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Childhood Fire-Setting: A Contextual Understanding

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CHILDHOOD FIRE-SETTING: A CONTEXTUAL UNDERSTANDING

A dissertation submitted to the McAnulty College and Graduate
School of Liberal Arts

Duquesne University

In partial fulfillment for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

by

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Spring 2005

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ABSTRACT

Previous research on fire-setting has been either totally theoretical or has been based on limited contact with individuals who set the fires. This dissertation accessed fire-setting through interviews with three male adults who set fires as children. Background information was acquired from the participants to construct the context in which each instance of fire-setting occurred. The purpose of this project was to understand each individual's life as a child in relation to his fire-setting behavior.

The initial goal of this project was to gain access to the actual experience of setting a fire; however, this proved to be an elusive goal and one that was not met. Instead, what emerged were recollected childhood experiences and beliefs.

All three participants reported feeling minimally supported by caregivers and/or treated in a way they perceived as different from that of their siblings. This situation was confusing and often left the participants trying to make sense of their place/role in the family. This attempt to make sense of the dynamics of their family proved difficult and the participants concluded that there was something about them that made them undesirable or isolated from the family. Likewise, given their insecurity regarding their place in the family, all participants felt that there was little use in talking with their family or eliciting help from them. Instead, each participant expressed fear that discussing his difficulties with his family would lead to further isolation.

In addition to feeling minimally supported or regarded as unimportant in the home setting, participants felt isolated in school and/or other social settings. Again, for the participants, this isolation was interpreted as reflecting a defect in them and each participant expressed a sense of helplessness regarding his ability to change this isolation.

Fire-setting seems to reflect the isolation, confusion, helplessness, and sometimes anger and frustration the participants experienced regarding their inability to change the problematic situations and it seems that fire-setting may have been a way for the participants to impact or have some control over their environment. This study was unique in its exploration of fire-setters' emotions; its findings may have heuristic value for further research on fire-setting behavior.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Ramel is very upset. At seven years old the pinnacle of his day is going to be buying ice cream from the ice cream man and enjoying the bounty with his friends. Instead, Ramel is told he cannot have money for ice cream. After searching the house for spare change, he finds himself under his mother's bed angry and still without the desired money. Instead of money, Ramel finds a lighter and begins to heat the material under his mother's bed. In an instant, the material ignites, filling the room with smoke and singeing Ramel's hair. Fortunately for Ramel, his sister takes notice and pulls Ramel from under the bed, preventing him from suffering further injury.

Although statistics on childhood fire-setting vary greatly, sources agree this phenomenon has become increasingly common. The National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) reported that between 1980 and 1997 children started 95,000 fires reported in the U.S. These fires accounted for over 300 deaths, 3,000 injuries, and over \$300 million in property damage. Other sources such as the FBI Crime Index, report that fires set by juveniles may be three times higher than the statistics provided by The National Fire Protection Association. An article published in the July/August 2004 *APA Monitor on Psychology* highlights the continued concern regarding juvenile fire-setting and states that psychologists are integral in reducing the more than 2 billion dollars in damages caused by fire-setting. Indeed, this problem warrants investigation.

Clinical observations made while working therapeutically with children in residential settings have revealed to me an interesting relationship between treatment settings and presenting behaviors: a fair number of children and adolescent residents in

treatment facilities present histories of childhood fire-setting. Likewise, many of these individuals also have histories of aggressive behaviors; consequently, childhood fire-setting has been considered by most to be just an extension of this aggression and both are generally treated through behavior modification approaches. But this begs the question, “Why fire?” Given the number of destructive ways one could choose to act out, it is fascinating that some choose fire-setting and others do not.

Prior to investigating this phenomenon, it is essential to distinguish the different types of fire-setters and clarify which group of fire-setters this project targets. Although categories vary by author and by name, there are some commonalities among them. That is, authors conceded that juvenile fire-setting ranges from normal experimentation to troubled fire-setting. Beyond this, fire-setting is regarded by some as being merely an example of numerous delinquent behaviors exhibited by a child or as symptomatic of psychiatric difficulties related to distorted perceptions or poor reality testing. Although these typologies will be explained in greater detail in the literature review, it is important to note that this current study is most concerned with those fire-setters who would be classified as “Troubled/Problem” (National Arson Prevention Clearinghouse, 2003) or as a “Cry-for help”(Dittman, 2004). Youth in this category are described as experiencing emotional difficulties and use fire as a way to “express anger, sadness, frustration, and powerless feelings related to stress or major changes in their life” (National Arson Prevention Clearinghouse, 2003). To date, literature concerning fire-setting is inconclusive in determining motivation. Some of the work that speaks most humanely about the phenomenon is found in the psychodynamic literature and posits that fire-setting is a manifestation of repressed feelings, generally associated with guilt or shame.

Although these may be the same feelings expressed through other aggressive behaviors, it is important to consider fire-setting separately from aggression in general. In order to gain access to the particular phenomenon of fire-setting and the deeper meaning that may be expressed through fire-setting, distinguishing fire-setting from aggression in general is essential.

One of the characteristics that seems unique to fire-setting is the deliberateness of the act. Most youths choose to engage in antisocial behaviors that are less likely to be detected, such as stealing. Fire-setting, however, can impact the public realm and has the potential for great destruction. That a fire is publicly evident and potentially devastating seems to demand acknowledgement. It is this demand for acknowledgment, in my opinion, that separates fire-setting from other forms of aggression.

Theoretical Assumptions Related to Fire-setting

Upon entering this project, there were assumptions I had regarding psychological theories and normal child development. Making these assumptions explicit and discussing them briefly will allow for a greater understanding of those areas that were most important to me during the interviews and will explain why some areas were explored more deeply than others. Most of my assumptions are related to a psychosocial or interpersonal approach to development and, consequently, many of my assumptions are consistent with this approach.

A primary assumption of mine is that we all have psychological needs, which are central to later psychological health. Erikson (1968) describes these needs through stage theory, with positive interactions with others being the key to resolving internal conflicts and facilitating a positive sense of self. One early childhood need described by Erikson is

for a sense of security. That is, children have a desire and need to understand the world as a safe and predictable place (Trust). With a sense of the world as a safe place children are able to feel confident to explore the world and progress towards maturity. Central to Erikson's model of development is the idea that positive social interaction is central to positive mental health and allows for a sense of security that allows us to develop a balance between exploration and dependence on others. Likewise, my own view places great emphasis on the parent/child relationship as being central to developing a positive sense of self. Consistent with other theories, it is my belief that parent-child relationships create an expectation for children of how they will be received in the world.

Consistent with this understanding of parents as being central to children's development of a positive sense of self is the idea that through interactions with their parents, children form a sense of who they are and respond to the world accordingly. Ideally children would feel supported, understood, and well regarded by their parents and use this experience to maintain confidence in themselves and their ability to impact those around them in a positive way. Therefore, another assumption of mine, consistent with Erikson (1968), is that children need support to venture into the world as well as a place where their experiences are validated and respected in a supported way. Conversely, when children feel criticized, condemned, or unable to communicate with their parent(s) without feeling judged, they will find a way to account for this while preserving the parent-child relationship and in turn preserving the perception of the world as a secure place. For most children, this is done by interpreting parental reactions as being caused by themselves and consequently indicative of their worth as a person.

Writers such as Sullivan (1953) contend that interpersonal interactions are critical to development of personality and a sense of self. Despite an emphasis on the parent/child interaction as central to positive child development, another assumption of mine is that human beings are social in nature and that social interactions impact children's sense of self. For instance poor interactions in one area, such as parental interactions, can be somewhat neutralized through positive interactions with teachers, peers, or relatives and provide the positive regard that they need to develop a positive sense of self.

Consistent with numerous psychodynamic theorists, another of my assumptions is that a poor parent/child relationship affects children's understanding of how they relate to others and affects their development. There are many ways that children may respond to problematic interactions with parents including resilience, avoidance, or, in some cases, behavioral acting out. Given that not all children interpret their interactions with their parents consistently and that not all behavioral acting out is directly related to poor parenting, upon entering this project it was of interest to me how fire-setters viewed themselves in relation to others. Consequently, background information acquired from the participants was used to construct the context in which fire-setting occurred and such topics as family composition, incidents of trauma, and methods of discipline and communication were explored to see if there was a link between the meaning of fire and the family or community as either the source or target of the participants' emotional lives. It is of note that although all of the participants reported setting more than one fire, they had difficulty recalling details regarding each incident. Given my interest in understanding the context in which fire-setting occurs and how it relates to the family

and/or community, I asked participants about the fire that was most memorable to them and I asked them to describe this instance thoroughly. This was done to encourage exploration of a specific fire set, and the details regarding this were explored in an attempt to obtain an understanding of the context in which this behavior emerged.

The purpose of this study is to understand the meaning associated with fire-setting, that is, to understand childhood fire-setting within the child's life world. In order to gain access to the meaning of childhood fire-setting, the experience of children who set fires must be explored and taken into account. Specifically, what is the experiential world of children who set fires? What emotions are associated with fire-setting? Finally, what is the purpose of their behaviors and why is fire the vehicle for doing this? It is of note that most fire-setters are males and consequently fire-setting will be addressed in masculine terms. Likewise, given issues raised regarding the utilization of juveniles for this study, interviews were conducted with adult males who set fires as children.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction to Fire-setting

Prior to beginning this literature review, it is important to clarify the phenomenon that is being explored. That is, although I will be speaking of fire-setting as problematic, not all fire-setting should be regarded as pathological. In fact many contemporary authors who define types of fire-setters included a category for those who, at a young age, play with fire out of curiosity (National Arson Prevention Clearinghouse, 2003; Dittman, 2004). For the curious fire-setter setting a fire is something that occurs at a young age, the intention being to learn about fire. At the other extreme of the fire-setting continuum are the delinquent or disturbed fire-setters. For these fire-setters, fire is viewed as resulting from criminal intentions or severe psychopathology. Between these two extremes is a group of fire-setters categorized as “Troubled/Problem” (National Arson Prevention Clearinghouse, 2003) or as a “Cry-for help” (Dittman, 2004). Youth in this category are described as experiencing emotional difficulties and as using fire as a way to “express anger, sadness, frustration, and powerless feelings related to stress or major changes in their life” (National Arson Prevention Clearinghouse, 2003). Although there are likely areas of interest within each category, the focus of this study was those youth who appear to use fire in order to express their emotions.

Cultural and Psychodynamic Approaches to Fire

Fire and a fascination with fire can be seen in most cultures, and fire is regarded as crucial to the development and survival of cultures. Prior to scientific investigation into the cause or treatment of fire-setting, several authors attempted to establish the

cultural meaning of fire. Investigators probed the significance that fire has in establishing a community or civilized way of life; often this earlier literature seems built on mythological or historical accounts of humankind's acquisition of fire. For example, Greek mythology cites fire as being a gift given by or stolen from the gods.

In their review of early literature, Kaufmann and Heims (1961) acknowledge that fire is universally attributed both positive and negative qualities. As an example they cite Biblical accounts of fire being used by God to lead Moses and his people through the desert to the Promised Land. That is, God appeared as a column of fire, which the Israelites were able to use as a compass through the desert. Other Biblical passages refer to fire as being the voice of God used to communicate with his people on Mt. Sinai and in other passages to Moses through the burning bush. Likewise, fire is described as having positive qualities to purify or cleanse and many Old Testament rituals regarding offerings to God require the use of fire to purify an offering before it is acceptable.

Other sources such as Native American lore refer to fire as being a gift from the gods. Likewise, writers such as Francis Bacon refer to a revered mythical creature that not only lives in fire but also has power to extinguish fire and make it unavailable to mankind. Additionally, French literature, as well as Shakespearean sonnets, refers to love as being a flame that burns brightly or goes out. Finally, despite protestation by environmental advocates, many contemporary farmers in Southern Africa continue to revere fire as a tool that can be used to clear forests for farming and that is believed to fertilize the fields for future crops.

In addition to positive attributes being given to fire, there are other biblical passages that refer to fire as something to be feared or avoided, as in the story of Sodom

and Gomorrah, in which the heavens rain fire onto the people of Sodom as punishment for their moral transgressions. Likewise, the book of Leviticus, which outlines the consequences of immorality, requires that those who have transgressed against God be thrown into a fire so that no immorality will remain among his people. Further, fire is often equated to God's anger and is described as consuming and destructive. In fact many commands given by God to his people mandate the destruction of idols or enemy possessions by throwing them in the fire. Though many of these references are from the Old Testament, New Testament passages refer to being thrown into fire as the result of God's judgment upon immorality. Likewise, other New Testament scriptures refer to Christians as branches of Christ and that those branches that do not bear fruit are to be cut off by God and thrown into the fire. Many writers conclude that the ambiguous spiritual origins of fire lead to a taboo being placed on its misuse, and they have used this conclusion to provide insight into the meaning of fire and its utility for self-expression.

Freud (1932) provided an early explanation of fire and fire-setting. Central to Freud's understanding of fire was humankind's ability to put out fire or control it. For Freud a fire that could not be controlled and extinguished was more dangerous than helpful to a culture. Freud went on to describe humankind's ability to urinate on fire as linked to control over it. For Freud, fire was symbolic of man's desire and thus for primitive people to control fire, symbolically, they had to be able to control their desires. Freud further linked this process to urethral pleasure and compared control over one's desires to one's ability to control one's bladder through urination.

In addition, Freud explored certain Native American mythologies that describe violent acts toward women as the means for acquiring fire. Freud proposed that, based on

the target of this aggression, it was most likely the mother who demanded control over one's desires. For Freud, it was homosexual desires that were the target of the renunciation demanded by the mother. Other authors have interjected into Freud's theory that it is not only the renunciation of homosexual urges that is demanded, but sexual desires of any kind (Vandersall & Wiener; 1970, Simmel, 1941).

Grinstein (1952) elaborated upon Freud's theory as it relates to the importance of fire within a culture to provide safety and to enable the success of a civilization. Grinstein points out that various cultures have different ways of explaining the origin of fire. He goes on to outline the mythic characters associated with fire and suggests that, in many cultures, fire is seen as a gift to humans. He cites the story of Prometheus who stole fire from the gods to give to humans, as well as Native American tales that attribute the origin of fire to an older mystical woman who could make fire and, depending on the tale, is somehow tricked or forced into giving it to the people. Grinstein points out that the majority of these myths have, as the giver of fire, a maternal figure, suggesting that in some way man is always connected to and can never abandon his need for women (Grinstein, 1952, pg. 417).

Grinstein also outlines criteria by which man can have control over fire. These criteria include an ability to conserve fire when it is burning so it does not go out, confine a fire's location so it does not destroy man or his property, extinguish it when finished with it, and rekindle it for future use. For Grinstein these criteria not only outline humankind's control over fire but also mirror the stages of development in humankind's control over desire or libido. Grinstein links fire to Freud's psychosexual stages as mirroring the containing/preserving qualities of the anal stage and the aggressive qualities

of the oral stage. For Grinstein, building on Freud, it is an inability to renounce desire and move through these stages that results in pyromania or fire-setting.

Although these authors attempt to define fire in relation to its significance to various cultures, they do not delineate what fire means to specific individuals. These accounts allow speculation as to what a child may have learned about fire from his or her cultural or religious heritage, but they do not explain what meaning the fire has to the child who sets it. Instead, the meanings are derived from historical documents and early literature, which may not accurately represent what fire means to an individual today. More contemporary scholars have begun to incorporate these early cultural views into an understanding of the meaning of fire-setting to specific children.

Fire-setting and Children

Yarnell (1940) focused on the psychodynamics of fire-setting and was one of the first and only researchers to rely solely on interviews with children to establish an understanding of fire-setting. Yarnell interviewed a representative sample of 60 hospitalized American children who had at some point set fires. The objective of his study was to compare latency aged fire-setters with adolescent fire-setters. Yarnell found that, although there were no significant differences among the groups in terms of intelligence or developmental backgrounds, the meaning of fire differed greatly between the two groups.

For latency age fire-setters, fire was an aggressive act directed at some member of the family. Consequently, the importance of the fire was not its symbolic meaning but its direct effect on the intended person. Conversely, the adolescent fire-setter seemed to exhibit a more schizoid approach to the world. Fire was used by the adolescent fire-setter

when the world was felt to be closing in on him, and fire was intended to help the individual avoid disintegration. An additional study by Yarnell and his colleague reinforced the notion that fire-setters were in such a state of tension that, if something drastic did not happen, their whole personality would explode and disintegrate (Lewis & Yarnell, 1951). This conclusion appears consistent with accounts provided of females who cut themselves and may highlight a gender difference in the expression of inner tension described by Lewis and Yarnell.

Rothstein (1963) studied the Rorschachs of eight fire-setters, ages 6-12 years, in an attempt to clarify the nature of the ego structures of these children. He concluded that there were two types of fire-setting individuals: The first type, referred to as “borderline,” was characterized by minimal capacity for delay. For “borderline” individuals, fire-setting projected inner tensions. The second group, referred to as “impulsive,” was characterized by having a firmer grasp on reality than the borderline individuals. Fire-setting for this group was more closely associated with sexual tension à la Freud and Grinstein.

