A Linguistic Approach to Agency: A Mixed Methods Study of Adult Secondary Learners

A Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
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by

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Dedication

This is dedicated to the adult learners who generously offered their time to help me with this research. I am honored by the gift of your stories, the richness of which this dissertation only begins to acknowledge.
Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my committee members for enthusiastically diving into this project along with me and sticking with me through its many metamorphoses. Thanks also to my family and friends who supported me through the ups and downs of this process, especially my cheerleader and checker, Jori. Thank you to my daughters, Annalise and Carly, for always accepting me where I am and patiently waiting for the promised doctorate and the promised dog. Finally, thank you, Aaron, for walking the doctoral road with me a second time—I promise there will be no third!
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Abstract

A LINGUISTIC APPROACH TO AGENCY: A MIXED METHODS STUDY OF ADULT SECONDARY LEARNERS

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The purposes of this linguistic analysis of agency in adult secondary learners are to use functional linguistics to develop a diagnostic tool to analyze narratives for agency and to investigate adult secondary learners’ agency experiences with discourse analysis. A feeling of agency—a capacity to produce effects (Kaptelinin & Nardi, 2006)—is critical in academic domains, where feelings of low agency can lead to poor performance and dropout. Related concepts like self-efficacy and perceived control are often assessed via survey, which may not assess cultural difference and may be predictable from the measure’s wording, unlike the narrative accounts proposed here. Moreover, agency may be particularly important in adult secondary education, where learners face high barriers to completion.

This mixed methods study follows a sequential design. Brief interviews with 64 GED® learners were conducted at two adult literacy organizations and coded for 20 different linguistic variables. The distribution of these variables was examined and used
to direct qualitative discourse analysis of portions of participants’ narratives, with a focus on participants’ particularistic understandings of their own and others’ roles in their education. To help inform analysis of these learners’ narratives, participants also completed measures of demographic characteristics, reading and writing self-efficacy, perceived academic control, perceived autonomy support, and structural barriers. Attendance records and placement test scores were also collected.

Results indicate that participants use the identified linguistic markers to construct a sense of agency that is distributed across themselves and other individuals (particularly family and teachers) and shifts across past and present temporal contexts. Many participants mitigate their degree of present agency, presenting themselves as obligated to get a high school equivalency. Participants also use relational and mental process types to narrate their resources: the supports or qualities they have or don’t have; and they use material process types to narrate themselves as actively pursuing broad goals (e.g., getting an education) and taking specific actions (e.g., using internet videos to study). Hence, these learners are mainly being, experiencing, and doing as agents pursuing an education. Survey results, while revealing little due to low variance, generally match these results, indicating participants’ overall strong feelings of self-efficacy, perceived control, and perceived autonomy and low sense of structural barriers.
Chapter One: Introduction

*Interviewer:* Do you have any questions for me?

*A 27-year-old female participant:* No. Like I really don’t feel like I don’t know if I’m gonna make it in this [adult secondary] program. I don’t feel that way because I *know* I’m going to make it as long as I put enough effort into making it. But at the same time, I hope I do take something—, I *know* I’m going to take something from this because you guys [at the literacy organization], you’re here to teach, y’all [are] *teaching*. So all I gotta do is pay attention. So I just wanna learn. That’s it.

The adult learner above expresses strong feelings of *agency*—broadly construed as a capacity to produce effects (Kaptelinin & Nardi, 2006). She “knows” she is going to make it and she knows that this is connected to her effort and beliefs about herself, something the literature bears out (Bandura, 2006a; Gillet, Berjot, Vallerand, & Amoura, 2012; Stupinsky, Perry, Hall, & Guay, 2012). Yet she also points to the importance of the teaching quality in her classes—“y’all are *teaching*”—implying that perhaps her job as a learner is a bit easier due to that: *all* she has to do is pay attention and maintain that drive of *wanting* to learn. This learner’s conception of agency is complex, involving her effort, attention, and commitment to learning and her *teachers’* efforts and skills. This participant’s narrative of agency in her current academic setting sharply contrasts with
her narrative of past academic experiences in middle and high school when, she says, “nothing felt like it was right” and she did not get to do the things her peers did like go to prom or high school graduation (see Rogers, 2004, for similar narrative contrasts with adult secondary learners). In just this short excerpt from a participant’s narrative, then, we see both the nuance and the importance of agency in academic pursuits.

Drawing on prior research in educational psychology, phenomenology, linguistics, and automated text analysis, this mixed methods study explores how adult learners narrate their agency across different academic experiences in their lives and what these narratives can tell us about agency as a construct and about these particular adult learners.

**An Argument for a Linguistic Assessment of Agency**

This research works to develop a construct of *linguistic agency*—the degree to which and manner in which speakers represent themselves as acting intentionally and autonomously on the world—through learners’ narratives of their educational experiences. Narrative is a particularly good tool for understanding participants’ sense of agency because *intention* (having a purpose or a goal) is a central part of both narrative and agency (McAdams, 2001). While agency and related constructs like control and self-efficacy may eventually be useful tools for understanding the adult classroom, currently assessment in GED® classes is limited to literacy, mathematics, and job readiness skills (cf., Greenberg et al.’s [2010] discussion of assessment in adult basic education). There are certainly psychological assessments available to measure students’ beliefs about how much control they have in the academic setting or their perceived efficacy (or lack
thereof) in the academic setting (Bandura, 2006b; Perry et al., 2001). But these assessments have not yet been adapted for the GED® or adult literacy population (with two notable exceptions: Beder, Tomkins, Medina, Riccioni, & Deng, 2006; Ziegler, Bain, Bell, McCallum, & Brian, 2006).

Moreover, self-report surveys of beliefs, attitudes, or perceptions are of limited value in the adult secondary instruction context because most are written and, even if read aloud, require oral processing of survey language, which may be difficult for struggling readers and writers (cf., Anastasi & Urbina, 1997 for a discussion of the advantages of projective techniques over self-report survey). And surveys may not detect the cultural and contextual differences in adult learners’ perceptions of agency, an important consideration given the growing population of adult learners from cultures outside the mainstream. Even more critically, some research suggests that individuals’ responses to written forms can be reliably predicted by the semantic qualities or the wording of the form itself (Arnulf, Larsen, Martinsen, & Bong, 2014; Sakshaug & Kreuter, 2014). Traditional measures, then, are limited in their ability to assess the ways adult learners talk more informally about who they are as learners and how they perceive their role in the classroom (Rogers, 2004). Without this assessment capability, instructors and administrators cannot determine when students are questioning their ability to agentively manage their classroom environment, making it difficult to know when and how to intervene and offer help.
Agency and the Adult Secondary Education Context

Agency may prove to be particularly important in the adult secondary education context, where learners face very different barriers from those they faced as high school students. To begin, adult learners are frequently balancing family and job responsibilities, making it difficult to find the time and space to come to class and study for the GED® exam (Comings, Parrella, & Soricone, 1999; Gopalakrishnan, 2008; King, 2002; Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007). Moreover, many struggle with the structural barriers of poverty like inadequate housing, lack of access to transportation, and significant health problems, which can lead to long periods away from class or study (Darkenwald & Valentine, 1985; Schafft & Prins, 2009).

Also, some researchers point to additional (albeit perhaps related) barriers to participation in adult education associated with learners’ perceptions of themselves and the classroom context (Benson, 2010; Compton-Lilly, 2009; Rogers, 2004). These studies found that while adult secondary learners often describe themselves as competent in their community or in family literacy settings, they focus more on their deficiencies and lack of agency in formal educational settings. Given that these learners usually reach a GED® class after being unsuccessful in the formal educational setting of high school, it is perhaps not surprising that they struggle with agency in the adult classroom. This study aims to offer a better understanding of this struggle and of how some adult learners use present and past experiences to build a sense of agency for themselves as GED® learners.
Adult Secondary Education: A Changing Landscape

Recently there have been major developments in the research, policy, and practice of adult education, making this an important time to research the needs and perspectives of adult learners. First, adult education research saw the release, in 2015, of the data from the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC). PIAAC, conducted internationally in 2011-2012, is a large-scale research study of adult skills, with a focus on education and employment (Goodman et al., 2013). Researchers surveyed a nationally representative sample of 5,000 adults between 16 and 65 years old in the United States and in 22 other countries (Goodman et al.).

The results of the PIAAC were somewhat disheartening, with the U.S. ranking below the international average across all three major study domains: literacy, numeracy, and problem solving in technology-rich environments (American Institutes for Research, AIR, 2014). Moreover, numeracy scores in the U.S. have declined since the last major assessment, the Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey (done between 2003 and 2008), and literacy skills have not changed significantly since that time (Goodman et al., 2013). AIR explicates some of the data in practical terms, noting that 20% of U.S. adults are not likely to be able to find the name of a specific congressman in a short list of information (part of the PIAAC literacy measure), 60% are not likely to be able to calculate the cost of shoes on a “buy one pair, get a second pair of equal or lesser value for half price” sale (part of the PIAAC numeracy measure), and 30% are not likely to be able to organize e-mail into folders (part of the PIAAC problem solving in technology-rich environments measure). Moreover, the U.S. has the greatest gap between the highest and lowest scores
in literacy and numeracy than any other participating country (AIR). These preliminary results indicate the great need for improvements in adult literacy, numeracy, and technology education and, thus, focused research studies in adult education.

Second, adult education policy has seen significant changes over the past year with the implementation of H.R. 803, the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA). The WIOA was a bipartisan effort, signed into law by President Obama on July 22nd, 2014, which took effect in July of 2015 (http://www.doleta.gov/wioa/). This reauthorization of the Workforce Investment Act (WIA; originally authorized in 1998) allots three billion dollars for employment, education, training and support services for job seekers. Included within the WIOA is a reauthorization of and amendment to the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act (AEFLA), the policy that determines the bulk of adult education funding and regulation.

While the 1998 WIA focused on funding “short-term training and rapid re-employment” and made it difficult for individuals to receive multiple services from multiple programs (e.g., a GED® class from an adult education program and a job training class from an employment center) the 2014 WIOA focuses on “streamlining programs, reporting, and administration” (National Skills Coalition, NSC, 2014). The major tools the WIOA uses to streamline programs are (a) a single, unified plan for every state with which local programs must align and (b) a common set of performance measures across different types of programs (NSC). This streamlining promises to allow different adult employment and educational organizations across a given state to
coordinate services so that they can help their clients both find short-term employment options and plan for long-term employment and education.

Yet, despite the hopeful improvements, literacy providers have concerns about the structure of the WIOA as well. To begin, some states administer the WIOA funds through the state Department of Labor and Licensing Regulations (DLLR) while others administer them through the state Department of Education (DOE). In DLLR states, some literacy providers are concerned that the focus and the funding will go primarily to employment efforts rather than educational efforts due to DLLR’s historical and structural commitment to labor issues. Next, the WIOA requires a single set of performance measures across each state, both in employment organizations and adult education organizations. Yet adult education organizations often need to do more nuanced testing in order to track students’ academic progress, so they may have to use their scant resources to administer two sets of assessments for their learners. Moreover, the WIOA does not stipulate any performance measures for the lowest literacy levels (individuals reading at the third grade level and below), creating concern among some adult educators about whether these adults will receive the educational support they need to participate fully not only in employment activities, but in civic activities as well. Finally, the WIOA maintains rather than increases the funding level for adult education. Many adult education programs around the country are at capacity, yet they are only serving 2 percent of the 39 million adults without a high school diploma (Lipke & Farrell, 2014). In fact, the adult education programs where this research was done report that they continue to be stretched thin and have not yet seen any kind of boost from WIOA.
Third, the practice of adult education is changing for educators and learners with the rollout of the new GED® exam in January, 2014. This new instantiation of the GED® exam (last updated in 2002) represents a radical overhaul in adult secondary assessment that is having a major impact on adult learners and educators and, in studies done in Arizona and New Mexico, has signaled a downturn in rates of both taking and passing the GED® exam (Hart, 2015; Page-Reeves & Cardiel, 2016). To begin, the fees for the 2014 GED® exam have increased dramatically. This is due in large part to the 2010 restructuring of the GED® Testing Service from a non-profit organization administered by the American Council on Education (ACE) to a for-profit organization owned by Pearson VUE Publishing and jointly administered by Pearson VUE and ACE (Lipke & Farrell, 2014). GED® Testing Service has set the minimum fee to $120, which is up from a fee of around $60 for the 2002 GED exam (Orson, 2012). Moreover, the GED® Testing Service has stricter standards for site certification, limiting the testing locations and perhaps adding travel cost to an already expensive venture (Lipke & Farrell).

In addition to higher exam fees, the new GED® exam is more difficult than the prior version (American Council on Education, 2011; Lipke & Farrell, 2014). Pearson and ACE designed the new exam to respond to the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) that have been adopted by most states for K-12 educational programs (Lipke & Farrell). Following CCSS, text complexity is increased at almost every grade level (i.e., what used to be called a 10th grade reading level is now only a 9th grade reading level), mathematical problems require a greater depth of understanding, and now two out of the four sections require extended writing (Lipke & Farrell). Because the new exam is in line
with the CCSS, adults who pass the exam will have better critical thinking skills and be more prepared for the demands of the current job market than previous test takers. Moreover, the four sections of the new exam may be taken on separate occasions, making it possible for test takers to focus their study of this more advanced material on one section at a time. Yet the increased difficulty of the GED® exam places additional pressures on learners and programs. In order to prepare students for the higher level of performance, programs will need more classroom time, new and updated curricula, and additional instructor professional developments (Lipke & Farrell). While GEDTS® is offering a number of resources on their website (e.g., GEDReady™ practice exams, access to a test preparation “marketplace,” and professional development programs; www.gedtestingservice.com), many of them come with a fee, which is prohibitive for low-income learners and the programs that serve them. For instance, it costs an individual $24 to take all four sections of the official GEDReady™ practice exam (www.gedmarketplace.com).

Also, for many learners, the change in format from the 2002 GED paper-and-pencil test to the computer-administered 2014 GED® exam poses additional difficulties (Lipke & Farrell, 2014). Adult secondary learners often have little access to computers (Cardoza, 2013), so computer-based testing could add to their cognitive load during testing. A 2010 GEDTS® usability study determined that the different question types on the exam make use of 20 unique computer skills, a high demand for a learner who may already be struggling with the difficulty of the material. After revisions to this exam for the 2014 rollout, though, the necessary computer skills were reduced, leaving; use of a
mouse, scrolling, drag-and-drop, navigating between tabs, basic word processing, drop-down menus, and a virtual calculator (Lipke & Farrell). While this represents a significant improvement over the 2010 version, these eight skills are still significant for a learner who has scant access to computer time and training. Furthermore, in order to provide this time and training, adult literacy programs need to budget for computer equipment, permanent space (some literacy programs have small offices and do their teaching out of free or inexpensive spaces in libraries, churches, and community centers), internet and physical security, software licenses and updates, and instructor computer training (Lipke & Farrell).

In conclusion, the emerging PIAAC research results, the policy opportunities and challenges inherent in implementation of the WIOA, and the changes in educational practice as a result of the new GED® exam indicate both the importance of and the constraints upon adult secondary education in the contemporary U.S. This dissertation explores and develops a potentially powerful tool for informing adult education resource and practice: learners’ perceptions of their own agency.

Definition of Key Constructs

This research was carried out with adult secondary learners: individuals aged 18 and above who were not able to complete a high school degree and, at the time of the study, were taking classes to assist them in passing the GED® exam or an equivalent.

This study draws heavily from constructs developed in the area of systemic functional linguistics (SFL). In this subfield of cognitive linguistics, researchers examine
the ways grammatical structures represent various concepts and how these structures are used to reach discursive goals (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999; Martin & Rose, 2007).

The construct of agency, to be developed further in Chapter Two, can be broadly understood as a feeling of control over one’s circumstances (Wehmeyer, 2004). This feeling of agency is distinct from a philosophical understanding of agency as actually being a fully self-determined individual, free from external strictures (cf., Martin, Sugarman, & Thompson, 2003, for a review of the determinism debates from ancient thinkers through the enlightenment and into modern debates). While that is indeed an important debate, instead, in keeping with a psychological perspective, I focus here on a feeling of agency.

In order to explore a sense of agency, I draw on the closely related constructs of self-efficacy, perceived academic control, and perceived autonomy support, discussed briefly here. Self-efficacy, a belief in one’s capabilities, is a foundational piece of agency; to believe you have control over your circumstances, you must first believe you have the capacity to affect those circumstances (Bandura, 2012). Perceived academic control, a feeling that you have the ability to influence your academic successes and failures, (Perry, Hladkyj, Pekrun, & Pelletier, 2001). A feeling of control over academic circumstances in particular is a central interest in this study. Finally, perceived autonomy support offers a perspective on how well the context supports feelings of control—in other words for this study, do learners feel as if they are “allowed” to exercise aspects of agency in the classroom environment (Williams & Deci, 1996)?
In addition to the constructs above, I draw on Darkenwald and Valentine’s (1985) conception of barriers to adult education: any factors that might deter an adult from starting or continuing their education. In consultation with adult education practitioners, I selected aspects of Darkenwald and Valentine’s barriers construct that related to structural barriers: situational factors like lack of transportation or health problems that tend to derive in some way from lack of material resources (see Schafft & Prins, 2009 for further discussion of the structural barriers of poverty).

Also, to measure the potential effect agency is having on outcomes, I examine achievement as operationalized by learners’ most recent Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment System (CASAS) scores and persistence as operationalized by percentage of total hours over a semester that a learner attends adult secondary classes.

**Purpose and Research Questions**

This study of linguistic agency in adult secondary learners has two purposes: (a) to investigate and describe adult secondary learners’ experiences of agency, (b) to develop a diagnostic linguistic tool for analyzing agency in narrative. Corresponding to these purposes, I pose three research questions:

1. What are the characteristics of an adult learner’s sense of agency?
2. How do adult learners understand themselves and others as agents?
3. What are the contributions of systemic functional linguistic analysis to psychological measurement?
Chapter Two: Literature Review

I argue in this chapter that an individual’s linguistic representation of her agency is a distinct and important construct in the study of adult secondary learners. In the first section, I review philosophical and psychological conceptions of agency, building an argument for the centrality of agency to human perception and functioning. Then, in the second section, I offer a linguistic account that encompasses the subtleties of the philosophical and psychological conceptions of agencies. In the third section, I argue for the importance of agency in the adult secondary education context, where learners face a distinct set of challenges. In the final section, I argue for the importance of the representation of agency in stories, making an argument for educational autobiography as a data collection tool.

Philosophical and Psychological Conceptions of Agency

Agency broadly understood as a capacity to produce effects (Kaptelinin & Nardi, 2006) has been debated in philosophy since at least the 17th century and Locke’s doctrine of determinism: the idea that all human actions are determined by external forces (see Wehmeyer, 2004, for a discussion of the historical evolution of determinism and agency debates). Arguments like Locke’s against the existence of free will persist, most notable among them the physicalist view that everything that happens in the world, including humans’ mental states, can be explained by physical and biological science (Churchland,
1986). In this view, humans may have a sense of agency, but they have no actual control over themselves or the world around them. Almost directly contrasted to physicalism, idealist accounts of agency maintain that an individual is “the ultimate causal source of his or her action” (Sugarman & Sokol, p. 2).

Many scholars, however, have moved away from this binary opposition of determined versus free to a more nuanced view of humans in context, in which agency comes both from individuals and from their environment, each working upon the other (Sugarman & Sokol, 2012). There are many varieties of this externalist view, but they all share some interplay between humans’ internal intentions and the external world. In this view, humans are certainly constrained by their biological and psychological make-up, their culture, and the physical world, but there is significant room for “improvisation” within these constraints (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998).

All three of the views discussed thus far—physicalism, idealism, and externalism—refer to an individual’s actual agentic capacity in the world, to the extent to which humans act free of constraints. While it is important to understand the limits of this capacity philosophically, it would be incredibly difficult to measure, involving constraints of culture, biology, social position, historical period, and even geography and weather. What can perhaps be measured is the psychological component of agency: humans’ sense of agency. This sense of agency is the subject of the remainder of this section, beginning with a brief review of some of the correlates of agency in educational psychology, moving to a three-part description of agency supported by work in
phenomenology and psychology, and concluding with a review of some potential contextual and cultural variations in the sense of agency.

**An Agent by Any Other Name**

Human beings are at their most satisfied when they are exercising agency over their environment and making choices (Bandura, 1997, 2006a; Heckhausen, 2011; Ryan & Deci, 2011). A sense of agency—a sense of having control over one’s circumstances—is a broad and powerful concept, particularly in the field of educational psychology. If all learners saw themselves as self-determined individuals who exercise control and regulate their own learning, there would perhaps be little need for the field. Thus, the concept of agency has been studied in many different guises. First, Bandura's influential self-efficacy construct is firmly and explicitly rooted in a broader theory of agency and social cognition (Bandura, 2012). Self-efficacy—belief in one’s capabilities—is, according to Bandura, the most important aspect of agency: individuals must believe in their capability to become agents before they take agentive action. Positive self-efficacy beliefs are a critical ingredient of academic success, leading individuals to invest more effort and to be more resilient in the face of setbacks (Schunk & Pajares, 2005).

Weiner’s (1985) attributional theory of motivation also makes use of agency. In attributional theory, there are three main dimensions along which individuals attribute causes for success and failure: locus (i.e., an internal versus an external cause), stability (i.e., a stable versus an unstable cause), and controllability (i.e., a controllable versus uncontrollable cause; Weiner). Essentially, the more agency (called control within Weiner’s theory) an individual feels, the more motivated the theory posits she would be.
For instance, an internal, controllable cause is something over which one can exercise more agency than an external, uncontrollable cause. Patterns of attribution and the concomitant perceptions of agency can predict academic outcomes, including level of academic achievement and whether or not students complete a program (Hall, Perry, Chipperfield, Clifton, & Haynes, 2006; Perry, Hladkyj, Pekrun, & Pelletier, 2001; Stupinsky, Perry, Hall, & Guay, 2012; Stupinsky, Stewart, Daniels, & Perry, 2011; Weiner, 2000). For instance, Perry and colleagues (2001) found college student attributions of control over their academic outcome were positively correlated with final grades in a psychology course ($R^2 = .27, p < .05$).

Another concept closely related to agency is that of autonomy. Autonomy has been used to refer to a broad array of concepts, including self-regulation, resilience, and goal orientation (cf., Confessore & Park’s 2004 Learner Autonomy Profile), but its core meaning is that of choicefulness (Sheldon & Deci, 1996). Autonomy is the sense that one has the freedom to overcome external constraints and take action (Morris, Menon, & Ames, 2001; Standage, Duda, & Ntoumanis, 2005). Within self-determination theory, perceived autonomy goes beyond the context of the classroom to overall functioning, well-being, and healthy development (Ryan & Deci, 2011; Williams & Deci, 1996).

Finally, self-regulated learning theory (cf., Zimmerman & Kitsantas, 2005, for a review), which applies self-efficacy, attribution theory, and autonomy to the actual ongoing process of learning, relies heavily on individuals’ sense of agency over their environment. According to this theory, successful learners engage in three distinct phases: forethought (during which they set goals and make plans), performance (during
which they exercise self-control and observe their progress), and self-reflection (during which they evaluate their effort). Agency is a prerequisite for self-regulated learning: in order for individuals to even enter the forethought phase in which they set goals and make plans for reaching them, they must believe they have free will, that they are free to make choices. When students exercise agency and engage in self-regulatory processes, they are more likely to be successful and they develop the skills to improve their subsequent performance (Zimmerman & Kitsantas).

Self-efficacy, attribution theory, perceived autonomy, and self-regulation, as demonstrated in the brief literature review above, are individual perceptions, beliefs, or practices that have been shown to correlate with academic success. Each of them shares something important with the broader construct of a feeling of agency. Thus, in the absence of an agency tool, I drew from resources developed through these theories to design this study.

A Phenomenology of Agency

Humans’ sense of agency is complex, deriving from psychological and physical sources (Gallagher, 2007, 2012). Yet this complex construct has separable parts. A thorough review of literature in psychology, philosophy, and linguistics identified three distinct components of agency: intentional causation (an actor changing the state of a person or thing in the world), degree of autonomy (how much freedom from coercion an actor has), and manner of autonomy (the modality with which an actor brings about causation). Each of these components is discussed here in turn.
**Intentional causation.** The core component of agency is the agent: an individual with an intention to cause some kind of change of state. Bandura (2006a) outlines four core properties of agents: *intentionality, forethought, self-reactiveness,* and *self-reflectiveness.* I briefly discuss each of these here in turn. First, *intentionality,* in its everyday sense, is the conscious formation of a purpose or a goal (cf., Searle, 1983, for a discussion of intentionality as “aboutness”). Agents do not act without reason; they have specific purposes for their actions and specific ends they wish to reach (Wehmeyer, 2004). Second, forethought requires visualizing oneself in the future, executing plans and goals (Bandura). Agents can see specific possibilities for themselves and, equally as important, can visualize the specific steps through which they will reach these possibilities (Markus & Nurius, 1986; Oyserman, Bybee, Terry, & Hart-Johnson, 2004; Yowell, 2002). Third, self-reactiveness is the ability to execute one’s goals (Bandura). Agents meet goals via specific actions and plans; they are self-directed and motivated. Fourth, self-reflectiveness is a metacognitive property and, according to Bandura, “is the most distinctly human core property of agency” (p. 165). In order to be effective agents, individuals must reflect on how they perform along the other three dimensions of agency: self-reactiveness, intentionality, and forethought. In other words, they need to produce comprehensible accounts of how they execute their plans. It is this final property of verbal self-reflectiveness that I recruit in developing a diagnostic linguistic agency tool based on individuals’ narratives of their experiences.

While Bandura (2006a) relates the properties of the individual agent, phenomenologists detail the properties of intention. Pacherie (2007) argues that there are
three levels of agentive specification of action: rational or future-directed intentions (F-intentions), situational or present-directed intentions (P-intentions), and motor intentions (M-intentions). F-intentions are formed by the agent prior to the action and are intentions about the whole action as a unit. P-intentions are formed by the agent while committing the action and involve specific moment-by-moment plans. M-intentions are actual sensorimotor representations that direct the body to carry out the action. For Pacherie, every agentive action involves all three types of intentions, while others argue that agentive action could bypass F-intentions, as when an agent comes across a task and begins it without any future planning (Gallagher, 2012). Thus, intentional causation is multi-faceted and, as such, we need flexible tools to assess it.

Finally, there is an important implied aspect of intentional causation that is not always discussed in theories of agency: the person or thing upon which or in reaction to which one may be acting. In some discussions of the development of agency, it is argued that agency itself derives from intersubjectivity: the ability to take another’s perspective in addition to one’s own (Gillespie, 2012; Kockelman, 2012). These theorists argue that the agentive qualities of intention and forethought require an ability to step away from one’s current time, place, and social position (Gillespie). In this formulation of agency, the other is a key aspect of intentional causation.

In summary, the perception of intentional causation is made up of (a) an agent with intentionality, forethought, self-reactiveness, and self-reflectiveness (b) who has F-intentions, P-intentions, and M-intentions, and (c) who acts upon or in reaction to another person or entity.
**Degree of autonomy.** While intentionality is an internal state of purposeful commitment to a goal, *autonomy* is a freedom from external influences (Morris, Menon & Ames, 2001; Wehmeyer, 2004). Within philosophy and phenomenology, the experience of autonomy is often referred to as an experience of control (Gallagher, 2007, 2012; Pacherie, 2007). Experiences of control, however, are not all identical. Gallagher (2007, 2012) distinguishes between what he calls a sense of ownership over action and a sense of agency over action. A sense of ownership is a mere kinesthetic experience of movement while a sense of agency is the sense of being the cause or author of the movement (Gallagher, 2007). Moreover, even a sense of agency can be broken down into more prospective agency, in which an individual consciously plans and monitors an activity, and retrospective agency, in which one attributes agency to one’s actions only after the fact (Gallagher, 2012). Also, Pacherie (2007) makes a distinction between *feeling in control* and *having to exert control* in a situation. While both are experiences of control, the latter corresponds to a lesser degree of autonomy but, in the long run can increase one’s sense of agency.

Thus, one is not simply free from external influences: there are degrees of autonomy. Individuals can own an action but not feel that they meant to do it, they can control an action, but only ascribe that control later, and they can fully plan for and carry out an action. They can feel more and less in control of an agentive action. I will argue below that there are distinct linguistic markers for degrees of autonomy.

**Manner of autonomy.** In addition to experience a range of degrees of control, individuals can experience different *types* of control. In other words, they can bring about
results via different kinds of action: Pacherie calls this “how-awareness” (2007, p. 9).

This how-awareness derives from interactions among the three intentional levels discussed above: M-intentions, P-intentions, and F-intentions. These levels create a sense of control that is “a compound of three more basic experiences: the sense of motor control, the sense of situational control, and the sense of rational control” (Pacherie, p. 19). While one only senses motor control when something does not go as planned (and then, only senses it indirectly as a sense of something being wrong), situational control and rational control are part of an ongoing awareness of agency. Thus, we are aware of how we are accomplishing goals and this awareness is particularly heightened when situations do not go as predicted (Pacherie), which is the experience of many adult learners as they look back on high school.

Manner of autonomy is also affected by the timing of our intentions and related actions (Pacherie, 2007). In fact, Emirbayer and Mische (1998) argue that agency is, by nature, embedded in the flow of time, “informed by the past (in its habitual aspect), but also oriented toward the future (as a capacity to imagine alternative possibilities) and toward the present (as a capacity to contextualize past habits and future projects within the contingencies of the moment)” (p. 963). At any given moment, individuals can be oriented towards the past, the present, or the future; it is in the flexible movement among temporal contexts that individuals craft their agency (Emirbayer & Mische). Moreover, in our language about these temporal contexts we can use past and present circumstances to frame novel possibilities for the future. The choices individuals make as their narratives
move through the flow of time allows them to construct their agency in different ways.

(This discussion of temporal contexts is drawn from Konopasky & Sheridan, 2016.)

**The phenomenological components of agency.** In summary, a sense of agency must include an intentional causer who considers other individuals and who expresses a particular degree of autonomy in a particular manner (see Table 1 for a summary of the components of agency). In the final section of this chapter, I will bring these components together into a definition of the linguistic representation of this sense of agency, one which includes an intentional causer, a degree of autonomy, and a manner of autonomy.

Table 1

*Components of a Sense of Agency*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Component of Agency</th>
<th>Explication</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Actor as Causer     | •Intentionality, forethought, self-reactiveness, & self-reflectiveness  
|                     | •F-intentions, P-intentions, M-intentions        |
| The Other           | •Intersubjectivity: ability to distance self from present situation |
| Degree of Autonomy  | •Control (ownership vs. agency)                  |
|                     | •Being in control versus exerting control over   |
| Manner of Autonomy  | •Kinds of action                                 |
|                     | •Temporal context of action                      |
Cultural and Contextual Variations in Agency

Numerous theorists have claimed that the experience of agency is universal (Bandura, 2006a; Chirkov, 2011; Heckhausen, Wrosch, & Schulz, 2010). Chirkov goes so far as to argue that some cultures “thwart” autonomy while others encourage it. According to these theorists, development is characterized by a growing sense of control over the environment and the pinnacle of that control is internalized, individual agency. Others, however, argue that this is a Western perspective and that it leads to labeling some cultures and contexts as being “less” agentive, creating a deficit perspective (Gould, 1999). I do not engage in this debate, but argue instead that agency comes in different varieties, some of which I discuss here.

Cultural variations in agency. The advantage of breaking agency down into its component parts of intentional causer with a degree and manner of autonomy acting in relation to others is that it allows for different combinations of these components across cultures. The most widely discussed cross-cultural variation in agency is the notion of an individualist versus a collectivist perspective (Miller, Das, & Chakravarthy, 2011; Morris, Menon, & Ames, 2001; Plaut & Markus, 2005; Stephens, Hamedani, Markus, Bergsieker, & Eloul, 2009). In the individualist perspective the agent is the individual “I” who has internal and personal intentions that she carries out autonomously in the world. In the collectivist perspective, the agent is the collective “we” who have external and collective intentions that they carry out in concert (but also autonomously—of other collectives) in the world.
In their review of Western (particularly North American) theories of competence and agency, Plaut and Markus (2005) bring in studies of China, India, Africa, and East Asia to demonstrate that the view of agency as a property “belonging to” an individual is not universal. They draw a distinction between what they call *conjoint* and *disjoint* models of agency. In conjoint models, the actions of the self are interdependent with the actions of others. In disjoint models, the actions of the self are distinct from the actions of others. For instance, in their study of self-determination in the U.S. and India, Miller, Das, and Chakravarthy (2011) found that the notion of *choice* was critical to both groups’ feelings of satisfaction, but that only the U.S. group felt less choice (and, hence, less satisfaction) about normative expectations to help friends and family. In other words, external norms only affected the U.S. participants’ feelings of autonomy.

In another cultural comparison, Snibbe and Markus (2005) study the ways high school-educated versus college-educated individuals conceive of being an agent. This series of studies begins with a discourse analysis of rock music versus country music lyrics (drawing from a national study linking these genres with higher versus lower levels of education respectively). They found that being an agent in rock music conforms more to traditional Western individualist models of agency, expressing the self through social influence over others. In contrast, agents in country music lyrics more often sing about controlling the self, resisting the influence of others, and maintaining integrity. In follow-up studies using Festinger’s (1957, cited in Snibbe & Markus) free-choice paradigm, they tested whether getting the free pen of one’s *choice* versus simply the free pen *available* affected the participants’ evaluations of the pen. They found that only participants with
BAs poorly rated something they did not choose. In this set of studies, then, there is a cultural difference along educational lines about control over the world or the other versus control over the self.

Morris, Menon, and Ames (2001) talk about these different models of autonomy as implicit theories of agency (ITAs): “conceptions of kinds of actors and notions of what kinds of entities act intentionally and autonomously” (p. 169). Individuals across cultures have different ITAs depending upon their cultural practices.

**Contextual variations in agency.** Bandura (2006a) offers a helpful construct for describing individual and collective ITAs: *modes* of agency. Even within a single culture, Bandura argues, agents must blend individual control over the environment (individual agency), collective control over the environment (collective agency), and a third kind of socially mediated control over the environment (proxy agency—asking another to act in your stead when you cannot). As individuals act across contexts in their lives, they must decide when it is strategic and appropriate to act as a single individual, act with a group, or ask another to act in their stead. I offer several examples of this contextual variation in agency here.

First, Paulus, Woodside, and Ziegler (2007) analyze the ways agency is expressed by four female graduate students on an online discussion board. While they do not label it as such, they found that these women created a collective form of agency, ascribing agency to each other and to the group as opposed to claiming it for themselves. Moreover, as the semester draws to a close, they develop a collective story about their
group, framing all of the actions as group actions. Thus, within the context of this online discussion board, the prominent form of agency was collective.

Second, Gibson and Cartwright (2013) research agency in the therapeutic context. Using narrative thematic analysis, they analyzed the transcriptions of 22 young people's (ages 16 to 18) oral accounts of their therapy experiences. They found a contradictory account of these individuals’ agency, in which participants made claims of evaluating the counselor, choosing which aspects of counseling to pursue, and taking responsibility for the therapeutic work, yet at the same time all but two of the participants indicated that they were not able to directly challenge or address their counselor about things that were not proceeding as they would like. This retrospective attribution of agency (Gallagher, 2012) indicates, according to Gibson and Cartwright, that accounts of agency need to consider the situation. In this case, the participants were not yet adults and the course of their therapy was, for most of them, largely determined by the adults around them, including the therapist.

Finally, Rogers (2004) uses discourse analysis to understand the ways adult literacy learners present themselves as agents in different literate contexts. She found that the same individual might present herself in an agentive way in the domain of family and community while presenting herself in a more passive way in the domain of schooling. Thus, these adults’ perceptions of agency shifted across contexts.

In this section, I have argued that the types and expressions of agency can differ across cultures and across contexts within a single culture. The aim of this dissertation is to develop a diagnostic tool to fluidly pinpoint this variation.
A Linguistic Account of Agency

Given its importance in human functioning, it is not surprising that agency is a central part of the verbal system in human language (Duranti, 2004; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004). As mentioned above, my literature review identified three components of agency: intentional causation, degree of autonomy, and manner of autonomy. These components are also represented linguistically, giving a definition of linguistic agency that draws on all these components: the degree and manner of autonomy with which a speaker represents the self as acting intentionally on others and the world. For instance, and adult learner who says, “I decided to take my GED test this semester” is representing herself with a higher degree of autonomy than the learner who says, “The teachers said to take the GED test this semester.” The former learner portrays the self as initiating an action (deciding to take) on a relatively important entity (the GED test). The latter, however, portrays her teachers as initiating an action of which she is only implicitly a part (she is not mentioned explicitly). Linguistic agency is grounded in systemic functional linguistics, particularly as conceptualized by Halliday (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004). It also draws from critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1995, 2003; van Dijk, 1997). Moreover, Quigley (2000, 2001) has done empirical psychological research on transitivity. In a study of children’s autobiographical narratives at ages 5, 8, and 12, Quigley found an increase in transitive statements with first-person subjects as children aged, hypothesizing that this was reflective of their development as independent actors. This initial work in transitivity is promising for the first component of agency: intentional causation. In the sections below, I propose further coding strategies
for intentional causation and for the two additional linguistic agency categories proposed here: degree of autonomy and manner of autonomy.

**Intentional Causation**

In linguistic accounts of agency, causation is encoded via the grammatical system of transitivity “a global property of an entire clause such that an activity is ‘carried-over’ or ‘transferred’ from an agent to a patient” (Hopper & Thompson, 1980, p. 251). According to Hopper and Thompson, transitivity occurs along a continuum from high (e.g., a purposeful, completed action by the self on an animate being like “I grabbed Fred”) to low (e.g., an inadvertent, ongoing state affecting nobody else like “I was hiccupping”). Speakers can also frame themselves as the objects of *others*’ transitive actions, usually with *me*: “He yelled at *me*.” The core of the transitivity system is a verb’s classification as transitive or intransitive. Transitive verbs have an object; intransitive verbs do not. In other words, highly transitive verbs are closer to humans’ prototypes of causation (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) than intransitive verbs. Each of the coding categories, including transitivity, is explicated along with a linguistic example in Table 2.
Table 2

*Linguistic Agency Coding Tools*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Linguistic Tool</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>High Agency Ex.</th>
<th>Low Agency Ex.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Causation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transitive/Intransitive</td>
<td>Presence/absence of a verbal object</td>
<td>I talked to the class.</td>
<td>I talked.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transitive/Intransitive</td>
<td>Self as object of another's transitive action</td>
<td>I did assignments.</td>
<td>She gave me assignments.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individuation</td>
<td>Animacy and intentionality of object</td>
<td>I walked up to the teacher.</td>
<td>I walked across the floor.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voice</td>
<td>Active or passive</td>
<td>I decided to drop out.</td>
<td>I was kicked out.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Degree of Autonomy</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generic or Indefinite</td>
<td>Generalized noun placing self among many others</td>
<td>I skipped class a lot.</td>
<td>You skipped class at that school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modal Verb</td>
<td>Verbal indicator of obligation or necessity</td>
<td>I took a job and left school.</td>
<td>I had to take a job and leave school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adverbs</td>
<td>Verbal modifier: <em>just</em></td>
<td>I stopped coming to class.</td>
<td>I just stopped coming to class.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Causative Markers</td>
<td>Indicators of an external cause</td>
<td>I left the program.</td>
<td>I had trouble. So, I left the program.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manner of Autonomy</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Process Types</td>
<td>Verb types representing different actions in world</td>
<td>Material: I left school.</td>
<td>Behavioral: I drifted out of the program.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Temporal Orientation</td>
<td>Use of tense to frame agency</td>
<td>I was a dropout and always will be.</td>
<td>I was a dropout, but now am succeeding.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The nature of the verb is not the sole element of the transitivity system; the nature of the object matters as well. As in the examples above about John and Sally, it matters not only whether there is object, but whether that object is, itself, an animate, autonomous being. Hopper and Thompson (1980) call this notion of transitivity *individuation*: how distinct an object is from the subject (e.g., “I hit *myself*” has a non-individuated object) and from its own background (e.g., “I walked across the floor” has a non-individuated object).

