’s best possible self) and gratitude (through writing gratitude letters) increased undergraduate college students’ SWB, especially among participants in the treatment groups who selected themselves for the study. This study suggests that along with the interventions themselves, motivation is an important component to increasing happiness. In addition, Gillham et al. (2011) found support that optimism, gratitude, and meaning were positively related to middle adolescents’ life satisfaction. They also found that adolescents who had strengths related to engaging positively with others (i.e., teamwork, kindness, forgiveness) had less symptoms of depression. Toner, Haslam, Robinson, and Williams (2012) also studied how middle adolescents’ strengths relate to happiness and life satisfaction. They found hope predicted both happiness and life satisfaction, which is consistent with the results from Gillham et al.’s (2011) study. Valle, Huebner, and Suldo
(2006) also found that for middle and high school students \((N = 699)\), measures of hope at one time point predicted life satisfaction at a time point one year later. Their sample was culturally diverse, with over one-half of participants identifying as African American. This indicates the importance of hope in influencing happiness may also apply to cultural minorities. Finally, Toner et al. (2012) found the strengths of zest, caution, and leadership were positively correlated with happiness and life satisfaction. Being curious and having the ability to love others and receive love from others were related to high happiness levels.

Bryant, Smart, and King (2005) also found evidence that engaging in intentional activities can boost happiness. Specifically, they examined a reminiscence intervention and found that college students who reminisced about positive events experienced increased happiness. This was even greater for people who reminisced as a way to increase self-insight and perspective rather than as a way to remove themselves from their present lives. Bryant et al. (2005) concluded reminiscence is powerful in increasing happiness by allowing people to savor and reflect on past experiences, not as a method to escape distress. Most positive psychology intervention studies have been conducted with college students, and an understanding of adolescent experiences and development will help researchers tailor interventions to adolescents.

The research that has been conducted with adolescents involved measuring how their strengths and well-being levels are related. Although some adolescents may naturally have certain strengths, I believe these strengths can be built. That means the research on adolescent strengths could inform interventions aimed at boosting happiness
in middle adolescents, similar to interventions that have already been implemented with college students.

**Adolescent Development**

Given that adolescents are the focus of the present research, a brief background in adolescent development provides context for the study. Developmental experts and researchers have debated how to define the age range for adolescence (e.g., Arnett, 2000; Balk, 1995; Berk, 2010; Elliot & Feldman, 1990; Scabini et al., 2006). However, there seems to be relative agreement on the tasks and milestones accomplished during this time. Adolescents confront biological and social developmental changes and challenges, including navigating physical and sexual maturation; learning new ways to relate to peers, including forming romantic relationships; and increasing their independence, including learning how to be adults who are separate from their parents (Elliot & Feldman, 1990). Developmental theorists have viewed adolescence as both a transitional period between childhood and adulthood and as its own unique period (Balk, 1995).

**Periods of Adolescence**

Developmental experts have provided age ranges for adolescence encompassing the time from 10 years old until 22 years old. I used Balk’s (1995) and Elliot and Feldman’s (1990) adolescent categories and age ranges in the present study. Both Balk (1995) and Elliot and Feldman (1990) defined early adolescence as ages 10 to 14 and middle adolescence as ages 15 to 17. They varied slightly in their age range for late adolescence, with Balk (1995) providing a range of 18 to 22 and Elliot and Feldman (1990) a range of 18 to the mid-20s. Early adolescence focuses on transitioning to
middle school, and during this time adolescents go through puberty and become interested in romantic relationships (Balk, 1995; Elliot & Feldman, 1990).

Middle adolescence is the high school period in which adolescents gain autonomy and begin spending more time with peers and less time with family (Balk, 1995). Although parents still matter to adolescents, friends’ ability to influence and pressure each other becomes heightened during middle adolescence (Hauser & Bowlds, 1990). Middle adolescents also become more involved in romantic relationships. For example, Feiring (1996) studied 117 middle adolescents (age 15) and found most of them had dated. Their relationships tended to last a few months. However, these relationships were not shallow, and Feiring (1996) described them as “brief but intense,” given the large amount of time adolescent couples spent together or talking on the phone throughout the relationship (p. 192). In addition, middle adolescents begin more complexly exploring their identities and become distressed by discrepancies they notice in themselves (Harter, 1990). For example, a middle adolescent could be concerned about being nice to friends but mean to family (Harter, 1990).

Late adolescence is a time when adolescents leave home and start becoming independent (Balk, 1995). According to Elliot and Feldman (1990), middle adolescence could be the end of adolescence for many. They argued only some people choose to enter late adolescence and wait to become adults because of educational or social goals (e.g., attending college). Although 18 to 22 year olds may vary in their levels of independence, I still believe they are not fully developed adults, and like Balk, I view them as late adolescents. In the current study, I focused on middle adolescence.
**Emerging adulthood.** Arnett (2000) has discussed a concept called *emerging adulthood*, which includes those between 18 and 25 years old. He believed people are moving into adulthood at a slower pace now than they did previously because the average age to get married and have children has increased. Arnett (2000) has viewed emerging adulthood as different from both adolescence and adulthood and has described it as a period in which individuals have independence but not all of the adult responsibilities. A large portion of emerging adults attend college, which gives them an increased level of independence while also providing them the security to explore what they want to do (Arnett, 2000). They still have many options for their futures and an environment where there are resources to explore these options (Arnett, 2000).

Arnett (2000) stated that most modern-day experts believe adolescence is from 10 or 11 years to 18 or 19 years. However, he did not cite specific experts who gave this range. He also argued the years after 18 are distinct from adolescence because people do not live at home, are not in grade school, and have legal adult status. At the same time, Arnett (2000) argued emerging adults are not young adults because being a young adult implies one is in adulthood. On the other hand, those ages 18 to 25 years old have said they feel like neither adolescents nor adults (Arnett, 2000). It seems Arnett (2000) may be using a different term to conceptualize a stage similar to what Elliot and Feldman (1990) and Balk (1995) have called late adolescence, given emerging adulthood involves identity exploration, leaving home, and learning how to acquire adult responsibilities. However, the current study focused on middle adolescence.
Systemic Theories

Two systemic theories informed the present research: Bronfenbrenner’s (1997, 2005) bioecological model and Ford and Lerner’s (1992) developmental systems theory (DST). DST was heavily influenced by Bronfenbrenner’s model, specifically the concept of reciprocal interaction between person and environment (Ford & Lerner, 1992). Both theories reflect the complexity of human development.

Bronfenbrenner’s Bioecological Model

According to Bronfenbrenner (1997), human development occurs through reciprocal interaction between the individual and his or her environment. Interactions that occur regularly are called proximal processes, and they could include engaging in activities with parents and other children, academic involvement, and sports (Bronfenbrenner, 1997). Proximal processes influence human development by affecting how genotypes translate into phenotypes (Bronfenbrenner, 1997). Specifically, objective and subjective components influence development, with the way people experience their environments being as important as the objective environments themselves (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). The specific effect of proximal processes on development is related to person and environmental factors (Bronfenbrenner, 1997). Bronfenbrenner (1997) gave the example that proximal processes that lead to positive outcomes tend to have a greater effect on high SES families, while proximal processes that cause negative outcomes typically have a greater effect on low SES families.

Bronfenbrenner (2005) saw the family as “the heart of our social system” (p. 260). He believed that in order to have a positive development, children need to engage in “progressively more complex activities” with an adult who cares about the child and
with whom the child has a bond (typically a parent; Bronfenbrenner, 2005, p. 9). Specifically, he mentioned the importance of parental involvement and an environment that is conducive to parental involvement. For example, policies must allow parents the ability to spend time with their children (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). Bronfenbrenner (2005) advocated for work settings to provide family-friendly policies, such as infant care leave. In addition to children having a strong bond and involvement with an adult, a third party adult should facilitate this relationship by supporting, encouraging, and caring for the primary adult (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). This person is often the other parent, yet single parents often need to find another adult who can serve in this role (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). This is important because if the primary caregiver does not receive assistance, children will have poorer developmental outcomes, such as engagement in risky behaviors (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). Bronfenbrenner (2005) argued the ability to be successful in environments outside of the family depends on the foundation the family gives. Overall, this model shows the family influencing children’s development in other environments and other environments influencing the family’s ability to provide an adequate environment.

Bronfenbrenner (1997) also discussed multiple systems that he has described as nested structures. Microsystems include activities in the “immediate environment,” such as family, school, peers, and work (Bronfenbrenner, 1997). Proximal processes occur in this system (Bronfenbrenner, 1997). Mesosystems contain relationships between at least two Microsystems, such as parent–teacher relationships (Bronfenbrenner, 1997). Exosystems also contain relationships between two or more systems, but in this case, one of those systems does not directly involve the child but still has an influence on the child
Bronfenbrenner (1997). Bronfenbrenner (1997) gave the example of the relationship between home and the parents’ work environment. Finally, the chronosystem, which is the largest system, refers to time, meaning the historical events that are occurring during development (Bronfenbrenner, 1997). These systems contain the contextual factors influencing development. Bronfenbrenner (1997) believed people have the potential to develop in many different ways and that systemic interventions could help them maximize their potentials. This optimism about positive development is part of Lerner’s (2009) DST and the positive youth development movement.

**Developmental Systems Theory**

Ford and Lerner (1992) developed DST based on developmental contextualism. Their model is an integrative, relational model rather than a reductionist one (Lerner, 2009). Like Bronfenbrenner (1997, 2005), Lerner (2009) has rejected dichotomies, such as nature versus nurture, in favor of many integrated levels that interact with each other. Two principles of developmental contextualism guide Ford and Lerner’s (1992) theory. The first is that there are many levels of organization (e.g., psychological, biological, physiological, historical, cultural), and no one level is central or able to be studied in isolation from the other levels (Ford & Lerner, 1992; Lerner, 2009). The second is that there is dynamic interactionism between levels, meaning levels have “mutually influential individual ← → context relations” (Ford & Lerner, 1992; Lerner, 2009, p. 154). This is true for all levels. Therefore, change in human development occurs through changing relationships (Ford & Lerner, 1992). According to Lerner (2009), these relationships are “the fundamental unit of analysis … of human development” (p. 154). Although I agree with Ford and Lerner (1992) and Bronfenbrenner (1997) that there is a
bidirectional relationship between person and environment, in the present study, I examined only one direction of this relationship: how adolescents’ families affect their happiness but not how adolescents affect their families’ happiness. This is because I was specifically interested in adolescents’ happiness experiences in the family system.

Similar to Bronfenbrenner’s (1997, 2005) discussion about how proximal processes affect development, Ford and Lerner (1992) have argued that human development has relative plasticity because genes and the environment are fused. This allows for a large number of possibilities for development but does not warrant a belief that anything is possible (Ford & Lerner, 1992). Developmental plasticity means that development can change based on one’s context (Lerner, 2009). Plasticity also provides optimism about human development because it indicates we can design interventions to increase positive development (Lerner, 2009). These interventions lead to changes not only in the moment but also in options for future development, meaning they can have a lasting impact (Ford & Lerner, 1992).

Lerner (2009) has also stressed diversity as a key component of human development, stating that much of the diversity in adolescent development is due to relationships with the environment. Human diversity reflects the many ways genes can be expressed (Lerner, Agans, DeSouza, & Gasca, 2013). The combination of a diversity of both genotypes and contexts leads there to be close to an infinite number of phenotypes (Lerner et al., 2013). According to Lerner et al. (2013), because of this diversity, we need to be specific when creating evidence-based interventions, asking “which characteristics, in which individuals, should be integrated with which features of the ecology of human development, and at which points across ontogeny, to produce
optimal instances of changes in behavior and development” (p. 181). This approach complements the one taken by counseling psychologists in the Evidence Based Practice in Psychology movement, which focuses on “the integration of the best available research with clinical expertise in the context of patient characteristics, culture, and preferences” (APA Presidential Task Force on Evidence-Based Practice, 2006, p. 273). In conclusion, Lerner et al. (2013) have argued we need to focus on diverse people, not the “ideal” person, because this will allow optimization of development to be possible for all. This focus on helping diverse people thrive would contribute to social justice, again tying in well with the counseling psychology movement (Lerner et al., 2013).

**Family-Centered Positive Psychology**

Sheridan and Burt (2009) noted that the child (defined broadly to include adolescents) and family literature tends to focus on problems and risk factors, and they proposed research on the families who are functioning well would help psychologists understand how families can effectively cope with problems. In addition, Sheridan et al. (2004) critiqued the positive psychology literature for emphasizing the individual. They argued that strengths-based child research needs to be systemic and include parents because parents control their children’s environments. Both the strengths-based focus and the systemic perspective hold value, and combining them could maximize the strengths of each field. Family-centered positive psychology (FCPP) attempts to do just that and combines ecological theory, family-centered services, and the empowerment literature (Sheridan et al., 2004). It is a perspective clinicians can use for work with adolescents and families that attends to strengths and building resources to help families grow rather than solving problems (Sheridan et al., 2004; Sheridan & Burt, 2009).
Researchers have found that this strengths-based, systemic perspective increases the PWB of children and adolescents (Kirschman et al., 2009).

The goals of FCPP are “family empowerment and enhanced functioning on the part of family members” (Sheridan et al., 2004, p. 8). To achieve these goals, psychologists must understand youths’ assets (Sheridan & Burt, 2009). The Search Institute (2005) developed 40 assets that can be developed during early childhood. Maximizing the number of assets youth have is essential to their healthy development (Sheridan & Burt, 2009). Parents can influence their children’s positive development most effectively through their interactions with their children, rather than by completing specific tasks (Sheridan & Burt, 2009). For example, two big themes for effective interaction are “warmth and sensitivity” and “support for autonomy” (Sheridan & Burt, 2009, p. 553).

A number of principles guide FCPP. First, process is just as important as outcomes, and the family is proactive in determining goals, using resources, and deciding what it needs (Sheridan et al., 2004). Families use their strengths and learn new skills based on these strengths (Sheridan et al., 2004; Sheridan & Burt, 2009). The focus on learning new skills rather than solving problems creates more permanent change, as skills can generalize to other situations, while solving the presenting problem creates a short-term solution for one problem (Sheridan et al., 2004). The emphasis on families using already existing strengths keeps them in the driver’s seat, which increases their empowerment (Sheridan & Burt, 2009). The goal is to help families access their strengths: FCPP advocates take the perspective that systemic factors could be making this difficult rather than believing families do not have strengths (Sheridan & Burt, 2009).
Clinicians help families access their resources, which often includes building social support networks, especially relationships with children’s schools (Sheridan at al., 2004; Sheridan & Burt, 2009).

I believe FCPP shows much potential for helping adolescents and families because it combines two movements (positive psychology and systems theories) that have shown success. Although there has been support for interventions based on the principles of FCPP (Kirschman et al., 2009), I did not find research specifically measuring FCPP’s effectiveness. However, the FCPP model is valuable in providing a context for the present study. Like FCPP, the present research was strengths-based, and findings could provide implications to help families build on their already existing strengths. In addition, the present research was systemic, and I took the perspective that adolescents’ happiness can be maximized when the entire family is involved.

**Positive Youth Development**

As discussed in Chapter I, the PYD movement also served as a framework for the present study. Although a number of theories will inform the study, PYD is the overarching theory guiding this study. This is because it includes elements of the theories discussed above and a developmental component specific to youth, making it the most comprehensive framework for this study. Like FCPP, PYD is strengths-based and systemic, with a focus on building generalizable skills (Kirschman et al., 2009; Lerner et al., 2005). In addition, the PYD movement includes theory and research about how youth can have a positive developmental trajectory (e.g., Durlak et al., 2007; Hershberg, DeSouza, Warren, Lerner, & Lerner, 2014; Lerner, 2009; Lerner et al., 2005; Morrissey & Werner-Wilson, 2005). Advocates of this movement take an alternative perspective to
the storm and stress model, which has not been empirically supported (Lerner, 2009). Instead, youth are seen as having strengths that can be developed (Lerner et al., 2005). In fact, researchers have found youth want to engage in meaningful, prosocial activities (Hershberg et al., 2014). This is also something that positively influences their development, meaning youth want to engage in activities that will help them succeed (Morrissey & Werner-Wilson, 2005). The main goals of the PYD movement are to help youth flourish and to prevent future problems (Bowers, Geldhof, Johnson, Lerner, & Lerner, 2014a).

The theoretical foundation for the PYD movement comes from the belief that youth will have an optimal positive development when there is a match between their individual strengths and the strengths/resources in their environments (Bowers et al., 2014a; Lerner, 2009; Lerner et al., 2005). These environments include influences from parents, peers, school, and the community (Bowers et al., 2014a). Like systemic theorists, PYD advocates believe adolescents have plasticity, which means they can be influenced by interventions (Geldhof, Bowers, & Lerner, 2013a; Lerner et al., 2005). Specifically, we can create positive relationships between adolescents and their environments (Geldhof et al., 2013a). Individual and contextual factors can positively influence each other, and this interaction leads to PYD (Bowers et al., 2014a; Lerner et al., 2005). This reciprocal interaction has been termed a relational developmental system (Bowers et al., 2014a).

The five Cs of competence, confidence, character, connection, and caring have been used as a way to comprehensively include the essential outcomes of PYD (Lerner et al., 2000). A sixth C, contribution, has been added by Pittman, Irby, Tolman, Yohalem,
and Ferber (2003) to describe the result of having all five Cs (Lerner, 2009; Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003). These six Cs can be fostered throughout childhood and adolescence (Lerner et al., 2000). Someone with the five Cs is likely to have “an ideal adult life,” which involves contributing to self and others through self-care and prosocial behavior, respectively (Lerner, 2009).

Since the beginning of the 21st century, research related to the PYD movement has burgeoned, with four special issues in journals (Bowers, Geldhof, Johnson, Lerner, & Lerner, 2014b; Lerner, von Eye, Lerner, & Lewin-Bizan, 2009; Lerner, von Eye, Lerner, Lewin-Bizan, & Bowers, 2010; Mahoney & Lafferty, 2003) and one special journal section (Geldhof, Bowers, & Lerner, 2013b) released devoted to the topic. While most interventions for youth have been targeted at the individual level, the PYD literature includes a greater proportion of systemic interventions (Durlak et al., 2007). Much of the PYD research has used the 4-H Study, which is a longitudinal study that began in 2002 and tracked youth from the time they were in fifth grade up until they were twelfth graders (Bowers et al., 2014a). The 4-H data include information about individual strengths (e.g., self-regulation, optimism, engagement in school) and environmental strengths (e.g., parental assets, opportunities to collaborate with adults, access to resources from institutions; Bowers et al., 2014a).

Family has frequently been listed as an environmental influence on PYD (e.g., Bowers et al., 2014a; Lerner et al., 2009; Geldhof et al., 2013a), yet only a few researchers (Durlak et al., 2007; Morrissey & Werner-Wilson, 2005) have explicitly studied how family affects PYD. Durlak et al. (2007) examined how school, family, and community interventions impacted PYD. Effective interventions in these three main
settings should lead to “enhanced social and emotional competencies,” which would then lead to overall PYD (Durlak et al., 2007, p. 270). These interventions can target either the individual or the system of which the individual is a part (Durlak et al., 2007). Durlak et al. (2007) conducted a meta-analysis that included family interventions focused on parenting practices and the overall family environment (e.g., routines, rules, bonds, problem-solving). They found these interventions were successful and resulted in the same amount of change as has been found for individual interventions.

Morrissey and Werner-Wilson (2005) explored how family influence, attitude toward community, opportunities in the community, and structured out-of-school activities relate to PYD in adolescents from Grades 5 through 12. Specifically, they used prosocial behavior as a measure of positive outcome. They found family involvement was directly related to youths’ attitude toward the community and their involvement in structured out-of-school activities. However, family involvement had no direct effect on prosocial behavior. Instead, structured out-of-school activities mediated the effect between family involvement and prosocial behavior. Morrissey and Werner-Wilson (2005) posited that they might not have found a direct effect between family interaction and prosocial behavior because adolescents spend less time with their families and possibly do not see them as influential. However, Morrissey and Werner-Wilson (2005) argued families are influential and can serve as a “safety net” for adolescents by influencing them to engage in beneficial academic, social, and extracurricular activities.

Hershberg et al. (2014) conducted a qualitative study with adolescents from the 4-H Study in which they explored participants’ descriptions of their future goals and what they found most meaningful in their lives. Youths’ responses indicated a theme of
connection (which included relationships with family and friends) for both meaningful factors and future goals. Compared to other themes, connection ranked high in importance. Hershberg et al. (2014) concluded connection “may be the ‘C’ that matters most to youth themselves” (p. 965). Therefore, the present study’s focus on connection with family has the potential to contribute to maximizing adolescents’ ability to flourish.

Although in the current study, I did not directly explore PYD, I explored how relationships between adolescents and their families influence their happiness. Well-being is one of the positive outcomes of successful youth development (Lerner, 2009), so this study could inform the PYD literature. In addition, the limited PYD research on family influences did not include siblings as a specific focus. The sample for the 4-H Study, which has been used for much of the PYD research, includes youth and their parents but not siblings. The present research has the potential to uniquely inform the PYD movement through exploration of adolescents’ relationships with their siblings.

Research on Adolescents’ Relationships with Family

Overall, research indicates that adolescents value family, have positive relationships with family members, and believe family influences their happiness (e.g., Edwards & Lopez, 2006; O’Higgins et al., 2010; Sargeant, 2010; Scabini et al., 2006; Tzeng, 2012). Scabini et al. (2006) found adolescents ages 16 to 18 years old were satisfied with their families. They also found these middle adolescents showed more communication problems with parents and felt less support from parents than younger adolescents. However, middle adolescents overall thought they had good communication with and felt supported by parents (Scabini et al., 2006). Scabini et al.’s (2006) research shows that family plays an important and positive role in adolescents’ lives.
Tzeng (2012) also found evidence family significantly impacts adolescents. Specifically, Tzeng (2012) explored significant influences on adolescents’ self-esteem. She examined data from a larger longitudinal study, and she included survey data from participants at two times: when they were in seventh grade and 2 years later when they were in ninth grade. Tzeng (2012) found family cohesion was an important influence on self-esteem for both early and middle adolescents, debunking the myth that parents have less influence on their children’s development later in adolescence.

In addition, researchers have found discrepancies between adolescents’ and their parents’ perceptions of family factors. In general, adolescents have a more negative perception of family factors than their parents do. For example, Ohannessian et al. (1995) studied 74 families (with each family consisting of one adolescent and one parent) and found when parents and early adolescents differed on their perceptions of family factors (i.e., family adjustment, family cohesion), adolescents reported more negative views. Scabini et al. (2006) found parents have greater overall satisfaction with the family than do middle adolescents. Rask et al. (2003) found similar results in their study with 239 dyads of a 12- to 17-year-old adolescent and a parent. They examined such factors as communication, structure of relationships, stability, and emotional bonds. They also found adolescents’ views of family dynamics were related to their SWB, while parents’ perceptions were not. This relationship was strongest for stability, having emotionally close relationships with parents, and positive communication. Finally, Stuart and Jose’s (2012) longitudinal research on differences in parents’ and adolescents’ views of family dynamics (i.e., “cohesion, conflict, mutual activities, autonomy, and identity”) was mostly consistent with previous research (p. 861). They studied 972 adolescents
who were 10 to 15 years old, along with one of their parents, and they assessed participants’ views over 3 years (consisting of three assessments at 1-year intervals). Parents rated family variables higher for all factors except for conflict. In addition, over time, ratings of positive factors decreased, while ratings of conflict remained constant for both adolescents and their parents. Ratings of well-being were more stable for older teenagers, and older teenagers also showed a stronger relationship between positive well-being and smaller discrepancies with parents on family dynamics. This indicates that parents and adolescents having similar views about family dynamics could be especially important to the well-being of middle adolescents.

Overall, it seems multiple perspectives are needed to completely understand how adolescents develop within their families. To date, researchers studying adolescent–parent discrepancies have used quantitative methods. Using qualitative methods to continue exploring the perspectives of adolescents and parents could help counseling psychologists understand the complexities of this topic. For example, adolescent views may be better at explaining happiness for many family factors, but parent views may contribute in unique ways that quantitative research has not been able to detect. In addition, researchers have yet to explore sibling perspectives on family factors.

**Research on Adolescent Happiness**

Researchers are beginning to realize the importance of studying adolescents’ happiness in addition to their mental health problems (e.g., Eloff, 2008; O’Higgins et al., 2010; Sargeant, 2010; Suldo & Shaffer, 2008). Suldo and Shaffer (2008) found evidence SWB relates to adolescent functioning and is a different construct than the absence of mental health problems. They tested a dual-factor model of well-being in which SWB
and psychopathology were tested as contributors to middle school students’ academic, physical, and social functioning. They found those with average to high SWB had better outcomes in all three areas of functioning compared with those who had low SWB (including low SWB individuals who did not have clinical psychopathology). This shows SWB and psychopathology are distinct and not opposites of each other (Suldo & Shaffer, 2008). Suldo and Shaffer (2008) concluded fostering SWB along with treating disorders is important to increasing adolescents’ overall functioning. They recommended practitioners and researchers measure and understand both constructs when working with adolescents. The present study’s focus on happiness answered this call to explore adolescents’ happiness as a way to help them thrive.

Because of the importance of boosting happiness to help adolescents flourish, over the past decade, researchers have explored what happiness means to adolescents and what makes them happy. Specifically, researchers have started focusing on the perspective of the adolescent, with an increase in qualitative methods. O’Higgins et al. (2010) noted that the literature is often unclear on the difference between well-being and happiness, with both terms being used to mean the same thing. They argued adolescents might interpret questions that measure happiness and well-being differently from the way the researcher intended. Therefore, their research focused on adolescents’ perspectives of happiness and health. Sargeant (2010) also argued that research from adolescents’ perspectives is needed, and he critiqued helping professionals for not actually investigating what adolescents think when trying to help them. He noted adults decide what is best for children based on their current views or on things they believe they
thought when they were children. His research also focused on how adolescents view happiness.

A consistent theme in the adolescent happiness literature has been the importance of relationships with others, with family being an especially important influence. Other themes have also emerged but have been less consistent across studies. Fararouei, Brown, Toori, Haghighi, and Jafari (2013) examined how happiness related to family, physical activity, diet, and leisure time in 8,159 Iranian high school women. They found those who spent most time with family were happier than those who spent most time with friends or watching television. O’Higgins et al. (2010) used a grounded theory methodology in which they interviewed 31 Irish 12 and 13 year olds for 10 to 20 minutes. They asked participants questions about how they define happiness, what the experience of happiness feels like, what affects their happiness, and how they can detect happiness in others. They found a social theme that included family and friends and a school theme that included enjoying school (but not tests and homework). They also found “pride, optimism, and feelings that give energy” were associated with happy experiences (O’Higgins et al., 2010, p. 374). Interestingly, what participants did not discuss was just as enlightening. Participants did not mention money as related to happiness, and one participant stated specifically that money was not a factor. They also did not discuss happiness as having more positive than negative emotions, meaning a hedonic perspective did not fit for them. O’Higgins et al. (2010) summed up the findings with two main themes: “‘doing things’ that they enjoyed and ‘being with’ friends and family” (p. 376).
Sargeant (2010) also found relationships were a central theme in Australian and English adolescents’ happiness. He gave 397 early adolescents (about 11 or 12 years old) a questionnaire that asked them, “What makes you worry?” and “What do you need to be happy?” (p. 415). He found relationships were the strongest theme, with two-thirds of responses related to family and friends. He also found much fewer responses related to material objects and wanting to change one’s circumstances. Participants also indicated they worried the most about their relationships, especially their connections with family members. They expressed worries about specific family members dying or fighting. This indicates early adolescents greatly value their relationships with family.

Relationships also emerged as a primary theme in Eloff’s (2008) research on 6 to 13 year olds’ constructions of happiness. Eloff (2008) interviewed 42 participants for about 10 to 20 minutes about their definitions of happiness, what contributed to their happiness, and the context of their happiness. About two-thirds of participants (27 participants) were 10 to 13 years old, making a large portion of the sample adolescents. Participants discussed family and friends and especially emphasized family by mentioning specific people who made them happy or how doing things with family made them happy. The other two themes were “recreation” and “receiving material possessions” (Eloff, 2008, p. 83). Eloff (2008) noted that these two themes also involved relationships: Recreation involved doing activities with people, and discussion of material possessions focused on gifts significant people in their lives gave them. Eloff (2008) also noticed participants did not mention accomplishment, which he said could be either a cultural difference or due to the methods of the study. This contrasts with O’Higgins et al.’s (2010) finding that pride was related to happiness. It also contrasts
with the pilot study I conducted (see Appendix A), in which all participants mentioned accomplishment. Finally, Hoffman, Iversen, and Ortiz (2010) asked undergraduate students in Norway to write about “an experience where you felt joy and happiness prior to the age of 14” (p. 69). They predetermined categories for experiences, and the most frequent responses fell into the “interpersonal joy” category (p. 69). Within this category, responses related to spending time with family were the most frequent. Overall, it seems interpersonal relationships, especially with family, greatly influence adolescents’ happiness.

Qualitative research to explore adolescents’ perspectives on happiness in the United States is still lacking. In addition, published research on middle adolescents’ general happiness experiences is also missing from the literature. All of these studies focused on early adolescents’ experiences. It is possible findings will generalize to middle adolescents, given the research on adolescent development discussed above that indicates middle adolescents value family relationships, but this needs to be investigated. Another limitation of current research is the lack of time spent talking with adolescents. A number of these studies used questionnaires, and the interviews that were conducted were very brief (e.g., 10 to 20 minutes; Eloff, 2008). The present study helped fill this gap in the literature by further exploring adolescent happiness through in-depth interviews.

Research on Adolescent Happiness in the Family

Quite a few researchers have explored what family factors may positively influence adolescent happiness. One avenue of research has been how adolescents’ and their parents’ happiness levels are related. Another topic has been what environmental
factors in the family may impact adolescent happiness. Overall, researchers have consistently found that family support and involvement relate to higher levels of adolescent happiness.

**Relationship Between Adolescents’ and Parents’ Happiness**

A number of researchers have explored how adolescents’ happiness levels relate to their parents’ happiness levels. For example, Ben-Zur (2003) measured 121 adolescents’ (15 to 19 years old) and their parents’ SWB and life satisfaction. She found a significant correlation between adolescents’ SWB and their fathers’ SWB. She also found adolescents’ and mothers’ life satisfaction was significantly related.

Headey, Muffels, and Wagner (2014) also explored this relationship by examining data that followed 1,251 adolescents and their parents over a course of 28 years, with all adolescents being adults who were no longer living with their parents at the end of data collection. They found parents passed on their happiness to their children, and these effects lasted into their children’s adulthood. This occurred through parents having prosocial values, being socially engaged, taking good physical care of themselves, and showing an ability to balance work and personal life. This study indicates parents’ happiness can influence adolescents’ happiness and that these effects are strong enough to continue affecting children into adulthood.

Finally, Matteson, McGue, and Iacono (2013) found results suggesting the relationship between parents’ and adolescents’ happiness is not due to “contagion” but to genetics. They measured happiness in 615 families in which adolescent children were either adopted or biologically related to their parents. They found no relationship between parents’ and children’s happiness for adoptive families and a modest effect for
biologically related families. This conflicts with Headey et al.’s (2014) research that parents pass on happiness to their children through various positive factors. However, Matteson et al. (2013) acknowledged it is possible adoptive families differ from biologically related families in ways other than genetics (e.g., adoptive families may have “range restriction … for SES and parent disinhibitory psychopathology”; p. 94). Overall, it seems the mechanisms by which parents’ and their adolescent children’s happiness are related are still somewhat unclear.

**Family Factors Influencing Adolescent Happiness**

Researchers across the globe have explored how various family variables relate to adolescent happiness. Most of this research is recent and has been conducted over the past decade. No significant cultural differences stand out, and common themes have come out despite the international diversity in this research. Gray et al. (2013) explored how both family factors and nonfamily factors were related to happiness in middle adolescents (ages 15 to 18 years old) in Thailand. Concerning family factors, they specifically measured spending time together as a family and family cohesion (related to the family feeling connected to each other on an emotional level). They found family factors, including spending time together (β = .130) and family cohesion (β = .239), contributed more to happiness than nonfamily factors such as extracurricular activities (β = .080), where participants lived (β = .018), and socioeconomic status (β = .060). However, self-esteem was one nonfamily factor that was strongly related to adolescent happiness (β = .252). Gray et al. (2013) commented on how in Thailand, both individualist and collectivist factors are important, explaining how both could impact adolescent happiness.
Edwards and Lopez (2006) specifically explored how perceived family support and acculturation were related to Mexican American adolescents’ life satisfaction. They highlighted how Mexicans greatly value family and that their study was an attempt to empirically validate this. Mexican Americans who were high school students in the United States participated in the study. Edwards and Lopez (2006) found that family was the most important influence on happiness, and this specifically involved parents caring, being present, and supporting the adolescent. Family support had the strongest association with life satisfaction. In addition, identifying with Mexican culture was associated with higher life satisfaction. Ben-Zur (2003) also found having good relationships with parents was related to higher SWB in Jewish families living in Israel.

Along with positive family relationships, parental involvement specifically is also positively related to adolescent happiness. Flouri and Buchanan (2003) found that for adolescents in Britain who were between 14 and 18 years old, parental involvement was associated with higher happiness levels. Parental involvement included spending time together, providing emotional support, helping children make plans, and being engaged with children. The relationship between parental involvement and happiness was stronger for fathers than for mothers. Offer (2013) also explored how parental involvement was related to well-being by studying mother and father involvement separately. Specifically, she explored how engagement in specific family time activities related to emotional well-being (including positive affect, engagement, negative affect, and stress). Adolescents between 11 and 18 years old completed time diaries. They were also given beepers and were asked to report the following when the beepers went off: what activity they were doing; if it was with their mother, father, or both parents; and
how they were feeling. Overall, eating meals with both parents was positively related to emotional well-being. Effects were stronger for eating meals with father alone versus with mother alone. However, for leisure activities, effects were strongest for both parents and mother only. Finally, working on schoolwork with parents had negative effects on emotional well-being, which was strongest when working with both parents or father only. Offer’s (2013) research shows the complexity of how father and mother involvement may relate to adolescent happiness. It seems father involvement may matter more for some activities (e.g., eating together), while mother involvement is more important for others (e.g., leisure).

Going along with the importance of family involvement, in Scotland, Levin, Dallago, and Currie (2012) found family communication (feeling easily able to talk with parents about problems) was related to life satisfaction. Their adolescent participants came from three age groups, with average ages of 11.5, 13.5, and 15.5 years. They found that for all age groups, family communication was the most important variable related to life satisfaction, compared with family structure and family affluence.

Researchers have also examined how family stressors affect happiness. For example, Chappel, Suldo, and Ogg (2014) studied how 183 middle school students’ life satisfaction related to their perspectives of their parents’ conflicts and stressful events (e.g., unemployment, medical problems). They found that as family stressors increased, life satisfaction decreased. Put together, all stressors contributed to more than one-third of the variance in life satisfaction. Out of all stressors, parental conflict had the largest effect on life satisfaction (accounting for 13% of the variance). Fosco, Caruthers, and Dishion (2012) also measured conflicts’ relationship to happiness. They conducted
longitudinal research on how family relationships, which included both conflict and cohesion, correlated with adolescent adjustment. They followed 998 adolescents from the time they were 17 years old to the time they were 23 years old. Family variables were measured at age 17, and adolescent adjustment variables were measured throughout the study. Both conflict and cohesion were directly related to adolescent adjustment throughout the study. However, family conflict was only related to aggressive behavior, while positive family cohesion related to increased SWB. This research not only contributes to the literature on how family factors influence adolescent well-being but also indicates family factors in adolescence have lasting effects into adulthood. This shows that understanding which family factors influence adolescent happiness could lead to enduring effects into adulthood. This means the present research could inform interventions that have the potential to increase happiness permanently.

Although researchers have conducted a number of quantitative studies specifically examining how family variables relate to adolescent happiness, qualitative research on this topic is lacking. Joronen and Åstedt-Kurki (2005) conducted a qualitative study that addresses this gap in the literature. They explored what family factors affect Finnish seventh and ninth graders’ SWB by interviewing 19 adolescents. They found six main themes: “comfortable home,” “loving atmosphere,” “open communication,” “familial involvement,” “external relationships,” and “sense of personal significance in the family” (p. 127). These themes are consistent with the previous research indicating loving, supportive relationships; family involvement; positive communication; and a stable home environment are related to adolescent happiness.
Although the focus on the study was on family factors, Joronen and Åstedt-Kurki (2005) did not specifically inquire about sibling relationships. A number of the adolescent responses Joronen and Åstedt-Kurki (2005) gave as examples, along with the general themes, seem to especially relate to parents. This is an overall limitation of the research on adolescent happiness in the family. Although the researchers discussed in this section have used the term *family* to describe their research, many were actually researching parents and not including siblings. These researchers either explicitly focused on parents (by asking adolescents about their parents and/or including parents’ perspectives) or asked about family without specifying specific family members. In fact, Offer (2013) acknowledged that siblings were not included in her study despite her using the term *family time*. Offer (2013) recommended future research incorporate siblings, and the present study addressed this large gap in the literature. Given that adolescents spend significant time not only with parents but also with siblings who live in the home, it is likely siblings also affect their happiness (Offer, 2013).

In addition, even though researchers have not directly studied how siblings influence adolescent happiness, they have examined how sibling relationships impact adolescent adjustment and development, and they have found siblings have a significant influence (Diener & McGavran, 2008). H.-C. Yeh and Lempers (2004) conducted a 3-year longitudinal study with 374 families to measure how sibling relationships affect adolescent adjustment. They measured families three times at 1-year intervals. Families consisted of a sixth or eighth grade adolescent, two parents (both living with the adolescent), and a sibling. However, data were collected from only the target adolescent and parents, not from siblings. Through conducting structural equation modeling, H.-C.
Yeh and Lempers (2004) found sibling relationships had an indirect effect on adjustment variables (i.e., academic achievement, loneliness, dependence, delinquency). Sibling relationships affected adjustment by directly influencing the adolescents’ quality of friendships and self-esteem, which in turn affected adjustment. Van Langeveld’s (2010) dissertation also focused on how sibling relationships relate to adolescent outcomes. Van Langeveld (2010) studied 311 families, with participants consisting of an adolescent, mother, and father. She took measurements at three time periods at 1-year intervals. Specifically, she found sibling affection had a direct relationship with adolescent prosocial behavior, hope, and problem behavior. However, sibling conflict had no direct effect on these variables. On the other hand, sibling conflict had stronger indirect effects because it exacerbated already existing adolescent stress. Finally, Buist, Deković, and Prinzie (2013) conducted a meta-analysis of the association between sibling relationships and youth psychopathology. Data included 34 studies with 12,257 children and adolescents. They found sibling warmth and sibling conflict were both related to internalizing and externalizing problem behaviors. Effect sizes for sibling warmth were -.12 for internalizing behaviors and -.14 for externalizing behaviors. For sibling conflict, they found significantly larger effect sizes: .27 for internalizing behaviors and .28 for externalizing behaviors.

Clearly, sibling relationships impact adolescent functioning, and it would be valuable to understand how specifically they relate to adolescent happiness. In addition, none of the researchers discussed in this section specifically inquired about siblings or examined siblings’ perspectives. However, siblings’ viewpoints would likely provide additional information about adolescents’ happiness experiences.
Individual Differences in Adolescent Happiness

Gender

Researchers have explored how happiness could be different for adolescent females versus adolescent males. Results have been mixed, with no definitive gender differences standing out. Khodarahimi (2014) found male adolescents’ ($N = 200$) and young adults’ ($N = 200$) happiness was greater than female adolescents’ and young adults’ happiness, yet Mahon, Yarcheski, and Yarcheski (2005) found no gender differences in early adolescents ($N = 151$). Bradshaw, Keung, Rees, and Goswami (2011) studied about 11,000 adolescents and found males had greater family well-being than females, while females had greater school well-being than males. Vera et al. (2012) found opposite results ($N = 168$), with females having greater family satisfaction and males having greater school satisfaction. Froh, Yurkewicz, and Kashdan (2009) studied 154 adolescents and found a positive relationship between gratitude and SWB and that females showed more gratitude than males, but males’ gratitude was more related to family support.

There have also been some gender differences found related to communication. For example, in O’Higgins et al.’s (2010) qualitative study about what makes adolescents happy, friends were important to both females and males, but females focused more on spending time together, while males focused more on engaging in specific activities with friends. Concerning the family theme in O’Higgins et al.’s (2010) study, females mentioned family conflict as something that made them unhappy more often than males did. However, Levin et al. (2012) found communication problems with one parent were enough to decrease life satisfaction for boys, while for girls, having good communication
with one parent protected against having poor communication with another. Finally, Piko and Hamvai (2010) found life satisfaction was related to the ability to discuss problems with parents. Specifically, parents’ support was more important for males, while respecting parents’ values was more important for females. In addition, parental monitoring was related to decreases in females’ life satisfaction. O’Higgins et al. (2010) also found this to be the case, with females being more upset about the limited freedom parents gave them and saying they wanted to get older so they could gain independence. While some researchers have found gender differences, more research needs to be conducted to determine if there are definitive gender differences in both general adolescent happiness and in adolescent happiness within the family.

**Family Structure**

The literature on the effects of parental divorce on adolescent happiness and well-being is mixed, and there is no definitive evidence that adolescents from divorced families are less happy than adolescents from intact families. For example, Størksen, Røysamb, Moum, and Tambs (2005) found that divorce decreased SWB among adolescent girls but not boys. Levin et al. (2012) found life satisfaction was lower from those coming from families in which the father was the single parent, but family affluence helped explain this relationship. However, Chappel et al. (2014) found no significant differences in life satisfaction between intact families, divorced families, and families in which the parents were never together. Amato and Keith (1991) conducted a meta-analysis on the relationship between parental divorce and well-being in adulthood. They found significant but small effect sizes (ranging from -.154 to -.172). Lansford (2009) reviewed a number of studies on children’s and adolescents’ adjustment to
parental divorce. From synthesizing these studies, she concluded that overall, while parental divorce is related to poorer adjustment, effects are typically not long-lasting. Lansford (2009) indicated that the overall conclusion is that while parental divorce can negatively impact children, effect sizes are small.