Kaufmann and Heims (1961) described fire-setting in children as a means of coping with inner tension. For these authors, this tension was initially denied and avoided, but eventually became externalized in fire-setting. They interviewed 30 children categorized as fire-setters and grouped their findings in terms of psychodynamics, including level of instinctual drives, ego mechanisms, and object relations. In terms of instinctual drives, Kaufmann and Heims concluded that child fire-setters tended to function at a more primitive level of development. They cited the aggressiveness of fire-

setting to support this, and suggested that libidinal and aggressive energies are fused and undifferentiated in children who set fires.

Fire-setting, to Kaufmann and Heims, is a way to express one's aggressive drives and, at the same time, allows the child to feel a sense of control by extinguishing the fires and regaining control over his aggression. This idea of control is also seen in Kaufmann and Heims' account of the object relations of fire-setters. The children they interviewed frequently indicated that they felt deserted and abandoned. For them, fire became a means to regain control by bringing the separated people together, usually to voice their concern over the child's behavior.

Although psychoanalytic literature brings us closer to understanding the phenomenon, there are still weaknesses in this approach, primarily that much of the early literature started from a theoretical vantage point. Many of these authors approached fire-setting in children based upon pre-existing theories of fire-setting as a cultural phenomenon. It seems that starting from a theoretical position limits a discussion to those possibilities that have already been addressed by that theory, thus limiting the possibilities of new directions.

In summary, psychoanalytic theory presents fire-setting as resulting from unresolved tension, which is internalized before being expressed through fire-setting. Even within this type of theory, the source of a fire-setter's tension and motivation vary. For most, the tensions described are regarded as being unconscious and, at times, undifferentiated. Even so, fire-setting is regarded in this literature as being an act of aggression used to discharge inner tensions. Although this literature is helpful in giving us a starting point, it does not bring us closer to understanding what meaning fire has for

the child or how the child makes sense of the fire he sets. Even Kaufmann and Heims, who began to look at the purpose of the fires, only make sense of this purpose in terms of the analytic theory of instinctual drives and ego mechanisms. It seems there should be a way to understand fire-setting that is not locked into a particular theoretical position or jargon, but still allows us to understand how fire is being used.

Fire-setting as a Thought Disorder

In addition to describing fire-setting in terms of drives or impulses, writers have also suggested that fire-setting is related to a schizoid or schizophrenic way of engaging the world. These writers often cite detachment from reality and a need for external stimulation as being present in the fire-setter, as well as a schizoid engagement with the world. Bychowski (1919) discussed this schizophrenic type of defect in the development of perception of reality as being related to childhood fire-setting. Similarly, Bleuler (1924, 1950) discussed the impulse control problems of fire-setters as being similar to those seen in schizophrenic patients. For Bleuler, there seems to be a relationship between distortions in reality testing and poor control of impulses, and he highlights this relationship as being present in both fire-setters and schizophrenics.

In these accounts, there is some similarity between fire-setting and a schizoid engagement with the world. However, although schizoid or schizophrenic types of engagement may be present in some fire-setters, it does not seem enough to assume that fire-setting can be attributed directly to schizophrenia or schizoid relations. Instead, the elements of family dynamics and psycho-social experience that Laing (1965) discusses as contributing to schizoid or schizophrenic interactions should also be considered for childhood fire-setters.

In summary, this literature presents a fire-setter as someone who is out of touch with reality and whose fire-setting behavior reflects a disconnection from the world. Although this accounts for one of the types of fire-setters, there are many young people who set fires who would not meet these criteria and whose fire-setting experience should be attributed to other issues.

Fire-setting in Relation to Others

With the emergence of contemporary approaches to understanding psychological disorders, some writers have discarded conceptualizations of fire-setting in terms of impulses, drives, or thought disorders, and have instead focused on the effects of early trauma and/or family relationships. Most of these accounts have highlighted the painful childhood experiences as well as abusive parenting that appear in many cases of childhood fire-setters (Sakheim, 1985; Jayaprakash, 1984; Heath, 1984). For these writers the emergence of fire-setting behavior represents the displacement of anger resulting from abusive parenting and becomes the child's mode of retaliation. Bender (1959) evaluated 33 boys and girls who had been associated with the accidental death of another person. In her report, she mentions fires as the mode of death in some cases. For Bender, fire represents something that is powerful, particularly to a rejected child, and can be used to have power over adults (Bender, 1954).

Children display a vast array of behavioral and emotional responses to experienced trauma, including resilience and thriving, behavioral acting out, and emotional shutdown. Although fire-setting appears to be an act directed toward others, that does not fully account for the meaning of fire in these situations. Many writers have explored the idea that fire-setting is a reaction to abuse or rejection by the family;

however, it is still uncertain what purpose fire-setting may serve. One presumes fire-setting is an expression of anger or rage; however, it could also be an attempt to elicit help from or for the family.

In short, fire-setting is attributed by these writers to poor parenting and/or abusive parenting. Inherent in these theories is the belief that as the child feels mistreated or abused, he becomes angry and, unable to retaliate towards the abuser, the child uses fire-setting as a way to express his anger or draw attention to the situation. In understanding fire-setting in this way, there appears to be a universal message communicated through fire-setting; nevertheless, these possibilities can best be substantiated by accessing fire-setters' lived worlds. Through talking with fire-setters, I stand to gain an even better understanding of how family dynamics are reflected in fire-setting.

Biological Accounts of Fire-setting

Although this is not my area of focus, I would be remiss not to acknowledge research that has explored how biological factors may contribute to fire-setting. Such literature has explored brain function and the influence of the chemical composition of one's brain on fire-setting behavior. For example, Milrod and Urion (1992) noted a consistency in the photoparoxymal response of fire-setters as compared to individuals who exhibit complex partial seizures, indicating that fire-setters might have a partial seizure affecting the processing of information related to impulse control. The authors suggested that these changes may result in poor judgment and fire-setting behaviors. They also suggested that the use of anti-convulsant medication may reduce the spikes present on their EEG and prevent the "lapse in judgment" that results in fire-setting.

Although these observations are interesting, the question still remains, “Why fire?” With an increased sample of EEGs, it seems likely that deviations or abnormalities would emerge, making this sample less homogeneous than assumed by Milrod and Urion. In fact, the number of individuals who exhibit fire-setting behaviors is relatively small, and one could presume that there were individuals in Milrod and Urion’s study who registered spikes on the EEG related to “antisocial” behavior but not related to fire-setting. The question then remains why some individuals chose fire and others did not.

For Milrod and Urion, and others, fire-setting behavior is the result of biochemical responses or abnormal brain activity which creates a need to set a fire. For some this need for fire is related to the fire itself and its stimulating properties. For others, however, fire-setting is the outward manifestation of poor impulse controls related to a defect in the brain.

Fire-setting as Multi-Determined

Silverman (1952) attempts to combine many of the theories previously mentioned into what he refers to as a “multi-causal approach” to the difficulties that fire-setting children present. Silverman identifies three components: thinking disorders (e.g., schizoid or schizophrenic thinking), motor disorders, and emotional disorders. For Silverman, each component plays an equal role in causing an individual to set fires, so that an individual who presents only two of these components may have problematic behavior, but he or she would not be a fire-setter.

Even though there are benefits to understanding fire-setting as multiply determined, this theory is weakened by the presupposition that fire-setting must originate and be explored as a disorder. Just as a purely theoretical approach could limit the scope

of one's exploration, so could an approach presupposing that fire-setting is symptomatic of a disorder. A study of fire-setting might be different if those in the study were encouraged to describe their motivations in a way that did not automatically stigmatize or label them, but instead allowed them to express how they felt setting the fire could be useful to them.

In short, an approach to understanding fire-setting as multi-determined looks at all factors in a child's life and attempts to synthesize these into an understanding of fire-setting. In some cases, fire-setting is understood as related to the biological factors previously mentioned or to emotional difficulties emerging from the family context. For these theorists, a child who is setting fires has multiple needs that will have to be addressed before the fire-setting behavior will cease.

Treatment of Fire-setting

Although the primary purpose of this study is not to arrive at recommendations for treatment, it is worthwhile to briefly consider the contributions of the literature in this domain. De Salvatore and Hornstein (1991) note the necessity for a highly structured environment for successful treatment of fire-setters and explore how various therapeutic needs can be met through particular modalities of treatment. This model suggests that treatments should be adapted to the individual needs of the client. For example, "Individual therapy has focused on the expression of anger and aggression as well as improved ego function. Family therapy has focused on generational boundaries, improving communication, and clearly defining rules. Behavior interventions such as positive and negative reinforcements have also been successfully utilized" (De Salvatore & Hornstein, 1991, pg 104).

Although not all researchers are as confident about treatment prescriptions, most concede that understanding individual differences among fire-setters is essential to treatment. In their report on the treatment of chronic fire-setting, Koles and Jenson (1985) state that “fire-setting is a complex problem that has multiple causes in a diverse population.” Although they mention much of the research previously addressed, they also state that none of the conclusions about the causal factors of fire-setting can be agreed upon and applied to all settings or all fire-setters.

Although the literature outlined in this section holds some promise for furthering the understanding of fire-setting as it has been addressed through treatment, the literature focuses mainly on the behavior itself and not the experience of childhood fire-setting. In order to understand the question, “Why fire?” it is important to not only understand fire-setting behaviorally, but also fire’s meaning to those who use it. From this vantage point, the objective of treatment is not to point out the deviance or danger of fire-setting, as is common in some treatment modalities, but instead to explore the meaning of the fires to the setters while temporarily bracketing theoretical explanations of fire-setting as an action. By understanding the meaning of fire to a fire-setter, one is able to focus on all areas of treatment and not merely the cessation of “deviant” behaviors.

Fire-setting as Antisocial and Conduct Disordered Activity

Finally, some authors have grouped fire-setting with antisocial or conduct disorders and treated the phenomenon as a small part of a larger problem. Hellman and Blackman (1966) speak of fire-setting as part of a triad predictor of adult crimes. The authors discuss a study that considered whether enuresis, fire-setting, and cruelty to animals were once present during childhood in individuals accused of various crimes.

Their findings indicate that those prisoners who had a history of one or more elements of the triad had gone on to commit violent or aggressive crimes, and those who had no history of these elements of this triad had not gone on to commit violent crimes. Hellman and Blackman's study gives strong credence to childhood fire-setting being a demonstration of antisocial behavior, specifically related to aggressive behavior. It is of interest that this same triad of enuresis, fire-setting, and cruelty to animals has also been used as an indicator of attachment issues.

Justice, Justice, and Kraft (1974) also explored this triad of predictors of adult crimes. From their perspective, however, although fire-setting may be predictive of adult crime, various other predictors also should be explored. Some of the predictors of adult crime that they suggest include fighting, stealing, school problems, and truancy. One difficulty with this assumption is that fire-setting and truancy, for example, are classified in a similar way and assumed to have a similar meaning; however, the experiential basis of this assumption has yet to be established.

In essence, fire-setting is understood by these theorists as being indicative of personality defects that will lead to adult criminal behavior. Consequently, fire-setting is not understood in terms of purpose, but instead as delinquent behavior that will evolve into criminal activity in adulthood. Although the authors mentioned above linked enuresis and cruelty to animals as predictors of adult crimes, fire-setting may also be a statement made to the family. If this were the case, what would be the purpose for setting a fire? Specific similarities in family backgrounds among children who set fires, are enuretic, or cruel to animals should be investigated. Understanding how each of these may be a

response to family dynamics may illuminate childhood fire-setting in a more meaningful way.

Fire-setting and Attachment

In addition to being considered a predictor of future criminality, fire-setting has also been regarded as symptomatic of poor attachment. That is, many writers (Krugman, 1987; Herman and Van der Kolk, 1987) conclude that poor attachment in childhood results in behavioral difficulties, mood disorders, and adjustment difficulties.

Additionally, some authors point to a lack of regard for others as being the result of poor attachment to parenting figures (Cassidy, 1996). This lack of regard for others is seen as integral to future criminal activity and can also be seen in pathological fire-setting.

With regard to childhood fire-setting, the Randolph Attachment Disorder Questionnaire which is used to assess attachment disorder, includes in one of its criteria for poor attachment the presence of fire-setting behavior. That is, those children who exhibit fire-setting behavior are identified as having an ambivalent attachment and are characterized as children who act out behaviorally regardless of the consequences (Randolph, 1995). It should be noted that the term "attachment disorder," as defined by Randolph, is different from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders-Fourth Edition (DSM-IV) diagnosis of "Reactive Attachment Disorder" and is not bound by the criteria for early childhood neglect or abuse outlined by the DSM-IV. Instead Randolph refers to poor attachment that can occur at any age. It is interesting that when Randolph's criteria for attachment difficulties are separated by gender, girls and boys are almost equally represented. This has been taken to indicate that although poor attachment

occurs equally in both genders, boys, who are generally more aggressive, may manifest their attachment difficulties with more significant behavioral difficulties than girls.

In summary, these authors regard fire-setting as resulting from poor attachment. Although some authors such as Randolph indicate that fire-setting is indicative of an attachment “disorder,” other authors point to this behavior as merely indicating that fire-setting represents a lack of regard for others which is consistent with poor attachment. Consequently, for these writers it is not the fire-setting behavior that is of concern but the poor attachment and resulting disregard for others. This seems consistent with predictors of adult crime as well, which seem somewhat contingent on a disregard for others.

Conclusion

Overall, there has been a good deal of material written on fire-setting; however, there is still something to be gained by further study of the subject. Specifically, the present study was designed to allow fire-setters to speak openly about the fires they have set as well as about their intentions in setting the fires. This work should allow us to form a better picture of the meaning of the fire in the experiential world of the individuals. Having gained an understanding of a fire-setter’s world, inquiry into the purpose of setting fires is possible. It is the exploration of fire as serving a purpose that distinguishes the present study from our literature and that is an attempt to gain new insight into the phenomenon of fire-setting.

CHAPTER 3

METHOD

Introduction

Anticipated Contributions of this Study

In doing this study, I anticipated that the results would be useful both theoretically and practically. In terms of theoretical implications, I hoped that the results would support and challenge previous theories. As indicated in my review of the literature, many of the theories cited do not utilize firsthand accounts of fire-setting by the children who set them. I hoped that the information gathered by talking to adults about the fires they set as children would add to existing theories and provide an account of the experience of children who set fires.

I also hoped that the results of this study would be of some practical use to clinicians who work with youths who set fires. I hoped that clinicians would gain a better understanding of the lived emotions that may be communicated through fire-setting. It has been hypothesized that fire-setting is used by some groups to express emotions and information regarding the specific emotions expressed will likely prove beneficial. With this understanding, clinicians should be better able to work with clients to help them verbalize and express these feelings in a less destructive way.

Finally, I anticipated that parents of children who set fires would benefit from reading accounts of setting fires provided by other children and gain a better understanding of why youths set fires. I hoped that by understanding why some youths set fires, parents would be better able to engage their own children in a dialogue about fire and about how to express their feelings more constructively.

This project emphasizes the meaning of fire to children. The following section outlines the method I used to obtain information on their experiences from three former fire-setters. After reviewing early research on fire-setting, I decided to speak directly to adults who set fires as children or adolescents.

Mode of Access

Comprehensive interviews were used to collect qualitative data from adults who reported setting fires as children. Participants were asked to speak directly about their experiences as well as about the contexts of their lives when they set the fires. More specifically, participants were asked to recall a fire-setting incident that was most memorable to them. This was done in order to increase the likelihood that some of the more minute details might be remembered. Although earlier literature attempted to deduce the meaning of fire-setting on the basis of theory, this project began with the hope that by describing their experience of setting fires as children, the participants would provide an understanding of what the fire meant to them at that point in their lives. It was this hope that dictated the method used to collect the data as well as the areas that would be thoroughly explored.

Participants

Initially, I had planned to interview young children about their fire-setting behavior; however, the extensiveness of the precautions required to safeguard the rights of fire-setting children presented numerous difficulties that would have to be addressed before the project could begin. Consequently, I decided that adult participants who recalled setting fires as children would be more accessible for interviews, even if some of

the details of the fire-setting incidents had been forgotten over time. Participants for this project included three adult males ages 24, 31, and 46 years. Two of the participants referred themselves by responding to an invitation, posted in a Central New York area community center, to participate in this study. The third participant was referred by an area clinician who had informed him of the study. The racial identities of the participants were Latino, African American, and Caucasian. All three participants were born into families of low socio-economic status, two in urban regions and one in a rural setting. It should be noted that only men responded to the invitation to participate and, given the disproportionate amount of fire-setting among males, this was accepted as likely more representative of “typical” fire-setters.

Certain criteria had to be met for acceptance in this study. First, each participant had to have set more than one fire during adolescence or childhood. This criterion narrowed the selection to those individuals for whom fire-setting was something of a pattern, suggesting that the behavior was more integrated into their ways of expressing themselves than for those who set a single fire (Experimental vs. Habitual fire-setting). Second, each participant had to be willing to discuss his life experiences aside from those directly related to fire-setting. This criterion was essential for constructing the context in which the fire-setting occurred. Finally, per Institutional Review Board guidelines, only people who had not been mandated for therapy, and who had not faced formal charges for the fires they had set as juveniles were allowed to participate. Participants were informed of the potential risks related to joining in this study and agreed to participate (see Appendix B).