Another aspect of the grammatical system in English that impacts agency is the *voice* of the verb (i.e., active or passive). The passive voice can be used to avoid taking responsibility for an action, as in this example from Duranti (2004) in which a teaching assistant avoids mentioning his role in mistakenly returning the course textbooks: “the books came in and *they were sent back*” (p. 465, emphasis in original). This speaker conveniently leaves out that they were sent back *by him* (the agent of the action). In informal English, this same function is often performed by the “get passive” (e.g., “the books came in and they *got sent back*”). While Duranti notes that passive voice is by no means the only method for linguistically removing the agent in English (nor, indeed, is removing the agent the sole use of the passive), it is a valuable resource for speakers.

A final important feature of the transitivity system is whether the self-as-subject is represented as singular (*I*) or plural (*we*). Martin (2007) discusses three distinctive notions of selfhood that have been researched in educational psychology: the expressive self (cf., self-concept research), the managerial self (cf., self-regulation research), and the
communal self (cf., sociocultural research). The expressive and managerial selves, arguably the most widely researched thus far, derive from psychology’s attention to the individual’s thoughts and experiences and correspond to singular Actors (Martin). The more communal plural Actors, Martin argues, have just as much potential for agency and, in fact, because of the importance of social learning, may perhaps be a critical focus in education (cf., Ahearn, 2001, on agency as socioculturally mediated). In this study, then, both singular and plural notions of selfhood will be considered, each of which expresses a different conception of autonomy.

Degree of Autonomy

While causation is generally linguistically encoded in the transitivity system (see above), autonomy is encoded in a variety of ways, often overlapping (Duranti, 2004; Hamilton & Pitt, 2011; Johansen, 2011; Rogers, 2004; Rymes, 1995, 2001). One element is the degree to which speakers represent themselves as autonomous actors. Representations of agency are not binary yes-or-no constructions; Ahearn (2001) suggests exploring this complexity via different types of agency like oppositional, complicit, intentional, etc. (p. 130). In the present study linguistic agency is conceptualized in terms of degrees, according to whether or not speakers use mitigators (Duranti; Rymes, 1995, 2001) to diminish their agency.

According to Halliday and Matthiessen (2004), there are three major elements that make up a clause: the participants (the doers and receivers and experiencers of actions and states), the processes (the predicate or action of the clause), and the circumstances (the adverbs and adverbial clauses that modify a main clause). Any of these elements can
be used to mitigate agency. I address here the agency mitigators that have been identified by sociolinguistic researchers.

**Mitigating agency through participants.** One of the easiest grammatical moves to mitigate agency is to place oneself as part of a large group of generalized others engaged in an action. For example, Rymes (2001) notes that generic or indefinite noun phrases are one linguistic tool used by her participants to indicate the universality of the settings and actions they describe: “*all you can go—just go do* there is like ditch, skip. That’s about it” (p. 47). By using generic you, the speaker here mitigates his agency in the action of skipping school. He is certainly part of the you, but this is a condition everyone at school is experiencing, so he presents himself as having little autonomy: skipping is simply a condition of participants in that setting.

**Mitigating agency through processes.** Another grammatical method for mitigating agency is to make the process (the predicate—usually a verb in English) weaker. One way to do this is through what Bybee, Perkins, and Pagliuca (1994) call agent-oriented modality: verbal forms like must, can, and need that express speakers’ attitudes about their relative autonomy. By using a modal verb of obligation, necessity, ability, or volition, the speaker can weaken her autonomy (e.g., “I did it” versus “I had to do it”). In this study of agency, I focus on modals of obligation, which indicate moments when participants feel obligated to do something, either through external or internal forces.

**Mitigating agency through circumstance.** Grammatical circumstances—the portions of the clause that are grammatically framed as the background—can also be used
to mitigate agency. Rymes (1995) points specifically to the adverb *just* and causative markers like *so* as tools her participants use to mitigate their agency in their dropping out stories: “he wouldn’t let me go *so*, heh heh, I don’t know I got mad and I *just* (0.2) hit ‘im… *Just* socked him a little, didn’t swing” (p. 505, emphasis mine). Rymes argues that, in many instances, *so* points to the external circumstances that caused an agentive action (e.g., “he wouldn’t let her go, *so* she had to”) and *just* limits the intensity of the action (e.g., “she *just* socked him a little”). Adverbs like *probably* and *possibly* contribute to the modality of a clause (see above; Rogers, 2004), also potentially mitigating the agency of the speaker.

**Manner of Autonomy**

Agency—mitigated or not—can be differentiated along process types (Fairclough, 2003; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004; Rogers, 2004; cf., Ahearn, 2001, for initial suggestions for a typology of agency). Within systemic functional linguists, process types represent a kind of schema for representing the world (Halliday & Matthiessen; see Table 3 for details and examples).
### Table 3

*Halliday’s Process Types*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Process Type</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Semantic Roles</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Material</td>
<td>1 entity <em>does</em> something to another</td>
<td>Agent (A) and Goal (G)</td>
<td>The lion$_A$ caught the tourist$_G$.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Existential$^1$</td>
<td>Some state or entity happens or exists</td>
<td>Goal (G)</td>
<td>There was a storm$_G$.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relational$^1$</td>
<td>Sets up relation between 2 entities</td>
<td>Carrier (C) and Attribute (At)</td>
<td>Mice$<em>C$ are timid creatures$</em>{At}$.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verbal</td>
<td>2 entities engaged in an exchange of meaning</td>
<td>Agent (A) and Goal (G)</td>
<td>John$_A$ told the truth$_G$.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental$^2$</td>
<td>1 entity thinks, feels, or perceives</td>
<td>Senser (S) and Goal (G)</td>
<td>It$_G$ worries me$_S$.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behavioral$^2$</td>
<td>Human entity engaged in physiological behavior</td>
<td>Behaver (B) and Goal (G)</td>
<td>He$_B$ is crying about the party$_G$.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Adapted from Halliday & Matthiessen (2004)

$^1$ Coded together for the purposes of this study

$^2$ Coded together for the purposes of this study

A speaker’s choice of process type to represent an event in the real world activates different models of reality for both the speaker and the listener (Semin, 2008). For instance, an adult secondary learner might choose to represent the same event with a material verb (“I stopped going to school after that.”) or a relational verb (“I wasn’t into school after that.”). These two utterances represent two different types of engagement with the event.
Fairclough (2003) argues that different process types are used in different discursive situations. For instance, one of the ways Rymes’ (2001) participants mitigate their agency in their dropping out stories is through the use of the existential process type *there is/are*. One participant justifies his participation in a gang by saying: “There’s a lotta gangs going there” (p. 49). The schema of the existential process type fits into Rymes’ “timeless truth” genre—the world is a certain way and one has little autonomy within that schema. In contrast, Rymes gives an example of a student who takes responsibility for her past actions as part of a gang: “I used to fight” (p. 84). In this case, the speaker uses the schema of a transitive material verb, *fight*, to represent herself as an unmitigated agent.

The examples above also point to the centrality of temporal context in manner of autonomy (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). “There’s a lotta gangs” is oriented toward the realities of the present situation while “I used to fight” draws on past realities to contrast and support different choices in the present. Rymes’ participants are using past and present contexts to narrate a certain kind of agency for themselves in the present and the future. Thus, in addition to process types, I will examine tense patterns as a linguistic tool for narrating agency. (This discussion of temporal contexts is drawn from Konopasky & Sheridan, 2016.) Table 2 gives a summary of the linguistic agency markers discussed in this section.

**The Benefits of a Linguistic Analysis of Agency**

Linguistic operationalization of intentional causation by the self or others, the Other, degree of autonomy, and manner of autonomy provides a set of concrete tools to
explore the phenomenology of agency (see Table 2). The position of the first person in the transitive structure of a sentence indicates whether or not the narrator positions herself as intentional causer (e.g., “I did assignments.” versus “She gave me assignments.”). The animacy and importance of the verbal object indicates how individuated the speaker makes other individuals and entities (e.g., “I walked up to the teacher.” versus “I walked across the floor.”). The use of generics, modal verbs, and other markers indicates how autonomously the narrator positions her actions (e.g., “I took a job and left school.” versus “You [generically] had to take a job and leave school.”). Finally, different types of verbs indicate different ways of acting autonomously in the world (e.g. leaving school versus drifting away from school). These linguistic tools lend themselves to both quantification and to detailed analyses of process.

Moreover, unlike surveys, these linguistic tools use participants’ own verbal representations of the world. As such, they allow the researcher to examine cultural and contextual variations. For instance, an individual’s choice of first-person singular (I/me) or plural (we/us) could point to a disjoint as opposed to a conjoint notion of agency. And if the same individual moves between singular and plural first-person and, by times, even third-person (she/he/her/him), an analysis of the contexts in which she uses each offers insight into when she engages different modes of agency (Bandura, 2006a).

Agency in the Adult Education Context

As the discussion of cultures and context above has indicated, agency is a malleable notion, enacted differently by different individuals across different environments. It is also potentially more or less important across different environments.
For instance, completing a medical physical as a patient does not necessarily require individuals to assert much control over their environment—for the most part, it involves allowing the doctor to assert her agency. Educational goals, on the other hand, require a substantial amount of agency, particularly a long-term goal like attaining a GED® credential.

In order to meet the goal of a GED® credential, learners have two major sub-goals. They must (a) persist long enough in their course of studies to learn the material (Comings, 2007; Mellard, Krieshok, Fall, & Woods, 2013) and (b) achieve reading, writing, mathematics, science, and social studies levels that are high enough to pass the GED® exam (Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment System, 2003). This study explores how adult learners narrate their agency in meeting these two goals.

This section discusses the particular importance of a sense of agency in the adult secondary education context, focusing on the GED® credential. I begin with a discussion of the particularly difficult barriers adult secondary learners face, move on to a brief review of existing studies on the importance of agency in adult education contexts, next discuss the challenges of the developmental nature of the GED exam, and finish by reviewing dominant approaches to adult learning that seem to call for a high degree of agency.

The Need for a High Degree of Agency: Barriers in Adult Education

Adult learners pursuing a diploma or certification face a multitude of barriers and, unlike children in the K-12 system, they do not have many institutionalized supports to aid in surmounting them. First, adult secondary education providers serve a large number
of students with a small number of resources (Zachry, 2010). Federal and state funding for adult education programs provides an average of $225 per learner per year, while funding for K-12 education provides more than $10,000, 44 times more funding (Zachry). This means that adult education programs generally cannot provide the kinds of services child learners receive, like identification and treatment of learning disabilities, free and reduced price meals during the learning day, and guidance counselors and social workers to help ensure a more stable home environment.

Second, learning disabilities are particularly prevalent in lower-income adults, the population that primarily comprises adult secondary learning programs (Gerber, 2012; Comings, Parrella, & Soricone, 1999). Somewhere between 15% and 36% of low-income adults struggle with some form of learning disability, so much so that the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services cites it as one of the top two most frequent functional impairments for Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) clients (Gerber). This is not incredibly surprising since many high school students with learning disabilities are never treated (Gerber) and, thus, may struggle academically. Perhaps the conclusion that “academic achievement” is the primary cause for non-completion of high school (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000) is premature; an underlying cause could be learning disability status. Whatever the causal direction, adult secondary learners are relatively likely to face the barrier of a learning disability without access to affordable treatment.

Third, low-income adult learners are facing the many barriers thrown up by their socio-economic status (SES). One of the most disruptive of these is residential mobility (Schafft & Prins, 2009). In their study of three high-mobility adult literacy programs,
Schafft and Prins found that the 17 adult learners they interviewed had moved a total of 78 times in the past five years. While most of these moves were within 15 miles of their original residence, the logistics of the move itself and the new transportation arrangements were enough to disrupt the education of many participants. King’s (2002) study of barriers to adult secondary participation had similar findings: “family constraints” were the most significant barrier, which included the survey items, “unable to attend regularly,” “family problems,” and “difficulty arranging child care” (p. 150). All of these supposed family constraints could be explained by a lack of economic resources. For instance, inability to attend regularly and family problems could have to do with care of a sick relative. Moreover, the non-completion of high school itself is directly related to SES: Battin-Pearson et al. (2000) found low SES to have a direct effect on dropping out. Adult secondary learners are in large part comprised of those who dropped out of high school previously (Zachry, 2010).

Fourth, low-income individuals have a higher risk of exposure to trauma and subsequent development of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD; Alim, Charney, & Mellman, 2006; Kaltman, Pauk, & Alter, 2011). PTSD, particularly in the wake of a violent trauma, can make it difficult to learn in traditional adult classrooms (Horsman, 2000; Kilgore & Bloom, 2002). Both Horsman and Kilgore and Bloom worked with female adult literacy learners who had experienced trauma and found that their lack of consistency (due to their struggles with PTSD) and tendency to cede all control to the instructor (due to their struggles with violence and control) inhibited them from being
successful in the classroom. Thus, trauma is yet another barrier adult secondary learners may face.

Finally, with the advent of No Child Left Behind and other accountability programs, more young people have been pressured to leave high school for adult education programs (Hughes et al., 2007), leading to what Rachal and Bingham (2004) call an “adolescentizing” of the GED® exam. But the exam was designed for returning World War II veterans whose secondary education had been interrupted when they chose to leave and go into the service (Rachal and Bingham, 2004). The GED® exam, then, was originally conceived of as a way to certify the secondary-level skills of returning veterans, not as a program for bolstering the academic skills of a group of young learners with incredibly diverse experiences and needs. Hence, younger learners are entering adult secondary preparation programs that may not meet their needs as adolescents and emerging adults (Arnett, 2004).

In conclusion, (a) the lack of funding for adult education, (b) the prevalence of learning disabilities among adult secondary learners, (c) the barriers created by SES, (d) the pervasiveness of PTSD among low-income learners, and (e) the mismatch between young adult learners and many adult education programs all potentially make a sense of intentional and autonomous action even more important for adult learners. In other words, it may be the case that adult learners need to feel a strong sense of agency to move past all these barriers.
**Existing Studies on the Agency of Adult Learners**

Developing a feeling of agency in educational contexts is often difficult for adults who are returning to school after a prolonged absence. Traditional classroom learning—
independent and individual cognition that can be generalized to a variety of situations—is often quite different from the kinds of learning in which adults engage at work or in the community (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007). Several studies have explored the disparate identities adult learners negotiate in and out of school (Benson, 2010; Compton-Lilly, 2009; Rogers, 2004). While these adults often describe themselves as competent agents in their community or family literacy settings, they focus on their deficiencies and lack of control in the educational setting (Compton-Lilly; Rogers). These perceptions of limited academic agency can make the formal classroom an uncomfortable place for adult learners, which is exceptionally problematic in a voluntary program like GED® preparation, where dropping out is common (Comings, Parrella, & Soricone, 1999). Here I review in some detail adult learners’ experiences of agency (or lack thereof).

First, as mentioned briefly above, Kilgore and Bloom (2002) did their research in literacy programs for women in crisis. They found that these women, in an attempt to please their instructors and succeed in the course, used “master scripts,” constraining their stories and leading to failure. Because these women’s stories were, at the time, still too fragmented to engage in authentic transformation, they took on one of two scripts. Some took on a script of individual, internal agency and autonomy (“I did it all by myself!”), which could not be sustained for long in their crisis situation. Others allowed
the agency of others to totally define them (“They did this to me.”), which made it difficult for them to shift and take up an agentive position in the classroom. A mismatch between the more mainstream individualist agency mode of their program and their potentially more collectivist or proxy modes disrupted their learning.

Second, Purcell-Gates (1993) writes a compelling single-case study about an adult learner in her 30s, Jenny, who had been attending adult education classes for over four years with no measurable literacy progress. Despite her hard work, when she first meets Purcell-Gates she is “fully prepared to take the blame upon herself and her language [an Appalachian dialect] for her failure in school” (p. 211). She feels agency for her failures, but has not been placed in a position to take agency over her successes. In fact, it turns out that her experience with writing has involved very little agency: she had never been asked to do any writing outside of prescriptive workbook exercises. In other words, she had never written or read her own words and ideas. She had never had the experience of forming a writing F-intention and carrying it out (Pacherie, 2007). She was reacting to others’ prompts rather than developing her own. Within a very short time of doing free-form journaling, she develops an astute phonemic awareness, a larger number of words, and moves from 8% use of punctuation to 94% use. Thus, it seems that it was not Jenny’s diligence or work ethic at fault, but, at least in part, a lack of a feeling of agency over the academic exercises.

Third, Compton-Lilly (2009) uses grounded theory and discourse analysis to study the emerging reading identities of 10 adult secondary learners. She finds that these learners see themselves as competent readers in a number of contexts outside of school,
but they do not transfer any of that sense of competence and agency to the academic context. Compton-Lilly argues that this low assessment of in-school ability is due in part to the formal, written assessments given by the program: the students tell their literacy narratives from the point of view of the assessments more than from what they can do functionally with reading and writing. In the academic context, the assessments, not their actual performance, are determining how much control students feel over written material.

Fourth, Rymes (2001) does an ethnolinguistic study of learners in an alternative high school, a sort of “last chance” school for students who either left or were expelled from traditional high school programs. She finds that those learners who eventually do not complete even this alternative program use linguistic markers of agency very differently from those who do complete it. The former learners frame their stories of dropping out of high school with themselves as the victim, using grammatical devices to mitigate their agency and stress the omnipresence of threat and violence to which they were forced to respond with their own threat and violence (lowering the degree of autonomy of their utterances). Meanwhile, the latter learners frame their dropping out narratives by emphasizing the bad acts, but using grammatical devices to distance themselves from those acts in time. Thus, they narrate themselves as agents of these acts, but point to the changes they have made in themselves since that time. Rymes argues that agency (and its mitigation) are critical aspects of learner narratives.

Finally, Rogers’ (2004) critical discourse analysis of adult learners’ understanding of themselves in different literacy contexts is crucial evidence for the importance of a
sense of agency for adult learners. First, as discussed above, Rogers found that these participants narrated themselves as having more control in literary contexts outside the classroom (and in their children’s classrooms) than inside. Second, and perhaps a more compelling argument for a diagnostic agency tool, she finds that learners narrate their current academic environments quite differently from their past academic environments. While they still do not frame themselves fully agentively in any classroom context, they use fewer negative and passive constructions in describing their current adult classrooms than their past secondary and middle school classrooms. This points to the notion of degree and manner of agency discussed above: even when the classroom remains a daunting environment, certain aspects of the adult classroom or learners’ lives may make them feel more agentive than in the past.

These studies of adult classrooms demonstrate the centrality of a feeling of agency to an adult learner’s experience.

**The GED® Credential as a Developmental Goal**

The context of the adult secondary classroom is unlike some other adult contexts in that it is a space where individuals come together to pursue a developmental goal. Developmental goals are challenges arising from biological development, social situations, or individual actions (Baltes, 1987). High school completion is a normative developmental deadline: social policies make high school mandatory up to age 16 and no longer available after the age of 21 in most states in the U.S. While the GED® exam does not fit into this normative deadline, there are several arguments that it is developmental. First, in Western cultures, education is often equated with growth and development, so
pursuing an educational goal as basic as a secondary degree fits within social norms of
development. Second, the GED® exam falls within Baltes’ (1987) trifactor model of
development, including age-graded, history-graded, and non-normative influences.
Individuals who drop out of high school and return to seek a credential may not fit
Baltes’ age-graded component, but they are influenced by their historical location (as
poor individuals within a system that does not always provide the necessary supports for
high school completion) and also often by non-normative influences like the death of a
parent, a teenage pregnancy, or drug addiction. For individuals in these situations, then,
attaining a GED® credential is a developmental step. Third, regarding the notion of a
deadline, there is far more freedom in almost every developmental deadline today than
there was a generation or two ago (Arnett, 2004). The most important feature of a
developmental deadline is not its timing, but the existence of “pre- and post-deadline
patterns of goal engagement and control behavior” (Heckhausen, Wrosch, & Fleeson,
2001). The striving for and celebration of a passing the GED® exam for many learners
conforms to these patterns.

As a developmental goal the GED® exam has particular features that make agency
important. Adult development, unlike child development, does not necessarily have clear
biological and social markers. Rather than being organized around age-based stages, then,
adult development must be organized around something else. Heckhausen and her
colleagues posit that it is organized around developmental goals, “the organizing
motivational units that enable individuals to take an active role in shaping their own life
course and development” (Heckhausen, Wrosch, & Schulz, 2010, p. 36). Adaptive adults
set goals in sequence, one after another, and then go through a cycle with each goal: goal selection, goal pursuit (sometimes called engagement), and, if the goal is not met, goal disengagement (Heckhausen, Wrosch, & Schulz). For adult secondary learners, selecting and pursuing the goal of the GED has particular developmental challenges for two reasons: first, learners must disengage themselves from their original normative goal of high school graduation, something that can be difficult in a society that values high school diplomas and stigmatizes “dropout.” Second, unlike other developmental goals, the GED has no clear deadline, so developing the motivation and agency to pursue it to the end is difficult.

Because attaining a GED® credential is a developmental goal and adult development hinges on a strong sense of agency (Heckhausen, 2011; Heckhausen, Wrosch, & Schulz, 2010), being able to assess and perhaps strengthen adult secondary learners’ sense of agency would be valuable.

**Andragogy: A Focus on Self-directed Learning**

Learner agency is particularly important in many *andragological* approaches to the adult classroom. Andragogy emerged in adult education as an explicit contrast to pedagogy and refers to educational approaches designed specifically for the adult learner. Proponents of andragogy claim that it should be set apart from pedagogy for several reasons, foremost among them the claim that adults have a fully-formed identity and more life experience than children (Knowles, 1978). For this reason, they argue adult learning should be *self-directed*, where “people take the primary initiative for planning, carrying out, and evaluating their own learning experiences” (Merriam, Caffarella, &
Baumgartner, 2007, p. 110). The assumption, then, is that all adult learners can engage in a disjoint model of agency, making plans internally and individually and carrying them out autonomously.

Andragogy, however, is not without its detractors. Pratt (1988) argues that self-directed, collaborative, problem-based learning may be appropriate for some adult learners, but that “adults vary considerably in their desire, capability, and readiness to exert control over [their learning]” (p. 161). Whether an adult would benefit from andragogical methods depends on the learner and the learning context. Furthermore, Knowles’ (1978) andragogical approach is what Muth (2011) would call social-humanist and, as such, focuses more on self-actualization than on the specific skills and practices the increasingly difficult GED® test demands.

Most critics of andragogy, however, are primarily concerned with issues of power and social justice (Amstutz, 2001; Brookfield, 1993, 2003; hooks, 1994; Sandlin, 2005, 2006). Most literacy educators are either part-time workers or volunteers and they have very little training (Smith & Gillespie, 2007; Ziegler, McCallum, & Bell, 2009). Unsurprisingly, then, only about 40% of adult secondary learners make measurable academic progress over the course of a year; the rest either leave their programs or stay at the same educational level (U.S. Department of Education, 2013). A disjoint model of agency that stresses individual responsibility and hard work places the blame for failure on students (Amstutz; Hamilton & Pitt, 2011; Sandlin, 2005, 2006). In this way, the system is never culpable and change never occurs, supporting the status quo.
Whether adult secondary learning follows an andragogical or pedagogical model, some research is emerging showing that any learning model based on a single final assessment may not be effective. Gopalakrishnan (2008) reviews three adult secondary education programs: one GED test preparation program involving classroom time, laboratory access, and one-on-one tutoring; one more traditional high school model (with no test at the end); and one problem-based model in which students work independently to complete projects. He found that students in the latter two programs had significantly better completion rates. Even with laboratory and tutoring assistance, it is extremely difficult for adult learners to develop the skills and the sense of agency they need to pass an intensive, one-time test, the current mainstream model for the GED in most states.

In order to understand how to improve learning for adults and to determine how adults perceive their agency and participation in learning environments, we need more rigorous methods for assessing these perceptions. Work on agentic engagement may offer a helpful model: when students’ sense of their own contributions and control in class were added to existing behavioral, cognitive, and affective engagement scales, a much fuller picture of student engagement appeared (Reeve, 2013; Reeve & Tseng, 2011). Agentic engagement emerged as a distinct factor in engagement and, for the first time, does not simply measure student reactions to teachers, but the dialectic movement between teacher and student construction of the classroom (Reeve & Tseng). In order to understand adult learning, programs need to do more than measure learner retention and test scores; they need a tool to understand how learners are constructing their classroom.
The Importance of Narrative Representation of the Self in Assessment

Because of the critical importance of agency to educational success, scholars have developed a number of instruments to assess agency-related constructs (Bandura, 2006b; Confessore & Park, 2004; Wehmeyer, 1995). Yet the tools I located in a review of the literature are self-report measures, which may not be ideal in all contexts. Like many experimental procedures, self-report surveys involve stepping outside the normal routines of everyday life into a scientific context and, often, into more scientific language (Anastasi & Urbina, 1997). This may be particularly difficult for individuals who do not have much experience with social science’s fill-in-the-blank procedures where there is purportedly no “right” answer. Moreover, self-report methods assume a relatively advanced level of metacognitive awareness: respondents must have conscious access to their beliefs and attitudes and must have thought about them enough to report on them with some clarity, which may not be true for all learners. Also, these surveys depend on researchers’ formulations of reality rather than participants’ own representations of themselves and their world. Even open-ended questionnaires are coded according to a closed system that may not allow for novel insight.

Furthermore, some recent research suggests that the wording of surveys and forms has a strong effect on participant responses (Arnulf, Larsen, Martinsen, & Bong, 2014; Sakshaug & Kreuter, 2014). For instance, Arnulf et al. used latent semantic analysis (LSA) to compare the semantic characteristics of survey items and obtained correlations almost identical to the correlations among human responses to the survey items. For example, a work effort scale and a work quality scale had a correlation of .36 in a linear
regression of participant responses and a .35 correlation in the semantic similarity of the survey items. This brings into question the true independence of these scales and highlights the importance of looking beyond survey measures to understand human perception (Arnulf et al.). Sakshaug and Kreuter come to a similar conclusion in their study of the wording of a research consent statement. By embedding the phrase “to keep the interview as brief as possible” in the consent, they received a significantly higher rate of consent compared to the neutral wording (one-sided Z-score = 1.75; $p = .04$).

Thus, survey methods may not pick up unanticipated cultural, contextual, and linguistic differences for which the research design may not account. I argue in this section that an analysis of participants’ spontaneous accounts of their lives is a viable alternative to self-report measures, offering a novel perspective on agency. I begin with a review of several psychological theories built on a narrative foundation and then make an argument for a brief form of educational autobiography as a method of narrative data collection.

**Arguments for Narrative Analysis**

This subsection reviews work done in narrative analysis to show its potential for understanding perceptions and beliefs. The linguistic category model (LCM), narrative psychology, automated text analysis, and self-authorship are each reviewed in turn.

**The linguistic category model.** To begin, the LCM maintains that the narrative choices individuals make about ordering, temporality, causation, and cultural scripts reveal information about how they perceive the world. Proponents of the LCM argue that the linguistic choices individuals make influence the perception of those around them and
reflect their own beliefs and perceptions (Läslö, 2004; Semin, 2008). For instance, Stapel and Semin (2007) found that a predominance of action verbs (e.g., hit) in a narrative directed listener attention to specific details of an event while a predominance of more abstract words like adjectives directed that attention to a global focus (e.g., aggressive). Thus, while speakers are usually not conscious of lexical and grammatical choices, those choices appear to be associated with a particular perception of a situation (Semin; Stapel & Semin).

**Narrative psychology.** Narrative psychologists move beyond LCM, claiming that narrative is a basic organizing principle for human psychology (Crossley, 2003; Gergen & Gergen, 2010; Läslö, 2004; Mancuso, 1996; McAdams, 2001; Murray, 2008; Polkinghorne, 1988; Sarbin, 1986). In this view people use stories to make sense of their lives and give it a sense of temporal order and coherence, a process that Sarbin (1986) calls *emplotment*. Moreover, because intentionality is at the core of storytelling (the purpose of telling one’s story is to communicate some intention; McAdams, 2001), narrative is a particularly good method for eliciting individuals’ sense of agency. When people tell stories, they select certain themes, certain lexical items, and certain grammatical structures to portray their actions in the world, offering a window into how they feel they are (or are not) autonomously and intentionally acting in that world.

Narrative has also been proposed as both a reflection and a construction of individual identity (Giddens, 1991). In a world of shifting roles and contexts, an identity that feels continuous and stable is a fragile construct, one that individuals sustain through narrative (Giddens). Conversely, these narratives offer a glimpse into an individual’s
characteristics and beliefs, something McAdams and his colleagues call narrative identity (McAdams et al., 2006; McLean & Jennings, 2012; Pasupathi & Hoyt, 2009). McAdams and his colleagues have been studying narrative identity for over 15 years, arguing that one’s broad narrative identity develops from all the specific narratives individuals tell in specific situations over time (see McLean, Pasupathi, & Pals, 2007, for a description of this process). For instance, in a study of 112 emerging adults over the course of three years, McAdams et al. (2006) found that narrative complexity and tone showed significant continuity over time, like other personality measures. Moreover, thematic analysis demonstrated that, as predicted in the developmental stage of emerging adulthood, participants’ narratives increased over time in complexity and level of motivation for personal growth.

In another study—of 51 adults ranging in age from 30 to 72—Bauer, McAdams, and Sakaeda (2005) compare their coding of crystallization of desire in narratives with three well-established independent measures: the satisfaction with life scale (Diener, Emmons, Larson, & Griffen, 1985), Emmons’s (1986) personal strivings measure, and the Big Five Inventory (John & Strivastava, 1999). They found that the narratively coded crystallization of desire correlated significantly with all three scales, with correlations of .51 for satisfaction of life (p < .001), -.31 for avoidance strivings (p < .05), and -.53 for the personality trait of neuroticism (p < .001). Thus, in the two studies above and other work (McAdams, 2001; McLean & Jennings, 2012; McLean, Pasupathi, & Pals, 2007), McAdams and his colleagues offer evidence that the ways individuals tell stories correlate with developing and enduring psychological characteristics.
Automated text analysis. The study of the relationship between narrative and psychological features has also been taken up by those pursuing automated text analysis. They argue that speaker choices can be predictive of certain behaviors, personality traits, or affect (Campbell & Pennebaker, 2003; Mairesse et al., 2007; Ha, Haury, & Nehm, 2012). In fact, Blake and Gutierrez (2011) were able to detect five distinct (all correlations between dimensions were under .20) dimensions of professionalism, including autonomy, in the reflective responses of students in a management program. They used LSA to compare management students’ responses to a “gold standard” corpus of ideal, highly professional, autonomous, texts, like the following:

I have learned for myself that it is very important to know what I want to do in my life (what job I am interested in). I should identify what industries I am interested in and in what field (sales, advertising, investment). After I can start searching for companies that can offer me the job I am looking for and prepare to the interview as best as I can. (Blake & Gutierrez, p. 2255)

This respondent takes responsibility for his past learning and his future decisions, offering a specific plan for obtaining a job. Interestingly, the authors found that the management program was less successful at engendering the professional dimension of autonomy in its students than the other dimensions (association, self-regulation, dedication, and societal benefits), a finding that helped leaders redirect the program’s resources for future events. In Blake and Gutierrez’s research, then, the language of individuals’ reflections acts as useful indicator of their perceptions of their ownership
over their career decisions. The current study will draw on this relationship between reflection and perception to explore agency.

**Self-authorship.** Another way the narrative performance of identity has been conceptualized is through self-authorship: “the internal capacity to define one’s beliefs, identity, and social relations” (Baxter Magolda, 2008). While the definition of self-authorship positions it as an internal faculty, it has been studied through narrative interviews. These interviews reveal individuals who exercise agency over the self and the world by listening for their internal “voice” and then making internal and external choices to align themselves with that voice (Baxter Magolda, 2008). Self-authored individuals’ narratives are purposeful and directed, displaying some of the qualities of agency discussed above.

The work in LCM, narrative psychology, automated text analysis, and self-authorship all argue for the importance of the narrative representation of the self. Whether consciously or unconsciously, individuals are selective both about what they choose to tell and how they choose to tell it. In this study, these narrative choices are examined to better understand how individuals position themselves as agents vis-à-vis other individuals, structures, and entities.

**Educational Autobiographies: A Tool for Narrative Data Collection**

While telling a story gives the participant more control and creative input than filling out a survey, the narrative form still places interesting constraints on representation (Goodson & Gill, 2011), making it a viable data collection tool. First, stories require individuals to place events in a linear sequence, talking about some things
before others and, as a result, often emphasizing some things more than others (Murray, 2008). Second, temporality often plays out differently in stories than in day-to-day existence, allowing the speaker to point to her experience of time, spending more time on some events than on others (Randall, 2010). Third, stories usually have causal linkages (e.g., because, so, if...then), marking the relationship the speaker perceives to exist between different people and events (Goodson & Gill). These causal linkages are part of what Rossiter (1999) calls the “morally retrospective” quality of stories: the teller takes a particular moral stance and uses causal linkages to construct a relationship among past, present, and future events in order to narratively argue for this stance. Similarly, Quinn (2011) argues that the causal linkages humans establish can be reliable guides to their basic cultural models for their world. Fourth, stories, like all human meaning-making, provide valuable cultural information: an individual narrative is influenced by surrounding cultural narratives, often conceived of by narrative theorists as “scripts,” acceptable combinations of characters, plot elements, and moral outcomes that are the norms of an individual’s culture (Rossiter, 1999).

The linearity, temporality, causal linkages, and cultural content of narratives suggest they would be a good method for analyzing adult learners’ sense of agency in the classroom. And a useful tool exists for eliciting these valuable narratives: educational autobiography (Dominicé, 2000). Dominicé’s educational autobiography has its roots in Goodson and Gill’s (2011) notion of life history: “a collaborative and reciprocal process of developing understanding” between participants (p. 25). Educational autobiographies, similarly, involve engaged inquiry and intense listening on the part of the researcher. The
learner’s act of telling a personal story in an educational space can feel strange at first, but Dominicé argues that it is an important critical act, because it is the first time for many learners that they have expressed their voice in an educational setting. The act of telling their own story, reflecting their own experiences, located in a setting that perhaps has felt disempowering in the past can be an empowering act. It is a way, then, for learners to express their own sense of academic agency, whether it be conjoint or disjoint, agency over the self or agency over the other. The brief educational autobiography interview used in this study is adapted from Dominicé’s longer procedure, which stretches over the course of an academic semester.

**Summary**

In this chapter I explored the phenomenon of agency from a philosophy of phenomenology perspective, a psychological perspective, and a linguistic perspective, arguing for its centrality in human behavior and language. I then discussed the particular importance of a sense of agency in an adult secondary education context. Finally, I argued for the importance of narrative for understanding agency, particularly when narrative is situated in an educational autobiography spreading across different contexts and time periods.
Chapter Three: Methods

Site Selection and Description

I am conducting this research at two community-based organizations offering adult basic and secondary education in a large, mid-Atlantic city. These organizations were chosen because it focuses its efforts primarily on adult learning and literacy (as opposed to workforce training or other kinds of outreach), so stakeholders are more enthusiastic about working with an educational researcher than other institutions. Moreover, these organizations have a well-developed community network and offer many of their classes in partnership with other community organizations like food banks, workforce training centers, churches, and high schools. They draw learners of varying ages and races from all over the city, who are at varying levels of proficiency in their secondary skills. This will, I hope, offer a relatively broad picture of adult urban learners. Here I describe each site in some detail.

City Literacy

The first site, City Literacy (CL; pseudonym), has been in operation for about 25 years. It offers General Educational Development (GED®) and basic reading classes and is one of the state’s National External Diploma Program (NEDP) providers. The NEDP is a self-directed “applied performance assessment program” (https://www.casas.org/nedp) that, like the GED® exam, provides a secondary equivalency degree (only learners who
place into at least 10th-grade mathematics are eligible for this program) but, unlike the GED® program, is not classroom-based. Through all of its programs, CL serves over 1,300 adults a year, partnering with community organizations around the city for classroom space and to offer services to their students. About half of its classes are offered on-site and the other half at these community organizations.

CL’s offices and classrooms are in a large, sunny, historically preserved building with high ceilings and many nooks and crannies for meeting and studying. It has seven full-time administrative employees and seven part-time administrative employees, making it the largest adult literacy organization in its city. Several of CL’s positions (executive director, instructional specialist, intake assessment specialist, and transitions specialist) are required by their state funding and the organization gives detailed reports of its learners’ progress to the state on a quarterly basis. Additionally, it has a director of finance, a director of technology and instruction, a grant writer, a custodian, and two development/fundraising staff members. It also employs almost 20 part-time instructors who teach the vast majority of the classes (several full-time administrators also teach a class in addition to their other duties). It also has approximately 200 volunteers at any given time.

CL is in an excellent position both financially and administratively. Their executive director has been working in adult learning for most of her career and is a savvy fundraiser, politician, leader, and administrator. It receives the majority of its money from the state literacy grant, but a smaller percentage than other area literacy organizations. This allows it to pursue projects and programs that are outside of the state
grant’s purview. When these efforts are successful, the state pays attention and often incorporates CL’s practices into their grant requirements, giving it some influence at the state level.

Regarding learner demographics, the vast majority of CL learners live at or below the poverty line. CL serves about 60% women and 40% men. About half of their learners are between 25 and 44, about 15% are below 25, and about 30% are above 44. Because CL does not offer English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), they serve a negligible amount of Hispanic learners compared to other literacy organizations in the city, with about 70% of their learners designating themselves as African-American, about 25% designating themselves as White, and about 5% designating themselves in some other way. About 50% of the learners at CL are employed and the rest are either searching for employment or are receiving disability or retirement benefits. The organization’s learners are divided between basic learners (those with math skills below the 8th grade level; about 80%) and secondary learners (those with math skills at the 8th grade level or above; about 20%).

**Adult Community Learning**

The second site, Adult Community Learning (ACL; pseudonym), was established more than 20 years ago as a part of a larger organization offering a variety of programs that aim to strengthen the neighborhoods in which their community centers are located. Like CL, they offer GED® and basic reading classes, but they are not an NEDP provider. They do, however, offer ESOL classes, so their GED® classes seem to have more non-native speakers enrolled than at CL. Adult Community is relatively small, serving about
600 learners a year. Most of their classes are on-site, but, like CL, they offer a number of off-site classes through community partnerships and through their own community centers.

ACL is located in the basement of a large church, where staff offices, six classrooms of varying sizes, three one-on-one tutor rooms, and a break area with coffee for learners and instructors are all snugly and cleverly arranged to use every inch of space, meaning that one sometimes has to walk through one office or classroom to get to another. ACL competes for and receives the same line of state funding as CL, so it has the same required positions, but it has fewer people covering those positions. Thus, one individual is responsible for a number of distinct jobs and ACL do not have any of the extra positions CL does. This is more the norm for literacy programs in this urban area. But unlike other programs, ACL is part of a larger community organization, so they can draw on those resources (e.g., volunteer coordinator, grants associate, media and communications manager), which are shared with all the other programs in the organization.