Summary

Theorists and researchers have explored and are continuing to explore what happiness is and what influences it. They have discussed different types of happiness and have debated whether happiness is a state, trait, or some combination of both. Concerning research on adolescent happiness, social relationships have been a consistent theme, and adolescents have reported valuing relationships with family (e.g., Gray et al., 2013; O’Higgins et al., 2010; Sargeant, 2010). Research on how siblings are involved in adolescents’ happiness is lacking. This research is needed, given the large amount of time adolescents spend with their siblings and the research indicating siblings influence adolescents’ overall functioning (Buist et al., 2013; Offer, 2013; van Langeveld, 2010; H.-C. Yeh & Lempers, 2004). The present study addressed this gap in the literature. To understand adolescent happiness within the family, it is necessary to take a systemic perspective. Bronfenbrenner’s (1997, 2005) ecological model and DST provide this perspective. In addition, perspectives incorporating contextual factors and family strengths also informed the present research. These include FCPP and the PYD movement. Overall, positive family relationships, family interaction and involvement, and good communication appear to contribute to adolescents’ happiness within the family (e.g., Edwards & Lopez, 2006; Flouri & Buchanan, 2003; Levin et al., 2012; Offer, 2013).
CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

In this chapter, I discuss the methodology for the present study, which includes the epistemology, theory, design, and methods for the study; procedures; data collection and analysis; and strategies used to enhance trustworthiness. I also discuss my personal research stance, including my background related to the current study and how I chose this topic.

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the essence of middle adolescents’ unique experiences of happiness within the family system from the perspectives of adolescents, their parents, and their siblings.

Reflexivity

Qualitative researchers believe in multiple truths, meaning they are not searching for an objective reality (e.g., Creswell, 2007). They see the researcher as a key tool in the research process, and her or his reactions can be used as data (Morrow, 2005). At the same time, it is important for qualitative researchers to make sure their findings reflect the experiences and views of participants and not their own biases and perspectives (Morrow, 2005). To do this, researchers must utilize reflexivity, which involves delineating their perspectives and prejudices so that these do not bias data analysis (Morrow, 2005). This is especially important in phenomenological research, in which the
researcher must make sure the findings reflect the essence of an experience for participants (Moustakas, 1994). Being “transparent to ourselves” helps us better set aside our biases when analyzing data (Moustakas, 1994, p. 86).

In addition, the researcher’s views will influence her or his writing, so it is important the audience reading this writing be aware of the researcher’s unique perspectives and background (Creswell, 2007). Therefore, I provide a description of myself and how I became interested in this topic. Writing this description has allowed me to be explicitly aware of my own perspectives. It also allows readers to understand what perspectives have influenced this writing. I describe additional ways that I worked to be reflexive in the trustworthiness discussion, found later in this chapter.

**Description of the Researcher**

I am a White, Jewish female in my late 20s who is a doctoral student in a counseling psychology Ph.D. program. I have two half siblings who are more than a decade older than I, and I am my mother’s only child. I come from an intact family, and I lived with my mother and father throughout my childhood, with my siblings spending a few nights at the house each week when I was in elementary school. I grew up identifying myself as an “only child with older siblings,” and most of my family interactions in the home as an adolescent occurred with my parents.

Throughout my life, I have had close relationships with my parents. They were supportive, empathetic, and interactive. We did many activities together as a family, including eating dinner together each night, going on vacations, and celebrating Jewish holidays. During my childhood, I also felt close to my siblings, and I might have described them as “cool parents.” I was excited when they came to stay at my house, and
I cherished our time together. By the time I was an adolescent, they had graduated from college and no longer lived in the same town as I did. While I still valued my relationships with them and enjoyed the times when we were able to visit, they played a less central role during my adolescence because of the distance. Overall, I believe my parents and siblings had a positive influence on my experience of happiness as an adolescent.

Looking back over my adolescence, I believe that this was an overall “happy” time for me. While growing up was not always easy, I overall enjoyed my adolescent years and continued to enjoy spending time with my parents despite also wanting to gain independence and foster relationships with friends. These experiences have likely influenced how I view adolescence. I do not believe that adolescence must be a period of storm and stress and think that it is possible for this period to be a generally happy time for a majority of adolescents. I also had some preconceived ideas about what adolescents might identify as important to their happiness, given my personal experiences and what I know based on previous research. One of these preconceived ideas was that families could likely identify supportive relationships with parents and engaging in activities as a family as important to the middle adolescent’s happiness experience. However, I also expected that I would find a diversity of experiences among participants and that some could identify quite different factors that influence their happiness. I was especially interested to learn how siblings influence middle adolescents’ experiences of happiness, given that this group has not often been studied and that I did not live with my siblings during adolescence. Being aware of my inherent biases based on my background was
important so that I could keep them in check and be open to seeing findings that went against my personal experiences and the empirical literature in this field.

**Choice of Research Topic**

Both adolescents and positive psychology have become special research interests of mine. I have worked with adolescents in various settings over the past 11 years, including as a summer camp counselor, as supervisor for the Junior Congregation at my synagogue, and as a therapist. I am always fascinated when I talk with adolescents to learn how they experience their worlds, and I have realized their experiences often differ greatly from those of adults. Most of my clinical work has been with late adolescents, specifically those seeking services in a college counseling center. From this work and from my experiences with early and middle adolescents, I have noticed that adolescents generally tend to demonstrate resilience. They develop unique ways to cope with stress and seem to adaptively find some humor in their struggles. My experiences working and bonding with adolescents have led me to want to know more about how they experience their worlds. Specifically, I have been interested in what makes them happy because of my belief that building on strengths and finding what works is at the core of effective therapeutic treatment. I also believe this perspective empowers clients. From my experiences, I have noticed adolescents are often disempowered by authority figures, and I believe this makes empowerment for them especially important.

Qualitative research is also a way to empower participants because its relational approach is consistent with the relational focus of many marginalized cultures; having conversations with participants can allow for richer data than asking participants to complete surveys (Morrow, 2007). I was especially drawn to qualitative research
because I believe it can greatly reduce the power differential between the researcher and the participants, allowing participants to feel empowered through being the experts of their lives.

Because of my strengths-based perspective, positive psychology has become a budding interest of mine. I became interested in positive psychology 7 years ago when I took a course entirely devoted to the topic. As I learned more, I realized positive psychology was a good fit with my personal approach to living and viewing clients. I think it is important to look for ways to increase happiness as opposed to ways to get rid of psychopathology.

As I began researching adolescent experiences of happiness in my graduate studies, I learned from interviews with adolescents that family was an influential factor for a number of participants (see Appendix A). I also noticed that there had been limited research conducted on adolescents’ happiness experiences within the family. This piqued my interest in learning more about adolescent happiness from a systemic perspective. Specifically, I noticed a lack of qualitative research from the perspectives of multiple family members despite literature indicating this research would be valuable, which led me to pursue the present research.

**Research Model and Paradigm**

Crotty (1998) discussed four elements qualitative researchers should consider: epistemology, theoretical perspective, methodology, and methods. Epistemology and theoretical perspective inform the choice of research question and rationale (Haverkamp & Young, 2007). They provide a rationale for the proposed methodology and allow the researcher to take a stance on how knowledge is created and what assumptions the
researcher will make (Crotty, 1998). Epistemology focuses on what constitutes reality and how knowledge is constructed (Crotty, 1998). Theoretical perspective is the researcher’s overall “philosophical stance” (Crotty, 1998, p. 7) and contains the researcher’s assumptions that guide methodological decisions (Morrow, 2007). Typically, qualitative researchers in counseling psychology have delineated and contrasted the following theoretical perspectives: postpositivism, interpretivism-constructivism, and critical-ideological (e.g., Haverkamp & Young, 2007; Morrow, 2007; Ponterotto, 2005). Methodology is the design of the study, which helps explain why researchers are using particular methods to answer the research question (Crotty, 1998). Methods are the tools the researcher uses to collect and analyze data (Crotty, 1998).

**Epistemology**

I worked from a constructionist epistemology, which is often used by qualitative researchers (Crotty, 1998). Constructionism holds that humans construct reality by their interaction in a social world (Crotty, 1998; Ponterotto, 2005). Constructionists believe that objective truth does not exist; rather, multiple realities are constructed by humans based on what already exists in the world (Crotty, 1998). These realities are constructed from the commonalities in the realities of knowledgeable people (Patton, 2002). Constructionists believe the construction of knowledge is based on our social context, meaning we may construct different selves in different social situations (Roy-Chowdhury, 2010). Therefore, truth must be judged within its value-laden context (Patton, 2002). There is a belief that meaning is constructed within interactions, not only individually from one’s private thought processes (Schwandt, 1994). Each interaction may reveal different truths about who one is (Roy-Chowdhury, 2010). This framework
was especially appropriate for the present research because I believed adolescents’
happiness would likely look unique in the context of the family system as compared to a
different context. I hoped to explore the reality adolescents and their families create
about this experience within the family system.

Because construction of reality is social, the interaction between participant and
researcher contributes to the formation of knowledge, and this relationship allows the
researcher to understand participants’ unique experiences (Ponterotto, 2005). Therefore,
the researcher’s values play a role in the study, and research cannot be value neutral or
without bias; however, researchers can be aware of their values and work to keep them
from distorting the findings (Ponterotto, 2005). This can be done through reflexive
journals, triangulation, member checks, peer debriefing, and negative case analysis,
which are discussed in detail in the trustworthiness section.

**Theoretical Perspective**

I conducted this study from an interpretivist-constructivist framework, which a
number of counseling psychologists have discussed (e.g., Haverkamp & Young, 2007;
Morrow, 2005; Morrow, 2007; Ponterotto, 2005; Ponterotto & Grieger, 2007) and which
incorporates elements of interpretivism and constructivism. This framework
complements the constructionist epistemology, as a belief in multiple valid realities
underlies this perspective (Ponterotto, 2005). In addition, Ponterotto and Grieger (2007)
explored which paradigms were typically used for a number of research approaches, and
they found that phenomenological research was typically conducted using interpretivism-
constructivism. This indicates this theoretical approach was a good match for the present
research.
Interpretivism originated as a reaction against perspectives and methods traditionally used in the natural sciences, with a belief that unique perspectives were needed to conduct human science (Crotty, 1998; Schwandt, 1994). While natural scientists aim to explain and make conclusions about causation, social scientists aim to understand by focusing on humans’ interpretations of phenomena (Crotty, 1998; Schwandt, 1994). Therefore, interpretivists emphasize people’s subjective experiences (Schwandt, 1994). They see these experiences as “culturally derived and historically situated” (Crotty, 1998, p. 67).

Like interpretivists, constructivists take issue with positivist and postpositivist perspectives (Schwandt, 1994). According to constructivists, truth is relativistic, meaning it is not absolute, and constructions can change (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Constructivists believe objective truth does not exist and that we cannot discover truth (Schwandt, 1994). Instead, they believe that individuals create truth (Hansen, 2004). This focus on the individual reflects how different people could form different interpretations of the same event (Hansen, 2004). This perspective is especially applicable to the present research and guided my research design. My belief that individuals create their own realities, which may lead them to interpret the same event differently, led me to believe interviews with multiple family members would provide a fuller understanding of the adolescent experience of happiness in the family.

As in constructionism, interpretivism-constructivism emphasizes the interaction between participant and researcher as a way to discover knowledge, with both parties co-constructing meaning (Haverkamp & Young, 2007; Ponterotto, 2005). Therefore, meaning “cannot be observed directly but must be interpreted” by the researcher
The purpose of research is understanding participants’ constructions of their experiences, with space for new interpretations to emerge as the research progresses (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Morrow (2007) stated that this perspective is especially useful in counseling psychology research given that therapy follows a similar framework, with both client and therapist constructing meaning. I used a similar process in this research, in which I worked to understand participants’ meanings and then shared these meanings with them so that we could collaboratively work to understand their views on the essence of adolescents’ happiness in the family. Hansen (2004) also noted parallels with counseling psychology, pointing out that a commonality among multiple counseling theories (e.g., humanistic, psychoanalytic, cognitive-behavioral, narrative) is a belief that individuals contribute to forming their own realities. I believe approaching the current study with a theoretical perspective that complements counseling theories makes these findings more applicable and relevant to counseling psychologists.

**Methodology/Research Design**

I used transcendental phenomenology to understand the essence of how middle adolescents experience happiness within their families. Phenomenology is an especially good match for counseling psychology research because of its focus on understanding people’s lived experiences (Wertz, 2005). Transcendental phenomenology is a descriptive phenomenology that has its roots in the work of Husserl, a philosopher. Husserl believed we experience phenomena through our senses and use these sensory experiences to describe phenomena (Patton, 2002). By a phenomenon, he meant the way a person experiences a specific object (Giorgi, 1997). Central to Husserl’s transcendental
phenomenology, along with all types of phenomenology, is human consciousness (Giorgi, 2005). This is because phenomenology focuses on human experiences, and Husserl believed all that humans can truly know is consciousness (van Manen, 1990). This relaying of consciousness by participants is retrospective, not introspective; participants must reflect on their experiences after they have them because reflecting during the experience would change it (van Manen, 1990). Giorgi (1997) has argued for the importance of consciousness in research by stating that it is impossible to eliminate consciousness, so by acknowledging it, we increase the rigor of the study.

Going along with this focus on consciousness, Husserl believed an experience was an interaction of something objective in the world with the person’s subjective reality in consciousness (Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2002). This concept is called *intentionality* and reflects Husserl’s idea that we cannot have consciousness independently but that we must have “consciousness of something” (i.e., the object; Husserl, 1913/1982, p. 200; Wertz, 2005). Intentionality refers to the concept that consciousness comes from a person in relation to an object, with truth coming from the subjective meanings the person gives to the object (Wertz, 2005). This relationship between subject and object is seen as holistic, with the two components being inseparable (Giorgi, 1997). Husserl’s phenomenology is called *transcendental* because descriptions are based on what occurs in the interaction between subject and object and consist of personal meanings, not facts (Moustakas, 1994).

Husserl focused on the participant’s *life-world*, which consists of our prereflective experiences before we analyze, categorize, or interpret a phenomenon (van Manen, 1990). The life-world includes descriptions of everyday experiences and does not
include theory (van Manen, 1990). Because of this focus on the life-world, analysis must be contextual and include influences such as language, culture, religion, and time (Wertz, 2005). This emphasis on the life-world, especially the implications for exploring contextual factors, fits with the present study because I was concerned with the everyday experiences of adolescents’ happiness in the context of their families.

Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology focuses on finding the essence of an experience, which can be accomplished by understanding what makes up the experience and how people make individual meanings from the experience (Moustakas, 1994). Often, description and interpretation of a phenomenon are inseparable, so in addition to describing the phenomenon, phenomenologists also focus on understanding how participants construct meaning from the phenomenon (Patton, 2002). However, Husserl’s phenomenology is descriptive and does not involve the researcher making his or her own interpretations based on things that are outside of the data (Giorgi, 1997). Typically, researchers using phenomenology conduct interviews to understand what people experience and how they experience it (Patton, 2002).

A defining feature of phenomenological methods is the assumption that experiences have an essence, meaning they have common elements shared by the multiple people who experience them (Patton, 2002). This essence is “what makes the phenomenon to be that very phenomenon,” and it refers to everyday experiences (Dahlberg, 2006, p. 11). The essence is not related to objective facts but rather includes the meanings made by the people experiencing the phenomenon (van Manen, 1990). However, this does not mean that essences are created by the researcher. They are not a result of the researcher’s interpretations, but they also do not solely reside in the object;
rather, they exist in the relationship between the researcher and the phenomenon (Dahlberg, 2006). Even though there may be variations within the phenomenon, its essence is what is invariant, and if this invariant structure were to change, then it would be a different phenomenon (Husserl, 1948/1973).

Although other types of qualitative research may focus on people’s experiences through a phenomenological perspective, researchers using phenomenology as a methodology are specifically concerned with finding this shared essence (Patton, 2002). Therefore, my focus was specifically on finding a common essence to adolescents’ happiness experiences. I was especially interested in participants’ descriptions of this phenomenon and how they make meaning of it.

When attempting to find the shared essence, Husserl believed researchers must engage in two types of *epochés*, meaning bracketing beliefs about the phenomenon (Wertz, 2005). This involves setting aside all previous knowledge we have about the phenomenon in order to have a fresh perspective and see information about the phenomenon “as if for the first time” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 85). Engaging in époché means being open to experience so that biases, feelings, values, and past experiences don’t limit our ability to create new meaning about the phenomenon and see what is happening in the moment as it is currently appearing (Moustakas, 1994).

The first type of époché is called “époché of the natural sciences” (Husserl, 1939/1954, p. 135) and involves bracketing what the researcher knows about the phenomenon based on what science has found (Wertz, 2005). Husserl (1913/1982) called this bracketing *phenomenological reduction*, and he noted a number of external elements to exclude, including natural science, culture, pure logic, and God. The objective is to
doubt external facts, not internal ideas and interpretations, in order to gain new perspectives (Moustakas, 1994). The second type is called “epoché of natural attitude” (Husserl, 1939/1954, p. 148) and involves bracketing personal beliefs about the phenomenon, allowing the researcher to discover the subjective experiences of participants (Wertz, 2005). This allows the researcher to focus on subjective realities and be able to understand reality from the point of view of participants (Wertz, 2005). It is important to note that although the researcher’s everyday knowledge is put aside, the researcher as a person is not put aside but is seen as an instrument who, while engaged in epoché, can inform the research with fresh perspectives (Moustakas, 1994). Also, the process of engaging in epoché does not mean researchers deny the reality of science and what they know to be true; rather, it means they attempt to suspend this knowledge in order to be open to new perspectives (Wertz, 2005).

In this study, I engaged in epoché to allow myself to remain open to new understandings related to the essence of adolescent happiness in the family. However, I used the term bridling (Dahlberg, 2006), rather than bracketing, to describe this process because it more accurately reflects my philosophy concerning how researchers can be reflexive so that previous understandings of the phenomenon do not prevent them from remaining open to new understandings. Current phenomenological researchers have advanced and used bridling (e.g., Carlsson, Dahlberg, Lutzen, & Nystrom, 2004; Dahlberg, 2006; Vagle, 2009; Vagle, 2010; Vagle, Hughes, & Durbin, 2009). I further discuss this concept in the data analysis section.

Phenomenological researchers typically fall into two camps: transcendental (descriptive) and hermeneutic (interpretive). The interpretive approach provides
descriptions but also includes interpretations, based on the belief that we cannot understand the essence of a phenomenon without interpreting it (Vagle, 2009). Giorgi has had a prominent influence on phenomenological research in counseling psychology and clinical psychology, and he takes a descriptive approach (Wertz, 2005). He has argued a thorough, rich description based on consciousness is sufficient to completely explain a phenomenon (Giorgi, 1997). In addition, he has criticized an interpretive approach because it focuses on external factors outside of the conscious experience, which can lead to findings reflecting an essence that is not based on the data (Giorgi, 1997). Like Giorgi, I believe focusing on participants’ descriptions rather than my interpretations and explanations of their descriptions leads to a more credible essence. While I did not believe I could remove my preconceived ideas about the phenomenon, I did believe I should be aware of them through reflexivity and bridling, which allowed me to focus analysis on the descriptions found in the data rather than on my own interpretations. I believe transcendental phenomenology allowed me to best accomplish my goal of understanding how participants describe the adolescent experience of happiness within the family.

Methods

Research participants. The sample consisted of seven participant units from the Southeastern region of the United States. Each participant unit consisted of a middle adolescent, parent, and sibling, which yielded a total of 21 participants. The final number of participants aligned with phenomenological researchers’ recommendations: For a phenomenological study, Dukes (1984) recommended 3 to 10 participants, and Polkinghorne (1989) recommended 5 to 25 participants. Because qualitative research
depends on the quality of data rather than the number of participants, I determined the exact number of families based on when redundancy of data, also called theoretical saturation, was reached (Morrow, 2005). This contrasts with the method for determining the number of participants in quantitative research, in that the goal is to maximize information rather than to make statistical generalizations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Redundancy is the point at which no additional information can be accumulated by including additional participants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Because adding participants will always add new experiences that increase the data’s complexity, researchers cannot get to a point of “true redundancy” (Morrow, 2007, p. 217). However, they can achieve theoretical saturation, which involves achieving practical redundancy (Morrow, 2007). Practical redundancy means collecting enough data so that themes can be derived that demonstrate the phenomenon’s complexity (Morrow, 2007). In addition, researchers should consider how the amount of resources they are using compares to the additional data they are collecting. The point at which putting in additional resources and energy to recruit participants does not result in a significant gain in information can also be a sign that the researcher has reached redundancy (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). After interviewing seven families, I noticed that interviewing new participants was not leading to new themes or significant increases in new information and the themes were becoming redundant, which let me know I had reached theoretical saturation.

To qualify for participation in this study, each family was required to have a middle adolescent, defined as a high school student between the ages of 15 and 17. I interviewed this adolescent, a parent of the adolescent, and a sibling of the adolescent who lived in the household and could speak to the adolescent’s experience of happiness.
Therefore, adolescents who were only children or who did not have siblings living in their homes were excluded from this study. In addition, I did not interview extended family members, meaning adolescents who lived with primary caretakers who were not parents were excluded from this study. To select which parent would participate, middle adolescents were asked to identify the parent who they believed could best speak about their happiness within the family. To select the sibling who would participate, middle adolescent participants identified the sibling living in the same household who they believed could best speak about their happiness within the family. This is because I was most concerned about the essence of middle adolescents’ experience of happiness. Most adolescents chose specific parents and siblings. However, three adolescents could not choose a specific parent and/or sibling (e.g., only one sibling living in the household, one parent not available due to divorce). Table 1 contains information about how adolescents selected siblings and parents. Both intact and divorced/blended families were allowed to participate, given the inconsistencies in the literature about how family structure affects adolescent happiness.

Procedure

Participant recruitment. After receiving approval from my dissertation committee and the University of Northern Colorado’s Institutional Review Board (IRB; see Appendix B), I began recruiting participants and collecting data. Qualitative research requires recruitment methods that allow researchers to gain rich, thick, complete descriptions of the phenomenon of interest (Polkinghorne, 2005). As the goal is not to recruit a representative sample, Polkinghorne (2005) has suggested the term selection, rather than sampling, may be more appropriate to describe participant recruitment.
Table 1

Selection of Siblings and Parents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Family</th>
<th>How Sibling Selected</th>
<th>How Parent Selected</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cortez</td>
<td>only one sibling living in home, no choice</td>
<td>adolescent chose mother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unit</td>
<td>one sibling, no choice</td>
<td>parents divorced, mother not a choice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fray</td>
<td>adolescent chose older brother</td>
<td>adolescent chose mother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Green</td>
<td>adolescent chose older sister</td>
<td>adolescent chose fathera</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canto</td>
<td>adolescent chose older sister</td>
<td>adolescent chose mother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Styles</td>
<td>adolescent chose younger sister</td>
<td>adolescent chose mother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hutcherson</td>
<td>one sibling, no choice</td>
<td>adolescent chose mother</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Unless otherwise noted, when adolescents chose parents and siblings, they made their choices in response to me asking them to choose who could best speak about their happiness in the family. All family names are pseudonyms.

aJohnathan Green thought his parents could speak equally well about his happiness in the family. He chose his father to add diversity to the research because he thought I would likely have more adolescents choose mothers.

I recruited participants using purposeful selection (Patton, 2002; Polkinghorne, 2005). Purposeful selection involves choosing information-rich cases that will help the researcher best understand the topic being studied (Patton, 2002). Polkinghorne (2005) has recommended general criteria that allow for purposeful selection: Participants must have experienced or be experiencing the phenomenon being studied, be able to describe and reflect on this experience, and be open to describing this experience to a researcher. I included all of these criteria when selecting participants. Specifically, all adolescents were required to have experienced happiness within the family system. In addition, all participants needed to be able and willing to describe and reflect on the adolescent’s experience of happiness in the family.

Qualitative researchers have discussed a number of types of purposeful selection (e.g., Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 1998; Patton, 2002), and I used two of these: maximum
variation and snowball selection. Maximum variation selection involves selecting a heterogeneous group of participants by recruiting diverse participants who represent a range of backgrounds (Patton, 2002). This type of selection is valuable for studies with a small number of participants because the common patterns found in a diverse group are particularly important when describing a shared essence to an experience (Patton, 2002). It also allows researchers to understand how participants’ experiences vary (Patton, 2002). I attempted to recruit participants from multiple cultural backgrounds and from families of various sizes and compositions. When recruiting, I let my contacts know that I was especially interested in diverse families. On some diversity variables (e.g., gender, age, family composition), I was able to do this. On other variables (e.g., race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, parents’ marital status), diversity was more limited. For information about each family’s composition, see Table 2. For information about participants’ demographic variables, see Table 3.

Snowball selection involves recruiting participants through asking others with whom it would be valuable to talk about the phenomenon of interest. I began by asking my contacts (e.g., colleagues, family, friends) to refer me to families they thought would be able to speak extensively about the middle adolescent experience of happiness within the family. After I started recruiting participants, I asked these participants if they could refer me to other valuable participants. None of the participants were people whom I knew personally. Limiting the study to people who were connected to my contacts but were not my actual contacts made my biases less likely to negatively influence the findings, as I did not have prior knowledge about participants. At the same time, this
method also limited the range of individuals who could be contacted, leading to less diversity in participants’ geographic region, socioeconomic status, and culture.

I began recruiting participants by asking family members, colleagues, friends, and acquaintances to refer me to families who they thought would qualify for this study. I gave these people information about the study either verbally or through email so that they could determine appropriate referrals. Once my contacts referred me to families, I contacted families through phone or email to discuss details of the study and ask about their interest in participating. I contacted families based on how they requested I contact them. Usually, this involved starting with a phone call or email to the adolescent’s parent. During the initial contact, I confirmed that families met the participation criteria. All families to whom I was referred met these criteria. After a participant unit agreed to participate, parents either scheduled all interviews for the family or asked me to contact other family members individually to set up interviews. I emailed interested participants an information packet about the study. This included informed consent and assent forms, the demographic questionnaire, and the interview guide. I recruited five participant units through my contacts and two participant units through snowball selection. For more information about how I recruited each participant unit, see Table 4.

Three families whom I contacted did not participate in the study. Two of these families expressed interest but then did not respond to my attempts to discuss the study or schedule interviews. One family had planned to participate but decided not to do so because of a busy schedule. In addition, one of the parent participants in this study attempted to refer me to two families who were culturally diverse. However, she stated that these families did not respond to her attempts to contact them.
Table 2

*Family Composition*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Family</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Living in Home?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cortez</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mother</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>father</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>half sister</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>brother</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unit</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>father</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>yes (2 to 4 days per week)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mother</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>yes (4 to 6 days per week)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sister</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fray</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mother</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>father</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>brother</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>yes (during summer)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>brother</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Green</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>father</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mother</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sister</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sister</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sister</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canto</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mother</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>father</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sister</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>yes (during summer)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>brother</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>grandmother</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Styles</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mother</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>father</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>brother</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>yes (during summer)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sister</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hutcherson</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>father</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mother</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sister</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Table 3

**Participant Descriptions**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Cortez</th>
<th>Unit</th>
<th>Fray</th>
<th>Green</th>
<th>Canto</th>
<th>Styles</th>
<th>Hutcherson</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adolescent</td>
<td>Liz</td>
<td>Child</td>
<td>Clarissa</td>
<td>Johnathan</td>
<td>Erica</td>
<td>Kayla</td>
<td>Aiden</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>17</td>
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<tr>
<td>Grade</td>
<td>11&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>9&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>11&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>10&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>11&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>11&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>9&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>female</td>
<td>male</td>
<td>female</td>
<td>male</td>
<td>female</td>
<td>female</td>
<td>male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race/Ethnicity</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parent</th>
<th>Maria</th>
<th>Giovanni</th>
<th>Tanya</th>
<th>Llewellyn</th>
<th>Gloria</th>
<th>Tiffany</th>
<th>Loren</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship</td>
<td>mother</td>
<td>father</td>
<td>mother</td>
<td>father</td>
<td>mother</td>
<td>mother</td>
<td>mother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race/Ethnicity</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>White</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sibling</th>
<th>Owen</th>
<th>Becca</th>
<th>Tom</th>
<th>Elena</th>
<th>Marina</th>
<th>Patricia</th>
<th>Shelly</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship</td>
<td>brother</td>
<td>sister</td>
<td>brother</td>
<td>sister</td>
<td>sister</td>
<td>sister</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race/Ethnicity</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>White</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Annual Family Income (in thousands) | $150+ | $100–$149.9 | $150+ | $70–$79.9 | $100–$149.9 | $150+ | $100–$149.9 |
| Parents’ Marital Status | married | divorced | married | married | married | married | married |

*Note.* All names are pseudonyms.

### Table 4

**Recruitment Sources**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Family</th>
<th>Recruitment Source</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cortez</td>
<td>mother’s contact</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unit</td>
<td>father’s contact</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fray</td>
<td>mother’s recruitment email to her neighborhood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Green</td>
<td>snowball: from the Frays</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canto</td>
<td>snowball: from the Frays</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Styles</td>
<td>father’s contact</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hutcherson</td>
<td>aunt’s contact</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Setting. I asked participants where they would like to be interviewed and gave them a choice of interview location. Options for interview location included participants’ homes, my home, and a place in the community (e.g., public or university library, university classroom, religious institution) where they would feel comfortable being interviewed. I interviewed 20 participants individually in their homes. These participants were all comfortable with me coming to their homes, and they expressed this was the most convenient location for me to interview them. I interviewed one adult participant in my home because this was more convenient for her. Qualitative researchers often interview participants in their “typical environment,” as this helps them establish rapport and better understand participants in terms of their context (Hoyt & Bhati, 2007, p. 202). Interviewing participants in the home was especially appropriate because this is where many significant family experiences take place. In addition, participants likely felt comfortable being in a familiar setting. In order to minimize the likelihood family members would influence participants’ reports, I conducted interviews in a private location in which others would not be passing through during the interview and in which participants were unlikely to be overheard by others (e.g., a room with the door closed). For interviews conducted in participants’ homes, I brought a white noise machine to place outside the room to prevent participants from being overheard.

Informed consent. After IRB approval and before participants were interviewed, they signed the informed consent form (for adults; see Appendix C) or the assent form (for minors; see Appendix D). Minor participants’ parents also signed informed consent forms for minor participants. I verbally discussed the study with participants, informing them of its purpose and what would be required of them (i.e., participation in an
interview and a follow-up conversation for them to give feedback on tentative findings). I emphasized that participants could choose whether they still wanted to participate and that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any time. I clearly discussed confidentiality and limits to confidentiality. For example, adult participants’ interviews are confidential with the exception of mandated reporting required by law. Parents have legal rights to access minor participants’ interviews, but I encouraged parents to respect their children’s privacy because this would likely increase trust and lead to more authentic and detailed descriptions. However, I let parents know that if there were any safety concerns about their children related to mandated reporting for mental health professionals, I would share these with them. In addition, I informed participants that I was using a research team to analyze data and transcribe interviews, meaning colleagues would be reviewing transcripts with identifying information removed. I invited all participants to ask questions about the study and/or the forms before consenting/assenting to participate.

Counseling. Given that the topic of this study was to explore experiences of happiness and that deception was not used, I did not anticipate risks beyond those normally experienced when being interviewed. However, talking about unhappy and unpleasant experiences could potentially have a negative impact on participants. As a researcher who is also a clinician, it was important that I had clear boundaries surrounding my role in this study, being to act as a researcher and not as a clinician. While I did not expect interviews to negatively impact participants, I provided all interested participants with referrals for counseling in the local community in case they felt the need for this after their interviews.
Data Collection

After participants and their parents (for participants who were minors) signed informed consent/assent forms, I asked all participants to choose pseudonyms. All data were recorded under these pseudonyms, including documents for transcripts, recordings, and data analysis, along with handwritten notes. I will also use pseudonyms in any professional presentation of the findings.

Each participant unit filled out the demographic form (see Appendix E). This allowed me to be aware of participants’ unique, diverse backgrounds so that I could better understand how cultural variables might impact their descriptions of adolescent happiness in the family. After completing the demographic form, all participants shared their experiences through face-to-face interviews. I began all interviews by asking participants what happiness meant to them. For parent and sibling participants, I followed up with a question about what they thought happiness meant for the adolescent family member. This was in order to set the context for the study, with the hope that if participants were asked to start by thinking about what happiness is, they would be better able to describe the adolescent’s happiness in the family. In addition, participants’ answers to these questions provide context for the study by providing information about what specifically participants meant when they discussed happiness.

Researchers conducting phenomenological studies usually collect data through interviews (Moustakas, 1994). Descriptions of the phenomenon can come from multiple perspectives, including the person experiencing the phenomenon and someone observing that person’s experience with the phenomenon (Wertz, 2005). First-person reports of the experience are not always considered to be better than third-person reports (Wertz, 2005).
In this study, I collected data from the multiple perspectives of the self (i.e., the middle adolescent) and others (i.e., parent and sibling). Data consisted of one semistructured interview, and I told participants I expected each interview to last between 30 to 90 minutes. This estimate is based on the fact that interviews with adolescents for phenomenological studies on counseling-related topics have typically lasted within this time range (e.g., Douglas, 2013; Eddles-Hirsch, Vialle, McCormick, & Rogers, 2012; Griffiths, Schweitzer, & Yates, 2011; McCann, Lubman, & Clark, 2012; Parikh, 2013).

The actual length of interviews ranged from 20 to 79.5 minutes. The average interview length was 41.64 minutes, and the median interview length was 37 minutes. I digitally audio-recorded all interviews, which have been stored as encrypted files on my password-protected computer, and I will erase all recordings 3 years after the data were transcribed. I removed participants’ names and stored all data using their pseudonyms. Either a transcriptionist or I transcribed all interviews. I stored all transcripts on my computer in password-protected files. My research advisor is storing consent and assent forms in a secure location for 3 years. Only my research advisor and I have access to these data.

Qualitative researchers tend to use open-ended interview formats in which questions are not highly structured (Merriam, 1998). Semistructured interviews include both structured and less structured questions (Merriam, 1998). Typically, the researcher creates an interview guide containing questions relevant to the study (Merriam, 1998). However, the researcher is free to be flexible with the wording and sequencing of questions during the interview (Merriam, 1998). Moustakas (1994) described the interview process for phenomenological research as “informal” and “interactive” and
emphasized the importance of researchers making participants feel comfortable and safe throughout the study (p. 114). A semistructured format was appropriate for this study because it provided enough structure for gathering relevant information while also providing enough flexibility to react to individual responses, creating richer, more detailed data. Questions focused on participants’ descriptions of the family factors they viewed as influential to middle adolescents’ happiness, the context of this happiness, and what adolescents did to indicate to others in the family that they were happy (see Appendix F for interview guide). Phenomenological researchers aim to obtain concrete descriptions of phenomena and are less interested in participants’ opinions, interpretations, analyses, and generalizations about other people’s experiences (Moustakas, 1994; Wertz, 2005). During interviews, I focused participants on concretely describing their experiences. One way I did this was by asking for concrete examples (Wertz, 2005). I continued interviewing additional families until I determined that I had reached saturation because a redundancy in themes began to emerge.

After I transcribed participants’ interviews and analyzed data, I conducted follow-up conversations with participants either in person or through online video software (e.g., Skype/FaceTime), phone, or email in order to share initial findings with participants. This involved sharing a summary of transcripts and findings with participants based on what they shared with me, meaning I did not share findings from other participants with them. This process was implemented to make sure confidentiality was maintained. I asked for participants’ feedback about the validity of these findings, and this information served as additional data for the analysis. This process is called member checking, which is necessary because it allows participants to review transcripts for accuracy and give
feedback on how well the researcher’s emerging themes fit with their experiences (Shenton, 2004). The importance of member checking is further discussed in the trustworthiness section.

**Data Analysis**

As Merriam (1998) recommended, data collection and analysis occurred simultaneously to ensure the collection of relevant, focused data. After each interview, I examined the data for tentative themes, descriptions, and meanings related to the essence of adolescent happiness in the family. Throughout the process, I reflected on my own potential biases.

I analyzed data using Moustakas’s (1994) modification of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method. The first step is for the researcher to delineate her or his entire experience of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). I explored my personal reflections on and experiences with happiness in my family, thinking back to when I was an adolescent. I answered all of the interview questions I asked participants and journaled about my reflections and answers to these questions. Phenomenological researchers use epoché, the process of becoming aware of and setting aside one’s prejudices and assumptions about the phenomenon (i.e., bracketing; Moustakas, 1994). This allows researchers to view new data with an open mind (Moustakas, 1994). Moustakas (1994) discussed how epoché, which involves viewing the phenomenon “naively” and without influence from any previous conceptions, is difficult to do (p. 85).

I argue that to completely bracket experiences so that they are entirely separated from the phenomenon is impossible, and I prefer Dahlberg’s (2006) term and metaphor of bridling. Dahlberg, a descriptive phenomenological researcher, developed the term
bridling because while she understood the need for phenomenological reduction (often called bracketing), she did not think the term adequately described how researchers can be reflexive about their experiences. Bridling is similar to bracketing in that researchers restrain their preconceived experiences so that they can be open to seeing the essence of the phenomena they study (Vagle, 2009). However, bracketing suggests that researchers are “suspending” and “setting aside” their biases (Vagle, 2009, p. 589). Dahlberg (2006) argued that we can hold back our preconceived understandings but that we cannot get rid of them. Instead, we can loosen them (just as we can loosen the slack when bridling a horse) so that we have room to see the phenomenon (Dahlberg, 2006). Bridling means reflecting on our views and staying open to seeing new views that emerged from participants while realizing that we are subjective and our views will influence how we make meaning from the data (Dahlberg, 2006). Another difference between bracketing and bridling is that bracketing is past-focused, with the focus on making sure past ideas do not affect the present research, while bridling is “forward looking,” with the focus on paying attention to preconceived understandings of the phenomenon throughout the research process (Vagle, 2009, p. 591). I engaged in bridling, reflecting on my personal views while leaving space to see new views from participants. Like Vagle, I believe engaging with my beliefs, reactions, and experiences related to the phenomenon throughout the study has allowed me to be more reflexive. My knowledge about this topic and the theories I used to study this topic have the potential to bias findings. Therefore, I actively worked to bridle my knowledge and theoretical perspective so that they would not prevent me from seeking alternative viewpoints.
After I wrote down a complete description of the phenomenon, I followed the steps recommended by Moustakas (1994) that should be completed based on the researcher’s experience and then based on the transcripts of participants’ experiences. I analyzed data by analyzing all interviews within a family and then moving on to subsequent families. For each step of analysis within a family, I started with the adolescent’s interview. I used the themes from each adolescent participant to provide a starting point for coding the parent and sibling participants. I examined which adolescent themes fit for parents and siblings, which did not, and which additional themes parents and siblings added. I started analysis with the adolescent to guard against the potential for the sibling and parent participants to project their own experiences onto the adolescent.

First, I examined each statement’s relevance to a description of the phenomenon of adolescents’ experiences of happiness in the family (Moustakas, 1994). Then, I conducted horizontalization, highlighting all statements I thought were relevant (Moustakas, 1994). Horizontalization is based on the metaphor that the horizon is limitless, just as are our experiences (Moustakas, 1994). Horizontalization involves giving all statements related to the phenomenon equal weight and being receptive to all statements related to participants’ experiences of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994).

After identifying all statements that I viewed as significant, I reduced these statements by eliminating all that were redundant, resulting in invariant horizons or invariant meaning units (Moustakas, 1994). Invariant horizons are the meaning statements that reflect the unique essence of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). Then, I organized the invariant horizons into themes using imaginative variation (Moustakas,
1994). Imaginative variation involves using imagination and looking at the phenomenon from different perspectives in order to explore possible meanings (Moustakas, 1994). Using imagination, the researcher varies an example of the phenomenon in every way he or she can imagine, which allows her or him to discover which elements are essential to the phenomenon and which are not important (Wertz, 2005). The researcher also engages in phenomenological reflection, in which he or she reflects on the many possibilities in order to explain them (Moustakas, 1994). After engaging in imaginative variation and phenomenological reflection, I sorted each significant statement into a theme by using color-coded highlighting.

I used these themes and the invariant meaning units to develop a textural description of what participants experienced and a structural description of the contexts and settings in which their happiness experiences occurred (Moustakas, 1994). The textural description pulls together all pieces of analysis thus far (i.e., invariant horizons, themes that link these invariant horizons together, phenomenological reflection) in order to create a unified, complete description of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). Imaginative variation guides creation of the structural description (Moustakas, 1994). This description focuses on the how of the phenomenon and involves finding examples that demonstrate themes (Moustakas, 1994). Contextual factors, which Moustakas (1994) called universal structures, that are considered when creating the structural description include “time, space, materiality, causality, and relationship to self and to others” (p. 99).

Finally, I developed a comprehensive description (i.e., the essence of happiness in the family for adolescents) that contains both the textural and structural descriptions.
(Moustakas, 1994). By combining these two descriptions, this composite description is a holistic description of the essence of the adolescent experience of happiness in the family. However, it is important to note that this description does not represent all possible essences of this experience, as those are believed to be limitless; rather, it represents the essence of this experience at a particular place and point in time (i.e., in the United States in the early 21st century) from my reflexive perspective (Moustakas, 1994).

Moustakas (1994) recommended that after creating this textural-structural description for each participant, the researcher create a composite description combining these descriptions into one essence. I did this for each family and then for all participants. After developing comprehensive descriptions for all participants in a family, I created a composite family description that combines the comprehensive descriptions of each family member. Then, I created a final composite description combining the composite descriptions of each family.

In addition to using Moustakas’s (1994) Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method, I also compared happiness experiences between and within families. Using Moustakas’s (1994) method, I accomplished the goal of finding similarities within and between families. In addition, I made a list of significant differences and looked for themes here. For example, I was concerned with whether the siblings’ or parents’ descriptions are most similar to the adolescents’ descriptions. I also paid attention to what is different between entire family units. As themes concerning what is different emerged, I was able to add complexity to my understanding of this phenomenon.
Trustworthiness

Qualitative researchers often use the term *trustworthiness* to address what quantitative researchers call *validity* and *reliability* (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Various researchers use different terms and criteria for ensuring trustworthiness. Corbin and Strauss (2008) articulately described this variability in defining trustworthiness, saying, “I find that everyone agrees evaluation is necessary but there is little consensus about what that evaluation should consist of” (p. 297). It appears all researchers agree it is important to develop standards to ensure trustworthy qualitative research. In the present study, I worked to enhance four types of trustworthiness: credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) recommended keeping a reflexive journal as a way to enhance overall trustworthiness, thus increasing all four types of trustworthiness. The researcher is influenced by a number of different factors, including personal ideas about the phenomenon, the literature, and communications with participants (Morrow, 2005). This reflexive journal can help the researcher reflect on potential influences that could affect data analysis. As recommended by Lincoln and Guba (1985), I kept a reflexive journal in which I recorded my reflections. In this journal, I wrote about my own reactions both before and during data collection and tentative interpretations I was making about the data. Finally, I recorded my experience of the phenomenon and engaged in bridling, as discussed in the data analysis section.