Procedure

When a potential participant contacted me, I explained the research process and considered each person in terms of the eligibility criteria. Additionally, I informed participants of the method of data collection to be used and explained that participation required written consent to participating in audio-taped and transcribed interviews. Participants were also made aware that each of the three interviews would last for approximately one hour. An appointment was then made for the first interview. All interviews occurred in a mutually agreed upon location of the participant's choosing.

At the beginning of the first interview, the consent form was reviewed and discussed, ensuring that the participant fully understood the materials prior to signing. A semi-structured interview protocol made certain that specific discussion topics were addressed with each participant. During each individual interview, however, participants were encouraged to speak freely about their experiences. Generally, the participants were encouraged to address the following areas:

1. The circumstances and situation that led to the fire-setting. This was a descriptive account and included where the fire was set, who was present (if anyone), when the fire was set, what was set on fire, and how the fire was discovered.
2. The emotions the participant remembered having before, during, and after he set the fire.
3. The expectations or fantasized outcomes of the act, also seen as the intentions or goals in setting the fire.

Following the initial interview, I reviewed the audio-tape and formulated questions for the follow-up interview. These questions aimed at encouraging the participants to elaborate and clarify the accounts provided during the first interview. Again, these questions were designed to be as nonleading as possible.

After the second interview, both interviews were transcribed and integrated with notes regarding significant nuances of speech (e.g., laughing or crying) as well as nonverbal cues (e.g., shifting in seat, looking around the room, or staring off). These two interviews were then synthesized into one working transcript to create a cohesive account of the individual's fire-setting event (see Appendix D). This edited synthesis served as the data to be analyzed for each individual.

Themes related to the individual's experience of setting a fire were explored, with those beliefs that spoke to family relations or emotional life being given greater attention. Specific areas of focus were determined by understanding how the individual's account reflected his understanding of past, present, and future as well as how the fire-setting reflected his understanding of his relation to self, world, and others.

To achieve a more general understanding, common beliefs and experiences from all of the participants' descriptions of fire-setting behavior were organized together. The objective was to highlight those experiences that were consistent among all of the participants and seemed to speak to the fire-setting event. The combined accounts comprised the participants' framework of the experience and meaning of setting fires. I then reviewed with each participant during our third meeting my understanding of his experience and of the meaning for him of setting a fire and tried to obtain clarification to

account for discrepancies between understandings in my formulation and the individual's account.

After reviewing my account of the participants' experiences and the meanings for them of setting fires, I discussed with them individually what their research participation had been like for them in an attempt to assess their reactions to participation in the research. This was an informal meeting and was used to encourage dialogue about what aspects of my understanding of their accounts they agreed with or objected to. A discussion of the participants' feedback will be explored in detail in the general results chapter. It should be noted that if a participant had expressed concerns or seemed upset, I would have recommended that he seek counseling and made referrals for therapy, if requested. However, no participant reported any distress. Some questions that were asked during the third meeting to gauge whether or not a participant was upset were:

1. What was it like for you to talk about setting fires?
2. Was there anything that we discussed that upset you?
3. Is there anything you wish we had not talked about during our interviews?

Precautions and Confidentiality

Due to the subject matter of this project, special precautions were taken to ensure that the participants understood the purpose and procedure of the research, and their rights regarding their participation (see Appendix B).

Participants were made aware that the purpose of this project was to examine the meaning of fire-setting behavior and that this research was being done for partial fulfillment of the Ph.D. requirements for a degree in Clinical Psychology at Duquesne University. All participants were informed that the interviews were not therapy sessions

but that a referral could be made if requested; however, no distress was reported. It should be noted, and it was addressed with the participants, that participation involved risk of criminal prosecution in the unlikely event that law enforcement or governmental authorities subpoenaed data.

Participants were made aware of their rights to confidentiality as well as of precautions that were taken to ensure confidentiality. Throughout the interviews, the precautions taken to ensure confidentiality included:

1. Storing audiotapes and any identifying information (e.g., release forms) in a locked and secure location.
2. Altering all identifying information in the transcribed interviews and throughout the analysis.
3. Destroying audiotapes upon completion of the project

Finally, participants were made aware of the limits of confidentiality as well as of their right to terminate participation in this project at any time.

Flow Chart of Method

1. Participant solicitation/invitations to participate were placed in a Central New York area community center (see Appendix A).
2. The participant initiated contact with the investigator via contact information provided on solicitation poster (see Appendix A). Information regarding topic of study and data collection methods were explained. If a potential participant was still interested in participating, then an initial meeting was set. The participant determined the location of the meetings.
3. Initial meeting/interview: Informed Consent form was signed and initial interview conducted and tape recorded (see Appendix B).
4. Second meeting: Elaborative interview used to collect further information and clarify or elaborate on any ambiguities from the initial interview.
5. Preparation of edited synthesis combining descriptions from both interviews into one workable transcript.
6. Delineation of common beliefs/experiences related to the fires set with regard to emotional expression or relation to family. These areas were determined by exploring how the individual's account of the fire reflects his understanding of past, present, and future as well as how the fire-setting reflects his relation to self, world, and others.
7. Comparison of common beliefs/experiences and their significance, across all participant protocols, highlighting those common beliefs/experiences which seemed related to fire-setting behavior.
8. Formulation of understanding of fire-setting within life context, how fire-setting is experienced through the lived world of the child.
9. Third and final meeting: Exploration of common experiences/beliefs reported among fire-setters and how these relate to the individual's experience of fire-setting. After reviewing the participants' experience and the meanings for them of setting fires, I discussed with them what their research participation had been like for them. Feedback from the participants is available in the results section.
10. Revision of my ideas to further incorporate individual experiences into a more accurate understanding of the fire-setting event as well as an understanding of the child's lived world in regards to self, world, and others.
11. Formulation of understanding of fire-setting within life context.

Table of Participants

Name: Carlos
Age: 24 years old
Occupation: Waiter
Marital status/Children: Single, no children
Fire-setting Event: Carlos set a trash can on fire when nine or ten years of age after his mother left him in his brother's care to go out on a date.

Name: Ronald
Age: 46 years old
Occupation: Graduate Student
Marital status/Children: Married with a daughter
Fire-setting Event: Ronald and a group of peers set paper on fire in the basement of an abandoned house when he was seven years old.

Name: Ramel
Age: 31 years old
Occupation: Telemarketer
Marital status/Children: Single with a daughter
Fire-setting Event: Ramel set a fire under his mother's bed when he was eight years old after being told that he could not have money for ice cream.

CHAPTER 4

OVERVIEW OF RESULTS

Prior to exploring in depth the results of this study, a brief overview of the results may assist the reader in obtaining a general understanding of childhood fire-setting which will be explored in future chapters. It should be noted that although the initial goal of this project was to gain access to the experience of setting a fire, this was a task which proved difficult. Instead the accounts provided by the participants allowed access to their feelings, beliefs, and experiences during childhood. These accounts were then explored with some inferences being made to connect the participant's beliefs and experiences to their fire-setting behavior.

When I looked at the participants' fire-setting behavior, family dynamics emerged as central to the experiences they described. Although each participant described his family as ideal, upon examination it became clear that early losses and poor communication characterized family interaction. Likewise, although individual circumstances varied, each participant felt the consequences of these circumstances experientially and expressed that they endured throughout his childhood.

Within each family, rigid expectations regarding behavior or morality suggested criticism of and disappointment in the child and led the child to feel guilt, which contributed to feelings of isolation within the family. Although many parents show disappointment with a child's misbehavior, this disappointment is usually directed toward the behavior and indicates that the behavior is unacceptable. However, as children, the participants were attuned to their parents' disappointment in them and interpreted this to signify that they were a disappointment to their parents. This experienced disappointment

resulted in a sense of isolation from and of not being good enough for the family. It is noteworthy that not all feelings of isolation were related to misbehavior, but instead may have been compounded by the child's sexual orientation or to perceived favoritism within the family. In any case, the child felt criticized and from it developed a sense that he was not meeting the family's expectations.

Further, the accounts provided reflected communication as having been minimal and ineffective. Parents were described as distant and the child felt that sharing his difficulties or problems would result in further criticism or rejection. Consequently, rather than being able to rely on parents for support, the participants felt alone when coping with difficulties and confusion.

In addition to feeling isolated from or criticized by their families, participants also felt isolated or criticized in school or social interactions. The participants' statements led to the conclusion that difficulties in school resulted in a sense of disconnection from others and in turn created a desire for connectedness. Although all of the participants could have easily become loners, it seems likely that the belief that they had control over their lives extended to a belief that they could influence others' feelings. However, coupled with experiences at home, their experiences in school also added to the belief that something about them was undesirable. Again, given limited communication with adults who could provide support, each child felt left alone to make sense of the situation. All participants spoke of feeling as though they did not fit in and that this was due to a fault of theirs. Although their isolation seemed to signify that there was something wrong with them, there was also a sense that this defect was out of their control, leading to a sense of helplessness and, over time, hopelessness that the situation could change. Fire-

setting arose from this context and was, primarily, the participants' expression of how they had been affected by and protested against their situations. Specifically these conflicts seemed to be related to anger, feelings of isolation, helplessness, and rejection. Rejection, in particular, seems central to fire-setting behavior as either the source of anger or as a motivator to gain acceptance by peers. Looking at the difficulties the participants experienced, it is no wonder that peer approval and acceptance would be so important to them. Given the families' ineffective communications, it is likely that participants felt it was of little use to try explaining the importance of their unmet social desires, and behavioral acting out was a way of having an impact on their own terms. Although they wanted to express their feelings, they also feared further rejection by or criticism from their family for such behavior. For my subjects, fire-setting seemed to encapsulate their intense feelings but at the same time was not directed at their parents in a way that risked further rejection.¹ That is, fire-setting is only problematic if discovered.

¹ This avoidance of further rejection does not seem consistent with Ramel's account; however, even though his mother's bed was the target of his fire-setting, Ramel made some minimal attempts to hide his action which seems to suggest some awareness that he did not want his behaviors to be discovered.

CHAPTER 5

CASE DESCRIPTION FOR PARTICIPANT #1- CARLOS

Information was gathered during two separate interviews, lasting approximately one and a half hours and two hours respectively. Carlos provided all of the information requested, although names and identifying details have been altered to ensure anonymity.

Identifying Information

Carlos was a 24-year-old Latino American male residing in New York State. His parents and maternal grandparents immigrated to the United States from Honduras when Carlos was an infant. He was employed as a waiter and expressed some interest in attending a local college in the fall, although he had not yet chosen a major. Carlos stated that he was homosexual but not currently in a relationship. Carlos was relaxed throughout the interviews and spoke openly about his feelings and memories of childhood.

Information Related to Fire-setting

Between the ages of nine and ten Carlos experimented with fire and described it as a means of expressing his disappointment when rejected. He reported setting three fires, each occasion similar in context, and described one of these situations in detail. In this instance, Carlos' mother had come home from work and started to dress to go out. Carlos indicated that his brother was older and typically preferred to spend his free time with his friends rather than with Carlos and his mother. Consequently, Carlos expected that this night would be similar and that he and his mother would be going out. Anticipating a night out with his mother, Carlos changed his clothes and waited excitedly on the couch for her. Instead, however, his mother left him with his brother while she went on a date. Carlos was overwhelmed and hid in his room to cry. Although he denied

entering his room with the intention of setting a fire, Carlos lit a piece of paper and threw it into the garbage can. He then sat, watching the flames grow and hoping his mother would return home. For Carlos, setting a fire was his way to make his mother take notice and finally understand how desperately he wanted to be with her. Instead, his brother took notice of his behavior, extinguishing the fire and reprimanding him sharply. To Carlos his brother's reprimand was evidence that his actions were not seen in light of his desire to be with his mother but instead as misbehavior. This was not the first or last time that Carlos felt that his family misunderstood his actions.

Family Background

Carlos spent his early and middle childhood on Long Island with his mother and brother, who was ten years his elder. Carlos reported that his brother was the result of a relationship his mother had prior to meeting and subsequently marrying Carlos' father. He added that he knew little about his brother's father and reported that it was his understanding that he was deceased, although he could not elaborate. After ten years of marriage, Carlos' father left the family. Carlos was nine years old at the time and reported that he had only seen his father once since, when he was eleven. Even so, Carlos' father sent child support monthly and a birthday card with money in it yearly. Carlos noticed minimal conflict between his mother and birth father, which left him somewhat confused about their divorce. Following his father's departure, Carlos, his mother, and brother moved into an apartment. Carlos' mother worked as a quality inspector at a textiles factory, and Carlos' brother filled the parenting role in her absence. These were meager times, but he stated that he felt comfortable and had all his physical needs met.

Although discipline was usually handled verbally, Carlos remembered being spanked by his mother regularly as well as by his brother when under his care. Carlos perceived his mother as being very protective, referring to him as her “little man.” Even though he lived in poverty and experienced the chaos of a family in transition, Carlos reported minimal behavior difficulties as a young child. He added that he had witnessed his mother withholding affection from his brother because of poor behavior and stated that this was something he wanted to avoid. Carlos added that his mother had very high expectations for him and his brother and that he perceived her love and affection as contingent on meeting those expectations.

Religion was central to Carlos’ extended family, which identified with the Baptist faith. Carlos’ aunt, a prominent figure in Carlos’ life, often took him to church. Although religion held less importance for his immediate family, the morals taught by the church were the measure of what was acceptable, and the rules based on them, were rigidly enforced by the family.

When he was eleven, Carlos lost his brother to a random shooting. This had a dramatic impact on the family, and Carlos reported falling into a deep depression. In the aftermath, Carlos’ mother moved with him to Tennessee to be closer to a male friend of hers whom she married shortly thereafter. This move was transformative socially as Carlos began to experience success and reported forming several meaningful peer relationships as a result. Carlos’ family life, however, became more distressing. Carlos characterized his stepfather as quite dominant, often exerting himself as a primary disciplinarian. For Carlos, this was a source of resentment directed not only toward his stepfather but also toward his mother, who he felt did not support him in standing up for

his rights. Carlos added that his stepfather died shortly after Carlos moved back to New York State and that he and his mother had since reconciled.

It is of note that Carlos reported early sexual activity with a male cousin seven years his elder; this occurred when Carlos was approximately eight years old. Carlos added that he did not feel victimized by his cousin and, instead, felt as though their encounters were very loving. Carlos added that he and his cousin had sexual encounters only a few times before his mother discovered what they were doing. Although his mother was outraged, she did little in terms of discussing the incidents with Carlos or seeking counseling to help him understand and make sense of his experience. Carlos stated that he felt very comfortable with these experiences and began to contemplate his sexuality at this young age. Because of his atypical sexuality, Carlos felt judged by his family and the church, which contributed to a sense of isolation between him and his family.

Social History and Educational Background

Carlos described his life as separated into distinct chapters: his life on Long Island up to age 11 and his life in Tennessee. On Long Island, Carlos was socially awkward and found himself frequently teased because he enjoyed stereotypically feminine activities, such as jumping rope, rather than stereotypically masculine activities, such as playing football. Carlos had few friends outside of his extended family. Academically, Carlos maintained average achievement but expressed minimal investment in his education or desire to reach a higher level.

When he and his mother relocated to Tennessee, Carlos felt he finally emerged as a social individual. Carlos had two close female friends with whom he talked on the

telephone and spent time. Following his brother's death, Carlos' mother was protective of him and did not allow him to attend many extracurricular events like dances or football games, but Carlos was involved in school activities and expressed pride in having been an anchor for his school's televised news broadcast. Academically, Carlos was bored but maintained average grades. Behaviorally, Carlos began to have some difficulty, but these were minor incidents, such as rudeness to a peer or teacher, and rarely resulted in disciplinary actions.

Emotional/Psychological Background

After his brother's death, Carlos saw a counselor for two sessions and found the sessions somewhat helpful. Carlos reported no current drug or alcohol use; however, he had spent time in jail for driving under the influence of alcohol when he was eighteen. There was some drug use in Carlos' extended family, and his brother went to jail at one point for selling drugs. Carlos reported no history of mental illness or emotional problems in his family.

Although his psychological history suggests identity difficulties related to his emerging sexuality, there are many children who have these experiences and do not set fires. The underlying function of his fire-setting behaviors suggests complex dynamics that requires further exploration. Further examination of these dynamics will shed light on Carlos' overall experience of childhood and allow us to understand the context of his fire-setting behavior.

Carlos' Beliefs

While conducting this study, my essential question was, what does the provided information convey about the individual's fire-setting event as it relates to his view of

self, world, and others? Several beliefs and experiences emerged throughout our interviews that seem central to understanding Carlos' experience of fire-setting in the context of his family and social functioning. Consistent with other participants, Carlos' life experience was marked by a sense of isolation developed through his experiences with family and peers.

Carlos' Fire-setting Event

Carlos clearly felt isolated within his peer group and family. When Carlos felt rejected by his mother, he also felt isolated and feared further rejection, and these feelings seemed to have been expressed through his fire-setting.

Initially, Carlos expected to go out with his mother and expected that she would be proud of his initiative in getting ready without being told. Carlos seems to have been seeking approval from and connectedness with his mother. Given his isolation in school and the neighborhood, it is likely he sought his mother's companionship to provide the support and positive sense of self that was otherwise missing:

And I asked her if we were going somewhere. At first she didn't even answer me...she was like all excited and listening to music. So, I just started getting dressed to go out with her. You know, got all dressed up like a little man.