ACL has about 25 part-time instructors and six administrative employees also teach classes. Adult secondary and literacy instructors in the urban area of the study work across a number of literacy organizations in order to cobble together something like a full-time position. In fact, when I first went to a professional development at ACL to recruit instructors, I found that I knew over half of the instructors from other organizations around the city, including CL.
ACL has a greater emphasis on one-on-one tutoring than CL, for which it relies primarily on volunteers, between 75 and 100 per year. It is located across from the main campus of a prestigious private university and administrators regularly recruit volunteers from there, as well as through their website and other volunteer recruiting websites like idealist.org. Even when learners are enrolled in a formal class, many of them still meet regularly with volunteer tutors, particularly at the lower levels.

As at CL, most learners at ACL live at or below the poverty line. CL serves about 65% women and 35% men. They do not collect age information on their learners. About 50% of ACL’s learners designate themselves as African-American (less than at CL), about 25% designate themselves as White, about 19% designate themselves as Asian, and about 25% designate themselves in some other way. Just under 40% of ACL learners are employed and the rest are either searching for employment or are receiving disability or retirement benefits. The organization’s learners are divided between basic learners (those with math skills below the 8th grade level; about 80%) and secondary learners (those with math skills at the 8th grade level or above; about 20%). ACL offers ESOL classes, with just under 50% of their learners in ESOL and just over 50% taking 300 GED® or basic literacy classes.

**Participant Characteristics**

Surveys and interviews were conducted one-on-one with 68 adult learners at the two literacy sites over the course of three months. Attendance records and achievement test scores (Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment System; CASAS) were collected
for all participants and teacher perception surveys were collected for all but three participants.

After excluding individuals who did not fit study criteria e.g., their literacy level was too low, they were not fluent speakers of English [i.e., they did not test at a ninth grade level on the English section of the CASAS test], their interview ran beyond 30 minutes and was too long for coding), the final sample consisted of 64 participants for survey measures and 63 participants for linguistic (i.e., interview-based) tools.

Participants were drawn from 14 classes over the two sites, 48% from CL and 52% from ACL. Demographics of the participants by site are given in Table 4. As the table indicates, there were slightly more female participants than male and the majority of participants at both sites were African-American. Participants were relatively evenly divided between those enrolled in upper-level GED® classes (testing on at least a ninth-grade mathematics level) and those enrolled in lower-level pre-GED® classes (testing between the sixth- and eighth-grade levels in mathematics). There were also two participants (3%) from the National External Diploma Program (NEDP): a path to secondary school equivalency through a self-paced applied performance assessment program (CASAS.org). Participants ranged in age from 17 to 69 with an overall mean of 41 ($SD = 15.6$) and, as Table 4 indicates, were relatively evenly distributed across the represented age range.
Table 4

Demographic Characteristics of Sample

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>CL % (n)</th>
<th>ACL % (n)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total Participants</td>
<td>48% (31)</td>
<td>52% (33)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>58% (18)</td>
<td>64% (21)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>42% (13)</td>
<td>36% (12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race/Ethnicity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African-American</td>
<td>77% (24)</td>
<td>94% (31)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>13% (4)</td>
<td>3% (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>10% (3)</td>
<td>3% (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class Level</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-GED</td>
<td>48% (15)</td>
<td>42% (14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GED</td>
<td>45% (14)</td>
<td>58% (19)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NEDP</td>
<td>7% (2)</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17-20</td>
<td>19% (6)</td>
<td>6% (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21-30</td>
<td>16% (5)</td>
<td>24% (8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31-40</td>
<td>26% (8)</td>
<td>12% (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41-50</td>
<td>16% (5)</td>
<td>21% (7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51-60</td>
<td>13% (4)</td>
<td>21% (7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>61-70</td>
<td>10% (3)</td>
<td>15% (5)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5 shows the age at which participants left school and the educational level obtained by their primary parent or guardian. As Table 5 shows, most participants left in high school, with the largest number leaving in 11th grade. The primary parents or guardians of participants achieved a relatively high education level, with only about 25% total not completing at least high school or the equivalent.
Table 5

*Educational Characteristics of Participants and Guardians*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>CL % (n)</th>
<th>ACL % (n)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Dropout Grade</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4(^{th})</td>
<td>3% (1)</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7(^{th})</td>
<td>3% (1)</td>
<td>3% (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8(^{th})</td>
<td>10% (3)</td>
<td>6% (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9(^{th})</td>
<td>26% (8)</td>
<td>18% (6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10(^{th})</td>
<td>16% (5)</td>
<td>24% (8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11(^{th})</td>
<td>26% (8)</td>
<td>36% (12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12(^{th})</td>
<td>16% (5)</td>
<td>12% (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Completed Education Level of</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Primary Guardian</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elementary School</td>
<td>10% (3)</td>
<td>6% (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle School</td>
<td>26% (8)</td>
<td>12% (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary or Equivalent</td>
<td>52% (16)</td>
<td>48% (16)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some College</td>
<td>10% (3)</td>
<td>9% (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associates, BA, or Grad School</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>24% (8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>3% (1)</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Epistemological Framework**

Before delving further into study design, I would like to present the epistemological lens through which I see this research. I narrate my research identity through two distinct disciplinary lenses. First, as a researcher who takes an interpretivist stance, I believe that our access to reality is through the social and that, therefore, our understandings of reality are socially constructed (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Through this lens, research participants’ perspectives on reality and my co-construction of those perspectives are the focus of my research. Since I cannot come to know universal truths, I focus on the particular truths of myself and my participants and present them with enough
detail and context to be rigorous representations of those truths. All the while, however, I maintain a constructivist ontology, believing that “there is no single, fragmentable reality on to which science can converge” (Lincoln, 1990, p. 77).

Second, as a functional linguist who takes a critical stance, I am interested in the ways human beings position themselves and others using (and sometimes adapting) the categories of their language (Fairclough, 2003; Hallidy & Matthiessen, 2004; van Dijk, 1997). I believe that linguistic categories like noun, predicate, adverb, and modality can be useful tools for denaturalizing everyday language in order to better understand the social and psychological structures language may create and sustain (Fairclough, 1995). In other words, the ways individuals choose to express themselves offer evidence for their beliefs about themselves, others, and the relationships among them. This lens shares with critical realism a commitment to constructing a rigorously supported “reality” in order to engage in a broader conversation about policy-making and social justice (Maxwell, 2012; van Dijk, 1996).

Yet these two disciplinary lenses—critical functional linguistics and interpretivist qualitative research—seem to pose a “logical disjunction: a realist…ontology coupled with a subjectivist epistemology” (Guba, 1990, p. 24, emphasis in original). The critical functional linguistic analysis that forms the basis for my construct of linguistic agency quantifies linguistic categories in order to generate knowledge. Meanwhile, interpretivist qualitative research is committed to emergent design: the research process constructs the data and, thus, the knowledge I may find within it.
Theorists have posed several solutions to this dilemma. Greene (2010) takes what I would call a personal approach. While interpretivism is value relative, interpretivist researchers need not be. Given that as qualitative researchers we are the central tool for inquiry, our knowledge “inevitably reflects the values of the inquirer, even as it seeks to reconstruct others’ sense of meaning and supporting beliefs” (Greene, p. 71). Moreover, the people who use our research are not value relative either. Thus it is inevitable that a research paradigm based on the social construction of reality will go on to socially construct a new reality. That is just the nature of the beast. Yet acceptance of this new reality goes against both my interpretivist and critical commitments, creating yet another social structure which must then be questioned.

Johnson-Bailey (2002) also takes a personal approach, but a slightly different one, attending to the “dance” between her own “power of the pen” and the voices her participants claim as they tell their stories to her (p. 325). Like Greene, she sees the creation of a new reality as the nature of the beast, but she focuses more on the process of Othering and how the reconstruction of others’ meanings is “wrought with issues of power” (p. 325). Johnson-Bailey’s chronicle is more tortured than Greene’s, detailing how her dance “come[s] back to haunt [her]” (p. 325). Similarly, for Koro-Ljungberg, Yendol-Hoppey, Smith, and Hayes (2009), the process of being haunted dispels the ghosts of constructivist epistemology. In other words, simply recognizing “the extent of our not knowing” (p. 697) is valuable in itself. As with Greene’s (2010) solution, however, this simple acknowledgement of my discomfort while moving forward with a research program contradicts those same interpretivist and critical commitments.
My resolution for this epistemological conflict is twofold. First, like Greene and Hall (2010), I take a dialectic stance, bringing multiple disciplinary and methodological lenses together, not in order to converge on a single reality, but in order to gain insight into the different ways that reality may be constructed. Rather than seeking integration of all data into a final set of claims, the dialectic stance offers opportunities for conversation among competing claims. Second, linguistic analysis provides a unique lens for investigating what Haraway (2003) calls situated knowledges: the critical knowledge located in particular bodies at particular times (p. 30). A linguistic analysis does not offer information about the real world as separate from our knowledge of it. Instead, it offers information about each individual’s representation of her own, embodied social reality. My critical task as a writer, then, is to position my research clearly as a representation of another’s reality, not as an absolute truth about the world. In other words, I must make clear that the precision of the quantified linguistic variables does not contribute directly to the validity of my conclusions (Maxwell, 2010). In writing, then, I have tried to make the dialectic relationship among the various units of my data transparent, juxtaposing potentially conflicting conclusions rather than creating a linear story to explain them away.

Design

This study is part of a larger research program investigating linguistic markers of agency in adult learners, conceptualized in Figure 1. This larger research program follows a sequential mixed methods design (I do not distinguish between exploratory or explanatory sequential design because I do not see the timing of the collection of one
type of data—qualitative or quantitative—as determining the epistemological framework for the study; cf., Fetters, Curry & Creswell, 2013): I began with a literature review and qualitative exploration of representations of agency in adult learning contexts (Konopasky & Sheridan, 2014) and used insights from that work to select survey measures, interview protocols, and linguistic coding procedure for the current study. Then quantified linguistic variables were used to direct the focus of qualitative discourse analysis (following Fairclough, 2003).

Yet, typologizing this study as sequential masks some of its complexity (Guest, 2013). The overall study is truly sequential: data collection and analysis for the pilot study preceded the data collection and analysis for the current study. Within the current study, however, all the data was collected simultaneously and it is only the stages of

Figure 1. Research program design map.

Yet, typologizing this study as sequential masks some of its complexity (Guest, 2013). The overall study is truly sequential: data collection and analysis for the pilot study preceded the data collection and analysis for the current study. Within the current study, however, all the data was collected simultaneously and it is only the stages of
analysis that are sequential, making the data collection convergent and the data analysis sequential. Survey data and linguistic data were analyzed quantitatively and then the same linguistic data were analyzed qualitatively based on that quantitative analysis. Moreover, some follow-up quantitative analysis (correlations among linguistic variables) was done as theories were developed through qualitative discourse analysis. In this way, the statistical results were *recontextualized* through careful textual analysis, which then led to more theories for statistical testing, much like some hermeneutic content analysis (Bergman, 2010).

I developed this design with three distinct purposes in mind. First, mixed methods analysis can be particularly helpful in applied linguistic studies, since qualitative tools allow a focus on the processes of language production while quantitative tools allow a focus on the outcomes of language use (Hashemi, 2012). Like grounded theory, the field of linguistics has established qualitative and quantitative techniques, balancing fluidity and structure (see Johnson, McGowan, & Turner, 2010 for a discussion of grounded theory and mixed methods analysis). I use this mixture of techniques to move between a more rule-bound “variance” perspective on the data through the description of linguistic variables and a more interpretative “process” perspective, using those variables to *sample* participant interviews for qualitative discourse analysis (see Maxwell, 2010 for a description of variance and process research views).

Second, this qualitatively-driven sequential design brings multiple methods into the same research context, offering, “numerous modes of meaning making and knowledge production” (Kinzelhoe, McLaren, & Steinberg, 2011, p. 169). Bringing
together systemic functional linguistics, correlational research, descriptive statistics, and qualitative discourse analysis reveals some of the complexities inherent in the notion of agency (Kincheloe et al.). Rather than focus solely on triangulation of results, this design allows me to place potentially divergent results in conversation with each other (Greene, 2007; Greene & Hall, 2010). In this way, I am able to catalog some of the “tensions and ambiguities of diverse mixed methods findings,” potentially providing a space where marginalized perspectives might emerge (Hesse-Biber, 2010, p. 187). For instance, by comparing the results of self-efficacy surveys with qualitative results of the ways participants frame their own abilities, a nuanced understanding emerges of participants as both highly self-efficacious and unsure of their own individual agency (see Chapter Four).

Finally, because the qualitative pilot study drove the design and then results were derived from qualitative discourse analysis, I led a more “interpretive, inductive, and dynamic qualitative analytic process” than would be possible if the quantitative and qualitative analyses were fully integrated (Plano Clark, Schumacher, West, Edrington, Dunn, et al., 2013, p. 234). Mixed methods designs have been criticized because they often subvert or devalue constructivist or interpretive techniques and claims (cf., Plano Clark et al. for a discussion and review). They tend to privilege the validity assumptions of the quantitative portion of the study, drawing from random samples, manipulating the environment to maintain internal validity, and maintaining distance from participants to promote objectivity (Plano Clark et al.). Certain aspects of my design do privilege my quantitative questions: for example I will not have the resources to do lengthy
observations in each classroom, follow up with participants across time, or engage in emergent analysis of interview transcripts by returning to participants numerous times to check interpretation. Nonetheless, I have chosen the sample selection, data collection procedures, and data analysis techniques of the qualitative portion of the study based on constructivist principles. I am purposefully selecting participants who present a unique “opportunity to learn” (Stake, 1995, p. 6) about educational experiences across childhood and adulthood because of their time spent at CL or ACL and their willingness to talk about it. I am conducting educational autobiography interviews at a time and place convenient to and comfortable for participants, outside of the bounds of class time. And I am allowing the qualitative analysis to emerge according to what the participants choose to share and how they choose to share it rather than seeking to answer a set of established, narrow research questions.

Data Sources

In this section, I review the sources of data, beginning with the core data for this study, the agency interviews, which were analyzed both qualitatively and quantitatively. I then review the learner agency survey measures, the achievement measure, the persistence measure, and the instructor perception of student risk scale.

Agency Interview

The agency interview developed for this study is based on Dominicé’s (2000) educational autobiography research with college students and on an educational autobiography interview protocol in an earlier study (Konopasky & Sheridan, 2014, 2016). In these studies, learners (undergraduates in Dominicé’s study and GED® learners
in Konopasky and Sheridan’s work) were asked to view their life histories through the context of their educational experiences. Both studies found that these accounts offered insight not only into students’ educational experiences, but their identities as learners and knowers. Rogers (2004) took a similar approach with adult learners, extending the interview from questions about their current and past educational experiences to questions about their involvement with their children’s education. She found, through qualitative analysis, that the adult learners in her study talked about themselves more agentively in stories set in certain contexts (their adult literacy programs or their children’s education) than in others (their elementary and secondary schools).

In the current study, I create a diagnostic tool to quantitatively code for the agency reflected in learners’ educational stories. In the previous study, we found the most rich data on agency in the answers to three types of questions: (a) descriptions of the self as a learner in high school and in adult education, (b) descriptions of supports in high school and in adult education, and (c) descriptions of barriers in high school and adult education (Konopasky & Sheridan, 2014, 2016). Thus, these three areas are the focus of the 6-item short-form interview. Participants were asked three questions about their high school experiences: (1) Describe yourself as a high school student; (2) Tell me about some of the people and things that supported you in high school; (3) Tell me about some of the barriers that led to you leaving high school. They were asked three parallel questions about their adult learning experiences: (1) Describe yourself as an adult learner; (2) Tell me about some of the people and things that support you in this program; (3) Tell me about any barriers to you staying in the program. About half (48%) of participants
were asked about their high school experiences first and half (52%) were asked about their adult learning experiences first.

While I attempted to keep interviews between 5 and 10 minutes in length to both offer enough linguistic data and be short enough for exhaustive coding, they had a much broader range due to some participants' nervousness, on the one hand, and the open-ended nature of the interviews, on the other. The final sample of 64 interviews ranged in length of time from 2 minutes, 4 seconds to 32 minutes, 3 seconds (with the latter being a full 13 minutes longer than the next shortest interview, at 18 minutes, 46 seconds). The mean interview length was 6 minutes, 46 seconds (it was 6 minutes, 22 seconds without the longest interview). In data analysis, word count was used rather than length because it more accurately represented participants’ contribution to the interview.

**Personal Data Questionnaire**

In order to obtain demographic information, a 6-item personal data questionnaire was administered. In addition to questions about gender, age, race, and mother’s education level, participants were asked at what grade level and age they left school.

**Agency-Related Survey Measures**

**Structural barriers questionnaire.** Structural barriers of poverty like inadequate housing, lack of access to transportation, and significant health problems can be central factors in learners’ decisions to start or continue in adult education programs (Darkenwald & Valentine, 1985; Schafft & Prins, 2009). In order to be assess learners’ perceptions of outside factors that may be affecting their agency, I developed a structural barriers questionnaire.
Darkenwald and Valentine created a detailed 34-item, 6-factor Deterrents to Participation in Adult Education scale (with a Cronbach’s alpha of .86). But since most of their participants were well educated and affluent, unlike the current population, and responding feedback from administrators and instructors at the two literacy organizations, I adapted the scale to focus on what might be most relevant for these participants. Moreover, 34 items is too lengthy, given the time I was allotted for data collection. Thus, in consultation with administrators and instructors, I modified seven items to create a short questionnaire. I retained Darkenwald and Valentine’s format, which asks participants to rate how important each factor is in the decision to continue with adult education on a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = not important, 5 = very important). The seven factors I chose in consultation with literacy practitioners are: transportation, work hours, child care, health problems of self and family, money for class supplies, housing difficulties, and worries about the safety of the class area. The Cronbach’s alpha for the final scale was .81. (See Appendix D for more details on scale development and validity.)

**Self-efficacy surveys.** To measure how confident adult learners were with classroom reading and writing tasks, Shell, Murphy, and Bruning’s (1989) reading and writing self-efficacy scales were adapted for participants’ classroom context (e.g., “Please rate how sure you are that you can read your class textbook,” and “Please rate how sure you are that you can correctly spell all the words in a writing assignment for class”). Self-efficacy scales ask about specific behaviors that an individual *can do*. This indication of perceived ability (i.e., *can*) to complete specific actions in the world (e.g., *read, spell*) is agentive, indicating autonomy in a concrete domain.
Following Bandura’s (2006b) guidelines for maintaining content validity in self-efficacy scale construction, only items describing behaviors that are relevant to the adult literacy classroom were selected or modified, resulting in two 6-item scales. Moreover, the language was simplified to account for a range of literacy levels (e.g., “rate how confident you are” was adapted to “rate how sure you are”). Following Bandura’s suggestion for simplifying the response scale, a 10-point scale was used instead of a 100-point scale. The Cronbach’s alpha for the final self-efficacy in reading scale was .84 and for the final self-efficacy in writing scale was .91. (See Appendix D for more details on scale development and validity.)

**Perceived academic control scale.** Perry, Hladkyj, Pekrun, and Pelletier’s (2001) 8-item perceived academic control measure was used to investigate students’ beliefs about what causes their academic successes and failures (e.g., “I have a lot of control over how well I do in my GED class,” and “The more effort I put into my GED class, the better I do”). Students rate how much they agree with these statements on a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*). Perry et al.’s measure uses a language of agency, with concepts like control, responsibility, and determination of events, so it was hypothesized that it would relate to a linguistic agency tool. The Cronbach’s alpha for the final scale was .72. (See Appendix D for more details on scale development and validity.)

**Perceived autonomy support scale.** The perceived autonomy support scale is a sub-scale of Williams and Deci’s (1996) Learning Climate Questionnaire (LCQ). The LCQ (itself adapted from the Health-Care Climate Questionnaire; Williams, Grow,
Freedman, Ryan, & Deci, 1996) is a 15-item questionnaire investigating how much learners perceive their instructor supporting their autonomy in the classroom (e.g., “I feel that my instructor gives me choices and options” and “My instructor listens to how I would like to do things”). Students rate how much they agree with these statements on a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). The concept of autonomy support measured by this scale overlaps considerably with the concept of agency developed in this study. Individuals who experience autonomy support feel that the person in charge, among other things, provides them with the information to make their own choices and does not try to pressure or control them (Williams & Deci). It was hypothesized that this scale’s focus on choice and control would relate to a diagnostic linguistic agency tool. The Cronbach’s alpha for the final scale was .71. (See Appendix D for more details on scale development and validity.)

**Additional Measures**

**Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment System (CASAS).** Organizations that receive state funding for adult literacy instruction, which include CL and ACL, are required to administer the CASAS test for initial learner placement and then again after 70 hours of instruction. CASAS uses as its subject matter “real-life competencies” like communicating with others, managing personal health, and seeking and retaining a job. Through questions in these areas, CASAS assesses reading and math, assigning each learner a score between 136 and 271 (for the standard test—those who fall outside that range are tested with different instruments). Score ranges are then used to assign learners to the following class levels: beginning literacy, beginning basic, intermediate basic,
advanced basic, adult secondary, and advanced adult secondary. While I could not find a reliability statistics for specific CASAS exams, according to the CASAS website, its assessments are developed using item response theory and have “undergone rigorous statistical procedures to ensure reliable and valid results” (https://www.casas.org/).

Feelings of autonomy, control, or choice are often predictive of academic performance (Bandura, 1997; Perry, Hladkyj, Pekrun, & Pelletier, 2001; Ryan & Deci, 2011; Stupinsky, Perry, Hall, & Guay, 2012; Wehmeyer, 2004). Because (a) the results of the CASAS assessment are available for all study students, (b) it is the primary instrument both sites use to assign students to classes, (c) it is valued by most students as a measure of academic performance, and (d) the two literacy organizations in this study do not assign any grades that could be used as a performance measure, I will use the latest CASAS results as a proxy for academic performance.

Since most students are hoping to pass the GED® exam, the GEDReady™ (the official practice test) might arguably be a better proxy than the CASAS assessment. But most students do not take the GEDReady™ until they are at the adult secondary level and it is a time-consuming and relatively expensive test by adult literacy standards ($24 per student on www.gedmarketplace.com at the time of data collection). There is evidence, however, that CASAS results and GED® exam results are correlated: CASAS (2003) published a report based on a study of 6,700 individuals in five states and found “a clear positive relationship between CASAS reading scores and GED reading scores as well as between CASAS math scores and GED math scores” (p. 1). While there are no statements of statistical significance, an earlier report on the CASAS Functional Writing
Assessment found that 68% of the variance in GED score was predictable from the CASAS writing score. Unfortunately both of these reports were published prior to the launching of the new, reportedly more rigorous version of the GED® exam in 2014 (http://www.gedtestingservice.com/ged-testing-service), but the CASAS exam remained the most accessible and affordable assessment to use in the two study contexts at that time.

Participants’ most recent scores on the CASAS reading and mathematics tests were collected as a measure of current academic achievement. Because both organizations offer reading/writing and mathematics as separate classes, learners can choose to take just one class and, as a result, may not end up taking both sections of the CASAS. Thus, an average of both sections cannot be computed for all participants. So, after determining that the reading and mathematics tests are indeed highly correlated for this sample ($r = .62, p < .001$), the achievement measure was calculated using the average of both scores when available and simply the individual reading or math when not available. Participant achievement scores ranged from 187 to 258, with a mean of 230 ($SD = 12$). This represents the full range from first grade equivalency (180-200) through to twelfth grade equivalency (251 and above). The mean, 230, is right at the line between seventh and eighth grade equivalency.

**Attendance.** Learner persistence in adult education programs is a central concern for adult education practitioners (National Research Council, 2012). Not only do researchers and practitioners point to persistence as a reason learners do not progress (Comings, 2007; Mellard, Krieshok, Fall, & Woods, 2013), but these organizations’ state
funding agency has made it a major grant performance indicator. Perceived academic control is a significant predictor of persistence in higher education (Gillet, Berjot, Vallerand, & Amoura, 2012) and learner self-advocacy and leadership are good predictors of persistence for women in adult education (Ziegler et al., 2006). Thus, this study examines the relationship between agency and persistence.

Persistence is operationalized here as hours of attendance over a period of time (Comings, 2007; Mellard et al., 2013). Weekly attendance data was used to calculate a variable representing a percentage of total possible class time attended per quarter. This helps to even out the weekly fluctuations and differences in survey administration time. Since different classes met for different lengths of time (anywhere from 60 to 212 hours over a semester), learner persistence was calculated as the percentage the learner attended out of possible class hours that semester (ranging from 9 to 184 hours).

**Perception of Student Risk Scale.** Because some learners in this study might be what some instructors describe as serial returners—learners who participate intensely for a time and then may withdraw for a while—additional data on persistence and achievement were gathered with an instructor-directed Perception of Student Risk scale consisting only of two items. This scale was kept short to ease the burden on instructors, but because of that brevity, reliability could not be established and it was, thus, used only in an exploratory fashion. The first asks how likely the instructor thinks it is that the student will pass the GED® exam in the next year (on a Likert-type scale from one, “extremely unlikely,” to five, “extremely likely”). The second asks how likely the instructor thinks it is that the student will continue to attend classes for the remainder of
the semester (on the same scale). Teachers’ expectations about how their students will do have significant predictive value (Jussim & Harber, 2005; Rubie-Davies, 2010). Whether the relationship between these expectations and student outcomes is a self-fulfilling prophecy or is because teachers’ expectations are relatively accurate (cf., Jussim & Harber for a review of this literature up through 2005), teacher expectations are a valuable predictive tool. The form of these two items is drawn from the longer, validated 16-item Teacher Risk Rating Form (TRISK; Soberman, 1994). Because of the time pressures of the GED® teachers in the chosen program, the TRISK, although reliable (with an alpha of .91 in Dishion, Kavanagh, Schneider, Nelson, and Kaufman, 2002), is too long. It is also directed at high school persistence, while the current study focuses on persistence in adult education. The two items used in this study ask instructors directly about learners’ likelihood of staying enrolled in the GED® program and passing the GED® exam.

Instructors were asked to judge potential for student dropout on a scale of 1 (extremely unlikely to continue attending to the end of the semester) to 5 (extremely likely to continue attending to the end of the semester). Responses, were positively skewed, with a range of 3 to 5 and a mean of 4.6 ($SD = .55$).

The second part of the Instructor Perception of Risk Scale, asking instructors to predict whether or not participants would pass the GED® exam in the next year. Like the persistence item, this question was on a scale of 1 to 5, least to most likely to pass the GED® exam in the next year. This scale was less skewed, with a full range from 1 to 5 and a mean of 3.5 ($SD = 1.4$).
Procedures

Sampling

All instructors in the on-site GED® and pre-GED® classes at both literacy organizations over the time of data collection (January through May, 2015) were invited to have their classes participate in the study, with 14 classes recruited in total. Several non-native speakers participated in data collection, but they experienced difficulty understanding the surveys and answering some of the questions, so their data were not included in the final sample. Similarly, three individuals of extremely low literacy participated in data collection, but also had difficulty, so were not included in the final sample. There was also one participant whose interview ran to almost an hour, so was not included in this study. Thus, out of the original sample of 72 participants, the final sample consisted of 64, which is described in detail below.

Recruitment and consent

As approved by George Mason University’s Institutional Review Board (IRB), I recruited learners via the instructors on a class-by-class basis. First, I introduced the project in instructor meetings at both sites, and shortly afterwards sent the IRB-approved e-mail to all instructors of GED® and pre-GED® classes (both on- and off-site) at both locations. All instructors who were interested in having their students participate either met with me in-person or by phone for a detailed description of the proposed project and to ask any questions. Instructors who agreed to take part then read a brief IRB-approved announcement to their classes prior to my first visit to class.
At the first class visit, I explained the broad purpose of the study and answered any questions learners had. I then invited students who were interested in participating to come with me one-on-one to a separate room (both sites have small “tutor rooms” with a desk and two chairs), where I read through the consent form with the learner and asked for further questions or concerns. If the learner was still interested in participating, s/he signed the consent form at that time.

At the end of the class period, after I had worked with all the interested learners, I went through the instructor consent form one-on-one with the instructor.

**Data Collection**

In order to minimize response bias, to account for the fact that many participants experienced difficulty paying attention in bigger groups (as reported by instructor and participants, in most cases), and to minimize reading issues, the five learner scales—the personal data questionnaire, reading and writing self-efficacy, perceived academic control, perceived autonomy support, and perceived structural barriers (39 items total)—were administered one-on-one and were read aloud. This process was usually relatively brief, lasting about 10-15 minutes.

After scale completion, we began the agency interview, which lasted (as noted above) anywhere from 2 to 32 minutes and was audio-recorded (learners were asked again for oral permission to do this at the beginning of the interview, in addition to their written consent earlier). Since most classes are at least two hours long, I was usually able to complete interviews of interested learners in one visit, but on two occasions, I returned a second time to work with more learners.
At the end of the class period, after learners had gone, instructors were asked to fill out the two-item perception of risk scale for all consented learners. The researcher usually left the room during this process, unless the instructor had questions, which happened on several occasions.

Finally, at the end of the academic semester during which participant data was collected (the study spanned two semesters at both sites: Winter and Spring), the researcher collected attendance and CASAS data for each participant from administrators at both sites (to make sure participants were aware of—and fully consenting to—the use of their data, this portion of the data collection process was a prominent part of the oral consent process).

Data Coding and Analysis

In this section, I explicate the analytic process, including (a) the coding of linguistic variables (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004; Martin & Rose, 2007), (b) the descriptive analyses of linguistic variables, (c) the exploratory analyses of how those linguistic variables relate to survey measures, (d) the use of exploratory and descriptive analyses to sample sections of interviews for qualitative analysis, (e) the qualitative analysis of those samples using discourse analysis of representational meanings (Fairclough, 2003), and (f) follow-up exploratory analyses to pursue theories developed via qualitative analysis.

Coding of Linguistic Variables

Based on a pilot study of four adult learners’ use of agentive language (Konopasky & Sheridan, 2014), I identified six different types of codes for this study,
shown in Table 6. For the first linguistic agency category, all the subjects of main verbs were assigned one of the following values: (1a) first-person singular self (I), (1b) first-person plural self (we), (1c) generic you, (1d) teachers or school representatives, (1e) peers, (1f) family or friends, (1g) first-person subjects of passive verbs, and (1h) all other subjects. (See Appendix E for a coding manual with further detail on this and the remaining codes.) A percentage of how frequently each subject occurred compared to other subjects was then calculated.
Table 6
*Linguistic Coding Types*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Sub-Types</th>
<th>Example</th>
<th>Calculation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 1. Main-clause subject | first-person singular *I*<sup>1</sup>  
first-person plural *we*<sup>1</sup>  
generic *you*  
teachers or school representatives  
peers  
family or friends  
first-person *I or we*, passive verb  
other | I decided to take the GED.  
We can always retake the test.  
You have to do your homework.  
She taught us a lot.  
They [peers] help me learn.  
My family supports me.  
I was kicked out of school  
The situation was difficult | Percent occurrence out of other subject variables |
| 2. Transitivity--high individuation | *I* + object  
*we* + object | I decided to take the GED.  
We can always retake the test. | Percent occurrence out of 100 words |
| 3. Transitivity--low individuation | *me* as object  
*us* as object  
generic *you* as object | They [peers] help me learn.  
She taught us a lot.  
They give you homework. | Percent occurrence out of 100 words |
| 4. Mitigation | modal verb  
*just*  
causative marker | I had to drop out.  
I just saw red and beat her up.  
So I decided to take the GED. | Percent occurrence out of 100 words |
| 5. Process type with *I, we*, and *you* | material verb  
mental/behavioral verbs  
verbal verbs  
relational verbs | I am jumping over every hurdle.  
I remembered how to do the problem from before.  
I tell the other students not to worry.  
I am a good student. | Percent occurrences out of 100 words |
| 6. Temporal Context | past contexts  
present contexts | I did well in elementary.  
I passed two tests last week. | N/A |
For the second linguistic agency category all coded instances of (1a) first-person singular I and (1b) first-person plural we subjects were additionally coded for whether or not the verb had a relatively concrete object distinct from the subject and the background. Thus, several object types were excluded: the self (e.g., “I asked myself”), verbal clauses (e.g., “I want to go to school”), the demonstrative pronouns this and that (because, as discussed above, they tend to refer back to actions or general states, e.g., “I really want this”), and nonassertive or negative pronouns (e.g., “I didn’t understand anything”; “I had nothing”). All other I + object and we + object sentences were coded as (2a) individuated first-person singular I and (2b) individuated first-person plural we. Then, this variable and the remaining variables were normalized so that they represented the average amount of occurrences per 100 words, a common procedure in corpus linguistics (Bybee, 2010; Gries, 2015).

For the third linguistic agency category, all first-person objects of verbs or prepositions were assigned a code of low individuation with (3a) a value of singular for me and (3b) a value of plural for us. Also, after noting their relative frequency in the data, (3c) all generic you objects of verbs were coded.

For the fourth linguistic agency category, three different types of mitigators were coded, whether used with a main-verb subject or a subordinate clause subject (in order to examine the full range of mitigation, which was a critical category in Rymes’ [1995, 2001] work): (a) modals of obligation (e.g., have to, got to), (b) restrictive just (see Lee,
1987 for details about the semantics of *just*; for this study, emphatic use of *just* was not coded, e.g., “That’s just great!”), and (c) causative markers (e.g., *because, so*).

Finally, for the fifth linguistic agency category, the verbs of all coded instances of (1a) first-person singular *I*, (1b) first-person plural *we* subjects, and (1c) generic you subjects were coded into one of the following four process types: (5a) relational, (5b) material, (5c) mental or behavioral, (5d) verbal. Mental and behavioral process types were coded together because there were so few behavioral process types (only 33 instances compared to 427 instances of mental process types) and because behavioral process types share characteristics with the mental in that they tend to be perceived as uncontrollable or natural. Also, existential process types were not included because they always have a *there* subject and, for this study, I only examined first-person and generic subjects and the representation of one’s own agency. (See Table 3 in Chapter Two for more detail on the differences among these process types.)

A final note on the coding of linguistic variables: while several codes fall clearly within a given linguistic category (e.g., the use of *have to* as a modal of obligation is unambiguous in most cases), most involve researcher interpretation of participant meaning using contextual clues. For instance, I chose to code *learn* as a mental verb due to its association with cognitive change of some kind. But there are parts of *learning* that are material (e.g., writing notes), verbal (e.g., talking out a mathematical procedure), or relational (e.g., having access to books and other materials). These variables, then, like most psychological variables, are the result of researcher judgment and interpretation
and, as such, should not be interpreted as fixed or objective characteristics of the participants who produce them.

**Descriptive Analyses of Linguistic Variables**

After coding linguistic variables, I ran descriptive statistics on all 20 variables to better understand their distribution. I also examined each variable for normality and converted those with limited distribution (i.e., where more than 20% of participants did not use the linguistic marker) to binary variables (see Tables 8 and 9 in Chapter Four to see which linguistic markers were converted to binary variables).

**Exploratory Comparisons of Linguistic and Survey Variables**

Next, I examined the hypothesized connections among the linguistic markers of agency and the agency-related surveys. Because of the limited variance of most of the agency-related surveys and the prevalence of binary variables (50% of the linguistic variables and 60% of the agency-related surveys), there were few significant statistical relationships. Moreover, due to the limited sample size, these comparisons were exploratory in nature.

Since each of the 20 linguistic markers were hypothesized to predict either high or low agency, I ran exploratory tests to determine their relationship with the five agency-related survey variables: reading self-efficacy, writing self-efficacy, perceived academic control, perceived autonomy support, and perceived structural barriers. I compared binary variables using Chi square tests; compared binary and continuous variables using either $t$ tests or, if the continuous variables violated assumptions of normality, Mann-Whitney $U$
tests; and compared continuous variables using Spearman’s rho (at least one variable in each pairing violated normality assumptions, so Pearson’s r was not used).

**Selection for Qualitative Analysis**

As an interpretivist, I recognize that choices about selection directly influence findings and interpretation (Reybold, Lammert, & Stribling, 2012). Moreover, the breadth of the interview data made in-depth analysis of every part of every interview impossible, so purposeful selection of data segments for analysis was a particularly important part of the design. In order to determine where to direct qualitative analysis within each of the 63 coded interviews, I began by examining either those participants who used each variable the most (to keep analysis manageable, I looked at the top 10%, i.e., the top 6). In several cases, there were so few instances of a given variable (e.g., there were only 24 instances of individuated *we* + object in the entire corpus) that I simply included them all in the sample. After an initial qualitative analysis of how the variable was used by those who used it the most (see below for qualitative analysis details), I examined those participants who used it the least (the bottom 10%, i.e., the bottom 6). If there were more than 6 participants who did not use the variable at all (e.g., 26 participants use no verbal process types at all), I randomly selected 6 participants from that group using a random number generator.

Rather than sampling a participant’s entire interview, I sampled the *question* and *response* in which that feature occurred. For example, if the participant used restrictive *just* as part of her response to “Describe yourself as a learner now,” I sampled my interview question and the participant’s full response to that question.
Qualitative Analysis

I was guided in my qualitative analysis by Fairclough’s (2003) critical discourse analysis of the representational meanings of language. Following functional linguistic theory (Halliday, 1994, Lemke, 1995, and Martin, 1992, all cited in Fairclough, p. 225), Fairclough distinguishes three types or levels of meaning that are simultaneously present in a text: actional (a text’s potential to engage in social action, e.g., apologizing), identificatory (a text’s potential to construct a person’s identity, e.g., representing the self as unsure with maybe), and representational (a text’s potential to represent the world in a certain way, e.g., representing the self or the teacher as the agent of one’s learning).

Fairclough (2003), again following functional linguistic theory, posits three central representational elements of a clause: participants (usually subjects and objects), processes (usually verbs), and circumstances (other clausal elements like adverbs and prepositional phrases). I focus on representations of agency in particular, exploring how different linguistic markers are used to represent different participants (i.e., self, others, and situations) as agents of different kinds of processes (i.e., choice of process type, temporal contrasts, and modality), and in different circumstances (i.e., mitigated with causative or adverbial circumstances). Each linguistic marker afforded a different analytical focus on one or more of these clausal elements. Analysis of subject markers centered around who or what was represented as agents; analysis of process types and modality centered around what kind of agency was being represented; and analysis of circumstances centered around how that agency was being represented. I began by examining participants who used a particular marker the most and tried to determine the
range of representations these participants were making with this marker (e.g., using teachers as subjects, ranging from agents of learning to passive observers of failure) and whether this marker tends to afford a certain kind of representation (e.g., causative markers afford a connected narrative of one’s own and others’ contributions to agency).

Drawing on Fairclough’s relational approach to discourse analysis (pp. 35-38), I explored the relationships participants were positing with this marker, both within the text (e.g., referring back to a prior remark to make a contrast) and outside the text (e.g., referring to a school policy that constrained them).

Once I had a set of theories about how participants were using a particular marker—in other words, the rhetorical aims for which they employed it—I turned to the samples of those who had used it very little or not at all. The goal of this part of the analysis was to determine how, if at all, this group accomplished the same rhetorical aims. For instance, if participants use causative markers to create a connected narrative of agents, I asked how those who do not use many causative markers do the same thing or, indeed, if they create connected narratives of agents at all. In order to make in-depth qualitative analysis manageable and better explore potential contrasts, I examined for each marker the 10% of participants who used it the most and the 10% of participants who used it the least (thus contrasting two groups of seven in most cases). The results of this analytic process were used to describe the characteristics of these adult learners’ sense of agency and their own understanding of themselves and others as agents.