Glaser and Strauss (1967) have argued that because the literature can impact the researcher’s views of the topic of study, it is best for the researcher to avoid delving into the literature before conducting the study. However, Morrow (2005) has argued that the
researcher likely already has preconceived ideas about the phenomenon, and the literature can provide additional viewpoints that protect against the researcher’s biases negatively influencing data analysis. I endorse Morrow’s (2005) perspective and used the literature review I conducted prior to this investigation as a way to broaden my perspectives about adolescent experiences of happiness in the family.

**Credibility**

Credibility is similar to the quantitative concept of *internal validity* (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Some researchers have defined it as the extent to which research findings are consistent with reality (Shenton, 2004). Other researchers have thought of credibility less in terms of truth and more in terms of believability. For example, Corbin and Strauss (2008) discussed credibility as being one of a number of possible interpretations, meaning it does not make sense to view credibility as an aim to find reality. Charmaz (2006) has also focused on believability and has provided a list of questions for researchers to answer to enhance credibility. For example, researchers should ask themselves if they have collected enough data to support their conceptualizations. Like Corbin and Strauss (2008) and Charmaz (2006), I define credibility as the extent to which findings are believable because I also believe that there are multiple truths and not one objective reality. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), the findings must be believable to those who consume the research, and consumers should find the data analysis to be helpful to them. However, the techniques for establishing credibility are aimed at understanding participants’ realities (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I believe this is because by using rigorous methods to understand participants’ truths to the best of our ability, we increase the likelihood consumers will believe and be able to apply the findings.
Triangulation, member checking, peer debriefing, and negative case analysis are ways I was able to discover if findings were credible.

Triangulation, the use of multiple methods of data collection (i.e., “multiple investigators, multiple sources, or multiple methods”), increases trustworthiness by verifying findings across sources (Merriam, 1998, p. 204). Triangulation of investigators means involving multiple investigators in the analysis of findings, triangulation of sources refers to gathering data from multiple sources but using the same method, and triangulation of methods means using multiple methods to collect data (e.g., interviews, observations, and artifacts; Patton, 2002).

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), each piece of information should be triangulated, meaning it can be verified by more than one source, in order for it to be considered trustworthy. However, this does not mean there is an expectation that all sources will point to the same conclusions (Patton, 2002). Rather, triangulation of sources involves testing to find out if sources are consistent with each other (Patton, 2002). Various sources may have discrepancies, which can provide a more thorough understanding of the phenomenon (Patton, 2002). This is also acceptable because the researcher’s goal is not to verify facts but to understand multiple perspectives of a phenomenon (Polkinghorne, 2005). In line with this idea, Morrow (2005) stated that increasing variety in data collection leads to data that has both increased breadth and depth. I used triangulation by speaking with multiple sources. Interviews from the perspectives of adolescents, parents, and siblings provide multiple perspectives that add richness to the findings. In addition, I used peer debriefing and member checks to triangulate findings. This could be considered a form of using multiple investigators.
During peer debriefing, I shared findings with a colleague who recently graduated from a counseling psychology doctoral program, was trained in qualitative research methods, and had a basic knowledge of positive psychology and systems theory. I shared findings with this colleague throughout data collection and after I analyzed all data and conducted member checks. The debriefing session can be used for dialoguing with a colleague so that my biases may become more explicit (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This colleague served as a “devil’s advocate,” asking me difficult questions to help me explore my biases and how I have come to my interpretations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 308).

First, I provided this colleague with a list of tentative themes and asked her to read transcripts from at least one middle adolescent, one parent, and one sibling and decide if based on these transcripts, she could verify my themes by coding the transcripts using these themes. This colleague was able to read transcripts from two families (six total participants). I planned to ask her for feedback about how I could revise any themes that she was unable to verify, but she was able to verify all themes. However, she helped me refine the wording of some themes so that they would be clearer and more precise. For example, I had originally labeled the family support theme relationships, and after a discussion with her, we decided family support was a more appropriate name for the theme. I also asked her feedback regarding if she thought I was missing any themes. She did not identify any themes she thought I had missed. Also, she did not find data that did not fit into one of the themes. If she had, my plan was to work with her to examine and revise themes so that all data fit into a theme. After conducting member checks, I again asked the colleague to examine the revised themes in the same way she examined
tentative themes. The peer debriefer’s role was not as a coresearcher but as someone who double-checked and critiqued my work.

Member checks involve sharing data and interpretations with participants to find out if they think the findings seem plausible (Merriam, 1998). They can allow participants to verify the accuracy of transcripts and speak to the validity of the researcher’s emerging themes (Shenton, 2004). I utilized member checks to verify facts and interpretations. During the follow-up contact I had with each participant who responded after his or her interview, I shared tentative themes and descriptions and asked for feedback on how they fit with participants’ experiences of happiness in the family. This occurred after the peer debriefing. I emailed participants a list of tentative themes so that they could have a chance to reflect on these themes and how well they fit. I asked participants for feedback about which themes fit and any themes that did not fit. For any themes that did not fit, I asked for feedback on how I could revise themes to make them fit better with participants’ experiences. I also asked participants if I was missing any themes that they thought should be included. No participants thought themes needed to be revised. In addition, I checked in that I was accurately understanding participants’ experiences as I collected data through paraphrasing and asking follow-up questions concerning anything that was unclear to me and concerning any meanings I wanted to further explore (Morrow, 2005).

Along with having a peer help me think critically about findings and member checks, I also used negative case analysis to question my own preconceived ideas about the topic and the initial findings. Negative case analysis does not mean looking for data about the opposite of the phenomenon being studied (i.e., adolescents’ unhappy
experiences in their families); however, I asked participants about times the adolescent was least happy in the family and what did not contribute to the adolescent’s happiness in the family in order to better understand happy experiences. Instead, negative case analysis involved looking for data that disconfirmed my assumptions and initial findings (Creswell, 2007). Negative case analysis is useful because by finding instances that disconfirm their hypotheses and go against the general themes found in the data, researchers can better understand the themes (Patton, 2002). For example, finding negative cases that do not fit themes may lead researchers to revise themes so that these negative cases fit, which leads to more adequate themes (Patton, 2002). Morrow (2005) has also used the terms adequate disconfirming evidence and adequate discrepant case analysis to describe this process. Specifically, adequate disconfirming evidence refers to intentionally looking for data that are inconsistent with the researcher’s expectations (Morrow, 2005). Adequate discrepant case analysis means comparing disconfirming evidence with confirming evidence in order to more completely understand the phenomenon (Morrow, 2005). Once negative cases were found, the disconfirming evidence they supplied allowed me to revise themes to more accurately reflect participants’ complex experiences (C. J. Yeh & Inman, 2007). I refined themes and descriptions until all data fit the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This means I needed to understand disconfirming evidence so that I could develop themes and descriptions that reflect these negative cases. For example, when I first started collecting data, I thought mealtime might be a theme, given that a number of participants discussed meals with the family as a happy time for the adolescent. However, one family discussed how meals were especially distressing to the adolescent. I revised this theme by including a
discussion of mealtime under the *quality time* theme instead of considering mealtime to be its own theme. I was able to resolve discrepancies from negative cases based on the data I collected. Had this not been possible, my plan was to collect additional data to help me clarify themes.

**Dependability**

Dependability refers to the consistency of findings and is similar to the quantitative construct of *reliability* (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The goal is to show similar results could be found if the same research were repeated with the same methods and in the same context (Shenton, 2004). While it is unlikely in qualitative research that researchers would obtain the exact same results, by thoroughly describing the research methods, we can allow future researchers the opportunity to replicate our work (Shenton, 2004). In addition, I conducted an inquiry audit, as recommended by Lincoln and Guba (1985). The auditor was my research advisor, who is trained in qualitative research methods. This auditor looked at the process used to collect and analyze data and at the findings arrived at through this process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). He reviewed my researcher’s journal in order to make sure the findings, interpretations, and recommendations were consistent with the data collected (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The auditor also examined whether methodological decisions were made appropriately and whether all data were fully explored (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Corbin and Strauss (2008) provided a number of conditions for “quality” research. They stated researchers should be methodologically consistent and have a clear purpose from the beginning of the study (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). By staying consistent with an established methodology and having an established purpose, I believe researchers make it
easier for others to replicate their work. Therefore, by describing the research methods I used in detail, using consistent methodology, and having a clear purpose throughout the study, I enhanced dependability. Finally, the triangulation procedures described above also served to bolster dependability (Merriam, 1998).

**Confirmability**

Confirmability is aimed at determining that the researcher’s findings reflect participants’ experiences, rather than the researcher’s biases and perspectives (Shenton, 2004). It is similar to the quantitative concept of *objectivity* (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Through triangulation, the reflexive journal, and providing a confirmability audit, confirmability can be bolstered (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Lincoln and Guba (1985) have viewed the reflexive journal and triangulation as part of the audit trail and no longer discuss them separately as methods to boost confirmability. My research advisor conducted the confirmability audit. By examining raw data, data analysis (including notes and final themes and findings), and researcher notes, the auditor confirmed that the findings reflect the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The auditor also paid attention to the potential for researcher bias and to confirming that my interpretations were logical (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). After considering all of these areas, the auditor was able to speak to the overall confirmability of the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

**Transferability/Generalizability**

Transferability refers to the ability of findings from a study to be applied to other situations and is similar to the quantitative concept of *external validity* or *generalizability* (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Merriam (1998) has discussed *reader or user generalizability*, in which the reader determines if research generalizes to his or her particular context. To
do this, researchers must provide enough contextual information (i.e., provide a *thick description*) for readers to determine whether the study is similar enough to generalize to their own situations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I accomplished this through providing demographic information about participants and details about the setting in which the study was conducted. I also created a thick description by using participants’ direct quotes to demonstrate themes and to describe the essence of middle adolescents’ experiences of happiness within the family.

**Summary**

I employed a constructionist epistemology and an interpretivist-constructivist theoretical perspective to guide this phenomenological study of the essence of adolescents’ experiences of happiness in the family. I conducted semistructured interviews with seven families, and each family unit consisted of a middle adolescent, a parent, and a sibling. I analyzed data using Moustakas’s (1994) version of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method. Throughout data collection and analysis, I kept a reflexive journal to aid me in reflecting on my own perspectives and biases. Final findings include themes, structural and textural descriptions, and comparisons between and within family units. I used a number of methods to enhance four aspects of trustworthiness: credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability.
CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

Introduction

In this chapter, I discuss the findings about the essence of the middle adolescent experience of happiness within the family system that emerged from utilizing a phenomenological methodology. This essence includes the family factors that middle adolescents, parents, and siblings view as influential to the adolescent’s unique experience of happiness. I provide themes and subthemes to describe this essence. I discuss examples of these themes, along with their context and meaning, through providing examples from participants, including quotes from interviews. By using these themes to describe both what participants experienced (the textural description) and how and in what context they experienced it (the structural description), I present a composite description of the essence of adolescents’ happiness in the family system. Because adolescents, siblings, and parents generally corroborated each other and did not significantly differ in their perspectives, I present findings for participants as a whole rather than as separate themes for adolescents, parents, and siblings. Another reason I present findings holistically is because the main research question was to understand the holistic essence of adolescent’s happiness in the family, not the separate essences based on multiple perspectives.
I also discuss similarities and differences between and within family units related to influential factors on middle adolescents’ happiness. I discuss similarities and differences between families throughout my discussion of themes. After discussing themes, I present comparisons within families by discussing overall differences between adolescents, parents, and siblings. Throughout this discussion of findings (and the entire dissertation), all participants’ names are pseudonyms.

The Participants

Following, I provide descriptions of each participant unit, including the interview environment and my observations when first interacting with the families. This is intended to help readers understand the context of the study so they can better assess transferability of findings. Because this is a phenomenological study, these descriptions are brief and are intended to set the stage for the findings. Another reason descriptions are not detailed is to protect participants’ confidentiality.

Cortez Family

The Cortezes are a White, Jewish family. I went to the Cortez’s house to interview Liz. Liz’s father and her brother, Owen, appeared to be in a hurry because they were leaving for the airport. Liz expressed being happy to have the house to herself. She presented as calm, and her desire for calmness came out throughout her interview. I returned to the Cortez house the next week to interview Owen and Maria, Liz’s mother. Maria and Owen were animated and engaged. Maria was talkative and shared a lot about her son’s and oldest daughter’s mental health problems. Owen was friendly, energetic, and insightful. Overall, the family was welcoming and interested in the research.
Unit Family

The Units are a Russian, Jewish family in which the parents recently divorced. I arrived at the Unit’s house to interview Child’s father, Giovanni, and his sister, Becca. Giovanni invited me to have dinner with them before the interviews, and he served traditional Russian food. Giovanni and Becca were friendly and welcoming. During dinner, they discussed numerous family trips they had gone on. When I first set up the interviews with Giovanni, he mentioned he very recently and unexpectedly got divorced. He seemed apologetic about how this might negatively impact my research. I came back to the Unit house the next day to interview Child. He was very brief in his responses to me before, during, and after the interview. I wondered if talking about his family might be difficult for him because of his parents’ recent divorce. However, he didn’t discuss how it had impacted him.

Fray Family

I interviewed the Frays in their house. All family members were friendly and engaged. They were welcoming and polite to me. They seemed interested in the research. They also interacted positively with each other and appeared to be a close-knit family. The Fray children were animated and expressive. Tanya, Clarissa’s mother, was especially interested in how I made methodological decisions about the study and what I was hoping to learn.

Green Family

The Greens are a Caucasian, Christian family. I arrived at the Green’s apartment to interview Johnathan and his father, Llewellyn. I also met his mother and younger sisters. The family was friendly and welcoming. The apartment had numerous toys for
Johnathan’s little sisters. Johnathan appeared animated, and he expressed excitement about participating in the research. Llewellyn presented as calmer but was also engaged and interested in the research. Elena, Johnathan’s older sister, was staying at a friend’s house, so I interviewed her on a separate occasion at my house because this was most convenient for her. Elena was warm and laid-back.

**Canto Family**

I arrived at the Canto house to interview Erica, Gloria (Erica’s mother), and Marina (Erica’s sister). Gloria answered the door and introduced me to her mother, (Erica’s grandmother). All of the Cantos were welcoming and appeared engaged during the interviews. Erica and Marina were energetic when interacting with me and with the rest of the family. Gloria was calm and relaxed. She shared her interpretations of what she thought was going on in the family based on her knowledge of psychology and family systems.

**Styles Family**

I interviewed Kayla, Patricia (her sister), and Tiffany (her mother) in their home. I also met Kayla’s cousin, who was staying with them for the summer. The Styles were welcoming and energetic. They seemed to have good rapport and playfully joked with each other. They were engaged during their interviews. All three of them emphasized how Kayla’s pet had some health issues that were negatively impacting her happiness. However, they also saw Kayla’s strengths and ways she was able to find happiness despite her sadness about her dog.
Hutcherson Family

I interviewed Aiden, Shelly (his sister), and Loren (his mother) in their house. The family was welcoming and engaged. Loren was animated and talkative, and she chatted with me before and after all of the interviews. Aiden and Shelly were calmer. Overall, the family appeared to get along well. However, all three family members emphasized how mealtimes could be stressful because Aiden would become irritated by the family’s eating noises (discussed in more detail in the themes section). The family discussed how they had just gotten back from a cruise, which had been an enjoyable time for all.

Participants’ Descriptions of Happiness

In this section, I provide a summary of participants’ descriptions of happiness for both themselves and the middle adolescent in order to provide context for the findings. Because this study focused on happiness, it is important to know how participants defined this concept. Although participants provided diverse descriptions of how they viewed happiness and how they thought middle adolescents in their families viewed happiness, there were a number of underlying core themes in their descriptions. Participants described both how they define happiness and things that make them happy. Some participants described happiness more as a varying state, while others described happiness as a steady trait. Concerning state descriptions, participants discussed happiness as a lack of stress or worries and feeling calm. They discussed being able to live presently, often as a result of not feeling worried or stressed. For example, Johnathan (adolescent) described happiness as, “when everything’s going the right way and everything is just peaceful and you don’t have to worry about anything and nothing’s
on your mind except for the now.” They also described happiness as having positive feelings, such as “joyful feelings” (Patricia; sibling), “a lifted feeling inside” (Kayla; adolescent), and “feeling good, positive, optimistic, futuristic” (Gloria; parent). Tanya (parent) thought that for her daughter, “happy is vibrant, it’s excited.”

Concerning things that made participants and middle adolescents happy, one component was positive interactions with others. These interactions included both doing enjoyable activities and being with people with whom one feels safe and comfortable. For example, Shelly (sibling) thought happiness means “when my family is all together and we’re all happy at the same time.” Tom (sibling) discussed the importance of feeling he can be himself: “I like feeling like I’m with people that I care about and that care about me. And I like being somewhere that I feel free to maybe express myself or be myself in an atmosphere like that.” Participants also noted being able to pursue goals as a component of happiness. Maria (parent) thought that part of her daughter’s happiness is “being able to have a goal or something to do and being able to do it.”

Some participants described more global aspects of happiness, in line with trait definitions. For example, Liz (adolescent) defined happiness as “being satisfied with the way you are and who you’re with and what’s going on in your life,” and Clarissa (adolescent) described it as, “a general easiness I guess about the way that you live.” Others noted that happiness doesn’t mean being happy all of the time: “I can be happy as a total person even if I have moments where I am not necessarily the happiest” (Erica; adolescent).

Understanding how participants viewed happiness for themselves and/or their middle adolescent children/siblings provides a context for understanding the essence of
middle adolescents’ experiences of happiness in their families. The themes that emerged relate to these descriptions of happiness and are discussed in detail. Although participants reported unique definitions for happiness, commonalities arose in the experiences that they described related to middle adolescents’ happiness in the family.

Themes

Nine themes that relate to the middle adolescent’s experience of happiness in the family emerged from the data. Six themes describe what contributes to adolescents’ happiness within the family: quality time, family support, humor, independence, outside influences, and family mood. For a visual representation of these themes and corresponding subthemes, see Figure 1. Three themes describe how adolescents’ happiness plays out within the family: external expressions of happiness, more engaged when happy, and family has a big influence on happiness. All themes fit for at least six of the seven families.

Thick descriptions with quotes from participants are provided throughout the discussion of themes. However, to help readers gain a more thorough understanding of adolescents’ experiences of happiness in the family and the context of these experiences, additional thick descriptions can be found in Appendix G. In Appendix G, an example quote is listed to demonstrate each theme for each participant, where applicable. In addition, Appendix G also demonstrates negative case analysis. If a participant specifically expressed that a theme did not fit, a quote is provided to demonstrate this as well. This appendix supplements the findings section by providing detailed information about each main theme.
For the purpose of this study, quality time is defined as spending time together doing things one enjoys. All participants mentioned quality time as a factor that contributed to the adolescent’s happiness in the family. Participants mentioned specific quality time experiences and contexts surrounding these experiences. These specific experiences and contexts are reflected in the following subthemes: special events, time with extended family, quality time in the home, and whole family versus one-on-one
interactions. Participants frequently highlighted special events, which typically took place outside of the home. These special events often included extended family. Participants also emphasized quality time activities in the home. Finally, some participants thought the adolescent preferred interactions with the whole family, while others thought the adolescent preferred one-on-one interactions with individual family members.

Participants emphasized that the quality of adolescents’ interactions, not just the fact that they were interacting with family, was an important contributor to happiness in the family. Two participants, Johnathan (adolescent) and Tiffany (parent), explicitly stated that the amount of time spent together was not a factor in increasing happiness but that what was important was having enjoyable time together. Tiffany, a schoolteacher, explained this as follows:

I have the same relationship and the same rapport with her that I do now [in the summer] as when I’m not here during the school year. So I think it’s the quality and what we do with the time we have and not necessarily how much time.

Participants described a variety of quality time experiences with family members that made adolescents happy. Most participants noted quality time activities both within and outside of the home. Some participants noted a preference for spending time outside of home. For example, all members of the Hutcherson family emphasized how Aiden was happier with family when he could get out of the house. Aiden discussed feeling more productive when he leaves the house. For example, when asked what makes him happiest in the family, he said, “Probably when we’re out and about doing stuff, like, just as a family not like sitting at home all day ’cause I like to be out and I just feel lazy when I’m just around the house.” Loren (parent) stated she thinks Aiden “gets bored when
we’re at home.” Marina expressed a similar idea about her sister, Erica, saying that getting out of the house makes Erica feel like she is doing something:

> She’s very oriented towards doing something: going getting dinner, just leaving and going somewhere versus she feels like being home is like doing nothing, even if we’re like all hanging out together watching a movie, she’s like, “We’re doing nothing tonight,” versus if we went to the movie theater and watched a movie: “We’re doing something tonight.”

Some participants also indicated the adolescent had a preference for quality time over receiving tangible, material objects from family. For example, all members of the Styles family emphasized that Kayla (adolescent) preferred quality time to material objects and that they did not think material objects influenced her happiness. If material objects did increase happiness, it was often due to something besides the object itself. One of these things was quality time. For example, Marina (sibling) discussed how Erica appreciates time spent shopping together more than the gifts bought while shopping. Johnathan (adolescent) also discussed how the happiness from gifts related to quality time because he associates gifts with memories of quality time: “And so I’ll look at it and be happy because I know that my family got it for me and I’ll think about times that that object reminds me of.”

Participants showed consistency in the specific types of quality time experiences they discussed. These include special events, time with extended family, activities in the home, and interactions with the whole family or with individual family members. I discuss these specific experiences in detail.

**Special events.** All participants discussed the importance of special events as quality time activities that made the adolescent happy in the family. Most special events took place outside of the house. These events included vacations, holidays, birthdays,
and time with extended family. All families thought vacations contributed to adolescents’ happiness in the family. Families discussed a variety of reasons for why vacations and other special events increased happiness, including being all together, seeing new things, and being relaxed. For example, all members of the Fray family discussed vacations as a happy time for Clarissa because the family is all together. Clarissa discussed being happy “all crammed in the car” together: “Like on road trips when we’ve been there for 8 hours. That’s honestly some of the most fun I’ve had with my family is on car rides like that.” Tanya (parent) echoed this, saying Clarissa is happy on road trips “not because of where we’re going or what we’re doing. I think it’s that we’re together and that she’s happiest.” Finally, Tom (sibling) thought Clarissa enjoyed working with the whole family to achieve a “group objective” while on trips: “We went to Boston, and our goal was to find the best clam chowder in Boston. So like that was a family mission and she definitely likes that kind of things specifically, just things we can rally around perhaps.”

A number of participants discussed how vacations contributed to happiness in the family because they were a time to relax. For example, Johnathan (adolescent) and Llewellyn (parent) emphasized how both being together as a family and the lack of stress during special events contributed to his happiness. When discussing a road trip to South Dakota, Johnathan stated that it made him happy for the following reasons:

- It was all of us together and it just, always vacations are always happy because it’s a way to get away from everything and we’re all happy, there’s no worries, there’s nothing like, no chores to do while you’re on vacation, nothing to work on while you’re on vacation.

Similarly, Llewellyn noted how Johnathan’s birthday and Christmas are times for the whole family to get together and be away from stress so that they can “focus on one
another.” Going along with this idea of getting away from stress, three families (i.e., Canto, Hutcherson, Styles) discussed how not having technology when on vacation could increase happiness. For example, Erica (adolescent) discussed how lack of technology facilitates her ability to do quality time activities and build relationships with family:

We all get cabins and so we are out of technology and we just kind of like hang out and play games and stuff and do puzzles, it’s really nice … and being able to have those relationships that can thrive under circumstances that aren’t like having a central thing that’s drawing all your attention, so you really have to pay attention to what’s happening between the people and not what you’re looking at.

Another way vacations increased happiness was through the opportunity to do something different. Becca (sibling) stated Child is happy when on vacation because of the specific new things he gets to see:

When we go on trips, he likes to see all the cool like animals and, so he likes hiking so we’ll go hiking. He likes natural stuff, like in the forest, different like species of animals, he likes to learn about different trees, stuff like that.

The Styles family highlighted vacations as a way to get out of the normal routine and see new things while making memories. Kayla (adolescent) discussed the family’s upcoming plans to go zip lining in California as a way to “change up the routine” and “experience all these memories together.” Patricia (sibling) also discussed this planned vacation and stated making memories on vacations increases Kayla’s happiness. Going along with the idea of having an opportunity to do new things, Marina (sibling) stated that for Erica, vacations are happy because Erica is out of the house doing something.

Overall, participants saw vacations as a positive influence on adolescents’ happiness, and all participants thought that vacations could increase happiness. However, a few participants noted vacations sometimes decreased happiness. For example, Liz (adolescent) stated that if her family seems relaxed, she enjoys vacations but that
vacations become stressful when family members are irritated with each other. Marina also discussed how vacations can be stressful for her sister, Erica, because Erica and she “want to have some time of just ourselves, be independent, be able to go and do something by ourselves and a lot of times, my parents want everyone to stay together, … and so that tends to cause some conflict.”

**Extended family.** All families except the Unit family reported extended family contributed to adolescents’ happiness in the family. Typically, participants discussed extended family as another reason why vacations and holidays were happy times for adolescents. Often, being able to do things with family members who were close in age to the adolescent increased happiness. For example, Tom (sibling) stated Clarissa is happy during vacations with extended family, such as spending time with cousins at the beach. Participants also discussed how having the whole family together increased happiness. For example, Johnathan (adolescent) thought his happiest time in the family was going to church every Sunday and then having family lunch at his grandparents’ house. He discussed how his family makes the music at church, saying, “It’s very nice and seeing my actual family go up there and play music and it’s just, it’s always very uplifting and makes me happy.”

**Quality time in the home.** In addition to describing quality time experiences outside of the home, participants also described quality time with family while at home. One common quality time experience that participants mentioned was mealtime. Participants considered this a happy time because family members talked about their days or other topics they enjoyed discussing together. Overall, participants thought it was a time during which family members had positive interactions, thereby increasing the
adolescent’s happiness. The Hutcherson family was an exception and was the only family who described mealtime as decreasing happiness for the adolescent. All participants in the Hutcherson family stated mealtime in the home decreased Aiden’s happiness because he has misophonia, a condition in which sounds in the family trigger him and cause anxiety. According to Aiden, these sounds include “individual noises, like coughing, eating the food, like, there’s also these things that come on, it’s called visual triggers so like the way someone eats.” Loren (parent) also emphasized mealtime as distressing and expressed how these sounds decreased Aiden’s happiness:

I think when he’s with us, sounds bother him and I think that if he could get those to stop, you know, that he would be so much happier with us because like a lot of times, we don’t eat dinner together and things like that.

Along with mealtime, participants also stated playing games together increased adolescents’ happiness. Johnathan (adolescent) and his sister, Elena, both stated Johnathan is happy when they play videogames together. Tanya (parent) discussed how games increase Clarissa’s happiness, saying, “She likes to do things that are like structured engagement, you know, community-building kinds of things.” Other participants also alluded to this idea of structured engagement when discussing other activities family members work together to do as a family. Often, these were activities that siblings did together without parents. For example, Kayla (adolescent) and her sister, Patricia, stated that the two of them cooking together increased Kayla’s happiness. Other structured engagement included creating things. For example, Gloria (parent) described how Erica and her siblings make videos and plays together: “So they’re all interacting and figuring things out, and you know, filming each other and watching it and putting it together, and so it’s a lot of interaction, it’s a lot of fun.”
Finally, participants thought watching movies, television, and videos together increased adolescents’ happiness. For example, both Erica (adolescent) and Marina (sibling) discussed how Erica enjoys watching American Ninja Warrior with the whole family each week. Marina noted that Erica has positive interactions with family members while watching this show. She also stated Erica has a number of television shows she watches with various relatives and that it increases her happiness because “it’s like a continuous thing that’s always the same.” Patricia (sibling) and Tiffany (parent) both stated Kayla is happy when she watches movies with her sister. Patricia also stated that the family recently watched a family tape of Kayla playing in a kiddie pool with her cousin and brother, and she thought watching this tape together increased Kayla’s happiness.

Whole family versus one-on-one interactions. Participants described quality time experiences both as a whole family and one-on-one. Some participants expressed that the adolescent had a preference for one type over the other, while other participants did not note a particular preference. Overall, both types of interactions could increase happiness, but for certain adolescents, one type caused a greater increase in happiness. For example, all members of the Fray family emphasized having the entire family together as the happiest times for Clarissa. Tanya (parent) said that Clarissa is “happiest within our family when like the five of us are playing or joking around, when we do things together.” On the other hand, all of the Hutchersons stated that Aiden is happier during one-on-one interactions. Aiden was not sure why he prefers one-on-one interactions. His mother, Loren, thought it could be because he can get more attention because he does not have to compete with his sister. All of the Cantos also discussed the
importance of individual interactions with family members for Erica’s happiness. Erica’s sister and mother thought she was happier in one-on-one interactions. However, Erica thought both one-on-one and whole family interactions were important for her happiness: “Well I think it really helps me feel, I mean, especially as a middle child, makes me have concrete relationships with each of my family members, as well as like us all being able to be together at once.” Overall, families described quality time individually and as a whole family as an important factor that contributed to adolescents’ happiness in the family.

**Family Support**

Family support emerged as the second most prevalent theme in contributing to adolescents’ experiences of happiness in their families. As with quality time, all participants identified family support as part of adolescents’ happiness in the family. The family support theme encompasses ways family members express care and maintain positive relationships with the adolescent. Family support took a number of different forms, and there were commonalities to the different types of family support participants discussed. Specifically, they highlighted three types of family support, which are subthemes of the overall family support theme: providing emotional support, giving advice or assistance, and showing interest in what adolescents are doing. Participants especially emphasized emotional support, which involved creating a safe and trusting environment, talking about/listening to the adolescent’s problems, and understanding the adolescent. In some cases, providing help also was a form of emotional support.

**Emotional support.** All families discussed the importance of emotional support in contributing to the adolescent’s happiness in the family. Participants highlighted how
having safety and trust in their relationships with family members increased adolescents’ happiness. Participants discussed adolescents being able to trust relatives with their problems or secrets. This safety created the foundation for adolescents to receive emotional support from relatives. Elena (sibling) discussed how safety has allowed her to support Johnathan: “It’s a safe zone. … It’s just kind of, we’ve learned to accept one another, and kind of a little safe place to talk about whatever.” Clarissa also discussed how trust has allowed her to get support from her mother, which then increases her happiness: “I don’t try to keep things from her usually so, she’s just very aware of what’s going on with me usually, and she’s usually able to bring up my mood.” Although not all families explicitly discussed safety and trust in relationships, all families except for the Cortezes reported being able to talk about problems and have family members listen increased happiness in the family. For example, Tiffany (parent) discussed contributing to Kayla’s happiness by listening to her and working to understand what she needs in order to maintain her happiness. Kayla also expressed increases in happiness from being able to talk with her mother, saying, “Sometimes it’s just nice to, you know, hear like, ‘How was your day,’ you know. Then I can like release all of my emotions, and … it just helps having somebody hear and listen.”

When interacting with adolescents to provide support, families noted the importance of providing words of affirmation. Marina and Gloria Canto (Erica’s sister and mother) especially emphasized how Erica feels happy when she receives approval and very unhappy when she feels she is being criticized. Gloria stated that Erica “equates that approval with love or a criticism as not loving her,” making approval a big influence on her happiness. She stated that to increase Erica’s happiness, she looks for “something
substantial to compliment her on.” Marina also discussed Erica’s need for words of affirmation, saying she needs “straight up, just blatant like, ‘I’m proud of you,’ or, … ‘I love you,’ like she needs these things said to her and shown to her directly.” Johnathan (adolescent) also stated his family increases his happiness through praise, such as by telling him he is doing a good job.

Going along with giving verbal affirmation, all families except for the Styles family thought being understood contributed to the adolescent’s happiness. Although Kayla (adolescent) did not think this directly contributed to her happiness, she stated that the family understanding her was a comfort for her. The other families explicitly discussed how being understood affected happiness. For example, Liz (adolescent) discussed having a number of misunderstandings with her family. She thought her older sister had the most positive influence on her happiness because her sister could relate to her. When asked what her family could do to increase her happiness, Liz recommended they “realize what I’m going through.” Clarissa’s family also discussed the importance of being understood. Tom (sibling) stated Clarissa is unhappy “when she feels like she’s being misinterpreted or when she’s being misrepresented in some way.” Tanya, Clarissa’s mother, echoed this idea, saying, “She is best and happiest … when somebody else understands her, when she feels like she understands like somebody else and she feels like there’s that connection.” For some adolescents, gifts related to being understood. When I checked in with participants about the importance of material objects, two adolescents expressed that gifts increased happiness because they showed family members understood them. Johnathan was one of these adolescents:

I like getting gifts from family because it’s usually not something that I like voice that I want but they’ll know my personality and I’ll open it and I’ll be like, “I
didn’t even know I wanted that.” And it just makes me really happy to know that they know me so well.

**Conflict.** A number of participants reported when adolescents were in conflict with the family, it decreased their happiness in the moment. However, conflicts typically did not lead to a lasting decrease on happiness. In a few cases, this was because adolescents were able to bounce back quickly on their own. However, in most cases, this was because adolescents were offered support to resolve the conflict. This support allowed their happiness levels to return to where they were before the conflict. Therefore, conflict is not seen as its own theme but as part of the family support theme because family support helped mitigate the effects of conflict on happiness. For example, Aiden (adolescent) stated that when he has a conflict, he is unhappy for a little while but that when he apologizes to his family, “it makes me feel better ’cause then we kind of like talk about what happened and stuff.” Gloria, Erica’s mother, also noted the importance of family engaging to help boost happiness when there is conflict. Gloria stated that when Erica is not happy with the family, she needs “to explode” with the family and have them engage with her. Tanya and Tom (Clarissa’s mother and brother) also discussed the importance of Clarissa being able to engage to resolve conflict. Tom noted that talking about conflict is important for Clarissa, saying that talking “usually gives some kind of … closure on an issue I guess. Even if it’s not actual closure, it maybe makes her feel better about it if it’s been talked about.”

**Assistance.** In addition to benefiting from emotional support, all families also thought adolescents felt happier in their families when relatives provided guidance and help. One way parents provided assistance was through helping their adolescent children
meet their goals. For example, Llewellyn discussed increasing Johnathan’s happiness by working hard to understand his son’s goals so that he could provide the appropriate help:

I think trying to see what things that he wants to do or where his goals are and where we are or are not being supportive in that and trying to help orient so that if he’s interested in this then belaboring him with information on that is excessive. And being able to make sure that supports are in the right place so that we’re spending that energy in the right areas and not stressing ourselves or him with the wrong bits of information.

Aiden (adolescent) also expressed that his father helping him with his goals increased his happiness. He discussed how his father motivates him, which helps him be more productive and thereby increases his happiness. Child (adolescent) echoed this, saying his mother is “educationally positive,” which “makes me work harder.”

Families also discussed giving advice to adolescents as a way to increase happiness. This typically came from parents and older siblings, and adolescents expressed appreciating getting advice from people who had already gone through what they were currently going through. For example, Johnathan (adolescent) reported feeling happier when receiving “helpful tips” from family. He expressed that his sister can help because she went to his school, and he said that when she gives him advice, “it makes me happy to know that she’s always there to support.” Clarissa (adolescent) also discussed how her older brother has helped her with preparing for the transition to college by providing help:

My brother, the way he’s actually handled that a lot recently is, he’ll text me later with links to articles saying things about, you know, dealing with college and transition and finding a school and things like that so, he’s not as mushy as my parents are but still lets me know that he’s listening, that he cares.

Finally, families discussed providing help with tasks adolescents could not do on their own. For example, Maria (parent) stated she keeps the family organized so that Liz
can do things she wants to do. This included keeping up with finances to ensure she has money to pay for Liz’s acting lessons. Tiffany (parent) discussed how Kayla’s father, who is a physician, helps with health-related issues. She talked about how Kayla has been distressed about recent health problems and that when Kayla has come to them, “We’d just say, ‘OK, that’s where Dad comes in,’ and we get her proper treatment and try to find the right doctor for her. So she always knows that I think that we’re always looking out for her.” Overall, adolescents were happier when their families provided assistance not only because they needed help but also because the assistance showed them family members cared about them.

**Showing interest.** Families reported adolescents felt happy when family members expressed interest in their activities. For example, Johnathan (adolescent) expressed feeling happy when his younger sisters want to see what he is doing and learn from him: “It just makes me happy to know that they’re constantly wanting to learn and they’re interested in what I’m doing and they’ll always ask me questions as to what I’m doing.” Loren (parent) also discussed how Aiden is happy with her when she shows interest in his activities:

I remember one time, he was really into this YouTuber and wanted me to watch it and, I mean, I could’ve cared less about the YouTuber, I didn’t find it that interesting, but he loved that we could sit together and watch it and he loves to see my reactions, so I was more than happy to do it because, you know, it was our bonding time.

In addition to showing interest through engagement with adolescents in activities they enjoyed, five parents mentioned the family showing interest through attending important events increased the adolescent’s happiness. Parents discussed attending concerts, dance recitals, and sporting events. They expressed this being important
because it indicates to adolescents that family supports and cares about them. For example, Tiffany (parent) discussed her brother going to Kayla’s band concerts as an example of how “someone’s always there supporting her.” Interestingly, adolescents and siblings did not mention family attendance at events as a contributor to their happiness in the family. Some parents discussed how adolescents would not indicate they were upset if family had to miss their events but that they could tell their children were not happy. For example, Tanya (parent) stated Clarissa’s father thought she didn’t care if he went to Clarissa’s dance recital. Tanya stated that when she checked in with Clarissa about this, Clarissa said, “Of course I want him to be there. I love it when he’s there. But I just don’t want him to feel guilty if he can’t go so I don’t wanna make a big deal out of it.” In sum, showing interest in adolescents’ activities and events was a way for family members to indicate to adolescents that they cared about them.

**Humor**

All families except the Cortezes discussed humor as part of happy moments in the family. Humor took a variety of forms, including laughing, joking, telling funny stories, making mistakes, and acting funny. Humor often took place during quality time moments. However, humor is its own theme because participants also discussed its influence on happiness independent of quality time moments and described it as a unique contributor to happiness. When asked what makes her happy in her family, the first response Erica (adolescent) gave was, “I mean just when we laugh really, if we’re all together in a room and we’re all laughing it’s just fantastic.” Both Clarissa (adolescent) and Marina (sibling) discussed how “inside jokes,” shared jokes within the family, contributed to happiness. For example, Marina stated that the family had inside jokes
about shows they watch together, which she thought increased Erica’s happiness. Erica also used watching shows together as an example of a time when she was happy laughing with her family. Johnathan (adolescent) also described shared family humor and stated he was happy when he could “hear funny stories” with extended family during family lunch after church. Child (adolescent) stated he was happy in his family while telling jokes during family meals. Tom (sibling) also discussed the importance of jokes for Clarissa’s happiness in the family, saying, “I think humor, I think that’s definitely part of making her happy is she always needs a witty comment or a joke or whatever.” However, jokes did not always have to be clever or considered of high quality to increase happiness. Patricia (sibling) said their father has a positive influence on Kayla’s happiness because “his jokes are, like they’re not bad, but they’re not good, they’re in the middle so like she always laughs about them ’cause they’re not the best jokes.” A few participants also discussed how it could be funny when family members make a mistake, leading to an increase in happiness. For example, Child stated board games make him happy “when someone messes up and it’s funny.”

In addition to seeing humorous moments as happy times for adolescents, participants also described humor as a strategy family members used to boost adolescents’ happiness. For example, Tanya (parent) reported Clarissa’s father tries to increase her happiness through humor: “Her dad is very adept at getting her, she’s [Clarissa’s] got a really good sense of humor, and kind of helping her connect with that, really helps.” Becca (sibling) stated she tries to increase Child’s happiness by repeating “stupid things” to make him laugh: “Like when I try to act all cool and he’s like, ‘Why are you acting all cool?’ and then I see that he starts laughing, and I understand that he
thinks it’s funny so then I do it again.” Patricia (sibling) stated she tries to increase Kayla’s happiness by telling jokes.

Participants discussed a number of reasons why they thought humor increased happiness. For example, Elena (sibling) thought humor increased happiness in the family because laughing increases happiness and because being able to joke about a problem makes it feel less serious. A few participants thought humor was connected with family support. Erica (adolescent) described humor as a way her family tries to support her when she is upset, and she stated her family will try to make her laugh to take her mind off her problems. Llewellyn (parent) also discussed humor being connected with family support but in a different way. He thought humor increased happiness through providing security in relationships, thereby enhancing the support Johnathan was able to seek:

It adds another level of security for him, when I think that when he might have something more serious to express, I think he’s gonna orient first to the people he’s been able to have more expressive humor about. … So I think that it can be a way of identifying, “Who can I trust for what?”

In conclusion, humor was both an important component of happy experiences in the family and a powerful tool used to make adolescents happier.

**Independence**

Independence was a theme that contributed to adolescents’ happiness for all families, and all but two participants discussed it in some form. This theme refers to opportunities for the adolescent to be autonomous. This includes trusting adolescents with increased autonomy, showing fairness and transparency in setting boundaries, allowing them to develop as individuals separate from their families, and giving them time to be alone. Most adolescents stated that restrictions from parents did not decrease their happiness because parents trusted them and provided only the necessary restrictions
to keep them safe and supported. Families also stated that when restrictions were necessary, adolescents felt happier if they could understand the reason for the restriction and view it as a fair restriction. For example, Clarissa and Kayla (adolescents) stated that their parents trust them because they are open with their parents, leading them to have more freedom and thereby increasing their happiness. Erica (adolescent) also discussed the importance of her family trusting her, along with needing to find a balance with setting restrictions: “I feel like restrictions in small doses are good, and I think that they are necessary but I think that people should also be able to be able to have the ability to restrict themselves.” Tanya (parent) also discussed trust as important and stated that when Clarissa has restrictions, she becomes unhappy when she thinks this indicates her parents don’t trust her. This unhappiness goes away once her parents explain the rationale behind the restriction: “It usually comes down to trust. ‘It’s not that we don’t trust you, it’s that for whatever reason, we think it’s in your best interest to do something else’” (Tanya). Similarly, Marina (sibling) stated Erica becomes unhappy if she views rules as unfair. Kayla stated that she views her family’s rules as fair and that them giving her explanations for rules shows her they trust her.