So, I am like sitting on the couch, and she comes out, and I am like all proud of myself, 'cause I thought she would be happy that I was all ready to go.

Instead, Carlos was told he could not go and thus experienced rejection. This incident upset Carlos, who, up to this point, had experienced a significant connection to his mother. Carlos experienced this as his mother replacing him. Given his chronic

rejection by his father and peers, it is likely that Carlos was clinging to the one person who showed him acceptance and love. It is of interest that, although his brother extinguished the fire he had set, Carlos expressed a desire that his mother would be made aware of the fire and come home. It seems, based on this account, that at least part of his intention in setting a fire was that his mother would respond to the situation and change her plans for the evening to spend time with him:

Then she says that she is going on a date with some guy. Well, I was just a kid, so I was like, I want to go. And she said that I couldn't go . . . like no. So, I started crying and kept asking her, and she said that I couldn't go, and she left me with my brother.

Well, I don't know what I thought would happen. I think maybe I just wanted my mom to come home . . . you know what I mean. I used to [set fires] when she would go out on dates.

Even after his fire-setting was discovered, there was still no discussion about it. Carlos recalled overhearing his mother and brother talking about what had occurred but added that no one really asked or talked to him about it. By not communicating with Carlos, his mother and brother reinforced his sense of his inability to ensure his mother's affection and avoid rejection. Likewise, Carlos described his mother's reaction as one of amusement and minimization, which appears to have permitted, if not encouraged, Carlos' expression of desire for his mother's company:

Well, I mean I don't remember it being a big deal. My brother told my mom and she was like, "well, he was probably just mad." I think she thought it was cute.

Carlos' Family

Carlos experienced many family disruptions in his early development. His father left when he was nine years old and, although he provided financial support, Carlos saw him only once after that. By this point Carlos' brother was a young adult and acted as a surrogate father of sorts until he was shot and killed two years later. Carlos felt abandoned by his father and unclear why his father did not remain involved with him. Meanwhile, Carlos' brother filled the paternal role and following his death Carlos became quite depressed.

These disruptions in Carlos' life seem to have created a greater longing for stability, stability he sought through his mother's support and affection. He expressed great love for his mother and described her as the most important person to him; he added that he took great care to ensure that his mother would not leave him:

Well, my mother and father were together until I was around nine. (Then?)

Well, I guess they had problems and he left when I was about nine. I saw him like once after that when I was around eleven...actually it was at my brother's funeral. After that I never saw him again . . . just got a check once a month and a birthday card with ten dollars in it.

I mean we were cool. [Carlos' brother] used to kick my ass when I wouldn't listen to him . . . but we were cool. I did kind of look to him as a father figure . . . kinda sad . . . I still miss him sometimes.

Although Carlos described feeling great love for his mother, he also described his home life as somewhat rigid and, at times, distant. Carlos' mother, though minimally involved in the church, was raised in a very religious home. This early Christian

influence laid the groundwork for what was morally acceptable in Carlos' home. Carlos added that it was assumed and expected that one would act in acceptable ways and display good moral character.

It is interesting to note that these moral expectations were not only rigid, but any deviation from them carried strong emotional consequences. Carlos described his mother as a loving woman who would offer and withhold her affection based on the choices he and his brother made. For instance, his mother strongly rejected Carlos' brother following his arrest, only relenting after he got out of jail and resolved to live in a moral way. Given the loss of his father, Carlos was willing to do anything to ensure his mother's affection:

My mom just didn't really go for that sort of thing, and I think I was still scared of my mom when I was in school. Even in high school, I might get sassy with a teacher a little bit, but I knew that I couldn't push it too far or there would be some serious . . . um . . . well let's just say some serious problems.

Well, my brother got locked up once before he got killed. Like right before he got killed, he got in trouble for drugs. The detectives came in on a drug raid. But my mother wouldn't go visit him or accept his calls or anything until he came home. No phone calls or nothing, she was just like, you got yourself into this and you can get yourself out of it. It wasn't the money...it was the principle.

She wanted us to know that she was disappointed and was not going to go out of her way for us.

I remember coming home from school, and he was hiding, and I was so

happy to see him. And when he was home, there was no problem. He had gotten himself out of trouble, so he was welcomed back. If he would have kept getting in trouble, it might have been different, but he wasn't doing that.

Finally, it seems clear that within Carlos' family efforts to communicate were ineffective. For Carlos, talking about difficulties opened the possibility of being judged or criticized. Consequently, Carlos was not able to discuss or explore his ideas with family members, especially concerning those subjects on which his views differed from what his family believed religiously. Instead, Carlos kept most of his thoughts and feelings to himself and attempted to understand his experiences on his own.

Carlos expressed the family's lack of communication poignantly when discussing his mother's reaction upon discovering that he and his cousin were engaging in sexual activity. Although quite upset by it, his mother never spoke to him about the incident. This lack of communication confused Carlos, who struggled to make sense of his experience with his cousin. Carlos added that he never spoke with anyone regarding the sexual experiences with his cousin or even about sex in general. Carlos' family was quite secretive, and he doubted if those in the extended family knew anything about what had occurred:

(But no one in the family talked to you about sex?) Not really . . . maybe cousins or my brother might have said something, but no one really sat me down and had the "birds and the bees talk," if that's what you mean.

I just remember her getting really upset, and there was a bunch of drama . . .
. Well, nobody knew about it except the two families that were involved.
You know my mom and my Aunt Gerri handled it . . . one of my cousins
did know though.

Carlos' Feelings about Himself

Religion seems to have had a profound impact on Carlos, as he attempted to form a sense of who he was and how he fit into the world. Carlos knew early on that his attraction to males was unacceptable in his religion, which created the hurdle of reconciling his natural inclinations with the church's beliefs. Unable to reconcile his religious beliefs with his developing sexual feelings, Carlos reported feeling isolated from and even abandoned by God, just as he had felt abandoned by his father. Carlos expressed awareness that his separation from God was related to his attraction to males, which ultimately became part of his identity. In essence, Carlos was separated from God because of his sexuality, and his only way to be closer to God was to deny a part of himself:

Then they made me talk to the pastor [about being gay]. (What did he say?)

I was damned to hell and God didn't like that.

I mean I do know what I believe now is not what I believed then. (What did you believe then?) That I wasn't going to go to heaven gay . . . period.

In addition to isolation from God, Carlos felt a distance between himself and his family. Again, as a child, Carlos preferred activities considered stereotypically feminine and spent a fair amount of time with female peers. Carlos remembered feeling criticized for this preference and recounted how his family made fun of him for not engaging in

more masculine activities. Additionally, Carlos felt family members viewed him as different and did not attempt to connect with him the way they did with other children in the family. Consequently, Carlos developed a sense that he did not meet his family's expectations and again felt that their acceptance required him to deny aspects of his identity:

Well, it wasn't something you talked about too much. Especially me.

(You?) Well, with the whole gay thing. I mean that's why you had pastors I guess.

As previously mentioned, Carlos' mother held him to a rigid moral code. Carlos said that any behavior outside of that norm resulted in aloofness or rejecting behavior from his mother. In light of their religious beliefs, Carlos understood that his behavior was different than what was expected of him; however, this was something that was never discussed with him. In fact, Carlos recalled being curious and experimenting sexually with other kids in the neighborhood, adding that although this behavior was discovered, he only got into trouble when caught experimenting with boys. To Carlos this meant that it was not his behavior that was unacceptable but his developing homosexual identity. Again, the only way to reconcile this was to deny a part of his self:

Well, I mean, there were some kids in the neighborhood whose moms called my mom 'cause I was touching them . . . boys and girls. (How was that addressed?) Well, I guess, get a beating whenever someone would find out. (And, what do you remember getting told about it? Like, why were you getting beaten?) That gay shit!

Carlos' Social Experience

Carlos described his early social supports as minimal and stated that he had few friendships. Carlos' early peer group was comprised mainly of girls from school and the neighborhood; he felt isolated from his male peers and unaccepted primarily because of his interest in feminine activities. Again, Carlos described a sense of isolation related to a part of his self, like his sexuality, over which he felt he had little control:

I was always kind of the sissy boy. (What do you mean?) Well, I was always doing the girls' stuff. Like I could double dutch better than throw a football. So there would always be the boys playing, and then me playing with the girls. (What did you make of that?) Well, I was supposed to do boy stuff.

As he grew older and more secure with himself, Carlos began to establish friendships that were quite meaningful to him. Carlos attributed this to moving away from his family and feeling better able to accept his sexuality without the criticism he had previously felt. Carlos added that his likes and dislikes did not change but he felt that, as his peer group matured, he was able to feel the acceptance and tolerance he had not felt when younger:

I didn't really have many friends. Then, when I went to Tennessee, things changed. (How?) Well, I mean, the first year or so I was there, it was like just transition time. But, then, like later in Jr. High and definitely High School, I was the Bell of the Ball. I had these two girlfriends that I would hang out with, and we were all sassy . . . but they were kind of cool, so I was part of the group; and people just accepted who I was. It was nice.

Carlos' Experiences in the School Setting

Carlos reported that elementary school was an isolating place for him and added that this continued until he began middle school (Jr. High) in Tennessee. Consistent with his experience with peers in the neighborhood, Carlos felt rejected by male peers due to his preference for stereotypically feminine activities. Although Carlos was able to find female peers to socialize with in the neighborhood, Carlos did not identify any girls whom he socialized with in school. Instead, his female peers also rejected him and his feminine qualities. Again, acceptance by his peers felt contingent on Carlos changing who he was.

Academically, Carlos found schoolwork manageable; he stated that he did not have many academic difficulties and was able to coast through school without much effort. Although school was not academically challenging, it also did little to bolster his sense of himself and provided little success from which he could draw self-esteem. Instead, he blended into the background academically while being rejected socially in different environments:

It was fine. I mean actually, when I was younger, it was kind of a drag. Not really because of school, but, you know, I didn't really have many friends. My grades were fine. I mean, I wasn't on the Honor roll or anything like that, but they were good enough. Like I said, I didn't like doing schoolwork and didn't always get it but good enough to get by.

Conclusion

Upon examination of Carlos' fire-setting event, understanding Carlos and his motivation for setting a fire becomes quite difficult. What is revealed by his account is

the context in which fire-setting emerged. Theories that regard fire-setting as predictive of adult psychopathology (Hellman & Blackman, 1966; Justice, Justice, & Kraft, 1974) or that understand fire-setting as co-morbid with thought disorders do not correspond to Carlos' expressed experiences. However, early writers such as Freud and Grinstein consider repressed sexuality to lead to fire-setting behavior. Indeed, Carlos was a child who was confused about his sexual orientation and educated himself through exploration with other children. Carlos reported that his mother expressed both anger and shame upon discovery of his sexualized behavior. Carlos described his mother as a judgmental and rejecting person who gave or withheld her affection conditionally. For dynamic writers such as Freud and Grinstein what emerges is an aggressive displacement of Carlos' sexualized desire through fire-setting. Likewise, Carlos' fire-setting is provoked when he is not taken on a date with his mother. Given Carlos' position in the family, it is likely that his mother's romantic evening raised the possibility that he might not always be the center of his mother's affection. That is, Carlos' fire-setting can be understood by dynamic theorists as emerging when feelings of closeness are confronted by the threat of being replaced as the object of his mother's desire.

Although Yarnell (1940) supports the theoretical idea of repressed sexual feelings emerging through fire-setting behavior, the impact that the action has symbolically is, in his view, less important than the actual impact it has on the intended person. Kaufmann and Heims (1974) describe fire-setting as an act directed towards some member of the family. For these writers, Carlos' fire-setting might be seen as having been provoked because his wishes were rejected and he became angry about this. As his anger intensified, Carlos set a fire. Although Carlos denied any abuse in the family, writers

such as Sakheim (1985) and Jayaprash (1984) contend that fire-setting emerges as a result of abusive parenting and that the aggressive feelings that are being expressed is only a portion of the anger the child feels towards his parents. Indeed, Carlos recalled discipline as being harsh, especially when in his brother's care; however, he did not relate this as being a source of anger or resentment. Although Sakheim and Jayaprash may touch on a portion of Carlos' motivation for setting a fire, it was clear that there were other dynamics that should be explored as well.

Although the literature illuminates ideas related to Carlos' fire-setting behavior, it does not seem to capture the essence of Carlos' lived world. That is, when I begin to understand Carlos' lived experience, I see a child whose early life was somewhat stable until the age of nine but who characterized his experience with descriptions of isolation, rejection, and minimal support. Carlos expressed struggling with rejection and isolation related to his father's abandonment of the family. This struggle extended into his social life, where Carlos found that his interests were unacceptable to his peers and resulted in their rejection of him. Despite external reasons, such as his mother's conditional regard and his misunderstood sexuality, which could account for some of his difficulties, Carlos considered these experiences to have negatively affected his sense of self. Likewise, Carlos seems to have held a number of beliefs: 1) the belief that there was a part of him that was unacceptable, and 2) the belief that discussing those things which were unacceptable would lead to further rejection by those around him. These beliefs were based on his life experience, but they were not beliefs that he could express verbally. In essence, I see in him a child who was isolated and fearful of further rejection and who felt unable to express his feelings verbally to those around him. With minimal support, a

sense of helplessness developed and words became ineffective. It was within this context that Carlos' fire-setting behavior emerged as a way for him to express what was unspeakable: his fear of being replaced in his mother's affections by another (at a time when he had few friends and his father had more or less abandoned him), a frustrated libidinal attachment to his mother, and perhaps more generally anger at his family's rejection of his emerging homosexual orientation.

CHAPTER 6

CASE DESCRIPTION FOR PARTICIPANT #2- RONALD

Information was gathered over two separate interviews, totaling approximately two hours. The following information was provided by the participant, although names and identifying details have been altered to ensure anonymity.

Identifying Information

Ronald was a 46-year-old Caucasian male residing in Pennsylvania. He was completing graduate studies in psychology. Ronald reported being happily married; his wife was also studying psychology. Despite desiring a family for some time, Ronald and his wife had difficulty conceiving. After numerous fertility treatments over three years, Ronald's wife finally gave birth to a daughter. Ronald showed great pride in the birth of his daughter, who was two years old.

Information Related to Fire-setting

Ronald set a couple of fires when he was approximately 7 years old and described being fascinated with fire throughout his childhood. Ronald set a fire in a wooded area near his house but considered a later experience to be more significant. When Ronald was seven, he and some neighbor friends entered an abandoned house near his home. Discovering a lot of trash in the basement, he tried igniting the trash in hopes that the house would also catch on fire. This seems to have been motivated by curiosity as well as by a desire to impress his peers. However, Ronald's parents discovered what he had done and punished him severely. Ronald stated that he felt like the consequences for setting a fire were more severe than the excitement he felt by setting a fire, and this was the last fire he set. Even so, Ronald remained fascinated with fire and engaged in related

activities, such as phoning in false alarms to the fire department throughout his childhood.

Family Background

Ronald grew up in a rural Eastern state, as the oldest of three siblings. Ronald's parents have been married for approximately 47 years. His father recently retired from a factory where he was a laborer throughout his marriage. Ronald's mother worked various jobs, including house cleaner, salesperson, and finally cook within the local school district, until she too retired recently. Ronald described his childhood as idyllic and stated that he was a "homebody."

Ronald's family was quite religious and identified with the Church of the Brethren faith. This sect is quite restrictive, and Ronald cited a prohibition against dancing or playing cards as examples of the rigidity of their beliefs. Religion was central to Ronald's family, and adherence to a strict code of conduct was expected from adults and children alike. Although he currently identifies himself as agnostic, Ronald reported still feeling guilt associated with activities his family deems immoral, such as drinking alcohol.

When Ronald was 18 months old, his younger brother was born. This was transformative for Ronald, as his brother was quite sickly and required medical care that could not be provided in their rural community. Consequently, his parents traveled to get appropriate medical care for his brother, often leaving Ronald with his extended family. Although he does not have any memories of this time, Ronald was told by his mother that he would act aggressively toward her when she returned home.

Despite intense medical treatments, Ronald's brother died when Ronald was approximately 3 years old. The family was deeply affected, especially Ronald's mother. Within a year of his brother's death, Ronald's sister was born, and Ronald reported that she was a source of resentment and jealousy for him. Ronald described feeling criticized by his parents, feeling inferior in their eyes, which seemed exacerbated by his mother favoring his sister and being more attentive and protective of her.

Social History and Educational Background

Ronald described himself as having been extremely awkward socially, which he attributed to limited social interactions outside of his church community. Ronald was often teased by his peers about being taller and more stout than them and, at times, this would lead to physical conflict. Although boys his age lived nearby, his friendships with them were based more on proximity than on genuine friendship or mutual interests. Consequently, Ronald was isolated as a child and had minimal support outside of his family.