While I relied centrally on Fairclough’s (2003) discourse analytic theory, I also compared data within and across participants, specifically between those who use a
particular linguistic marker more and those who use it less. Comparison was also important in understanding the different uses of linguistic markers across temporal contexts (i.e., across past and present educational experiences). My results and conclusions derive from interactions among these various contexts, the literature supporting this study, and my own developing theories and constructs. This analytic process derives from a constructivist epistemology, wherein knowledge is co-constructed by the participant, the researcher, and the analytic techniques themselves.

**Further Exploratory Analysis**

Several times during the course of qualitative analysis, I developed theories about relationships among linguistic variables. For instance, since generic *you* subjects and generic *you* objects were both used to distinguish between different general situations in past and present, I hypothesized that they might be related, so I ran a Chi square test in order to test this hypothesis and they were also statistically related. Like the exploratory analysis described above, this was not taken as proof of a relationship, just as additional evidence for or against the theory I was developing in qualitative analysis.

**Quality**

Seeking quality is a process that I attended to throughout data collection, data analysis, and presentation of results (Cho & Trent, 2006; Maxwell, 2013). Data collection extended over the course of several months, during which time interviewed participants, followed up with them informally, observed them and their instructors in classes, spoke with their instructors and with administrators, and observed the day-to-day activities of the organizations. I was able in this way to collect “rich” data that gave me the context
and understanding to ethically portray my participants’ experiences (Maxwell). Next, the process of data analysis supported quality through comparison: comparison with agency survey results; comparison of participants’ representations of themselves in past and present; comparison among participants who use the same linguistic markers; comparison between groups of participants who use different linguistic markers; and comparison with the results of prior studies (Rogers, 2004; Rymes, 1995, 2000). In this way, I checked my emergent theories across a variety of data sources and narrative contexts. Finally, as I wrote up the conclusions, I checked in frequently with my interpretative community for their input and made sure to justify my interpretations of participants’ experiences with support from the data (Polkinghorne, 2007).

**Methodological Limitations**

There are several limitations in the design of this study. First, the strategy of one-on-one data collection helped to control for potential literacy or attention issues, but it may have resulted in an inflation of socially desirable responses. In other words, sitting in the room with only the researcher, the participants may have felt the need to be overly positive on the surveys about their own agency. Second, the sample size of 64 learners (63 for agency interviews) did not allow for lengthy interviews or, for that matter, for follow-up interviews regarding emergent results. This limited participant contact may threaten the quality of the conclusions about participants’ experiences of agency. Third, because there was only a single researcher, I was not able to test linguistic coding for inter-rater reliability. I developed the code book to help alleviate this problem and maintain homogeneity of coding, but future studies should involve a team of coders.
Chapter Four: Results

The adult learners in this study narrate their agency in varied ways, sometimes claiming individual agency for the self, sometimes distributing agency across entities, and quite frequently distinguishing their past and present situations as agents (note: I use the verbs narrate and represent to describe participants’ first-person accounts. Speakers may not always be aware of or intentional about their linguistic choices, but these verbs make clear that, nonetheless, these words are indeed their choices as verbal agents). This chapter summarizes the results of this exploratory sequential mixed methods design, highlighting ways in which linguistic markers can indicate both where and how agency is being asserted by participants. I begin with an overview of the demographic and survey variables, using those variables to describe the characteristics of learners in this sample. Next, I offer a descriptive overview of the linguistic markers of agency. Then, in the bulk of the chapter, I use those markers as a guide to exploring the agency of these adult learners, beginning with intentional causation, moving on to expressions of degree of agency and finishing with the various manners in which participants express their agency.

Persistence, Agency, and Barriers: Attendance and Survey Measures

The descriptive statistics for persistence and survey agency variables given in Table 7 indicate two trends. First, participants in this study were relatively persistent.
According to administrators at both organizations, the mean attendance rate of 65% is high for their adult learners. They also said that most learner dropout occurs in the first two weeks of the semester, prior to data collection for this study, resulting in a more persistent sample. Instructor ratings agreed with the attendance rate, with instructors rating students’ likelihood of persisting 4.6 out of 5 on average.

Table 7

_Descriptive Statistics for Attendance and Agency Scales*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Continuous Variables</th>
<th></th>
<th>Binary Variables</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Achievement (CASAS score)</td>
<td>N = 64</td>
<td>Minimum: 187</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent Attendance (Persistence)</td>
<td>N = 61</td>
<td>Minimum: 15%</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Likelihood of Persistence</td>
<td>N = 61</td>
<td>Minimum: 3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Efficacy (Reading)</td>
<td>N = 64</td>
<td>Minimum: 3.7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Efficacy (Writing)</td>
<td>N = 64</td>
<td>Minimum: 1.5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*See Appendix D for details of scale development
Second, participants rate their agency as high and their barriers as low: the mean for the self-efficacy variables is high at 7.3 or 8 out of 9; over 35% of participants rate their academic control and autonomy at the maximum scale value; and over 40% of participants rate their structural barriers at the minimum. All these scales are positively skewed except the structural barriers scale, which is negatively skewed. Moreover, Pearson’s correlations, t tests, or Chi square tests indicate that all these measures are significantly related in the expected direction (with the exception of perceived structural barriers, where low and high values of the binary variable do not show significantly different self-efficacy in reading or writing scores). This suggests that, as hypothesized, these scales measure related constructs.

Learners in this sample, then, tend to describe themselves on surveys as having high agency and low structural barriers, with little variance. Interview responses to structural barriers questions support this lack of variance, with approximately half of participants stating that they have “no barriers” to getting their degree, and most of the rest mitigating those barriers with words like “only” and “just.” Yet, regarding agency, these survey responses correspond only partially to prior literature and to interview and observation evidence. For instance, qualitative studies of adult secondary and literacy learners (discussed in Chapter Two) indicate that while learners feel higher agency in adult learning settings than they felt in their prior learning settings, they still feel unsure of themselves (Compton-Lilly, 2009; Rogers, 2004) in the classroom. Participants in this study similarly narrate feeling more confident in their current classrooms, but many of them also talk in their interviews about math insecurities or other academic difficulties. In
class, learners participate regularly and vocally in class, but they also express academic insecurities to teachers. Thus, the survey instruments offer only a partial portrait of these learners’ agency. (See Appendix G for a more detailed description of survey responses.)

**Linguistic Markers of Agency: An Overview**

To better understand participants’ agency, I examined the proposed linguistic markers of intentional causation, degree of autonomy, and manner of autonomy (see Table 6, Chapter Three). I use these markers as diagnostic tools to find places in participants’ texts where agency “talk” might be located and then I analyze these places qualitatively (Konopasky & Sheridan, 2016). Because these markers were determined a priori based on theoretical research, I also examine the potential correlations between these linguistic markers, demographic characteristics, and the agency and persistence variables discussed above. Because of the small size of the sample and the number of statistical tests, however, these analyses are only exploratory and are used to better understand the data rather than make reliable or generalizable claims. In other words, the analysis here is “detective in character” rather than “judicial in character” (Tukey, 1977, p. 3). Also, the survey measures and achievement and persistence variables are all measurements of participants’ present situation and/or view of their future situation, while about half of the linguistic agency markers refer to participants’ past situations, so these relationships are not fully equivalent. Thus, these comparisons are exploratory in this way as well.

The interviews of 63 participants were coded for 20 distinct linguistic variables (some with two values when converted to binary variables), shown in Tables 8 and 9.
Descriptive statistics for the eight subject types (Table 8) represent the percentage occurrences related to the other seven subject types. Descriptive statistics for all other variables (Table 9) represent their occurrence per 100 words. These 20 variables have considerable spread, indicating wide variability in individual usage. Nine variables (those indicated with an asterisk) are highly skewed to the left, so categorical variables were created, with a value of 1 for those who use it and 0 for those who do not (the number of participants who do not use a given variable is given in parentheses after the minimum).

It is difficult to draw conclusions from Tables 8 and 9 because of lack of prior studies of these variables, but I make some general observations here.

Table 8

Distribution of Main-Clause Subjects by Percentage

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject type</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Minimum (N)</th>
<th>Maximum</th>
<th>Median</th>
<th>IQR (^1)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>First-person singular <em>I</em></td>
<td>63</td>
<td>21% (1)</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>59.3%</td>
<td>50-67.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*First-person plural <em>we</em></td>
<td>63</td>
<td>0% (37)</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0-3.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*Generic you</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>0% (32)</td>
<td>18.2%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0-5.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*Teachers or school representatives</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>0% (19)</td>
<td>30.4%</td>
<td>6.3%</td>
<td>0-11.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*Peers</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>0% (40)</td>
<td>15.4%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0-4.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family and friends</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>0% (5)</td>
<td>64.3%</td>
<td>13.9%</td>
<td>8.3-22.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*First-person, passive verb</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>0% (45)</td>
<td>7.7%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0-1.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*Other</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>0% (23)</td>
<td>41.2%</td>
<td>3.4%</td>
<td>0-18.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^1\) Interquartile Range

*Indicates a binary variable was used for analyses; distribution of continuous variable shown here

The number in parentheses after minimum is the number of participants who had only the minimum number of occurrences
Table 9

Distribution of Non-Subject Linguistic Variables (per 100 words)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Minimum (N)</th>
<th>Maximum</th>
<th>Median</th>
<th>IQR</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>High Individuation</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>I</em> + object</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>0 (2)</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>1.12</td>
<td>0.65-1.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>We</em> + object</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>0 (54)</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0-0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Low Individuation</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Me</em> as object</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>0 (3)</td>
<td>3.23</td>
<td>1.01</td>
<td>0.58-1.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Us</em> as object</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>0 (50)</td>
<td>1.08</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0-0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Generic you</em> as object</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>0 (39)</td>
<td>0.54</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0-0.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Degree of Autonomy</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modals of obligation</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>0 (13)</td>
<td>1.48</td>
<td>0.34</td>
<td>0.17-0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Restrictive <em>just</em></td>
<td>63</td>
<td>0 (5)</td>
<td>2.41</td>
<td>0.62</td>
<td>0.29-1.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Causative markers</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>0 (2)</td>
<td>4.14</td>
<td>1.97</td>
<td>1.47-2.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Manner of Autonomy</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relational</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>0 (8)</td>
<td>3.23</td>
<td>1.12</td>
<td>0.78-1.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Material</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>0 (6)</td>
<td>3.08</td>
<td>1.21</td>
<td>0.84-1.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental or Behavioral</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>0 (5)</td>
<td>3.36</td>
<td>1.11</td>
<td>0.75-1.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Verbal</em></td>
<td>63</td>
<td>0 (26)</td>
<td>1.51</td>
<td>0.17</td>
<td>0-0.37</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1 Interquartile Range
*Indicates a binary variable was used for analyses; distribution of continuous variable shown here
The number in parentheses after minimum is the number of participants who had only the minimum number of occurrences

First, the subject variables in Table 8 indicate that, on average, participants represent themselves as subjects most of the time (an interquartile range of 50% to 68% of the time). Yet they also represent a variety of others (teachers, peers, family members, friends, and others) as subjects in their narratives, suggesting that intentional causation is at least somewhat distributed across actors and resources beyond the participant. Also, use of *we* subjects was quite low (with 37 participants not using it at all). This infrequency contrasts with the pilot study, where participants frequently used *we* to
represent themselves as part of a group of students, potentially a marker of collective agency in that case (Konopasky & Sheridan, 2014).

Second, moving to Table 9, markers of high individuation (self as subject of a main-clause transitive verb, indicating potentially high individual causation) and low individuation (self as object of a transitive verb or a preposition, indicating potentially low individual causation) both appear infrequent (we subjects of transitive clauses and us and generic you objects, for instance, all have medians of 0).

Third, participants do mitigate their autonomy (with medians around 1 per 100 words), using causative the most and modals of obligation the least (with 13 participants using no modals of obligation). Generic you (Table 8), which has also been posited as a mitigator (Rymes, 2005), is less frequent than the other mitigators, with an interquartile range of 0 to 5.3% of subjects. Yet, despite its relative infrequency, generic you appears to be an important tool as a main clause subject for some participants (18% of total subjects for 1 participant).

Finally, manner of autonomy is relatively evenly distributed on average among relational, material, and mental process types, with little use of verbal process types.

Linguistic Markers of Intentional Causation

In this section, I characterize the ways participants present themselves along a continuum of intentional causation from first-person subjects of their own transitive actions to first-person objects of others’ transitive actions. First, I discuss the self (I or we) as causer through four linguistic markers: first-person singular I subject, first-person plural we subject, first-person singular I with object, and first-person plural we with
object. Next, I discuss others as causers through six linguistic markers: teachers and school representatives as subjects, peers as subjects, family and friends as subjects, “other” subjects, first-person singular me as object, and first-person plural us as object.

As discussed in Chapter Three, in the case of each marker, I examined in depth the participants who use it the most (top 10%) and the least (bottom 10%). This helped to sharpen my understanding of the meaning and use of each marker.

**Self as Causer**

As anticipated in a narrative of one’s own educational experiences, participants represent themselves as subjects with first-person singular I more frequently than any other subject (see Table 8). Those who use this marker the most (top 10%, 6 learners) use it to talk positively about what the participant “has to” do to get a degree and to narrate past and present struggles (e.g., “I [came] home from school and my parents wasn’t there to help me,” “I’m having surgery on my foot”). These participants often use I to create a contrast between past events that led to leaving school and present commitment to education. For example, participant 75, a 52-year-old African-American male, contrasts his decision to cut classes and leave high school with his persistence through disappointment in his current class (see Table 10). He is building his present persistence and agency—coming, fighting—in part through contrast to his past lack thereof—“just” waking up and saying he was through. Those who use this variable the least (bottom 10%, 6 learners) also contrast past and present circumstances, but narrate a broader array of agents: themselves and family, friends, teachers, and peers. This broader distribution of causation seems to be interpreted positively by their teachers: use of first-person
singular *I* correlates negatively with teacher pass ratings ($r_S = -0.28, p < .05$). Given the exploratory nature of this study, this cannot be generalized, but it is a trend that bears examination in future studies.

Table 10

**Examples of Uses of First-Person Singular *I***

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Use</th>
<th>ID</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Quote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Narrate leaving school</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>[Talking about barriers in the past] <em>I</em> remember I started cutting classes and not going and one day <em>I</em> just woke up and said, &quot;I'm through&quot; and that was it. And <em>I</em> wish I would never have done that. <em>I</em> wish I would never have done that.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Narrate specific present actions</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>[Talking about his recent attempts at the GED exam] <em>I</em> scored a 2160. <em>I</em> missed it by 90 points. Missed it by 90 points. <em>I</em> was like, &quot;Psh! Oh, man!&quot; But <em>I'm still</em> [laughs], I'm still coming. <em>I'm still fighting.</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

First-person singular *I* with an object (individuated *I*) appears more indicative of agency than simple narration with *I*. As shown in Table 11, those who use individuated *I* the most (top 10%) often use it positively: participants *teach, remember, help, explain, do programs, get jobs, work at places, go to school, raise children, like reading and English,* and *get help*. Whether it is in the academic, work, or family context, these individuals represent themselves as intentionally acting upon the world. Moreover, they are not just acting intentionally, but acting upon a *specific* object or individual. When they tell their stories of *doing to*, they are clear about who or what is involved.
Table 11

Participants Using I-Individuation the Most Frequently

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ID</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Quote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>57</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>I'm able to learn, more that I'm going back to things I knew, but just was rusty on it. And I can teach people that never knew. Because I'm the youngest out of my class.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>42</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>[asked about high school barriers] Well, as I got older, I started experimenting with drugs, alcohol, and marijuana, hanging out with my friends real late and just wouldn't get up for school. And then when I got 16, you know, I knew I could legally stop going to school. And- [pause] Worst mistake of my life. And that's what I did.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>I do remember a fond friend of mine [in high school]. He was actually foreign--he didn't speak that good of English and I helped him with that and I helped him-, I explained to him the differences in certain-, in texts and stuff that he didn't understand. And I think I helped him out really good. So he went on to graduate and stuff like that.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>And then when I got back [from living at her grandmother's], I did a couple of programs, but I had always um-, you know. I got good jobs. Like I worked at Gas and Electric. I did-. I went to school for data entry and stuff like that, but I never felt like I could go any further because I didn't have that [hits table hard with hand] credential.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>65</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>[asked about supports in high school] Well, I raised my children. All my children graduated from school because I wanted them to get-, have more than me.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>[asked to describe herself as an adult learner] Well, um. [pause] I like reading. I like English especially. I'm a little slow in math, you know. But I kind of get help from my kids and, well, the teacher. And then when I go home, my kids come around to help me.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Not all uses of individuated I, however, are positive. For instance, participant 42 in Table 11 talks about *experimenting with drugs, alcohol, and marijuana* and links that
experimentation with her eventually leaving school. Others talk about negative events like *hooking* school, *not having* food and clothes, *having* problems, and *not being able to read* words. Yet, as is the nature of individuation, these participants name specific entities in the world, even if they are engaged in negative action in regards to them (e.g., *hooking school*) or are unable to act upon them (e.g., *not being able to read*). These participants are specific about their actions, good and bad. Moreover, this variable differs significantly by level of perceived academic control ($t(61) = 2.1, p < .05, d = .47$, Levene’s $F = 4.28, p = .86$), indicating that those who narrate themselves more often as acting upon specific objects perceive themselves as having more control in their adult classroom.

Participants in the bottom 10% of individuated $I$ users offer a helpful interpretative contrast. Like those described above, they narrate successes and barriers, but they do not narrate them as actions upon specific entities. Even when these participants do use individuation, it tends to be general. For instance, one participant talks about “getting something better out of life,” but is not specific about what that is. Moreover, in their stories, these six individuals seemed to give a significant agentive role to family and friends, narrating parents as getting them out of bed and supporting them financially. Thus, there appear to be individual differences across the sample in how participants narrate intentional causation of the singular self, with some learners indicating more agency over others and some less. The manner in which participants represent this agency (e.g., doing versus relating versus feeling) is discussed in detail below through the lens of process types.
**Acting with others.** Another, but less common, way to represent the self as causer is with first-person plural *we*. Only 41% of participants use this construction (see Table 8 for its distribution) and even for those who use it, *we* only represents about 5% of these participants’ main clause subjects. Men use *we* slightly more than women (50% of the men use it while only 35% of the women do), but this difference does not reach significance. Most uses of *we* refer to the participant together with friends, family, or coworkers. As Table 12 shows, some of these uses of *we* refer to past relationships (e.g., friends in high school), while some refer to current relationships with partners, parents, children, or co-workers. Of the 26 individuals in the sample who use *we*, only 5 of them refer to themselves together with other GED® learners or instructors (see the last example in Table 12). For most of the learners, little of their collaborative action is represented in concert with their current GED® peers. Instead, it is those outside the GED® context who work together with them.
Table 12

*Examples of Uses of First-Person Plural We*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Use</th>
<th>ID</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Quote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Along with friends in high school</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>And some of us <em>we</em> achieved that goal [graduation] back then, but I was one of the ones unfortunately that didn't.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Along with family in high school</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>F</td>
<td><em>We</em> moved a lot. So it seemed like every year I was at a different school and each school was on a different level, so I was always lost and could never keep up.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Along with family currently</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>My fiance supports me now, because he's in a GED class too, so <em>we</em> support each other.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Along with coworkers currently</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Well, <em>we</em> have 20 people now [in the assisted living facility she manages].</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Along with GED class</td>
<td>2183</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>[How do your teachers support you?] By giving me work and going over and over [it] until I get it and then, once I get it, <em>we</em> move on.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While *we* appears indicative of joint action, it rarely indicates intentional causation in this sample. For instance, individuated *we* (as the subject of a transitive verb) is only used by nine participants (shown in Table 13), five of whom use the construction to set up relationships with other entities (participants 18 and 25 in Table 13) or emphasize what they had *not* done (participant 53 in Table 13) rather than express causation.
Table 13

Examples of Individuated We to Indicate Relationship or Unmet Goal

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ID</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>We went on a field trip. So we probably had like four or five buses. And then the rule was, you could be a chaperone if you were at least 18. And there were some 12th graders that were 18. So we did have on certain buses the 12th grade, you know, watching over us.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>[explaining why he struggled in school]. When I was in school, we got classes that we wasn't even really interested in, you know, just to fill up your day.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>53</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>[Talking about how his group of friends was motivated by sports to continue going to school to achieve the goal of graduation] And like some of us, we achieved that goal back then. But I was one of the ones unfortunately that didn't, you know.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Only three participants use individuated we to establish a collective and intentional causation, as shown in Table 14, and all of them represent exceptions to a rule. First, participant 28 is the only one to use this variable to narrate the GED® class as a collective working body acting on objects (homework, decimals). Second, participant 26 is the only one to use individuated we actions with high school peers that serve academic goals rather than negative actions like cutting class or neutral actions like having a girlfriend. Third, participant 48 is the only one to narrate a strong mentoring relationship with a formal group. He narrates his participation with this group through both we and I, using overwhelmingly positive language, often leaning forward to explain how powerful their work is. He further narrates the group acting positively on him: inspiring him and helping him. For this group of participants, then, agency is only rarely
expressed as a group of people working together as we on a joint action, in what Bandura (2006a) might call the collective mode (see Chapter Two).

Table 14

*Examples of Individuated We to Indicate Intentional Causation*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ID</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>28</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>[explaining why his adult classes are better than his high school classes] <strong>We</strong> get a lot of homework here now, but I mean it's stuff we worked on through the day. I'm not saying in high school you didn't get stuff you worked on, cause you did. But it's like, today, <strong>we're working on</strong> decimals, so we're gonna get all our homework on decimals. And that was kind of like a little, um, how can I say it, it was like a tool I guess. Cause it was just like keeping my brain focused on this topic right now, but <strong>not</strong> letting it drift away.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>[describing how his high school friends supported him] <strong>We</strong> did the same physical activities together. <strong>We</strong> also worked on the same things in school and class. <strong>We</strong> pretty much <strong>bounced ideas off of each other</strong>, you know, to better educate each other.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>48</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>[describing a mentoring program in which he volunteers] <strong>We</strong> work with inner city kids from [neighborhood]. And all the kids come together and <strong>we do games</strong>, activities, Bible studies, go to trips. <strong>We</strong> recently <strong>did a mission trip</strong> in Tennessee. <strong>We</strong> just do different activities.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Summary of self as causer.** In summary, these learners frame their narratives mainly around *I* subjects, using contrasts between past and present to argue hopefully for their current academic venture. *I* subjects with objects have a relatively normal distribution across this group, with those who use it more indicating agency over others.
more frequently. Finally, participants only infrequently narrate themselves acting as a joint *we* engaged in a single action.

**Other as Causer**

The learners in this sample attribute agency to others frequently; 35% of subjects are others on average. Analysis of these subjects may indicate how much and what kind of agency participants attribute to different entities: teachers, peers, family and friends, and situations. In addition, it is useful to examine the kinds of entities and actions participants represent as acting upon themselves: *me* and *us* objects. I examine these moments of other as causer here.

**Main clause actions of teachers and school representatives.** With the exception of a handful of statements, participants talked about current GED® instructors positively and past middle school or high school teachers negatively, often contrasting the two. To explore this contrast, *two* binary variables were created for this subject: one representing whether or not a participant referred to GED® teachers as main-clause subjects and one representing whether or not a participant referred to K- through 12th-grade teachers as main-clause subjects. These variables created four types of learners: those not referring to teachers as subjects at all (32%), those referring positively to current GED® instructors (36%), those referring negatively to past middle school or high school teachers (21%), and those referring *both* positively to current GED® teachers and negatively to past middle or high school teachers (11%). I examined the teacher statements of the three latter types to determine how they framed teacher action differently (see Table 15).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Use</th>
<th>ID</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Quote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positive description of current GED instructor</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>There's other schools that I could go to, but I feel so comfortable here. <strong>They</strong> make you feel comfortable until you get it. And <strong>they're</strong> not real crazy. And the teacher that I have, if you don't understand something, <strong>she'll</strong> make you go to the board. And that kind of pushes you. Even if you're shy, <strong>she</strong> makes you go to the board and work the problem out.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>42</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>F</td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>He</strong> [the teacher] works by our pace and <strong>he</strong> wants, you know, if we don’t get it, <strong>[he wants us to]</strong> stop him so he can teach us. <strong>He</strong>’s a wonderful teacher. <strong>He</strong>’s great. And I’ve learned a whole lot since I’ve been in this class. Things that I struggled with when I came here, I got it like that [snaps].</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative description of past high school teacher</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>And in alternative schools, and a lot of citywide high schools period, the teachers can't really take control of the class. So if I already don't feel safe coming to school and I'm in class and I'm not learning, it's just-, it got pointless.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Combination of positive GED and negative high school teacher description</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>When I was younger, the teachers, they didn't really give you that &quot;I'm here for you&quot; type feeling. It was like, &quot;I'm here&quot; but they look at me wrong. I don't really want to be there. But here, everybody here for a common goal. <strong>They</strong>, just [give you] confidence, help you with work, you know, like, &quot;I know you want to write it. Try it.&quot; Just keeping you motivated. So that helps a lot.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The first two learners in Table 15 point to themes that emerge for many participants: feeling comfortable with the content and the pace while also being challenged. Effusive descriptions like participant 42’s emerge across sites and classes, with several learners attributing their success to their instructors. There is perhaps an implicit comparison in these kinds of descriptions: prior teachers did not take the time.

The third participant talks about the powerlessness of teachers in high school. In these narratives, teachers are well meaning but either do not or cannot exercise control to help the student. Another common negative theme around high school teachers is disparate treatment: “In my school, a lot of stuff that teachers tolerated from one student, they didn’t tolerate from another” (participant 19). Several other participants talked about feeling like they were treated differently from other students, which eventually, often along with other factors, led to these participants leaving school.

Finally, the last participant in Table 15 contrasts high school and GED® teachers, framing the latter more positively. While several learners acknowledge that they did have one or two caring teachers prior to leaving school, in this sample participants tend to place negative teachers in the subject position, focusing on these teachers’ role in their lives. One participant says, of his teachers, “They really wasn’t worrying. They was too busy saying that you ain’t gonna make it. Had at least three or four teachers that said I wouldn’t even make it to 21.” After his 21st birthday, he actually returns to tell one of those teachers, “I’m still alive. I’m still here” because the negative effect of this teacher’s verbal actions on him was so profound.
Thus, participants narrate teachers as either acting supportively and helpfully in the present or acting neglectfully or poorly in the past. And some learners contrast these two types of teacher agency. These differing portrayals of teachers as agents—helpful present actors or disruptive past actors—are reflected in exploratory analysis of the structural barrier and perceived autonomy survey measures. Those who narrate high school teachers as subjects are significantly more likely to perceive themselves as currently having high academic barriers ($X^2(1) = 4.95, p < .05$). While admittedly this is an exploratory finding, it suggests that participants who discuss past high school teachers’ main clause actions perceive more significant barriers to GED® completion.

Taken together, these qualitative and quantitative findings indicate that how participants represent teacher agency is critical to their own stories of academic agency.

**Main clause actions of peers.** Only 23 participants (37%) frame their peers as main-clause subjects. Examining the narratives of all these participants, three ways of framing peer agency emerged: (a) peers as barriers acting negatively upon participants, (b) peers as models (sometimes good, sometimes poor) for participants, and (c) peers acting supportively upon participants (see Table 16). First, mainly in stories about high school and a couple times in GED® classes, some participants (like 45 in Table 16) frame their peers as barriers holding them back from their education, *picking on* or *making fun of* learners; *being mean* to learners; *holding back* or *holding down* learners, *wanting to fight* learners, or *saying* learners did something they did not, leading in two cases to expulsion. In all these cases, participants frame themselves as objects of malicious peer actions that hinder their pursuit of education.
Table 16

*Distribution of Types of Peers-as-Subjects*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of peer subject</th>
<th>Number of participants</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Barriers</td>
<td>11 (48%)</td>
<td><em>Kids</em> in my class [in high school] would pick on <em>me</em>. <em>They</em> would make fun of <em>me</em>, what was on my leg. I couldn't help that because I was born with that. I was scared. I had bullies in my class. [sighs] (Participant 45, 21, F)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Models (good and bad)</td>
<td>11 (48%)</td>
<td>You know, we all strive for the same goal and I see people-, <em>the ones</em> that <em>honor</em> that goal, you know, <em>they</em> reach that goal. And so, by me seeing that, that helps me to strive more harder to get to that place where they at. (Participant 53, 49, M) And that's basically all I grew up around. You know, besides my parents and my sister, <em>everybody else</em> was out on the street, doing they own thing, either selling or in and out of prison. (Participant 23, 44, M)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supports</td>
<td>5 (22%)</td>
<td><em>They</em> help me out when they see I'm struggling. And <em>they</em> show me what I'm missing and how they got the answer. So they help me pretty good now since I been back [after foot surgery]. (Participant 21, 54, F)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Second, peers’ actions are often narrated in parallel to participants’ actions, acting as models for persistence or temptations to stray. As participant 53 in Table 16 explicitly states, participants imply that positive peer models encourage them in their current educational pursuit, if not enough to counteract other negative influences. Participants also talk about peers as negative models, acting almost like barriers: *telling* malicious stories about other learners; *not caring* about school; *being* out on the street or in prison;
and *dropping out*. These peers do not take direct action actions participants, but participants are encouraged vicariously through them to neglect schoolwork.

Finally, like participant 21 in Table 16, learners frame peers as supports, helping them on difficult problems and encouraging them when they are feeling down. While few participants frame peers this way in main clauses, those that do are adamant that peer support is a critical part of their education. While some participants talk about positive peer models in high school, peers as supports *only* emerges in the GED® context.

Thus, peer agency does appear to play a role in participants’ educational experiences, despite the rare use of *we* to refer to peers in this sample. Rather than equal collaborators, then, participants frame peers as barriers, models, or supports. Furthermore, peers play different roles at different times in participants’ lives, only acting as direct supports in adulthood.

**Main clause actions of family and friends.** Most participants (92%) place family and friends as subjects of at least some actions and this is the second most frequent subject type after *I*, so it is a robust category. As the examples in Table 17 show, those who used this variable the most (top 10%, 6 participants) narrate family as agents of a range of actions, from generally encouraging and supporting to more material actions like feeding, waking up, transporting, and financially supporting. Participant 16 even narrates her husband preventing her from attending school. Thus, participants with high scores on this variable seem to narrate their family members as exercising considerable agency in their lives, usually in a supportive way.
Table 17

Examples from Those Who Frequently Use Families and Friends as Subjects

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ID</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Quote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>64</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>They [my family] encourage me. Like on days that I don't want to come to class, my fiancé's like, &quot;Get your butt up and go to class.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>61</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>My family always supported me, the people I was raised with, my sisters. My aunt raised me. My grandmother's deceased now, but she always kept telling me to go to school, go to school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>62</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>My mom made sure that we got up every morning, we had breakfast, and we went straight to school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>I've taken other classes at other different places, but my husband wanted me home. So he would cause trouble [laughs], you know, keep me home.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>My father actually was one to have skipped [grades] twice in school, so. And he got in a truck accident and he lost some of his memory. So he definitely pushed, &quot;get your education, education, education.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>38</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>My family plays a big part. They bring me [laughs]. They pay for it. They make sure I'm here. If I'm not here, I'm in trouble, so yeah, my family plays a big part of it.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In contrast, participants who use this subject type the least (bottom 10%, 6 participants) do talk about their families, but do not place them frequently as the main clause subjects of actions in their lives, as illustrated by the examples in Table 18. Instead, these participants frame family and friends more often as part of the background circumstances of the situation or, as with participant 42 in Table 18, as the motivation for
their actions. Instead, these participants talk more about their own actions with I or we, framing themselves as the central intentional actor in the narrative. Participant 48 does frame his mother as an actor, but immediately afterwards emphasizes that he is the one whose actions matter most.

Table 18

*Examples from Those Who Rarely Use Family and Friends as Subjects*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ID</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Quote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Some of the kids were very mean because my mom was not fashionable, so we weren't ones to have nice clothes and stuff.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>49</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>With my parents, if I didn't go to school, I had to get a job. I had to be responsible somewhere along the line. I ended up going to Job Corps.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>71</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>[What was your support in high school?] Well, I had a best friend, but I really stopped going to school because I had gotten pregnant.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>42</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>And it's never too late to accomplish your dreams and that's what brings me here. I want to get my education so I can get me a better job, a career, for me and my family.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>48</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>My mother, she also tries to support me. And I think I really gotta support myself, you know. I gotta excel and realize that most of everything is in my hands if I wanted it to change.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Family, then, is a part of almost all learners’ stories, but some participants narrate family more as directly acting upon them while others narrate their own relationships to family. These different grammatical representations of family seem to coincide with
different levels of individual agency: for the former, family shares a critical amount of the agency for returning to school; for the latter, family act more as background resources for the participant’s academic agency.

**Main clause actions of situations.** A final way participants represented causers other than themselves was by placing *situations* in the main clause subject position. Situations took on four different grammatical forms: (1) the pronominal subjects *that*, *this*, or *it* with no reference (i.e., a pleonastic pronoun) or referring back to a prior, often complicated or unclear, entity, (2) existential *there* (standard English) or *it* (nonstandard English) followed by *be*, (3) generalizations about *people, things, everything, nobody*, etc., or (4) verbal or prepositional phrases. Each of these subject types allows participants to refer to some general situation as the causer, as shown by the examples in Table 19.
Table 19

"Other" Subjects

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject Type</th>
<th>ID</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pronominal <em>it, this, or that</em></td>
<td>36</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>[Finishes explaining her significant financial constraints]: So, <em>it's</em> kind of crazy. That's why I said, if I don't come here three times a week, I'm never going to get [a GED].</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>37</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>I have anxiety when it comes to reading, no, not reading, but writing. Like I don't know where to start from. I be like, &quot;Oh my God, I don't know what to write.&quot; So I mean <em>that's</em> the main thing, my writing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>70</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>After I had my baby, I went to a career training school and I was just doing data entry. I went for data entry and I was doing data entry for years and <em>that's</em> how I took care of my kids.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Existential <em>there/it + be</em></td>
<td>2183</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>[asked about barriers]: <em>It's</em> really not no barriers. Yeah. This is something I want to do, I must do to get my high school diploma.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>62</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>[asked about barriers]: You know, you've been out of school for a long time and <em>things</em> don't come back to you, you know, as when you were younger. And trying to retain information is kind of hard.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generalization</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>I get bored a little bit, especially when the homework I have is too far above my level. But other than that, <em>nothing</em> stops me from getting here, unless I have a doc-[talks about recent surgeries].</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phrasal subject (verb phrase or prepositional phrase)</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>I didn't really like going to school [in high school]. I just laid my head down and just [blows out breath] because my grades were just terrible, so I stopped trying. Ah. [pause] Asking for help didn't really help me at all either, because I still didn't understand what I was doing.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
First, participants use the pronouns *this, that,* and *it* and the existential construction *there+be* (*it+be* in nonstandard English) to assert some kind of relationship or state like life being crazy, school being hard, hanging out with friends being tempting, or there being difficulties. These two constructions allow participants to narrate something that feels ongoing and true for them, which parallels what Rymes (1995, 2001) found in her study of alternative high school students, where expressed lower agency by alluding to “timeless truths.” Furthermore, they allow speakers to put the sentential focus (the new information, the main thrust of a sentence; Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech, & Svartvik, 2010, p. 1361) on that state. For instance, participant 36 uses the pronoun *it* to assert a truth about how crazy her life is and to place all of the focus of that sentence on that craziness rather than any details that preceded or followed it. It allows her to place her general situation as the central actor in this part of her story. Similarly, participant 2183 uses the nonstandard existential *it+be* to place the focus on the lack of barriers. Note that another hypothetical instantiation of the same facts for participant 2183 would be, “I don’t really have any barriers,” framing himself as the subject. This construction allows this participant to focus on his truth of a lack of barriers.

Second, participants use generalizations like *people, things, nothing,* and *everything* to assert a general truth about a situation. Like the pronominal examples in Table 19, these generalized subjects are not always used to avoid intentional causation by the self. In fact, all of the participants in Table 19 assert at some point their intention to continue with their education. Yet, by framing their own lives in this general way, these participants frame themselves as part of general, usually uncontrollable, situations. These
assertions can be (and are frequently in this sample) used to mitigate participant autonomy, whether in the direction of a GED® certification (nothing stopping you) or away from it (things not coming back).

Finally, participants use verbal or prepositional phrases like asking for help or from the age of seven to make a situation the subject. In these sentences, the subject is usually some kind of state that the participant then comments upon. For instance participant 46 comments on asking for help, saying that it is not helping. In this way, her intentional causation (I ask for help) is only implied, making a verbal situation the focus of the statement.

In summary, while they may not always be used to imply lowered agency, these four constructions at least afford their users justifying low agency by representing some kind of state or relation as a situation.

**Being the object of others’ actions.** Perhaps the most clear diagnostic tool for places where others act intentionally upon participants are first-person *me* and *us* objects. Most participants (98%) use one of these constructions, and the relatively normal distribution of *me* indicates a range of frequency of use. (Plural *us* is rarely used, but is briefly discussed at the end of this section) I examine this range of *me* usage here. First, the top 10% (6 participants) place themselves as the objects of others’ actions for three different purposes: (a) assigning responsibility to others (people and things) for participants’ past and present struggles, (b) crediting others for their part in participants’ successes, and (c) relieving others of potential blame for participants’ failures (see Table 20 for examples).
Table 20

*Uses of First-Person Singular Object Construction*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Use</th>
<th>ID</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Quote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(a) Assign responsibility for struggles</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>[Asked about barriers to completing high school] Being bullied and people calling me names. [...] That made me leave the school that I was at before the old school I left. [It] made me leave, before I came here.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>45</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>[Asked about barriers to completing high school] Kids in my class would pick on me. They would make fun of me, what was on my leg. I couldn't help that because I was born with that. I was scared. I had bullies in my class. [sighs]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(b) Give credit for success</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>[Asked about supports in getting a GED] Family [supports me]. Friends. My teachers and my classmates as well, because they help me fairly. You know, if the teacher helping somebody else, I can get help from a student as well.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>59</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>[Asked about supports in high school] [My daughter] was the driving force behind me wanting to do that [go back to school]. And my mother, she-, you know, she stood beside me. She made sure that my daughter was taken care of so that I could obtain my education.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(c) Relieve blame</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>[Asked about supports in high school] My teachers. And my family, my dad. Um, that's basically it. [Asked to elaborate how they supported her] By giving me um-, by giving me-. Well, by encouraging me, trying to encourage me to stay in school, but I dropped out. It wasn't a smart idea.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
[Asked about supports in high school] Like I said, my family always supported me. The people I was raised with, my sister. My aunt raised me. My grandmother—she's deceased now—but she always kept telling me to go to school, go to school. [Goes on to explain how it was concern for his safety rather than lack of support that led him to drop out]

First, participants use me objects to assign responsibility to people or things that contributed to their struggles, as with the first two examples in Table 20. These two participants frame people—kids in my class—and states—being bullied as acting upon them, contributing to their eventual decision to leave high school. Like the placement of high-school teachers in the subject position (see above), this use of me works to deflect agency for academic experiences in childhood and youth onto other agents. This is not to say that these participants were not bullied by peers and that leaving high school as a result of this bullying was not a reasonable decision. These two participants are quite young (20 and 21 years old respectively) and when they talk about the ways they were treated by their high school peers, they show genuine hurt and sorrow. Rather, this analysis indicates that the me object is a tool individuals can use to tell a story in which their struggles are the result of others’ actions upon them.