Families also discussed the importance of empowering adolescents to feel independent in contributing to their happiness. For example, Aiden (adolescent) and his mother, Loren, thought Aiden is happier when he works to earn the money to buy things he wants. Aiden expressed feeling happy when his father motivates him and helps him think of ways to earn money, such as starting a small business. Gloria (parent) stated that when her daughter was able to have the car this past year, it increased her happiness because of the feelings of “independence,” “freedom,” and “adulthood” it gave her.
Others also expressed that adolescents were happier when given freedom, such as the opportunity to do things away from parents or the option to bring a friend on vacations. Finally, Erica (adolescent) emphasized needing to be given autonomy to develop her own personality:

I mean the biggest thing is really just being an individual. I think it’s really important in a family, with especially a lot of people but really just in any relationship, to feel like you’re bringing something to the table.

Overall, families expressed adolescents felt happier in their families when parents allowed them autonomy to begin moving toward adulthood.

Finally, families expressed the importance of letting adolescents have space when needed. Liz (adolescent) especially emphasized being happier when her family leaves her alone. She stated that she gets along better with her father than her mother because “he kind of respects my boundaries more than my mom.” She also stated she is happiest when she can be alone in her room and not be distracted by family noise. Tiffany (parent) stated that even though Kayla enjoys interacting with people, having alone time in her room also contributes to her happiness. Overall, the understanding and ability to respond to adolescents’ needs for autonomy, freedom, and space contributed to adolescents’ happiness in their families.

**Outside Influences**

All families reported that things outside of the family influenced the adolescent’s happiness within the family. Usually, outside influences were stressors that family members experienced from outside of the family that then affected family interactions and decreased happiness within the family. Adolescents’ happiness was impacted both when they were stressed and when family members were stressed. For example, Clarissa
adolescent) stated she is least happy in the family “usually if something’s stressing us out, any one of us. So usually when it’s school, probably the biggest one would be school.” Other families also discussed the impact of school stress, and it was the most frequently mentioned outside influence. Families noted that when there wasn’t school stress, they felt more relaxed and could have more positive interactions. For example, Llewellyn (parent) stated that when there are breaks from school, “there are some of those things removed and we’re all able to be a little less stretched and able to kind of focus on one another.” Participants also noted that school stress could cause tension in the family because of parents’ involvement with schoolwork: “I think we stress her out a good bit about schoolwork, for example. So I think our demands about that interfere with her happiness” (Tanya; parent). In addition to adolescents’ stress, participants also noted that other relatives’ stress impacted adolescents’ happiness. Erica (adolescent) stated that school stress for her, work stress for her mother, and sports injuries that cause hip pain for her father all impacted her happiness, saying “it does definitely put a strain on us, we have to figure out how to work around each other’s pain, which is sometimes difficult, but then doable.”

Three families noted that family members’ significant mental health or medical problems impacted the adolescent’s happiness. Although not an event occurring outside of the family, this is seen as an outside influence because the family had no control over relatives developing these conditions. The Cortez family discussed how Liz’s siblings’ mental health problems negatively impacted her happiness. For example, Maria (parent) stated that Liz “doesn’t like to be with us because of Owen’s ADHD. It’s just too intrusive for her.” All members of the Hutcherson family discussed how Aiden’s
misophonia negatively affected his happiness in the family because he would become irritated by their noises. Both Aiden and Loren (parent) stated that when he is stressed and anxious from school, this makes his misophonia worse: “It gets worse when anxiety is at its highest, so that makes it even worse. When he doesn’t have as much anxiety, we notice it’s much more decreased, like he doesn’t, things don’t bother him as much” (Loren). Tiffany (parent) stated that despite being a “generally happy person,” Kayla’s happiness in the family has been negatively impacted by medical problems because “she doesn’t have what she used to have in the sense of the drive.” These uncontrollable conditions put stress on adolescents, which decreased their happiness in the family.

Although participants mostly noted negative outside influences that decreased happiness in the family, some participants also noted positive outside influences that increased happiness in the family. For example, Owen (sibling) stated Liz was at one of her happiest times with the family when they visited her at summer camp. He thought this was because “having fun and then wanting to see people you haven’t seen for a while kind of really makes you happy and gets you in the moment of being extremely happy.” Tiffany (parent) discussed how school could positively impact Kayla’s happiness, saying Kayla expresses happiness in the family “when she wants you to share about her grades or she did really well on something.” These positive experiences outside of the family carried over into the family, creating more happy moments with family.

Not only did things outside the family influence adolescents’ happiness in the family, their happiness in the family also influenced their happiness outside of the family. The Cantos and Frays discussed how experiencing happiness in the family made what happened outside of the family easier to cope with. For example, Clarissa (adolescent)
stated that whenever she had a difficult time at school, “I would always remind myself, ‘Like okay, but at the end of the day, I get to go home to a house where I feel happy and safe and loved and supported and everything’s going to be fine.’” Gloria (parent) also discussed family happiness as a protective factor, stating that being happy in the family enhanced Erica’s interactions with friends: “She has that security of at home and so then … she doesn’t have to put that effort into finding happiness here, it’s just here, and then she can go out and be out there with them.” Aiden (adolescent) discussed how his happiness in the family carried over into his happiness outside of the family: “If I’m upset inside the house or they’re upset, you can definitely tell when I go outside and hang out with friends, like, I’m not as happy that I would be like when I’m with friends.” To summarize, contextual factors outside of the family impacted adolescents’ experiences of happiness in the family, and their happiness in the family impacted experiences outside of the family.

**Family Mood**

All families except for the Units expressed that the mood of others in the family affected the adolescent’s happiness in the family. This included both the overall family mood and the individual moods of family members. Often, factors from outside the family influenced family members’ moods, thereby impacting adolescents’ moods. However, some participants discussed the effect of family mood independent of influences from outside of the family. Therefore, I identified family mood as a distinct theme.

Participants stated that when the overall mood of the family was relaxed and not stressed, adolescents were happier with their families. Liz (adolescent) stated she was
happier in her family when family members were “in a good mood” and “being calm.” She also stated that if she was relaxed, she was happier in her family. She discussed how when everyone in the family was relaxed, they had more enjoyable family dinners. Other participants also noted how adolescents’ happiness was affected by family mood because it impacted family interactions. For example, Gloria (parent) stated, “Definitely when I’m stressed out, then I’m gonna be, ‘You’re not helping out with the housework and this and that and the other,’ and so that’s gonna affect everybody’s lack of happiness.”

Participants also discussed the idea of family members’ moods directly affecting adolescents’ happiness. Erica (adolescent) noted that her parents yelling at her when they are in a bad mood affects her happiness. She discussed how their moods all affect each other:

I think it’s a cycle, we all kind of like to be in a balance or else we kind of all are affected by it, so. They all can make me a lot happier and they all can, we can all make each other happy and we can all make each other unhappy.

Johnathan (adolescent) also reported his relatives’ moods directly impacted his happiness. He expressed how his younger sisters’ positive moods made him happy: “Just seeing them and how young they are too and just how energetic they are and excited, it makes me the most happy.” Clarissa (adolescent) echoed this idea and said her brother, Tom, “has the ability to put me in a good mood a lot of the time just by being in a good mood.” Overall, for some families, the mood of others was almost contagious.

In addition to discussing how the overall family mood impacted adolescents’ happiness through affecting family interactions and the overall climate of the family, some participants reported family mood affected happiness because adolescents cared about their relatives. The Fray and Styles families especially emphasized how Clarissa
and Kayla were directly impacted when their relatives were happy or unhappy. Tom (sibling) stated, “I think she cares about her family a lot and I think if her family’s really unhappy that it’s gonna affect her in a lot of other ways.” Tanya (parent) expressed that Clarissa is especially sensitive to others’ emotions, which affects her happiness: “She’s a canary in the coalmine in terms of emotionality. If anybody is feeling, you know, unsettled or depressed or anything, she’ll be aware of it. She’ll be on it. So I think everybody has an impact.” Clarissa echoed this idea and stated that her relatives’ happiness strongly affects her happiness. For example, she stated that when her father is stressed and doesn’t tell her what is bothering him, “sometimes I feel like it makes me more sad not knowing than if I did know because I awefulize and I’m just sure it’s something really, really awful.” Kayla (adolescent) and Tiffany (parent) also discussed how Kayla’s care causes others’ moods to affect her happiness. They thought this was especially true for her mother because she is closest to her mother. Kayla discussed caring about her mother’s happiness: “When she’s upset it kind of just, I wanna make her happy but sometimes I can’t, so I gotta let her blow off steam before I come and talk to her again.” Altogether, participants expressed that family mood affected adolescents’ happiness because of how it impacted family interactions, because relatives’ moods were contagious, and because adolescents cared about how their relatives were feeling.

The themes up to this point have concerned factors that directly impact middle adolescents’ happiness in the family, both by increasing and decreasing their happiness. According to participants, quality time with family members, receiving support from family members, humor, and feeling a sense of independence in the family increased adolescents’ happiness. Two themes, outside influences and family mood, had the ability
to either increase or decrease adolescents’ happiness. Factors outside of the family and the overall family mood or individual moods of family members increased adolescents’ happiness when they were positive and decreased adolescents’ happiness when they were negative. The remaining three themes describe factors that were important to the adolescent’s experience of happiness in the family and are focused on how adolescents’ happiness played out in the family rather than on specific factors that contributed to their happiness. Figure 2 provides a visual depiction of these themes and corresponding subthemes.

Figure 2. Themes: How Adolescents’ Happiness Plays Out in the Family

**External Expressions of Happiness**

All participants except for the Cortez family thought that in general, family members could tell if the adolescent was happy. Fifteen participants expressed that it was clear if the adolescent was happy. For example, all three members of the Canto family indicated it is obvious when Erica is happy. Gloria (parent) said that Erica’s happiness “is 100% there or it’s not,” that “it’s bubbling out of her or she’s a bear,” and that “when she’s happy, it’s heard throughout the house.” Shelly (sibling) also expressed it was clear if Aiden was happy, saying, “I can tell right away by the tone in his voice or what his actions are.”
Although six of the seven adolescents thought their family could tell if they were happy, there were three adolescents (i.e., Clarissa, Johnathan, Kayla) that thought there were differences in the extent to which various family members could tell. Johnathan thought his parents were best at knowing if he was happy:

I feel like my mom and dad are probably the most, they’re probably the best at reading when I’m happy because they’re my parents and they exhibit the same signs when they’re happy. And so they can obviously, even when I’m not showing it, they can still point and be like, “Hey, what happened? You don’t look real happy.” And my older sister would look at me and be like, “I don’t see anything different.”

Kayla thought it was clearest to her sister when she was happy and least clear to her brother and father, mostly because of the differences in how much contact she has with various family members: “They’re just guys. It’s hard for them to detect my emotions I guess sometimes. Well with [brother] being out of the house, and then, my dad busy, sometimes it’s not really obvious to them.”

The Cortez family was a negative case, and all family members expressed difficulties with picking up on Liz’s happiness. Liz expressed that her family will often think she is not happy when she is feeling okay: “I think they think that if I’m locked in my room the whole day, then I’m not happy, which isn’t the case.” Similarly, Maria (parent) expressed difficulty knowing if Liz is happy when she goes in her room, given she thought Liz will go in her room when she needs to be alone and is happy but also when she is unhappy: “It’s very hard to know. It usually has to be preceded by something that she says before she goes into her room.” She expressed that “there’s a lot of mystery” about whether Liz is happy. Owen (sibling) reported it is difficult to tell if Liz is was happy because “she internalizes it but doesn’t really show it maybe.”

However, even though Owen and Maria found it difficult to tell if Liz was happy, they
still were able to identify some signs that indicated she was happy. These signs were smiling, laughing, talking more, and being more “bubbly.” In conclusion, although families varied in the extent to which they thought family could tell if the adolescent was happy and who in the family could tell best, participants generally thought relatives had a good read on the adolescent’s happiness.

**More Engaged When Happy**

Along with being able to tell when adolescents were happy, family members could also identify specific signs that adolescents were happy. All participants indicated adolescents appeared more engaged with the family when they were happy. Participants reported adolescents showed engagement in a variety of ways, including body language, verbal communications, and actions. Participants consistently discussed two specific forms of engagement: being more expressive and interacting more. Because these are two prominent parts of being more engaged, they are conceptualized as subthemes.

**More expressive.** Participants stated that when adolescents were happy in their families, they became more animated and had more energy. They reported adolescents were energetic and excited and became louder when happy. Some participants used the word “bubbly” to describe this increased energy. For example, Johnathan (adolescent) discussed how he expresses happiness, saying, “I’m really outward with my happiness and I’m very energetic and bubbly when I’m happy.” Tanya (parent) also described Clarissa’s happiness as very expressive: “She’s vivacious, she’s talking. Her whole being kind of radiates. Her face lights up. She’s engaged.” Similarly, Tiffany (parent) described Kayla’s happiness as a visible expressiveness: “Her overall glow, it’s her overall, I mean the vibe she gives you. Her facial features. Her expressions.”
Participants also gave examples of specific ways adolescents expressed themselves, such as singing, laughing, dancing, joking, and smiling. For example, Gloria (parent) stated that when Erica is happy, “she’s loud and she’s singing and she’s dancing and she’s laughing and she’s laughing and she’s laughing and she’s laughing and it’s full on.” Similarly, Clarissa (adolescent) discussed a number of clear indicators that she is happy: “If I’m singing or speaking in an accent, are usually two key indicators. Or I’ll tell a joke or like poke them or mess with them or something.” Kayla (adolescent) also gave clear ways she expresses herself when happy: “I sing a lot, maybe not in the best pitch … I guess I’m loud. Loud, and singing and dancing like randomly throughout the house.” Finally, Johnathan stated that he expresses happiness by “just smiling a lot and I think the biggest one is just constantly being in a state of smiling and just really energetic and moving around a lot and bouncing.” Interestingly, despite highlighting how relaxing situations contributed to adolescent happiness in the family, no participants stated adolescents presented as calmer or more relaxed when happy. All participants except Liz indicated that when adolescents were happy in their families, they were more expressive and presented with more energy.

**More interactive.** In addition to discussing how adolescents outwardly expressed their happiness, all families also thought that when happy, adolescents showed engagement by interacting more with the family. Many participants stated that the adolescent was more talkative when happy and less talkative when unhappy. Tom (sibling) stated that he could determine how happy Clarissa is from “the amount she talks.” Liz (adolescent) echoed this and stated the way her family could tell the difference between if she is happy or unhappy is “If I’m talking more, probably. I’m not
very talkative with them or very much just in general, so if I’m talking more, I guess that’s just an indicator.” Maria (parent) also thought Liz is more talkative when happy and discussed an example of this: “I called her the other day. And she was shopping with her friends. And she was bubbly, she was talkative, she was engaging. And that is the sign that she’s happy.” As well as talking more, some participants stated adolescents explicitly vocalized to the family whether they were happy. Kayla (adolescent) and Tiffany (parent) both discussed how Kayla is good at vocalizing if she is happy. For example, Tiffany stated that when Kayla is unhappy, “she’ll tell you: ‘I don’t know what’s wrong. I sometimes cry, and I’m upset about how I feel and I’m frustrated,’ and so, she has vocalized. She will vocalize.” Likewise, when discussing ways he indicates happiness to his family, Johnathan (adolescent) stated, “The most straight-forward one is to come out and say, ‘Hey, I had a fantastic day,’ and I’ll tell them what happened.” Overall, participants expressed that adolescents indicated their happiness levels through talking more and specifically discussing their feelings.

Participants also discussed how they could tell how happy adolescents were based on how much they wanted to spend time with the family. For example, Giovanni (parent) stated he can tell Child is happy “if he’s asking to come here. ‘Hey, can I come to see you?’” Marina (sibling) stated that when Erica is happy, “she will actively pursue spending time with family members.” She specifically discussed how Erica was more interactive when happy and less interactive when not happy:

When she’s upset, she goes in her room all day and never interacts with anyone, but when she’s really feeling loved and a part of the family, she’ll be downstairs hanging out with us, talking to people, offering to do things with people, instead of just trying to make plans with her friends and get away from us.
Some participants also stated adolescents wanted to engage in specific activities with the family when happy. For example, Kayla (adolescent) stated that an indicator she is happy is “if I do things for my sister, like I don’t often like to go swimming, but if I say ‘yes’ that’s when she goes, ‘Oh, she’s happy.’” Shelly stated she knows Aiden is happy when “he is with the family and actually interacting with them and being happy while we’re maybe having dinner, which he usually sits out for because it really bothers him.”

Some participants discussed how adolescents retreated to their rooms when unhappy. Because they also discussed the need for adolescents to have alone time in their rooms in order to be happy, I wanted to understand how they could determine if adolescents were happy when alone in their rooms. Participants’ responses indicated the length of time adolescents spend alone in their rooms and their energy levels when going to their rooms helped them determine whether adolescents were happy. Tom (sibling) explained that when Clarissa is in her room when she is happy, “she’ll stay there for maybe like an hour, and then she’ll come back out and she’ll look for something to do.” He also stated Clarissa likes to read in her room but that they know she is happy because “usually she’ll come out and she’ll wanna talk about the book or something like that.”

Loren (parent) also discussed how she could determine Aiden’s happiness level when he is in his room:

I think maybe his energy level would factor into it. I just feel like when he is laying in his bed, which he does at times and, you know, won’t come out of his room for a long time, I definitely worry that is he unhappy or depressed or anything like that.

Similarly, Tiffany (parent) stated that when Kayla is not happy in her room, “it’s more when she doesn’t wanna talk … you can kind of watch her close down some and be by
herself and kind of get, hang out too much in bed.” Finally, Tanya (parent) discussed the importance of the context in determining whether Clarissa is happy in her room:

Her M.O. when she feels like she’s not understood, and actually a lot of the time, like if she’s got homework or anything to do, she retreats to her room. So, if we feel like she’s retreated to her room not because she’s working on something or texting her friends or whatever, but because she feels kind of cut out, we’ll make her come back, and we’ll make her talk about it.

Overall, participants expressed that adolescents’ level of interaction with the family was a key way to determine their happiness. Llewellyn (parent) summed this up: “So a lot of it is just being able to see the array of interactions and then just assessing from barely any interactions to hyperinteraction and how does, where does he fall on that continuum.”

**Family Has a Big Influence on Happiness**

All families stated they thought family had a significant influence on the adolescent’s overall happiness. Some participants said that family was the largest factor affecting the adolescent’s happiness. Liz was the only participant who said she thought family played a small role in her overall happiness. In general, participants saw family as a positive influence on the adolescent’s overall happiness. In fact, all families except the Cortezes indicated that family generally positively impacted the adolescent’s overall happiness. The Cortezes discussed a mix of positive and negative influences. When asked about how much they thought family contributed to adolescents’ total happiness, the general consensus based on 17 of 21 participants was that family contributed to approximately half of the adolescent’s happiness. They gave a number of reasons for this. One was that adolescents have had the most contact with family. This included the impact of currently spending the most time with family and the cumulative impact of
growing up with family. Kayla (adolescent) explained how spending the most time with family has led them to have a large influence on her happiness:

Just ’cause I always see them every day, so I get to experience them every day rather than some of the external things like friends and school, you know, that’s not always an everyday thing. But since I experience them on a daily basis it affects it more.

Tom (sibling) also discussed how Clarissa spending the most time with family has led them to greatly impact her happiness, saying, “She lives with all these people, so maybe if she’s not happy with her family or the family’s not happy with her, then I mean, that’s obviously going to affect her happiness in a pretty major way.”

Participants also noted that family members had a large influence on overall happiness because they have been part of adolescents’ lives for the longest time. Participants thought that because of this, family members knew the adolescents best and could therefore positively impact their happiness. For example, Johnathan (adolescent) stated, “I’d say family probably goes close to like 70% of it [his happiness] because, like I said before, they’ve known me the longest in my whole life and they know how to make me happy faster than really anyone.” Aiden (adolescent) echoed this, saying family was a large percentage of his happiness “maybe because I, like, I obviously have been with them my whole life, so they kind of know me the best and I know them very well.”

Participants also thought family played a big role in adolescents’ happiness because family was a stable factor. This included the idea that family has always been there and will always be there. For example, Erica (adolescent) stated, “I think family is a pretty big chunk in my overall happiness pie because it’s just, these are the people that I live with is the people that I will always have in my life.” Marina (sibling) discussed family stability by comparing the influence of family with friends on Erica’s overall
happiness: “And I think it’s like not a short-term thing, like, friends are short-term, but happiness of the family part of her life is something that’s constantly affecting her, in both positive and negative ways.” Participants also described how family provided stability in terms of supporting adolescents, which they thought was one reason why family was a big part of adolescents’ overall happiness. For example, Patricia (sibling) thought family played a “huge” role in Kayla’s happiness “’cause if she’s having problems outside the house, she can always, she knows that she can come home and it will be all okay, we’ll all be together to talk about stuff.” Clarissa (adolescent) also noted how having a supportive family made problems outside the family easier to manage: “Because I’m able to have such supportive parents and I’m close with my brothers, it just makes everything that happens outside of my family so much easier to deal with because I have such supportive people in my life.” Finally, Llewellyn (parent) discussed how family has been a consistent support for Johnathan: “I think that there’s an undergirding happiness that is almost inherent that is, that relates to his family because he’s never been let down from that even when it’s been stressful and strained it’s always been there.”

In sum, family’s large, generally positive presence in the adolescent’s life seemed to make it a significant factor in the adolescent’s total happiness. In general, adolescents, parents, and siblings thought family was a top contributor (and in some cases, the primary contributor) to the adolescents’ overall happiness. They provided a variety of reasons for why family’s contribution to the adolescent’s happiness was significant. These include the fact that adolescents spent the most time with family, have known family longer than anyone else, and saw the family as a stable part of their lives.
Comparisons Within Families: Comparing Adolescents, Parents, and Siblings

In this section, I discuss overall similarities and differences in how adolescents, parents, and siblings described the middle adolescent’s experience of happiness in the family. Overall, the three types of participants highlighted similar factors as contributing to the adolescent’s happiness in the family. In addition, members within families tended to corroborate each other’s experiences. This is evident from the examples provided in the themes section. At the same time, interviewing multiple family members added depth and understanding to the description of the phenomenon because each family member shared unique examples and understandings related to the general themes.

Although family members were generally on the same page, there were a few significant differences when comparing the overall responses of adolescents, parents, and siblings. For example, six of the seven families reported humor was a significant contributor to adolescent happiness in the family, but humor was an individual theme for a smaller amount of overall participants (two-thirds of participants or 14 participants). In the six families who discussed humor, all adolescents reported humor was a significant contributor to their happiness in their families. Similarly, five siblings discussed humor. However, only three parents discussed humor as a contributor to happiness.

There were also minor differences in participants’ discussion of the overall influence of family on the adolescent’s happiness. Although most participants discussed family as a large contributor, in some families, relatives differed in their response to this question. In two families (i.e., Canto, Hutcherson), the parents stated they thought family was not a large influence on their adolescents’ happiness and that friends were a bigger influence. However, their adolescents and the adolescents’ siblings expressed that family
was a large influence on happiness. For example, when I asked Gloria (parent) how big a part she thought family was in affecting Erica’s happiness, she stated friends were more important to Erica:

Currently I would say that we’re lower on that totem pole. Certainly when she was younger, we were the majority of it but I think right now, especially this past year, she’s really into spreading her wings and really sowing her oats and feeling what, how she fits into that greater world and everything, and her social, her friendships are really, really strong right now.

However, Erica viewed family as a “large chunk” of her overall happiness because of how big a part they are in her life. Also differing from Gloria, Marina (sibling) compared family to friends but emphasized how family was a large influence: “I think family is, like, friends are a steady source of happiness, but family is more up-and-down, but it is a really big sector.” Contrasting with the Canto and Hutcherson families, in the Cortez family, both Maria (parent) and Owen (sibling) emphasized the importance of family, but Liz (adolescent) stated she did not think it was a significant contributor. However, her mother and brother accurately recognized that she likely did not think family was a large portion of her happiness. Owen thought family had a large influence on her happiness because it could “boost her confidence and boost her happiness thinking about how the family, how she has a family and there’s most people who don’t have a family and that she should be happy for what she has.” However, he also recognized Liz might discount them: “She thinks she could survive on her own, that she’s more confident or independent, but she really needs us. And I think somewhere inside her that she knows that she needs us.” Maria echoed this. She contrasted how she viewed family’s influence versus how she thought Liz viewed family’s influence. She viewed family as “a tremendous influence because we keep her on the straight and narrow.” However, when
discussing Liz’s perspective, she said, “I think Liz thinks that we’re a detriment to her. Like we have these two kids that bother her.” Although three families showed differences between adolescents, parents, and siblings, there was no distinct pattern in one direction. In addition, the other four families were generally on the same page when discussing the influence of family on the adolescent’s overall happiness.

Along with showing some differences in how they viewed family’s influence on overall happiness, family members also differed in which family members they thought most influenced the adolescent’s happiness. Overall, siblings emphasized the contribution of parents and deemphasized the contribution of siblings compared with adolescents. For example, Becca (sibling) thought their mother most contributed to her brother’s happiness for the following reason:

Because my brother and my mom have a good connection with each other where like, I don’t know, it’s just me and my dad and just he doesn’t really tell us any things and stuff like that, other than just eating with us. But he has more of a connection with my mom. So like he’ll tell my mom secrets and stuff like that. Five siblings believed parents had the most influence on the adolescent’s happiness, and two siblings thought siblings had the most influence. However, only three adolescents noted parents as top contributors, while four adolescents noted siblings. Liz was one adolescent who thought a sibling had the most influence on her happiness: “Well my sister is the one that makes me happiest. … she can connect with me more. She’s closer to me, because she’s been through high school and stuff and she knows what I’m going through.” Parents responded in the middle, with five parents noting parents as top influencers and four parents discussing siblings as having the most influence. A number of participants thought multiple family members had the most influence, leading to more responses than families. For example, Clarissa thought her older brother and mother
contributed most to her happiness. Patricia thought each family member contributed equally to her sister’s happiness but did so in different ways:

My mom does, like, talking and my dad does the fooling around, I hang out with her, and my brother helps her with like school stuff. Like, because he’s in college so he’s been through all the grades so he knows what to expect.

Only two adolescent participants mentioned solely parents as the family members who contributed most to their happiness. However, four siblings did so. In addition, only one sibling thought siblings alone contributed most to the adolescent’s happiness, while three adolescents mentioned only siblings as top contributors. The Green siblings exemplified this contrast. Johnathan (adolescent) stated that in terms of who had the greatest influence, “On my happiness without knowing it would be my two little sisters, just ’cause no matter what I’m doing they’ll come in and they’ll be like, ‘Hey, can I watch you do this?’” However, when I asked Elena (sibling) who most influenced Johnathan’s happiness, she stated, “Definitely our parents.” She discussed how their mother would joke with them, which she thought increased Johnathan’s happiness, and their father would “lecture” Johnathan about chores, which she thought could “aggravate” him.

A final significant difference concerns the role of material objects. In general, participants deemphasized the importance of material objects in contributing to adolescents’ happiness. The first two families I interviewed (Cortez and Unit) were the only families to explicitly mention material objects as a contributor. The other five families only discussed material objects when I checked in about their importance. In four families, the adolescents, siblings, and parents corroborated each others’ responses. However, in all three families in which responses differed, the parents (and in two cases the siblings) emphasized material objects more than the adolescents. Two of these
families were the families that explicitly brought up material objects. For example, both Giovanni (parent) and Becca (sibling) discussed specific gifts, such as a Go Kart, Pokémon, and PlayStation 3, that they thought made Child happier in the family. Becca stated that most of Child’s happiness in the family was “the things that he gets and the trips that we go on. … Some of those trips that he likes to go on are cruises because he likes all the unlimited ice cream.” Child did not mention gifts, and when I asked him during the interview if he thought things his family gave him affected his happiness, he expressed feeling they weren’t a major influence: “It can. Yeah. Sort of. It can be neutral.” While all three members of the Cortez family brought up gifts, Maria (parent) emphasized their importance to Liz’s happiness much more than Liz and Owen did. Maria gave examples throughout her interview of how material things were important to Liz’s happiness, while Liz and Owen only mentioned their importance in one part of their interviews. In general, for the families who emphasized gifts and money as key influences, parents appeared to think these were significantly more important than their adolescent children.

Adolescents, parents, and siblings were generally on the same page when they discussed the adolescent’s happiness in the family. However, I found some minor differences in their responses. In some cases, these differences were more salient for specific families. Even though differences were not pervasive, understanding the nuances in how adolescents, parents, and siblings differed in their perspectives adds complexity to the understanding of adolescent happiness in the family.
Summary

Participants provided rich, thick descriptions about the middle adolescent’s experience of happiness within the family. These experiences are presented through themes and comparisons between and within families. Nine major themes emerged: quality time, family support, outside influences, independence, family mood, humor, external expressions of happiness, more engaged when happy, and family has a big influence on happiness. All participants endorsed three of these themes: quality time, family support, and more engaged when happy. In addition, all themes were endorsed by at least six of the seven families. In general, family members corroborated each others’ responses while adding increased richness and understanding to the essence of adolescent happiness in the family. In a few areas, adolescents, parents, and siblings differed in their responses. Overall, participants described family as a significant and positive influence on the adolescent’s happiness.
CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

Overview of the Study

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore and understand the essence of middle adolescents’ unique experiences of happiness in their families from the multiple perspectives of the middle adolescent, a parent of the adolescent, and a sibling of the adolescent. The primary research question was the following:

Q1 What is the essence of the middle adolescent experience of happiness within the family system?

To answer this question, I explored the family factors that adolescents, parents, and siblings thought contributed to adolescents’ experiences of happiness in their families.

Three research subquestions addressed these factors:

Q1a What family factors do middle adolescents view as influential to their unique experience of happiness?

Q1b What family factors do parents view as influential to their middle adolescents’ unique experience of happiness?

Q1c What family factors do siblings view as influential to their middle adolescent siblings’ unique experience of happiness?

I also wanted to understand how adolescents’, parents’, and siblings’ perspectives compared with each other and how each family unit compared with other family units.
Therefore, the final research subquestion was the following:

Q1d What are the similarities and differences between and within family units related to influential factors on middle adolescents’ happiness? I explored these research questions through semistructured interviews with adolescents, parents, and siblings.

**Overview of Findings**

Nine themes emerged from the data. Six themes related to factors that contributed to middle adolescents’ happiness in their families. These include the following themes: quality time, family support, humor, independence, outside influences, and family mood. The first four of these themes increased adolescents’ happiness in their families. The last two had the ability to increase or decrease happiness. The remaining three themes describe how adolescents’ happiness played out in the family and include external expressions of happiness, more engaged when happy, and family has a big influence on happiness.

Participants thought spending quality time with family members increased adolescents’ happiness in the family. Quality time activities included engaging in special events together such as vacations, holidays, birthdays, and time with extended family; activities both inside and outside of the home; and interactions as both a whole family and one-on-one with individual family members. Participants also stated receiving support from family members made adolescents feel happy in the family. This included emotional support, assistance from family members, and family members showing interest in adolescents’ activities. Humor also contributed to adolescents’ happiness in the family, and humorous moments often took place during quality time activities. Some participants stated they intentionally used humor to boost the adolescent’s happiness.
Finally, giving adolescents independence through autonomy, being fair and transparent with boundary setting, allowing them to develop as unique individuals, and giving them alone time increased their happiness with their families.

Concerning outside influences, participants noted how events that happened outside of the family affected happiness (both positively and negatively) inside the family. Examples of outside influences included school stress, family members’ mental health and medical problems, and positive events occurring outside of the family. Finally, participants thought the adolescent was happiest in the family when the overall family mood was relaxed and when individual family members were in a good mood.

The remaining three of the nine total themes concern how adolescents’ happiness plays out in the family. These include the following themes: external expressions of happiness, more engaged when happy, and family has a big influence on happiness. In general, adolescents thought family could easily tell if they were happy. Likewise, parents and siblings thought they could easily tell if their adolescent family members were happy. Parents and siblings noted adolescents were more expressive and interacted more with the family when happy, and adolescents also thought they were more expressive and more interactive when happy. Participants also thought that the family played a significant role in influencing the adolescent’s overall happiness.

Concerning comparisons within families, adolescents, parents, and siblings generally noted similar factors when discussing the essence of the adolescent’s happiness in the family. However, a few significant differences stood out. For example, more adolescents and siblings than parents noted humor contributed to the adolescent’s happiness. Family members also differed in which family members they thought most
influenced the adolescent’s happiness. The majority of siblings thought parents contributed most to adolescents’ happiness, and most adolescents thought siblings had the greatest influence. Specifically, five siblings believed parents were top contributors to the adolescent’s happiness, while only three siblings stated they thought parents were top contributors. On the other hand, four adolescents noted siblings as family members who contributed most to their happiness, while only two sibling participants identified siblings as the primary contributors to the adolescent’s happiness. One adolescent and one sibling each stated they thought all family members contributed equally to the adolescent’s happiness. Finally, for families that discussed the importance of material objects in contributing to the adolescent’s happiness, parents (and some siblings) emphasized material objects more than adolescents.

Discussion of Findings in Relation to the Literature

Many findings from this study are supported by the literature. At the same time, this study makes unique contributions, as researchers have not found some of the themes and specific findings from this study. In addition, a few findings provide new perspectives that contradict previous research. I discuss how themes fit or do not fit with the literature, starting with the themes that had the most research support. I continue with the themes that had moderate research support and conclude with the themes that make unique contributions to the literature.

Themes with Significant Support from the Literature

Family has a big influence on happiness. In general, participants thought family had a large, significant, and positive influence on the adolescent’s happiness. This is consistent with developmental literature (e.g., Balk, 1995; Scabini et al., 2006;
Schlegel & Barry, 1991), which indicates that even though adolescents are spending more
time with peers and becoming interested in romantic relationships, families continue to
have a large influence on their development. In addition, previous studies consistently
confirm this finding. For example, Suldo, Frank, Chappel, Albers, and Bateman (2014)
qualitatively studied what contributes to 30 American high school students’ life
satisfaction and found 80% of participants mentioned that family affected their happiness.
Similarly, in Turtiainen, Karvonen, and Rahkonen’s (2007) mixed methods study with
15-year-old Finnish adolescents, participants mentioned family as instrumental to their
positive well-being. Participants in the current study made statements in line with this
finding. Participants emphasized how family had a significant influence on adolescents’
happiness because they spend the most time with family and because family can serve as
a protective factor that makes it easier for them to cope with stressors outside of the
family. For example, Tiffany stated she thinks family is a big part of her daughter’s
happiness because it provides “stability:” “I think it’s 'cause she can rely on us. You
know, she knows someone’s gonna be there.” Turtiainen et al.’s (2007) participants also
emphasized how family was a significant part of their well-being because it helped their
functioning outside of the family.

In addition to seeing family as a significant contributor to the adolescent’s
happiness, in general, participants in the current study also viewed family as the most
important contributor when comparing it with other influences. This finding also fits
with previous research. Gray et al. (2013) found that family factors (i.e., spending time
together, family cohesion) contributed more to Thai middle adolescents’ happiness than
nonfamily factors (i.e., extracurricular activities, where participants lived, socioeconomic
status). Similarly, Edwards and Lopez (2006) found family was more important to Mexican American high school students’ happiness than friends, money, and religion. Eloff (2008) also found in her qualitative research with South African children and adolescents that participants emphasized family when discussing what contributed to their happiness. Finally, in Sargeant’s (2010) qualitative research on what makes English early adolescents happy, relationships (which included family and friends) were the strongest theme, and participants gave few responses about material objects. The present study specifically supports findings from previous research. When asked about family’s part in adolescents’ overall happiness, participants mentioned friends as the other significant piece of adolescents’ happiness but did not tend to discuss money, where they lived, and religion as even contributing to adolescents’ happiness. This also fits with O’Higgins et al.’s (2010) grounded theory study with Irish early adolescents, in which they found family and friends were primary contributors to happiness. This appears to be a universal finding, given that researchers across countries (e.g., Edwards & Lopez, 2006; Eloff, 2008; Gray et al., 2013; Sargeant, 2010) have consistently found that family factors are more important contributors to adolescents’ happiness than nonfamily factors. The robust support for the importance of family in affecting adolescents’ happiness indicates it is especially valuable to understand how specifically the family contributes to adolescents’ happiness. Given family’s importance to adolescents’ happiness, intervening at the family level would likely be a way to have a large, positive impact on adolescents’ overall happiness.

Although in general, the theme that family has a big influence on happiness fits with the literature, one finding related to family’s influence on happiness does not fit with
prior research. Six of the seven adolescents in this study viewed family as a positive influence on their happiness, and they spoke about their family’s influence just as positively as (and in some cases, more positively than) their parents and siblings did. However, previous researchers have consistently found that adolescents have more negative views of family factors than their parents (e.g., Ohanessian et al., 1995; Rask et al., 2003; Scabini et al., 2006; Stuart & Jose, 2012). These researchers studied adolescents’ and their parents’ perceptions of family factors quantitatively and measured factors such as family cohesion, communication, emotional bonds, and shared activities. These factors are part of the quality time and family support themes found in this study. When participants in this study discussed their overall happiness and the specific quality time and family support themes, there were no apparent differences between the descriptions of adolescents, parents, and siblings. Overall, adolescents, parents, and siblings spoke equally positively about quality time experiences and family support. It is unclear why this study’s findings indicate adolescents viewed family factors as positively as their parents did, while previous researchers have found adolescents have a more negative view of family factors. One reason could be that this study had a qualitative methodology, and there are no other qualitative studies that compare adolescents’ perspectives on family factors with those of their parents or siblings. It is possible the quantitative measures used in prior research did not account for nuances in participants’ experiences, making it appear that adolescents viewed family factors more negatively. It is also possible that had participants in this study been given quantitative measures to assess their perception of family factors, significant differences may have been found. Finally, the adolescents in previous research included both early and middle adolescents.
It is possible that as adolescents become older, their perceptions of family factors become more similar to their parents’ perspectives. Future research would need to be conducted to better understand this inconsistency. For example, researchers could conduct longitudinal research with adolescents and their parents. They could measure adolescents’ and parents’ views of family factors during early, middle, and late adolescence. This would allow them to determine if adolescents’ perspectives become more similar to their parents’ perspectives over the course of adolescence.

Another unique finding is that adolescent, parent, and sibling participants emphasized different family members when discussing who they thought most influenced the adolescent’s happiness in the family. Compared with sibling and parent participants, more adolescent participants stated siblings had the most influence on their happiness. Along with this finding, a greater number of parent and sibling participants reported they thought parents had the most influence on adolescents’ happiness. Siblings especially emphasized the importance of parents, with five of seven siblings stating they believed parents were the family members who contributed most to the adolescent’s happiness. Previous researchers have not compared family members’ views on who has the most influence on adolescent happiness in the family. Therefore, it is unknown if the current finding that different family members have different perspectives on how much specific family members contribute to adolescents’ happiness would generalize to other populations. Researchers could conduct further studies with diverse samples in which they ask adolescents, parents, and siblings which family members they think most contribute to the adolescent’s happiness.
Overall, previous research supports the finding that family has a positive, significant influence on the adolescent’s happiness. Participants in this study discussed similar ways family affects adolescents’ overall happiness to participants in previous studies. They also viewed family’s influence on adolescents’ happiness as more important than the influence of factors outside of the family. They generally stated that family was more important than friends in contributing to adolescents’ happiness. They also thought family contributed to adolescents’ happiness by making it easier for adolescents to cope with challenges that occurred outside of the family. They thought family had such a large influence on adolescents’ happiness because adolescents have known their families the longest, spend the most time with family, and find stability in their families.

Quality time and family support. Concerning specific influences on the adolescent’s happiness in the family, previous research overwhelmingly supports the themes of quality time and family support. Frequently, these two themes were tied together in the literature. Other times, these themes appeared in the literature more distinctly. Therefore, I first discuss the two themes together and then provide separate discussions of unique findings for each theme. In this study, quality time and family support were the clearest themes. These themes fit for all 21 participants, and these two themes also had the most responses. This finding fits well with previous research, and both the qualitative and quantitative literature emphasize the importance of factors related to quality time and family support in increasing adolescents’ happiness (c.f., Eloff, 2008; Flouri & Buchanan, 2003; Fosco et al., 2012; Joronen & Åstedt-Kurki, 2005; Levin et al., 2012; Offer, 2013; Piko & Hamvai, 2010).
Consistently, previous researchers have found that adolescents value feeling connected to their families and see this connection as positively influencing their happiness. Connection includes both spending quality time together and receiving support from family members. Researchers have provided different labels for this connection, such as *family communication*, *family cohesion*, and *parental involvement* (e.g., Flouri & Buchanan, 2003; Gray et al., 2013; Joronen & Åstedt-Kurki, 2005; Levin at al., 2012; Offer, 2013).

Fosco at al.’s (2012) study supports both the quality time and family support themes in the present study. They measured a number of family factors. One of these factors was family cohesion, which they defined as the “degree to which family members experienced trust, comfort, and enjoyment in their relationships and the extent to which they engaged in activities together in the past month” (p. 568). This definition encompasses both aspects of family support and quality time that were described in the current study. Fosco et al.’s (2012) finding that family cohesion was related to subjective well-being (SWB) aligns with findings from the present study. Consistent with Fosco et al.’s (2012) results, participants in this study reported that having trust in their relationships and doing activities together that they enjoyed contributed to adolescents’ happiness in the family.

Flouri and Buchanan’s (2003) research on the impact of parental involvement on adolescent happiness also fits with both the quality time and the family support themes in this study. Questions to assess parental involvement included rating how much each parent “‘spends time with you,’ ‘talks through your worries with you,’ takes an interest in your school work,’ and ‘helps with plans for the future’” (Flouri & Buchanan, 2003, pp.
These different aspects of parental involvement are in line with the quality time theme and the emotional support and assistance subthemes of the family support theme. Specifically, participants in this study stated parents spending time with adolescents, talking about problems with them, and helping them achieve their goals contributed to adolescents’ happiness in the family. Therefore, the current study supports Flouri and Buchanan’s (2003) finding that parental involvement was associated with increased happiness for middle adolescents.