School was quite difficult for Ronald, partially because he was uncertain about what was expected of him. Ronald did not attend kindergarten because it was unavailable where he lived, which also may have contributed to his school difficulties. Ronald said that he had not been ready to attend school, adding that although he tried to achieve academically he often did not comprehend the schoolwork assigned. Since Ronald was quite reserved and did not feel comfortable asking for help from his teachers, he experienced little academic success and was plagued by problematic peer relationships. Following academic testing that placed his intellectual ability in the above average range of functioning; Ronald was seen by a school psychologist who questioned his lack of

academic achievement. Ronald stated that he remembered little about the sessions, but recalled that he saw this psychologist only a few times.

After completing high school, and after working in a restaurant for a while, Ronald entered the military, becoming a military police officer. This was important for Ronald as he escaped his sheltered community and traveled the world. After serving six years, Ronald was discharged. At this time, he began seeing a therapist who encouraged him to explore further education. Ronald then enrolled in a local college, receiving his bachelor's degree from a major state university, and then later receiving two master's degrees from Ivy League schools. Ronald's later academic achievement is important as it highlights that he was a capable student whose school difficulties were likely unrelated to a cognitive inability to understand or complete the work assigned.

Emotional/Psychological Background

Following his discharge from the military, Ronald sought out psychological services to address his low self-esteem and uncertainty about what he wanted to accomplish in life. Ronald said that, due to the family's strong religious convictions, any difficulties as a child were perceived as being indicative of a poor relationship with God. He added that these difficulties were often addressed through the church with the goal of strengthening his relationship with God in hopes that this would create a change in Ronald's behavior. Ronald reported no drug or alcohol use in his family but acknowledged some criminal involvement in his very extended family. Ronald reported no history of mental illness or emotional problems in the family. Although one may make the assumption based on his accounts of his parents' struggles with grief and stress

related to his brother's illness that there may have been difficulties within the family, this is not something that Ronald acknowledged as a difficulty.

Ronald's Beliefs

While conducting this study, my essential question was, what does the provided information convey about the individual's sense of his experience as it relates to his view of self, world, and others? Several experiences/beliefs emerged through Ronald's interview that seem central to understanding his experience of the world. Consistent with previous participants, Ronald's fire-starting seems related to his family, school, and social interactions, and a sense of isolation that developed through his experiences.

Ronald's Fire-Setting Event

As Ronald discussed setting a fire, it was evident that he believed his behavior was motivated simply by curiosity and was reluctant to conceptualize this behavior as stemming from anything else. Indeed, looking at the circumstances surrounding his fire-setting event, it seems that Ronald's motivation seems most consistent with that of an experimental fire-setting. Consequently, less emphasis can be given to who extinguished the fire in Ronald's instance compared to the descriptions provided by the other participants. Ronald added that he had gone to the house with some neighborhood children and was trying to be a leader. However, since he and the other children were eventually punished for this incident, Ron conceded that it did not appear that fire-setting was effective in eliciting this approval from his peers:

When I was about seven, there was an abandoned house down the road.

Myself and several of the neighbor boys were able to get inside the house.

The basement was filled with trash. I remember trying to light the trash on

fire . . . throwing matches on it, lighting pieces of paper, and throwing it in the pile. Fortunately the house didn't ever catch on fire. However it turned out that the house wasn't really abandoned. It was on the back of [someone's] property, and the guy who owned it came out one day and saw the evidence of the fires. He started asking around, and the first place they went to look were the houses that were closest and that was me and my neighbor's house. (After that?) Well, after that, I remember getting in trouble and deciding it wasn't worth the punishment.

I think sometimes [with my peers] I was the leader. With this, I think that I was the leader and just wanted to make them think I was cool for coming up with an idea like this. Didn't really work though because we all got in trouble². (laughs)

After his fire-setting was discovered, Ronald was severely disciplined. He added that he was punished for his fire play and did not continue to engage in this behavior. Even so, it is interesting that his fascination with fire emerged in behaviors such as phoning in false alarms to the fire department:

It wasn't about being destructive or antisocial or anything. It was really about curiosity. I just wanted to see what would happen. I just wanted to see a house burn. I think, by-and-large, that I was a pretty sweet kid, a sensitive kid. I don't think there was too much in me to do things just to be bad.

Either way, it was very clear that this was not acceptable.

² Although he appears to be a leader in this situation, Ronald described this attempt as unsuccessful and added that he did not feel accepted by his peers much of the time.

I remember my parents asking me where God lived and, then, where the devil lived. They told me that God did not like fire, so he put the devil there.

If you like fire, well, then, I guess you couldn't be with God.

Ronald's Family

Ronald seems to have an idealized view of his family; several times he referred to his family as being idyllic and providing refuge from the persecution he experienced from peers both socially and in school. Ronald spoke of his family as being close-knit and said that many of their social situations centered on activities with extended family:

But, really, our home was quite idyllic, which caused me to be somewhat of a homebody because I had such problems socializing with other children that I would just stay home.

Um . . . My home was very idyllic. Outside of the home, I had some friends who were actually my cousins.

Despite his perceptions that his family was ideal and warm, Ronald spoke of rigid expectations based on his family's religious views, and intense criticism when these expectations were not met. Ronald described most of the family's expectations as related to morality. Since the church defined morality, adherence to these expectations was interpreted as an outward sign of one's commitment to God. Consequently, disobedience was not regarded as normal or related to mischievousness but, rather, as immoral and a sign that one was not spiritual enough. Ronald had behavioral difficulties in school and with peers and began to perceive himself as defective and to believe God was judging him in the same way as the members of his church and his family did. This belief that one's behavior reflects one's spirituality stuck with Ronald and left him with deep

feelings of guilt, even enduring into adulthood, when his life decisions were inconsistent with his parents' beliefs:

Yeah. I grew up in a church called the Church of the Brethren . . . The church is intensely conservative. Dancing is wrong. Playing cards is wrong. Stuff that people would generally think of as not having a problem with morally was a sin. Even as a child I remember not being able to do laundry or play on Sunday. Definitely no swearing. No drinking. No smoking. (How did that carry over to the expectations of the house?) You were expected to be good, to be very moral, to be very Christian. They looked down on people who did not have the same beliefs. Growing up, even into early adulthood, I did not question our beliefs at all. If I would have a beer, there would be this intense guilt and fear that my parents would find out. Even today, if there is beer or wine in the house, I will hide it before they come over.

My parents were quite religious, so they had very rigid expectations for us and who we could associate with. As an adolescent, I remember shoplifting some candy a few times, but the guilt was just too much.

Ronald's family also held to traditional gender roles. His mother stayed home with him and his sister and also was the main disciplinarian in the family. Discipline in the family was swift and, at times, physical. Although Ronald spoke of his disapproval of corporal punishment, he quickly added that he was a hard child to raise and likely evoked that type of discipline. He also said he was more hurt by remarks his mother would make about his poor behavior than by spanking, adding that she expressed her disapproval in a

way that hurt him emotionally. His justification of his parent's discipline coupled with his mother's criticism led Ronald to excuse his parent's decision and instead came to believe that his negative behavior was deserving of a physical response. Ronald also expressed feeling as though there was some truth to his mother's comments and this too affected his sense of self:

I would say probably my mother more than my father. Mostly spanking...you know, just the hand type of spanking. I do remember getting the belt at times, but I don't remember it being the norm.

I think the things that did more damage to me as a kid were the things that were said. My mother did not really have good self-esteem. She denies it now, but she would call me stupid or tell me I was lazy, which doesn't seem like much. But, I really internalized that.

Although his parents made a great effort to guide and discipline him, Ronald stated that neither of his parents were available for or inviting of communication regarding his thoughts and feelings. Consequently, Ronald was not able to discuss or explore his ideas with others and, instead, was responsible for exploring the world on his own. In fact, when discussing sex, communication was not only lacking, but his mother perceived even the minimal information given by his father as too much. Given the close-knit nature of his family as well as their religious beliefs, assistance from anyone outside of the family or church was prohibited:

[Sex] definitely wasn't talked about. Then when my sister was abused [by a schoolmate of hers], my dad sat me down and talked to me about it. I was pretty old by then, and I pretty much knew most of what he was telling me.

My mom was really upset that he talked to me about it. She just didn't think it was something I needed to know--about sex.

Looking back I think I had some pretty serious problems, but nothing was ever diagnosed. My parents would threaten to take me to talk to the pastor. Their whole thing is that you have to have faith and trust in the Lord and, if you don't, you have problems.

Ronald experienced his family as being critical yet unavailable to guide him. Additionally, Ronald perceived that his sister was treated differently, more positively, than he was. Ronald attempted to make sense of this, attributing it to his mother's grieving over his brother's death; however, it was clear that this had upset Ronald. This apparent favoritism was expressed as constant during Ronald's childhood and created tension between him and his sister. In conjunction with feeling unsupported and criticized, this experienced favoritism led to him feeling isolated within his family:

We had a fairly large garden, a couple acres. It is a source of sustenance and is significantly bigger than what people have in their backyard. Even as a child of 6 or 7 years old, it was my job to weed that, and I felt like it was too much work for a little kid, and I resented it. My mom always felt like, if you were around, you should be doing work. So, I would weed or do dishes or do laundry. I was always doing something. My sister didn't have to do anything. So I think maybe that's why there was some conflict between me and my sister, because I resented her.

I have long since thought about this and made my peace with it, so I just sort of let it roll past me. But growing up, my sister and I definitely did not get the same treatment.

Ronald's Feelings about Himself

Although Ronald portrayed his family as ideal, he felt criticized by them and believed, at times, that he was not good enough for them. Ronald described himself as a rambunctious child whose poor behavior often frustrated those around him. In addition to being overwhelmed by his behaviors, Ronald's parents often seemed unsure how to help him. Rather than blaming his parents for not getting him help, Ronald deduced that there was something about him that was undesirable and beyond help. Coupled with his lack of social success, Ronald's sense of self was severely affected. Ronald described this as resulting from what he perceived as harsh criticism from his mother coupled with his parent's lack of follow-through regarding ways to help him achieve in school:

Well, I think they were concerned, I just don't think they knew what to do and, at a certain point, they just gave up.

Well, I think they were just more frustrated with me. I don't think they quite knew how to handle it. Compared to some of the kids I see now for [psychological] evaluations, I don't think we were all that bad . . . I just don't think my parents knew what to do about it.

As Ronald described his childhood behavior problems, it was clear that his difficulties had not been effectively addressed. Ronald believed that not living up to his church's strong religious expectations meant that he could not be connected to God. In an environment that emphasized closeness to God, Ronald began carrying intense guilt for

his behaviors. For example, Ronald described feeling intense guilt associated with shoplifting as an adolescent. These rigid expectations and guilt seem to have exacerbated his already poor self-esteem:

Also, I remember feeling extremely guilty and scared that people would know and that God would judge me.

Ronald's Social Experience

Ronald presented his social life as fraught with difficulty and rejection. He spent much of his time in various extended family networks, never really exposed to or able to learn the social expectations of his peers, and, consequently, he experienced minimal peer success. Consistent with his experiences in school, Ronald did not know how to obtain the success he desired and he lacked the parental support to express his difficulties without judgment or criticism. In fact, given his family's harsh view of those who did not share their religious beliefs, Ron's parents might have even supported his isolation from peers. Again, Ronald appears to have viewed his social failure as further evidence that there was something about him that was wrong and undesirable:

I had some friends who were actually my cousins, and some other friends, too . . . but then again, I was always the kid who got picked on and so on.

Um . . . which I think had to do with me not being a well-socialized kid. I was also quite a bit bigger than other kids. I would get picked on to a point and then I would start fights with other kids and defend myself.

Ronald's Experiences in the School Setting

Ronald reported that school was a difficult and isolating experience for him. Although he wanted to do well, Ronald quickly became overwhelmed and lost among the

other students. He expressed that he did not understand the expectations in school, and this confusion led to academic problems. Speaking with Ronald about his performance, his difficulties appear more related to learning difficulties than reluctance to achieve. Ronald reported being referred to a school psychologist to address his difficulties but added that there was no follow-up treatment to this initial consultation. Likewise, Ronald's parents offered little support or guidance:

My grades were abysmal. I can remember going off to the first day of school and not having any clue about what was going on. I remember just feeling out there. And then I took my report card home, and my parents were instantly angry. But I didn't know what was going on. I didn't know what a report card was. I didn't know what was expected of me.

I don't really remember anyone worrying about if I got my homework done. I remember them helping me a little bit, but not a whole lot. So they kinda just left me to my own devices and I did horribly in school . . . I can remember just looking out of the window much of the time, or getting up and down a lot. My second grade teacher actually tied me to my seat 'cause I wouldn't sit down.

Despite possible external explanations for his school difficulties, Ronald seems to have shouldered the blame himself. Additionally, his poor performance did not elicit his parents' support, but rather their criticism. Ronald reported being frustrated by school and displayed aggressive and oppositional behaviors in school, exacerbating his academic difficulties. Ronald was generally frustrated, upset, and bored with school:

They didn't know how to make me study. They didn't know how to motivate me to do better. I really didn't like school. I had trouble socializing in school, and the other kids picked on me. I had all kinds of fights. (But it doesn't sound like you were being defiant?) No I was just lost, and school wasn't a very reinforcing situation. And this was all the way up and through high school. High school was the same story.

Conclusion

Upon examination, my understanding Ronald and his motivation for setting a fire becomes quite difficult. In fact, given his accounts, it is not clear what typology of fire-setter Ronald represents. What is provided is the context in which fire-setting emerged. Although there were numerous theories reviewed earlier, many of those theories are not consistent with Ronald's experience. Theories that regard fire-setting as predictive of adult psychopathology (Hellman & Blackman, 1966; Justice, Justice, & Kraft, 1974) or that understand fire-setting as co-morbid with thought disorders do not correspond to Ronald's expressed experiences. Although Ronald described some behavioral difficulties, these are best regarded as normal child development. Likewise, Ronald's fire-setting does not seem to be fueled by anger or to have a clear target. Without an expressed target for his feelings, it is difficult to understand the motivations for Ronald's fire-setting behavior on the basis of the work of writers such as Yarnell (1940) or Kaufmann and Heims who place emphasis on the impact fire-setting has on the intended target (1974). Sakheim (1985) and Jayaprash (1984) would contend that fire-setting emerges as a result of anger related to abusive parenting. Although there do seem to be indications of harsh discipline

in the home, understanding Ronald's fire-setting as a reaction to this abuse seems incomplete.

Although anger is described as a motivating factor for writers such as Sakheim and Jayaprash this theory seems to only address one of the possible emotions being expressed. Ronald stated that his sister's birth is credited with lifting his mother's depression. It is likely that his perception that his mother favored his sister over him acted as a further reminder that he was inferior to others. Although Ronald's belief is not uncommon among other young children, it does not prove true in most cases.

Understanding Ronald's fire-setting behavior on the basis of the work of early writers such as Freud and Grinstein proves difficult as well. Ronald described feeling criticized by his mother and jealous of the time and attention she gave his sister. However, Ronald described his fire-setting behavior as more peer driven and indicated that being disciplined by his parents put an end to his fire-setting behavior. Given his parents' deep religious involvement, it is likely that there was a taboo surrounding fire; however, Ronald's account provides minimal information regarding this.

Although Ronald's experience of fire-setting is not consistent with the literature, understanding the context in which Ronald's fire-setting behavior emerged allows us to begin understanding possible motivations for this behavior. Ronald was a child whose early life was stable but characterized by isolation, rejection, and minimal support. Ronald struggled with feelings of rejection and isolation; he felt criticized and believed that his sister was better treated than he was. These feelings of isolation and rejection extended into his social life, where Ronald found himself less socially developed and physically larger than his peers, which resulted in rejection by them as well. Though

external reasons such as rigid parenting and strict religious beliefs could account for some of his difficulties, Ronald felt that he was responsible for these experiences, which negatively affected his sense of self. This seems multi-caused and may be related to 1) the rigid religious belief that taught that misbehavior resulted from immorality and was unacceptable and 2) the lack of a supportive person with whom he could discuss his feelings without further criticism or judgment. Feelings of rigid morality and lack of effective support were based on Ronald's life experience; however, they were not expectations that he could express verbally. In essence, I see a child who is isolated and fearful of further rejection but without an avenue to express these feelings. With minimal support, a sense of helplessness develops and words become ineffective. It is within this context that Ronald's fire-setting behavior emerged as a way to express his overall frustration.

CHAPTER 7

CASE DESCRIPTION FOR PARTICIPANT #3- RAMEL

The following information was provided by the participant; names and identifying details have been altered to ensure anonymity. This information was gathered during two separate interviews, totaling approximately three hours.

Identifying Information

Ramel, a 31-year-old African American male, resided in Central New York with his eight-year-old daughter. Ramel had sole custody of his child, and neither he nor his daughter maintained much contact with the mother. Ramel worked as a telemarketer but did not express contentment with this job. Although maintaining steady employment was important to him, Ramel felt disappointed that his employment does not have a higher status.

Ramel was somewhat reserved at the beginning of the interview. However, over time, as his level of comfort increased, Ramel began to reveal more about himself and his feelings about his history. Frequently during the interviews, Ramel attempted to make light of his background, after which he grew quiet and thoughtful as though realizing the significance of what he had said.