Second, and in almost direct contrast, participants use me objects to give credit to others for what they have done to help participants succeed, as with participants 22 and 59 in Table 20. Like the use of me to assign blame, participants are narrating themselves as being acted upon by others, but here it is to recognize others for the positive things they have done to make it possible for the learner to move forward academically. These
uses of *me* are almost always followed by some *I*-action that another’s action has made possible, as with participant 59 whose mother’s actions allow *the participant* to obtain her education. Sometimes is given not to a person, but to a program or group of people, as with participant 11, a 60-year-old man who credits both Lexia (basic reading software) and the veteran’s organization he is a part of for helping him succeed. Thus, this use of *me* seems to be less giving over agency to others than accounting for the resources these learners have.

Third, participants use *me* objects to relieve others of potential blame for participants’ mistakes, as shown in the last two examples in Table 20. Participant 63 only speaks 155 words, but she uses 94 of those to make clear what her family, particularly her father, did for her, encouraging her and providing for her. She is clear in taking responsibility for dropping out—“but *I* dropped out”—letting her father off the hook for what she perceives to be her own failures. Similarly, participant 61 emphasizes his family’s support and then narrates his concerns about safety and teachers who can’t take control of the class as the main causes of his dropping out. This use of *me*, like the prior one, pays homage to the efforts friends and family have made on behalf of the participant, placing the responsibility for academic disappointments elsewhere.

Since participants who used *me* the most tended to use it either to assign responsibility for high school or GED® struggles or to credit others for help with the high school or GED® process, I compared the ways the top and bottom 10% answered the questions about barriers and supports. While both groups generally deny current barriers (e.g., “I don’t have any”) and narrate themselves as at least partly responsible for
academic failures (e.g., “It was me, really [responsible for leaving high school]”), there are differences in the ways they narrate supports. Those who use me less use more I-statements while those who use me more frame their supports more in terms of others’ actions on them. Often these actions are quite strong, with verbs like pushing, forcing, telling, and raising. Table 21 gives examples of this distinction with two participants. First, participant 25 frames his support jointly in terms of his own and his family’s actions. They nag him now and they paid his bills in high school, but he still narrates his own role in getting support, in responding to their nagging, and—through the use of generic you (he switches from second-person you to generic you halfway through the passage)—in going to school, and pulling in good grades. Even when he uses the word support, he narrates it as him getting support rather than others supporting him. In contrast, participant 44 narrates herself as the object of others’ supportive actions, and a few of these actions are quite strong, like pushing and waking [her] up. Yet she is not without agency: she is pushed, but she is pushed to do her work. She is woken up, but then she goes to school. This is a complex agency distributed across the participants’ supporters and herself.
Table 21

*Examples of Responses to Question about Supports*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Context</th>
<th>ID</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low usage</td>
<td>GED</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>[asked about current supports] Um, my family. My family. I'm actually doing this for my family, so I get a real lot of support for this. [asked about how they support him] Uh, more of a bugging, nagging type thing. &quot;Get your homework done. You do your homework? I ain't playing with you. Do your homework. Did you do your homework?&quot; And I be like, &quot;I don't got none.&quot; They go, &quot;lemme see. Lemme see if you got some! Lemme see.&quot; So it's more of a good nagging type of way.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low usage</td>
<td>High school</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>[asked about supports in high school] Family. [asked about how they support him] Mm, their support is, &quot;What I do for you, all you gotta do is go to school.&quot; [pause] So I ain't paying no bills, I gotta be in school. You want these new tennis shoes, new clothes, and so forth and so on, you gotta go to school. You get extra [if] you pull in good grades and all that, so.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High usage</td>
<td>GED</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>[asked about current supports] My grandmother and my mother. […] [explaining how they support her] Um, pushing <em>me</em> hard to do my work and try to get my high school diploma.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High usage</td>
<td>High school</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>[asked about supports in high school] Me getting up for school in the morning and my-. First God woke <em>me</em> up and then my mother took-. And my grandmother push <em>me</em> to get up to go to school, to get my education from there and then move on to the 12th grade.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Plural *us* objects afford constructing a different kind of experience of being acted upon, one in which participants are part of a group. But, like plural *we* subjects, this
construction is rarely used (there are only 17 instances of it and 13 participants who use it). And, unlike the pilot group, the individuals in this sample do not generally seem to use *us* to narrate themselves and their GED® peers as a collective group (Konopasky & Sheridan, 2014, 2016). Instead, they talk about the actions their teachers take in a group context, as shown in Table 22. These participants, unlike pilot group participants, do not go on to talk about their experiences and actions as a class. Instead, all three participants continue to talk about themselves as individuals and their individual journeys.

Table 22

*Examples of First-Person Plural as Object of Teacher Action*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ID</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Quote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>60</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>[asked about barriers in getting the GED] Um, math is just, has never come really easy for me, math really hasn't. But I am doing better now. Um, because it seems like I'm <em>understanding</em> better now. I'm just understanding it better. I don't really have some of the same maybe <em>fears</em> because different teachers I've had-.- Mr. W. is really great, too, but different teachers I've had that are-. They deal with <em>us</em> as individuals and not just with the math.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>38</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>[asked to describe herself as an adult learner] Un, I guess how we learn [laughs]. My teacher takes the one-on-one time with <em>us</em> and that's one thing I like.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>[telling the story about the field trip that resulted in her getting asked to leave school] So we had probably like 4 or 5 buses and then the rules was, you could be a chaperone if you were at least 18. And there were some 12th graders that were 18. So we did have on certain buses the 12th grade, you know, watching over <em>us</em>.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Summary of other as causer. In conclusion, participants differ in how they represent others as acting in their academic narratives. First, participants who narrate GED® teachers as intentional causers tend to focus more on the support of these individuals as resources for their own agentive actions than those who narrate high school teachers as causers. Second, while we is not frequently used, participants do narrate peers as important agents in their lives, modeling, supporting, and sometimes throwing up barriers. Third, participants who narrate family as causers tend to attribute to them relatively strong agency, perhaps diminishing their own. Fourth, narrating the situation as a causer seems to often work like Rymes’ (1995, 2001) “timeless truth” genre, mitigating the participant’s agency. Finally, participants narrate me as sometimes hurt and sometimes supported by those around them, both powerful experiences of others’ agency, sometimes in service of participants’ own goals and sometimes working against them.

Linguistic Markers of Degree of Autonomy

Qualitative analysis indicates that generic you subjects and objects, passive I subjects, modals of obligation, causative markers, and restrictive just are sometimes used as mitigators of how much autonomy an individual has to obtain an education. In talking about experiences in the present or recent past (i.e., since returning to school as an adult), however, these markers are used differently, often used to boost a participant’s ability to achieve an education by mitigating potential barriers. These linguistic markers of degree of autonomy are discussed separately below, first in reference to past experiences and then to present.
Mitigation of Past Autonomy

In relating past stories, particularly of high school, participants used degree of autonomy markers to narrate (a) the timeless truth (Rymes, 1995, 2001) of their own lack of agency, (b) the timeless truth of others’ power over them as victims, and (b) conflicting obligations and forces working against their completion of high school.

Narrating a lack of agency as a timeless truth: restrictive just and generic you subjects. Participants use two linguistic markers to mitigate their autonomy in high school, presenting their situation as a simple and generalized truth: restrictive just and generic you subjects. To begin, most participants use restrictive just at some point to mitigate their past actions, framing them as “just” something participants did, as shown in Table 23. Like Rymes’ (1995, 2001) participants, these individuals portray leaving school or acts that led to leaving school as simple facts. Leaving school was not something they thought about and made choices about; it was something that “just” occurred.
Table 23

*Restrictive Just to Mitigate Past Agency*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mitigated action</th>
<th>ID</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Leaving high school</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>[Talking about how he felt unsafe at his high school] I tried to switch, but I couldn't. [...] So I just stopped going to school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leaving high school</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>She'd tell me stay in. And I just at that timeframe I didn't care enough to stay in school. I just wanted to be out.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leaving high school</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>[Describing her experiences in high school] I just got pregnant and dropped out. Just got pregnant and dropped out.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skipping school</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>[Asked about her supports in high school] Um [blows out a breath] Well, I liked school. Like, I liked to learn and I always liked my teachers and I was always a fast learner, you know, I always liked school. It was just the fact that I wanted to fit in with other kids and I just wouldn’t go and I did what they did and stuff like that.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While most participants (92%) qualify their agency with *just* at some point, only 51% use generic *you* subjects and these subjects are only infrequently (20% of the time) used to describe past actions. When they are used this way, they conform to the pattern Rymes (1995, 2001) predicts, presenting a universal state of affairs over which participants have little autonomy, as shown in the examples in Table 24. This group of participants narrates a general state of affairs in the past—*having to work, being frustrated, and getting sucked into that lifestyle*—over which they felt little control. Participants often contrast this lack of autonomy with current feelings of support and autonomy. For instance, the second participant in Table 24 follows her discussion of past...
frustration around understanding by saying that now she is “more focused because it’s something that I want,” pointing out the change in circumstances.

Table 24

"Timeless Truth" Use of Generic You in the Past

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ID</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>It was my mother [the main barrier to finishing high school]. I'm old school: my sister's seven years old so by that time you had to work and go to school too.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>You [are] in class [in high school] and you [are] frustrated because you don't really understand the different activities or what they're asking.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>74</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>I don't want to use that excuse, but substance abuse [is a barrier to completing high school] too, especially growing up in [this city], a poverty stricken neighborhood, you get sucked into that lifestyle if you don't have any people to look up to.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Still, many participants do not simply accept their past assessments. The third participant in Table 24, for instance, recognizes the complexity of the past situation, introducing his statement with, “I don’t want to use that excuse.” This temporal perspective taking makes the contrast between past and present somewhat more complex.

Narrating others’ actions as a timeless truth: generic you objects and passive I subjects. While restrictive just and generic you subjects focus on the relative lack of autonomy of the speaker, generic you objects and passive I subjects, while still suggesting a quality of timeless truth, focus on others’ actions upon the speaker. Generic you objects are only used by 38% of the participants. Like one use of me objects (see
above), participants use generic *you* objects to narrate past harms, as in Table 25. But the generic pronoun gives these harms a generalized sense, suggesting that these actions upon these individuals, and perhaps upon other students who were in a similar situation, were commonplace. This mitigation of past autonomy, however, is usually paired with an assertion of present autonomy. Participant 20 in Table 25, for instance, was answering a question about *current supports* by contrasting them to the relative *lack of supports* in high school. These participants are talking about a *past* truth that is markedly different from the present, as with generic *you* subjects above. In fact, those who use generic *you* objects also tend to use generic *you* subjects more frequently ($X^2(1) = 13.92, p < .001$).

### Table 25

*Examples of Generic You Object Usage*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ID</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Quote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>68</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>[asked about barriers in high school] Um, probably the fact that I felt like I was beneath all the other students and, um. [pause] Especially if somebody told <em>you</em> you can't spell, so they didn't tell me I could learn how to spell. They just said you can't spell, so I must have like closed that up in my mind and said, &quot;Oh, I don't think I can do any better than what I'm doing.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>[asked about current supports] Family and the teachers [in her current program]. Like when I was younger, the teachers, they didn't really give <em>you</em> that &quot;I'm here for you&quot; type feeling, you know. So it was like, &quot;I'm here&quot; but they look at me wrong. I don't really wanna be there. But here, they just-, everybody [is] here for a common goal.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Passive I subjects, like generic you objects, are only used by a small portion of the sample (29%) and focus on someone else’s actions upon the participant. The syntactic function of the passive voice, however, is to demote the original verbal subject to an indirect subject position, where it can be omitted (e.g., Joan kicked the ball → The ball was kicked [by Joan]), so unlike generic you, it affords a total focus on the action and the participant. Table 26 gives some examples. The five subject types in Table 26—school representatives (often teachers), parents, peers, doctors, and some unknown force—account for most (80%) of the demoted subjects, generally in the past (with a few exceptions). But these referents are not always suppressed; these same participants refer overtly to these school representatives, parents, peers, or doctors in other parts of their narrative. The function of the passive here, then, seems to be to highlight uncontrollable (and usually negative) actions upon the participant, mitigating their autonomy in past situations.
Table 26

1-Passive Examples

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demoted subject</th>
<th>Number of instances</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>School representative</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>I was sometimes quiet, sometimes a little reckless. I might have got put out a couple schools, you know, not going down the right path. (participant 27, 25, F)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>[Asked about barriers in high school] Just being easy distracted and just wanting to I guess fit in. But I was raised up without a father, so, you know, [it was] pretty bad. Me being a man or, you know, or me coming to a stage of being a man, there was no father figure, so my mama did the best she could and it's always a fight. (participant 66, 46, M)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peers</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>I was pretty quiet in school, so. And I got picked on a lot, teased and stuff like that. So that's what made me actually stop high school for real. (participant 37, 38, F)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doctors</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>And now it's important to me to get this education because it's something on my bucket list. Um, I was diagnosed with triple negative breast cancer five years ago and this is something that I wanted to do for myself, you know. Just, one of my things that I can check off my bucket list that I want to accomplish for nobody else but me. (participant 69, 68, F)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>When you went to the set up schools for pregnant ladies, it wasn’t like to really see to it that you finish. So I got disencouraged and I lost my way. (participant 14, 62, F)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Narrating conflicting obligations and forces: modals of obligation and causative markers. In the past, participants generally use the last two linguistic markers of mitigation—modals of obligation and causative markers—to cite extenuating circumstances that mitigate their autonomy in leaving high school. In other words, they
talk about other obligations and reasons that led to leaving high school rather than
directly narrating the choice to leave. I discuss each marker in turn here.

To begin, participants use modals of obligation in two distinct ways. First, three
participants use a modal of obligation to directly mitigate negative choices that led to
leaving school (see Table 27). While the first participant, like Rymes’ (1995, 2001)
participants, portrays herself as having little agency in dropping out, note that the last two
participants in Table 27 claim that their past feelings of a lack of autonomy were illusory:
they actually did have a choice, but did not realize it. Like Rymes’ (1995, 2001)
participants, this 50-year-old woman mitigates her agency in dropping out of high school
with a modal of obligation, framing herself as having no choice. Only two other
participants use modals of obligation to frame negative actions, saying we gotta fight (as
a distraction to avoid doing difficult work), and you must sell drugs (in order to be
accepted in the neighborhood). But both of these participants are clear that these are
stances they held in the past, not currently. Thus, even when participants do use modals
of obligation to mitigate past negative actions, they are usually disagreeing with that
obligation from their current position, unlike Rymes’ participants.
Table 27

_Mitigating Negative Past Choices with Modals of Obligation_

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Choice</th>
<th>ID</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dropping out of</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>[Asked about supports in high school] Well, um, my mom did support me in high school. But you know, um, I came from a family, a big family, a very big family, but I was the first in her kids to go to high school. [Begins to cry] And she was very proud of me, you know. But, um, then I got pregnant in school and back in my country they don't usually-, um, they don't usually accept children, so I <strong>had to</strong> drop out.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>school</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fighting in school</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>[Describing himself as a learner in high school] I would see stuff backwards or read it or write it backwards and that was a thing of saying, if anybody laugh at me, I don’t wanna learn this, or we <strong>gotta</strong> fight, just anything to distract from when it’s my turn to write or when the teacher called me, so that was a struggle most of my life.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selling drugs</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>[Asked about barriers in high school] In the neighborhood it was just a crap card, people holding each other down. And then they want to be your friend and you <strong>must</strong> sell drugs and stuff like that. Those people were down in those kind of communities and it was kinda rough, you know, living. And so I just kinda took care of myself.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Second, and more frequently, modals of obligation in the past are used to mitigate *positive* actions that led to dropping out, as with the examples in Table 28. These participants are not narrating themselves as perpetual failures, but as students who met their obligations until, one day, because of *other* obligations, they did not. They still mitigate their past autonomy, but they narrate themselves positively engaged in other actions, unlike Rymes’ (1995, 2001) participants.
Table 28

*Mitigating Positive Actions in High School with Modals of Obligation*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ID</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Quote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Uh, I'm old school. Um, my sister's 7 years old, so by that time, you know, you had to work and go to school, too.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>49</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>With my parents, if I didn't go to school, I had to get a job. I had to be responsible somewhere along the line. I ended up going to Job Corps.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Participants also use causative markers to explain relationships, but less to narrate obligations and more to narrate the relationships between different forces in their lives and past choices. (These findings derive from my analysis of the top 10% of causative users because it is such a robust variable, with 1183 instances across the whole sample, making it difficult to do careful qualitative analysis of the entire sample.) As the examples in Table 29 demonstrate, some causes are external (lack of resources, parent expectations) and some are internal (lack of focus), and all lead to past choices—either leaving school or, for participant 25, persisting in school, if only for a limited time. As with modals of obligation, causative is used to narrate a conflict: these participants wanted to stay in school (and, again, for participant 25, he wanted to leave school earlier than he did), but other forces got in the way.
Table 29

Narrating Causes and Effects in the Past

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cause</th>
<th>Effect</th>
<th>ID</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lack of resources or care</td>
<td>Bad feelings and eventually leaving school</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>My father always helped me with my math and like my schoolwork. So once he left home, it was like I had nobody cause my mom worked all the time. And I'm the oldest, so I was left babysitting and stuff like that. Yeah. So. Basically no support.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent expectations or pressure</td>
<td>Persisting (at least for some time) in school</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>[Asked to expand on how his family supported him in the past] Their support is, &quot;What I do for you, all you gotta do is go to school.&quot; [pause] So, I ain't paying no bills. I gotta be in school. You want these new tennis shoes, new clothes, and so forth and so on, you gotta go to school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not being focused or understanding material</td>
<td>Feeling left out and eventually leaving school</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>[Talking about past adult education classes] I had been to classes, but I kind of got kind of frightened because I had-, well-, so much with the young people, but you know, people knowing so much and I'm not knowing and it seems like things was [claps and wipes hands together in gesture of dismissal], &quot;rush, rush, rush!&quot; and I felt as though I couldn't keep up with them, so [claps, begins to cry], I let it go and I walked away.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Summary of mitigation of past autonomy. In summary, participants use a variety of linguistic tools to mitigate past autonomy, implying lack of autonomy as a timeless truth or narrating conflicting obligations and forces. Yet, mitigation of past
autonomy is only commonplace with restrictive just and causative markers; generally, past mitigators are used only by a small portion of participants. Mitigation of present autonomy is more frequent, and also quite different in character, as I will argue in the next section.

Mitigation of Present Autonomy

Most participants employ mitigators to narrate their present pursuit of a GED® certification. Yet, in contrast to the use of past mitigators to narrate an inability to continue their education, participants tend to use present mitigators to narrate a necessity to continue their education. I discuss the six markers of mitigation below, each of which has different affordances and uses.

Restrictive just: Mitigating the complexity of obtaining a degree. Over 90% of participants use restrictive just and most of them use it in the present, to mitigate the difficulty of different aspects of their GED® struggles, as shown in Table 30. Unlike the participants Rymes (1995, 2001) talks about, these participants are mitigating the difficulty of their current task: it’s “just” transportation, it’s “just” spelling, it’s “just” mental illness. They are representing the GED® process as something uncomplicated, often in response to my question about barriers.
Table 30

Restrictive Just to Mitigate Current Struggles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Current Struggle</th>
<th>ID</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Transportation</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>[Asked about barriers to completing the program] Like getting here? It's usually just, the main problem is just getting a bus on time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic ability</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>[Asked about herself as a student now] I mean that's the main frustration of my life, just the spelling factor, yeah. So I have a lot of difficulty in that.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic persistence</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>[Talking about current barriers] And I think that's the only thing that really distress me, like, &quot;I ain't gonna be able to do this.&quot; Cause the work is all getting harder and harder, so. Just gotta keep going at it, that's all.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental illness</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>[Asked about current barriers] Um, right now it's just my mental illnesses that I deal with. But hopefully I'm taking care of that and just trying to find the right medication to get my mind right.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finances</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>[Asked about current supports] Um [pause] I really just support myself.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Yet, as Table 9 shows, there is a range in use of restrictive just, with six participants who do not use it at all. These participants, like those who use just frequently, are positive about their current task. Three of them, in fact, say at some point in the interview that there are “no barriers” to getting their degree. Yet, despite their
optimistic outlook, they do not generally represent the prospect of getting their GED® certification as a simple one, as the examples in Table 31 show. All three of these participants note the difficulty in their task and offer specific strategies for getting over those difficulties: putting aside time to work, working together with a loved one, and doing extra practice. This indicates a subtle difference in agency between these two groups: the former assert their optimism through the simplicity of their actions, while the latter assert their optimism through the specificity of their actions.

Table 31

Participants Not Using Restrictive Just: Strategies for the GED

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>ID</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Putting aside a day</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>[Asked about current barriers] Well, working, you know? Because I do housekeeping and the money, you know, is very-. So what I usually do, I completely take off the Saturday so I can focus on class. So, that's what.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working with a loved one</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>My fiance supports me now, because he's in a GED class too, so we support each other […] If he has a problem with something I can do, I'll show him what to do. He wants to learn how to do computers. I'm pretty good at the computer, so I'm gonna start showing him what to do with the computer.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doing extra practice</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>[Asked about himself as a learner now] Ah, I'm trying the best I can. I score fairly high on the tests, but my spelling, I can't spell worth a hoot. But I am beginning to learn a little bit. They had me on, um, Lexia on the computer, where it was teaching me the sounds and the vowels and some consonants. So that's helping some.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Modals of obligation and generic you subjects: Asserting the necessity of a degree. Participants use modals of obligation in the present far more than the past (71% of modals refer to the present). In contrast to past usage, however, participants use present modals most frequently (over 80% of the time) not to narrate obligations that keep them away from education, but to narrate an obligation to their education, as shown in Table 32. These participants use modals of obligation to assert the overall importance of obtaining their degree and the importance of particular actions to that end like attendance and communication with instructors.
Table 32

*Mitigating Positive Current Actions with Modals of Obligation*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Purpose</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Assert importance of diploma to meet financial obligations</td>
<td>[Asked about current barriers] Well, my barrier this time was I lost my job and I <em>had to</em> pay 60 dollars [to sign up for the class]. I lost my job of 7 years. So that's what [slaps palm with fist] [it] really was like. Out there trying to find a job you <em>have to</em> have that diploma. You're not getting anywhere now. (participant 36, 36, F)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assert caregiver and role model obligations</td>
<td>[Talking about the importance of his children to him] my <em>kids</em>, you know, they support me and I'm real like- I'm like on them about going to school. So it's just like you <em>gotta</em> practice what you preach, so. You can't be like, &quot;You gotta go to school, you gotta go to school.&quot; They look up to you and they're like, &quot;Well, why you always saying you gotta go to school? <em>You</em> gotta got to school!&quot; (participant 66, 46, M)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assert obligation to attend physically</td>
<td>[Talking about how he got into the program] I stayed on disability until now, [I'm] 42. But I've got children now and because I have children, I'm trying to take care of my children. So I said, &quot;Well, I <em>need to</em> go back to school. And [a welfare-to-work program] was saying that, &quot;Well, whatever trade you want to go into, but you need your GED. That's the only thing that's holding you back.&quot; (participant 34, 43, M)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assert obligation to attend mentally</td>
<td>[Talking about her confidence in this program] I know I'm going to take something from this because you guys, you're here to teach. Y'all teaching. So all I <em>gotta</em> do is pay attention. So I just wanna learn. That's it. (participant 44, 27, F)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assert obligation to put in significant time</td>
<td>[Talking about the importance of schoolwork] When I go home, I take my-, you know I study as much as I can. I take my work with me everywhere I go. My [boyfriend] be-, &quot;Baby, you need to take this with you?&quot; [laughs] &quot;Yes, I <em>need to</em> take this with me. I <em>gotta</em> study.&quot; (participant 37, 38, F)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assert obligation to be motivated</td>
<td>[Asked to describe himself as a student currently] Um, committed. I mean, you <em>gotta</em> be committed and determined. And, yeah, cause I really want this. This is for <em>me</em>. (participant 40, 20, M)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
One potential gender distinction emerges in this analysis among the participants who use modals of obligation in reference to their children or grandchildren. While there are too few participants to make a generalization, it is interesting to note that fathers and grandparents narrate their obligations to get the degree to obtain a particular status and, thus, be a role model (as with participant 36 in Table 32). Meanwhile, mothers narrative time obligations to their children, sometimes mitigating their autonomy to do homework or attend class because of these time concerns. In this limited sample, then, men and older participants tend to narrate themselves as obligated to get a degree for their children while women tend to narrate themselves as obligated to care for their children.

Overall, however, the most common use of the modal of obligation with these learners is to narrate a responsibility to fully pursue the GED® certification. Based on classroom observations and informal interviews with instructors, the obligations in Table 32 are oft-repeated instructor mantras: attend class, have confidence, stay focused, keep calm, ask for help. It seems that in these constructions, participants are not necessarily mitigating their autonomy to, for instance, pay attention or attend class. Instead, they are narrating a set of norms they “have to” or “need to” conform to if they want to pass the exam. In other words, they seem to be creating rules for success.
In order to better understand the kind of agency that these rule-type statements assert, I briefly examine the 14 participants who did not use modals of obligation at all. These participants also assert an obligation to attend, not as a “have to” rule, but as causative connections. For instance, participant 38 talks about the consequences with her family if she does not attend GED® class: “They [her family] bring me. [laughs] They pay for it. They make sure I’m here. Um, if I’m not here, I’m in trouble, so, yeah, my family play a big part of it.” Like the participants discussed above, this participant asserts an obligation, but in choosing a causative construction, she also explicitly asserts the actors behind that obligation: her family. Modals of obligation, in contrast, afford implying an obligation without having to explicitly state its source. This broad representation is more in line with Rymes’ (1995, 2001) timeless truth portrayal, suggesting perhaps higher mitigation of autonomy. And, in fact, exploratory statistics suggest a negative relationship between modals of obligation and self-efficacy in reading ($r_s = -.31, p < .05$). In other words, those who use more modals of obligation feel less self-efficacy in academic reading tasks. This potential relationship should be explored in future work.

Like modals of obligation, generic you subjects are used more often in the present than the past. Also like modals of obligation, these subjects usually assert the importance, and often inevitability, of getting the GED® certification, as shown in Table 33. In contrast to use of this construction in the past, these participants use generic you in the present to assert the timeless truth of staying in the GED® program, motivating themselves to keep going.
Table 33

Generic You Examples Showing Necessity or Inevitability of Completion

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ID</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Quote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>40</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>M</td>
<td><strong>You</strong> gotta be committed and determined. Cause I really want this. This is for <em>me</em>. I believe an education is good to have. Because if <strong>you</strong> wanted a job that requires an education, <strong>you</strong> can't <em>get</em> it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>In dealing with math now, I'm just better. It's like I think as <strong>you</strong> feel comfortable with yourself, more confident, <strong>you're</strong> able to understand more cause <strong>you</strong> take on more, <strong>you're</strong> more <em>open</em>, more open to learning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>69</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>I think a lot of people...are not even aware of the fact that if <strong>you</strong> really want your education, <strong>you</strong> can still get it. <strong>You</strong> don't have to just sit back and think that it's [there's] no help, you know, because it [there] is help. But <strong>you</strong> gotta pursue it and go after it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>They [the literacy center] have professional teachers and they are very open and they are pulling for you, for me as a person. No matter if I think that I don't know or no matter what, all <strong>you</strong> have to do is just say that there's something going on or you need to talk or whatever and they're there for <em>you</em>.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There are, however, several instances of participants using generic *you* in the present to express a barrier to education, as in Table 34. Yet, all of these participants follow these statements (either immediately following an assertion of a barrier or several conversational turns later) with a declaration of a support that counteracts them. For instance, participant 68 talks in Table 34 about being tired after work, then states, “Sometimes I *do* go home, but, like I say, my daughter’s there like, ‘You got class tonight?’ She eagers me to go, so that’s a good thing.” Directly after this participant mitigates her agency to go to class with the timeless truth of tiredness, then, she asserts a
countervailing force: her daughter’s *eagering* as she encourages her mother to go to class.

Thus, even when generic *you* is used to describe the present situation, participants balance that *negative* situation with *positive* supports.

Table 34

"*Timeless Truth*" to Express a Current Barrier

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ID</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Quote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>68</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Sometime when you get home [after 8 hours of work] <em>you</em> just don't want to go back out [to GED class]. So that would be a barrier for me.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>F</td>
<td><em>The GED is difficult</em> because <em>you</em> don't think as good. <em>You’re</em> not as alert. And then when you haven't been doing it all along--I mean, I have grandchildren.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>The options [at this literacy organization are a barrier]. Like <em>you</em> have to have a certain criteria to get to the next class or if <em>you’re</em> in the highest class but <em>you</em> might be past that class or something like that. Or <em>you</em> might have understood this, but that's what's being taught at this time.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Generic *you* objects: The timeless truth of support.** While participants use generic *you* objects in the past to narrate themselves as victims, they use them in the present to narrate themselves as objects of support, as in Table 35. Like generic *you* subjects, this construction affords a sense of inevitability, but it is not an inevitability of *success*, but an inevitability of *support* through the process. Moreover, this construction is sometimes used to narrate the ways agency is distributed across teachers and learners, as with participant 36 in Table 35. In this example, the teacher acts *upon* the students, but she compels *them* to act, *going to the board* and *working out problems*. In examples like
this, participants narrate the timeless truth of the simultaneity of being acted upon by teachers while also acting themselves.

Table 35

Examples of Generic You Object Usage

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ID</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>[example text]</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>[asked about being a learner now] I like being a part of something again. I like being in the classroom. Um, positive people, you know. Everybody willing to learn. Um, I'm not the outcast, you know. Cause all the students are without diplomas so there's nobody looking down on you. Um, the teachers are really teaching.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>65</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>[asked about having barriers now] [pause] No, not really. I'm just glad to be in this school and I have a wonderful teacher. Even though she's young, she takes out the time. And she encourage you, you know. If you feel as though you can't do nothing, she'll come right there where you at, &quot;you can do this, just think.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>[narrating how her teacher helps her learn] Even if you're shy, she makes you go to the board and work the problem out.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Causative markers: Self as causer. As with the causative section above, this analysis focuses on the top 10% of causative users due to the quantity of instances. This group uses the causative more in the present than the past and, when they do use it, they tend to narrate their own actions and emotional states as causes, as seen in Table 36. Whether the effects are positive (more focus or more time for school) or negative (questioning the self), the driver in these causative constructions is the participant. Rather than mitigating autonomy, then, this group of participants uses causative markers in the
present largely to narrate themselves as central to the causative chain in their GED® pursuit.

Table 36

*How High Causative Users Narrate their Own Actions and States as Causes*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cause</th>
<th>Effect</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wanting a degree</td>
<td>Being more focused</td>
<td>[Talking about herself as a GED student] I think I'm more focused <em>because</em> it's something that I want. (participant 12, 38, F)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communicating with employer and wanting a degree</td>
<td>Having time for school</td>
<td>[Asked about current barriers] Like I would [in the recent past] tell my work to work around my schedule, <em>so</em> it's not really a problem <em>cause</em> I know I want it and need it. (participant 27, 25, F)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowing a lot, but not having a degree or confidence</td>
<td>Questioning herself, being driven crazy</td>
<td>I question myself <em>because</em> I know a lot of things but, you know, I second guess myself <em>because</em> of not having that. And then when I do it and see it, I'm like, &quot;Wow, I was right all long.&quot; But <em>because</em> I don't have that kind of little confidence in some things I do when I come to class--um, schoolwork sometimes--um, it kind of drives me crazy. (participant 21, 54, F)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Participants who use causative markers the least (bottom 10%) offer a revealing contrast: when they do narrate causative patterns in the present, the causers tend to be other individuals or general circumstances. For instance, one woman, participant 65, narrates the way others’ *encouragement* helps her to continue in class and another, participant 74, narrates how *being 18* makes class more difficult (because he is younger). Generally, though, present events are narrated as an only *implicitly* connected series, as with participant 62, whose response when asked about current barriers is: “It’s hard. It’s
hard. You know, you’ve been out of school for a long time and things don’t come back to you, you know, as when you were younger. And trying to retain information is kind of hard.” This learner implies that being out of school and being older are causes with a negative effect on her recall and learning abilities, but she does not use causative markers to say it directly. Moreover, she does not attribute causation to her own actions or own emotional or motivational states, but to the physical situation of being older and out of school longer.

This close examination of 12 participants suggests that causative markers can be used to promote autonomy by narrating oneself as the cause. Furthermore, a lack of causative markers may suggest decreased autonomy, but only if participants are narrating experiences and events in a relatively unconnected series that might otherwise be represented by the self as causer.

Summary of mitigation of present autonomy. In summary, participants use mitigators frequently in talking about their present situation: mitigating the complexity of their current task, narrating a responsibility to get an education, asserting the support of those around them, and narrating their own roles as initiators of their education. These mitigation examples, unlike many of those in the past, argue for rather than against the pursuit of education. Nonetheless, they still mitigate autonomy, simplifying, generalizing, or necessitating pursuit of a GED® certification.

Linguistic Markers of Manner of Autonomy

In this section, I use the lens of verbal process types (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004) to explore the manner or type of agency participants characterize for themselves.
Because there were over 1,600 tokens of first-person or generic main clause process types, I focused the qualitative analysis on the top and bottom 10% (6 in each group, with the exception of relational, where I examined the top and bottom 7 participants [11%] due to a tied score) of participants who used each process type (relational, mental, material, and verbal). Through this analysis, I identified four different patterns in how these participants narrate their agency across time periods: (a) accounting for resources (both their lack and their presence), (b) pursuing goals and taking actions, (c) distributing agency across one’s own and others’ actions, and (d) taking verbal actions. I discuss each of these patterns and the associated manner of autonomy variables in the sections below.

**Accounting for Resources: Relational and Mental Process Types**

As with other linguistic markers above, relational (*having* or *being*) and mental (*sensing*) process types are used differently in reference to past and present situations. Participants at the top 10% of relational and mental verb use (10 participants total, since there was some overlap in the top relational verb and top mental verb users) tend to use them to narrate a lack of resources or presence of barriers in the past and a presence of resources and lack of barriers in the present. I discuss each of these patterns below.

**Not having or experiencing resources: Relational and mental process types referencing the past.** Participants using relational and mental process types the most use them almost exclusively to narrate a past lack of resources (sometimes framed as a presence of barriers). In other words, they narrate what they did not have or were not able to be (relational) and what they know or feel (mental) was lacking in the past, connecting both of these to leaving or not completing school.
Beginning with those who use relational process types the most, these seven participants (there were two participants with the same percentage, so I investigated the top 11%) narrate their past either (a) as a lack of internal or external resources or (b) as a change in resources so that a lack develops (not both—they either narrate one or the other). Three of the participants in this group narrate either an internal or external lack of resources in the past, as shown in Table 37. The first two participants narrate not having resources contributing significantly to leaving high school while the third narrates not being a good student contributing significantly. These participants use relational process types to assert an external or internal resource lack that they connect to not finishing high school.
Table 37

Participants Describing High School as a Lack of Resources

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Resource Lack</th>
<th>ID</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>External: money for basic necessities</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>[Asked about barriers in high school] I didn't have money to go. I didn't have shoes to wear. I didn't have clothes. I would go when I can and whenever I did go, I was lost. I was just lost.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>External: money and positive friends</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>[Talking about barriers in the past] You know, so it was, go to school and then after school, hang out on the corners, to be honest with you, with some of my friends. I had no, besides my family, I had no positive friends, you know, that didn't want to go to college or anything like that. And that's where-, that what messed me up. You know, if I'd a had someon positive beside my family or, you know, somewhere to go, like now [to GED class], I'd a had my GED over 25 years ago. But at the time it wasn't, you know, the resources weren't there for me.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internal: academic ability or motivation</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>[Asked about herself as a high school student] I wasn't the best student. I was a problem child. Yeah. But it was because I was going through things a lot. So at the time I wasn't how I am now.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The other four participants using relational process types the most also narrate a lack, but through a change in situation, from presence of internal resources (being 

motivated, focused, good, smart) to one of lack or barriers as shown in Table 38.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ID</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Initial Resources</th>
<th>Changed Resources (Lack or Barriers)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>49</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>[Describing herself as a high school student earlier on] I was motivated.</td>
<td>Talking about why she left an alternative certification program that had started out well] They didn't have the funding for the exact class that I wanted to do. Um, so they put me in auto service and I lost interest altogether because I wanted the classes that I wanted to be in, but they didn't have them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>[Describing herself in high school] I was a good student. I was focused on what I needed to do.</td>
<td>[Asked about barriers in high school] Well, barrier for me was that I got-, I got pregnant at a young age, so that stopped me from finishing school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>[Asked about herself as a high school student] I was a good student, cause I had to work and go to school. But when I went, I was good.</td>
<td>[Asked about barriers in high school] I got pregnant and dropped out. Just got pregnant, dropped out [of] working and going to school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>71</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>[Asked about herself as a high school student] Well, I was pretty outgoing. I feel I was-, ah, I was kind of smart, I think. Um, I kind of stayed to myself at times, but.</td>
<td>[Asked about supports in high school] Well, I had a best friend, but I really stopped going to school because I had gotten pregnant. And then I was sick a lot, so I just stopped after that.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Participants using mental verbs the most (top 10%) assert a similar lack in the past, as shown in Table 39. The four participants in Table 39 either talk about what they didn’t know or understand in the past or, from the perspective of today, about what they don’t know or understand now about past events. They narrate themselves, then, as cognitively restricted in some way: either not understanding academic content in the past or not understanding what happened in high school in the present. Thus, those who use relational and mental process types the most narrate a past lack of resources and, sometimes, a lack of comprehension from the present stance about what went wrong.