**Quality time.** Both previous quantitative and qualitative research supports this study’s quality time theme in general and some of the specific aspects of quality time that participants described. Participants in this study emphasized opportunities to spend time with family contributed to adolescents’ happiness. O’Higgins et al.’s (2010) and Eloff’s (2008) qualitative research also found that spending time with family was an important contributor to youth’s happiness. In fact, the two main themes from O’Higgins et al.’s (2010) interviews with early adolescents were “‘doing things’ that they enjoyed, and ‘being with’ friends and family” (p. 376). Eloff’s (2008) participants also specifically discussed doing things with family when describing how family contributed to their happiness. In a quantitative study, Gray et al. (2013) also found time with family was important to adolescents’ happiness. They measured spending time with family by asking adolescents whether they think their family members “spend sufficient time with each other” (p. 709). Their finding that adolescents who thought they spent “sufficient time” with family members were happier than those who did not fits with the present study’s quality time theme. Participants in this study stated that the fact that adolescents had opportunities to spend time with family members made adolescents happy in their
families. Loren discussed how this quality time contributed to her son’s happiness: “I guess I think he loves to be around us and spend time with us and do family things, … so I perceive it as that would be when he’s happiest with us, and he enjoys spending quality time with us.” Joronen and Åstedt-Kurki’s (2005) interviews with adolescents about what affects their SWB also revealed that time with family was important, and their *togetherness and family activities* subtheme (within the larger theme of *family involvement*) is in line with this study’s quality time theme.

Both Gray et al. (2013) and Joronen and Åstedt-Kurki (2005) emphasized the amount of time spent with family members as increasing adolescents’ happiness. When describing the importance of spending time with family, Joronen and Åstedt-Kurki (2005) stated that the “mere presence of other family members at home was considered an essential dimension of well-being” (p. 128). In line with this finding, Suldo et al. (2014) found that adolescents stated the amount of time they spent with family affected their happiness. However, in the present study, not only did spending time with family members affect happiness, but also the quality of that time was a key influence on happiness. Participants did not emphasize the amount of time adolescents spent with family members. They also did not state that family members being busy had a negative impact on adolescents’ happiness. In fact, a few participants explicitly stated that the amount of time was not a factor in increasing the adolescent’s happiness but that what mattered was spending time together that was of high quality. For example, Tiffany stated that “the quality and what we do with the time we have and not necessarily how much time” is what affects her daughter’s happiness. Turtiainen et al.’s (2007) research supports this finding. They found that the quality of the time adolescents spent with
family was a more important contributor to their happiness than how much time they spent with family. Participants in the current study gave myriad examples of quality time activities, suggesting adolescents had ample opportunities to spend time with family members even if family members were busy. It is possible that once the basic need of spending sufficient time has been met, adolescents might become more concerned with meeting higher order needs. Participants might have emphasized the quality of time spent together because they did not have concerns about adolescents finding enough time to spend with family. This is consistent with Maslow’s (1943) theory of motivation, which states that there is a hierarchy of needs in which people focus on meeting more complex needs once their basic needs are met.

In the current study, when discussing quality time activities, participants’ responses showed a number of specific activities were especially important contributors to the adolescent’s happiness. Participants frequently discussed mealtime, playing games, and watching television or movies with family as especially happy times. Offer (2013) and Piko and Hamvai (2010) specifically measured how mealtime was related to adolescents’ well-being and found a positive association, which supports this study’s finding. Offer (2013) also found that leisure activities, some of which included playing games and watching television, were positively associated with adolescents’ happiness. In Eloff’s (2008) interviews with youth, participants specifically mentioned games when discussing activities with family that made them happy, which also fits with the present research.

Participants in this study also discussed quality time activities that have not been common themes in previous research or that previous researchers have not examined.
For example, participants frequently mentioned special events (especially vacations). Eloff (2008) found that vacations contributed to youth’s happiness, but no other researchers have noted this finding. Participants also discussed time with extended family, which was not found in previous research about adolescent happiness or important family factors for adolescents. Eloff (2008) found that participants discussed relationships with extended family. The two participant quotes she provided that referred to extended family were about how grandmothers contributed to adolescents’ happiness. The remaining quotes about family either were about family generally or immediate family members. Although Eloff’s (2008) participants mentioned vacations and extended family, these factors were not themes. In the present study, these factors featured prominently into participants’ responses. It is possible one reason why participants in the present study consistently mentioned vacations and extended family is because I interviewed them either right before they were on a break from school for the summer or during their summer break. Quite a few participants mentioned specific family trips they had gone on that summer or that they had planned for that summer. Sometimes, these vacations also included extended family. Because these trips were recent or upcoming, they may have been more easily accessible quality time experiences for participants to discuss. In addition, participants in this study were able to afford to travel.

In sum, the literature overwhelmingly supports this study’s quality time theme. This study also contributes to the literature by showing that quality time with siblings, not only parents, is important to the adolescent’s happiness. This study provides unique findings related to quality time because previous researchers have not found some of the
quality time activities that participants in this study discussed (e.g., vacations, time with extended family).

**Family support.** Participants reported various types of family support contributed to the adolescent’s happiness in the family. In this study, three types of family support emerged from the data, creating three main subthemes: emotional support, assistance, and showing interest. Previous researchers (e.g., Gray et al., 2013; Joronen & Åstedt-Kurki, 2005; Levin et al., 2012; O’Higgins et al., 2010; Piko & Hamvai, 2010; Sargeant, 2010) have not discussed support in terms of these specific subthemes. However, these researchers’ findings fit with the overall support theme, even though they have used different labels and/or organization. Their findings also provide ample support for the emotional support subtheme and minimal support for the assistance subtheme. Previous researchers have not found explicit support for the showing interest subtheme that emerged from this study’s data.

Important aspects of the emotional support subtheme in the present research included: good communication, trust and safety, and being able to talk about problems. Prior research has also indicated these specific elements contribute to adolescents’ happiness in the family. For example, Levin et al. (2012) found that family communication was more related to Scottish adolescents’ life satisfaction than family structure and family affluence. They assessed family communication with the following question: How easy is it for you to talk to the following persons about things that really bother you?” (p. 291). This fits with the current research both because participants emphasized that talking with family members contributed to the adolescent’s happiness and because they did not emphasize family structure and family affluence as contributors.
to their happiness. Similarly, Piko and Hamvai’s (2010) finding that life satisfaction related to talking to parents about problems fits with the emotional support subtheme. Gray et al.’s (2013) research also supports this subtheme because one of the family variables they found contributed to adolescents’ happiness was family cohesion, which they defined as “the perception of emotional bonding among family members” (p. 709).

Qualitative studies on adolescent happiness also corroborate this study’s family support theme. Throughout the literature, adolescent participants have consistently noted various aspects of family support are significant contributors to their happiness. For example, Sargeant (2010) found a relationships theme that included relationships with family members. Specific responses in this theme included feeling safe, being able to talk to parents about problems, and feeling love from family. O’Higgins et al.’s (2010) participants also emphasized how family provided security and love, which contributed to their happiness. Suldo et al.’s (2014) participants discussed family support and emphasized having positive relationships with family members. These findings are in line with the emotional support subtheme in the current study. Finally, three of Joronen and Åstedt-Kurki’s (2005) themes fit with the family support theme: loving atmosphere, open communication, and familial involvement. These themes included having close relationships with family; trusting and being able to communicate well with family; and family providing “encouraging support” through guidance, comfort, and praise (Joronen & Åstedt-Kurki, 2005). This fits with the emotional support and assistance subthemes in the present research. Although Joronen and Åstedt-Kurki (2005) also studied adolescent happiness in the family, they focused on parents and did not ask specific questions about siblings, and they gave very brief descriptions of each theme, with only one quote to
illustrate each theme. Therefore, this study builds on their research by showing the same aspects of family support apply when siblings are considered and by providing richer, more in-depth descriptions of how these factors contribute to adolescents’ happiness in the family.

As part of the emotional support subtheme, participants in the present research reported conflict didn’t have a lasting decrease on adolescents’ happiness and that the chance to resolve conflict made adolescents able to maintain happiness in the family. Fosco et al.’s (2012) research with adolescents and parents fits with this finding because they found family conflict was related to aggressive behavior but not to SWB. However, Fosco et al. (2012) did not examine the effects of having opportunities to resolve conflict. Other researchers have also not explored this finding, making it a unique contribution to the literature. This finding is important because it suggests that conflict does not need to be eliminated in order for adolescents to maintain happiness in their families. Instead, the goal for families wanting to maximize their adolescents’ happiness could be to find ways to resolve and discuss conflict. However, more research is needed to determine how well this finding generalizes. Future researchers could assess how opportunities to resolve conflict in the family relate to happiness, such as how conflict resolution mediates the relationship between happiness and conflict.

Another unique contribution from this study is the showing interest subtheme. In the current study, the showing interest subtheme included family members expressing interest in activities the adolescent wanted to do, along with attending the adolescent’s activities. Quantitative researchers have not assessed these specific factors when examining what contributes to adolescent happiness. In addition, qualitative researchers
have not reported these specific factors were significant in contributing to adolescents’ happiness in the family. In the current study, parents emphasized that attending the adolescent’s activities increased the adolescent’s happiness, while adolescents did not mention this. The qualitative literature on adolescent happiness includes interviews with adolescents but not parents, which could be one reason why this finding is new to the literature. Finally, in this study, participants made fewer statements that fit with the showing interest subtheme than the emotional support and assistance subthemes, so it is likely a less significant contributor to adolescent happiness in the family than the other subthemes.

In sum, prior research shows large support for this study’s family support theme in contributing to adolescent happiness. This was especially true for the emotional support subtheme. In this study, participants reported emotional support factors such as good communication, trust and safety in relationships, and feeling care from family members all affected adolescents’ happiness. This theme also came out in previous literature both when participants completed assessments about specific support factors (e.g. Gray et al., 2013; Levin et al., 2012; Piko & Hamvai, 2010) and when researchers asked participants open-ended questions about what contributes to their happiness (e.g., Joronen & Åstedt-Kurki, 2005; O’Higgins et al., 2010; Sargeant, 2010).

Themes with Moderate Support from the Literature

Outside influences. Participants reported factors outside of the family that affected the adolescent or other family members influenced the adolescent’s happiness within the family. Some outside influences decreased adolescents’ happiness, while other outside influences increased their happiness. Often, these outside influences were
family stressors, such as school, work, and mental health or medical problems. These stressors decreased the adolescent’s happiness in the family. In line with these findings, both Chappel et al. (2014) and Nevin, Carr, Shelvin, and Dooley (2005) found negative major family life events were associated with less happiness for adolescents. Examples of such events included unemployment and medical problems. In Chappel et al.’s (2014) study, major family life events were negatively associated with life satisfaction. In Nevin et al.’s (2005) study, middle adolescent participants were grouped into those with high, moderate, and low SWB. Adolescents with high SWB had fewer family stressful life events than those in the other groups, and adolescents with moderate SWB had fewer family stressful life events than those with low SWB. These findings are in line with the present study’s findings that family members’ stressors outside of the family decreased adolescent happiness in the family.

Prior research also supports some of the specific family stressors that participants mentioned. For example, Joronen and Åstedt-Kurki (2005) found one theme related to “adolescent subjective ill-being” was ill-being or death of a family member, which encompasses one aspect of the outside influences theme (p. 129). This included both adolescents having a chronic illness and adolescents worrying if a family member was ill or had died of an illness because they thought they might also get the same illness. Although in the current study, family members being ill negatively affected adolescents’ happiness in the family, participants gave different reasons for why other family members’ illnesses impacted adolescents’ happiness. These reasons included family members being stressed and therefore having less positive interactions with adolescents and adolescents being worried because they care about their family members. In
addition, Offer’s (2013) finding that “productive time” with the family was associated with lower well-being somewhat fits with the outside influences theme. In Offer’s (2013) study, productive time included doing school-related activities with the adolescent such as homework and attending school events. Some participants in the present study mentioned parents being involved with schoolwork caused tension, which therefore decreased the adolescent’s happiness. However, participants did not think family attending school events decreased adolescents’ happiness. In fact, some participants mentioned attending school events as a way family members showed interest in the adolescent, which therefore increased their happiness. Therefore, Offer’s (2013) findings only partially fit with the present study’s findings.

Another part of the outside influences theme was that adolescents’ happiness within the family influenced their happiness outside of the family. Often, participants described the family as a protective factor that made it easier for adolescents to cope with stressors outside of the family. Participants stated that because adolescents felt secure at home, they were able to be less unhappy when stressors outside of the home occurred. For example, Clarissa discussed how her family helps her cope with outside stressors, making these stressors have less of a negative effect on her overall happiness: “It just makes my life outside of my house easier to handle just knowing that I have, I guess a cushion to fall back on.” O’Higgins et al.’s (2010) participants made similar statements, such as that if they were fighting with friends, they would still have their family to help their happiness. Participants in the current study also stated that when adolescents were unhappy in the family, it led them to then be less happy outside of the family. Similarly,
O’Higgins et al.’s (2010) participants stated that when they were unhappy in their families, it made it hard for them to be happy outside of their families.

Although previous studies support some parts of the outside influences theme, they do not support all aspects of this theme. This study adds to the literature because participants provided a variety of examples of outside influences that affected happiness, including both stressors and positive events. In addition, participants provided in-depth reasons for why outside influences impacted happiness in the family, which adds further complexity to understanding adolescents’ happiness in the family. Specifically, they discussed how outside influences impacted adolescents’ happiness by affecting their interactions with family members. They stated stressors led to more negative family interactions, which decreased adolescents’ happiness in the family. This indicates outside influences could be impacting adolescents’ happiness in the family because things that happen outside of the family affect quality time experiences. This study’s findings provide information about how factors outside of the family interact with factors inside of the family to influence happiness, and this understanding of how outside influences affect adolescent happiness is new to the literature.

Independence. Participants reported that independence had a positive impact on adolescents’ happiness in the family. This independence took various forms, including adolescents having autonomy, perceiving boundaries as fair and understanding the rationale for rules, and having space to be alone. This theme fits well with the literature on adolescent development, given that middle adolescents are at a stage where they are gaining and desiring autonomy and are exploring their own identities (Balk, 1995; Harter, 1990). In addition, the importance of autonomy in contributing to happiness fits with
Ryan and Deci’s (2000) empirically supported self-determination theory, which states that psychological well-being is related to autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Ryan and Deci (2000) have viewed these factors as “essential nutrients” to well-being for people at all developmental stages of life (p. 75). Therefore, it is not surprising participants in this study thought autonomy was a key component of adolescents’ happiness in the family.

Participants in this study came from families in which parents gave significant autonomy, and adolescents did not report their parents as being overly restrictive. Participants thought that parents not having a lot of restrictions and explaining and being fair about the restrictions they did have made adolescents happy. This fits with Kocayörük, Altintas, and İçbay’s (2015) finding that high parental autonomy support was related to higher SWB in middle adolescents. Parental autonomy support involves showing support for children’s autonomy by giving their children choices, providing reasons for why they think their children should do certain things, and being willing to look at things from their children’s perspectives (Downie et al., 2007). Suldo and Huebner (2004) also found a positive association between adolescents’ life satisfaction and parents giving them autonomy. Participants in the current study described similar parental behaviors and believed these specific behaviors helped the adolescent feel happy in the family. They also stated they thought that having restrictions did not decrease adolescents’ happiness because adolescents were not significantly restricted and understood why restrictions were in place. Had the adolescents in this study come from more restrictive families, it is possible restrictions would have decreased their happiness.
Adolescents’ comparisons of their families and their friends’ families suggest this. Erica discussed this as follows:

I think if my family was more restrictive on like going out and stuff like that, and like who I could talk to, because I know I’ve experienced some people who have really strict curfews, and like, “I don’t want you hanging out with that person,” or things like that, I think that’s really, really not beneficial for the person because I think that the person needs to figure out what works with them.

Research with families who are more restrictive could help counseling psychologists better understand the role of restrictions in impacting adolescents’ happiness, such as if restrictions actually do decrease happiness for adolescents who have many restrictions.

Going along with having autonomy, participants also discussed how adolescents having freedom increased their happiness in the family. This included privileges such as being able to drive the car, do things without parents on vacations, and be allowed to bring friends on vacations. This increased freedom may have allowed adolescents to feel greater competence, as it indicated to adolescents that parents trusted them and believed they were capable. This fits with the competence factor of Ryan and Deci’s (2000) self-determination theory. Previous research also supports this finding. Joronen and Åstedt-Kurki (2005) found adolescents were happier when they could have a balance between family time and time with people outside of their families. In addition, O’Higgins et al.’s (2010) female early adolescent participants thought their happiness in the future would come from getting more freedom after they left school. O’Higgins et al. (2010) concluded this finding reflected participants were moving toward a place in which friends and peers would become their most important relationships. This is consistent with developmental theory, which indicates during middle adolescence, adolescents spend increased time with peers and decreased time with family (Balk, 1995). Although their
finding fits with the present study’s independence theme, their conclusion does not. Even though adolescents valued independence and freedom, they still saw family relationships as important and generally did not view relationships with friends and peers as more important than family relationships. However, when asked about their overall happiness, participants mentioned family and friends as the two major components of their happiness, indicating both groups were important influences on their happiness. This also fits with developmental theory, which indicates that even though relationships with friends and peers become more important during middle adolescence, adolescents continue to view family as important and family continues affecting adolescents’ development (Balk, 1995; Hauser & Bowlds, 1990; Scabini et al., 2006; Schlegel & Barry, 1991). Another difference in the present study is that both female and male adolescents and their family members thought freedom contributed to their happiness in the family. This contrasts with O’Higgins et al.’s (2010) finding that only female adolescents discussed freedom as related to their happiness. The present study could have found freedom was a contributor to happiness for both females and males because participants in O’Higgins et al.’s (2010) study were hypothesizing about the future when discussing freedom, while participants in the current study were discussing current happiness. It is possible that there are differences between what male adolescents think will be important to them and what actually is important to them.

Another aspect of the independence theme was being allowed to develop as an individual and contribute to the family. This finding was less prevalent than the need for freedom and understanding the rationale behind rules, and it only appeared for three families (i.e., Canto, Hutcherson, Styles). The Cantos emphasized the importance of
developing as an individual as a major contributor to Erica’s happiness. For example, when discussing what factors contributed to Erica’s happiness, Marina stated, “So her individuality is, I think, very important to her. It’s something she’s very adamant about.” In line with this finding, Joronen and Åstedt-Kurki (2005) found that adolescents were happy when they felt they made unique contributions to the family and were important to family members. This previous research builds support for the importance of individuality and contributing to the family in increasing adolescents’ happiness in the family. Future qualitative research on adolescent happiness in the family with more diverse samples could help determine how large a role individuality and family contributions play in adolescents’ happiness.

One aspect of the independence theme has not been supported by prior research. This is the finding that adolescents thought having time alone while at home contributed to their happiness. Participants stated adolescents were happier in the family when family members respected their desire to spend time in their rooms alone. Even though participants also stated adolescents enjoyed interacting with the family, they discussed how having a balance between time with family and alone time made adolescents happy. Participants stated adolescents were happy when spending time alone because they appreciated having privacy, feeling their space was respected, and getting away from family noise. It is unclear whether participants in other qualitative studies did not believe time alone contributed to their happiness or whether they did not think to discuss it. Also, quantitative researchers have not examined this variable. This finding needs further exploration in order to determine if it generalizes to most middle adolescents.
In sum, theoretical and empirical research generally supports the independence theme. Some aspects of this theme are unique to this study and have not been supported by prior literature. These aspects contribute to the literature and should be further examined.

Themes with Limited Support from the Literature

**Family mood.** Participants reported family members’ moods impacted the adolescent’s happiness in the family. They reported adolescents were happier when the family mood overall felt relaxed and unstressed because this led to better interactions with family members. Similarly, Joronen and Åstedt-Kurki (2005) found adolescents were happy when there was a “‘fun’ atmosphere in the family” (p. 128). They did not elaborate on what this fun atmosphere looked like, so it is difficult to know the extent to which their findings fit with the present study’s findings. However, in both studies, it appears having an overall positive family atmosphere was important to adolescents’ happiness in the family. Participants also specifically reported that an overall relaxed family mood allowed adolescents to feel happier because they did not have things to worry about. Participants especially mentioned family vacations as a time when adolescents could have fun and feel relaxed and unstressed, which made them feel happy. This fits with Schueller and Seligman’s (2010) finding that pleasure and engagement are part of happiness.

Schueller and Seligman (2010) found a moderate relationship between pleasure and components of SWB, including happiness, life satisfaction, and positive affect. However, they found being engaged in enjoyable activities was more strongly related to SWB. This fits with the current study because not only did participants emphasize
having fun and feeling pleasurable emotions when the family mood was relaxed, they also discussed how this allowed adolescents to engage in positive interactions with family members. In fact, participants made more comments about adolescents’ ability to interact positively with family members when the family mood was unstressed than comments about adolescents experiencing pleasure from being unstressed. This suggests engagement could have been a more important component of adolescents’ happiness in the family than pleasure, consistent with Seligman and Schueller’s (2010) findings.

The research literature is lacking in studies that explore how the moods of family members directly impact adolescents’ happiness. Although adolescent participants in previous studies (e.g., Chappel et al., 2014; Joronen & Åstedt-Kurki, 2005; Turtiainen et al., 2007) have reported getting along with family, having overall family harmony, and lack of conflict contribute to their happiness (which are findings that fit better with this study’s family support theme), they did not specifically discuss the family mood independent of family support. In this study, participants elaborated on how overall family mood directly impacted the adolescent’s happiness, which adds to the literature. Understanding this connection between family mood and happiness could help counseling psychologists to better design interventions to increase adolescent happiness. For example, the finding that family members’ stressed moods decreased adolescents’ happiness by impairing family interactions indicates that when families are stressed, it could help them to learn ways to manage this stress so that it does not impair family interactions. It is inevitable that families will have stressors, so an awareness of how these stressors impact adolescents’ happiness could allow families to intentionally find ways to maintain positive family interactions during stressful times.
Participants also reported individual family members’ moods directly impacted adolescents’ happiness because adolescents felt happy from seeing others in a good mood. In a sense, others’ moods were “contagious.” Previous researchers (e.g., Ben-Zur, 2003; Headey et al., 2014) have found significant correlations between adolescents’ happiness and their parents’ happiness, which fits somewhat with these findings. However, it is unclear why this correlation exists because of mixed findings concerning whether happy parents pass on positive factors to their children or whether the correlation is due more to genetics (Headey et al., 2014; Matteson et al., 2013). While these findings relate to the family mood theme, the present study’s findings differ from prior research in that participants described more state components of happiness. They discussed how family members’ moods in the moment impacted the adolescent’s happiness in the moment. This finding fits with findings from the pilot study (see Appendix A), in which participants reported they felt happier when they were around others who were happy. The current study builds on the pilot study because participants specifically discussed this phenomenon in the context of family and described how specific individual family members’ moods had this type of influence on them. This included others’ good moods in and of themselves making adolescents feel happy and being happy when other family members are happy because they care about their family members’ well-being.

Overall, research supporting the family mood theme is limited. Researchers have found a positive family atmosphere and other family members being happy influence adolescent happiness. However, they have not specifically studied how family members’ moods in the moment impact adolescent happiness and why the overall family mood and individual family members’ moods affect this happiness. In this study, family mood was
an influence for six of the seven families. However, the reasons why family mood impacted happiness varied across families. These reasons include the fact that family mood affects family interactions, that others’ moods are contagious, and that adolescents care about their family members and are therefore concerned about their moods. It appears family mood is a common influence on adolescents’ happiness in the family but that the reason why may be more individualized to the specific adolescent. This study provides some ideas for why family mood could be important to adolescents’ happiness in the family. This diversity in reasons that family mood affects adolescent happiness indicates it could be important for counseling psychologists to explore why family mood is an influence for the individual families with whom they work. Understanding these reasons could help them better tailor their interventions to increase adolescent happiness.

**More engaged when happy.** Participants reported adolescents engaged more with the family when happy. Two subthemes encompass this engagement: behaving more expressively and interacting more with family members when happy. Adolescents showed this increased engagement verbally and nonverbally. For example, participants reported adolescents became louder, more animated, and more energetic with family members when happy. They would express this happiness through singing, dancing, and telling jokes. Mogilner, Kamvar, and Aaker (2011) found that participants in their teens and 20s associated happiness more with excitement than peacefulness, and the reverse was true for those in their 40s and 50s. Adolescents’ increased expressiveness and energy with family when happy fits with this idea that younger people tend to associate happiness with excitement. O’Higgins et al. (2010) reported that “feelings that give energy” were related to adolescent happiness (p. 374). They did not elaborate on what
they meant by this phrase, but it appears in line with the increased expressiveness subtheme in the current study.

Participants also reported adolescents wanted to spend time with family members and talked more to family members when happy. Sreeshakumar, Nagalakshmi, and D’Souza (2007) found that for high school students in India, shyness was negatively correlated with happiness. Adolescents interacting more with family members when happy is somewhat in line with these findings. However, participants did not describe this increased interaction in terms of being outgoing versus shy.

Overall, there is limited research support for the more engaged when happy theme, likely because previous researchers have not explored how adolescents behave when they are happy. In the pilot study, I also explored how adolescents act when happy and found similar findings. Participants in the pilot study reported they interacted and talked more with others when happy. In general, the literature suggests participants have more energy and feel more excited when happy. This study supports that finding and builds on it by showing that this increased energy and excitement comes out in how adolescents express happiness with family members. Another contribution to the literature is the finding that both parents and siblings noticed adolescents’ increased engagement, meaning excitement isn’t only something that is felt internally when adolescents are happy but also something that is expressed externally.

**Humor.** Participants reported humor contributed to adolescents’ happiness in the family. This is consistent with previous research, which has consistently found that adaptive humor is associated with increased well-being (including subjective happiness, PWB, affective well-being, and life satisfaction; e.g., Jovanovic, 2011; Páez, Seguel, &
Martínez-Sánchez, 2013; Yue, Liu, Jiang, & Hiranandani, 2014). This finding is cross-cultural, with studies conducted in Hong Kong, Spain, and Serbia (Jovanovic, 2011; Páez et al., 2013; Yue et al., 2014). Adaptive humor includes affiliative and self-enhancing humor styles (Martin, Puhlik-Doris, Larsen, Gray, & Weir, 2003). Affiliative humor is aimed at improving relationships, such as telling jokes, trying to make others laugh, and using humor as a way to decrease tension in relationships (Martin et al., 2003). Self-enhancing humor focuses on taking a humorous perspective on life and includes finding humor during stressful times and to cope with life problems (Martin et al., 2003).

Participants in this study discussed both types of adaptive humor as increasing the adolescent’s happiness in the family. For example, participants thought laughing, joking, being funny, telling funny family stories, and making mistakes increased the adolescent’s happiness. This humor often occurred during quality time moments and was a way for family members to enhance their relationships. In fact, some family members discussed intentionally using humor to try to boost the adolescent’s happiness and viewed humor as a form of support from family, which is consistent with the affiliative humor style (Martin et al., 2003). Participants also made statements in line with using a self-enhancing humor style when discussing why humor contributed to happiness. They thought humor might contribute to adolescents’ happiness because joking helps to reduce the seriousness of problems. For example, Elena thought humor could increase happiness during stressful times because “it’s not as big of an issue if you can joke about it. So stuff that you can’t joke about, that’s really dampening.”

Along with noticing that adolescents were happier during humorous times, participants frequently discussed using humor when asked what they did to try to increase
the adolescent’s happiness. This is consistent with previous research on interventions for increasing happiness, which have found interventions using humor are effective at increasing happiness (e.g., Gander, Proyer, Ruch, & Wyss, 2013; Wellenzohn, Proyer, & Ruch, 2016). Gander et al. (2013) asked adult participants to write about three funny things that happened to them each day for one week, and they found this intervention increased happiness. Similarly, Wellenzohn et al. (2016) used this “three funny things” intervention with adults but tested three interventions: one for funny things in the past, one in the present, and one in the future. They found all three interventions increased happiness.

Although there is robust research support (e.g., Gander, et al., 2013; Jovanovic, 2011; Páez et al., 2013; Wellenzohn et al., 2016; Yue et al., 2014) that humor increases happiness and is associated with higher happiness levels, this research has been with undergraduate or other adult populations but not with adolescents. Other happiness and family researchers have not studied how humor impacts adolescent happiness, nor have they found it as a theme when asking adolescents what makes them happy. After searching for discussions related to humor in the literature, I found only one qualitative study on adolescent happiness where humor was mentioned. In Sargeant’s (2010) research on what adolescents need to be happy, participants’ responses included people (including family) making them laugh. In Sargeant’s (2010) study, humor was not its own theme but was part of the relationships theme. The finding that humor also contributes to adolescents’ happiness and can be used as a way to increase their happiness adds further support to the literature that humor can be used as a way to increase happiness with a variety of populations.
Although research is lacking about humor’s relationship to adolescent happiness, research on character strengths in adolescents supports this study’s finding that humor could be an important contributor to happiness. Humor is one of the transcendence character strengths (the others being hope and gratitude). Consistently, researchers have found that transcendence strengths are strongly related to life satisfaction in early and middle adolescents (e.g., Dahlsgaard, 2005; Gillham et al., 2011; Toner et al., 2012). Although research suggests humor contributes to adolescent happiness, the present research is the first study to show humor is a significant contributor to adolescent happiness in the family.

**External expressions of happiness.** All participants except for one family reported family members could tell when the adolescent was happy. Fifteen participants thought this was obvious to family members. Three adolescents noted differences in the extent to which specific family members could tell if adolescents were happy. Johnathan thought his parents could best tell if he was happy, Kayla thought her sister had the best read on her happiness, and Clarissa thought her mother was best at knowing if she was happy. In addition, three participants (i.e., Clarissa, Elena, Becca) expressed that although it is clear if the adolescent is happy or unhappy, other family members don’t always know the best way to respond when the adolescent is unhappy or why the adolescent is unhappy. For example, Elena said about Johnathan’s happiness, “So I think for the most part, I’m able to tell. It’s just hard to tell sometimes whether I should try to talk to him about it or not ’cause you don’t wanna pry but you do wanna help.” However, other participants expressed they knew how to respond when the adolescent was unhappy, such as inviting the adolescent to join the family in activities, being willing
to talk about what is making the adolescent unhappy, or giving the adolescent space. For example, Loren stated that when her son is unhappy, she tries to increase his happiness by inviting him to go somewhere with them:

Sometimes my husband and I will just get up on a Sunday morning and go walk along the beach, and grab something to eat like while we’re out and about and take it to the beach, and so if we get him up to go do that with us, he loves that kind of stuff.

Previous research has not examined the extent to which family members can tell when adolescents are happy. As well, family’s ability to tell whether the adolescent is happy has not been a theme in previous literature. Therefore, the finding that family could tell when adolescents were happy is new to the literature. This study’s findings also indicate some family members may be able to tell better than other family members if the adolescent is happy and that some family members have a better grasp on how to respond when the adolescent is unhappy. It is possible this has not been a theme in previous research because previous studies on adolescent happiness have not focused on the extent to which others can tell when adolescents are happy. In this study, I specifically asked adolescent participants how much they thought family members could tell if they were happy and parent and sibling participants how much they were able to tell that their adolescent family members were happy. Another reason previous researchers might not have studied family members’ ability to tell if adolescents are happy could be because assessments do not exist to measure people’s perceptions of others’ happiness. It is possible that if future research specifically focused on family members’ ability to tell when adolescents are happy, similar findings would be found, but this needs to be further explored.
Theoretical Implications

The positive youth development (PYD) movement was the primary theory informing this research. Findings from this study fit well with a number of aspects of the PYD movement, bolstering support for PYD theory. The PYD movement emphasizes that youth have strengths that they can develop and that they can have a positive development that does not have to include a storm and stress period (Lerner, 2009). Lerner et al.’s (2000) five Cs can be used to conceptualize PYD and include: competence, confidence, character, caring, and connection. This research supports the five Cs. The independence theme fits with the competence and confidence components of PYD. Having autonomy allowed adolescent participants to develop competence and confidence in new skills (such as driving a car and creating a business to make money), which increased their happiness in the family. The character positive development outcome also fit for adolescents in this study. According to PYD advocates, youth want to engage in prosocial activities (Hershberg et al., 2014), and this was also true of adolescents in this study. Participants stated adolescents were happy when they could feel productive and help family members. For example, part of Kayla’s happiness came from feeling appreciated. Also, the importance of developing character could explain why adolescents’ happiness did not seem to be affected when they were given family chores. Participants in this study also indicated adolescents’ care for others influenced their happiness in the family. Participants expressed adolescents were unhappy when family members were upset because of their empathy and care for family members.

Finally, concerning connection, participants in this study expressed that relationships with parents (and other family members) were important to adolescents and
that adolescents continued to maintain close bonds with family, which contributed to their happiness. This is in line with the PYD movement, as proponents of PYD believe adolescents value relationships with their parents and maintain close ties with them even though they are separating from their parents (Balk, 1995; Lerner, 2009). In addition, participants in this study emphasized relationships with family more than other factors related to the five Cs, with all participants discussing family support. Hershberg et al. (2014) found that connection was the most important of the five Cs to youth, which fits with this finding.

The PYD movement also incorporates developmental systems theory (DST). DST theorists argue that adolescents’ development involves multiple levels of organization (e.g., psychological, biological, physiological, historical, cultural) interacting and influencing each other (Ford & Lerner, 1992; Lerner, 2009). In this study, the outside influences theme supports DST. Participants discussed how various levels mutually influenced each other, with factors outside of the family influencing happiness in the family and factors in the family influencing happiness outside of the family. This is also consistent with Bronfenbrenner’s (1997, 2005) bioecological model. Specifically, the outside influences theme fits with Bronfenbrenner’s (2005) belief that the family sets the foundation for children to have positive experiences outside of the family. As well, Bronfenbrenner’s view (2005) that children need a strong bond and interaction with a parent in order to have a positive development fits with this study’s finding that family plays a significant role in the adolescent’s overall happiness. It also fits with this study’s family support and quality time themes.
This study’s findings are also consistent with theory on adolescent development. The fact that participants saw family as a big influence on the adolescents’ overall happiness fits with developmental theorists’ (e.g., Balk, 1995; Scabini et al., 2006; Schlegel & Barry, 1991) belief that family has a significant influence on adolescent development. Developmental theorists have also noted that middle adolescents become more invested in friendships, romantic relationships, and peer relationships (Feiring, 1996; Hauser & Bowlds, 1990). Although this study was not focused on friends and participants viewed family as the top contributor to adolescents’ happiness, they frequently mentioned friends as a significant contributor to adolescents’ overall happiness. Finally, this study’s finding that adolescents were happy when family members gave them independence fits with developmental theory, as middle adolescence is a time when adolescents become more focused on exploring their individual identities (Harter, 1990).

Finally, families in this study appeared to possess strengths that contributed to adolescents’ happiness in the family. Participants gave numerous examples of positive family experiences for the adolescent and things family members did to boost the adolescent’s happiness. They also described family as a positive influence on the adolescent’s overall happiness. This fits with the family-centered positive psychology (FCPP) perspective that families have strengths that they can build on (Sheridan & Burt, 2009). In addition, participants gave examples of ways adolescents were resilient, such as the fact that conflict did not have a lasting decrease on happiness when the adolescent had an opportunity to resolve the conflict. Another example of resilience was being able to find happiness during less desirable circumstances. For example, Llewellyn stated that
when Johnathan is asked to participate in less preferred activities, Johnathan approaches it with the idea that “since I’m here, gotta make the best of it. I’ve gotta amp up my energy ’cause I have to get to my happiness.” This is in line with PYD theorists’ belief that youth have inherent strengths (Lerner et al., 2005).

Overall, adolescents in this study showed a positive development within their families and were able to use the five Cs to increase their happiness. Participants also indicated family was an important and generally positive part of adolescents’ development, which positively affected their happiness outside of the family. Findings fit well with the PYD and FCPP movements, suggesting the PYD and FCPP perspectives would be valuable to use not only to understand child development in general but also to specifically understand the development of middle adolescents. In addition, the PYD and FCPP movements have mostly focused on youths’ relationships with parents. However, this study indicates relationships with siblings also contributed to PYD. Therefore, it would be valuable for PYD and FCPP proponents to consider expanding PYD theory to incorporate relationships with siblings.

Practice Implications

The findings from this study provide implications for counseling psychologists who work with middle adolescents and their families. Given participants believed family has a large, significant influence on the adolescent’s overall happiness and given the literature (e.g., Edwards & Lopez, 2006; Gray et al., 2013; O’Higgins et al., 2010; Sargeant, 2010) that also supports this finding, it is especially important that counseling psychologists consider family when providing counseling to middle adolescents. They could do this by specifically asking adolescents about their families, what their
relationships look like with each family member, and how family affects their presenting problems. Because participants indicated family has a significant influence on adolescent happiness, exploring family factors and helping adolescents improve family factors would likely be a way to increase the adolescent’s overall happiness. Findings also indicate family factors affect adolescent happiness outside of the family. Therefore, counseling psychologists would likely be able to help increase adolescents’ overall happiness if they addressed family factors even when their adolescent clients’ presenting problems were not explicitly about family.

Findings indicate that not only parents but also siblings are influential to adolescents’ happiness in the family. Therefore, when psychologists conduct family therapy that is aimed at increasing middle adolescents’ happiness, they should include siblings (when applicable) in counseling sessions. This could help families to best draw on their strengths so they can work together on family issues in order to increase the adolescent’s happiness. In addition, findings in this study indicate siblings were more likely to think parents were the biggest influencers of adolescent happiness, while adolescents were more likely to think siblings were the biggest influencers. Given siblings might not recognize how much impact they have in the relationship, psychologists could help them recognize that they contribute significantly to the adolescent’s happiness.

Counseling psychologists also need to have a wide lens when working with families who have middle adolescents, given this study’s findings that influences outside of the family affect the adolescent’s happiness within the family. This is also consistent with previous research and theory (e.g., Bronfenbrenner, 1997; Bronfenbrenner, 2005;
Chappel et al., 2014; Ford & Lerner, 1992; Lerner, 2009; Nevin et al., 2005). Therefore, psychologists who work with families could increase adolescents’ happiness in the family by addressing issues that could be occurring outside of the family, such as family members’ school and work stress, and how these issues then impact happiness within the family.

Quality time and family support (especially emotional support) were the most prevalent themes in this study and previous research (e.g., Eloff, 2008; Joronen & Åstedt-Kurki, 2005). Therefore, counseling psychologists should consider these aspects both when providing individual counseling to middle adolescents, siblings, and parents and when providing family counseling when the focus is on increasing adolescent happiness. For example, in individual counseling with adolescents, therapists could ask about their clients’ quality time experiences with and support they receive from family. This would allow therapists to better understand their clients’ contexts and also help their adolescent clients gain insight into what helps their happiness in the family. Psychologists could help these clients learn ways to initiate rewarding quality time experiences with family members in order to increase their happiness. Given participants thought that adolescents’ receiving emotional support contributed to their happiness, psychologists could likely increase adolescent clients’ happiness by helping them learn how to seek out support, as well as who in the family is most helpful to approach for support. In addition, helping parents and siblings learn how to provide support and quality time experiences to adolescents would likely lead to increases in adolescents’ happiness.

In family therapy where the focus is on increasing adolescents’ happiness, counseling psychologists could work with the whole family to build quality time
experiences and family support. For example, they could encourage family members to spend time together doing things they enjoy. Given participants frequently mentioned mealtime and previous researchers have also found mealtime helps adolescents’ happiness, psychologists could recommend families eat meals together when possible to help further improve adolescents’ happiness. In addition, psychologists could likely help adolescents feel happier in their families by strengthening family support, such as by helping family members build trust, learn to communicate effectively with each other, and learn how to express their support to their middle adolescent family members. Given the finding that adolescents felt happier when they felt understood by family members, psychologists should help parents and siblings learn to understand the adolescent’s perspective in order to increase the adolescent’s happiness. They could also help family members learn ways to resolve conflicts, given this study’s findings that opportunities to resolve conflict were important to maintaining adolescents’ happiness so that conflict wouldn’t have a lasting decrease on happiness. This focus on helping families build resources to increase happiness is consistent with FCPP (Sheridan et al., 2004; Sheridan & Burt, 2009). Perspectives from family systems are also consistent with this positive psychology approach and could provide frameworks for counseling psychologists who work with middle adolescent families. For example, psychologists could use a solution-focused approach to explore family strengths (e.g., Selekman, 2002). The focus on activities and actions families can intentionally do to increase adolescents’ happiness fits with Lyubomirsky et al.’s (2005) recommendation that the best point of intervention for increasing happiness is intentional activities, given this is the portion of happiness that people can control. Structural family therapy (e.g., Minuchin & Fishman, 1981) could
also provide a framework for psychologists, given this is an approach in which the therapist must be active and directive in helping families find unique ways to break patterns that are not working.

Participants also reported independence helped adolescents feel happy in their families. Therefore, family therapists who are focusing on increasing adolescents’ happiness should recognize the importance of autonomy for the adolescent. They could model giving autonomy to the adolescent during counseling sessions. This could include involving adolescents in discussions by specifically asking for their perspectives. They could also help parents and siblings learn how to help the adolescent gain a sense of independence in the family. Counseling could also be framed as a way to help adolescents gain freedom so that they can be happy (Hanna, Hanna, & Keys, 1999). Finally, given participants thought transparency and fairness in rules increased adolescents’ happiness, family therapists could help parents communicate to their children the rationale for their rules.

A final recommendation for family therapists is to consider incorporating humor into counseling (Hanna et al., 1999). This study’s findings indicate family humor helped boost adolescent happiness. Therapists could model using humor when appropriate, which Hanna et al. (1999) have also recommended as a way to build trust, especially with defiant adolescents. Empirical studies also support humor as an intervention for increasing happiness (e.g., Gander et al., 2013; Wellenzohn et al., 2016). Another finding was that fewer parents than adolescents and siblings noted humor as a key influence, so it is possible parents do not recognize the full impact humor has on their
adolescent children’s happiness. It could help to make parents aware that they can use humor to help their adolescent children’s happiness.