Information Related to Fire-setting

Ramel characterized his early childhood family, social, and academic background as chaotic and isolating: chaotic due to his father's drinking and his mother's revolving relationships following their divorce, isolating because of his bad behavior and the frustration it elicited from those around him. Ramel's experimentation with fire-setting

began within this context. Although he reported setting several small fires during his childhood, when asked, Ramel recalled the following instance as the most significant.

Ramel set a fire under his mother's bed when he was 8 years old. Ramel had been outside with his friends and had gone inside to ask for money for the ice cream truck. After being denied the money, he became quite disappointed. He searched the house and eventually made his way under his mother's bed, where he realized that he would not find any money. Upset, Ramel lit the underside of the bed with a lighter. In the process, Ramel accidentally singed his hair and had to be pulled from underneath the bed by his sister. Ramel said the experience horrified him and was the last time he set a fire as a child.

Family Background

Ramel grew up in a major metropolitan area with his mother, brother, and three sisters. He was the middle child with two older sisters, and a sister and brother younger than him. All of the siblings are close in age, with a ten-year difference between the oldest and youngest. Ramel characterized his relationships with them as close but added that they currently live in different areas of the country, so they only have minimal contact. Although his parents were together for some time, Ramel described their relationship as conflictual and violent. Ramel's father was an alcoholic, and his continuing struggle with alcohol resulted in significant marital discord. Ramel remembered his father's drinking and the money spent on alcohol as central to many disagreements between his parents. At times their disagreements escalated into physical altercations that resulted in the destruction of household items. Ramel's parents were married for approximately five years; he was seven years old when his father left and cut

off contact with his family. Although Ramel had siblings as a result of other male figures in his mother's life, he did not describe any of them as being involved in his life in a significant way.

Following his father's departure, Ramel's mother moved the family into a four-unit apartment building owned by his grandparents in which each apartment was occupied by part of Ramel's extended family. This network provided an atmosphere of communal living where family members shared space and child-rearing duties. Ramel's mother was employed as a health care aide and worked rotating shifts, often leaving Ramel and his siblings with extended family. The family suffered financial hardships for many years. Money was limited, allowing for few luxury items, such as new clothes for school or money for movie tickets.

Ramel's family was somewhat religious and identified with the Christian Baptist faith. His grandparents seem to have been the driving force behind religion in the family and occasionally took the children to church. Although Ramel stated that religion held less importance in his immediate family, he still identifies himself as a Christian and admitted that the lessons he learned in church at an early age affect his view of the world and his sense of morality. Ramel also expressed a desire for his daughter to develop the same belief system he acquired as a child.

Ramel characterized his behaviors during childhood as aggressive and oppositional. Within the family, he was known as a "problem child" due to his behavioral acting out and need for attention. Ramel added that, at times, his older uncles tried counseling him regarding his behavior, but more often than not this was ineffective and his mother would have to discipline him. Ramel often found himself the target of harsh

discipline, and he described spankings as routine. As he became older and more physically difficult to manage, Ramel's mother's attempts at discipline often resulted in physical altercations between them. For example, Ramel recalled attending his 8th grade graduation in a cast following a disagreement with his mother. He added that as they were fighting, he had tried to walk away and she had thrown him down the stairs.

Social History and Educational Background

Ramel often associated with older and "more sophisticated" friends. Combined with his already established pattern of defiant behavior in the home, this led to problematic behaviors, such as truancy, shoplifting, and gambling. Ramel and his friends were close-knit and eventually were initiated into a gang together. This provided a sense of security that Ramel did not feel in his home. Despite the activities of his peer group, Ramel was never arrested as a juvenile.

Consistent with his family, which Ramel found isolating, school also did not provide a supportive environment, and he characterized it as a difficult and frustrating experience. Although never formally diagnosed with any learning disabilities, Ramel had a reputation for being a slow learner; his academic achievement was average and school proved challenging. Poor school performance was a chronic struggle for Ramel and seems to have affected his sense of self. He began to doubt his ability to do the assigned work, which resulted in frustration and further behavioral difficulties. Ramel's attempt to cope with his academic frustration was maladaptive and problematic, leading to truancy, fighting, and disrespect for others within the school setting.

The underlying function of Ramel's fire-setting behaviors is complex and difficult to understand. Further examination of these underlying experiences/beliefs will shed light

on Ramel's overall experience of childhood and offer insight into the context of his fire-setting behavior.

Emotional/Psychological Background

Despite enduring behavioral difficulties, Ramel denied any history of psychological or emotional difficulties and has never received psychological treatment. Likewise, he reported no history of mental illness or emotional problems in the family. Although one may make the assumption based on his accounts of alcoholism in the family and physical altercations with his mother that there may have been difficulties within the family, Ramel did not report these as difficulties.

Although never formally diagnosed with behavioral or emotional difficulties, some of Ramel's behaviors were worrisome and cause for concern. Ramel reported engaging in self-harmful behaviors such as burning himself with cigarettes, cutting himself with glass, and even drinking bleach on one occasion. This happened, Ramel said, between the ages of seven and ten, and was his way of coping with and expressing his feelings. Ramel also reported hurting a cat once but minimized his involvement, instead blaming older peers.

Ramel denied any drug or alcohol abuse but stated that he has occasionally smoked marijuana since high school. Ramel did discuss some additional illegal behaviors, such as being truant from school and shoplifting, but he has never been arrested. He did not report a history of drug or alcohol use in his family, aside from his father's.

Ramel's Beliefs

While conducting this study, my essential question was, what does the provided information convey about the individual's sense of his experience as it relates to his view of self, world, and others? Within this framework, several beliefs emerged from Ramel's interview that are central to understanding his experience. As will be seen in later chapters, these beliefs are consistent with the other participants' experiences and convey a sense of isolation from his family and schoolmates. Ramel's early life was chaotic, with minimal support, supervision, and "appropriate" boundaries. Many of his underlying beliefs stem from feelings of rejection and isolation caused by his father's abandonment of the family. These feelings were reinforced in the school setting where Ramel struggled academically and felt rejected by peers who saw him as stupid.

Ramel had no clear memories prior to age eight, when he says he last set a fire. Ramel was able to remember some events that occurred before the age of eight, but could not provide an absolute timeline regarding the order of events and how they corresponded to his chronological age. I have taken the risk of trying to understand his life based on the examples he gave, regarding his memories and emotions about events that occurred after his fire-setting behavior had ended. Some may argue that this does not provide an authentic understanding of Ramel at the time he set the fire; however, this assumption must be used whenever obtaining information retrospectively from an adult and will be addressed as a limitation in the concluding chapter.

Ramel's Fire-setting Event

Through exploring Ramel's fire-setting incident within the context of his life experience, it seems that a sense of isolation in school and family may have contributed

to his expressing himself through fire. A progression of expectations that Ramel had were not met, and he feared that he would again be different than his peers.

Initially, Ramel expected to be given money to buy ice cream. On the surface this seems merely the desire for material gratification, however, Ramel voiced an expectation that not having money to buy ice cream would isolate him from his peers. Given his poor sense of connectedness to family and schoolmates, it is likely that this potential isolation from peers felt persistent and one that he did not like. This possibility is consistent with fears Ramel expressed that not engaging in the same behaviors as his peers meant that he risked rejection by them:

Well, it was the summer and everyone was outside and all that. You know, just doing kid's stuff like riding bikes and shit. And it was the summer, so you know the ice cream truck started coming around and all us kids got excited and shit. So everybody went home to get money from their parents so they could get ice cream. So I went home to get money, too.

I mean, I knew that all my friends were going to have ice cream and I was going to be the one sitting there staring at them . . . like watching them eat their ice cream.

I just knew the other kids would get money and I wouldn't . . . just pissed me off. (Why do you think it bothered you so much?) Because I never got ice cream. (laughs) I mean, I was always the one without. Know what I mean? Old shoes. Old clothes . . . just got tired of it.

Instead of having his expectation met, Ramel felt the sting of disappointment and described being angry that his mother denied him the money. For Ramel, this was one of

many times where his social desires were unmet. This is striking because it seems to represent a denial of the importance of Ramel's peers and their acceptance of him, which speaks to Ramel's underlying belief that his desires were secondary. Again, Ramel was reminded that his family did not understand how isolated he felt and how important his social network was because of this.

Given the lack of communication within his family, Ramel was not able to speak about the importance of his desires. Ramel also seemed to convey an understanding of the financial situation, even though it was a disappointment to him. In this I also see a sense of frustration that there was little he could say or do to change his mother's mind. In essence, Ramel felt helpless. Fire-setting, for Ramel, seemed to serve as an alternative. It is of note that Ramel lit a fire under his mother's bed. Although certain theorists would enjoy speculating as to why he chose this location, taken superficially this location seems to suggest that Ramel was attempting to gain his mother's attention. Perhaps he wanted to express his feelings to her or to ask again for money. Either way it seems that at least part of Ramel's fire-setting event may have been motivated by a desire for his mother to respond to the fire which would at least provide some acknowledgement/validation of Ramel's feelings:

Well, I asked my mom for money and she said that she didn't have any to give me.

I mean, I was [mad], but what the fuck. I knew we didn't have money. You know what I mean? Like, I knew she didn't have it. I didn't really think about it as her fault . . . I was just pissed that I couldn't get ice cream.

I was pissed and just didn't know what else to do. I mean, money wasn't going to just pop up. (But setting the fire, how was that going to help?)

Well, I don't think it was going to help . . . I was just pissed . . . that's it. I was just pissed.

Even after his fire-setting was discovered, there was still no communication regarding what had occurred. In essence, his behavior had no impact. Ramel did say that people in the house were upset by his behavior but added that no one really asked or talked to him about it. Although Ramel reported being somewhat relieved because he feared severe consequences if his fire-setting behaviors had been thoroughly investigated, this reinforced his sense of his inability to evoke a response or change a situation:

First of all, they were mad, upset, and angry that I could have really hurt myself. Second of all, they were mad because I set the place on fire. I mean, I didn't get a beating or nothing. I didn't get a punishment because they didn't know I did it on purpose. They just thought it just kind of happened . . . I guess. (What do you mean?) Well, I mean no one saw me under there, my sister just saw the flames and pulled me out and then, like in all the chaos, it was kind of just forgotten. I mean, I sure as hell wasn't going to say anything about doing [it] on purpose. I think everyone just thought I was screwing around.

Ramel's Family

Ramel seems to have an idealized view of his family. For instance, although he expressed disappointment regarding his father's lack of involvement in his life, he added that he had adjusted to this without difficulty. Additionally, although Ramel

acknowledged his family's financial hardships, he also felt satisfied that all his physical needs were met. Overall, Ramel described feeling very loved:

I had a happy childhood. I mean, my mother tried to give us everything we . . . I'm not going to say wanted, but everything we needed and let us have fun. She made us happy and did the best for us. I enjoyed my childhood.

I mean they loved me . . . unconditional love. I always felt loved.

Upon further examination, Ramel's belief that he had a happy childhood seems to mask that he felt isolated from his family. Stated simply, Ramel's own account provided limited evidence to confirm his positive experience. In contrast to his siblings, who were generally well-behaved, Ramel was a challenging child who required a good deal of supervision and discipline. Additionally, Ramel described his home life as somewhat chaotic at times, primarily when his father was still home. The outward dysfunction of his family seemed to decrease after his father left, but for Ramel this was a confusing and insecure time.

Although Ramel's mother made attempts to discipline him, his extended family offered limited guidance and showed an inability to control his behavior; Ramel reported that they also had difficulty supporting and correcting him. Although it is likely that external factors, such as his father's abandonment, contributed to some of Ramel's behavioral difficulties, Ramel seems to have internalized these difficulties as indicative of a personal flaw:

My uncles would try and talk to me. I didn't really listen. I was kind of hard-headed, so my uncles would try and talk to me so my mom wouldn't

kill me. They taught me right from wrong and let me know when I wasn't doing good or needed to stop doing something. They would put me on punishment or take things away. I mean, they would whoop me when I was younger . . . but sometimes I just did not want to listen.

Well, I am not going to say I am different from them (his siblings) . . . but I will say that I made different choices growing up. I had a choice between the right road and the wrong road and I didn't choose the right way very much.

Feeling as though he was to blame for his difficulties at home, Ramel assumed that he exhausted those around him. Ramel sensed that his family had little patience for him, often leaving him feeling self-conscious and guilty when he had to ask for their help or support. Consequently, Ramel neither discussed nor explored his ideas with others, and took sole responsibility for exploring the world on his own. This often proved a source of tremendous pressure for him.

Isolated at home and at school, Ramel often desired help, but instead had to rely on himself to manage his difficulties. This experienced absence of support and communication apparently affected his sense of self. Further, the family was very private and not open to allowing others to meet Ramel's needs. Ramel expressed this poignantly when discussing how he found out about sex:

Well, you know my grandparents went to church and didn't really want to talk about things like that. My mom knew we were going to do things and would have my uncles talk to me man to man. But it was more of one of

those things you figured out on your own. I guess they thought we would figure it out eventually.

I never really went to talk to anyone, we would just talk to family if we were having problems.

Sex was not the only area that Ramel felt was minimally discussed. In fact, Ramel expressed feeling solely responsible for exploring and understanding all domains of his life. Ramel added that he wanted the support of his family but that his family quickly grew tired of him and his behaviors, and he often felt put off by them and quite alone. He seems to have felt their annoyance with him, even at an early age, and expressed it movingly when describing how his family managed his childhood nightmares:

Yeah, I did have some nightmares as a kid . . . I don't really remember them too much...just that sometimes I would wake up and try to get in bed with my mom. (What was her response to it?) Well, I mean when I was just a little kid like four or five she was cool about it, but when I got older there were younger kids who needed to sleep in there so she would just send me back to my room. (How did you feel about that?) Well . . . they were littler than me, so I kind of had to learn to take care of myself. (But it does sound a little scary for a kid?) Well, hell, yeah it was scary . . . I mean you have a dream and get scared and have to go back to bed . . . it was scary . . . but like I said, I wasn't the baby anymore.

Ramel's Feelings about Himself

Although Ramel portrayed his family as loving and supportive, it was clear he had felt responsible for taking care of himself, and also for meeting their expectations. Ramel

found this process difficult to negotiate, especially when he felt criticized by a family who often seemed disappointed in him. Ramel spoke of feeling most criticized in reference to the overall outcome of his life and the choices he had made that limited his success.

Inherent in Ramel's sense of isolation and responsibility was the belief that if he had been better behaved he would have been more likeable. He adopted the prominent Christian and American belief system that he controlled his life and through his behavior could draw his family closer to him. In essence, love was conditional and contingent on Ramel making positive choices.

Many times during the interview, Ramel alluded to poor choices keeping him from obtaining success. Ramel's accounts seemed genuine and allowed him to accept responsibility for his life. Still, his explanations do not support theoretical factors, such as poverty or learning difficulties that would have affected his life regardless of his choices. Again, I see a child who took responsibility for obtaining his family's affection and struggled to develop strong self-esteem in the absence of familial support. This was previously addressed as Ramel stated that he was no different than the other members of his family and attributed his difficulties to the poor decisions he made:

I did good things and I did not so good things. Like I said, when you're a kid some things happen. I would say my childhood was like 75% good and 25% bad. (What made the 25% bad?) Not going to school. Disobeying my parents. Stealing. Not paying attention in school.

Responsibility for his own self-esteem coupled with minimal support overwhelmed Ramel; although at first it appears as though Ramel found ways to

compensate for familial limitations, further examination shows he consistently struggled to bolster his self-esteem. As a result, Ramel turned inward. Specifically, Ramel spoke of having strong emotions but at the same time feeling there were limited outlets available for expressing these emotions. Containing his emotions worked for a while, but sometimes he would use self-injurious behavior as a release before returning to his usual coping style:

I cut myself with glass. Burnt myself with cigarettes once. I don't really remember how old I was, I just remember doing stuff like that. (Do you remember why you did those things?) Not really, I just had a hard time dealing with my anger so sometimes I would do things like that to get it out.

Ramel's Social Experience

Contrasting to his experience of family and school, Ramel presented his peer interactions in the community as successful and greatly supportive. Ramel said he had felt accepted by older peers in his neighborhood and that without those peers his life would have been more difficult. This sentiment was expressed several times during the interviews and although Ramel did not elaborate on it, this does appear to have been a success for him, bolstering his sense of worth.

Even so, Ramel's peer group engaged in activities or behaviors that his family did not view as positive, and it is likely that this association deepened the chasm between him and the adults in his life. Interestingly, Ramel reported concern regarding his peers' behaviors and acknowledged that he had not always been comfortable with their choices; he cited older peers hurting an animal as one of those times. Ramel added that his

reluctance to participate was often countered by fear of a rejection that would leave him without any supports in his life:

I had plenty of friends growing up. Boy did I! It seemed like I was always out doing something. I was hardly ever in my house. Always playing basketball or riding bikes. Anything to just be out in the neighborhood and see what was happening. We would build go-carts and race them in the streets . . . play football. Then when I got a little older we would steal, play hooky from school, play tops for money . . . Yeah I guess you could say we were a gang. I mean they were all the kids that I knew when I was little but as we got older we all kinda stuck together and . . . let's put it this way . . . nobody was going to come into our neighborhood and do anything to any of our friends and between all of us everybody had friends.