Table 39

**Narrating Past Lack with Mental Verbs**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ID</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>46</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>[Asked about herself as a learner in the past] I didn’t know anything. I didn’t like it there, didn’t feel right. I couldn’t understand things that I can now.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>43</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>[Talking about herself as a learner in the past] Certain things I just didn’t comprehend. And I just sat there. I sat there very quiet. I remember me being very quiet and shy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>49</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>[Asked about herself as a student in the past] I was motivated. I don't know what happened to where I decided not to go. I just decided not to go.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>[Talking about barriers in the past] I look back now and I just think it was my support system.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Having or experiencing resources and not having barriers: Relational and mental process types referencing the present. The same 10 participants discussed in the prior section use relational and mental verbs quite differently in the present compared
to the past, accounting for their resources—both internal and external—and asserting a lack of barriers, as shown in Table 40. These participants—usually in direct or implied contrast with the past absence of resources discussed above—use relational process types to assert *not having* barriers and *having* supports and use mental process types to talk about what they *want* and *like* as current students, mental states that support them in achieving GED® certification. Taken together, this pattern of high either relational or mental process types (or both) represents a resource-driven kind of agency: these participants are asserting that they used to have few, if any, resources and that now they are, for some participants, *inundated* with resources. Eight out of the 10 participants in these high groups are women and, in fact, women are more likely to use relational verbs than men (Mann Whitney $U = 270, p < .01, r = .35$). Moreover, use of relational verbs correlates positively with age ($r_S = .26, p < .05$). Thus, this comparison of past and present resources is, in this limited exploratory study, associated with women and older participants.
## Table 40

*How the Top Relational and Mental Verb Users Narrate the Present*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Narrative Use</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Relational:</strong> Assert</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>[Asked about current barriers] Well, right now I don't have any barriers. But, um, I did have some barriers because, at the time when I was going to school, I had problems getting to school as far as transportation. And then I had problems because I was trying to find a house, a place to live. (participant 50)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lack of barriers, usually</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>[Talking about current supports] So I'm just trying to do what I should have did over 25 years ago. And, you know, I'm into church now, so the church is also, you know, supporting me. Something positive, you know. And now I'm surrounded by with positive people. (participant 23)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>changed circumstance</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>[Asked about herself as a current student] I'm frustrated. And I'm frustrated because I have children. And I don't want them to know certain parts of math I don't know. Like for instance, my times tables. And I know that's what gets around to all of the math, so now I'm working on that. (participant 49)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Relational:</strong> Account</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>[Asked about himself as a learner now] I like that I can articulate what I want. I love to talk. I'm getting better at reading. The assignments are getting a little more comfortable for me and that's because of my participating in school. (participant 15)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>for support</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>[Asked about herself as a learner now] I like to know how to get things. Basically like if I don't understand, I know I'm gonna ask a question, but I like to take my time with it so I can understand basically what's going on. (participant 27)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Relational &amp; Mental:</strong></td>
<td>48</td>
<td>F</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Account for internal</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>state that aids academic</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>goals</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mental:</strong> Accounting</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>M</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>for current internal</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>resources: traits</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mental:</strong> Accounting</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>F</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>for current internal</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>resources: strategies</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Distributed agency: Avoiding relational process types

While top relational verb users (along with mental verb users) narrate their experiences through resource accounting, the bottom seven (11%) relational verb users narrate a complex distributed agency, interweaving their own actions and feelings with the actions of other people and entities, as shown in Table 41. The stories told by these participants are a combination of their own actions (doing well, Googling GED classes, walking to the library) and feelings (feeling unsafe) with the actions of other entities. Some of these other agents are specific (math, wild animals, family), but many of them are less tangible like math or the biggest struggle or the pleonastic pronoun (a pronoun with no specific reference) in it’s really hard. In this pattern, participants represent both the self and others as main-clause actors in their stories, taking some agency for themselves, but also distributing it to others, both for positive and negative actions.
**Table 41**

**Narrating a Distributed Agency**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Narrative Strategy</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Narrating the past: material process types and other subjects</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>[Asked to describe himself as a high school student] Um, middle and elementary school I did really well. High school, it wasn't that I did well. I missed a lot of school, you know, on my own actions and decisions. But, um, math was a problem for me in school. As far as everything else, you know-. And I struggled in math a lot but I kind of did well in chemistry. (participant 52)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Narrating the past: mental process types and other subjects</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>[Asked about barriers in the past]. I just-, no one ever picked on me or anything. I just felt unsafe. I kind of felt like, if you were to go to the zoo and sit in the cage with wild animals. They might not bother you, but you wouldn't feel comfortable because you're always wondering, when is-, when are some of them going to lose their mind. So I just didn't feel safe anymore. (participant 61)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Narrating the past: mental process type and other subjects</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>[Asked about barriers in the past] The biggest struggle in high school was, I think, keeping students motivated to know how much knowledge can benefit them. I feel like that's what's lacking in the school education system: passionate teachers, but also passionate students that have respect for their teachers and respect for their peers to say, &quot;Hey, we can make a difference in this world than just being another statistic.&quot; (participant 74)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Narrating the present: material process types and other subjects</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>[Asked about current barriers] For myself it wasn't really hard. So I just Googled and looked for free GED classes and I saw several and I called this place. And then I-, you know, they told me I could come here for an appointment, so that was pretty easy. (participant 59)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Narrating the present: material process types and others’ supportive action</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>[Asked about current supports] Ah, they [family] somehow give me transportation or help me with my work when need be. Everything else I just do on my own. If not, I sometimes walk to the library. (participant 39)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Pursuing Goals and Taking Actions: Material Process Types

The six participants who use material process types the most again show distinct patterns in past and present. In the past, these participants narrate their experiences using what seems like a broad variety of material verbs: working, going to school, getting pregnant, having a baby, hooking school, going to the prom, and missing out. They also narrate a number of negative material actions: not doing what one is supposed to, not completing school, not getting work done, and not going to school. Yet, beyond broad negative associations, these participants’ past material verbs do not seem to indicate a particular pattern. These participants’ use of material verbs in the present, however, is focused on (a) the broad goals they are trying to reach and, (b) the specific actions they are taking to reach these goals. Examples of each are shown in Table 42. All four of these participants, like those discussed above who use relational and mental process types, are positive about their chances of obtaining a GED® certification. Yet they assert this positivity through broad goals and strategies (e.g., getting the education, applying myself) and specific actions and strategies (e.g., took and failed math, watch videos) instead of through an accounting of resources and distributed agency.
Table 42

How Those Who Use Material Verbs the Most Narrate Current Experiences

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Narrative Strategy</th>
<th>ID</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Broad goals</td>
<td>2183</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>[Asked about herself as an adult learner] Well, I get the education, keep my mind focused.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specific actions</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>[Talking about her barriers] I took math and reading [the GED tests]. And I failed math by one point and I failed the reading by two points.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Broad and specific strategies</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>[Describing himself as an adult learner] I definitely apply myself. I use the internet a lot. If I don't understand something, I will Google it. I will watch videos if I have to. I'll go to textbooks if I have them, but internet's my strong point.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specific actions and broad goal</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>[Describing herself as an adult learner] I listen, I pay attention, I read, and I do what I can in order for to learn and grow.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note also that material verbs recounting specific actions and strategies tend to have direct objects, making them also high individuation constructions (see above). As such, they tend not only to be specific, but to narrate actions upon specific entities in the world. And, like high individuation constructions, some of these actions are negative (e.g., failing the math by one point). Nonetheless, these participants are narrating themselves as taking material actions in the world towards an academic goal, which may be difficult claims to make for these individuals who have, until now, experienced little academic success.
These participants narrate themselves generally as academically capable. While those in the sections above, however, narrate that capability through accounting for resources and distributed agency, this group asserts its capability through broad and specific goal-directed material actions.

**Talking to Teachers, Voicing the Self, and Making the Family Strong: Verbal Process Types**

While verbal process types are used less frequently than others and only used by a portion of participants (36 individuals, 57% of the sample), some participants use this agency of speaking in powerful ways. Coding all 116 instances of this feature, I found that the most frequent addressees were self, teachers, children, parents, and groups of family or friends (accounting for about 45% of verbal process types). Carefully examining the contexts of utterances with those addressees in particular, I identified three actions participants accomplish with these verbs: (1) contrasting their present and past verbal agency with teachers, (2) managing their identity through internal conversations and statements to others, and (3) building family resources through connections to parents and encouragement of their own children. I discuss each of these below.

**Contrasting past and present classroom roles: Talking to teachers.** As with mental and relational process types, verbal process types are used to make a distinction between past and present. In particular, they narrate a history of participants’ relationships with teachers, as with the participant in Table 43. For instance, the participant in Table 43 was silent and now uses her voice, narrating a shift from *shyness* to *confidence.*
Table 43

*One Participant Addressing Teachers Past and Present*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Verbal Action</th>
<th>ID</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Silence</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>[Asked to describe herself as a high school learner] I was mostly shy and quiet. I really didn’t speak much unless I was called upon. I did say things, but I was mostly too shy to speak out, so I mostly like blended in in the background.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>[Asked to describe herself as an adult learner] Outspoken. I can speak when I speak now. So, I still got that shy tendency, but not mostly. I can speak out. I don't gotta wait to be called on now. I got confidence now.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

One particularly powerful example of the above contrast between past and present voice in the classroom emerges with a 30-year-old African American participant who was told by “at least three or four teachers [in high school]” that he would not live to the age of 21. He uses verbal process types to narrate an empowering confrontation with a former teacher about this hurtful declaration:

Yeah, I went back to [this one teacher] because she really made me feel some type of way. So when I got 21, I went back and told her, “I’m still alive. I’m still here.” [asked what she said] She couldn’t believe it. She was shocked that I still even remembered that. I said, “I been thinking about that.” I made it. I’m almost 30 now, so. I wish I know where she at now. I’d tell her, “I’m still here.” (participant 20)
This learner uses three main-clause verbal verbs to narrate what he said to this teacher, but nowhere does she get a chance to respond. Even when I, as the interviewer, ask what she said, the participant narrates her mental state (*couldn’t believe, shocked*), not her words. And he ends with a conditional: he *would tell* her that he is still here, responding even in her absence. Verbal actions upon teachers, then, are important assertions of agency for some participants.

**Presenting the self: Conversations with self and others.** Verbal process types offer an opportunity to almost *meta-narrate*: to narrate one’s own narration, both to self and others, affording a construction of a certain type of identity. In Table 44, the participants offer various self-presentations, things they say to themselves in encouragement or distress and things they say to others. While these utterances are “just” occasions wherein participants tell me what they told themselves or others, they are places where participants take agency over a past conversation, asserting their truth about what they say and the kind of people they are.
### Table 44

**Meta-narrating with Verbal Process Types**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Addressee</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>[Explaining how he keeps persists] That’s my perseverance right there: saying, &quot;You supposed to be changing--change. Let it go.&quot; And I let go some things. And I said, &quot;You not as smart as you think you are but you still smart, so keep doing what you're doing and you're going somewhere with this.&quot; And that’s what I'm trying to do. (participant 34)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>[Talking about potential current barriers] So that's what's hard: [...] my age factor and all the experience I had in my life and the military and what I've learned. I asked myself, &quot;What's it all for?&quot; And I tell myself all the time, &quot;What is this all for?&quot; (participant 32)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>[Explaining how he persists] As an adult learner I just want to do my best. I know I can pass the test. I know I can as long as I keep on telling myself. If I tell myself I can’t, then it’s [that's] all my brain gonna resonate. It’ll say, “Can’t, can’t, can’t, can’t” and it’s always gonna be there. But I keep telling myself, “You gonna pass it. You gonna do good. You gonna pass it. You gonna do good.” So if I keep telling myself that, eventually it’s gonna sink in whereas though I’m gonna concentrate more and really knuckle down and get it. (participant 75)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family and others</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>[Asked about how her family supports her] Just, you know, they know I'm not big on discussing it. I always like to be-. I usually don't even tell people when I'm doing something until I accomplish it or finish it. Even if I apply for a job, I don't say, &quot;Hey, look, I'm going to an interview this week.&quot; I might say, &quot;Hey, I got the job at this-&quot; &quot;Oh? I never knew you went.&quot; And then, you know, so even them, they know I don't like being asked. (participant 19)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peers in high school</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>[Explaining how people often thought she went to a school where she just spent time with friends] It was to the point where I used to have people like even after they graduated, “Oh, didn’t you used to go to this school?” And I’m like, “Well, no, I used to be there, but I didn’t graduate from there.” (participant 18)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Building family resources: Drawing from parents and giving to children.

Participants also use verbal process types to narrate the resources within their family, both the existing connections and supports (mostly with parents) and the ways participants further build those supports by encouraging their children. For instance, in Table 45, the first two participants narrate how their verbal actions upon parents (or grandparents) and children are commitments that support them in continuing. The next participant, like many others, makes her relationship with her mother a part of the story, even if only via a narrative connection. Finally, the last participant narrates how, despite her own incompletion of high school, she continued to build her family’s resources by telling her own children to get both a high school and a college degree.
Table 45

*Building Family Resources with Verbal Process Types*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Addressee</th>
<th>ID</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parent</td>
<td>2183</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>[Relating determination to continue the program, despite his anxieties] I'm not gonna give up the program because I want to finish. I <em>promised</em> my mom and my grandmother I will finish it. And now I'm confident in [a] way but I'm [also] not because I still got that little afraid to move forward.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>[Talking about her motivation to get the degree] I do know how important a diploma is and also, for me, it’s about my kids. I can’t <em>tell</em> them to do great and aspire to be great and get a diploma and finish school if I haven’t done so myself. So for me that’s what it was mostly about.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>[Asked to describe herself as a learner in the past] [laughs] I hate to say this, but I think I was the class clown. [laughs] And I <em>told</em> my mother, I think it started from kindergarten up, you know.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>[Asked about what supported her in high school, but answering about how she supported <em>her</em> children through <em>their</em> high school] And I would <em>tell</em> them, you know, “Since you finished school, why don’t you all go to college and do x, y, z.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Thus, participants use the verbal manner of agency to assert their shift in classroom autonomy, their self-presentation, and their family’s connections and resources. Several of these participants have distinct styles, more frequently quoting themselves and others than other participants do and, for some, offering more detail in these recounted tales. And, in fact, those who use verbal verbs are more likely to have
higher word counts than those who do not ($U = 324, p < .05, r = .28$). While this is exploratory, narrating one’s actions verbally may be associated with talkativeness.
Chapter Five: Discussion

A feeling of agency is critical for persistence and achievement in academic contexts (Bandura, 2006a; Gillet, Berjot, Vallerand, & Amoura, 2012; Stupinsky, Perry, Hall, & Guay, 2012). Moreover, linguistic agency—how learners narrate themselves and others as agents—offers a window into cultural and contextual differences that survey measures do not. This study develops linguistic agency as a diagnostic tool, guided by the following questions:

1. What are the characteristics of an adult learner’s sense of agency?
2. How do adult learners understand themselves and others as agents?
3. What are the contributions of systemic functional linguistic analysis to psychological measurement?

In Chapter Three, based on phenomenological explorations of agency, I identify three sets of linguistic agency features to address these questions: intentional causation, degree of autonomy, and manner of autonomy (see Table 46). Participants use these features in their narratives to construct a sense of agency (a) that is distributed across themselves, other individuals, and social structures to varying degrees and in varying manners and (b) that shifts across space and time (specifically, past and present academic experiences; cf., Martin, Sugarman, and Thompson, 2003, for their conception of agency as distributed, shifting, and situated).
Table 46

Distributed Agency

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Agency Experience</th>
<th>Characteristics of Participant Agency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Intentional Causation</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| **Self as Causer**        | -Individual *I*-agency is most frequent form  
                          | -Rare joint *we*-agency               |
| **Actions upon Others**   | -Narrated by almost all participants    
                          | -Associated with perceived control, even when negative action upon others |
| **Others' Actions**       | -Others act both to block and to support self   
                          | -*Family & friends*: robust category with parents acting either as resource to or as direct actor upon participant  
                          | -*Teachers*: particularly powerful in the past   
                          | -*Peers*: present, but infrequent               
                          | -*Situations*: broad situations act on participants, often demonstrating the "timeless truth" of a lack of agency |
| **Degree of Autonomy**    | -Mainly used to modify present situation, expressing obligation to get a degree |
| **Manner of Autonomy**    | -Relational, mental, and material process types most frequent   
                          | -Relational and mental used to frame an agency of possessing *resources*  
                          | -Material used to frame an agency of *doing* |

In what follows, I review the major implications of this work for learning theory. First, I discuss how the distributed nature of agency is reflected in the complex narrative interweaving of internal and external resources. Second, I examine how participants employ dynamic shifts of agency over time both as motivational tools and to narrate their
how their perceptions of agency have shifted. Before those theoretical implications, however, I begin with an account of agency in the adult education context, relating it to prior work in adult education and offering suggestions for how it might contribute to contemporary theories of andragogy.

**Agency in the Adult Secondary Learning Context**

To begin, the results point to the importance of a sense of agency for the adult learners in this study, with a number of participants even rejecting my question about what supports them as adult learners and saying it is *all on them*, not others. These learners not only perceive agency as important, but seem to underscore the importance of individual agency. Yet, as in prior work in adult education (Benson, 2010; Compton-Lilly, 2009; Rogers, 2004), participants’ understanding of that individual agency shifts across time (admittedly, while narratively reflecting from a single context and a single point in time). They tend to claiming more agency for themselves generally in the present than the past through more positive *I* actions, as Rogers finds. The participants in this study, however also point to the importance of the role of *others* (e.g., family, friends, teachers) in their educational journey, narrating a shift in the resources available to them from past to present. Thus, unlike in prior work, the major past/present distinction in this study is not how participants understand their own *individual* agency, but (a) how they understand the agency of others and (b) where they feel their choices lie.

Regarding others’ agency, the narratives here suggest that most learners saw teachers and/or peers as *barriers* in the past, but see them as *supports* in the present. Teachers or peers are not necessarily more or less agentive in learners’ lives across these
time periods (although some learners talk exclusively about GED® instructors, while others talk exclusively about high school instructors); they are just exercising different kinds of agency. Extending Rogers’ (2004) work, not only do participants’ understandings of their own agency shift from negative to positive across temporal contexts, but their understandings of others’ agency undergo that same shift.

In terms of choices, participants soften their autonomy with mitigators like restrictive *just*, and modals of obligation in both past and present contexts, framing their agency as limited across time periods. The distinction lies in which choices they feel are mitigated. In the past, many participants understand themselves as being compelled to work or care for family, limiting their autonomy to pursue an education (e.g., *I had to work*). In the present, in contrast, these same participants understand themselves as being compelled to pursue a GED® credential, limiting their autonomy to focus too much on other things like work, leisure, or family. In fact, participants use mitigators *more frequently* about the past than about the present (although not quite significantly so: Wilcoxon’s $Z = 1.9, p = .054$), an average of 7.6% of the time in the present versus 5.3% of the time in the past. Thus, participants understand themselves in some ways as *less agentive* in the present than in the past, but with a compulsion to finish a degree program rather than a compulsion to leave a degree program.

**Implications for Andragogy**

As discussed in Chapter Two, a central aspect of many critiques of andragogy is andragogy’s insistence on the self-directedness, control, or *agency* of the learner (Brookfield, 2003, 2015; Hamilton & Pitt, 2011; Sandlin, 2005, 2006; Sandlin & Clark,
This is reflected not only in the theory itself, but in analyses of instructor and policymaker accounts of learners, which tend to emphasize learner responsibility and autonomy over the potentially difficult social and structural conditions of learners’ lives (Belzer & Pickard, 2015; Hamilton & Pitt; Sandlin, 2006). And, indeed, a number of features of this study’s participant narratives echo critical work in andragogy: many participants claim to have no barriers, they represent themselves as agents of positive actions in service of their certification, and they narrate themselves as causers (rather than family, social pressures, or friends, for instance) of many of their academic actions. Furthermore, most participants use mitigators like have to and just to characterize themselves as having little choice in completing the GED® certification process. Like the Heroic Victim character type first identified by Quigley (1997), they dismiss potential challenges or barriers as unmatched to their own, individual ability to persist.

Another aspect of these learners’ self-characterizations is that, as critics of andragogy would predict, they almost exclusively represent themselves as individuals instead of as part of a collaborative or joint we working together with other students (they do use collaborative we occasionally, but outside the classroom context). Brookfield (2003) and Johnson-Bailey (2002) argue that this perspective derives from andragogy’s theoretical contention that all teaching and learning (and, by extension, teachers and learners) is the same and that it is driven by the individual self. From this theoretical stance, learners who have a non-individualized view of their education are seen as being “deviant” or “exotic” (Brookfield). Yet, while the learners in this study do not use collaborative peer we to challenge this stance, they do challenge it in two interesting
ways. First, they narrate themselves and others—mostly family members—as working jointly to support their education. While this is not a classroom collaboration, it is a collaboration and many participants narrate it as a critical part of their educational pursuit. Second, while participants narrate mainly from an individual I perspective, they do much of that narration about the resources not inside themselves: family, teachers, friends, and church people and programs. Thus, they are narrating themselves as learners who are autonomous and in control, but as learners who largely have that status because of the resources around them. In this way, they challenge andragogical notions of learning that are perhaps being encouraged in their classrooms.

Another tenet of andragogy is the notion of teacher as facilitator (Knowles, 1984, cited in Sandlin, 2005). In this role, the teacher does not direct student learning, but supports student learning by providing resources. The participants in this study do indeed see their instructors as positive supports (e.g., motivating or encouraging learners) and frequently narrate teachers as resources (e.g., having a great teacher). But these learners also narrate current instructors in more traditionally agentive ways, making learners comfortable, showing learners what they missed, and simply teaching learners. In these instances, the teacher is acting directly upon students the same way a traditional teacher might. Participants in this study, then, seem to have a mixed model in which teachers both facilitate from the sidelines and directly act upon learners. Perhaps they are combining models of teaching from their childhood (which make up the majority of their formal education experiences) with models from their current program. This supports Pratt’s (1988) contention that, due to learners’ prior experiences, adult educators must
explicitly teach and model andragogical principles if that is what they want in their classroom.

Finally, the learners in this study challenge traditional andragogical models by narrating structures beyond themselves that threaten their autonomy and agency as adult learners. This emerges most clearly through linguistic analysis of situations as subjects, where participants may refer to general (e.g., *my situation*) or specific (e.g., *math, health, child care*) barriers to pursuing a GED® certification. These assertions of something beyond the self, teacher, or family as agents in participants’ education are relatively infrequent (about 10% of the time, and less in reference to present pursuits) and they often come off as stilted or awkward (e.g., “So that’s a thing that has been making me not come to school this semester”), suggesting that perhaps they are not supported by the surrounding classroom discourse. But learners do assert these other structures and forces in their narratives, challenging adult educators to “develop a kind of narrative consciousness that will ensure that we understand the narrative forces that shape our culture and impact our practice, as well as enable us to respond effectively with powerful narratives of our own” (Sandlin & Clark, 2009, p. 1026).

**Agency and the GED® Exam**

The current study of agency comes at an important time, particularly in these first few years of Pearson’s new GED® exam based on the Common Core Standards. Since the advent of the new exam in January, 2014, fewer people have taken and passed the GED® exam and Pearson has had to decrease its passing score after more than 25,000 people took and failed an exam at a pass rate that Pearson has now theorized was *more*
challenging than getting a high school diploma (Hart, 2015; Ifill, 2015; Page-Reeves & Cardiel, 2016; Turner & Kamenetz, 2015). Also, fewer non-academic organizations like churches and community centers can offer GED® training now because of the importance of the computer-based preparation materials (Page-Reeves & Cardiel). Thus, attaining a GED® equivalency appears to be more difficult than ever before, making it critical to understand how adults build the agency and resources to persist towards this goal.

One final note: while an individual’s conception of their agency and marshaling of their existing resources is an important aspect of success in adult secondary education, individual persistence will not accomplish much without more resources for adult learners. As argued in Chapters One and Two, adult secondary education programs do not have enough money to hire or train the instructors they need and adult learners usually do not have enough money and time to seriously pursue a degree. Academic research like the current study needs to go hand-in-hand with advocacy for more resources at both the state and federal levels. Moreover, scholars need to work directly with advocacy organizations like Value USA (http://valueusa.org/) and the Commission on Adult and Basic Education (COABE; http://www.coabe.org/) and their local affiliates to do research that will be relevant to policymakers. Adult literacy organizations often do not have the same history of cooperation with researchers that public K-12 schools do, but they are open to that work and make valuable partners in research and in social change.
Agency as Distributed: Accounting for Resources

The analyses of markers of intentional causation, degree of autonomy, and manner of autonomy suggest that participants experience their agency as distributed, to varying degrees, across themselves, other individuals, and social structures. The ways these participants tend to narrate their agency is summarized in Table 46. Beginning with intentional causation, individual agency with first-person singular I (i.e., self as the causer) is, by far, the most common instantiation. Since participants are being asked directly about themselves in two of the six prompts (“Describe yourself as a high school student/adult learner”), this is perhaps expected. But the remaining four prompts ask about supports and barriers, prompts which pilot participants answered alternately with I and first-person plural we, so it is somewhat unexpected that joint we agency is so infrequent here (although that may be related to the differences in class structures between this study and the pilot; see Konopasky and Sheridan, 2014, 2016 for more detail). These participants are largely narrating personal actions as individual actions.

Another characteristic of agency for almost all participants is the experience of acting upon others (individuals, objects, and structures). These individuated utterances are largely assertions of control, even when involving negative actions (e.g., experimenting with drugs). They are used to assert both the good and the bad actions participants have taken in the world and they are, within this admittedly exploratory framework, differed significantly along the perceived academic control scale.

While the self as individual causer is the most frequent instantiation of agency, it only accounts for just under 60% of main-clause subjects, with teachers, family and
friends, and situations accounting together for almost 33%. Portrayal of others as intentional causers, then, is also robust in this sample. Others’ actions directly upon the participant (low individuation) are a part of almost all (over 95%) participants’ narratives and are portrayed at times as supportive and at times as obstructive. Thus, one characteristic of agency for these learners is being subject to others’ agency, whether willingly (what Bandura, 2006a, calls proxy agency) or unwillingly.

Learners narrate a variety of others as actors in their story, whether acting directly upon the self or just acting in the story of the self: family and friends, teachers, peers, and situations. Participants endow each of these groups of actors with slightly different kinds of agency. Family and friends are, by far, the most frequent non-self actors in these participants’ stories and they take on a range of roles: from a resource for the learner (e.g., taking care of children, encouraging) to directly acting upon the learner (e.g., waking her/him up to go to class, telling her/him to study). Teachers also play a part in participants’ narratives, acting particularly powerfully in the past, often making it harder for participants to complete high school. Some participants also narrate peers as actors, but infrequently. In keeping with the low joint we agency pattern, peers do not play a central part in most participants’ stories. Finally, some participants use broad entities or actions (like things or taking tests), to narrate a “timeless truth” (Rymes, 1995, 2001) in which often seemingly uncontrollable situations are acting as agents instead of the participant. The prevalence of these other agents suggests that, in these participants’ educational narratives, agency is distributed rather than solely an individual, internal construct.
While markers of intentional causation indicate to whom or what agency is attributed, markers of degree of agency indicate *to what degree* they are given agency (see Table 46). In this study, I focus only on the way participants narrate their own degree of agency (through *I*, or *we*, or generic *you* subjects). Participants use these degree markers most frequently to narrate themselves as learners who are simply (*just*) obligated to pursue a GED® certification, despite the difficulties. Many of their individual *I* actions towards certification, then, are distributed—to a degree—across themselves and external obligations, forces, or situations. In other words, they are partially compelled in their pursuit of a GED® certification.

Finally, as the last entries in Table 46 indicate, the kind of agency these learners narrate is largely relational (connections between participants and other entities), mental (internal affective or cognitive states of participants), and material (physical actions in the world). Participants use relational and mental process types to narrate their *resources*: the supports they have or don’t have (e.g., friends, flexible work hours, or transportation) and the internal qualities they possess or don’t (e.g., understanding the material, or liking school). They use material process types to narrate themselves as actively pursuing broad goals (e.g., getting an education) and taking specific actions (e.g., using internet videos to study). In phenomenological terms, these participants demonstrate two different approaches to autonomy: simple *ownership* of an action (i.e., action as resource) versus a feeling of *control over* an action (i.e., action as goal pursuit; Pacherie, 2007) Participants who frame their agency more through relational and mental process types seem to establish ownership of resources, cataloging what supports they currently *have* or the
kinds of mental states they currently experience (often in contrast with what they did not have and did not experience in the past, discussed in the next section). It is their possession of these resources that appears to drive their feeling of agency. Meanwhile, participants who frame their agency more through material process types assert control over their own actions in the world and, at times over others’ actions (through high individuation, which is correlated with material process types). For these participants, a feeling of agency comes with successful movement throughout their world. Hence, these learners are drawing on feelings of being, experiencing, and doing as individual I agents pursuing an education, with some drawing more on one type than another.

**Distributed Agency as an Accounting of Resources**

This distributed account of agency indicates the importance of other entities in participants’ narratives. Moreover, the analysis of manner of agency suggests that a major part others play is as resources (alongside participants’ own internal resources) in participants’ pursuit of a GED® certification. This aspect of agency—the contribution of others’ actions, particularly as resources—is closely related to the idea of resourcefulness: “individual or communal acts of innovatively drawing on internal sources (e.g., skills, knowledge, confidence) and external sources (e.g., experts, informational texts, community partners) in order to persist in meeting individual or communal needs and wants” (Sheridan & Konopasky, 2016, p. 31). This resourcefulness work draws on a case study children and adults in an open-ended creative making context, but the ethos of resourcefulness seems to be similar. Like those makerspace participants, the GED® learners in this study narrate how they draw on external sources
(primarily parents, children, and GED® teachers) and internal sources (what they now, as adults, know or feel) to persist in their studies. I would argue further that they marshal these resources innovatively, figuring out ways they can build their academic resources further with the somewhat meager academic resources with which they entered their program. In other words, they narrate how they work resourcefully as individuals to meet what some perceive as a want and others perceive as a need: a high school equivalency.

Moreover, this experience of possessing resources seems to be fundamental to many participants’ views of themselves as agents capable of obtaining GED® certification. Most learners, in fact, use the comparison between their current possession of resources and their past lack of resources to argue for their optimistic view of their situation. In fact, talking about what they have or are is far more common for these participants than talking about what they do. They seem to be constructing their agency to a significant degree based upon their marshaling of resources.

Yet, unlike participants in the makerspace case study, these participants rarely talk about collaborative actions, needs, or wants. They place themselves in a community, talk about how they make use of that community, and how they give back to that community (teaching and tutoring others, for instance), but rarely frame themselves and others engaging in processes jointly as “we.” Thus, in these particular narratives (which, to be sure, are situated in the context in which the interview took place), participants are narrating a more individual resourcefulness, relying on and participating in community but not acting or desiring together with community.
This more individual resourcefulness is in direct contrast to a pilot study with five adult learners in a more intensive (meeting for longer, more frequently, and with a firmer deadline for GED® completion) learning arrangement, where all participants frequently talked about themselves together with their peers engaging in joint we processes (Konopasky & Sheridan, 2016). These two distinct ethoses emerged from different learning contexts. Further work might examine how the broader cultural models of a learning space interact with and shape participants’ notions of how they dynamically build upon and grow their internal and external resources for pursuing a degree.

**Distributed Agency as Particularistic: Situatedness in Participants**

While there are broad trends in the ways agency is distributed, there are also certain characteristics of agency that are situated in smaller groups of participants (Martin, Sugarman, & Thompson, 2003). Indeed, each individual has her or his own particular experience and narration of agency. While all participants share a goal of obtaining a GED® certification, each individual’s agency is situated in her/his own perspective. The brevity and quantity of the interviews and lack of rich observational data do not provide the right kind of evidence to describe the nature of each individual’s situated agency, but I did note a number of agency characteristics that seem to emerge in smaller groups of participants. I offer here brief descriptions of several of these characteristics, outlined in Table 47.
Table 47

Situated Characteristics of Distributed Agency

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Diagnostic Tool</th>
<th>Agency Characteristic</th>
<th>Frequency*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Individuated <em>we</em> subjects</td>
<td>Joint action upon other entities</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peers as subjects</td>
<td>Critical peer role</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family and friends as subjects</td>
<td>Critical family role</td>
<td>92%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First-person singular <em>me</em> objects</td>
<td>Beneficiary of support</td>
<td>95%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental and relational process types</td>
<td>Primacy of resources</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Indicates percentage of participants who use this feature at all, not necessarily frequently

**Joint action upon other entities.** While most participants do not narrate joint actions upon other entities (i.e., first-person singular *we* subjects with direct objects), some of those who do appear occasionally to narrate what Plaut and Markus (2005) would call *conjoint* (as opposed to *disjoint*) agency: an agency where the actions of the self are interdependent with those of others. Participant 48, for instance, a 20-year-old African-American man, talks frequently about the work he does together with a volunteer church group to mentor other young people who, like him, are academically at risk. He talks about this program and his mentor continue to support him and how seeing the good work they do inspired *him* to work with youth. His sense of joint action comes, not with other classroom peers, but with other advocates and volunteers. In fact, throughout the sample, *we* is used more often to describe self and family, friends, or high school peers much more frequently than GED® peers. These contexts external to the GED® classroom, then, may be importance places to explore as a means of supporting learners’ joint agency.
**Critical peer role.** Despite the paucity of conjoint agency with peers, some participants do narrate peers in critical roles as main-clause subjects: as barriers to, supporters of, or models for participants. Those who exhibit this agency characteristic frame peers as important agents in their lives, sometimes negatively, sometimes positively. They are not acting *with* peers, but they are being acted *upon* by peers and are acting *alongside* peers. This nuanced role for peers should be further explored in future work.

**Critical family role.** Most participants (92%) narrate family or close friends (mainly family) in a main-clause subject role. Those who do this the most, however, tend to narrate a particularly agentive role for family members, who emotionally support and encourage them and, moving beyond that, house them, drive them, and financially support them. These participants narrate themselves frequently as being acted upon directly by family members, actions which are often critical in their academic pursuit. In this situated type of distributed agency, participants do act, but many of their actions are directly supported by a heavily involved family. They are building internal academic resources, but only through the support of the external resources in their family (Sheridan & Konopasky, 2016).

**Beneficiary of support.** Related to those who narrate a supportive family are those who, more generally, narrate themselves frequently as objects of others’ action (i.e., as first-person singular *me* objects). Those who narrate themselves as *me* most frequently tend to answer the questions about high school and GED® supports by narrating others’ actions upon them (often family members’ support *pushing, telling, raising,* or
encouraging). Like those who narrate a critical family role (and these two categories overlap quite a bit), these participants narrate their own successes (and failures) as dually involving others’ actions upon them and their own actions in response.

**Primacy of resources.** A final situated type of agency involves a narrative focus on internal and external resources through mental and relational process types. Most participants narrate resources quite frequently, but those who use mental and relational process types the most narrate themselves as almost inundated with resources: surrounded by positive people, strongly supported by family, curious, and eager to learn. These participants tend to be older women (according to the exploratory statistical analysis) who claim to have few, if any, barriers to academic success. Yet they do not frame this lack of barriers through their actions in the world (studying, asking questions, making time for homework), but through their access to resources, internally and externally. For these learners, their optimism and hope is built on their resourcefulness more than their material agency.

**Agency as Shifting: Temporal Perspectives on Resources**

In addition to narrating their agency as *distributed*, the adult learners in this study use markers of intentional causation, degree of autonomy, and manner of autonomy to narrate *temporal shifts* in their agency between past and present academic contexts. This emerges in part due to the nature of our interview: participants are not pursuing their certification directly at the time of interview, so they frame their own and others’ agency either *prospectively*, narrating future plans, or *retrospectively*, attributing agency to themselves and others after the fact (Gallagher, 2012). Both prospective and retrospective
accounts, rather than being in-the-moment reports of agency, are more reflective. For instance, in reflecting on his past struggles, a 55-year-old participant narrates his past self as being obligated to fight, but implies that now he has the perspective to know that might not have been his only choice, that it might have been a distraction from his frustration at his learning issues: “if anybody laugh[ed] at me, I don’t wanna learn this, or we gotta fight, just anything to distract from when it’s my turn to write or when the teacher called me, so that was a struggle most of my life.” This temporal perspective-taking offers opportunities for:

- a metacognitive stance, in which the subject might reflect on whether she is taking the right strategy to accomplish her goal, or she might ask whether what she intends to do (or has done) is consistent with her beliefs, desires, and her other activities. (Gallagher, p. 16)

Thus, these interviews provide opportunities for examining participants’ reflection on the agency experiences themselves, in particular the distinctions between past and present academic pursuits. Table 48 gives a summary of the main points of contrast. To begin, participants tend to narrate more negative or powerless actions in the past in comparison with the present. Moreover, they use this past-to-present shift to argue for present agency: their actions were neither positive nor powerful enough in the past, so they could not obtain a high school diploma; but now they are both positive and exercising control over their circumstances, so it is likely and perhaps even inevitable that they get the degree.
Table 48

Learners’ Distributed Agency by Shifting Temporal Context

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Past</th>
<th>Present</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Intentional Causation</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Self as Causer</strong></td>
<td>- I subjects to narrate more negative or powerless actions</td>
<td>- I subjects to narrate more positive actions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Other as Causer</strong></td>
<td>- High school teachers narrated as barriers to agency</td>
<td>- Current teachers narrated as supports to agency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Others framed as responsible for struggle or free of blame</td>
<td>- Others framed as causes of success</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Degree of Autonomy</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Lack of agency and power of others framed as &quot;timeless truth&quot;</td>
<td>- Support of others and attainment of degree framed as &quot;timeless truth&quot; or necessity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- External obligations and forces framed as conflicting</td>
<td>- External obligations framed as simple with just</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Self’s actions framed as primary causes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Manner of Autonomy</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Learners framed as lacking resources</td>
<td>- Learners framed as having resources and lacking barriers</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The ways participants narrate others’ agency also shifts between past and present contexts, with many participants explicitly narrating a sense of intersubjectivity: taking on others’ perspectives as they contemplate their course of action (Gillespie, 2012; Kockelman, 2012). They narrate middle and high school teachers in the past and GED® instructors in the present as agents with about the same frequency (a mean of 1.4 per 100 words in the past and 1.7 per 100 in the present), but past teachers are narrated primarily
as barriers (e.g., getting frustrated with students, not making the classroom safe) while present teachers are narrated primarily as supports (e.g., making learners feel comfortable, going at a reasonable pace). Teachers, then, remain critical agents in both contexts, but they play vastly different roles. Similarly, in looking broadly at all instances when learners are the object of others’ actions (low individuation), others mainly act as barriers in the past (e.g., picking on learners, making them leave school) and supports in the present (e.g., helping learners, standing beside them through difficulties). Thus, while participants narrate a distributed agency in both past and present contexts, they narrate a shift in the kind of agency others exercise across those contexts. Many participants also demonstrate an awareness of how these others view the participant, focusing retrospectively on their parents’ views of their past misadventures and prospectively on how their children will see them, either with or without a degree.

Perhaps the most striking contrast between past and present contexts emerges in the degree of autonomy markers. Participants use these markers to mitigate their agency across contexts, but in the past they tend to frame uncontrollable circumstances as working against their education while in the present they tend to frame them as working towards their education. First, restrictive just and generic you subjects and objects are used in the past to suggest that participants’ lack of power and, in fact, others’ power over them are what Rymes (1995, 2001) calls “timeless truths”: inevitable circumstances (e.g., “you just” are frustrated in school and there’s nothing to be done about it). In contrast, modal verbs and generic you subjects and objects are used in the present to suggest that same timeless truth quality about others’ support for participants and about
the necessity and even inevitability of the degree (e.g., noting that “you have to” get a diploma). So, through these degree of autonomy markers, the overarching circumstantial feel of the two time periods is, for most participants, distinct; they are two very different lived experiences.

Participants narrate a similar past/present contrast in their obligations: they tend to use modals of obligation and causative markers to narrate conflicting obligations or commitments in the past that led to either poor academic performance or leaving school (e.g., stating how one “had to” get a job, thereby neglecting educational obligations). Meanwhile, they tend to use restrictive just to narrate the dismissal of external obligations and commitments in the present (e.g., talking about “just” the barrier of child care, dismissing what is a serious time commitment as a small problem). Furthermore, participants tend to narrate themselves as primary causers in the present, demoting other external obligations (e.g., claiming work is not a major barrier “because I” want the degree). These learners, then, narrate barriers to their education across past and present, but appear to be more dismissive of them in the present, giving them less power in the narrative.

Finally, manner of autonomy markers reveal a shift from past to present. Agency is largely framed around resources (what participants have/are or do not have/are not) across time periods, but participants narrate themselves as lacking resources in the past (e.g., not having family support or the ability to concentrate) and as having resources and lacking barriers in the present (e.g., having family support and not having difficulties
focusing in class). A catalog of resources is a critical part of agency for these learners, but resource distribution is quite different from past to present.

In conclusion, these adult learners’ sense of present agency appears to be at least partly built upon a contrast to past struggles with agency. This linguistic analysis of learners’ past agency does not necessarily indicate that learners experienced those struggles in the moment in the same way they are narrating them retrospectively, but it does indicate that interpretations of the past can be powerful arguments for (or, potentially, against) present agency. This suggests that past narratives may be important elements in understanding and supporting adult learners’ current pursuits.