Counseling psychologists who work with middle adolescents and their families outside of the counseling room could also apply the recommendations discussed above to their work. For example, psychologists who provide outreach workshops to families could incorporate these aspects into their trainings. They could help families understand that quality time, family support, autonomy, and humor are important to the adolescent’s happiness, and they could provide recommendations for how families can incorporate these factors with the middle adolescent.

Counseling psychologists could also provide outreach in which they help families with middle adolescents recognize and build on their strengths related to the factors that this study found increase adolescents’ happiness in the family. They could conduct activities in which families assess their progress in each area so they can gain awareness of what they are doing well and work to build on their strengths, thereby maximizing adolescents’ happiness in the family (Kirschman et al., 2009; Sheridan et al., 2004). These outreach activities would be a way to provide preventative care to help families build strengths before problems occur, consistent with the core values of counseling psychology (Lopez & Edwards, 2008). Intervening early and using preventative interventions is especially important given research that the presence of positive familial factors, (e.g., family support, feeling family members value the adolescent, family cohesion) in middle adolescence predicts mental health in late adolescence (Reinherz, Giaconia, Paradis, Novero, & Kerrigan, 2008). This approach fits with the PYD movement. However, future programs could build on the PYD movement by including
families rather than primarily focusing on the youth perspective. Counseling psychologists could assess the effectiveness of these programs and use this assessment to refine programs so that they best meet the needs of families with middle adolescents. Finally, counseling psychologists could specifically focus their outreach efforts on low-income families, given these families are less likely to be able to afford therapy and could especially benefit from preventative care. This is consistent with counseling psychology’s social justice mission (Vera & Speight, 2003).

**Research Implications**

Many findings from this study align with previous research. Other findings either contradict future research or are entirely unique to the literature, with no research to support or contradict them. Findings from this study can inform future research that could continue to add complexity to the understanding of adolescent happiness in the family system. For example, some themes were more salient for participants than others. Quality time and family support (especially emotional support) were the most salient themes both in this study and in prior research (e.g., Eloff, 2008; Flouri & Buchanan, 2003; Fosco et al., 2012; Joronen & Åstedt-Kurki, 2005; Piko & Hamvai, 2010). These themes were most prominent in this study both because all participants endorsed them and because of the high number of participant statements that fit under these themes. It appears that some factors that contribute to adolescent happiness in the family are more important than other factors. Future researchers could gain a more thorough and concrete understanding of the extent to which various factors contribute to adolescent happiness in the family. This could be done through quantitative research that assesses the correlations between this study’s themes and adolescent happiness. Adolescents and their
family members could complete questionnaires assessing each of the six themes from this study that contributed to adolescent happiness, along with the adolescent’s happiness levels. Researchers could then seek to understand how these factors work together to predict adolescent happiness in the family. This would help counseling psychologists determine how much specific family factors contribute to adolescents’ happiness in the family. This would also allow counseling psychologists to know more about the generalizability of the present research.

Overall, participants’ descriptions of adolescents’ happiness in the family suggest that memory making could be an important contributing factor. Some participants explicitly discussed how adolescents felt happy because they made positive memories with family members. This was especially evident when participants discussed specific quality time experiences that made adolescents happy. Future researchers could explore the extent to which making memories plays a role in how happy adolescents feel in their families. They could interview families about positive memories and how these impact adolescents’ happiness. They could also assess the extent to which the ability to recall positive family memories correlates with adolescent happiness.

Future researchers could also further explore siblings’ views on adolescents’ happiness in the family. This was the first study to incorporate siblings’ perspectives, and more research is needed to determine if this study’s findings generalize to other populations. Future research could include additional qualitative research with siblings and quantitative research on how siblings believe various family factors relate to adolescent happiness. For example, researchers could conduct additional phenomenological studies on adolescent happiness in the family with siblings from
diverse backgrounds in terms of race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, geographic location, and gender. If similar themes were found in diverse populations, this would enhance the generalizability of the current research. Quantitative researchers (e.g., Ohannessian et al., 1995; Rask et al., 2003) have already compared parents’ and adolescents’ perceptions of family factors and how this relates to adolescents’ well-being by asking adolescents and their parents to complete questionnaires and examining how both adolescents’ and parents’ perspectives compare with each other and how they correlate with the adolescent’s well-being. Similar research could be conducted that includes siblings. Rask et al. (2003) also recommended this and discussed the importance of including additional family members in order to increase validity when assessing the relationship between family factors and adolescent happiness.

Another potential future research direction is further comparing adolescents’, siblings’, and parents’ perspectives. In this study, family members generally corroborated each other’s descriptions of adolescents’ happiness in the family. However, there were a few notable differences between the groups. For example, a finding unique to this research was that adolescents, parents, and siblings differed in which family members they thought had the most influence on the adolescent’s happiness. Future researchers could quantitatively examine potential differences between adolescents, parents, and siblings, using this study’s findings as guidelines for which factors to assess. This could include questionnaires about how much family members believe various family factors contribute to adolescents’ happiness, how well family members can tell if the adolescent is happy, how much family members think that the family contributes to the adolescent’s overall happiness, and which family members they think have the most
influence on the adolescent’s happiness. It is possible quantitative research would reveal differences not detected in this study, such as differences in how strongly certain themes fit for different family members. Another area for future comparison studies related to adolescent happiness in the family would be to examine gender differences. Previous researchers have found some gender differences in family factors that impact adolescent happiness (e.g., O’Higgins et al., 2010; Piko & Hamvai, 2010), but these differences were not evident in the present study. Further research that includes exploring gender differences could help to make sense of these inconsistencies. For example, researchers could specifically examine gender differences in adolescent happiness in the family based on the specific themes found in this study.

Along with conducting comparison studies to add complexity to the understanding of adolescent happiness in the family, researchers could also conduct studies to help resolve discrepancies in the literature. A few findings from this study contradict previous research. For example, adolescents in this study spoke just as positively as their parents about the family’s influence on their happiness, which contradicts prior research that adolescents have more negative views of family factors than parents (e.g., Ohanessian et al., 1995; Rask et al., 2003; Scabini et al., 2006; Stuart & Jose, 2012). It is possible there is a discrepancy between how participants answer questionnaires and what they qualitatively report about their experiences. A mixed methods study that includes both interviews with family members and quantitative measures of family factors could help determine if this is the case. By giving a questionnaire to and conducting interviews with the same group of families, researchers could compare results across methodologies and more holistically understand how
different family members view family factors. Researchers would be able to determine if family members respond differently to questionnaires versus interviews, which could help resolve discrepancies in the literature.

Finally, a number of findings from this study are unique to the literature or had very little research support. These findings could be further explored through both qualitative and quantitative research in order to determine if they generalize to more diverse populations and across a variety of methodologies. Some findings that lacked research support that future researchers could specifically explore when studying adolescent happiness in the family include the role of humor, extended family, family members showing interest in the adolescent, opportunities for adolescents to be alone, and opportunities for adolescents to resolve family conflicts. Quantitative researchers could explore to what extent these family factors correlate with higher adolescent happiness. Qualitative researchers could consider asking specific questions about these areas when exploring family influences on adolescent happiness with diverse samples.

In addition, researchers could further explore the extent to which family members can tell if adolescents are happy. Prior researchers have not explored this area, and more research is needed to determine if this study’s finding that family members can usually tell if the adolescent is happy generalizes. Qualitative researchers could inquire specifically about this topic. Quantitative researchers could assess the extent to which adolescents believe specific family members can tell if they are happy, which could be compared with the extent to which family members believe they can tell if the adolescent is happy. Research is also lacking on how adolescents behave when they are happy and how family members know adolescents are happy. Future phenomenological studies
with diverse samples on adolescent happiness in the family that specifically address adolescents’ behaviors when happy would allow counseling psychologists to understand the extent to which this study’s more engaged theme generalizes.

Another unique finding is that participants reported the opportunity for adolescents to spend time alone contributed to their happiness. Quantitative researchers could examine the relationship between adolescents spending time alone and their happiness levels to see if this finding generalizes. Although participants thought adolescents needed time alone, they also indicated that if adolescents stayed in their rooms for extended periods of time, it could be a sign that they were not happy. They thought adolescents also needed opportunities to interact with family. Therefore, research on the relationship between time alone and happiness could also examine whether there is an optimal amount of alone time for maximum adolescent happiness.

Finally, given the finding that family mood impacted adolescents’ happiness, future researchers could explore how family members’ moods at given points in time correlate with adolescents’ happiness at these same points in time. This could be accomplished through a study in which adolescents, siblings, and parents periodically report on their moods at the same points in time. This would allow researchers to understand how strong the correlation is between family mood and happiness. Specifically, they could examine whether positive versus negative moods have stronger correlations with adolescent happiness. This research would also provide an understanding of how well this study’s findings generalize.

In sum, future research could build on findings from this study in quite a few ways. Researchers could conduct more studies to help assess the generalizability of
findings, resolve discrepancies in the literature, and add complexity to counseling psychologists’ understanding of adolescents’ happiness in the family. This research could include both qualitative and quantitative studies with adolescents, parents, and siblings.

Limitations

This study had limitations, and future researchers could conduct studies to address these limitations. First, the participants in this study were somewhat limited in terms of diversity. This sample had good diversity in terms of gender, the adolescent’s grade, and family structure (related to number and gender of siblings). I attempted to recruit a diverse sample, but given my recruitment was based on my connections and the participants’ connections, participants lacked diversity on a number of specific variables. Most participants were Caucasian, had a relatively high socioeconomic status, and were from intact families. In addition, all participants were living in the Southeast region of the United States. Finally, most participants selected their mothers to participate, causing there to be only two father participants. Therefore, the generalizability of these findings is limited and specific to the sample studied. It is unknown if similar themes would be found in racial/cultural minorities, those from a low socioeconomic status, and those from divorced or blended families. It is also unknown if findings would apply to families living in different regions of the United States and other countries. More information is also needed about how fathers view adolescents’ happiness in the family, given generalizations cannot be made based on two fathers. Finally, it is possible the specific seven families interviewed were unique from other families, and a larger sample size could help determine how well these findings generalize to other middle adolescent
families. Future researchers could conduct this research with more diverse samples in order to determine how well the findings in this study generalize. For example, participants especially emphasized vacations as happy times for the family. One reason could be because of their higher socioeconomic status. Future research with participants who are diverse in socioeconomic status is needed to determine if special events are consistently a prevalent subtheme within quality time. For participants who are not able to afford vacations, it is possible other special events such as holidays, day trips, and spending time with extended family contribute to the middle adolescent’s happiness. Future research should also include culturally diverse families and families with divorced parents in order to improve generalizability of findings. A different recruitment strategy could help future researchers reach a more diverse sample. For example, researchers could limit the number of participants they include from a particular demographic category. They could also recruit through posting information about the research in public places, such as through flyers at a variety of places in the community or in a newspaper. This would likely lead to a more heterogeneous sample.

Another limitation is that this research was focused on one moment in time for families. It is unknown how findings would change as the middle adolescent continues to develop. It is likely findings would change some. This is reflected by Gloria’s response about her daughter after I member checked themes with her. Gloria stated that the themes fit well for Erica during the point in time when I interviewed them, and she noted some changes since the interview: “As she developed more independence her happiness increased even more. And her relationships with family members became more relaxed. No need to explode when upset. Just more even keeled.” Longitudinal research could
allow researchers to explore differences in family factors that influence the adolescent’s happiness over time. Qualitative researchers could interview families at various points in time from the time the adolescent starts high school to the time the adolescent finishes high school. Quantitative researchers could have families complete measures about family factors and happiness at various points in time while the adolescent is in high school. This would allow counseling psychologists to understand how adolescents’ happiness in the family changes during high school, providing information about which family factors are consistent and which ones change throughout middle adolescence.

Along with being limited to one moment in time, this research was also limited by whom I interviewed. For each family, I interviewed one middle adolescent, one sibling living in the home, and one parent. I did not include caretakers who were not parents in this study. I also did not include all family members. When there was a choice, adolescents selected the parent and sibling they thought would be able to speak best about their happiness in the family. Adolescents selected diverse siblings in terms of age and gender. However, they were less diverse in which parents they selected, with five of the seven adolescents choosing their mothers. Future qualitative research could include both parents, multiple siblings, and/or caretakers who are not parents. In addition, it could also be valuable to interview extended family members, as participants reported adolescents spending time with extended family was an important component of their happiness. With these additional family members, researchers could conduct phenomenological studies that are similar to the present study in order to develop further complexity into understanding middle adolescents’ happiness experiences in the family.
This research was also limited to middle adolescents with siblings in the home. It is unknown how these findings would generalize to only children or adolescents whose siblings are no longer living in the home. Future researchers who study middle adolescent happiness in the family could include these adolescents. One specific future direction could be to conduct a comparison study in which researchers compare the experiences of adolescents who are only children with the experiences of adolescents with siblings. This could help counseling psychologists understand to what extent themes generalize and what the key differences may be between these two groups.

Finally, this research was confined to the family system. In this study, when asked to discuss the adolescent’s overall happiness, participants reported family relationships were a significant part of the adolescent’s happiness, but they typically reported friendships were the other large component of overall happiness (Balk, 1995; Feiring, 1996; Hauser & Bowlds, 1990). Therefore, it would be valuable for researchers to also understand how friendships contribute to middle adolescents’ happiness. Future researchers could conduct comparative qualitative studies in which they interview both family members and friends about the adolescent’s happiness experiences. They could examine which themes are common to both groups and which themes are unique to each group. They could also work to understand how friend factors and family factors interact with each other to influence the adolescent’s overall happiness experience.

**Conclusion**

This research provides a thorough, complex understanding of the essence of middle adolescents’ experiences of happiness in their families from the multiple perspectives of adolescent, parent, and sibling. The findings generally support and build
on previous research and theoretical literature. In addition, findings contribute uniquely to the literature by providing new themes that researchers have not previously found. The incorporation of siblings’ perspectives and influence on adolescents’ happiness is also unique. Finally, this is the first qualitative study to include multiple family members’ perspectives about adolescents’ happiness. Findings from this study can help inform the practice of counseling psychologists in both their counseling and outreach work. Although this study’s findings provide new information about adolescents’ experiences of happiness in their families, more research is needed to determine if these findings will generalize to more diverse samples. This would help psychologists learn more about how to tailor their approaches based on diversity variables when working with middle adolescents and their families. In sum, this research both contributes to previous research and provides directions for future research.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A

PILOT STUDY
The Adolescent Experience of Happiness

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Abstract

Many researchers have conducted quantitative studies about happiness, but few qualitative studies have been done in this area. Even fewer qualitative researchers have explored how adolescents experience happiness. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore the essence of adolescent happiness through understanding how adolescents experience and conceptualize happiness. The main research question the author explored was the following: How do adolescents define and experience happiness? Subquestions included 1.) What does happiness mean to adolescents? 2.) What makes them happy? and 3.) How do they and others know that they are happy? Utilizing a positive psychology framework, a phenomenological design was used, and semistructured interviews were conducted with 5 adolescents in order to answer these questions. Seven major themes emerged: demonstration of the 3 orientations to happiness (i.e., pleasure, meaning, engagement), self-expression, accomplishment, helping others, social support, interaction, and physical signs. Practice implications and directions for future research are discussed.

Keywords: adolescent attitudes, happiness, phenomenology, positive psychology, well-being
The Adolescent Experience of Happiness

When we try to help people with their problems, too often we may focus on how to eliminate what is wrong or decrease the negative aspects of their lives (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). However, much can be gained through focusing on people’s strengths and what makes them happy, from the growing field of positive psychology (Lopez & Gallagher, 2009; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Rather than focusing only on eliminating disorders, psychologists have started to examine ways to help people develop their strengths and increase their happiness levels, from researching what factors influence happiness to what intentional activities one can do to increase happiness (Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005). While researchers have conducted many quantitative studies in the field of positive psychology (e.g., Diener, Ng, Harter, & Arora, 2010; Lyubomirsky, Dickerhoof, Boehm, & Sheldon, 2011; Lyubomirsky & Tucker, 1998; Watson, Clark, McIntyre, & Hamaker, 1992), fewer qualitative studies have been conducted (e.g., Eloff, 2008; O’Higgins, Sixsmith, & Gabhainn, 2010; Sargeant, 2010). Also, much research on happiness has been limited to college student populations (e.g., Lyubomirsky et al., 2011; Lyubomirsky & Tucker, 1998; Watson et al., 1992).

Psychologists working with adolescents could benefit from understanding the unique perspectives adolescents have on happiness. It is quite possible that the way adolescents view phenomena is strikingly different from how adults perceive the same phenomena. For example, Pradhan and Pandey (2006) found differences in how adolescents described happiness and the sources they cited for their happiness, compared with middle aged adults. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to understand how adolescents experience and conceptualize happiness. The main research question was the
following: How do adolescents experience and describe the concept of happiness? An interview format was especially useful in answering this question because it allowed for rich, thick descriptions from participants. This study has practical significance for the field of counseling psychology because by understanding in detail how adolescents experience happiness, we can gain insight into what types of interventions may be effective for increasing happiness in this population. The themes that emerged from this study will be useful in guiding these future interventions.

The field of psychology has seen an increase in scientific research on happiness at the end of the 20th and throughout the 21st centuries. The establishment of the Journal of Happiness Studies in 2000 reflects the acceptance of happiness as an academic area (Ahmed, 2007). In addition, there has been increasing interest in happiness among people in general, as indicated by the media’s focus on it (Ahmed, 2007). Subjective well-being and life satisfaction are two terms in the psychological literature that have been used to describe aspects of happiness. Sometimes, these terms are used interchangeably, while other times, they are seen as distinct. The construct of subjective well-being has been conceptualized as a combination of life satisfaction, positive mood, and lack of negative mood (Ryan & Deci, 2001). Scales that measure subjective well-being often ask questions related to the amount of pleasure and the lack of displeasure people experience. Questions may inquire about positive and negative emotions or people’s views on how satisfied they are with life (e.g., Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985; Diener, Wirtz et al., 2009). While subjective well-being has hedonic components, it has also been used to describe an attitude. Diener, Oishi, and Lucas (2009) defined subjective well-being as “a person’s cognitive and affective evaluations of his or
her life as a whole” (p. 187). Life satisfaction is a similar concept and has been defined as “the degree to which people judge the overall quality of their life as a whole favourably” (Veenhoven, 1988, p. 334). This definition sounds almost identical to Diener, Oishi, and Lucas’s (2009) definition of subjective well-being, and it seems that in practice, the two terms are often used interchangeably.

A number of studies have been conducted that examine what influences happiness. From learning what factors have an effect on happiness, researchers have started to develop interventions to increase happiness. Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, and Schkade (2005) propose a pie chart model (developed from past literature) in which happiness is influenced to varying degrees by three factors: 50% due to genetics, 40% due to intentional activity, and 10% due to circumstances. The fact that circumstances are a small influence on happiness initially surprised researchers (Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999). While researchers expected circumstances to greatly affect happiness, when it comes to the reality of their own lives, people may be more accurate in their awareness of what makes them happy. For example, in a qualitative interview study with preadolescents in Australia and England, participants believed they did not need changes in their circumstances (such as an increase in wealth) to be happy (Sargeant, 2010). More often, they said relationships were important to their happiness, mentioning friends, family, and pets.

Based on the pie chart model mentioned above, Lyubomirsky and her colleagues have gone on to test various happiness interventions that focus on the biggest section we can control: intentional activity. In one study, Lyubomirsky et al. (2011) found that interventions using optimism (through thinking about one’s best possible self) and
gratitude (through writing gratitude letters) increased happiness, especially among participants who selected themselves for the study and were in the treatment groups. This study suggests that along with the interventions themselves, motivation is an important component to increasing happiness.

In addition to looking at what factors affect or correlate with happiness, researchers have also studied what qualities happy people have. Lyubomirsky and Tucker (1998) found that while happy and unhappy college students experienced the same types of events, happy people tended to interpret both positive and negative events as making them more happy and to view these events in a more positive light than unhappy people.

The most current researchers have looked at how people experience happiness, with an increase in qualitative methods being used. These studies are most similar to the present study. Eloff (2008) studied happiness experiences by conducting semistructured interviews about the concept of happiness with 42 children in South Africa who were 6 to 13 years old. The participants in this study saw happiness mainly in terms of “relationships,” “recreation,” and “attainment of material possessions.” O’Higgins et al. (2010) conducted 10-to-20-minute semistructured interviews in Ireland with 31 students who were 13 years old about how they viewed the words “health” and “happy.” They found that happiness was related to family, friends, belonging to a group, and having good social skills.

The present study was conducted in the United States with a slightly older group of participants. It is notable that the current qualitative research on happiness has been conducted outside the United States, making the present study unique. In addition,
O’Higgins et al.’s (2010) study focused on both perspectives on happiness and health. With interviews lasting only 10 to 20 minutes, it is likely they were not able to thoroughly explore the essence of happiness for adolescents in depth. The present study focused solely on happiness, with interviews lasting averaging about one-half hour. Compared to the O’Higgins et al. study, the present study also addressed happiness in an older population, middle adolescents, who are at a different developmental stage than early adolescents (e.g., Berk, 2010). Phenomenological research on late adolescents’ happiness experiences is lacking, yet this research would be valuable for informing interventions for increasing happiness in this population.

**Methodology**

**Theory**

This study was conducted from an interpretivist framework. According to Crotty (1998), the goal of interpretivism is to understand and explain. In this study, the researcher attempted to understand the adolescent experience of happiness and to explain this experience to others. Within interpretivism, there are specific subcategories, such as symbolic interactionism, phenomenology, and hermeneutics. This study was approached from a symbolic interactionist perspective. Symbolic interactionists assume that the way humans act toward objects relates to the meaning they assign to these objects, that they make meaning of objects based on social interaction with others, and that they modify these meanings based on their experiences (Blumer, 1969, as cited in Crotty, 1998). Because we are social beings, we must look at the world from others’ points of view (Crotty, 1998).
Design

This study had a phenomenological design. Phenomenological research focuses on the essence (the “core meanings”) of an experience that is shared by multiple people and requires the researcher to bracket (put aside) his or her prior beliefs (Merriam, 1998, p. 15). Phenomenology is an especially good match for counseling psychology research because of its focus on understanding people’s lived experiences (Wertz, 2005). Phenomenology has its roots in the work of Husserl, a philosopher. Husserl believed an experience was an interaction of something objective in the world with the person’s subjective reality in consciousness (Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2002). His transcendental phenomenology focused on finding the essence of an experience, which can be accomplished by understanding what makes up the experience and how people make individual meanings from the experience (Moustakas, 1994). In this study, the essence of happiness for adolescents was explored. The researcher worked to bracket her ideas about how adolescents experience happiness in order to gain new perspectives about this experience.

Reflexivity

Reflexivity involves researchers delineating their perspectives and prejudices so that these do not bias data analysis (Morrow, 2005). Being “transparent to ourselves” helps us better set aside our biases when analyzing data (Moustakas, 1994, p. 86). Therefore, what follows is my background and interest related to this study.

Both adolescents and positive psychology (the study of what makes people happy) have become special interests of mine. I have worked with adolescents in various settings over the past six years, including being a summer camp counselor, supervising
the Junior Congregation at my synagogue, and as a therapist. I am always fascinated when I talk with adolescents to learn how they experience their worlds and have realized their experiences often differ greatly from those of adults. My experiences working and bonding with adolescents have led me to want to know more about how they experience their worlds. Specifically, I have been interested in what makes them happy because of my belief that building on strengths and finding what works is at the core of good treatment. I also believe this perspective empowers clients. From my experiences, I have noticed adolescents are often disempowered by authority figures, and I believe this makes empowerment for them especially important.

Positive psychology has also become a budding interest of mine. I became interested in positive psychology two years ago when I took a course entirely devoted to the topic. As I learned more, I realized positive psychology was a good fit for my personal approach to living and viewing clients. I think it is important to look for ways to increase happiness as opposed to ways to get rid of psychopathology. I tend to view counseling from a strengths-based approach, and positive psychology also emphasizes people’s strengths.

**Participants and Setting**

Participants were five adolescents (three female, two male, ages 17 to 18) who were high school students in the Rocky Mountain region. Dukes (1984) recommended 3 to 10 participants for a phenomenological study. All participants were 12th-grade students who attended the same high school. Participants were recruited using convenience and snowball sampling (Merriam, 1998). Initial participants were found through the researcher’s acquaintances, and further participants came from the
acquaintances of those participants (Merriam, 1998). To ensure the sample was purposeful, participants were asked to recommend others who they thought would be able to speak extensively about their happiness experiences. Participants were interviewed in a private room at a university library.

**Data Collection Methods**

After IRB approval and before participants were interviewed, they were informed that the study’s purpose was to explore how they experience and describe the concept of happiness. After participants and their parents signed informed consent forms, participants were asked to choose pseudonyms, and all data were recorded under these pseudonyms. Data consisted of semistructured interviews lasting between 27 and 52 minutes. According to Merriam (1998), semistructured interviews are “guided by a list of questions or issues to be explored, and neither the exact wording nor the order of the questions is determined ahead of time” (p. 74). A semistructured format provided enough structure for gathering relevant information while also providing enough flexibility to react to individual responses, providing richer, more detailed data. Questions focused on participants’ descriptions of happiness, what makes them happy, the context of their happiness, and how they and others know they are happy. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

**Trustworthiness**

It is important for qualitative studies to “present insights and conclusions that ring true to readers, educators, and other researchers” (Merriam, 1998, p. 199). Readers need to be able to believe in the truth of the research findings, a concept known as trustworthiness. In order to enhance trustworthiness, a number strategies were used.
Triangulation, the use of multiple methods of data collection, increases trustworthiness by verifying findings across sources (Creswell, 2007). In this study, multiple sources of data were collected through interviewing multiple participants and reviewing the literature. While analyzing the data, negative case analysis was employed, in which the researcher looked for cases that disconfirmed the hypotheses and revised hypotheses to reflect these “negative” cases (Creswell, 2007). Trustworthiness was also enhanced through peer debriefing, which involved discussing findings and analysis with three colleagues, who were trained in qualitative methodology, in the counseling psychology/counselor education field and obtaining their feedback about the analysis (Creswell, 2007). Finally, a member check was performed, which involved sharing data and interpretations with participants and asking them to speak to how well these initial findings fit with their experiences (Merriam, 1998). This involved sharing themes that emerged with participants and asking them to assess the accuracy of these themes in order to provide better trustworthiness for the study. Participants who responded to the member check all stated the findings fit for them.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using Creswell’s (2007) simplified version of Moustakas’s (1994) modified Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method. First, the researcher explored her personal reflections on and experiences with happiness by answering the interview questions asked of participants. Throughout this process, she used epoché, the process of becoming aware of and trying to remove her prejudices and assumptions about the phenomenon (Merriam, 1998). She worked to avoid imposing her personal views of happiness on participants and on the data she analyzed. Then, horizontalization was
conducted, in which significant statements in the data were highlighted (Creswell, 2007). After identifying significant statements, these statements were organized into themes (Creswell, 2007). Finally, a comprehensive description (i.e., the essence of happiness for adolescents) was developed that contained a “textural description” describing participants experiences and a “structural description” describing the contexts and settings in which their happiness experiences occurred.

As Merriam (1998) recommends, data collection and analysis occurred simultaneously to ensure the collection of relevant, focused data. This involved looking for tentative themes in the data after each interview, with the researcher reflecting on her own potential biases throughout the process.

Findings

Seven major themes emerged from the data. These themes are experiencing the three orientations to happiness, self-expression, accomplishment, helping others, social support, interaction, and physical signs.

Three Orientations to Happiness

**Meaning: “For me, happiness is really meaningful.”** Most participants described having meaning as contributing to their happiness. For example, Bob stated that, “having a meaning makes me happy. How when you’re doing something important to help others or being noticed.” Often, participants described aspirations for the future as having meaning that gave them happiness. Baylor stated that the “meaning of my life is knowing where I’m going to go and the path that I’m going to take . . .” Tyler also referred to meaning through thinking about the future as influencing his happiness:
“I think it’s important . . . to give meaning for the things that you do, and for me, I would really like to have a job that I care about in the future.”

Along with describing meaning making them happy, some participants also believed happiness was a meaningful experience. Four participants described happiness as being difficult to explain in words and more powerful if it was not vocalized. For example, Tyler described happiness saying, “For me, happiness, is really meaningful so, the things that I can’t express with words are usually more meaningful for me because it’s not shareable, it’s more personable.” Jif explained how it was hard to verbally describe the complete essence of happiness: “Happy’s such a small word. I just feel like it’s so big, it’s bigger than happiness.”

**Engagement: “It makes me happy to just feel the music.”** Bob described a possible flow experience by discussing his experience playing well in a basketball game: “You feel like you can do more, you feel like there’s not a lot that can bring you down.” Jif and Tyler both discussed feeling happy through playing music. For example, Jif stated, “Music makes me happy . . . . The music that I can create, not the music I have to turn on the stereo for.”

**Pleasure: “The perfect breeze outside.”** All but one participant discussed feeling a number of different types of positive feelings that related to happiness. Tyler explicitly used the word pleasure, among other positive feelings, when describing his definition of happiness:

Happiness to me is a feeling that’s joyous, that’s completely positive, there’s no negative. And that might be where it can just be pleasure, or that it could be just
contentment. But the key is that there’s no harm done with happiness. It’s just positive.

Many participants also discussed the pleasure aspect by describing happiness as peaceful. For example, Constance stated that she knows she is happy “[w]hen I feel calm and I don’t feel a sense of nervousness or negativity or anything.” Baylor discussed this peaceful feeling by mentioning not worrying when he is happy: “I definitely think that if you don’t have to worry about anything in life then that’s the overall happiness of life . . . Living day by day without having to face your struggles that you have in your life.”

Finally, two participants discussed “little things” making them happy. For Constance, simplicity was especially important to feeling happy:

. . . find the happiness in simple little things like when it’s the perfect breeze outside . . . or anything that I find enlightening. Like usually the weather . . . Or I really like food. Specific foods usually trigger happiness. Or if the situation happens when you don’t expect it to happen but it ends up better than you expected it to.

**Self-Expression: “Being Me Makes Me Happy.”**

Self-expression was a part of all participants’ experiences of happiness. However, self-expression took many different forms. Some participants discussed aspects of identity formation, such as self-understanding and an opportunity to act authentically. For example, Constance stated that “understanding how you feel about yourself as a person and understanding how you feel for your future and where you stand . . . makes you happy.” Both Baylor and Jif described the opportunity to be themselves making them happy. Baylor expressed this by saying, “Happiness to me means that
you’re allowed to be yourself mostly around people that you love and people that care about you.”

**Acting more expressively: “Some kind of energy comes to you.”** All participants described acting more expressively or having more energy as something they or others do when they feel happy. This involved various things for different participants, including a feeling of excitement and/or energy, being more outgoing, and being more animated. For example, Baylor stated that he can tell people are happy when “[t]hey seem lively and they have a lively character to them.”

**Creativity: “Being able to create something.”** Creativity also played a role in self-expression. Three participants reported that creating music, art, and/or written work made them happy. Constance stated, “That’s probably the happiest thing that I could possibly do for myself is sit there with myself and actually put on paper something that I want to express.”

**Accomplishment: “There’s Always an Outcome.”**

All participants reported that accomplishment made them happy, and for most, it played a large role in increasing their happiness. Bob began his interview by saying, “Happiness means feeling accomplished and I guess that’s it.” Constance described outcomes as being an important aspect of happiness saying, “I can see it and I can show it to other people or just the sense of accomplishment with productivity.” Often, reinforcement for accomplishments contributed to happiness. Jif stated, “When I’m being praised I feel that makes me the happiest.” For Tyler, the pride he felt from his accomplishments in the marching band made him feel happy: “But when I got to stand on
that podium and just listen to everything and orchestrate all that was happening, it was a lot of pride in it.”

**Helping Others: “Making People’s Days”**

All participants mentioned helping others, including family, friends, and the community, as part of their happiness experiences. Jif said she feels happy when she is kind to others in her class, such as by “talking to that one person in that one classroom that isn’t talked to, that shy person . . . . I try to pick those people out and get them involved.” Bob discussed feeling happy through helping his siblings by being a good role model for them. Along with being a cause of happiness, helping others was also an effect of it. Constance reported, “I’m very, very, very nice to people when I’m really happy, and I’ll do little things like open doors for people.”

**Social Support: “Knowing that People Have Unconditional Love for Me”**

Most participants stated that social support made them happy, and for some, it was a major factor in their happiness. This included feeling unconditional support from family and friends and spending time with them. Baylor emphasized throughout his interview that the key factor in his happiness was being around people who love and support him. He believed situations were not important to his happiness because “a bad situation’s kind of like a bump in the road but you have to view the overall picture of who’s supporting you and who’s actually there for you in life.” Jif also discussed the importance of social support throughout her interview: “That it just felt good to be with these people, to feel the love and the support and the attention and their energy and just those memories that we’ve all had with each other.”
Interaction: “I Just Feel Involved with People”

Three participants mentioned being more interactive when they felt happy. This involved being “more engaged in the activity” (Tyler), along with being more involved with people. Constance stated that when she is happy, “I like to feel very informative and I just like to keep talking about stuff and I just feel involved with people when I’m more happy than when I’m not happy.”

Physical Signs: “Like the Best Piece of Pie You’ve Ever Eaten”

Participants noted physical signs when they and others felt happy. Two types of physical signs were mentioned. First, participants discussed signs they could see on themselves or others. All participants mentioned facial expressions as a sign of happiness, and some also mentioned body language. For example, Tyler stated that when he is happy, “there’s a sparkle in my eye, and it’s just where I have my shoulders back, my posture’s good . . .”

Participants also believed they could tell they were happy through sensations that were physically felt. When asked where they felt happiness in their bodies, some participants provided specific answers, while for others, there was not one specific place. Two participants reported feeling healthier when happy. Baylor did not feel happiness in a specific place but stated, “I feel healthier when I’m happy because . . . when I feel happy I just feel rejuvenated, and I feel good about myself, and I feel like my health is doing . . . very well.” However, Jif knew specifically where she felt happiness, saying she could feel it in her xiphoid process. Tyler felt happiness in a similar place and provided a detailed description:
I always feel it at the kind of the base of my sternum where it’s right above my stomach, and it’s just center of my abdomen where it just feels like, when you’re stressed or something, it kind of feels weighted down, but when you’re happy it’s a little bit lighter and it, I don’t know, glows, for some type of an adjective.

Other Factors Related to Happiness

**Happy places: “The meaning associated with these places.”** In addition to these major themes, the context of happiness for participants also provides important information about the overall adolescent happiness experience. When asked about specific places and situations that made them happy, participants often reported that situations influenced their happiness more than places. Locations were not an important factor in participants’ happiness, or they influenced happiness only because of the memories associated with them. Tyler thought that “having a focal point for my happiness in a specific place isn’t necessarily how my happiness functions, whereas maybe it’s more about the people I’m around or the activities that we’re doing.” Jif mentioned a number of specific places she felt happy, such as the band room and the cheer lobby at school, and said the memories she had in these places were the reason they were happy places for her.

**Contagious happiness: “If one person’s happy, then another person’s happy.”** All but one participant mentioned that happiness could be easily spread from one person to another. Tyler stated, “Usually when I’m happy, the people around me are either happier, or they’re more engaging with me.”
Discussion

This study contributes uniquely to the literature in positive psychology because the adolescent experience of happiness was explored in-depth through semistructured interviews. Compared to the number of studies addressing positive psychology topics, only a handful used qualitative methods to study happiness, and all of the studies that explored adolescents’ happiness experiences were conducted in countries other than the United States.

The experience of happiness for adolescents appears to be complex. Participants experienced different paths to finding happiness, reported many factors influencing happiness, and described various ways of expressing happiness. Having meaning, being engaged in an activity, and pleasurable emotions were all routes to happiness participants experienced. The opportunity to express and be themselves, feeling accomplished, helping others, and social support were important factors associated with being happy. Interacting more with others, having more energy, visibly showing happiness through facial expressions and body language, and feeling happiness in their bodies were ways participants expressed happiness and knew they were happy.

Schueller and Seligman (2010) have researched what factors influence happiness and found that three orientations to happiness have been associated with greater subjective well-being: meaning in life, engagement in interesting activities, and pleasure-seeking. According to Schueller and Seligman (2010), having a purpose in life can contribute to feeling happy. Schueller and Seligman described engagement as being completely absorbed in an activity. Related to engagement is the concept of flow, which involves satisfaction from being engrossed in an activity that is seen as intrinsically
rewarding (Shernoff, Csikszentmihalyi, Schneider, & Shernoff, 2003). Flow involves an optimal balance between skills and challenge (Shernoff et al., 2003). Finally, pleasure is a hedonic form of happiness that relates to feeling frequent positive emotions (Schueller & Seligman, 2010). All three of these orientations were present in participants’ descriptions of happiness.

In Schueller and Seligman’s (2010) study, only meaning and engagement related positively to objective well-being. Also, these two variables were more strongly correlated with subjective well-being than was pleasure-seeking, suggesting that finding meaning in life and participating in engaging activities contributes more to one’s happiness than does pursuing pleasure. Interestingly, participants gave many more statements explicitly referring to the pleasure orientation than to the meaning and engagement orientations. It is possible that participants saw pleasure as contributing most to their happiness, but it is equally possible they found it easier to describe pleasure than meaning and engagement. It might be easier to verbally express feeling positive emotions and a lack of negative emotions than to express finding meaning and being completely engaged in an activity.

Specifically, participants referred to pleasure in terms of peacefulness. Interestingly, this finding contradicts previous research. By examining personal internet blogs and administering surveys, Mogilner, Kamvar, and Aaker (2011) found that happiness concepts varied for different age groups. For those in their teens and 20s, happiness was more associated with excitement and less associated with peacefulness, but for those in their 40s or 50s, the reverse was true. However, in this study, peacefulness was an important part of participants’ concept of happiness.
Self-expression influenced happiness for all participants. This is not surprising because identity exploration often occurs during adolescence. Erik Erikson’s fifth stage of development (often experienced when one is 12 to 18 years old) is called identity versus role confusion, and in this stage, adolescents learn about devotion and fidelity toward others as they search for their own identities (Harder, 2009). Because identity is an important concern to adolescents, it makes sense that opportunities to express their true identities would make them feel happy.

Accomplishment also influenced happiness for all participants. In high school, there is often a focus on accomplishing, both in school and in extracurricular activities. Perhaps, that is why it was a large contributor to happiness for most adolescents.

Previous research has also found that social support contributes to adolescents’ happiness. O’Higgins et al. found that belonging was a theme in adolescents’ descriptions of happiness. This included spending time with family and friends feeling part of a group. In another study (Hoffman, Iversen, & Ortiz, 2010), Norwegian college students were interviewed about their happiness experiences prior to the age of 14. The researchers found that interpersonal joy was a common theme, with responses in the subcategories of “family togetherness,” “birth of a baby sibling or cousin,” and “romantic bliss” being especially prevalent. Finally, Sargeant (2010) found that relationships were a major theme.

Concerning the context of participants’ happiness, all participants described acting more expressively when happy. Sreeshakumar, Nagalakshmi, and D’Souza (2007) found that for high school students in India, shyness negatively correlated with happiness. The fact that some participants reported acting more outgoing when happy is in line with
the results from Sreeshakumar et al.’s study. Participants also stated that they interacted more with people when happy. This finding was also supported by O’Higgins et al. (2010), who found adolescents communicated more with others when they felt happy.

Participants’ descriptions also included how happiness affects them and others. For example, they identified physical reactions when they and others are happy. Suldo and Shaffer (2008) found that adolescents with high subjective well-being scores were physically healthier than their peers with lower scores, supporting the finding in this study that some adolescents reported feeling healthier when happy. Finally, participants discussed happiness as contagious. While this finding may seem obvious because many people have experienced increases in happiness from being around happy people, it is interesting that most participants specifically mentioned this. This suggests that adolescents’ concepts of happiness include an understanding of how happy people affect others.

**Future Directions**

This study’s participants were all senior high school students living in the Rocky Mountain region, and it would be interesting to see if the findings of this study generalize to a more diverse population. For example, future researchers could compare the happiness experiences of adolescents living in various regions and who are varying ages. This would provide a more holistic and complete understanding of the adolescent happiness experience because researchers could gain knowledge about whether the findings in this study are typical of adolescents in general or whether region and age impact how happiness is experienced.
Researchers could also conduct case studies in which they interview and observe adolescents who have high scores on measures of happiness. By studying adolescents who are especially happy, counseling psychologists could learn what these adolescents are doing that helps them feel happy. This could further inform interventions to increase happiness in adolescents.

**Practice Implications**

This study has practical significance because counseling psychologists can apply these findings in their interventions with adolescents. For example, by being aware that adolescents feel happiest when they can express themselves, psychologists can provide opportunities for clients to use self-expression in session (e.g., using music therapy if a client uses music for self-expression). This study also suggests accomplishments are highly valued by adolescents, so it may be useful for psychologists to point out accomplishments they notice and to encourage clients to pursue activities that will make them feel accomplished. Understanding how adolescents express happiness will also be useful for counseling psychologists. By knowing how adolescents show they are happy, they will be better able to determine when their clients feel happy, allowing them to more easily build empathy for and rapport with clients. Also, they will more easily spot warning signs that indicate adolescent clients are not feeling happy.

Notably, participants did not mention material objects contributing to their happiness, and two participants explicitly mentioned that material objects were not a factor. Jif stated, “I feel that I can’t fill myself with material items like that because I think they run out fast.” From my own experiences, I have noticed that adults often view adolescents as being highly materialistic. However, this study suggests that is not the
case, and it would be useful for practitioners to educate those who work with adolescents about what does influence their happiness.

In sum, psychologists can use these findings to gain ideas for effectively increasing happiness in adolescent clients. While all adolescents are different, there may be some commonalities in how they experience happiness. Through experimenting with interventions inspired by this study’s themes, psychologists can conduct their own local research, learning what works to increase happiness in their adolescent clients.
References


APPENDIX B

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL
DATE: January 20, 2015

TO: Marsha Cohen, B.S.
FROM: University of Northern Colorado (UNCO) IRB

PROJECT TITLE: [676410-4] Understanding Adolescents’ Unique Experience of Happiness Within the Family: Bridging Multiple Perspectives of Adolescents, Parents, and Siblings

SUBMISSION TYPE: Amendment/Modification

ACTION: APPROVED
APPROVAL DATE: January 18, 2015
EXPIRATION DATE: January 18, 2016
REVIEW TYPE: Expedited Review

Thank you for your submission of Amendment/Modification materials for this project. The University of Northern Colorado (UNCO) IRB has APPROVED your submission. All research must be conducted in accordance with this approved submission.