We put a cat in a microwave one time. I mean I was a little kid, but some kids . . . like older kids . . . in the neighborhood put this cat in the microwave. (How old were you?) Oh, I don't really remember, I was pretty young, maybe first or second grade. It was weird, but at the same time, I kind of wanted to see it 'cause it was something different. (What did you think about it?) Well, I mean, I felt bad because of it, but I didn't want to look like a baby.

Ramel's Experiences in the School Setting

Consistent with family dynamics, Ramel experienced school as academically challenging and socially isolating. He added that he found schoolwork difficult and, although he wanted to do well, he quickly became overwhelmed and felt lost among the

other students. As before, Ramel's coping pattern was to blame himself, which ultimately affected his sense of worth. As mentioned earlier, Ramel said that his poor choices in school had led to his academic problems, however, his difficulties in school appear more related to actual learning difficulties than defiance. While Ramel said he never had a formal diagnosis related to learning, he stated that the other kids teased him for being slow and that he was always the last to complete tests or assignments. Not knowing there might be valid explanations for his difficulties, Ramel shouldered the blame for them, again, then externalized his emotions through problematic behaviors:

Hell, yeah, the work was hard! I am not going to sit here and lie. It was hard as hell. I mean, it was probably hard 'cause I didn't understand it. You know when you don't understand something it seems a lot harder. If I could sit there and listen it probably wouldn't have been too hard, but I made it hard on myself.

Mainly, I made things hard on myself. If I would have just done what I was supposed to have done it would have been a different story, but since I didn't, it was a lot harder than it needed to be.

Looking at Ramel's tendency to relate negative outcomes to negative choices, one wonders if Ramel's behavior difficulties in school served as an excuse for his poor performance: when his behaviors became the focus, he was able to protect himself from feeling less competent than his peers. Even so, Ramel reported feeling responsible for his choices and performance in school and frustrated by his academic experiences.

One way to understand Ramel's peer problems is that he was reacting to the rejection by his peers that he felt were related to his learning difficulties. Ramel's

frustration with schoolwork extended to include school itself, and Ramel said he had felt upset and bored with the whole educational process:

Yeah, I had all kinds of trouble. I got into fights, picked fights. I mean, if you was going to the school that I was going to, you would have probably been doing the same thing, too.

I hated school. Really, I hated school with a passion. The only thing I liked about school was the lunch, gym, and recess. (laughs) Naw . . . school was alright . . . I just didn't do that well . . . like in math. School just felt like something that got in the way of better things. Like I hate getting up in the morning, so going to school meant I couldn't stay out as late. Have to get up on these cold-ass days and walk to school. So I didn't really like school too much.

Coupled with his school difficulties and rejection by his peers, Ramel expressed feeling as though his peers were moving in a different direction than he was. Again, Ramel was in a situation in which he felt isolated but saw no way to make changes, and again this was exacerbated by his lack of adult confidants and desired adult support. This feeling consistently followed Ramel throughout his development, and he expressed it best in reference to completing school:

I think now I realize that I should have done different. Actually, I knew that I had messed things up at graduation. I barely got through school . . . just lucky, but when it was all over I just remember feeling like I was on a row boat heading down to Chinatown . . . you know? (Not really) Like everyone was heading forward, but I was floating away. I knew right then that I

should have done better 'cause now it was real and I was expected to do something. (How did you feel about that?) Scared.

Conclusion

Upon examination, it is difficult to understand Ramel and his purpose for setting a fire. Even in the context in which the fire-setting emerged, his motivations for fire-setting seem complex. Although theories that regard fire-setting as related to biological causes do not speak to Ramel's motivations for fire-setting behavior, many of the theories reviewed prove at least somewhat true for Ramel. Experientially, I see a child who had a strong desire to be close to his mother but who often felt his requests to be with her denied. Indeed, Ramel's account of being told he could not sleep with his mother to be consoled after bad dreams, coupled with his mother's bed being the object of his fire-setting, raises some questions regarding his feelings for her. Ramel would claim that he felt cared for by his mother and attributed any shortcomings she had to the number of children in the home; however, Ramel described the trigger to his fire-setting behavior as being denied money by his mother and stated that this angered him. Given earlier accounts that he would at times be denied access to sleep with his mother so she could care for other children, one wonders if Ramel may have also been denied access to his mother when she had men living with her. It is likely that Ramel felt that his mother often denied his requests to be close to her, and, when denied money for ice cream, Ramel experienced disappointment. According to psychodynamic theories, this was not a response to the denied ice cream but rather an outward display of frustrated Oedipal desire.

Although psychodynamic theorists would be concerned with the unconscious motivations for setting a fire, other writers such as Kaufmann and Heims (1974) would be most interested in the target of this aggressive act and the intended impact. Likewise, Yarnell (1940) describes fire-setting as an aggressive action directed towards a specific person. Understanding Ramel's fire-setting behavior in light of these authors, it is clear that he was angry at his mother. Ramel may have been angry that his mother did not have the money to give him and more angry that she frequently did not have money to give him. Regardless, for these writers Ramel's fire-setting behavior would be regarded as an aggressive act directed towards his mother. Sakheim (1985) and Jayaprash (1984) would add that fire-setting is a result of an intense anger that results from abusive parenting. Ramel stated that he was a difficult child to control and described one incident in which his mother's attempt to control him resulted in his being thrown down the stairs.

It was clear from Ramel's account that he was a troublesome child who exhausted those around him. Some writers (Hellman & Blackman, 1966; Justice, Justice, & Kraft, 1974) regard fire-setting as indicative of conduct disorders related to other delinquent acts as a child or predictive of later adult criminality. For these writers, Ramel's fire-setting behavior, coupled with his cruelty to animals and juvenile delinquency, would be best understood as symptomatic of antisocial personality traits. This characterization also seems consistent with Ramel's accounts. Likewise, Ramel described numerous behavioral difficulties during childhood that could be seen as indicative of the poor judgment and impulse control characterized as related to fire-setting by writers such as Bychowski (1919) and Bleuler (1950).

The literature raises many theoretical points that could be explored in relation to Ramel's motivation for setting a fire; however, it does not provide a clear understanding of Ramel's experience. Although it is difficult to understand Ramel's experience and motivation for fire-setting behavior, Ramel was a child whose early life was chaotic and characterized by minimal support, supervision, and boundaries. Additionally, Ramel struggled with feelings of rejection and isolation occasioned by his father's abandonment of the family. These feelings of isolation and rejection continued throughout school, where Ramel struggled academically and felt rejected by peers. Despite external reasons that could account for some of his difficulties, such as poor supervision or learning difficulties, Ramel felt he was responsible for these experiences, and this negatively affected his sense of self. This seems multi-caused and may be related to 1) the belief that he held sole responsibility for life choices, and 2) the belief that he would experience further rejection if he expressed this difficulty. These beliefs seem to have been based on Ramel's life experience, but they were not beliefs that he could express verbally. In essence, this was a child who was frustrated by life, yet without a voice to express his feelings. Without a network of support, a sense of helplessness developed and words became ineffective. In this context his fire-setting behavior emerged as a way to express the confusion and isolation he felt.

CHAPTER 8

GENERAL RESULTS

As each participant shared his experience of childhood fire-setting, as well as the context in which this behavior occurred, common experiences/beliefs emerged. Through further analysis and comparison of each interview with the others, previously identified experiences/beliefs emerged as consistent among all participants. This chapter explores those commonalities, discussing them in relation to each other as well as to pertinent literature, while working toward a better understanding of childhood fire-setting.

Dynamics of the Interview Process

In understanding the interview process, it is important to look at how the process of interviewing the participants affected the overall project. More specifically, how did information obtained during initial interviews impact the areas of focus for the second interviews and eventually the conceptualization process? Upon entering this project an area that I felt would be significant would be the family. I was not sure at the time how the family would contribute to fire-setting behavior; however, this was an area which I was fairly confident would emerge. Consequently, as information related to family and the dynamics of the family emerged I was quite attuned to these areas and followed them intensely during the interview. Having some of my presuppositions confirmed through the initial meeting with the first participant, I am sure that these areas were more explored with the second and third participants as well.

Additionally, as the interviews progressed, it became clear to me that family was not the only area of concern for the participants. That is, while conducting initial interviews, accounts began to emerge which seemed to suggest that the participants

experienced difficulties in other realms, such as school or peers, as well. Although I had anticipated that parenting would not be directly causal for fire-setting, I did not expect that participants would have experienced the degree of isolation in other settings that they expressed. Consequently, their experience of isolation was an area that I found myself exploring in more depth than I had anticipated. It should be noted that although changes were made during the interview process to allow for emerging themes, these were subtle changes more related to areas of focus.

Comparison of Fire-setting Events and Beliefs

When describing their backgrounds, the participants in this study initially presented their families as ideal. That is, the listener was encouraged to believe that the family was supportive, loving, and generally able to meet the needs of those within the family. It is interesting that the family was not described as average or comparable to other families, but instead as perfect:

Ramel: [In regard to his family] It was nice. I mean, I think I had a pretty good childhood.

Ronald: My home was very idyllic . . . But, really, our home was quite idyllic, which caused me to be somewhat of a homebody because I had such problems socializing with other children that I would just stay home.

Upon further questioning it was clear that these families experienced a significant loss. The losses not only affected the children, but also affected the parental figures and, ultimately, the amount of financial and emotional resources they had available for the children. For two participants, the separation of their parents and subsequent abandonment by their father disrupted their family life. Although there may

have been some problems prior to their fathers leaving, each participant stated he was shocked at his father's departure and characterized it as quite traumatic at the time. For one participant, the birth and subsequent death of a sibling resulted in spending a fair amount of his early childhood with relatives. Although he was quite young when this occurred, he described these events as having a profound impact on his family, particularly his mother, and added that he felt as though she had been emotionally unavailable to him throughout his childhood.

Comparing the presentation of their families to the actual events in their lives suggests that the participants have chosen to see the good in their family, specifically their parents. That is, although problems and some traumatic events were apparent in their family life, this is not something that they presented. This approach is consistent with what object relations theorists term "splitting" and is used to account for those events which compromise a sense of well-being in one's life and family. Teyber's (1997) overview of this theory states, "These splitting defenses preserve the necessary image of an idealized, 'all good,' responsive parent with whom the child is internally connected" (pg. 9). When looking at their accounts, it seems that the participants have a desire to preserve an idealized image of their families in spite of the experiential difficulties they encountered:

Carlos: Well, my mother and father were together until I was around nine. (Then?) Well, I guess they had problems, and he left when I was about nine. I saw him like once after that, when I was around eleven . . . actually it was at my brother's funeral. After that I never saw him again . . . just got a check once a month and a birthday card with ten dollars in it.

Ronald: Well, I had a brother when I was still very small . . . he was born when I was 18 months old and died when I was 3 years old. During that time I was transferred from relative to relative because he was very sick and had palsy and all kinds of things, and he needed a lot of intense care so my parents would be going down to [a distant city]. I would stay with aunts and uncles . . . I have always thought I had an emotional sense of that. My mother told me that it was very hard on her. She said that they would get back from being out of town and she would come to give me affection, and I would be so angry at her for not being around that I would push her away . . . I mean, I have never sat down and thought about what was going on with my mother, but losing a child like that I have heard, people have told me, even my mother has told me, that she nearly did not get through that time. So she felt like she was not there for me as much. She got pregnant with my sister several months after my brother died and that kinda pulled her back. I think that also caused conflict between me and my sister.

Along with the early loss in the home, there was no communication regarding that loss. Essentially, early disruptions were treated as something that never occurred. This proved problematic because all were aware of what had occurred and the tremendous impact it had on the family as a whole and as individuals. By not communicating about these losses, the parental figures sent a message that the events were something that should not be discussed and, consequently, the participants felt as though they could not express their feelings about the event(s). Likewise, there was a

sense that the parents acted unaffected by the changes in the home, which conveyed the message that the children should also be unaffected. Finally, by not communicating about the losses, the parents left the children to imagine what the causes may have been. Given the participants' reluctance to acknowledge difficulty in the home, it is probable that they attributed the causes of the difficulty to something other than the parents, such as themselves. Teyber (1997) accounts for this succinctly as he explains the adverse effects of presenting the parent as "all good": "The price is high: Reality is distorted; the self is fragmented; and the child becomes the one who is 'bad.' The frustrating parent is no longer 'bad,' which allows the child to view the external world as safe" (pg. 9).

In addition to limited communication, the families of the participants held very rigid expectations. These expectations were often based on Christian morality, conveyed intolerance for behavior that did not fit these expectations, and viewed misbehavior as indicative of one's overall immorality. Furthermore, the expectations were of perfection, and the parenting project was not one of guidance but rather of discipline. In the absence of guidance and communication, the child was left to make sense of his misbehavior. Again, this is interpreted as being indicative of the child's worth:

Carlos: You had to go to church. And you couldn't do things on Sunday 'cause it was the Sabbath day and the Lord rested. You couldn't iron or do any housework, really. (What type of church would you go to?) Baptist. My aunt was my Sunday School teacher.

Ronald: I grew up in a church called the Church of the Brethren . . . The church is intensely conservative. Dancing is wrong. Playing cards is wrong. Stuff that people would generally think of as not having a problem

with morally was a sin. Even as a child I remember not being able to do laundry or play on Sunday. Definitely no swearing. No drinking. No smoking. So really almost aesthetic. (How did that carry over to the expectations of the house?) You were expected to be good, to be very moral, to be very Christian. They looked down on people who did not have the same beliefs. Growing up, even into early adulthood, I did not question our beliefs at all.

The participants' accounts indicate that they believed their misbehaviors resulted in rejection by their families; further rejection was perceived in parental criticism and in judgments in which disappointment seemed implicit. Although the parents aimed at shaping behavior and eliminating unwanted behaviors, parenting as experienced conveyed that something about the participant was unacceptable and unworthy of the parent. In essence, instead of perceiving rejection as cause for changing behavior, it was viewed as being indicative of the worth of the child to the parent. Based on the family histories provided, these families were contending with stressors related to finances, unstable relationships, and/or illness in the family that may have depleted emotional resources, adding to the overall level of frustration in the home. However, this was unlikely to have been expressed to the child, so, instead, he felt solely responsible for not adding to the stress his parent was under.

Carlos: Well my brother got locked up once before he got killed . . . but my mother wouldn't go visit him or accept his calls or anything until he came home . . . if his girlfriend called on three-way she would talk to him, but she would not accept his calls or send him letters. No phone calls or

nothing, she was just like, you got yourself into this and you can get yourself out of it. It wasn't the money . . . it was the principle. 'Cause when I went to jail it was the same sort of thing towards me. She wanted us to know that she was disappointed and was not going to go out of her way for us. (What was the reaction when he got out of jail?) I mean we were happy to see him. I remember coming home from school, and he was hiding and I was so happy to see him. And when he was home, there was no problem. He had gotten himself out of trouble, so he was welcomed back. If he would have kept getting in trouble, it might have been different, but he wasn't doing that.

Ronald: I think the things that did more damage to me as a kid were the things that were said. My mother did not really have good self-esteem. She denies it now, but she would call me stupid or tell me I was lazy, which doesn't seem like much. But I really internalized that. I think it really slowed me down from achieving more at an early age.

Combine limited communication with their families with feelings of isolation and disappointment, and these children were left believing they were in some way different from other family members. Each participant expressed feeling that there was something about him that did not correspond to family expectations. For example, Carlos' emerging sexual orientation was different and wrong within the context of his family's strong religious convictions. Additionally, he was led to believe that he had some control over this and that, by not changing his behavior, he showed corrupted morals and, unlike the rest of his family, did not desire to be close to God. For the other

participants, misbehavior seemed to isolate them from their family; both expressed having wanted to avoid trouble and be better behaved, but added that they got into trouble anyway. As a result family members were often exhausted and exasperated by them.

By showing exasperation, our participants' parents conveyed uncertainty that they could contain our participants' behaviors. Writers such as Ferenczi (1913), Piaget (1937), and McWilliams (1994) describe the infant as having a sense of omnipotence regarding his ability to affect the world and have his desires met. As the infant grows and matures, this omnipotence shifts and becomes attributed to the primary care-givers, with the child taking on secondary omnipotence. That is, children hold the belief that their parents are omnipotent and have answers to all of life's questions and expect that there is nothing their parent cannot effectively address. For a child expecting his parents to handle any difficulty, the message received from uncertainty is that the problematic behaviors are so extreme as to be unfixable. Observing their parents' ability to control their siblings' behavior, the child concludes that it is not the parent who is inadequate in parenting, but that his behavior is far different and worse than his siblings'. In turn, this indicates that there is something different about him:

Ramel: I mean they love me, like unconditional love. I think they just wish that I would have done those things, too. I think they thought I could have done more but it really didn't work out like that so much . . . I am not going to say I am different from them . . . but I will say that I made different choices growing up. I had a choice between the right road and the wrong road and I didn't choose the right way very much.

Ronald: Looking back I think I had some pretty serious problems, but nothing was ever diagnosed. My parents would take me to talk to the pastor. Their whole thing is that you have to have faith and trust in the Lord and, if you don't, you have problems. I remember in like 8th or 9th grade thinking, I'll try this and get saved and was still screwed up.

Carlos: Well, I mean, there were some kids in the neighborhood whose moms called my mom 'cause I was touching them . . . boys and girls.