A Developmental Perspective on Temporal Shifting: From Barriers to Resources

From the perspective of the motivational theory of lifespan development (MLD) discussed briefly in Chapter Two, adult development across the lifespan is largely individually driven through cycles of goal selection, pursuit, and disengagement (Haase, Heckhausen, & Wrosch, 2013; Heckhausen, 2011; Heckhausen, Wrosch, & Schulz, 2010). According to this approach and the authors cited, adaptive development occurs when individuals exercise their agency to strategically select future goals for which they have the resources and disengage from past goals for which they did not. And participants in the current study do seem to view their adult secondary education at least partly through this lens, demonstrating what Heckhausen et al. (2010) call a volitional or implementation mindset: having made the decision to pursue a degree, they frame their past levels of control as limited (e.g., referring to the many barriers they had) and their present levels of control as enhanced. In this way, they are able to put aside many
potential barriers or difficulties (e.g., many participants’ assertion of “no barriers” and the inevitability of a positive outcome).

In addition to an adaptive developmental mindset, participants in this study avail themselves of all four proposed types of control to engage their goals: (a) direct, individual assertion of effort through actions like coming to class and doing homework (selective primary control), (b) enlistment of another’s direct effort on one’s behalf by asking for help from people like teachers and family (compensatory primary control), (c) positive focus on resources like family and friends (selective secondary control), and (d) attribution of past failures to external sources like work or neighborhood and comparing past selves with more competent present selves (compensatory secondary control; Haase, Heckhausen, & Wrosch, 2013). The learners in this study, then, seem to be using all the strategies available to them to pursue GED® certification, evidence of what Heckhausen and her colleagues would call highly adaptive developmental regulation (Haase, Heckhausen, & Wrosch; Heckhausen, 2011; Heckhausen, Wrosch, & Schulz, 2010).

As argued in Chapter Two, this kind of adaptive regulation providing a sense of agency is important in part because adult secondary learners often face significant barriers: transportation and housing issues due to lower socioeconomic status (King, 2002; Schafft & Prins, 2009; Zachry, 2010), potentially undiagnosed learning disabilities (Gerber, 2012; Comings, Parrella, & Soricone, 1999), and post-traumatic stress disorder from exposure to trauma (Alim, Charney, & Mellman, 2006; Kaltman, Pauk, & Alter, 2011). Due to the volitional mindset, participants in this study do not seem to perceive these barriers. They report low perceived structural barriers on survey (a sample mean of
1.7 on a scale of 1 to 5) and many participants cite “no barriers” to getting a GED® certification. Yet, in interviews, various participants mention struggles with transportation, child care, and employment; attentional and processing difficulties; and/or traumatic past events. What the present study indicates is that, while participants certainly face many of the struggles discussed in the literature, given their volitional mindset, they do not see them as *barriers to a degree*. Instead, they focus on current resources and a contrastive narrative of the major barriers in the past compared to what they understand as relatively minor challenges in the present.

This emphasis on present resources and past barriers emerges particularly robustly with older women, who use relational process types like *have/not have* more than other participants. As with prior developmental studies, the older women in this study drew extensively on social resources (family, friends, colleagues, peers) to surmount barriers (Baltes & Baltes, 1990; Kinsel, 2005; Prins, Toso, & Schafft, 2009). Unlike some other research in adult secondary education, however, these women only rarely narrated their contemporary peers as resources (Konopasky & Sheridan, 2016; Prins, Toso, & Schafft, 2009). Rather, their perception of access to resources and few barriers seems to depend more on instructors and family as supports.

Whether women or men, participants’ volitional “no barriers” stance to their current educational pursuit can be seen as both encouraging and potentially worrisome. It is encouraging that these learners, with the support of instructors, family, and their own sense of agency, feel capable of succeeding and, in fact, *expect* a successful outcome, an important indicator of achievement (Shell, Colvin, & Bruning, 1995; Shell, Murphy, &
Bruning, 1989). Yet the precarious economic situation of many GED® learners, among other factors, means that the non-completion rate for GED® programs tends to be quite high: only 40% of GED® learners make measurable academic progress annually; the rest either leave their programs or stay at the same educational level (U.S. Department of Education, 2013; and this may be worse with the advent of the more difficult assessment in 2014—there are no statistics on this as of yet). One concern about the “no barriers” narrative, then, is the potential motivational consequences for learners who are not able to obtain a credential immediately and have to leave their program for some period of time. Will those learners attribute it to a change in circumstances in which barriers arise, or will they continue to perceive themselves as the central agent and attribute it to their own lack of commitment or ability? Some studies of regret within the MLD assume that older adults have “low opportunity” to address those regrets due to their age (Wrosch, Bauer, & Schier, 2005; Wrosch & Heckhausen, 2002), but GED® certification is theoretically possible at any age. Bauer, Wrosch, & Jobin (2008) argue that the opportunity to undo regrets can indeed lessen regret intensity, but they do not explore the effects of what can begin to feel like serial failures in a GED® context. Future work might explore the shifting agency of learners who are unable to complete a program initially and how they narrate their internal and external resources in this situation.

**Temporally Shifting Agency as Particularistic: Situatedness in Participants**

Like the distributed quality of participants’ narratives, the temporally shifting quality also differs from learner to learner, dependent upon her/his particular past experiences and present outlook. While most participants have particularly bad experiences from middle
school or high school, agency is situated in each individual’s own perspective. I discuss here two temporally shifting aspects of agency that differ by individual, as shown in Table 49.

Table 49

*Indicates percentage of participants who use this feature at all, not necessarily frequently

Critical role of high school teacher. Narrating one’s high school teachers as main clause subjects is another diagnostic tool indicating what seems to be a particular type of agency, giving those teachers a critical role in the narrative. Associated significantly with low perceived autonomy in the exploratory analysis, those who use this feature more spend more narrative time on past teachers’ negative actions upon them instead of present teachers’ positive actions. These participants talk about not feeling safe, feeling ignored, or feeling humiliated. Most of them offer more details about past academic experiences than present academic experiences, perhaps indicating that they have not yet had enough positive academic experiences to build a “roadmap” to a possible self as an academic achiever (Oyserman, Bybee, Terry, & Hart-Johnson, 2004).

Explicit causes. Again, almost all participants (97%) use some causal markers, but those who use causal markers most frequently seem to narrate, at times, a slightly
different type of agency. While causative markers and modals of obligation both afford a softening of agency by attributing actions to external forces (e.g., “I dropped out because I got a job” or “I had to drop out [underlying cause: having a job]”), the causative construction requires an explicit cause. Those who use causal markers most frequently, then, tend to be more specific about to whom or what they attribute causal power. This explicit attribution through causal markers is used most by these participants in the present tense to narrate GED® successes and struggles. One of the most frequent causers in this scenario is the self: participants using this construction the most narrate themselves as succeeding and struggling due to their own desires, habits, or actions. In other words, they attribute causal power to themselves. Rather than mitigating agency, then, causal markers in these cases seem instead to construct a more detailed agency, explicitly cataloging participants’ roles in their current educational pursuit. Future work might look at how causative markers of the self in particular might be related to academic persistence and achievement.

**Methodological Contributions of a Systemic Functional Linguistic Approach to Agency**

In this section, I discuss the methodological contributions of this study, discussing the ways the tools of systemic functional linguistics (SFL; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004; Martin & Rose, 2007) afford a nuanced account of a participant’s sense of agency as distributed and shifting. Because SFL analysis is grounded in participants’ own accounts of their own and others’ actions in their lives, it allows us to explore the balance between structure and agency—between being determined and free
(Archer, 2003; Latour, 2005; Martin, Sugarman, & Thompson, 2003). And it is from this balance that the nuanced portrait of agency as management of resources emerges. Moreover, because SFL analysis can be grounded in more open-ended conversation, it moves away from the semantic constraints the wording of survey questions can impose on responses (Arnulf, Larsen, Martinsen, & Bong, 2014; Sakshaug & Kreuter, 2014). I discuss here the three major methodological contributions of this SFL analysis: augmenting and enriching survey research on academic agency, a nuanced set of tools for understanding agency as distributed and shifting, a new, more complex, perspective on agency in narratives. I then offer the beginnings of a set of guidelines for using SFL as a diagnostic tool for the analysis of psychological constructs.

**Methodological Contribution 1: Enriching Survey Research**

In surveys, learners in this study reported high levels of perceived academic control, autonomy, and self-efficacy, supporting previous research on the importance of these constructs in the academic context (Bandura, 2006a; Perry, Hladkyj, Pekrun, & Pelletier, 2001; Schunk & Pajares, 2005; Standage, Duda, & Ntoumanis, 2005; Stupinsky, Perry, Hall, & Guay, 2012). Yet, despite the significant barriers most participants narrate facing, the survey measures used here indicated little variance in these agency-related constructs. This made it impossible, at least statistically significantly, to discern differences among participant perceptions that might indicate some range of feelings of agency. SFL analysis offers tools for better understanding this lack of variance, shifting the focus to (a) distributed agency across people and resources in people’s lives and (b) temporal shifts in agency. For instance, according to the
perceived academic control scale, most participants attributed control for their classroom success mainly to themselves. Analyses of subject types confirmed that, in narration, participants also attribute most actions to themselves. Yet they also narrate others as subjects of significant actions, giving control over academic direction to their instructors, giving control over actions like emotional support and motivation to family, and occasionally narrating others as acting upon them directly, usually as supports in the present. Participants also narrate instructors acting as more negative agents upon them in the past and contrast that to instructors’ positive actions upon them in the present. In this case, SFL analysis of narratives shows a broader range of attribution possibilities than the survey and it reveals to whom participants narrate control for which actions and how that shifts over time.

Next, the perceived autonomy scale, like the perceived academic control scale, had little variance, indicating that participants generally felt they had choices over their actions in the classroom. SFL analysis offers insight into the kinds of choices they narrate for themselves, both inside and outside the classroom. In particular, using causative markers and relational and mental process types, they narrate connections among themselves and their resources to varying degrees for varying participants. Much of their autonomy, then, seems to be rooted in resources, adding a valuable dimension to the scale.

Finally, survey results indicate that most participants have high self-efficacy in both their reading and writing tasks in class. In other words, they feel they are capable of achieving in two sets of basic GED® tasks. SFL tools suggest that at least part of
participants’ self-efficacy may come from downplaying potential barriers (e.g., *just* having to manage mental illness, *just* getting a bus on time, *having to* go to school despite other commitments). In other words, they frame themselves as *feeling in control* rather than *having to exert control* (Pacherie, 2007), simplifying the process through their narrative. One source of these GED® learners’ self-efficacy, then, may be a volitional mindset, ignoring some potential barriers in pursuit of a goal (Heckhausen et al., 2010). As mentioned earlier, this particular source of self-efficacy may not be very stable and could in fact represent a poor calibration of individual control, due to the unpredictability of many participants’ support structures. SFL allows researchers of academic agency to identify sources of self-efficacy like this that may be vulnerable, and could, in the long run, work *against* persistence.

**Methodological Contribution 2: Representing Agency as Distributed and Shifting**

There is a growing body of work arguing that agency is far more complex than the individual, internal construct which we have relied upon for so long in Western psychology (Aaltonen, 2013; Bandura, 2006a; Damsa, Kirschner, Andriessen, Erkens, & Sins, 2010; Edwards & D’Arcy, 2004; Evans, 2002; Haase, Heckhausen, & Wrosch, 2013; Kaptelinin & Nardi, 2006; Martin, Sugarman, & Thompson, 2003; Miller, Das, & Chakravarthy, 2011; Plaut & Markus, 2005; Rainio, 2008; Stephens et al., 2009; Turner, Goodin, & Lokey, 2012). These authors point to the ways individuals draw upon others to support their agency and to the ways external people and structures can constrain individual agency. Bandura (2006a), for example, characterizes agency in terms of different “modes”: individual, collective, and proxy. The SFL tools developed in this
study allow us to describe individuals’ experiences of these different kinds of agency by viewing agency as distributed across individuals and resources and shifting across participants’ lives. Here I offer several examples of how SFL tools and the notions of distribution and shifting contribute to this body of research.

First, this SFL analysis points to the importance of others’ agency in participants’ educational pursuits. These learners willingly submit themselves to—and regularly ask for—the actions of GED® instructors, parents, spouses, and children. Like Bandura’s (2006a) proxy agency, Kaptelinin and Nardi’s (2006) delegated agency, Edwards and D’Arcy’s (2004) relational agency, and Haase, Heckhausen, and Wrosch’s (2013) compensatory primary control, participants here narrate the ways they “recognize and use the support of others in order to transform [an] object” (Edwards & D’Arcy, p. 149). Moreover, SFL analysis allows us to explore the different types of agency participants accept from others. For instance, a subset of learners narrate family members as exercising considerable material agency in their education (waking them up, driving them to class, pushing them to do their homework). Unlike other learners in the study, they narrate relying heavily on others’ actions to pursue their goals. The SFL tools developed here allow us to explore these variations in agency.

Second, SFL tools allow us to describe moments when individuals feel their agency constrained or bounded by circumstances and social structures (Evans, 2002). Like Evans’ participants, the adult learners here recognize the “boundaries and barriers that circumscribe and sometimes prevent the expression of agency” (262) while valuing and believing in the effects of individual effort. For instance, many learners use
pronominal subjects to express frustration with broader situations making it difficult for them to achieve or persist (e.g., “That’s the main thing, my writing” or “It’s kind of crazy). Yet these same participants narrate the power of their own effort (e.g., “I just keep trying” and “I try to come to tutoring as much as I can and I take my work with me everywhere I go”). The SFL analytic techniques used here offer insight into these participants’ complex negotiations of bounded agency.

Third, these tools reveal an area not as explored in the agency literature: the boundedness of others’ agency. For instance, several participants talk about the actions their high school teachers were unable to take—controlling rowdy students, solving students’ financial problems at home—and attribute some of their own struggles to their teachers’ lack of agency. They were in an environment where not only did they lack resources, but those around them who might be expected to help also lacked resources. These results might expand the definition of bounded agency to include not just individuals’ structural constraints, but the structural constraints of the broader community that, in turn, limit individual options for proxy (Bandura, 2006a), delegated (Kaptelinin & Nardi, 2006), or relational (Edwards & D’Arcy, 2004) agency.

Fourth, researchers can use SFL to explore the extent to which different environments support collective or conjoint agency (Miller, Das, & Chakravarthy, 2011; Plaut & Markus, 2005; Stephens et al., 2009). Given the shared pursuit of GED® certification as an educational goal and the results of the pilot study (Konopasky & Sheridan, 2014, 2016), I had predicted that participants would narrate a collective agency with their current peers using we subjects. Yet joint actions with peers are the exception
in this corpus. This does not mean that participants are not narrating themselves as part of a community and their educational pursuit as deeply connected to community: learners narrate family and instructors frequently as subjects, they describe family and friends as causes for their return to classes, and they talk about the ways their embeddedness in community has both supported and prevented different goal pursuits. So they are narrating aspects of collective agency, but not with we subjects as, for instance, pilot participants do. These learners, then, weave independence and interdependence together, creating their own, situated agency (Martin, Sugarman, & Thompson, 2003; Raeff, 2006).

Fifth, SFL tools offer insight into a continuum of agency, highlighting ways participants may narrate differing degrees of agency for themselves. For instance, learners may talk about taking a job and leaving high school using I, but soften their autonomy with a modal of obligation like have to or a causative marker like because. In these examples, participants are neither claiming that their actions were fully determined, nor that they were fully free. Instead, they are narrating themselves as individual agents who are, to a certain degree and by certain circumstances, bounded by external forces (Evans, 2002). Further exploration of linguistic mitigators may offer insight into the ways various individuals experience the continuum of agency across varied contexts. One unexplored area in particular is the experience of conditional agency: actions that the self owns, but experiences as unintentional (Kaptelinin & Nardi, 2006). Linguistic mitigators may be a way to begin exploring this important construct.

Finally, the SFL approach described here allows researchers to broaden definitions of agency, including not only individual or group actions in the world, but
possession and experience of external and internal resources. By focusing on the
functional properties of the transitivity system rather than the semantic properties of an
agent (cf., Halliday, 1967; Hopper & Thompson, 1980; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), this
analysis includes subjects of having, being and feeling verbs. In this study, these verbs
were critical for participants’ assertion of resources and, hence, their experiences of
efficacy and control. For example, the utterance “I have my family” frames the speaker
semantically as a possessor rather than an agent, but this assertion is a critical part of a
GED® learner’s feelings of capability and control. The capability of this methodological
approach to explore broader definitions of agency will make it easier to explore an
agency beyond the individual and the internal, one that is perhaps closer to individuals’
day-to-day experiences.

Methodological Contribution 3: Complicating Agency in Narratives

As argued in Chapter Two, the central role of intentionality in a narrative (i.e.,
communicating an intention) suggests that it would be a good space to explore an
individual’s sense of agency (McAdams, 2001). The results of this study support this
hypothesis: a central purpose of all of these narratives of educational experiences is to
communicate participants’ intention to finish a degree and, perhaps more importantly, to
communicate that they have the agency to do it (through internal and external resources
and material actions). Moreover, this SFL analysis offers a different operationalization of
agency in narratives than some other studies, which contrast agency (individual power
and achievement) with communion (love, friendship, and community, following Bakan
(1966; see McAdams et al., 2006; McLean, Pasupathi, & Pals, 2007). This SFL analysis
reveals a type of agency that is grounded in love, friendship, and community, and the critical resources those ties provide, putting forward another construct that could perhaps be explored in this literature.

This SFL analysis also adds to this literature by putting forward a method for contrasting past and present time periods within a single narrative (i.e., talking about the self in high school versus the self in a GED® program). This temporal perspective marking—using different linguistic tools within a single narrative to mark one’s perception of different time periods in life (Kimberly Sheridan, personal communication)—allows researchers to examine the temporally embedded quality of agency (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). Emirbayer and Mische argue that agency is informed by the past and oriented toward the present and future and that agency can only be fully understood by taking account of these temporal orientations. The lens of SFL is one way to trace how individuals are using temporal orientations in narrating their agency. For instance, participants in this study shift from narrating teachers as barriers to teachers as supports and from narrating absence of resources to presence of resources. This temporal perspective throughout the narratives—examining and understanding one’s past lack of resources—becomes an argument for agency: participants have the resources and the understanding of the importance of those resources that they did not have back in high school. This accomplishment of agency with temporal perspectives is a direction that could be explored in future narrative studies.
Guidelines for Using SFL as a Diagnostic Tool

In this section, I have argued that attending to the *functions* of different linguistic markers can provide powerful insights into the complex shifting and situated nature of agency. In fact, attending to these markers is perhaps critical to deeply understanding how individuals conceive of their actions, roles, and effects in the world, even beyond the construct of agency. Steinkuehler (2006), in her SFL analysis of online gaming practices, argues that, “Without such [functional linguistic] accounts, our analyses of human activity (read: distributed and situated cognition) might run the risk of missing the forest for the trees” (p. 39). SFL analysis offers much to agency, but has potential for other constructs as well. For instance, many examples of first-person singular *I* usage revealed a shift in the present to a mastery approach to learning, like this 17-year-old female participant: “I'm able to learn, more that I'm going back to things I knew, but just was rusty on it. And *I* can teach people that never knew. Because I'm the youngest out of my class.” An analysis of *I* subjects, then, offers a window into participants’ goal orientation. (e.g., goal orientation motivation, self-efficacy).

Similarly, analysis of degree of agency patterns with *just* reveal a link to self-regulation theory, with some participants mitigating the difficulty of their current task (“*Just* gotta keep going at it—that’s all.”) and others narrating the difficulty and how they use forethought to address it (“[Asked about current barriers] Well, working, you know? Because I do housekeeping and the money, you know, is very-. So what I usually do, I *completely* take off the Saturday so I can *focus* on class.”). The contrast in linguistic use may indicate a difference in understanding of task management and, hence, self-
regulation skills. Below I draw on the methodological insights gained in the current study and I offer eight guidelines for using SFL as a diagnostic tool to study other dispositional psychological constructs.

1. **Begin with narrative.** Narratives (as opposed to short-answer questions or even conversations) provide a solid foundation for SFL analysis because they are *self-directed* and *sequential*. McAdams (2001) notes that,

   Life stories are based on biographical facts, but they go considerably beyond the facts as people selectively appropriate aspects of their experience and imaginatively construe both past and future to construct stories that make sense to them and their audiences, that vivify and integrate life and make it more meaningful. (p. 101)

In narratives—particularly those about the self over time—individuals make choices about which people, structures, and actions to narrate; what the relationships are among those narrative components; and how to order those components. Functional analysis of these choices offers insight into perception and identity (Läslö, 2004; McAdams et al., 2006; McLean & Jennings, 2012; Pasupathi & Hoyt, 2009; Semin, 2008).

2. **Conduct brief (10-15 minutes) interviews.** A major methodological finding of this study is that these diagnostic linguistic tools offer the analyst a theoretical framework for focusing in on certain parts of the narrative, parts that might not seem meaningful when seen through other lenses. This focus and subsequent discourse analysis of the purposes for which participants are using different linguistic forms allows researchers to do a deep agency analysis with brief interviews. While these brief interviews do not
provide the depth of knowledge or relationship that can emerge in lengthier interactions between participants and researchers, they can offer a meaningful window into participants’ perspectives on themselves and others in a particular context (in this case, the adult secondary classroom).

3. **Take a particularistic and diagnostic approach.** The approach to SFL outlined here begins with quantifying certain linguistic features, but that quantification is not the end goal. Instead, those statistics are used interpretively to guide case selection. This particularistic approach is rooted in the value of “concrete, context-dependent knowledge” for understanding human learning (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 224). Patterns in the linguistic data (e.g., number of mitigation markers, types of subjects used, range of process types used) may *suggest* a particular type of agency (or other psychological characteristic), but the function of language is inherently tied to the context around it, so these patterns must be a diagnostic means, not a prescriptive end. In other words, these linguistic tools are a way to identify *critical cases* rather than a complete analysis in themselves (Patton, 2002). Martin and Rose (2007) frame the relationship between language and context in this way: “Discourse analysis employs the tools of grammarians to identify the roles of wordings in passages of text, and employs the tools of social theorists to explain why they make the meanings they do” (p. 4). The type of analysis outlined here, then, interweaves the work of the grammarian with the work of the social theorist.

4. **Code exhaustively.** Because the SFL analysis used here attributes interpretative importance to the frequency and contrast of choices made by particular
individuals across the course of a narrative, it is important to catalog those choices exhaustively. In other words, researchers should strive to include all the linguistic data in the initial quantitative analysis. In this way, the statistical patterns are holistic representations of an individual’s narrative.

In practice, exhaustive analysis can be difficult with natural language data. Recording quality, false starts, overlap, and self-correction all present difficult interpretive choices. Moreover, just as the very act of transcribing oral speech into written form involves researcher interpretation (Mishler, 1997), the coding of this transcription is an interpretative act. Exhaustive analysis, then, is not the same as “objective” analysis; researcher interpretation is part of the process at every level. But the rigor of examining and cataloging participants’ speech clause-by-clause engages the researcher in the full narrative and adds rigor to the overall process.

5. **Begin with main clauses and transitivity.** Exhaustive SFL analysis, however, does not necessarily entail analysis of every single word, nor would that be practically possible with any except the shortest narratives. In this initial exploration of SFL as a diagnostic tool, given my research questions, I focus in on the *main clauses* (i.e., not subordinate clauses) and on the *transitivity system*. Since this study is the first SFL analysis of adult secondary learners’ sense of agency, I was interested in what participants frame as the primary processes (in contrast to the subordinate processes) in their narratives. This main clause analysis—of processes, subjects, objects, and process *types*—offers an overview of how each individual imposes structure and sequence upon the educational events across their lives.
In picking and choosing to which functions I would attend in main clauses, I was guided by functional linguists’ use of the transitivity system (essentially verbs and their subjects and objects in the English grammatical system; Halliday, 1967; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004; Hopper & Thompson, 1980). This is a particularly useful system for agency analysis because of its focus on those who act and those who are acted upon, but it could be useful for other psychological analyses as well because of its connection to the representational function of the clause (Halliday and Matthiessen). In its representational function, the clause helps humans “build a mental picture of reality, to make sense of what goes on around them and inside them” (Halliday & Matthiessen, p. 106). The transitivity system, then, provides a starting point for analysis because it offers insight into how individuals represent the central processes of their narrative.

6. Let theory guide the study of modifiers. One step out from core transitivity system of main-clause verbs, subjects, and objects are the phrases and clauses used to modify those elements. These include linguistic forms like adverbs, adjectives, prepositional phrases, and subordinate clauses. Because of their range and quantity, particularly in exhaustive analysis, researchers can easily get mired in untangling these modifiers and determining which ones are contributing meaningfully to participants’ narratives. My approach to modifiers in this study, one that has proven fruitful, has been to use existing theory as a guide. For instance, attribution theory suggests that the cause or reason individuals give for failure or success is an important indicator of achievement (Shell, Colvin, & Bruning, 1989, 1995). Hence, I included subordinate clauses introduced by causal markers (e.g., because, since) in my analysis. Similarly, prior work by Rymes
(1995, 2001) indicates that the adverb *just* may be used to mitigate agency in educational narratives, so I included that adverb (but no others) in my analysis. In order for linguistic markers to function well as diagnostic tools, particularly when looking beyond the main transitivity system, they must be well chosen based on the study’s theoretical framework.

7. **Use markers of modality to attend to perspective and possibility.** The verb is the center of the transitivity system in most clauses and *modality* reflects the speaker’s judgment about that verb: either level of control over that process (e.g., “I have to/should/must go to the store”) or likelihood of that process (e.g., “I might/may go to the store”; Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech, & Svartvik, 2010). In the current study of agency, I focus on level of control with modals of obligation like *have to* and *got to*. But modal auxiliary verbs are a rich set of tools for examining individuals’ perspectives, for instance, about what they *could* and *should* do across contexts and situations. Perhaps even more compelling, drawing on possible worlds work (Yowell, 2002), would be an exploration of what individuals believe is possible. In other words, when do people talk about what *might* happen versus what *could* happen versus what *can’t* happen versus what *will* happen? Modal auxiliaries could be a powerful tool for diagnosing moments of possibility and impossibility.

8. **Attend to temporal contrasts.** A central methodological finding of the current study is the power of examining the linguistic features described above *across time*. While a narrative is created in the present moment, narrators can draw on past experiences and future plans to communicate their perspectives. Participants use *proto-longitudinal* perspective marking (specifically, comparing less agency in the past to more
in the present and predicting a successful future) in this study to support narratives of themselves as agentive and effective learners. But individuals’ perspectives on the past and the future are critical to many psychological constructs, particularly in educational contexts. For example, learners draw on past mastery experiences to support present self-efficacy (Bandura, 2012) and learners’ beliefs about their future “possible selves” are predictive of academic performance (Yowell, 2002). SFL analysis can act as a diagnostic tool, pinpointing places where participants represent themselves and others differently across different time periods. These contrasting representations may then indicate productive areas for more careful qualitative analysis.

**Limitations**

There are several limitations to this study. First, as mentioned in Chapter Four, the scales chosen were not sensitive enough to pick up variance in agency-related constructs. Part of this may be due to the nature of survey instruments which, unlike linguistic markers, do not allow for as much individual variation. But in addition, in keeping with the preferences of the research sites, participants were not recruited in the first few weeks of the class. Thus, participants who dropped out in the first few weeks were not part of the sample, perhaps skewing the survey results. Also, the scales were aimed at the classroom context (e.g., success in class, self-efficacy in class) rather than the broader GED\textsuperscript{®} context (e.g., success in obtaining a GED\textsuperscript{®} credential, self-efficacy in obtaining a GED\textsuperscript{®} credential). The interviews revealed that most students were confident about their classwork and felt that their instructor gave them autonomy, but that some were less confident about the actual GED\textsuperscript{®} exam (administered externally to and not associated
with either literacy program) and how long it might take them to pass. Future work might look at whether changing the focus of the scales allows for more variance and, thus, more significant findings regarding the relationship among scales and linguistic variables.

Second, a diagnostic approach (as opposed to, for instance, a correlational approach) presents tension in the interpretation of results, particularly when comparing “high” and “low” users of a particular linguistic marker. For instance, some participants who use first-person object *me* the most also seem to be more vague or general in their language. For instance, in answering a question about how family helps, one participant answers: “pushing *me* hard to do my work,” not offering specific ways they help. The question arises, then, whether *me* itself is the critical aspect of understanding this person’s agency or if it is some other, related aspect like specificity of language. The lack of a full linguistic analysis leaves these causal connections open to question.

Third, while the brevity of the interviews and the focus of the diagnostic tools allowed me to explore experiences of agency across a relatively large number of participants for a qualitative study, the shortest ones (those less than 8 or 9 minutes) were more difficult to analyze. While they showed many of the same markers as the other interviews, the minimal context made it more difficult to draw conclusions about learners’ purposes in using these markers. In further work with these markers, participants should have a bit more time to talk in more detail about their educational experiences.

Fourth, due to time and resource constraints, I have not been able to explore how identification of the linguistic markers identified here might possibly be automated to
some extent with existing tools like Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC: Pennebaker & King, 1999) or Coh-Metrix (Graesser, McNamara, & Kulikowich, 2011). While automated text analysis would not be appropriate for all the markers identified here (e.g., identifying manner of autonomy by determining the process type of main clause verbs could not yet be automated), identification of different main clause subjects, self as object (we, us), adverbials like just, and causative markers lend themselves to automation. That would allow researchers to use these markers with longer interviews, perhaps giving an even better idea of how these markers shift across contexts.

Finally, while this study examines the ways participants’ perspectives shift as they talk about different times and places, it was limited to the context of the literacy organizations (as opposed to participants’ homes, public spaces, or even visiting the middle- and high-schools that participants discuss in their interviews) and to the current time. Thus, while the study offers insight into participants’ current experiences of other times and places, I was not able to examine the ways linguistic markers of agency might shift as participants move through actual time and space. In future research, I hope to work with adult secondary learners across a broader range of contexts and over a longer period of time (for example, maintaining contact with participants even when they leave literacy programs) to explore the possibilities of contextual shifts in these linguistic markers.

**Conclusion, Implications, and Future Work**

In conclusion, the linguistic diagnostic toolkit proposed here (and see Konopasky & Sheridan, 2016) offers a way to approach experiences of agency that reveals both their
distributed and dynamic qualities. Rather than framing agency as an internal trait, this analysis shows how these participants view their agency as both internal and distributed. They narrate their agency as their own internal resources and the external resources provided by families, teachers, and broader social structures. Their agency, then, is grounded in their own doing and feeling and the having (or not having) of external resources. This analysis also moves away from viewing agency as a relatively static trait, revealing the dynamic shifting of agency that participants narrate across their lives. Participants, in fact, bolster their present agency by contrasting it to a lack of agency in the past. And any lack of agency in the present seems to come only through the narration of obligation, wherein participants feel they have to obtain their GED® certification.

The insights about the distributed and shifting qualities of agency emerge in part out of the 20 linguistic markers that were selected for this study based on prior research and theory. Yet these markers are only diagnostic, pointing to places in participants’ narratives where agency may be at play. Similarly, examining the distribution of these markers as variables suggests patterns of agency for this group of participants. But the markers themselves are not directly linked to agency for all participants in all circumstances. Instead, it is in the dynamic weaving of implicit language (i.e., the agency markers) and explicit language (i.e., the content of participants’ stories, claims, and representations) that I develop the in-depth insight and understanding reflected in the results. Thus, the somewhat structural approach outlined here is grounded in a qualitative understanding of the researcher as the instrument, an instrument who interprets
participants’ narratives subjectively, grounded in her own dynamically distributed agency across contexts and times.

This analytic movement between implicit and explicit language reveals a distributed and shifting agency that is nuanced and subtle. First, while interviews were designed to elicit stories about participants’ own actions and feelings, 35% of subjects in this corpus were other entities beyond the self: family, teachers, friends, peers, organizations, social structures, and others. The resources of others, then, are a critical part of participants’ narratives. And exploratory statistics suggest that a fully individual I agency might be something GED® instructors value as well: use of first-person singular I subjects was significantly correlated with lower instructor ratings about whether or not students would pass the GED® exam. Again, while conclusions cannot be drawn from this exploratory work, it suggests that instructors may value distributed agency as well.

Results also indicate that the ways in which participant agency is distributed are often complex. For instance, participants rarely frame peers as jointly collaborating with them in first-person plural we actions. Yet peers are an important part of their journey, supporting them, modeling learning for them, and sometimes acting as barriers to them. Rather than working as a unit on a single action, then, participants represent themselves and their peers as each pursuing their own actions, but often towards the same goal. Participants, then, frame peers as acting in parallel to participants or directly upon participants, not as acting together with participants, complicating even notions of collaborative agency.
Similarly, a number of participants represent their family members (particularly parents) as agents, but, most of the time for these participants, they neither act together with family nor are solely acted upon by family. Instead, they participate in a causative chain of agency. For instance, one participant talks about her mother and grandmother “pushing me hard to do my work.” In this example, family acts as an agent, pushing the participant, but this starts a chain of agency in which the participant does her work. Her mother and grandmother use their resources of verbal persuasion to elicit the participant’s internal resources for completing her work. As with representations of peers, these representations of family complicate the idea of distributed agency.

The distributed agency participants construct also shifts in complex ways across time. For instance, participants narrate obligations with have to and got to across past and present time periods, but the implied creator of that obligation shifts. In past contexts, participants talk about a wide variety of people and structures that obligate them: parents, peers, siblings, and social norms among others. These people and structures most often create obligations that move participants away from completing their education—they have to take care of siblings, work, or do what the crowd does, for example. In present contexts, however, participants primarily refer (usually implicitly) to a set of values or norms that obligate them: responsibility to family members, social expectations of finding a job and caring for oneself, the ideal of having a high school diploma. These values and norms create obligations supporting participants completing their obligation—they have to stay in the program, do their work, or get their GED® certification, for
instance. Thus, participants narrate obligations in the past and the present, but these obligations work through different entities to different ends.

Perhaps the most striking result of participants’ narratives of shifting agency is the complex ways in which *past* agency interweaves with *present* agency. For instance, exploratory statistical analysis revealed that participants who talk about *past* teachers as agents (i.e., subjects) are more likely to represent themselves as having higher structural barriers *now*. In other words, participant narration of the agency their teachers had in the past relates to the ways they perceive their barriers to adult secondary education in the present. Qualitative analysis of these participants’ narratives suggests that they saw their *teachers* as barriers in the past and now see *other* entities (e.g., work, family, class scheduling) as barriers in the present. While their perspective on *what* is acting as barriers to their agency has shifted, perhaps their perspective on whether or *not* they have barriers has not. (This perspective may indeed relate to a “reality” of barriers that *also* has not shifted. I do not have the data to speak to this reality, only to the perspective, but many of the participants in this study are certainly struggling with incredibly difficult circumstances.)

Finally, shifts in agency across time are further complicated by the *present* lens of participants; all of these interviews are proto-longitudinal in that participants may *talk about* the past, but they are solidly *in* the present. Thus, we see indications that participants no longer hold the same perspective as their past selves. For instance, one participant talks about what it was like for him as a high school student when he did not know that his academic struggles were related to a learning disability:
I felt like I was beneath all the other students and, um. [pause] Especially if somebody told you you can't spell, so they didn't tell me I could learn how to spell. They just said you can't spell, so I must have like closed that up in my mind and said, "Oh, I don't think I can do any better than what I'm doing."

This participant uses generic you to represent a past situation that was unchangeable, but from his present perspective, he knows he can learn to spell and talks openly about it (in fact, he passed all sections of the GED® exam shortly after this finished). Generic you in this case supports a distinction between two different perspectives on his life. It is not that he couldn’t spell then and can spell now, but that he viewed the issue through a different, less informed lens as a child. Shifts in agency, then, can be a tool that participants use agentively in their narrative to explicitly detail a perspective shift.

The current study points the way to at least one implication and two possible future directions for this work. First, the emergence of internal and external resources as a critical aspect of agency for these adult learners may have implications for instructors, both in adult education and in other educational contexts where agency may be important. Attending to the ways learners describe their resources could offer instructors a valuable tool to help determine where and when learners might need extra support or guidance. Moreover, understanding the ways learners narrate shifts in resources across time periods and contexts might give instructors their own resources for motivating learners when they are discouraged. A professional development about appreciating, activating, and seeking out learner resources might be helpful for instructors in a variety of contexts.
Second, while the transitivity system (subjects, verbs, and objects), modifiers, process types, and tense offer interesting insights into these adult learners’ experiences of agency, there are other SFL tools that hold potential for further studies of agency. For instance, Hancock et al. (2010) demonstrated that text cohesion (broadly, connections among different parts of a text) was an indicator of status in a corpus of letters. While I include markers of causation in the current analysis, I do not include other types of discourse markers of cohesion, nor do I explore the ways the coherence of a narrative might relate to the kind of agency an individual experiences. For instance, perhaps individuals with higher levels of cohesion in their educational narratives experience their agency as distributed across fewer—but more tightly interconnected—individuals.

Third, future research might apply these tools in contexts beyond adult secondary education. I have already used some of these tools in two other contexts in which, as in GED® programs, a sense of agency is theorized to be important for persistence: an informal learning context with elementary school children (Konopasky & Sheridan, 2015) and a high school for children with learning disabilities (Brigham, Konopasky, & Ahn, 2016a, b). These two groups of participants used markers of agency differently than the participants in the current study, offering insight into the characteristics and experiences of agency in those two contexts. These tools might offer similar insights in other contexts where agency is thought to be useful.

In conclusion, this research supports past findings that a feeling of agency is critical for learners, particularly in situations where they face difficult barriers. Yet, there is a distinct contrast between the relatively high level of agency represented in the survey.
measures used here and the rich and nuanced portrait of agency developed through the linguistic agency markers and qualitative analysis. This indicates the importance of a careful analysis of the language of agency for truly understanding how participants view themselves and others across varying times and contexts.
Appendix A

IRB Approval Letter

TO: Kimberly Shimp, College of Education and Human Development
FROM: Aarti Dave 
Assistant Vice President, Research Compliance

TITLE: The Agency of Adult Literacy Learners

PROTOCOL NO.: 8694 Research Category: Class Project (G)

DATE: April 19, 2013

CC: Abigail Kuspaak

Under George Mason University (GMU) procedures, this project was determined to be exempt by the GMU Office of Research Assurance & Integrity (ORIA) since it falls under DHHS Exempt Category 1, research conducted in an educational setting that will assess the effectiveness of educational materials and practices and (Exempt Category 2, research involving the use of educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures or observation of public behavior.

Copies of the final approved consent documents are attached. Please use these stamped copies for your research.

You may proceed with data collection. Please note that any modifications in your protocol must be submitted to the ORIA for review and approval prior to implementation. Any unanticipated problems involving risks to participants or others, including problems regarding data confidentiality must be reported to the GMU ORIA.

GMU is bound by the ethical principles and guidelines for the protection of human subjects in research contained in The Belmont Report. Even though your data collection procedures are exempt from further review by the GMU IRB, GMU expects you to conduct your research according to the professional standards in your discipline and the ethical guidelines mandated by federal regulations.

Thank you for cooperating with the University by submitting this protocol for review. Please call me at 703-993-5381 if you have any questions.
Appendix B

Survey Measures

**Personal Data Questionnaire**

1. Gender (circle one):  Female  Male
2. What year were you born?
3. What do you consider your race to be (circle one):
   - African American
   - Asian American
   - Hispanic or Latino
   - White
4. At what grade level did you leave high school?
5. At what age did you leave high school?
6. What is the highest education level of your mother (circle one)?
   - Elementary school, middle school, or some high school
   - High school diploma
   - **GED™** or equivalency
   - 1 or more year of college, no degree
   - Bachelor’s degree
   - Graduate degree (for example: MA, MD, MSW, MBA, DDS, PhD)
Agency Interview

Questions about high school experiences
1. Describe yourself as a high school student.
2. Tell me about some of the people and things that supported you in high school.
3. Tell me about some of the barriers that led to you leaving high school.