This submission has received Expedited Review based on applicable federal regulations.

Please remember that informed consent is a process beginning with a description of the project and insurance of participant understanding. Informed consent must continue throughout the project via a dialogue between the researcher and research participant. Federal regulations require that each participant receives a copy of the consent document.

Please note that any revision to previously approved materials must be approved by this committee prior to initiation. Please use the appropriate revision forms for this procedure.

All UNANTICIPATED PROBLEMS involving risks to subjects or others and SERIOUS and UNEXPECTED adverse events must be reported promptly to this office.

All NON-COMPLIANCE issues or COMPLAINTS regarding this project must be reported promptly to this office.

Based on the risks, this project requires continuing review by this committee on an annual basis. Please use the appropriate forms for this procedure. Your documentation for continuing review must be received with sufficient time for review and continued approval before the expiration date of January 18, 2016.

Please note that all research records must be retained for a minimum of three years after the completion of the project.

If you have any questions, please contact Sherry May at 970-351-1910 or Sherry.May@unco.edu. Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence with this committee.
Hello Ms. Cohen,

Thank you so much for the requested modifications. I am approving your application and wish you the best in the conduct of your research.

Sincerely,

Nancy White, PhD, IRB Co-Chair

This letter has been electronically signed in accordance with all applicable regulations, and a copy is retained within University of Northern Colorado (UNCO) IRB’s records.
DATE: January 25, 2016

TO: Marsha Cohen, B.S.
FROM: University of Northern Colorado (UNCO) IRB

PROJECT TITLE: [676410-5] Understanding Adolescents' Unique Experience of Happiness Within the Family: Bridging Multiple Perspectives of Adolescents, Parents, and Siblings

SUBMISSION TYPE: Continuing Review/Progress Report

ACTION: APPROVED

APPROVAL DATE: January 22, 2016

EXPIRATION DATE: January 22, 2017

REVIEW TYPE: Expedited Review

Thank you for your submission of Continuing Review/Progress Report materials for this project. The University of Northern Colorado (UNCO) IRB has APPROVED your submission. All research must be conducted in accordance with this approved submission.

This submission has received Expedited Review based on applicable federal regulations.

Please remember that informed consent is a process beginning with a description of the project and insurance of participant understanding. Informed consent must continue throughout the project via a dialogue between the researcher and research participant. Federal regulations require that each participant receives a copy of the consent document.

Please note that any revision to previously approved materials must be approved by this committee prior to initiation. Please use the appropriate revision forms for this procedure.

All UNANTICIPATED PROBLEMS involving risks to subjects or others and SERIOUS and UNEXPECTED adverse events must be reported promptly to this office.

All NON-COMPLIANCE issues or COMPLAINTS regarding this project must be reported promptly to this office.

Based on the risks, this project requires continuing review by this committee on an annual basis. Please use the appropriate forms for this procedure. Your documentation for continuing review must be received with sufficient time for review and continued approval before the expiration date of January 22, 2017.

Please note that all research records must be retained for a minimum of three years after the completion of the project.

If you have any questions, please contact Sherry May at 970-351-1910 or Sherry.May@unco.edu. Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence with this committee.
APPENDIX C

INFORMED CONSENT FOR ADULT PARTICIPANTS
CONSENT FORM FOR HUMAN PARTICIPANTS IN RESEARCH
UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN COLORADO

Project Title: Understanding Adolescents’ Experience of Happiness Within the Family
Researcher: Marsha L. Cohen, B.S., School of Applied Psychology and Counselor Education
Phone Number: xxx-xxx-xxxx Email: marsha.cohen@unco.edu
Research Advisor: Stephen Wright, Ph.D. Email: stephen.wright@unco.edu

My name is Marsha Cohen, and I am a graduate student in the Counseling Psychology program at the University of Northern Colorado. I am researching how adolescents who are in high school experience happiness within their families by studying the multiple perspectives of the adolescent, parent, and sibling. I would like to interview you and your children by asking open-ended questions about your adolescents’ happiness experiences in the family. An example question you and your children will be asked is, “What does happiness mean to you?” Interviews will last approximately 30 to 90 minutes. All interviews will be audio-recorded so that I can transcribe them and analyze them for common themes. You will also be asked to complete a demographic questionnaire so that I can learn about your family’s background.

Be assured that I intend to keep the contents of recordings and questionnaires private, and 3 years after interviews are transcribed, the recordings will be erased. Participants will be allowed to choose pseudonyms to protect confidentiality, and the pseudonyms, instead of the names of participants, will appear in any professional report of this research. All data will be kept confidential to the fullest extent possible under the law.

After all interviews are completed, I will share emerging themes with you and your children, and you and your children will be asked to speak to the validity of these themes. After discussing these themes with you and your children, I will make any necessary revisions and develop the final themes into a report.

I foresee no risks to participants beyond those that are normally experienced when being interviewed. Potential benefits include a possible increase in happiness from reminiscing about happy experiences and the educational knowledge gained from learning the general results of the study. You will also have the opportunity to be provided with the general results of the study.

Please note that as a mandated reporter in the State of Colorado, I am required to break confidentiality for the following reasons:

- Suspected or reported child abuse
- If you are a serious danger to yourself or others
- If your data are court ordered
- If you are a threat to National Security
While I will do my best to inform you if I need to break confidentially because of one of these reasons, I am not required to do so.

Please feel free to call me if you have any questions or concerns about this research, and please retain one copy of this letter for your records. Thank you for assisting me with my research.

Sincerely,

Marsha L. Cohen

Participation is voluntary. You may decide not to allow your child to participate in this study, and if (s)he begins participation, you may still decide to stop and withdraw at any time. Your decision will be respected and will not result in loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Having read the above and having had an opportunity to ask any questions, please sign below if you would like to participate in this research. A copy of this form will be given to you to retain for future reference. If you have any concerns about your selection or treatment as a research participant, please contact the Office of Sponsored Programs; Kepner Hall, University of Northern Colorado; Greeley, CO 80639; 970-351-1910.

Participant’s Full Name (please print) (month/day/year)  
Participant’s Birth Date

Parent/Guardian’s Signature  
Date

Researcher’s Signature  
Date
APPENDIX D

INFORMED ASSENT FOR MINOR PARTICIPANTS
Project Title: Understanding Adolescents’ Experience of Happiness Within the Family
Researcher: Marsha L. Cohen, B.S., School of Applied Psychology and Counselor Education
Phone Number: xxx-xxx-xxxx \hspace{1cm} Email: marsha.cohen@unco.edu
Research Advisor: Stephen Wright, Ph.D. \hspace{1cm} Email: stephen.wright@unco.edu

My name is Marsha Cohen, and I am a graduate student in the Counseling Psychology program at the University of Northern Colorado. I am researching how adolescents define and experience happiness. I will be interviewing you by asking you questions about your (or your sibling’s) happiness experiences. An example question I will ask you is, “What makes you happy?” All interviews will be audiorecorded so that I can transcribe them and analyze them for common themes. Be assured that I intend to keep the contents of these tapes private, and 3 years after interviews are transcribed, the recordings will be erased. You will be allowed to choose a pseudonym to protect confidentiality, and the pseudonym, instead of your name, will appear in any professional report of this research.

After all interviews are completed, I will share emerging themes with you, and you will be asked to comment on the themes and if you think they accurately reflect your experiences. After discussing these themes with you, I will make any necessary revisions and develop the final themes into a report. You will also have the opportunity to be provided with the general results of the study.

There are no risks to you beyond those that are normally experienced when being interviewed. Potential benefits include a possible increase in happiness from talking about happy experiences and the educational knowledge gained from learning the general results of the study.

Please feel free to call me if you have any questions or concerns about this research, and please keep one copy of this letter for your records. Thank you for assisting me with my research.

Sincerely,

Marsha L. Cohen
Participation is voluntary. You may decide not to participate in this study, and if you begin participation, you may still decide to stop and withdraw at any time. Your decision will be respected and will not result in loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Having read the above and having had an opportunity to ask any questions, please sign below if you would like to participate in this research. A copy of this form will be given to you to retain for future reference. If you have any concerns about your selection or treatment as a research participant, please contact the Office of Sponsored Programs; 25 Kepner Hall, University of Northern Colorado; Greeley, CO 80639; 970-351-1910.

________________________________________
Participant’s Full Name (please print)

________________________________________
Participant’s Signature

_______________________________
Date

________________________________________
Researcher’s Signature

_______________________________
Date
APPENDIX E

DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE
Please complete the following form so that I can learn about your background. Please fill in this information based on how you personally identify yourself.

Pseudonym (i.e., a false name you would like me to use): _________________________

Age: _____

Grade of the adolescent: _____________________

Gender: ____________________

Race/Ethnicity: _________________

Annual Family Income:

___ Less than $10,000   ___ $10,000–$19,999   ___ $20,000–$29,999   ___ $30,000–$39,999

___ $40,000–$49,999   ___ $50,000–$59,999   ___ $60,000–$69,999

___ $70,000–$79,999   ___ $80,000–$89,999   ___ $90,000–$99,999   ___ $100,000–$149,999

___ $150,000 or more   ___ prefer not to answer

Parents’ Marital Status: ______________________________

Which relatives make up your immediate family, and what are their ages?

Which of the relatives listed above live with you? If you live in multiple homes, please specify which relatives make up each home and how much time you spend living in each home.
APPENDIX F

INTERVIEW GUIDE
Adolescents

1.) What does happiness mean to you?
2.) When are you happiest within your family?
   a. Tell me about specific times when you felt your happiest when with your family.
3.) Which family members most influence your happiness, and how do they do so?
4.) In what situations/settings do you feel the happiest when with your family?
5.) How do you indicate to your family that you are happy?
6.) To what extent can each family member with whom you live tell when you are happy?
7.) To what extent does your family affect your overall happiness?
8.) When are you least happy within the family?
9.) What are things that do not contribute to your happiness within your family?

Parents

1.) What does happiness mean to you?
   a. How do you think your child would describe happiness?
2.) When is your child happiest within the family?
   a. Tell me about specific times when you think your child felt his/her happiest when with the family.
3.) Which family members most influence your child’s happiness, and how do they do so?
   a. What do you do to increase your child’s happiness?
4.) In what situations/settings does your child feel the happiest when with the family?
5.) To what extent are you able to tell if your child is happy?
   a. How do you know that your child is happy?
6.) To what extent do you think family influences your child’s happiness?
7.) When do you think your child is least happy within the family?

Siblings

1.) What does happiness mean to you?
   a. How do you think your sibling would describe happiness?
2.) When is your sibling happiest within the family?
   a. Tell me about specific times when you think your sibling felt his/her happiest when with the family.
3.) Which family members most influence your sibling’s happiness, and how do they do so?
   a. What do you do to increase your sibling’s happiness?
4.) In what situations/settings does your sibling feel the happiest when with the family?
5.) To what extent are you able to tell if your sibling is happy?
   a. How do you know that your sibling is happy?
6.) To what extent do you think family influences your sibling’s happiness?
7.) When do you think your sibling is least happy within the family?
APPENDIX G

THEMES WITH QUOTES FROM PARTICIPANTS
**Theme 1: Quality Time**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Quote Demonstrating Theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cortez Family</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liz (adolescent)</td>
<td>“I mean like, with my extended family, we go, because my mom’s side of the family’s Christian, so we celebrate Christmas with them, and I like being with that side of the family. My cousin is only 3 year older than me and we’re really close. That’s where I’m happy too.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maria (parent)</td>
<td>“Yeah, so I mean, she is happiest when she’s I think there’s two times I’d say. One is when she’s with me and we’re doing shopping or something.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Owen (sibling)</td>
<td>“We go to Christmas at our cousins’ house, and we celebrate with both sides of the family, same side but like different family, both my aunts’ families. And, she’s happy then because we all have family plus it’s Christmas and stuff like that.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Unit Family</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child (adolescent)</td>
<td>“When we are doing what we like together.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Giovanni (parent)</td>
<td>“We play Frisbee and uh PlayStation and we going out for lunch whatever place he want to go. We went to this place downtown. And, we’re going to Disney. Yeah whenever he spends time, at least with me, it makes him happy.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Becca (sibling)</td>
<td>“Well me and my brother sometimes we go in the pool. And then, we have fun.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Fray Family</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clarissa (adolescent)</td>
<td>“In the car, at the dinner table are the top two (referring to times she is happiest) I would say. If we’re ever watching a movie together.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tanya (parent)</td>
<td>“So, I think she’s happiest within our family when like the 5 of us are playing or joking around, when we do things together. She likes family game night. She really likes that.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tom (brother)</td>
<td>“I don’t think she would ever say this but I think she does sort of kind of enjoy family dinner, like when we can all sit down and have dinner together.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Green Family</strong></td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
| Johnathan (adolescent) | “I’d say, the most happy is every Sunday we go to church as a family and we get to see aunts and uncles who live in town or about 30 minutes away in [city nearby.] And after church, we
all go to my grandparents’ house and we all have a big family lunch, and we get to see the little cousins running around. We get to see the aunts and uncles, get to catch up with them.”

Llewellyn (parent) “I think being able to have you know time doing activities, fun things, active things, that are kind of out and about, rock gym or being able to go swimming or go to like Disney or Universal. Active, involved things that he’s interested in. Going to the movies. For him, a lot of it is just having basic interaction that’s enjoyable and fun.”

Elena (sibling) “We’ve been teaching my little sisters to play Mario Kart and Super Smash Brothers, and they both, they wanna learn how to play Mind Craft too. So recently we’ve all been, like the 4 of us have all been playing all those together so I’m sure he likes that.”

Canto Family

Erica (adolescent) “Just really spending time with them and then being able to have individual time, like not just as a family, but having like moments where it’s just like one-on-one, like just with my brother, my sister, my mom, or my dad.”

Gloria (parent) “So, a lot of the times, their band was a bluegrass band, and so we would go camping with them to blues festivals and stuff, so it’d be the whole family and, sleep in tents, and then all of the rest of the bluegrass bands and all of their families and so, it’s just a really happy time.”

Marina (sibling) “Time spent like out like, not doing activities together here, but going to the pool or a park or vacation or something. I think she enjoys those activities because they feel social.”

Styles Family

Kayla (adolescent) “I’m most happiest with like family time. You know, I like spending time with my family, especially at dinners. Then we get to talk about our days and you know, kind of release emotions and thoughts. We also have a boat. We’ll go on the water. We’ll go like paddle boarding or fishing and that’s always fun.

Tiffany (parent) “So when we go on the boat, it’s away from everything, away from cell phones, away from computers. It’s just us talking or you know, paddle boarding or fishing or kayaking, scalloping soon, you know those sort of things.”

Patricia (sibling) “Probably like we always tell like family stories like when we were younger and last night we actually watched like a family tape from like when she was born and stuff. Like my brother
playing with her and stuff.”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Family</th>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Quote Demonstrating Theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hutcherson Family</td>
<td>Aiden (adolescent)</td>
<td>“Probably when we went on an excursion in St. Kitts with the dolphins. I remember, like, everything was, I just felt really happy.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Loren (parent)</td>
<td>“And he loves to travel, I mean when we told him we were going on a cruise, I mean he said, “I think I'm gonna cry,” he was so excited. He has memories of a cruise we went on 4 years ago, so he was very excited to do that again, but yeah, he likes to travel, he likes to do quality things with us and he does like to be with us.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Shelly (sister)</td>
<td>“Maybe when, sometimes when he gets his phone taken away, he likes it sort of because he can get away from all the electronics and stuff. And he'll actually go outside and interact with us.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Theme 2: Family Support**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Quote Demonstrating Theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cortez Family</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liz (adolescent)</td>
<td>“My sister is the one that makes me happiest. … she can connect with me more. She’s closer to me, because she’s been through high school and stuff and she knows what I’m going through.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maria (parent)</td>
<td>I mean, I manipulate our checkbook, I pay bills, you know, I actually have days I pay bills so she can do stuff, you know, or, I have money on this credit card so I can pay for her to take an acting lesson. … You know, so she likes being with me and, she likes when I do things for her.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Owen (sibling)</td>
<td>“Honestly, I think that she should be happy with me as well, but I think just because [oldest sister]’s a girl, and I think she, my sister can relate to my other sister better because girls have more in common than guys.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unit Family</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child (adolescent)</td>
<td>“She is also a positive influence by being a scientist, I don’t know. So it’s like educationally positive.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Giovanni (parent)</td>
<td>“Pay attention to him.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Becca (sibling)</td>
<td>“My brother and my mom have like a good connection with...”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
“My mom just knows me really well I think. So she knows if I’ve had a bad day or she knows if I’m not happy about something. And I don’t try to keep things from her usually so, she’s just very aware of what’s going on with me usually, and she’s usually able to bring up my mood or, I don’t think she’s ever tried to bring my mood down but, just because she knows me so well and because we’re actually very similar.”

“She is best and happiest when she feels like she is, when somebody else understands her, when she feels like she understands like somebody else and she feels like there’s that connection.”

“She’s going to have to make big life-changing decisions, so I think support’s really, really important in that regard. Just being there to talk or to be loving, regardless of how things turn out or she thinks things turn out or whatever, whatever there may be.”

“And that just makes me happy because she knows what I’m going through but she’s also there to help me get through it. And it’s very comforting to know that I have someone I can always trust.”

“I think trying to see what things that he wants to do or where his goals are and where we are or are not being supportive in that and trying to help orient so that if you know, if he’s interested in this then belaboring him with information on that is excessive. And being able to make sure that supports are in the right place you know so that we’re spending that energy in the right areas and not stressing ourselves or him with the wrong bits of information.”

“But then this past year he got an award for academic excellence in one of his computer classes. And so, him and Mom and Dad went to the award ceremony and they got to go up on stage and accept the award and everyone was clapping so I’m sure he felt really good about that.”

“I think the people that make me the happiest would be my sister and my brother just because we’re so, well he’s a little further in age, but we’re definitely close in age. And so they are the ones who I would go to if I was not happy or if I just
Gloria (parent)  “And if we’re all together then loud isn’t as good because the more loud we get, you know, the parents or grandparents, like, the loudness really annoys my mother, so then we’re trying to tamp it down a little bit and then that just dissolves some of the happiness because then there’s disapproval and then that equates to love.”

Marina (sibling)  “And she feels glad that I would choose to do an activity that she likes instead of an activity that I like. And then, that’s what I do because we don’t have that many conflicts. Other people in our family have to work a little bit harder to make her feel included, but the big competition with me and her is just, she feels like I always think that I’m better, everyone thinks that I’m better than her. So if I can make her feel better, I feel like she just really appreciates that, and it increases her happiness.”

Kayla (adolescent)  “Sometimes it’s just nice to, you know, hear like, “How was your day,” you know. Then I can like release all of my emotions, and then I mean, you know, school’s always stressful. Every day is different, so it’s just, it just helps having somebody hear and listen.”

Tiffany (parent)  “So I think it’s just being able to listen to her and see, try to feel out what she needs. And, you know, getting her whatever help she needs or getting her whatever to try to keep her happy.”

Patricia (sibling)  “I like to make sure she’s OK and like being around her, which is what I do at the times to get her mind off bad stuff.”

Aiden (adolescent)  “I think, definitely my mom and dad because they are, like, encouraging me and with whatever I do, motivating me. I mean my dad especially motivates me a lot, but then my mom's always like, my dad’s more the person to kind of, like, push me and, what's it called, like, give me a realization of what, like, the situation actually is, and then my mom’s there to be kind of like, more of, kind of like, the mother figure.”

Loren (parent)  “Yes, and I also will say like he loves when we come and see him in his you know school things. … But he loves it; he will come and hug us, say ‘Love you,’ in front of his friends, so I definitely know we, he wants us around, you know, and he does like that support that he gets from us.”
Shelly (sister)  
“Well my dad is more strict than my mom, so he kind of gets him better and, he kind of talks to him more so he can get straightened up and he tries to make the family come together a lot of the time; same with my mom, and he always talks to him.”

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**Theme 3: Humor**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Quote Demonstrating Theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cortez Family</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liz (adolescent)</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maria (parent)</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Owen (sibling)</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Unit Family</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child (adolescent)</td>
<td>“When someone messes up and it’s funny.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Giovanni (parent)</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Becca (sibling)</td>
<td>“Sometimes like I do stupid things. Like the first time when I do them, he laughs at me. Like when I do stupid things that I didn’t mean on purpose for him to laugh. Like when I know that he’s laughing, then I’ll do it again and again, and he’ll laugh again and again.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Fray Family</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clarissa (adolescent)</td>
<td>“We have a lot of stories and inside jokes which sounds kind of lame but whatever.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tanya (parent)</td>
<td>“Her dad is very adept at getting her, she’s [Clarissa’s] got a really good sense of humor, and kind of helping her connect with that, really helps.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tom (brother)</td>
<td>“I think humor, I think that’s definitely part of making her happy is she always needs a witty comment or a joke or whatever.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Green Family</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Johnathan (adolescent)</td>
<td>“We definitely joke around a lot and just, humor is definitely, it makes me happy because most of the time just it won’t even be a big thing but my dad will just say one little thing to whatever we’re talking about. He’ll say a little joke and it gets all of us just rolling on the floor laughing. It’s just, I think humor is a big part in the happiness too.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Quote</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>Llewellyn (parent)</td>
<td>“Humor is a good gateway for that security to maintain happiness. And he loves, he definitely loves funny things and loves the humor. And I think that it’s a, I think it’s a tool for happy maintenance.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elena (sibling)</td>
<td>“Well I think we’re all pretty funny, and laughing is a good way to make yourself happy again, so it’s kind of simple. I think laughing makes you happier and we’re all pretty funny and make each other laugh a lot, so I think it’s just real simple.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canto Family</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Erica (adolescent)</td>
<td>“I think my brother tries to relate to me, which is humorous to me because he’s not very good at it, just because he’s so different, because he’s at a much different point in his life now. He’s going into 6th grade now and I’m going into senior year, it’s just, he tries to figure out how he can like help me and then that always just makes me feel better just because he’s trying to help and like he’s failing so badly but in failing it’s helping, because it’s funny to me.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gloria (parent)</td>
<td>“And she likes to, I don’t know what it is, social media and stuff where you make a story of your day. I don’t think it’s not like Snapchat, I don’t know, one of those things. And so, she’ll, like, just come up and like get you on video and you know and stuff, and then she just laughs and has a ball with that kind of stuff.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marina (sibling)</td>
<td>“Every Monday night, I think it’s Mondays, we watch <em>American Ninja Warrior</em>, it's like a, I don't know if you know what it is, but we watch it all together as a family and she seems really happy during that time. … It gets really fun, we all joke and we have all, like, inside jokes about the shows, so stuff like that, where it's like a built-up thing, like, we used to watch <em>The Walking Dead</em> together, that was the same thing.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Styles Family</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kayla (adolescent)</td>
<td>“My dad for the most part, he’s kind of a goofy guy.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tiffany (parent)</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patricia (sibling)</td>
<td>“At the same time my dad, his jokes are, like they’re not bad, but they’re not good, they’re in the middle so like she always laughs about them because they’re not the best jokes.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hutcherson Family</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aiden (adolescent)</td>
<td>“Yeah, and funny and, yeah” (referring to his extended</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Theme 4: Independence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Quote Demonstrating Theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cortez Family</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liz (adolescent)</td>
<td>“I like it when they’re gone. I mean I’m alone completely, like everything is quiet and I can relax and do my work in peace, which is nice. So I guess that’s when I’m happy.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maria (parent)</td>
<td>“So, she’s happiest kind of in her room talking with her friends on Skype, and she Skypes her friends in [city where they live].”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Owen (sibling)</td>
<td>“And then she breathes all her happiness out into her room and that’s where she’s happy.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Unit Family</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child (adolescent)</td>
<td>“It can [referring to restrictions influence on his happiness]. If it’s something fair, I’ll accept it.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Giovanni (parent)</td>
<td>“You know like do what they really want to do.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Becca (sibling)</td>
<td>“He’s happiest when you let him do what he wants, as in, like not running around crazy but like playing on his phone.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Fray Family</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clarissa (adolescent)</td>
<td>“And I think that because I’m so open with my parents and because I don’t try to keep things from them, they trust me more. So that just means that I don’t have as many restrictions and I don’t have to push against them. And usually the restrictions that they do set for me, I respect and understand.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tanya (parent)</td>
<td>“So like getting a car, she’ll be happy to have her independence.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tom (brother)</td>
<td>“She doesn’t like being treated like a kid. She likes feeling like and having responsibility.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Green Family</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Johnathan (adolescent)</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Llewellyn (parent)</td>
<td>“I think that, like when we went out to SD, being able to see Mt. Rushmore or being able to participate in some event or”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
when we were camping, being able to, you can go off on, going off on his own, biking around in the mountains and you know, so he was able to explore and do those things and so he was able to tolerate you know sleeping on the rocks in this particular campground.”

Elena (sibling) “There’s a lot, there’s a very, very big sense of family obligation, so like we have to to go to lunch with our grandparents no matter what every Sunday. We have to go. So sometimes you just don’t feel like going but you have to so you just kind of have to force a smile and go anyway. So I think sometimes that can be upsetting.”

Canto Family

Erica (adolescent) “So I’m definitely I’m happier because I’m more comfortable with me and I’m more comfortable with the person I am, knowing that like I can still function if she’s not around (referring to sister going away to college), so that was definitely really important.”

Gloria (parent) “Having a car is definitely a way of being in charge and I’ve seen her a lot happier when she can just be her own self and not have to wait on other people to get things done that she wants to get done.”

Marina (sibling) “And now that she can drive, she always wants to just, and I feel like my parents always asked me where I was, but I feel like they’ve given her, because she really needs it, that space so that they’re not constantly calling her and checking up, so that’s really good.”

Styles Family

Kayla (adolescent) “But they’re really chill and I mean, they’re not in my, they give me my privacy. They’re not all up in my business. Because I think it also goes with how I am always open in general, so if they don’t really have a need to get every single little detail of my life.”

Tiffany (parent) “You know and then she’ll get to bring a friend along, so then the person that she wants there is there. So I think it’s when she can have those, again, around her that keep her happy. But she also likes the time by herself. She does like her own alone time in her room, you know, as well. I think that makes her happy too. Not to always have the hub hub of everyone else around her.”

Patricia (sibling) N/A
Hutcherson Family
Aiden (adolescent)  “They kind of like give me my space, which is something I really need, like, usually I'll be in my room or out and about, like, with my friends, they'll let me get out and stuff, not only when I'm triggered, but, yeah.”

Loren (parent)  “I think he’s pretty proud of himself when he works for it, because he’ll say, you know, ‘Well, I earned my own money for that,’ so easy to tease his sister because she’s like, ‘I want this,’ or whatever, and he’s like, ‘You never even paid for it,’ so I think it does make him happy knowing that he did it himself.”

Shelly (sister)  “Sometimes if he's mad at me and he tells me to leave his room, I don't and I tell him why, or ask him why I have to leave his room, and if I just listen more, to just leave him alone, I think he would be happier.”

Theme 5: Outside Influences

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Quote Demonstrating Theme</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cortez Family</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liz (adolescent)</td>
<td>“If I’m, you know, stressed with school and doing homework and then I have to eat dinner and then do more homework, you know, that’s, I mean those aren’t the best dinners, you know.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maria (parent)</td>
<td>“She doesn’t like to be with us because of Owen’s ADHD. It’s just too intrusive for her.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Owen (sibling)</td>
<td>“When we were visiting her at camp, at her sleepover camp. She was actually really happy, and I saw her with all her friends and she was, she hugged me and my parents and we were just happy. She was happy to see us and I think because she hadn’t seen as in a while.”</td>
</tr>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Unit Family</th>
<th></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Child (adolescent)</td>
<td>Referring to when he is least happy in the family: “Whenever I don’t want to talk. Tired or whatever, yeah.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Giovanni (parent)</td>
<td>“When the plans change. He doesn’t like change. Any change in the plan, it doesn’t matter what, he is not taking well away. So he’s hard to adjust to new stuff.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Becca (sibling)</td>
<td>“Well, in the morning, sometimes he gets mad, because he gets to wake up at 8. We have to wake up mornings and we”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
turn on the lights and he gets mad and he’s like, ‘Can you keep the volume down?’ and stuff like that.”

Fray Family
Clarissa (adolescent) “It just makes my life outside of my house easier to handle just knowing that I have, I guess a cushion to fall back on.”
Tanya (parent) “I think we stress her out a good bit about schoolwork, for example. So I think our demands about that interfere with her happiness.”
Tom (brother) “If there’s a conflict between two things she’s very passionate about, that’s definitely always tough. Like, if there’s a family trip that’s happening and she’s supposed to be at dance for something and she’s supposed to be at school or doing a show or something like that, and those all conflict, that’s always, that always makes her feel bad.”

Green Family
Johnathan (adolescent) “Sometimes just there’s days where, like moving was not super happy when I was moving because just they were constantly asking me to just work and work and work and sometimes I’d sit down and stuff. They’d sit down and rest but I would try to sit down and rest and they’d be like, “Hey, keep working.” And it’s like, just sometimes they put too much of a workload on me from time to time and that does involve some definitely not the happiest times.”
Llewellyn (parent) “I think a lot of the times that he seems the happiest I think is when more of the family is together, I think whether it’s like for his birthday or Christmas you know, a time that’s celebratory and other stresses like school and stuff are kind of not involved, because his birthday falls around Thanksgiving, so we have to have a week off around that, or we have 2 weeks off for Christmas, you know, so there are some of those things removed and we’re all able to be a little less stretched and able to kind of focus on one another and so I think that those, those times seem to be more you know, happier apart from past strains with some of those times with money at times can impact and put stress in the house and whatever and trying to.”
Elena (sibling) “Yeah, because he’s usually in such a bouncy, happy mood, that whenever he’s stressed out about school stuff, then it’s like, ‘Wow, it must be not that great if Johnathan’s stressed out about it.’”

Canto Family
Erica (adolescent) “I definitely if I’m not happy with something that’s going on
here [in the family], it will seep into other things that I won't be able to completely focus on other things if something is going wrong here.”

Gloria (parent)  “I mean, she can be a bear when she’s under the stress of, you know, too many things coming at her at the same time, so, obviously, you know, big tests and projects due, and this and that and the other and then, arrrggh!”

Marina (sibling) N/A

**Styles Family**

Kayla (adolescent) “Well, my sister at the moment’s going through hormonal phases, so it’s kind of stressful, you know, one day she hates me, and I’m like, ‘I didn’t do anything,’ and, you know, gets kind of like upset because we’re close too. But um, yeah, my mom whenever she’s having a bad day at work or like if she’s really sad about something that happened like you know, in our outer part of the family, you know, I’ll notice how she like just does things, and it kind of just affects me.”

Tiffany (parent) “She’s, you know, generally a happy person. Um, other than when she feels really bad. Because she’s been struggling now for a year and a half with medical issues, so, you know that’s hard because you have to balance that and where she doesn’t have what she used to have in the sense of the drive. I mean, you just kind of, she gets worn out really easy. You know so we’ve had some down, really some down moments this past year, but, with that as well.”

Patricia (sibling) “Well, because she doesn’t really get to hang out because she’s doing homework. We’re all doing stuff because my mom’s a teacher and she has to like do stuff for her kids and I do my homework, she has to do her homework, Dad’s at work, or that kind of stuff.”

**Hutcherson Family**

Aiden (adolescent) “I have this thing called misophonia. … It’s kind of like, where certain sounds trigger me and like give me anxiety and it’s hard to be around my family and that’s also a reason that I like being out of the house because, like, um, that’s why we fight most of the time because, like, I can’t eat dinner with them or, and it’s hard to be around them a lot of the times because even talking can like trigger me and it’s not necessarily everybody, it’s the people that I’m closest to.”

Loren (parent) “When he doesn't have anything coming up or, like, big tests or things, he seems happier, definitely. Over the weekends, I
can say, you know, make him much happier.”

Shelly (sister)  “It depends on his mood that he’s in, so if he’s happy, the family makes him happy or he’s sad, the family makes him sad.”

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**Theme 6: Family Mood**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Quote Demonstrating Theme</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cortez Family</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Liz (adolescent)</td>
<td>“When they’re, I think, in a good mood. That’s a time when I’m happier with my family.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maria (parent)</td>
<td>N/A</td>
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<tr>
<td>Owen (sibling)</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Unit Family</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child (adolescent)</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Giovanni (parent)</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Becca (sibling)</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Fray Family</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clarissa (adolescent)</td>
<td>“But mostly just tiny things will just stress one of us out and it’ll affect the rest of us.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tanya (parent)</td>
<td>“If he’s unhappy, she’s worried. So it’s a different kind of influence on her happiness. But, she is, she’s pretty tuned into him.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tom (brother)</td>
<td>“I think she cares about her family a lot and I think if her family’s really unhappy that it’s gonna affect her in a lot of other ways, so yeah, I think it’s a pretty big part of it.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Green Family</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Johnathan (adolescent)</td>
<td>“Just seeing them and how young they are too and just how energetic they are and excited, it makes me the most happy.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Llewellyn (parent)</td>
<td>“But you know, the girls are always providing accolades. They’re very outgoing and expressive verbally, so I think that, that affirms him and feeds him you know that even if they’re bickering and arguing among themselves or tattling on the teenager you know they still are not such a, they’re not an immense strain on the happiness because they can separate.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elena (sibling)</td>
<td>“I feel like maybe when our parents are happy specifically, it”</td>
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</table>
definitely does help his happiness because when our parents are happy they’re more inclined to be like, ‘Hey, let’s randomly like go see a movie at the theater,’ or, ‘You guys get to pick out dinner tonight.’ So that, I think when our parents are happy, it definitely is more happy for him.”

Canto Family
Erica (adolescent)  “And then obviously my parents can be a factor in decreasing happiness if they are in a bad mood or are yelling or whatever.”

Gloria (parent)  “So, yeah, I mean, definitely when I’m stressed out, then I’m gonna be ‘You’re not helping out with the housework and this and that and the other,’ and so that’s gonna affect everybody’s lack of happiness.”

Marina (sibling)  N/A

Styles Family
Kayla (adolescent)  “I’m that person who likes to please people and I like being around happy people. So that’s why, yeah. That kind of, when she’s upset it kind of just, I wanna make her happy but sometimes I can’t, so I gotta let her blow off steam before I come and talk to her again.”

Tiffany (parent)  “I mean, just things that she wants me to be happy so she’s, as well and so she knows, so she’s trying to please me, which means she’s happy because I’m not, you know a tyrant or anything.”

Patricia (sibling)  “At home, we feel like we can relax. We don’t have to worry about like where are we gonna go, where are we gonna go. So you can just like chillax all together.”

Hutcherson Family
Aiden (adolescent)  “I mean, after I’m outside for a while, then, like, my mood will kind of change to like how my friends are and stuff but like, at first, it’s kind of, like, right after I leave my family, I’m kind of like in that same mood, however it was inside the house.”

Loren (parent)  “I think if we are in a bad mood if affects, he’s told me before that if I’m in a bad mood, it affects him; he does not, it makes him upset when I’m in a bad mood, so, I mean and I do tell him, ‘You know, people are in bad moods, people have their moods, it’s okay to have a bad mood day, you know there’s nothing wrong with that.’ I tell that to my daughter all the time, but. So I would say definitely our mood can affect his
happiness, definitely.”

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<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cortez Family</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liz (adolescent)</td>
<td>“I think they think that if I’m locked in my room the whole day, then I’m not happy, which isn’t the case.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maria (parent)</td>
<td>“I can’t tell if she’s happy these days or not.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Owen (sibling)</td>
<td>“It’s kind of like a straight face that doesn’t really show emotions, like the same thing with happiness, she’s not transparent…”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Unit Family</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child (adolescent)</td>
<td>“Like I said just if I’m interactive or not.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Giovanni (parent)</td>
<td>“Yeah it’s not hard. He’s pretty much an open book.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Becca (sibling)</td>
<td>“Um, he’s always like, ‘So, how was school?’ and I can tell because like he changes his voice to a happy voice, whereas usually he’ll just like speak in his normal voice.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Fray Family</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clarissa (adolescent)</td>
<td>“I’m usually pretty outward with my emotions, so they’re usually able to tell.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tanya (parent)</td>
<td>“Oh you can totally tell.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tom (brother)</td>
<td>“I think everyone has some sense of whether she’s happy or unhappy.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Green Family</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Johnathan (adolescent)</td>
<td>“I feel like my mom and dad are probably the most, they’re probably the best at reading when I’m happy because they’re my parents and they exhibit the same signs when they’re happy.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Llewellyn (parent)</td>
<td>“So a lot of it is just being able to see the array of interactions and then just assessing from barely any interactions to hyperinteraction and how does, where does he fall on that continuum.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elena (sibling)</td>
<td>“I think for the most part, I’m pretty, pretty good at being able to tell when he’s upset or not just because I noncreepily watch”</td>
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</table>
him. I can tell when he’s really upset. Usually because he’s so happy, it’s pretty obvious to me right away when he’s not.”

Canto Family

Erica (adolescent)  “I think it’s pretty obvious, I think they can all pick, we’ve been in this house living together for, with me in it for 17 years, so definitely they know if I’m upset and I know when they are upset.”

Gloria (parent)  “Oh, it's 100% there or it’s not, so it’s like our saying with her and Marina they’re, you know, they’re just, it’s bubbling out of her or she’s a bear. There’s, I mean there’s a little in between but yeah, but yeah, when she’s tired, she’s just kind of grrr. I mean, she’s not, when she’s happy, it’s heard throughout the house.”

Marina (sibling)  “She’s usually pretty vocal about it. Sometimes, you can’t tell if she’s, like, sometimes she’ll be kind of simmering about it because she’ll know. It’s just like more of a problem knowing why she’s unhappy. Usually you’re like, ‘Erica’s upset,’ but you’re like, sometimes you know because you’re like, ‘Oh, we just had a big fight, so she's upset.’ Sometimes you’re like, ‘Something is bothering her, it will surface eventually.’ There's never a time when you never find out. Always eventually, something will be said, either subtly or loudly, but it will be, it will be said.”

Styles Family

Kayla (adolescent)  “I mean I will vent to my mom because she understands more my problems than probably my sister would, so I mean, I would be vocal about how I’m feeling or what’s going on.”

Tiffany (parent)  “It’s pretty obvious. I mean, she’s good at internalizing and hiding things, but so am I. So I can kind of tell when she kind of goes by herself and kind of hovers under the covers. … but she’ll tell you when she’s not. She'll vocalize a lot. I mean there may be times that we don’t know. Um, and then she’ll eventually talk to us about it, but, you know, when she starts getting grumpy and, you know, snotty at us. But you can tell she’s not happy.”

Patricia (sibling)  “In the middle. It’s not like super obvious but it’s not like why is she away kind of like.”

Hutcherson Family

Aiden (adolescent)  “I think all of them can kind of tell when I’m happy or not, like, the same, especially when it comes to, like, the misophonia, they can tell when I’m, like, annoyed or triggered
and I mean, I think they can just tell, like, by my body language and how I’m, like, wrapped into certain things.”

Loren (parent)  “I can tell immediately when he starts talking to us, um, what his mood is like, and I can sense that he’s happy.”

Shelly (sister)  “I can tell right away by the tone in his voice or what his actions are.”

**Theme 8: More Engaged When Happy**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Quote Demonstrating Theme</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cortez Family</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liz (adolescent)</td>
<td>“If I’m talking more, probably. I’m not very talkative with them or very much just in general, so if I’m talking more, I guess that’s just an indicator.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maria (parent)</td>
<td>“And she was bubbly, she was talkative, she was engaging. And that is the sign that she’s happy.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Owen (sibling)</td>
<td>“She’s basically, whenever she’s with my sister, whenever my sister’s with [oldest sister], she’s more, she laughs and giggles with her and has, and feels really happy when she’s near her and talks to her about stuff.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unit Family</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child (adolescent)</td>
<td>“By laughing or being positive.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Giovanni (parent)</td>
<td>“If he’s asking to come here. ‘Hey, can I come to see you?’”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Becca (sibling)</td>
<td>“Like the signs of it are smiling, he’s not mean.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fray Family</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clarissa (adolescent)</td>
<td>“If I’m singing or speaking in an accent, are usually 2 key indicators. Or I’ll tell a joke or like poke them or mess with them or something.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tanya (parent)</td>
<td>“She’s vivacious, she’s talking. Her whole being kind of radiates. Her face lights up. She’s engaged.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tom (brother)</td>
<td>“The amount she talks, the amount of jokes she makes.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Green Family</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Johnathan (adolescent)</td>
<td>“I’m really outward with my happiness and I’m very energetic and bubbly when I’m happy.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Llewellyn (parent)</td>
<td>“I don’t have a scale but being able to, more just being able to observe knowing what I perceive him to be like when he is”</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
expressively interactive and energetic and wants to share about his day or wants to share different things or wants to do things. A little more talkative.”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Canto Family</th>
<th>Elena (sibling)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Erica (adolescent)</td>
<td>“I laugh a lot. You can tell when I’m upset because I’m not laughing. And I’m a very loud person, so if I’m quiet, they know something’s wrong.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gloria (parent)</td>
<td>“She’s loud and she's singing and she's dancing and she's laughing and she's um laughing and she's laughing and she's laughing and it's full on.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marina (sibling)</td>
<td>“She’ll actively ask us to do things, like people besides me, to do things with her, like, ‘Mom, do you want to go the store?’ or, ‘Dad, do you want to watch some TV together?’ which usually is like a struggle, like if she’s unhappy it’s a struggle to get her to do anything, but if she’s happy, she’s like, ‘Oh, I want to hang out with everyone,’ and that’s the biggest indicator. She will actively pursue spending time with family members, which is great.”</td>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Styles Family</th>
<th>Kayla (adolescent)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tiffany (parent)</td>
<td>“I mean the obvious is coming and, I mean smiling and you know, singing and being goofy. Um, being with us and being with her sister, willingly. Playing games.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patricia (sibling)</td>
<td>“She feels like she can dance and she can like laugh and tell jokes and stuff.”</td>
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<tr>
<th>Hutcherson Family</th>
<th>Aiden (adolescent)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Loren (parent)</td>
<td>“We can tell immediately, just sort of even how he comes to the car, the more talkative he is with us, I feel like I can read him, that he’s in a much better mood and happier; the less talkative he is with us, then I know uh oh, something’s up.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Shelly (sister)</td>
<td>“He’s being nice, nicer than normal. Or he is saying, or he is with the family and actually interacting with them and being happy while we’re maybe having dinner, which he usually sits...”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
out for because it really bothers him; sometimes he comes, rarely he likes to eat dinner with us.”

**Theme 9: Family Has a Big Influence on Happiness**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Quote Demonstrating Theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cortez Family</td>
<td>“Not too much I guess like, I’m definitely more happy with my friends than with my family. It’s not like they have such a negative effect on me but it’s not all too positive.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liz (adolescent)</td>
<td>“I think the family influences her happiness a great deal because we are the, this is my opinion not her opinion of the family influence. I would say, we are a tremendous influence because we keep her on the straight and narrow.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maria (parent)</td>
<td>“I think it’s a lot. It’s enough to spring her to, it’s enough to spring her happiness to an extent where she’d say, ‘They have their flaws, but I can live with them. They make me what I am today,’ and kind of boost her like, boost her confidence and boost her happiness thinking about how the family, how she has a family and there’s most people who don’t have a family and that she should be happy for what she has and that kind of builds up her confidence and being happy and being thankful for what she has, instead of taking it for granted.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Owen (sibling)</td>
<td>“I think it’s a lot. It’s enough to spring her to, it’s enough to spring her happiness to an extent where she’d say, ‘They have their flaws, but I can live with them. They make me what I am today,’ and kind of boost her like, boost her confidence and boost her happiness thinking about how the family, how she has a family and there’s most people who don’t have a family and that she should be happy for what she has and that kind of builds up her confidence and being happy and being thankful for what she has, instead of taking it for granted.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unit Family</td>
<td>“Pretty big factor.” “You spend the most time there.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child (adolescent)</td>
<td>“Just in general it seems like a big influence. It makes him fun, makes him happy.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Giovanni (parent)</td>
<td>“Out of 10? … Probably um, like 7½. Because the other part of it is like you said friends and like parties and camping, all the other fun things that we do out of the family.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fray Family</td>
<td>“If it’s something that’s outside my house, usually I’ll come in, be upset for 10 minutes, and then I’ll be fine. It’s only the few things that happen from within my family that make me upset for long periods of time I think.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clarissa (adolescent)</td>
<td>“I don’t think it’s entirely responsible for it, but I do think it’s pretty influential. So, if, you know, happiness is a pie chart, I’d say 75% is family. I do think it’s a big chunk.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tanya (parent)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Tom (brother)  “I think family probably has more of an impact on her in her immediate life, maybe mental state, just because it has to be such a big part of her life right now.”

Green Family

Johnathan (adolescent)  “I’d say family probably goes close to like 70% of it because, like I said before, they’ve known me the longest in my whole life and they know how to make me happy faster than really anyone.”

Llewellyn (parent)  “I’d probably have to say that the, that family would be at least 50% considering how large our family is. And I think he has a breadth of family experiences that outnumbers his friends and other interactions.”

Elena (sibling)  “I feel like when our parents are happy, it affects him maybe like 70% of the time, and I feel like when our parents are unhappy, it’s more like 40 or 50. I feel like the happiness affects him more than the negativity just because he’s a very optimistic person.”

Canto Family

Erica (adolescent)  “I think family is a pretty big chunk in my overall happiness pie because it’s just, these are the people that I live with is the people that I will always have in my life, hopefully obviously, but so they are definitely a huge chunk of it.”

Gloria (parent)  “Currently I would say that we’re lower on that totem pole. Certainly when she was younger, we were the majority of it but I think right now, especially this past year, she's really into spreading her wings and really sowing her oats and feeling what, how she fits into that greater world and everything, and her social, her friendships are really, really strong right now.”

Marina (sibling)  “I think family is, like, friends are like a steady source of happiness, but family is, like, more up-and-down, but it is a really big sector. I think she cares a lot about family and a lot about how what we think of her and how we feel about her, and if she’s feeling favorable, that it makes a huge part of her happiness, and if she’s feeling unfavorably about it, then it can like significantly make her unhappy. And I think it's like not a short-term thing, like, friends are short-term, but, like, happiness of the family part of her life is like something that’s constantly affecting her, in both positive and negative ways.”

Styles Family

Kayla (adolescent)  “Just because I always see them every day, you know, so I get to experience them every day rather than some of the external
things like friends and school, you know, that’s not always an everyday thing. But since I experience them, you know, on a daily basis it affects it more.”

Tiffany (parent) “I think it’s a lot. I mean, we have a lot, I mean not only does our family but also extended family. There’s a lot of people, um, a lot of, my husband’s family’s in town. So there’s a lot of cousins and um, some uncles and grandma and grandpa, and, you know, my brother’s in town, part-time. My sister lives in Boca so you know, now that she has freedom with her car, she can go visit. And drive and see them. And, or they come up here like what we have now. So, yeah I mean I think family plays a lot in her happiness. A lot.”

Patricia (sibling) “A huge (referring to the role family plays in Kayla’s happiness). ‘Cause if she’s having problems outside the house, she can always, she knows that she can come home and it will be all okay, we’ll all be together to talk about stuff.”

Hutcherson Family

Aiden (adolescent) “Probably like around, maybe 60% and then my friends are 40%. … I guess just the fact that they’re actually, like, my family and I’m not really sure that’s, hmm. Maybe because I, like, obviously have been, obviously have been with them my whole life, so they kind of know me the best and I know them very well.”

Loren (parent) “Okay, I think it’s one part of it, but I don’t think that we affect his whole happiness. I think he himself has to be happy with himself. I definitely, like I said, if he has something that interests him or excites him, but that has nothing to do with the family, that helps a lot with his happiness. I also think the fact that he has friends and things to look forward to doing. So I definitely think the family plays a part in it, but not, not the whole thing.”

Shelly (sister) “I think it’s a big effect because sometimes family makes him really annoyed and just not happy at all and sometimes it makes him happy and wanting to be with us and that’s it.”

Note: “N/A” means the participant did not make any statements consistent with the theme. Quotes in italic font indicate negative cases in which the participant explicitly expressed the theme did not fit. All names are pseudonyms.
APPENDIX H

MANUSCRIPT FOR PUBLICATION
Understanding Adolescents’ Unique Experience of Happiness Within the Family:

     Bridging Multiple Perspectives of Adolescents, Parents, and Siblings

     Marsha Cohen

     University of Northern Colorado
Abstract

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the essence of middle adolescents’ unique experiences of happiness within the family system from the multiple perspectives of adolescents, their parents, and their siblings. Another goal was to make thematic comparisons between and within families in order to better understand the complexity and development of the phenomenon for adolescents. Previous researchers have not holistically explored adolescent happiness in the family from multiple perspectives. Seven families participated in this study and consisted of a middle adolescent (aged 15 through 17 years old), parent, and sibling, yielding a total of 21 participants. Data were analyzed using Moustakas’s (1994) modification of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method. In addition, happiness experiences between and within families were compared. Nine themes emerged from the data: quality time, family support, outside influences, independence, family mood, humor, external expressions of happiness, more engaged when happy, and family has a big influence on happiness. Findings are discussed in relation to prior research. Practice and research implications are provided.

Keywords: adolescents, family, happiness, qualitative research
Understanding Adolescents’ Unique Experience of Happiness Within the Family: Bridging Multiple Perspectives of Adolescents, Parents, and Siblings

Social relationships have a key influence on subjective well-being (SWB) and are considered a requirement for high happiness levels (Diener & McGavran, 2008). A consistent theme in the adolescent happiness literature is the importance of relationships with others. Specifically, researchers focusing on adolescents discovered that family factors (such as family structure, time spent together, and quality of relationships) were more important contributors to happiness than nonfamily factors (such as school and work activities, self-esteem, and socioeconomic status; Gray, Chamratrihirong, Pattaravanich, & Prasartkul, 2013). Because researchers have found family dynamics have a significant influence on adolescent happiness (e.g., Edwards & Lopez, 2006; Gray et al., 2013; O’Higgins, Sixsmith, & Gabhainn, 2010; Sargeant, 2010), it is valuable to explore in depth how the family influences adolescents’ happiness. By learning how to increase happiness within the family, counseling psychologists could have a significant impact on adolescents’ overall happiness levels. Family has consistently been a theme in the qualitative research on adolescent happiness (e.g., Edwards & Lopez, 2006; O’Higgins, et al., 2010; Sargeant, 2010), yet few researchers have holistically explored how family influences adolescents’ happiness. The positive youth development (PYD) movement provided a framework for this research. The main goals of the PYD movement are to help youth flourish and to prevent future problems (Bowers, Geldhof, Johnson, Lerner, & Lerner, 2014).

Adolescents’ Relationships with Family

Overall, research indicates that adolescents value family, have positive relationships with family members, and believe family influences their happiness (e.g.,
Edwards & Lopez, 2006; O’Higgins et al., 2010; Sargeant, 2010; Scabini, Marta, & Lanz, 2006). For example, Scabini et al. (2006) found that adolescents ages 16 to 18 years old were satisfied with their families and overall thought they had good communication with and felt supported by parents (Scabini et al., 2006). Scabini et al.’s research shows that family plays an important and positive role in adolescents’ lives.

However, researchers have found discrepancies between adolescents’ and their parents’ perceptions of family factors. In general, adolescents have a more negative perception of family factors than their parents do. For example, Ohannessian, Lerner, Lerner, and von Eye (1995) studied 74 families (with each family consisting of one adolescent and one parent) and found when parents and early adolescents differed on their perceptions of family factors (i.e., family adjustment, family cohesion), adolescents reported more negative views. Scabini et al. (2006) found parents have greater overall satisfaction with the family than do middle adolescents. Rask, Åstedt-Kurki, Paavilainen, and Laippala (2003) found similar results when examining such factors as communication, structure of relationships, stability, and emotional bonds. They also found adolescents’ views of family dynamics were related to their SWB, while parents’ perceptions were not.

Overall, it seems multiple perspectives are needed to completely understand how adolescents develop within their families. To date, researchers studying adolescent–parent discrepancies have used quantitative methods. In addition, researchers have yet to explore sibling perspectives on family factors. This research is needed to help others understand the complexities of this topic.
Adolescent Happiness in the Family

A number of researchers conducting quantitative studies have examined how various family factors are related to adolescent happiness. Flouri and Buchanan (2003) found that father and mother involvement had a positive effect on British adolescents’ happiness. Rask et al. (2003) found that feeling emotionally close to and having stable, secure relationships with family members predicted high life satisfaction among adolescents. Similarly, Edwards and Lopez (2006) found that family was the most important influence on life satisfaction in Mexican American high school adolescents’ happiness. Family’s influence involved parents caring, being present, and supporting the adolescent. Offer (2013) used hierarchical linear modeling to examine the relationship between adolescent emotional well-being and family activities. She found that eating meals and engaging in leisure activities as a family were positively related to adolescents’ emotional well-being. These studies are useful in providing information about family factors that may be important to adolescent happiness, but they do not reflect the complexity of how systemic factors work together as a whole to influence happiness levels for the unique individual (Joronen & Åstedt-Kurki, 2005). Qualitative researchers have provided a more holistic and complex picture of what influences adolescent happiness. However, few qualitative studies have focused specifically on family factors.

Joronen and Åstedt-Kurki (2005) addressed this concern and explored how family influences adolescent SWB by conducting semistructured interviews with adolescents in seventh and ninth grades. This study provides a good start to exploring systemic influences on adolescent happiness holistically. However, this study took into consideration only the views of adolescents and not those of other family members, such
as parents and siblings. Rask et al. (2003) and Ohannessian et al. (1995) called for research that explores how all family members, including siblings, view family dynamics in order to gain a more complete understanding of the phenomenon, yet to date, researchers have not examined this area. Qualitatively investigating happiness with adolescents, parents, and siblings provides a more holistic view of how family affects adolescent happiness. This information could allow practitioners to better design systemic interventions targeted at increasing adolescent well-being, as it will help researchers understand this complex picture of adolescent happiness within the family system in its entirety.

Given the lack of holistic, qualitative research on adolescent happiness in the family from multiple perspectives, the purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the essence of middle adolescents’ unique experiences of happiness within the family system by bridging the multiple perspectives of adolescents, their parents, and their siblings. Another goal was to make thematic comparisons between and within families in order to better understand the complexity of the phenomenon.

In line with the PYD movement, this study’s design was informed by the belief that adolescents have inherent strengths, that family influences their development, and that they value family relationships throughout their development (Lerner, 2009; Scabini et al., 2006). Therefore, a primary goal was to provide findings psychologists can use to help adolescents build on their strengths and flourish. During data analysis, I paid attention to how the strengths adolescents already possess and how interactions between multiple family members contribute to adolescents’ overall happiness experiences.
Methodology

I used Husserl’s (1913/1982) transcendental phenomenology to understand the essence of how middle adolescents experience happiness within their families. My focus was specifically on finding a common essence to adolescents’ happiness experiences. I was especially interested in participants’ descriptions of this phenomenon and how they make meaning of it.

I conducted this study from an interpretivist-constructivist framework. Interpretivist-constructivists believe in multiple, subjective realities and emphasize the interaction between participant and researcher as a way to discover knowledge (Haverkamp & Young, 2007). This perspective is especially applicable to the present research and guided my research design. My belief that individuals create their own realities, which may lead them to interpret the same event differently, led me to believe interviews with multiple family members would provide the fullest understanding of the adolescent experience of happiness in the family.

Participants

Seven families, each consisting of a middle adolescent, parent, and sibling, participated in this study. This produced a total of 21 participants. Middle adolescents were high school students between the ages of 15 and 17. To select which parent and sibling would participate, middle adolescents were asked to identify the parent and sibling living in the household who they felt could best speak about their happiness within the family. All participants were from the Southeastern region of the United States. Each family completed a demographic questionnaire. For information about family demographics, see Table 1.
I recruited participants using purposeful selection, which involves choosing *information-rich cases* that will help the researcher best understand the topic being studied (Patton, 2002). I also used snowball selection by asking participants to recommend other families who could provide rich descriptions.

Table 1

*Participant Descriptions*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Cortez</th>
<th>Unit</th>
<th>Fray</th>
<th>Green</th>
<th>Canto</th>
<th>Styles</th>
<th>Hutcherson</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adolescent</td>
<td>Liz</td>
<td>Child</td>
<td>Clarissa</td>
<td>Johnathan</td>
<td>Erica</td>
<td>Kayla</td>
<td>Aiden</td>
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<td>11th</td>
<td>10th</td>
<td>11th</td>
<td>11th</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>White</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
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<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent</td>
<td>Maria</td>
<td>Giovanni</td>
<td>Tanya</td>
<td>Llewellyn</td>
<td>Gloria</td>
<td>Tiffany</td>
<td>Loren</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
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<td>mother</td>
<td>father</td>
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<td>White</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sibling</td>
<td>Owen</td>
<td>Becca</td>
<td>Tom</td>
<td>Elena</td>
<td>Marina</td>
<td>Patricia</td>
<td>Shelly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
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<td>19</td>
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<td>sister</td>
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<tr>
<td>Race/Ethnicity</td>
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<td>White</td>
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<td>Hispanic</td>
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<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annual Family Income (in thousands)</td>
<td>$150+</td>
<td>$100–149.9</td>
<td>$150+</td>
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<td>$100–149.9</td>
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<td>$100–149.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>married</td>
<td>married</td>
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</table>

**Collection Methods**

After participants and their parents (for participants who were minors) signed informed consent/assent forms, I asked all participants to choose pseudonyms. All data were recorded under these pseudonyms, including documents for transcripts, recordings, and data analysis, along with handwritten notes. Each participant took part in one semistructured interview, with most interviews lasting between 30 and 60 minutes. A semistructured format was appropriate for this study because it provided enough structure for gathering relevant information while also allowing enough flexibility to react to individual responses. This created richer, more detailed data. Questions focused on
participants’ descriptions of the family factors they view as influential to the middle adolescent’s happiness, the context of this happiness, and what the adolescent does to indicate to others in the family that he or she is happy. During interviews, I focused participants on concretely describing their experiences. I continued interviewing families until the data were saturated. I determined that I had reached saturation when I noticed a redundancy in themes and no new themes emerging from the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Analysis

All interviews were transcribed so that they could be analyzed for themes. After each interview, I looked in the data for tentative themes, descriptions, and meanings related to the essence of adolescent happiness in the family. Throughout the process, I reflected on my own potential biases. I analyzed data using Moustakas’s (1994) modification of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method. First, I engaged in epoché to become aware of and work to set aside my prejudices and assumptions about the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). Specifically, I used Dahlberg’s (2006) concept of bridling. Bridling means reflecting on our views and staying open to seeing new views that emerge from participants while realizing that we are subjective and our views will influence how we make meaning from the data (Dahlberg, 2006). While I did not believe I could remove my preconceived ideas about the phenomenon, I did believe I should be aware of them through reflexivity and bridling, which allowed me to focus analysis on the descriptions found in the data rather than on my own interpretations. Therefore, I used a researcher journal to explore my personal reflections on and experiences with happiness in my
family, thinking back to when I was an adolescent. I also journaled about my reactions throughout data collection and shared with other experts in the field.

When analyzing transcripts, I examined each statement’s relevance to the phenomenon of adolescents’ experiences of happiness in the family. I conducted horizontalization, highlighting all relevant statements. I organized each significant statement into a theme by using color-coded highlighting. I used these themes to develop a textural description of what participants experienced and a structural description of the contexts and settings of their happiness experiences. Finally, I developed a comprehensive description (i.e., the essence of happiness in the family for adolescents) that contains both the textural and structural descriptions. I also compared happiness experiences between and within families. Using Moustakas’s (1994) method, I accomplished the goal of finding similarities within and between families. In addition, I made a list of significant differences and looked for themes. As themes concerning what is different emerged, I was able to add complexity to my understanding of this phenomenon.

I enhanced trustworthiness through triangulation of sources (i.e., interviewing multiple family members), peer debriefing, member checks, and negative case analysis. During peer debriefing, I shared findings with a colleague, who was able to verify my themes when reading transcripts from two families (i.e., six participants). After peer debriefing, I utilized member checks. I shared tentative themes and descriptions and asked for feedback on how they fit with participants’ experience of happiness in the family. Finally, negative case analysis involved looking for data that disconfirmed my assumptions and initial findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).
Findings

Nine themes that relate to the middle adolescent’s experience of happiness in the family emerged from the data. Six themes describe what contributes to adolescents’ happiness within the family: quality time, family support, outside influences, independence, family mood, and humor. Three themes describe how adolescents’ happiness plays out within the family: external expressions of happiness, more engaged when happy, and family has a big influence on happiness. All themes fit for at least six of the seven families.

Quality Time

All participants stated quality time contributed to the adolescent’s happiness in the family. Participants emphasized that the quality of adolescents’ interactions, not just the fact that they were interacting with family, was an important contributor to happiness in the family. Some participants also indicated the adolescent had a preference for quality time over receiving tangible, material objects from family. For example, all members of the Styles family emphasized that Kayla preferred quality time to material objects and that they did not think material objects influenced her happiness. Participants described a variety of quality time experiences with family members that made them happy, including special events, time with extended family, and activities in the home.

Special events. All participants thought special events made the adolescent happy in the family. Most special events took place outside of the house. These events included vacations, holidays, birthdays, and time with extended family. Families discussed a variety of reasons why vacations and other special events increased happiness, including being all together, seeing new things, and being relaxed. For
example, Tom thought Clarissa enjoyed working with the whole family to achieve a “group objective” while on trips: “We went to Boston, and our goal was to find the best clam chowder in Boston. So like that was a family mission and she definitely likes that kind of things specifically, just things we can rally around perhaps.” Three families (i.e., Canto, Hutcherson, Styles) stated not having technology when on vacation can increase happiness. Erica discussed how this facilitates her ability to do quality time activities and build relationships with family: “We all get cabins and so we are out of technology and we just kind of like hang out and play games and stuff and do puzzles, it’s really nice.”

Six families reported extended family contributed to adolescents’ happiness in the family. Typically, participants discussed extended family as another reason why vacations and holidays were happy times for adolescents. For example, Tom stated Clarissa is happy during vacations with extended family, such as spending time with cousins at the beach.

**Quality time in the home.** Participants also described quality time with family while at home. One common quality time experience was mealtime. Participants considered this a happy time because family members talk about their days or other topics they enjoy discussing together. Overall, participants thought family members have positive interactions during mealtime, thereby increasing the adolescent’s happiness. Along with mealtime, participants also stated playing games together increased adolescents’ happiness. Tanya discussed how games increase Clarissa’s happiness, saying, “She likes to do things that are like structured engagement, you know, community-building kinds of things.” Finally, participants thought watching movies, television, and videos together increased adolescents’ happiness.
Family Support

Family support emerged as the second most prevalent theme in contributing to adolescents’ experiences of happiness in their families. As with quality time, all participants identified family support as part of the adolescent’s happiness in the family. Family support took a number of different forms, including providing emotional support, giving advice or assistance, and showing interest in what adolescents are doing.

Emotional support. All families reported emotional support contributed to the adolescent’s happiness in the family. This involved creating a safe and trusting environment, talking about/listening to the adolescent’s problems, and understanding the adolescent. Participants highlighted how having safety and trust with family members increased adolescents’ happiness by creating the foundation for adolescents to receive emotional support from relatives. Elena discussed how safety has allowed her to support Johnathan: “We’ve learned to accept one another, and kind of a little safe place to talk about whatever.” When interacting with adolescents to provide support, families noted the importance of providing words of affirmation. Gloria stated that to increase Erica’s happiness, she looks for “something substantial to compliment her on.” Going along with verbal affirmation, participants thought being understood contributed to the adolescent’s happiness. For example, Liz discussed having a number of misunderstandings with her family. She thought her older sister has the most positive influence on her happiness because her sister can relate to her. When asked what her family could do to increase her happiness, Liz recommended they “realize what I’m going through.”
A number of participants reported when adolescents are in conflict with the family, it decreases their happiness in the moment. However, conflicts typically did not lead to a lasting decrease on happiness. In most cases, this was because adolescents were offered support to resolve the conflict. This support allowed their happiness levels to return to where they were before the conflict. For example, Aiden stated that when he has a conflict, he is unhappy for a little while but that when he apologizes to his family, “it makes me feel better because then we kind of like talk about what happened and stuff.”

**Assistance.** In addition to benefiting from emotional support, all families thought adolescents felt happier in their families when relatives provided guidance and help. One way parents provided assistance was through helping their adolescent children meet their goals. For example, Child stated his mother is “educationally positive,” which “makes me work harder.” Families also discussed giving advice to adolescents as a way to increase happiness. Johnathan reported feeling happier when receiving “helpful tips” from family. He expressed that his sister can help because she went to his school, and he said that when she gives him advice, “it makes me happy to know that she’s always there to support.” Finally, families discussed providing help with tasks adolescents could not do on their own. Maria stated she keeps the family organized so that Liz can do things she wants to do. This included keeping up with finances to ensure she has money to pay for Liz’s acting lessons. Overall, adolescents were happier when their families provided assistance not only because they needed help but also because the assistance showed them family members cared about them.
**Showing interest.** Families reported adolescents felt happy when family members expressed interest in their activities. For example, Loren discussed how Aiden is happy with her when she shows interest in his activities:

I remember one time, he was really into this YouTuber and wanted me to watch it and, I mean, I could’ve cared less about the YouTuber, I didn’t find it that interesting, but he loved that we could sit together and watch it and he loves to see my reactions, so I was more than happy to do it because, you know, it was our bonding time.

In addition to engaging with adolescents in activities they enjoy, five parents mentioned the family showing interest through attending important events increased the adolescent’s happiness. Parents discussed attending concerts, dance recitals, and sporting events. They expressed this was important because it indicates to adolescents that family supports and cares about them.

**Humor**

Six families discussed humor as part of happy moments in the family. Humor included laughing, joking, telling funny stories, messing up, and acting funny. Patricia said their father has a positive influence on Kayla’s happiness because “his jokes are, like they’re not bad, but they’re not good, they’re in the middle so she always laughs about them because they’re not the best jokes.” A few participants also discussed how it could be funny when family members make mistakes, leading to an increase in happiness. Child stated board games make him happy “when someone messes up and it’s funny.” Participants also described humor as a strategy family members used to boost adolescents’ happiness. Becca stated she tries to increase Child’s happiness by repeating
“stupid things” to make him laugh: “Like when I try to act all cool and he’s like, ‘Why are you acting all cool?’ and then I see that he starts laughing, and I understand that he thinks it’s funny so then I do it again.”

A few participants thought humor increased happiness because it was connected with support. Erica stated her family tries to make her laugh to take her mind off her problems. Llewellyn also discussed how humor is connected with support but in a different way. He thought humor increases happiness through providing security in relationships: “I think he’s gonna orient first to the people he’s been able to have more expressive humor about … so I think that it can be a way of identifying, ‘Who can I trust for what?’”

**Independence**

All families indicated independence contributed to adolescents’ happiness. This theme includes trusting adolescents with increased autonomy, showing fairness and transparency in setting boundaries, allowing them to develop as individuals separate from their families, and giving them time alone. Most adolescents stated restrictions from parents did not decrease their happiness because parents trust them and provide only the necessary restrictions to keep them safe and supported. Families also stated that adolescents feel happier if they understand the reason for restrictions and view them as fair. For example, Tanya stated that Clarissa’s unhappiness about restrictions goes away once her parents explain the restriction’s rationale: “It usually comes down to trust. ‘It’s not that we don’t trust you, it’s that for whatever reason, we think it’s in your best interest to do something else.’” Families also reported empowering adolescents to feel independent contributed to their happiness. For example, Aiden and Loren thought
Aiden is happier when he works to earn money to buy things he wants. Gloria stated that when her daughter was able to have the car this past year, it increased her happiness because of the feelings of “independence,” “freedom,” and “adulthood” it gave her.

Finally, families expressed the importance of letting adolescents have space when needed. Liz especially emphasized being happier when her family leaves her alone. She stated that she gets along better with her father than her mother because “he kind of respects my boundaries more than my mom.” She also stated she is happiest when she can be alone in her room and not be distracted by family noise. Overall, family’s ability to respond to adolescents’ needs for autonomy, freedom, and space contributed to adolescents’ happiness in their families.

**Outside Influences**

All families reported that things outside of the family influenced the adolescent’s happiness within the family. These were usually stressors that decreased happiness in the family. School stress was the most frequently mentioned outside influence. Families noted that when there wasn’t school stress, they felt more relaxed and had more positive interactions, which increased the adolescent’s happiness. For example, Llewellyn stated that during breaks from school, “there are some of those things removed and we’re all able to be a little less stretched and able to kind of focus on one another.” Other stressors included work stress and medical and mental health problems. The Cortez family discussed how Liz’s siblings’ mental health problems negatively impact her happiness. Maria stated that Liz “doesn’t like to be with us because of Owen’s ADHD. It’s just too intrusive for her.” Tiffany stated that Kayla’s happiness in the family has been negatively impacted by medical problems because “she doesn’t have what she used to
have in the sense of the drive.” These uncontrollable conditions put stress on adolescents, which decreased their happiness in the family.

Although participants mostly discussed outside influences that decreased happiness in the family, some participants noted outside influences that increased happiness in the family. For example, Owen stated Liz was at one of her happiest times with family when they visited her at summer camp because “having fun and then wanting to see people you haven’t seen for a while kind of really makes you happy and gets you in the moment of being extremely happy.” These positive experiences outside of the family created more happy moments with family.

Not only did things outside the family influence adolescents’ happiness in the family, their happiness in the family also influenced their happiness outside of the family. Aiden discussed how his happiness in the family carries over into his happiness outside of the family: “If I’m upset inside the house or they’re upset, you can definitely tell when I go outside and hang out with friends, like, I’m not as happy that I would be when I’m with friends.”

**Family Mood**

Six families expressed that the mood of others in the family affected the adolescent’s happiness in the family. This included both the overall family mood and individual family members’ moods. Participants stated that when the overall family mood was relaxed and not stressed, adolescents were happier with their families. Liz stated she is happier in her family when family members are “in a good mood” and “being calm.” She discussed how when everyone in the family is relaxed, they have more enjoyable family dinners.
Participants also reported family members’ moods directly affected adolescents’ happiness. For example, Johnathan expressed how his younger sisters’ positive moods make him happy: “Just seeing them and how young they are too and just how energetic they are and excited, it makes me the most happy.” Another reason family members’ moods affected adolescents is because adolescents care about their relatives. For example, Tanya expressed that Clarissa is especially sensitive to others’ emotions, which affects her happiness: “She’s a canary in the coalmine in terms of emotionality. If anybody is feeling, you know, unsettled or depressed or anything, she’ll be aware of it. She’ll be on it. So I think everybody has an impact.”

**External Expressions of Happiness**

All participants except for the Cortez family thought that in general, family members could tell if the adolescent was happy. Shelly expressed it is clear if Aiden is happy: “I can tell right away by the tone in his voice or what his actions are.” Three adolescents (i.e., Clarissa, Johnathan, Kayla) thought that although in general, their family could tell if they were happy, there were differences in the extent to which various family members could tell. Kayla thought it is clearest to her sister when she is happy and least clear to her brother and father, mostly because of the differences in how much contact she has with various family members: “Well with [brother] being out of the house, and then, my dad busy, sometimes it’s not really obvious to them.” Although families varied in the extent to which they thought family could tell if the adolescent was happy and who in the family could tell best, participants generally thought relatives had a good read on the adolescent’s happiness.
More Engaged When Happy

Along with being able to tell when adolescents were happy, family members could also identify specific signs that adolescents were happy. All participants indicated adolescents appeared more engaged with the family when they were happy. Participants reported adolescents showed engagement in a variety of ways, including body language, verbal communications, and actions. Participants discussed two forms of engagement: being more expressive and interacting more.

**More expressive.** Participants stated that when adolescents were happy in their families, they became more animated and had more energy. They reported adolescents were energetic and excited and became louder when happy. For example, Johnathan discussed how he expresses happiness: “I’m really outward with my happiness and I’m very energetic and bubbly when I’m happy.” Participants also gave examples of specific ways adolescents expressed themselves, such as singing, laughing, dancing, joking, and smiling. Interestingly, despite highlighting how relaxing situations contribute to adolescent happiness in the family, no participants stated adolescents presented as calmer or more relaxed when happy.

**More interactive.** All families thought that when happy, adolescents interacted more with the family. Many participants stated that the adolescent was more talkative when happy and less talkative when unhappy. Liz stated the way her family can tell she is happy is “If I’m talking more, probably. I’m not very talkative with them or very much just in general, so if I’m talking more, I guess that’s just an indicator.” Participants also stated they could tell how happy adolescents were based on how much they wanted to spend time with the family. For example, Giovanni stated he can tell Child is happy
“if he’s asking to come here. ‘Hey, can I come to see you?’” Marina stated that when Erica is happy, “she will actively pursue spending time with family members.” Some participants stated adolescents want to engage in specific activities with the family when happy. Kayla stated that an indicator she is happy is “if I do things for my sister, like I don’t often like to go swimming, but if I say ‘yes’ that’s when she goes, ‘Oh, she’s happy.’” Some participants stated adolescents retreat to their rooms when unhappy. Participants indicated the length of time adolescents spend alone in their rooms and their energy levels when going to their rooms reveal whether they are happy. Overall, participants expressed that the adolescent’s level of interaction with the family was a key way to determine his or her happiness.

**Family Has a Big Influence on Happiness**

All families stated they thought family had a significant influence on the adolescent’s overall happiness. They gave a number of reasons for this. One was that adolescents have the most contact with family: “She [Clarissa] lives with all these people, so maybe if she’s not happy with her family or the family’s not happy with her, then I mean, that’s obviously going to affect her happiness in a pretty major way” (Tom). Participants also noted that family members have a large influence on overall happiness because they have been part of adolescents’ lives for the longest time. They thought that because of this, family members know the adolescents best and can therefore positively impact their happiness.

Participants also thought family played a big role in adolescents’ happiness because family is stable. For example, Marina compared the influence of family with friends on Erica’s overall happiness: “And I think it’s not a short-term thing, like, friends
are short-term, but happiness of the family part of her life is something that’s constantly affecting her, in both positive and negative ways.” Participants described how family provided stability in terms of supporting adolescents. Patricia thought family plays a “huge” role in Kayla’s happiness “because if she’s having problems outside the house, she can always, she knows that she can come home and it will be all okay, we’ll all be together to talk about stuff.” In sum, family’s large, generally positive presence made it a large factor in the adolescent’s total happiness.

Comparisons Within Families: Comparing Adolescents, Parents, and Siblings

Adolescents, parents, and siblings generally noted similar factors when discussing the essence of the adolescent’s happiness in the family. However, a few significant differences stood out. For example, more adolescents and siblings than parents noted humor contributed to the adolescent’s happiness. Family members also differed in which family members they thought most influenced the adolescent’s happiness. Most siblings thought parents contributed most to adolescents’ happiness, and most adolescents thought siblings contributed most. Finally, for families that discussed the importance of material objects in contributing to the adolescent’s happiness, parents (and some siblings) emphasized material objects more than adolescents.

Discussion

This research provides a thorough understanding of the essence of middle adolescents’ experiences of happiness in their families from the multiple perspectives of adolescent, parent, and sibling. This is the first study to explore siblings’ perspectives on adolescents’ happiness. Based on a thorough literature review, it is also the first study to qualitatively explore the perspectives of multiple family members.
In line with previous studies (e.g., Edwards & Lopez, 2006; Gray et al., 2013; O’Higgins et al., 2010; Sargeant, 2010), participants generally thought family had a significant, positive influence on adolescents’ happiness. This is consistent with developmental literature (e.g., Balk, 1995; Scabini et al., 2006), which indicates that even though adolescents are spending more time with peers, families continue to have a large influence on their development. In addition to seeing family as a significant contributor to the adolescent’s happiness, in general, participants also viewed family as the most important contributor when comparing it with other influences. This appears to be a universal finding, given that researchers across countries (e.g., Edwards & Lopez, 2006; Eloff, 2008; Gray et al., 2013; Sargeant, 2010) have consistently found that family factors are more important contributors to adolescents’ happiness than nonfamily factors.

Quality time and family support were the clearest contributors to adolescent happiness. These themes fit for all participants and received the most responses. Participants emphasized spending time with family contributed to adolescents’ happiness, which is consistent with previous research (e.g., Eloff, 2008; Gray et al., 2013; Joronen & Åstedt-Kurki, 2005; O’Higgins et al., 2010). Both Gray et al. (2013) and Joronen and Åstedt-Kurki (2005) discussed how the amount of time spent with family members increased adolescents’ happiness. However, in this study, participants did not emphasize the amount of time adolescents spent with family members and stated what mattered was spending high quality time together. This fits with Turtiainen Karvonen, and Rahkonen’s (2007) finding that the quality of time spent with family was a more important contributor to adolescents’ happiness than how much time they spent with family.
Participants reported various types of family support contributed to the adolescent’s happiness in the family. The emotional support subtheme is heavily supported by prior research (e.g., Joronen & Åstedt-Kurki, 2005; Levin, Dallago, & Currie, 2012; O’Higgins et al., 2010; Piko & Hamvai, 2010; Sargeant, 2010), indicating it is likely an essential contributor to adolescents’ happiness in the family. In addition, the finding that conflict didn’t have a lasting decrease on adolescents’ happiness and that resolving conflict allowed adolescents to maintain happiness in the family suggests conflict does not need to be eliminated in order for adolescents to maintain happiness in their families. Instead, the goal for families wanting to maximize the adolescent’s happiness could be to find ways to resolve and discuss conflict.

Participants discussed extrafamilial factors that influenced the adolescent’s happiness within the family. In addition, they provided in-depth reasons for why outside influences impacted happiness in the family, such as the fact that things that happen outside of the family affect quality time experiences and thereby impact happiness. In line with these findings, Chappel, Suldo, and Ogg (2014) and Nevin, Carr, Shelvin, and Dooley (2005) found negative major family life events were associated with less happiness for adolescents. Another part of the outside influences theme was that adolescents’ happiness within the family influenced their happiness outside of the family. Often, participants described family as a protective factor that made it easier to cope with outside stressors. O’Higgins et al.’s (2010) adolescent participants made similar statements. This finding suggests that intervening at the family level to increase happiness could also lead to increases in happiness outside of the family.
The finding that independence positively impacted adolescents’ happiness in the family is not surprising because developmentally, middle adolescents are desiring more autonomy and exploring their own identities (Balk, 1995). In addition, the importance of autonomy in contributing to happiness fits with Ryan and Deci’s (2000) empirically supported self-determination theory that psychological well-being is related to autonomy, competence, and relatedness. A unique finding is that adolescents thought having time alone at home contributed to their happiness. It is unclear whether participants in other qualitative studies did not believe this contributed to their happiness or whether they did not think to discuss it. Also, quantitative researchers have not examined this factor.

The research literature is lacking in studies that explore how the moods of family members directly influence adolescents’ happiness. Although adolescent participants in previous studies (e.g., Chappel et al., 2014; Joronen & Ästedt-Kurki, 2005; Turtiainen et al., 2007) have reported getting along with family, having overall family harmony, and lack of conflict contribute to their happiness (which are findings that fit better with this study’s family support theme), they did not specifically discuss the family mood independent of family support. In this study, participants elaborated on how overall family mood directly impacted the adolescent’s happiness. Specifically, participants reported a relaxed family mood made them feel happier because they did not have things to worry about and could have fun and engage in positive interactions with family members. This fits with Schueller and Seligman’s (2010) finding that pleasure and engagement are pathways to happiness. Understanding this connection between family mood and happiness could help counseling psychologists to better design interventions to increase adolescent happiness.
This appears to be the first study to find that humor contributes significantly to adolescent happiness based on a literature search. Given the finding that humor is related to happiness in adult populations (e.g., Páez, Seguel, & Martínez-Sánchez, 2013; Yue, Liu, Jiang, & Hiranandani, 2014), this finding is not surprising. Importantly, participants noted family members intentionally used humor as a strategy to increase happiness. This fits with research that interventions using humor are effective at increasing adults’ happiness (Gander, Proyer, Ruch, & Wyss, 2013). This also builds on previous research by showing this finding could apply to adolescent populations.

The finding that family members could easily tell when the adolescent was happy is new to the adolescent happiness literature. Specifically, participants also thought adolescents engaged more with family when happy, which could be one reason why it was easy for family to tell if adolescents were happy. Participants reported adolescents interacted more with family members and were more expressive when happy. This fits with Mogilner, Kamvar, and Aaker’s (2011) finding that participants in their teens and 20s associated happiness more with excitement than peacefulness. The present study found that this excitement came out in how adolescents expressed happiness with family members. Findings also indicate both parents and siblings noticed adolescents’ increased engagement, meaning excitement isn’t only something that is felt internally when adolescents are happy but also something that is expressed externally. This ability to detect adolescents’ happiness is a strength that families could use to effectively monitor adolescents’ happiness and intervene when necessary to try to increase their happiness.
Limitations and Future Research Directions

Findings from this study can inform future research that could continue to add complexity to understanding adolescents’ happiness in the family system. Participants were somewhat limited in terms of diversity. This sample was diverse in gender, the adolescent’s grade, and family structure (related to number and gender of siblings). However, most participants were White, had a relatively high socioeconomic status, and were from intact families. Therefore, the generalizability of these findings is limited.

This study was unique in that it incorporated siblings’ perspectives and explored family members’ ability to tell if the adolescent is happy. It is recommended researchers further explore these topics to determine if this study’s findings generalize to more diverse samples.

This research was also limited to focusing on one moment in time. It is unknown how findings would change throughout adolescent development. Through longitudinal studies, researchers could explore how family factors influence the adolescent’s happiness over time. This would allow them to understand how adolescents’ happiness in the family changes during high school, providing information about which family factors are consistent and which ones change throughout middle adolescence.

Another limitation is that only one middle adolescent, sibling, and parent per family were interviewed. When possible, adolescents chose parent and sibling participants. They selected siblings who were diverse in age and gender. However, when selecting parents, only two adolescents chose their fathers. Future qualitative research could include multiple parents and siblings. In addition, it could be valuable to
interview extended family members, as spending time with extended family was an important component of adolescents’ happiness.

Finally, this research was limited to middle adolescents with siblings in the home. It is unknown how findings would apply to only children or adolescents whose siblings do not live with them. Future research could include these adolescents, such as by comparing the experiences of adolescents who are only children and adolescents with siblings. This could help psychologists understand what the key differences are between these two groups.

**Practice Implications**

This study’s findings provide implications for counseling psychologists who work with middle adolescents and their families. Because participants and the literature (e.g., Edwards & Lopez, 2006; Gray et al., 2013; O’Higgins et al., 2010; Sargeant, 2010) indicate family has a significant influence on adolescent happiness, exploring family factors and helping adolescents improve family factors would likely be a way to increase the adolescent’s overall happiness. Specifically, psychologists could ask adolescents about their relationships with each family member and how family affects the presenting problem. Findings also indicate influences outside of the family affect happiness in the family. Therefore, psychologists who work with families could increase adolescents’ happiness in the family by addressing issues that could be occurring outside of the family, such as family members’ school and work stress.

Findings indicate that not only parents but also siblings are influential to adolescents’ happiness in the family. Therefore, when psychologists conduct family therapy, they could include siblings (when appropriate) in order to increase the
adolescent’s happiness. This could help families to best draw on their strengths so they can work together on family issues in order to increase the adolescent’s happiness. In addition, findings indicate siblings were more likely to think parents were the biggest influencers of adolescent happiness, while adolescent were more likely to think siblings were the biggest influencers. Given siblings might not recognize how much impact they have in the relationship, psychologists could help them recognize that they contribute significantly to the adolescent’s happiness.

Given quality time and family support were the most prevalent themes in this study and previous research (e.g., Eloff, 2008; Joronen & Åstedt-Kurki, 2005), psychologists could increase adolescents’ happiness by incorporating these aspects into counseling. For example, by asking middle adolescent clients about quality time experiences and support in their families, psychologists could better understand their clients’ contexts and help them gain insight into what helps their happiness in the family.

Counseling psychologists can also help families understand what factors contribute to middle adolescents’ happiness through providing preventative care to help families incorporate these factors before problems occur or escalate (Bowers et al., 2014). Counseling psychologists could provide outreach in which they help families with middle adolescents recognize and build on their strengths related to the factors that this study found increase adolescents’ happiness in the family. They could conduct activities in which families assess their progress in each area so they can gain awareness of what they are doing well and work to build on their strengths, thereby maximizing adolescents’ happiness in the family (Bowers et al., 2014).
References