Questions about adult learning experiences
4. Describe yourself as an adult learner.
5. Tell me about some of the people and things that support you in this program.
6. Tell me about any barriers to your staying in the program.
Reading Self-Efficacy

(Adapted from Shell, Murphy, & Bruning, 1989 and 1995)

Please rate how sure you are that you can do each of the reading tasks below.

Rate how sure you are by circling a number from 0 to 10 using this scale:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>0</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
<th>9</th>
<th>10</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cannot do at all</td>
<td>Can do a little bit</td>
<td>Very sure I can do</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. Read your class textbook
2. Read a story or article for class
3. Pronounce different words in one of your class readings
4. Know all the words on a page in one of your class readings
5. Recognize the parts of speech in one of your class readings
6. Understand the main idea of a story you read for class
Writing Self-Efficacy

(Adapted from Shell, Colvin, & Bruning, 1989 and 1995)

Please rate how sure you are that you can do each of the writing tasks below.

Rate how sure you are by circling a number from 0 to 10 using this scale:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>0</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
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<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
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<th>8</th>
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<th>10</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cannot do at all</td>
<td>Can do a little bit</td>
<td>Very sure I can do</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. Write a 1-paragraph summary of something you read for class
2. Write a story about what you did last summer for class
3. Correctly spell all the words in a writing assignment for class
4. Put the correct punctuation marks in a sentence for class
5. Use the correct parts of speech in your writing for class
6. Get your point across in writing for class
Perception of Academic Control

(Adapted from Perry, Hladkyj, Pekrun, & Pelletier, 2001)

Please rate how much you agree with each of these statements.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>strongly disagree</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5 strongly agree</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. I have a lot of control over how well I do in my GED™ class.
2. The more effort I put into my GED™ class, the better I do.
3. No matter what I do, I can’t seem to do well in my GED™ class.
4. I see myself as mostly responsible for how I do in my GED class.
5. How well I do in my GED™ classes is often the “luck of the draw”.
6. There is not much I can do about my performance in my GED™ class.
7. When I do badly in my GED™ class, it’s usually because I haven’t tried my hardest.
8. Whether or not I move up to another class level is basically determined by things out of my control and there is not much I can do to change it.
Perceived Autonomy Support

(Downloaded with permission from selfdeterminationtheory.org on 3/8/13 and slightly adapted for adult context)

Please rate how much you agree with each of these statements.

1 strongly disagree
2 neutral
3 strongly agree

1. I feel that my instructor gives me choices and options.
2. I feel understood by my instructor.
3. My instructor shows confidence in my ability to do well in the class.
4. My instructor encourages me to ask questions.
5. My instructor listens to how I would like to do things.
Structural Barriers

(Drawn from relevant concepts in Darkenwald & Valentine, 1985)

Sometimes it is difficult to begin or to continue attending adult education classes. How important have any of the following issues been for you in the past year? Please rate the importance of these factors using this scale:

1. Finding transportation to class.
2. Finding time to come to class because of work hours.
3. Finding child care to attend class.
4. My own or my family’s health problems
5. Money for class supplies.
6. Finding housing or changing housing.
7. Worrying about the class being in an unsafe area.

1 2 3 4 5
Not Very important important
Instructor Perception of Risk

(Both questions will be asked about every student in the instructor’s GED® class)

1  2  3  4  5
extremely unlikely extremely likely

How likely do you think it is that this student will pass the GED™ exam within the next year?
How likely do you think it is that this student will continue to attend classes for the rest of the semester?
Appendix C

Informed Consent Forms

Learner Informed Consent

The Agency of Adult Literacy Learners

INFORMED CONSENT FORM: STUDENTS

RESEARCH PROCEDURES

We are doing this research to better understand how adult learners feel about their classroom experiences. If you agree to take part in this, over the next semester a researcher will come in to your class 2-3 times (during your normal class period) and ask you to fill out some short surveys about your learning. This will take a total of 35-45 minutes over 2-3 class periods. Then, if you agree, you and the researcher will talk in a separate room one-on-one for 10-15 minutes about your experiences in high school and as an adult learner. This conversation will be audio recorded. Finally, if you give the researcher permission, she will get the information on your latest CASAS test score and your semester attendance from the staff at Baltimore Reads, Inc.

RISKS

There are no risks that we can foresee for participating in this research

BENEFITS

There are no benefits or money paid for being in this study. But the things I find out may help teachers to better help adult learners like you.

CONFIDENTIALITY

The data in this study will be confidential; that means your name will not be on it. All possible identifying information will be removed from the transcript of the interview we record so that nobody, inside or outside the program, will be able to connect this interview to you. Your CASAS score and attendance record will be recorded using an identification number, not your name. Also, our interview recordings, surveys, and transcripts will be stored in a secure location and (1) your name will not be included on the collected data; (2) a code will be placed on all collected data; (3) through the use of a code, the researchers will be able to link your responses to the scales to your name; and (4) only the researchers will have access to the code. Data may be retained for future studies.

PARTICIPATION

Your participation is voluntary—you do not have to do this—and you may leave the study at any time and for any reason. If you decide not to participate or if you leave the study, there is no penalty. It will not affect your class assignments or grades. There are no
costs to you or any other party. If you choose not to participate in the research, the audio recording device will not be placed within your small group. Also, the researcher will note when you speak in class and will not transcribe on to paper the things you say.

CONTACT
This research is being conducted by Dr. Abby Konopasky and Dr. Kimberly Sheridan through the College of Education and Human Development at George Mason University. They may be reached at 202-650-7490 (Dr. Konopasky) or 703-993-9181 (Dr. Sheridan) for questions or to report a research-related problem. You may contact the George Mason University Office of Research Integrity & Assurance at 703-993-4121 if you have questions or comments regarding your rights as a participant in the research.

This research has been reviewed according to George Mason University procedures governing your participation in this research.

CONSENT
I have read this form and agree to participate in this study.

__________________________
Name

__________________________
Date of Signature
Instructor Informed Consent
The Agency of Adult Literacy Learners
INFORMED CONSENT FORM: INSTRUCTORS
RESEARCH PROCEDURES
This research is being conducted to better understand how students experience and interact in the adult literacy classroom. If you agree to participate, a researcher will come into your classroom at your convenience 2-3 times over the next semester to ask students questions about their learning using surveys (about 35-45 minutes total over several class sessions). During this time, if you agree, you would fill out brief surveys about how likely you believe each student is to complete the semester and obtain a GED™ certification (this should take about 15-20 minutes). Also, the researcher will invite students to talk with her one-on-one in a separate classroom about their high school and adult learning experiences (10-15 minutes).

RISKS
There are no foreseeable risks for participating in this research.

BENEFITS
There are no benefits to you as a participant other than to further research in adult literacy education.

CONFIDENTIALITY
The data in this study will be confidential. All possible identifying information will be removed from the scales you fill out.

PARTICIPATION
Your participation is voluntary, and you may withdraw from the study at any time and for any reason. If you decide not to participate or if you withdraw from the study, there is no penalty. There are no costs to you or any other party.

CONTACT
This research is being conducted by Dr. Abigail Konopasky and Dr. Kimberly Sheridan through the College of Education and Human Development at George Mason University. They may be reached at 202-650-7490 (Dr. Konopasky) or 703-993-9181 (Dr. Sheridan) for questions or to report a research-related problem. You may contact the George Mason University Office of Research Integrity & Assurance at 703-993-4121 if you have questions or comments regarding your rights as a participant in the research.

This research has been reviewed according to George Mason University procedures governing your participation in this research.

CONSENT
I have read this form and agree to participate in this study.

____________________________________________________________________________________
Name

____________________________________________________________________________________
Date of Signature
Appendix D

Scale Development Information

This appendix contains detailed information on the exploratory factor analysis that was used to develop the final scales.

Structural Barriers Questionnaire

Screening for bivariate normality, less than half of the correlations were significant and, of the significant correlations, two were less than .5. Removing the three items that had no significant correlations (one item had a single significant, but low, correlation), the \( r \) values ranged from .45 to .62 \( (p < .01) \) with a Cronbach’s alpha of .81. These remaining four items loaded on to a single factor accounting for 63.9% of the variance, with a Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) of .76 (middling to meritorious) and communalities all above .5. Interestingly, the four remaining items are those associated with financial constraints (finding transportation to class, money for class supplies, and finding or changing housing) or living in neighborhoods of poverty (worrying about class being in an unsafe area), while the three items that did not correlate were associated more with responsibilities to others (finding time to come to class because of work hours, finding child care to attend class, one’s own or one’s family’s health problems).

The final composite variable has a mean of 1.67 \( (SD = 1) \) with a minimum of 1 and a maximum of 5. This is slightly lower than Darkenwald and Valentine’s (1985)
mean for the related items, which was 1.73. Thus, despite the lack of education (all lack high school credentials) and level of poverty (about half of the learners at both organizations are unemployed), these participants seem to rank their structural barriers lower than the more educated (95% had a high school credential or more) and better off (a 23% unemployment rate) participants in Darkenwald and Valentine’s study.

Although the final StrBar scale is reliable, it is still highly skewed to the left, enough that I decided, as with the two previous variables, to create a binary variable. As with PAC and PAut, a large percentage (42%) of participants rated themselves as having the lowest possible barriers across all 4 items, giving them an average score of 1. Thus, I split the variable into those who rated themselves as having the lowest possible barriers and everyone else. The descriptive statistics for this variable are given in Table XX. As the table shows, after removing those who rate themselves without barriers, the other participants have a mean of 2.16 (higher than Darkenwald and Valentine’s, but with a large standard deviation (1.09), so it is difficult to know if they are truly different) and two participants rate a 5 on all 4 items.

Self-Efficacy Surveys

In Shell, Murphy, and Bruning’s (1989) original use of the scale, reliability as measured by Cronbach’s alpha was .92 for their task subscale and .93 for their skill subscale. Given the adjustments, however, reliability will be calculated for this version of the scale as well. While the original use of the scale was with college students, Shell, Colvin, and Bruning (1995) adapted the scales for use with 4th-, 7th-, and 10th-grade students, obtaining coefficient alpha reliability estimates between .62 and .76 for each of
the four subscales they used. The participants in this study are adults like the college
students in the original study, but have low reading and writing levels, perhaps more like
the students in the second study, so this scale was hypothesized to be appropriate for
these adult learners.

First, to assess the latent constructs underlying the 6-item measure of self-efficacy
in reading (SER), an exploratory factor analysis was performed. First, data were screened
for univariate normality. While there was some skewness to the right, an examination of
the histograms determined that they were satisfactory for this exploratory analysis.
Screening of correlations for bivariate normality indicated that all correlations were
significant, with $r$ values ranging from .34 to .64 ($p < .001$) and a Cronbach’s alpha of
.84. A principal components analysis was run, with all 6 items loading on to a single
factor which accounted for 58.5% of the variance. Communalities ranged from .4 to .7
and the KMO measure of sampling adequacy was .81, which is considered meritorious
(Kaiser, 1974).

Exploratory factor analysis was also completed for the 6-item measure of self-
efficacy in writing (SEW). Like the SER measure, most of the SEW items were skewed
to the right, but an examination of the histograms determined that they were satisfactory
for this exploratory analysis. Screening of correlations for bivariate normality indicated
that all correlations were significant, with $r$ values ranging from .52 to .8 ($p < .001$) and a
Cronbach’s alpha of .91. A principal components analysis was run, with all 6 items
loading on to a single factor which accounted for 68.9% of the variance. Communalities
ranged from .6 to .8 and the KMO was .87, which is considered meritorious (Kaiser, 1974).
Perceived Academic Control

Reliability as measured by Cronbach’s alpha was .80 in the initial study. This measure was used with college students in a psychology course, similar in age but not education level to the participants in this study. Stupinsky, Perry, Hall, & Guay (2012), also working with college students, used the same scale and received alpha reliability coefficients between .78 and .86.

Given the new context (adult secondary learners), an exploratory factor analysis was also performed on the 8-item perceived academic control measure (PAC) on a Likert scale of 1 to 5. First, after adjusting for reverse scoring, data were screened for univariate normality and all 8 items were highly skewed to the right. Moreover, screening of correlations for bivariate normality indicated that less than half (10) of the correlations were significant and, of those significant correlations, only two were above $r = .5$. Removing the item that had no significant correlations and using principal component analysis and varimax rotation with a Kaiser normalization, two factors were isolated (corresponding to the positively and negatively worded items), reaching only a KMO score of .67 (corresponding to mediocre; Kaiser, 1974) and a Cronbach’s alpha of .72 for the best of these two factors. The final composites remained significantly skewed to the right.

Investigating the data further, it was noted that over a third of participants (38%) had an average score of 5 on a composite of the 7 final items. These individuals, then, rated themselves as strongly agreeing with all the statements “I have a lot of control over how well I do in my GED® class,” “The more effort I put into my GED® class, the better
I do,” and “I see myself as mostly responsible for how I do in my GED® class” and strongly disagreeing with all the statements, “No matter what I do, I can’t seem to do well in my GED® class,” “How well I do in my GED® classes is often ‘luck of the draw,’” “There is not much I can do about my performance in my GED® class,” and “Whether or not I move up to another class level is basically determined by things out of my control and there is not much I can do to change it.” Thus, PAC was converted to a binary variable, divided between participants rating themselves as having the highest control on every item, and everyone else. This resembles the strategy Perry, Hladkyj, Pekrun, & Pelletier (2001) used: they divided participants into those with moderate PAC scores and those with high PAC scores.

**Perceived Autonomy Support Scale**

Reliability of the 15-item scale as measured by Cronbach’s alpha was .96 in the initial study (Williams and Deci, 1996). Black and Deci (2000) had similar results, with an alpha of .93 for their study at time one, and .94 at time two. In order to facilitate administration of the six measures in this study and because autonomy support by others is less central to the concept of agency than perceived academic control or self-efficacy, I selected the 6-item short-form of the scale recommended on Deci and Ryan’s self-determination assessment website (http://www.selfdeterminationtheory.org). Ntoumanis (2005) received an alpha of .81 in working with this 6-item version with adolescent physical education students.

The PAut scale is 5 items long with a Likert scale ranging from 1 to 7. Again, all six items were significantly skewed to the right. After removing one item, all correlations
were significant, with $r$ values ranging from .41 to .56 ($p < .01$) and a Cronbach’s alpha of .71. Principal components analysis yielded a 1-factor solution with a KMO score of .76 (middling according to Kaiser, 1974) and all communalities above .5. This final solution accounts for 60.1% of the variance and has an overall mean of 6.44 ($SD = .67$). Because the scale chosen here is based on the more recent recommendation on Deci and Ryan’s self-determination assessment website (http://www.selfdeterminationtheory.org), it was done on a 7-point scale and, thus is difficult to compare it to prior studies, which used the 5-point scale. Nonetheless, this sample appears to have higher scores than prior work. If the scores are all recalculated in terms of percentage, the adult participants in this study have a mean of 92%, while Ntoumanis’ (2005) high school participants have a mean of 62% (a 3.1 average) and Black and Deci’s (2000) college participants have a mean of 82% (a 4.1 average, prior to intervention).

The final composite scale of four items, while accounting for a decent amount of the variance, remains extremely skewed to the right, enough that it was determined not to have a normal distribution. This is due in part to the fact that, like the PAC variable, more than a third (36%) of participants had an average score of 7, meaning that they rated their perceived autonomy support at a maximum on all the items, “I feel that my instructor gives me choices and options,” “I feel understood by my instructor,” “My instructor shows confidence in my ability to do well in the class,” and “My instructor listens to how I would like to do things.” Thus, PAut was recalculated as a binary variable divided between participants rating themselves as having the highest autonomy support on every item, and everyone else.
Appendix E

Coding Manual

Category 1: Main-Clause Subjects

- **Definition**: A main-clause subject is any noun or pronoun that agrees with the verb of an independent clause. (See the end of this appendix for a table with the full list of study codes.)
  - Example: *I* in “*I* was growing up too quick.”

- **Additional details**: Must be completed sentence (i.e., not trailing off); include repeated sentences; exclude dependent clauses *unless* they begin with *so* or *because* and are being used as main clauses (i.e., the participant uses *so* as a discourse marker)

1a. First-Person Singular *I*

- **Definition**: Contracted or full first-person singular *I* as subject of a main clause.
  - Example: *I* in “*I* was growing up too quick.”

- **Additional details**: Do not include passive subjects (see below); exclude the following *I*-phrases: *I* feel like, *I* figure, *I* find, *I* guess, *I* mean, *I* think, *I* would/have to say.

1b. First-Person Plural *We*

- **Definition**: Contracted or full first-person plural *we* as subject of a main clause.
  - Example: *we* in “And then *we* moved.”
• Additional details: None for this data set.

1c. Generic You
• Definition: You as the subject of a main clause when used in a general, universal sense.
  o Example: you in “You have to go to school to participate in these activities.”
• Additional details: Excluding you know when used as a filler (e.g., “You know, I did good in school”)

1d. Teachers or School Representatives
• Definition: Nominal or pronominal references to teachers, school representatives (e.g., principal, counselor, district employee), a specific school, or the act of teaching (e.g., “His teaching has really taught me some of the stuff I tried to learn on my own.”) when used as the subject of a main clause.
  o Example: instructors and staff in “The instructors and staff here are great.”
• Additional details: Can be second person (e.g., “y’all teaching here [as opposed to ignoring learners]”)

1e. Peers
• Definition: Nominal or pronominal references to peers, either from childhood or adult education, when used as the subject of a main clause.
  o Example: they in “The in crowd, you know, they don’t care about school.”
• Additional details: None for this data set.

1f. Family or Friends
• Definition: Nominal or pronominal references to family or friends.
Example: bolded she (referring to participant’s mother) in “When she could, she could watch the baby.”

- **Additional details:** Includes pastors.

**1g. I, We, or generic You with a Passive Verb**

- **Definition:** First-person singular I, first-person plural we, or generic you when used as the subject of a main clause passive verb with either got-passive or be-passive constructions.

  - Examples: I in “I got disencouraged.”; second I in “Though I want [this degree], I can’t be set out on the street.”

- **Additional details:** None for this data set.

**1h. All other subjects**

- **Definition:** All subjects of main clause verbs not fitting any of the categories above.

  - Example: it in “When I’m learning a new topic, it may seem like my mind gets frustrated.”

- **Additional details:** None for this data set.

**Category 2: Transitivity, High Individuation**

- **Definition:** All sentences coded as (1a) or (1b) that are transitive (i.e., have direct objects).

  - Example: full sentence of “I did all my work.”

- **Additional details:** Include phrasal verbs as transitive (e.g., working on in “We’re working on decimals.”); include quotes as objects (e.g., “I said, ‘No, I can do this.’”); exclude self as object (e.g., “I take care of myself”); exclude negative polarity objects
like any, no, or none (e.g., “I have no one”); exclude phrasal idioms like “stay the course”; exclude demonstrative pronouns (e.g., “I can do this”); exclude generalized objects like things (e.g., “I feel that I could do better things that I want to do.”).

Category 3: Transitivity, Low Individuation

3a. Me as Object

- **Definition**: First-person singular me as the object of a transitive verb or a preposition.
  - Example: full sentence in “She didn’t give me the whole details about it.”
- **Additional details**: Exclude sentences with self as subject (e.g., “I take care of me”); exclude the idiom “believe me”; exclude “I just VERB’ed me a ___” construction; exclude “let me see”

3b. Us as Object

- **Definition**: First-person plural us as the object of a transitive verb.
  - Example: full sentence in “If we don’t get it, we stop him so he can teach us.”
- **Additional details**: None for this data set.

3c. Generic you as Object

- **Definition**: Generic you as the object of a transitive verb.
  - Example:
- **Additional details**: None for this data set.

Category 4: Mitigation

4a. Modal of Obligation

- **Definition**: All sentences coded as (1a), (1b), or (1c) that are subjects of the modals of obligation have to, got to, must, need to, or supposed to.
4b. Restrictive *Just*

- **Definition:** All uses of the adverb *just* where it restricts the meaning of the verb; substitutable by *simply, merely, or only* (Lee, 1987)
  
  - Example:

- **Additional details:** Include completed thoughts (i.e., participant’s speech must not be interrupted by self or other), even if they are not complete sentences; exclude when substitutable by *immediately, really, or absolutely* (Lee, 1987); exclude phrase “just like” (e.g., “I’m just like, ‘I’ll sit back and wait!’”)

4c. Causative Markers

- **Definition:** All uses of *so, because, and cause*.
  
  - Example: *so* in “I didn’t want to look stupid when it came, of course, to math again, *so* I didn’t ask for help.”

- **Additional details:** I used HyperRESEARCH to automatically code for this marker.

Category 5: Process Types with *I, We, and Generic You*

5a. Material Process Types

- **Definition:** All sentences coded as (1a), (1b), or (1c) where the verb denotes “doing” or “happening” (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004). Tested using the diagnostic questions, “What did the participant *do?*” and “What *happened* involving the participant?” (i.e., if the sentence could be an answer to these questions, it was a material verb; Halliday & Matthiessen).
Example: do in “Being an adult, I can go home and do homework with my children.”

- Additional details: For this and all process types, code only the first verb in a conjunction without a repeated subject (e.g., “I sat and waited.”) but code both with repeated subject (e.g., “I sat and I waited.”); include the following verbs which could potentially be coded as mental or relational: deal with, face, get to, give up, handle, make a decision/decide, make sure, miss (an event), pay attention, read, struggle, try.

5b. Mental/Behavioral Process Types

- Definition: All sentences coded as (1a), (1b), or (1c) where the verb denotes “sensing” or “behaving” (Halliday & Matthiessen). Tested against the diagnostic questions for Material process types, “What did the participant do?” and “What happened involving the participant?” (i.e., if the sentence could be an answer to these questions, it was not mental or behavioral; Halliday & Matthiessen). Also used Halliday & Matthiessen’s tense test, where mental clauses take simple present tense (she likes the gift) while material clauses take present progressive tense (she is building a house).

  o Example: worry in “Then I was worrying about my sports more than my academics.”

- Additional details: Include the following verbs which could potentially be coded as material: choose, find (when meaning perceive) freeze, get it (meaning understand), grasp (meaning understand) learn, need (but not need to as a modal verb), pay
attention, sit, stay, wait; include attributions of the following basic emotions, even if introduced with relational be: anger, disgust, fear, joy, sadness, surprise.

5c. Verbal Process Types

- **Definition:** All sentences coded as (1a), (1b), or (1c) where the verb denotes “saying” (Halliday & Matthiessen).
  - Example: Include share and encourage when used to denote verbal actions; include be like when used to mean say (e.g., “I’ll be like, ‘I’m not really worried about it.’”)

- **Additional details:**

5d. Relational Process Types

- **Definition:** All sentences coded as (1a), (1b), or (1c) where the verb denotes “being” or “having” (Halliday & Matthiessen).
  - Example: had in “I had both my parents, which was a luxury growing up in the inner city.”

- **Additional details:** Include the following verbs in addition to be and have: come from (meaning origin or family, not actual movement), end up, find oneself somewhere, fit in, get to, get/become + state (e.g., get/become frustrated), live with/in/at + something/somewhere, lose interest, miss (when it denotes a state) wind up; exclude be + to when it denotes movement (e.g., “I been to California.”).

Category 6: Temporal Context

6a. Present Contexts
• **Definition:** All sentences referring to present or recent past circumstances; states that may have started in the past but extend to the present; use learner contrast (e.g., *then* versus *now*) and most recent researcher question as a guide.
  
  o Example: both sentences in “It’s hard because I got let go of my other job. They cut off my benefits probably I would say going on three months now.”

• **Additional details:** Code at clausal unit, not sentence unit; include stories about recent past used to support claims about present or future; exclude stories about past explicitly contrasted with present situation, even if it was another adult learning program.

**6b. Past Contexts**

• **Definition:** All sentences referring to distant past circumstances; use learner contrast (e.g., *then* versus *now*) and most recent researcher question as a guide.
  
  o Example: full sentence in “That type of stuff, I didn’t do as a kid.”

• **Additional details:** Code at clausal unit, not sentence unit; include stories about past that are contrasted explicitly with present situation, even if it was another adult learning program.
**Table 50**

*Full List of Study Codes*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Example</th>
<th>Calculation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Main-clause subject</td>
<td>first-person singular <em>I</em></td>
<td>I decided to take the GED.</td>
<td>Percent occurrence out of other subject variables</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>first-person plural <em>we</em></td>
<td>We can always retake the test.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>generic <em>you</em></td>
<td>You have to do your homework.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>teachers or school representatives</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>peers</td>
<td>They [peers] help me learn.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>family or friends</td>
<td>My family supports me.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>first-person <em>I</em> or <em>we</em>,</td>
<td>I was kicked out of school</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>passive verb</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>other</td>
<td>The situation was difficult</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Transitivity--high individuation</td>
<td><em>I</em> + object</td>
<td>I decided to take the GED.</td>
<td>Percent occurrence out of 100 words</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>we</em> + object</td>
<td>We can always retake the test.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Transitivity--low individuation</td>
<td><em>me</em> as object</td>
<td>They [peers] help me learn.</td>
<td>Percent occurrence out of 100 words</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>us</em> as object</td>
<td>She taught us a lot.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>generic <em>you</em> as object</td>
<td>They give you homework</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Mitigation</td>
<td>modal verb</td>
<td>I had to drop out.</td>
<td>Percent occurrence out of 100 words</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>just</em></td>
<td>I just saw red and beat her up.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>causative marker</td>
<td>So I decided to take the GED.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Process type with <em>I, we, and you</em></td>
<td>material verb</td>
<td>I am jumping over every hurdle.</td>
<td>Percent occurrences out of 100 words</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>mental/behavioral verbs</td>
<td>I remembered how to do the problem from before.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>verbal verbs</td>
<td>I tell the other students not to worry.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>relational verbs</td>
<td>I am a good student.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Temporal Context</td>
<td>past contexts</td>
<td>I did well in elementary.</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>present contexts</td>
<td>I passed two tests last week.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix F

Analytic Summary Memos

Intentional Causation

The phenomenological components of intentional causation are an agent with intentions about the present and future who may choose to act upon another individual or entity in the world. This section explores the phenomenology of intentional causation through the lens of participants’ framing of themselves and others as subjects and their use of individuation (transitive verbs), whether high (the participant as subject of a transitive verb), or low (the participant as object of a transitive verb). These linguistic markers describe the agency of these adult learners as shared by multiple agents, mitigated by external factors, shifting (often radically) from past to present, and different for each individual.

First, although first-person singular I is the most common subject, learners distribute agency to their teachers, peers, family, friends, and even general situations or states of affairs. There is a relationship between a few of these other subjects (high school teachers, family and friends [non-significant], and other subjects) and less perceived autonomy, less perceived academic control, and more perceived barriers (all as measured by scales). Moreover, there is a significant relationship between highly individuated I constructions and perceived academic control. This all suggests that narrating other actors
as intentional causers is associated with low agency. And descriptions of high school
teachers as powerless to help, family as taking on the brunt of academic actions (i.e.,
getting learners to school and pushing them to study), general situations as timeless truths
that cannot be changed, and the learner as the object of school system mistreatment all
seem to support this impression of lowered ability to have an effect on the world when
others are agents. Yet participants often frame the help and support that teachers, peers,
and family give to students as indispensible: they would not be able to continue in the
program without it. Even narration of the self as object (me) focuses frequently on giving
credit to others for their support. Moreover, the situations that learners narrate as agents
are often challenging structural barriers that do make it difficult to balance the pursuit of
a GED® certification with the rest of one’s life. In other words, perhaps distributing some
of the agency to others in the midst of an incredibly difficult task is a productive coping
mechanism. In fact, instructors at both organizations regularly urge learners to lean on
their support systems, to let family and friends help them so that learners can get the
degree, get a job, and return the favor. Thus, while a distributed model of agency may
rank low on scales of perceived autonomy or academic control, it may be the appropriate
model for the GED® situation.

Second, two markers in particular—generic you and passive I—offer evidence
that learners feel their agency is often heavily mitigated by external factors. Passive I is
even associated significantly with the modal of obligation and causative mitigators.
Learners use generic you and passive I to talk about negative events beyond their control
that have affected their academic paths. Yet, interestingly, learners use generic you even
more frequently to narrate the generic situation of persisting in the GED® class, despite obstacles. So these adult learners do feel their academic autonomy or control mitigated by external factors, but they also feel an external push in the direction of persistence. Even the mitigation of agency in this section, then, is not a simple story of being forced to quit.

Third, these markers of intentional causation offer evidence for participants’ sense of agency shifting, particularly when contrasting past academic experiences in middle school and high school with more recent academic experiences in GED® classes. First-person singular I subjects and teachers as subjects illustrate this often stark contrast particularly well. Learners who use I the most use it to compare what they had (or, more often, didn’t have) or who they were in the past with specific positive actions in the present. Similarly, most learners who narrate teachers as main-clause subjects make clear distinctions between the poor treatment they received at the hands of high school teachers and the kind, helpful, and supportive treatment they receive from their GED® teachers. This contrast becomes even clearer when looking at first-person plural object us, which is used most often to narrate groups of students as the object of unfair teacher actions in the past. Many of these adult learners emphasize the ability they have to be effective academic actors now by comparing that situation to either their lack of agency or lack of commitment in the past. Thus, not only do these learners narrate a temporally shifting agency, but they use that agency to make an argument for their ongoing academic persistence.

Finally, while there are general trends in how learners frame their own and others’ intentional causation in their lives, there are also distinct patterns for smaller groups and
individual learners. The existence of small, distinct groups becomes most clear with the use of first-person plural we and us to narrate working in concert with peers. Only a handful of participants use we and us in this way, yet the model of collaboration they suggest involves moving forward as a group, encouraging each other, and sharing an intimate class setting. One participant in particular uses a high percentage of we subjects and an analysis of his linguistic profile gives a sense of how he tells his story and where his peers fit in.

The results in this section indicate the importance of main clause subjects and first-person objects in understanding a participant’s sense of agency. These tools indicate that this group of learners represents their agency, as Martin, Sugarman, and Thompson (2003) would predict, as distributed across agents, shifting across contexts, and situated in their particular lives.

**Degree of Autonomy**

This examination of degree of autonomy focused on the ways participants use linguistic markers to mitigate their autonomy, thus we might predict that these markers are associated with lower agency and poorer outcomes. And, in fact, use of modals of obligation is significantly related to lower self-efficacy in reading and the highest use of qualifying just is related (although not significantly) to lower attendance. Yet these robust markers are not significantly associated with other agency variables and, in fact, use of causative markers is significantly related to higher attendance. As with the discussion of generic you and passive I above, then, even mitigation of autonomy is not obviously a negative linguistic move.
As with intentional causation, this analysis of degree of autonomy indicates a nuanced picture of agency, distributed across people and situations, shifting across contexts, and situated within individual people (Martin, Sugarman, & Thompson, 2003). To begin, both modals of obligation and causative markers are, by definition, markers of distributed agency. In mitigating autonomy through an external obligation or cause, they point to other people and structures that operate on learners’ lives. For example, participants talk about how they have to take certain actions around finances, caregiving, and health and how they do things because of a lack of resources or parental pressure. These are all external situations that mitigate participants’ autonomy. Yet the reality of these forces—money, dependents, health—in students’ lives is incontestable, so narrating this reality is not necessarily always a sign of yielding agency. Instead, it can also be interpreted as a nuanced accounting of how agency in participants’ lives is shared by others beyond themselves.

Degree of autonomy markers also reveal a contextual shifting in agency, particularly between past middle- and high-school experiences and present GED® experiences, as with intentional causation markers. For example, those who use causative markers the most use them differently, narrating their own actions and emotional states as causes more in the present than the past. Similarly, in the present participants use modals of obligation more—narrating both obligations to stay in the GED® program and obligations pulling them away from the GED® program—while in the past they use them less frequently and more to narrate a lack of resources and support. Also, participants who use qualifying just the most tend to use it to mitigate the difficulty of present tasks.
(e.g., it’s “just” spelling) more than past tasks. Thus, participants are mitigating their autonomy differently in the past and in the present.

Finally, as with intentional causation markers, degree of autonomy markers are used by different participants to create different pictures of agency. For instance, two distinct patterns in narrating causation emerge: some learners use causative markers to narrate the ways their own actions and emotions directly cause change in their lives while other learners narrate general situations as the cause. These latter participants often narrate no explicit cause at all, only implying connections between the general situation and events. Another distinction in mitigation of autonomy occurs with modals: learners who feel pressure to leave the GED® program and those who feel pressured to stay in the program both use modals of obligation. But while the former mitigate their autonomy to persist (e.g., they have to get a job to support themselves), the latter mitigate their autonomy to leave (e.g., they have to have a degree to get a job). Thus, even among those who use modals, there are distinct patterns, indicating that narrating manner of autonomy is situated within the individuals’ experiences and circumstances.

**Manner of Autonomy**

In this section, I discuss how participants represented their own manner of autonomy with first-person or generic main clause subjects of four process types. Consistently with the other sets of markers, participants’ manner of autonomy is distributed across people and situations, shifting in time, and situated within the individual.
Despite the focus of this set of variables on the individual’s perspective (only I, we, and generic you subjects were analyzed for process type), participants narrate the ways they share their agency with others, mainly through the their accounting of resources with relational verbs. In talking about what they have, they name friends, family, teachers, and other supports; and in talking about what they do not have, they note the lack of these supports. Use of these relational constructions is significantly positively related to perceived autonomy. Thus, one way to narrate the self’s autonomy is through an accounting of resources.

The aspect of Martin, Sugarman, and Thompson’s (2003) model of agency that emerges the most clearly with manner of autonomy variables is the clear contrasts participants are building between past and present circumstances. With relational verbs, they contrast past barriers with present supports and resources; with material verbs, they contrast things they did not do in the past with their goals and actions in the present; and with mental verbs, they simply avoid narrating states in the past, focusing instead on their current disapproval of past actions. As with markers of intentional causation and degree of autonomy, these markers suggest that participants narrate a large shift in agency from past to present circumstances.

Finally, qualitative analysis of the top and bottom 10% for each manner of marker autonomy revealed differences in how participants narrated their experiences. For instance, all participants talked about barriers in the past, but some talk about these barriers as a lack of resources (i.e., not having, not being) and others talk about them as a lack of action or negative actions on their part (e.g., not getting work done, hooking
Similarly, most participants narrate some supports in the present, but some narrate them as resources (i.e., having, being), some narrate them as specific actions (e.g., paying attention, taking the test), some narrate them through conversations with their teachers, their family, themselves, or some higher power (e.g., saying, telling). Only narration through the relational process type correlates significantly with demographic variables (it is used more by women and older participants), but these different narrative styles are nonetheless distinct.
Appendix G

Item-By-Item Description of Survey Responses

Self-Efficacy in Reading

Regarding self-efficacy in reading, learners were most confident in their ability to read a story or article for class (μ = 8.8, SD = 1.5) and least confident in their ability to recognize the parts of speech in a reading for class (μ = 7.1, SD = 2.4), but the standard deviations were large and there was not a large difference among items. The final SER composite of the 10-point scale ranged from 3.7 to 10, with a mean of 8 (SD = 1.4), comparable to Shell, Murphy, and Bruning’s (1989) means (7.6 and 8.7 when converted to a 10-point from a 100-point scale) for the relevant self-efficacy subscales from which our scale was drawn. Yet this range is deceiving: a vast majority of participants (97%) scored at 5 or above, and many (56%) scored at 8 or above, suggesting that learners are, on the whole, extremely confident about their reading abilities. In order to ensure that this was not being skewed by higher level learners, a t test was run to determine if there was a difference between pre-GED® and GED® learners. There was no significant difference between the groups (t = .22, p = .83). There was also no significant gender difference (t = .68, p = .5), nor was there a correlation between SEW and age (r = -.05, p = .72), percent attendance (r = .16, p = .23), or aggregated CASAS score (r = .16, p = .21). Thus, all
learners in this sample appear to have exceptionally high self-efficacy in reading, at least as measured by the SER scale.

**Self-Efficacy in Writing**

Regarding self-efficacy in writing, learners were most confident in their ability to get a point across in writing for class \( (\mu = 7.9, SD = 2.1) \) and least confident in their ability to put the correct punctuation marks in a sentence for class \( (\mu = 6.5, SD = 2.2) \), but the standard deviations were large and there was not a large difference among items. The final SEW composite of the 10-point scale ranged from 1.5 to 9.7, with a mean of 7.3 \( (SD = 1.9) \), lower than Shell, Murphy, and Bruning’s (1989) means \( (8.2 \text{ and } 8.9 \text{ converted to a } 10\text{-point scale}) \) for the relevant self-efficacy subscales. Learners, then, were slightly less confident in their writing abilities than either Shell et al.’s participants or than they were in their reading abilities, with 87% scoring at 5 or above (compared to 97% in SER) and 37% scoring at 8 or above (compared to 56% in SER). A \( t \) test was also run on the SEW scale to ensure there was no difference between pre-GED\(^{\circledR} \) and GED\(^{\circledR} \) learners and there was not \( (t = .43, p = .67) \). There was also no significant gender difference \( (t = .32, p = .75) \), nor was there a correlation between SEW and age \( (r = -.15, p = .24) \), percent attendance \( (r = .19, p = .13) \), or aggregated CASAS score \( (r = -.02, p = .9) \). In summary, then, while these learners had lower self-efficacy in writing than for reading, it was still quite high.

**Perceived Academic Control**

For the perceived academic control scale, learners felt the most control over the results of their efforts in class: the item with the highest mean \( (4.88) \) is “The more effort I
put into my GED class, the better I do,” while the one with the lowest (4.13, after reverse scoring) is “Whether or not I move up to another class level is basically determined by things out of my control and there is not much I can do to change it.” So, participants have a strong belief in the value of their effort in terms of overall class performance, but they feel the least control about moving up a class level. The latter is probably to be expected since, unlike general class performance, moving up a level is often not administered by their instructor. Nonetheless, as with self-efficacy, participants tend to rate their academic control very highly.

**Perceived Autonomy**

For the perceived autonomy scale, the lowest rating \((m = 6.25)\) was for the item, “my instructor listens to how I would like to do things” and the highest rating \((m = 6.8)\) was for the item, “my instructor shows confidence in my ability to do well in the class. Participants were often a bit confused by the former question, perhaps because, as some of them talk about in their interviews, they trust in the instructor’s expertise about how to do things and, therefore, probably would not try to assert another way. Regarding the latter question, participants were, on the whole, quite insistent that their instructor believes in them, often nodding their head vigorously and responding with “Oh, definitely!” or “Oh, yes!” before choosing a ranking on the scale. Thus, it is not surprising that this item ranked the highest. In conclusion, as with the above measures, participants in this study appear to have an extremely high perception of their autonomy support.

**Perceived Structural Barriers**

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Regarding the measure of perceived structural barriers, the lowest rating ($m = 1.09$; i.e., the least important barrier in the past year) is for one of the items that does not make it into the final scale, “finding child care to attend class.” This may be because 67% of participants are over 30 and this group of learners does not tend to have young children. Instead, according to the interviews, many of them are the child care for their own children’s children. The item with the highest rating ($m = 2.11$; i.e., the most important barrier in the past year) is another item that does not appear in the final scale, “my own or my family’s health problems.” Indeed, many learners, talk in their interviews about either their own doctors’ appointments, missing class for surgeries or illness, or missing class to take family members to appointments or care for them. Thus, while interviews indicate that this is an important issue, it does not seem to correlate with other items on the scale.
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Biography

Abigail Konopasky graduated from Dartmouth College with her Bachelor of Arts in 1993. She received her Ph.D. in Linguistics and Slavic Linguistics from Princeton University in 2001. After graduating, she was a postdoctoral fellow in writing at Duke University and an assistant professor of English and Linguistics at the University of New Orleans.