(How was that addressed?) Well, I guess I would get a beating whenever someone would find out. (And what do you remember getting told about it? Like, why were you getting beaten?) That gay shit! Then they made me talk to the pastor. (What did he say?) I was damned to hell and God didn't like that. (What did you think about that? I mean as a kid?) Well, I don't know if I believed it, I mean I don't believe it now. I guess I just had to suppress my feelings. I still did it, I was just careful to make sure I didn't do it with people who would tell. I mean I don't know; what I believe now is not what I believed then. (What did you believe then?) That I wasn't going to go to heaven gay. Period.

This feeling of isolation extended into other areas of the participants' lives, as well. All expressed feeling isolated in school and two participants expressed struggling academically, their academic difficulties causing frustration with peers and resulting in rejection by peers. Although one participant did fair academically, his interests were not consistent with those of his peers and he, too, felt rejected by them. Given that the participants already felt isolated within their families, their rejection by peers seemed to

emphasize that there was something undesirable about them. When a child sees other children doing well in school and enjoying positive social interactions, he begins to wonder why he is not and may deduce that the inadequacy is not in the teacher or that the problem is not that his peers are insensitive, but rather that he is different:

Ramel: School? I hated school. Really, I hated school with a passion. The only thing I liked about school was the lunch, gym, and recess. (laughs)

Naw . . . school was all right . . . I just didn't do that well . . . like in math.

School just felt like something that got in the way of better things. Like I hate getting up in the morning, so going to school meant I couldn't stay out as late. Have to get up on these cold-ass days and walk to school. So I didn't really like school too much. (How did you do in school?) Umm, I probably averaged about a C+ average. I mean sometimes I would do better and sometimes [my grades] would fall. It really just depended on how much I applied myself. (Was school hard for you?) Hell, yeah, the work was hard! I am not going to sit here and lie. It was hard as hell. I mean, it was probably hard 'cause I didn't understand it. You know when you don't understand something it seems a lot harder. If I could sit there and listen it probably wouldn't have been too hard.

Ronald: My grades were abysmal. I can remember going off to the first day of school and not having any clue about what was going on. I remember just feeling out there. And then I took my report card home, and my parents were instantly angry. But I didn't know what was going on. I didn't know what a report card was. I didn't know what was expected of

me. (Was it ever spelled out?) No, it wasn't really spelled out. My family, I would say they didn't put a high value on education, but they were working class and my mother grew up on a farm, so it wasn't that important. I don't really . . . Now I feel like I probably had ADHD. I can remember just looking out of the window much of the time or getting up and down a lot.

Carlos: It was fine. I mean actually, when I was younger, it was kind of a drag. Not really because of school, but, you know, I didn't really have many friends.

Along these same lines, two of the three participants also expressed feeling rejected socially. Although all participants identified reasons why they thought their peers rejected them, as children they had to make sense of it on their own. In retrospect, they came to believe that differences in interests or undeveloped social skills interfered with their social success; however, they also admitted it was confusing and difficult to not feel accepted by their peers. Without adult guidance and support to balance their lack of acceptance by peers, the participants came to believe there was something about them that was unacceptable to their peers:

Carlos: I was always kind of the sissy boy. (What do you mean?) Well, I was always doing the girls' stuff. Like I could double dutch better than throw a football. So there would always be the boys playing, and then me playing with the girls. (What did you make of that?) Well, I was supposed to do boy stuff.

Ronald: Outside of the home, I had some friends who were actually my cousins and some other friends, too . . . but then again, I was always the kid who got picked on and so on. Um . . . which I think had to do with me not being a well-socialized kid. I was also quite a bit bigger than other kids. I would get picked on to a point and then I would start fights with other kids and defend myself. I was big enough, significantly bigger than other kids, so I could do some damage. So I would get into trouble for those fights.

Consistent with the lack of involvement the family displayed toward disruption, the difficulties that occurred outside of the home were also minimally addressed; although each participant struggled academically or with peer group relations, not one expressed feeling supported or guided toward improvement or progress in the struggle. For example, Ronald said that he was referred to a psychologist to address his poor school performance; however, he saw this person only a few times and said that his parents did not follow-up with these services or work to monitor his progress. Instead, he felt that his parents had given up on him and had become resigned that he could do no better. Similarly, Carlos recalled being made to talk to a pastor regarding his sexuality. He added that it was clear that the goal was for him to change his sexual orientation. Carlos found this a further indication of God's and his family's disapproval of him. Likewise, Ramel reported no intervention to address the difficulties he was experiencing and described family interactions as punitive responses.

Participant Feedback Regarding Findings

During the third and final interview, information was shared with participants regarding commonalities among interviews and was presented as it related to fire-setting behaviors. Participants were then encouraged to discuss how they felt about what was presented, what areas they agreed with, and what areas they took objection to. Overall, the participants agreed with much of what was presented but made some suggestions about areas they thought should be clarified. This input was then incorporated as I developed and wrote the results and discussion section and will be discussed here as well.

All participants seemed to resonate with feelings of isolation. Even participants who felt as though they were included in certain domains, such as Ramel and his social support network, acknowledged that this sense of belonging was not pervasive across domains of their lives and felt quite alone in other domains (e.g., school, family). Likewise, participants acknowledged feeling as though there was something about them that was causing the perceived disconnect from others. They felt strongly that if only they were able to identify and change the defect within themselves, then their lives would improve. Interestingly enough, each participant acknowledged giving up on this project at some point, resigning himself to being isolated. Even so, each participant still held negative feelings about the situations, incorporating these feelings into his sense of self and perceptions of self-worth.

One area that received mixed reviews was the participants' relationships with their families. Participants expressed ambivalence about their family's functioning and about their places within the family structure. Even though participants acknowledged that communication within the family was limited and that there were some topics that

did not feel open for discussion, they also emphasized having love for their family and feeling loved by their family. Likewise, participants did not perceive problems within their families until they were older, more mature, and more able to take an outsider's perspective of the family. However, while growing up, they viewed their family as normal and perceived their experiences within the family as normal as well. To this end, participants attributed much of their difficulty within the family to a defect in themselves or to their misbehavior. Further, participants supported the idea that they felt solely responsible for their difficulties and consequently for remedying the situation.

Significance of Who Extinguished the Fires Set

When presented with the hypothesis that fire-setting could have been a way for them to elicit help from or send a message to their family, participants adamantly disagreed. They saw their fire-setting as merely misbehavior. For example, although Carlos was able to verbalize his desire for his mother to return home to be with him, he did not acknowledge being aware of this at the time. Rather, he perceived himself as simply being bad. Likewise, when discussing what they expected would happen or whom they had hoped would discover the fire they had set, all participants stated that they did not remember thinking about this at the time they set the fire but had only reflected on this after discussing this with me. This was consistent among all the participants and seems to suggest that the purpose of fire-setting was unconscious at best.

CHAPTER 9

DISCUSSION

The original goal of this project was to gain access to the details of fire-setting from adults who set fires when they were children and through the accounts provided attempt to understand the meaning(s) fire has for children who set fires. Some authors have suggested that fire would show symbolic meaning or some representative quality would make it appealing to fire-setters; however, analysis of the interviews provided no such symbolic meaning. Instead, fire emerged as serving a purpose, and I am left to interpret what this purpose may be, and why fire was the chosen form.

Returning to the previously discussed literature, many theories were inconsistent with this study's accounts of fire-setting; however, other authors' ideas captured, in part, some of the experiences described by the participants during the study. To better grasp the phenomenon of childhood fire-setting, a brief consideration of this literature seems appropriate.

Psychodynamics and Fire-setting

Writers such as Freud (1932), Grinstein (1952), and Rothstein (1963) attribute fire-setting to repressed sexual tension. That is, as one contains and represses sexual desires, tension and frustration increases and results in fire-setting behavior. For these writers, fire-setting is an externalization of inner conflicts. Similarly, Kaufman and Heims (1961) describe fire-setting as a mechanism for coping with inner tension. This inner tension is initially denied and avoided only to be later externalized through fire-setting. Whereas these authors see libidinal urges and infantile development as the tensions related to fire-setting behavior, the participants gave no indication that this was

the case. Instead, although the participants acknowledged conflict/tension, this study indicates that the origins of this tension and other factors should also be explored.

Attachment and Fire-setting Behavior

Yarnell (1940) described fire-setting, for latency age children, as being an aggressive act directed toward some member of the family. Various other writers have acknowledged the aggressiveness of fire-setting behavior and attribute it to displacement of anger related to abusive parenting (Sakheim, 1985; Jayaprakash, 1984; Heath, 1984). These writers mark a shift away from conceptualizations based on drive theory and toward understanding fire-setting relationally.

Although the relational aspect of childhood fire-setting is crucial to my understanding of the phenomenon, attributing fire-setting to anger resulting from abusive parenting is not consistent with the accounts provided during this study. What participants described was not abusive parenting, but instead parenting that was critical and was interpreted by them as reflective of an individual's worth to the parent. That is, each participant described poor family relations, and expressed feeling he was a burden or exhausting to those around him. Bowlby (1969) characterizes the relationship between the child and mother as foundational for later attachment and essential to the development of emotional security. Other writers have incorporated these ideas on the mother-child relationship with emphasis being placed on the symbolic meaning the mother holds for the child; however, for Bowlby attachment is a relational concept that is lived/experienced between the mother and child. It should be noted that although Bowlby only refers to the relationship between the mother and child, many writers have explored the impact of the father and other care-givers in similar ways; consequently, it seems fair

to generalize the concepts outlined by Bowlby to all care-givers (Grossman et al., 2002; Marsiglio and Cohan, 2000).

Based on their accounts, it is clear that our participants felt isolated or disconnected from their families. Although this does not necessarily indicate a lack of attachment in early development, it does suggest that the child did not feel a strong sense of attachment or connectedness during childhood. Looking at their accounts, I find that the participants' seem to utilize similar strategies to cope with feeling isolated and disconnected. Fairbairn wrote on the concept of "splitting" as a defense used to respond to frustration. More specifically, splitting is a response to frustration resulting from one's interactions with the parental figure(s). That is, splitting is a way for a child to separate negative experiences with their parents from their overall view that the parent is good. Although writers such as Klein (1946) and Guntrip (1961) have written from different vantage points on the idea of splitting, Teyber (1997) gives a functional explanation that addresses the relational dynamics consistent with the accounts provided by this study's participants:

The frustrating parent is no longer "bad" which allows the child to view the external world as safe. The price, however, is inner conflict: The child believes that, if only he or she were different, parental love would be forthcoming . . . The child's belief that he or she is bad maintains the illusion that the world is orderly and just. This self-negating distortion enables the child to cope--to feel that he or she has some control over events and is not shamelessly helpless, ineffectual, or vulnerable. (Teyber, 1997, pg. 9)

For our participants, ambivalence on the part of, and perceived rejection by, their parents apparently magnified negative feelings about themselves. That is, although the participants expressed having some connectedness to their parents, they also expressed feeling as though they were a source of parental frustration. Two of the participants recalled feeling as though their parents had given up on correcting them after they continued to misbehave after being disciplined. For Carlos, it was not misbehavior that led to isolation, but instead it was his “feminine” interests and nature that were a source of frustration for his mother and extended family. His family’s frustration conveyed a desire for Carlos to change his sexual orientation, and their frustration increased as it became clear that this was not likely. Attempting to make sense of the oscillation between connectedness and frustration, participants seemed to have used splitting in order to cope. That is, rather than blaming their parents for not being supportive or consistent in their parenting, our participants blamed themselves for eliciting this response from their parents.

Having experienced early loss related to their fathers’ departures and experienced disconnection from parents, it seemed clear to the participants that the potential for loss and rejection was possible, if not likely, and that they would be left to face the world by themselves. To keep their worlds safe, stable, and consistent, preserving the idealized parent is essential and can be done through splitting. However, for splitting to be effective, a child must accept responsibility for any problem or lack of support as being a response to something he has done. Likewise, the child also feels responsible for remedying the situation and hopes that if he changes, he would be able to elicit the desired response from the parent. In time, this burden led to frustration and fire-

setting appears to have been used, at times, to force connection between the parent and child. For example, Carlos conveyed that he set his fire in the hopes that his mother would discover his fire-setting and stay with him rather than going on her date.

Interestingly enough, each participant also described involvement in religion, specifically Western religion, which reinforced the idea of personal responsibility for his life, and the importance of having a personal desire to change. That is, when the parents became frustrated with the child, they referred to clergy or scripture that conveyed that the child was not meeting the standards of morality and behavior outlined, and consequently it was he who was creating the difficulties. This response, as well as religious teachings that supported this response, seems to have served as validation that the participants were responsible for their difficulties and consequently were responsible for resolving these difficulties.

Whereas Freud and Grinstein characterize fire-setting as a response to frustration derived from repressed sexual desires, the accounts provided suggest that the frustration experienced by the participants was a response to their failure to elicit a sense of connection with their parents. In short, although participants incorporated splitting as a way of preserving the idealized view of the parent, they still did not receive the nurture and connection they desired. In Teyber's words, "These children are trapped in an unsolvable dilemma: They can not succeed in evoking a reliable response from their parents, nor can they escape or forsake their need for attachment. In a word they feel anguish" (Teyber, 1997, pg. 8).

By understanding the "anguish" experienced by our participants, I gain a greater appreciation for the situation in which our participants found themselves:

Although there was a desire for attachment, they did not feel attached. Further, their disconnectedness spread into school and/or social situations, where they again found themselves desiring a connection that was unavailable. Having already assumed responsibility for feeling disconnected from the family, it is likely that the participants assumed responsibility for feeling isolated elsewhere as well: Each participant conveyed that had he done things differently, his life would have been better. This felt isolation increased the participants' level of frustration and, as mentioned earlier, this frustration could be seen as related to fire-setting. Although all the reasons for this are unclear, it seems that their experienced lack of connection to others played a significant role.

Emotions Related to Fire-setting Behavior

Although I have placed emphasis on the frustration the participants experienced, it would appear that anger was also being expressed. Two of the participants explicitly stated being angry when they set fires, and identified their anger as being related to setting a fire. Given the desire to preserve the idealized view of their parent, their anger was not able to be directed toward their parent, but instead was expressed through indirect means. It seems for our participants that this was accomplished through setting a fire. Likewise, anger about unmet desires was exacerbated by frustration about inability to change their situation. In essence, they felt helpless. It should be noted that, while many other emotions such as sadness or disappointment may have been felt, they were situational and not explicitly described. Likewise, Ronald's fire-setting seems best explained through curiosity rather than emotional upset. However, the anger and frustration experienced by the other participants seem to have superceded the situational emotions, and were the emotions that emerged most directly from our interviews.

Having identified the emotions experienced by the participants, one begins to wonder why these emotions were expressed behaviorally: why could these emotions not have been verbalized and explored with family members? In addition to parenting styles that necessitate some splitting defenses, lack of or ineffective communication likely contributed to fire-setting behavior. That is, the participants did not express comfort discussing their difficulties with their parents. Instead, they said they sought information elsewhere. The participants likely feared that discussing their difficulties within their families would lead to further isolation and criticism. It was clear through the interviews with the participants that they had a desire to express their feelings to others but never felt that this was something that could be done. One could speculate that this inability to convey their feelings and experiences from childhood did not go away, and in fact, may have in part led to their volunteering for this project.

When children use splitting, their self-esteem is diminished by accepting blame for the shortcomings of their parent(s). In addition to fear of further isolation or criticism, the participants apparently felt little ability to express themselves. The participants likely developed a sense of having little control over the world and, further, that attempts to verbalize their difficulties would be ineffective. McWilliams (1994) writes of self-esteem being based on the view, no matter how unrealistic, that one has influence over the world; it seems reasonable, then, that low self-esteem would affect the amount of influence a child feels he has over his environment.

Although participants were able to describe the fires they set and elaborate on their context, they provided little information regarding why they chose fire, leaving me to speculate. One idea is that fire was able to convey the intensity of their emotions in a

way that other behaviors would not: Setting a fire is regarded as a serious act and it may be that seriousness which is sought when expressing the anger and frustration experienced. For example although a behavior like stealing would be viewed as wrong, it does not seem to convey the emotional intensity of fire-setting.

Another consideration is that fire-setting is not a behavior that would be described as morally wrong. That is, stealing is wrong, fighting is wrong, breaking items in the house is wrong; however fire-setting is not as likely to be formally addressed as those behaviors. Given the criticism already experienced, it appears that fire-setting was a way to express frustration and anger without shouldering further feelings of themselves as bad or immoral. Although it is probable that children know fire-setting is prohibited, given common prohibition not to play with fire, it does not seem to have the same implications of immorality as stealing or fighting. Conversely, it could be that the religious values taught by their family conveyed that fire was taboo and that it was this taboo that was appealing. That is, our participants felt disconnected from their peers as well as their family, and fire-setting may have been used as a purposeful way to violate societal norms, as they understood them, in a way that would be noticed by all.

Given the isolation experienced as well as their inability to change this situation, I would postulate that fire-setting was chosen because it was a behavior in which the participants could have control and impact their environment. That is, it seems possible that fire-setting was a way for these children to feel some control. Although they may have not felt as though they could change their family dynamics or social situation, they were able to control their behavior and were able to choose to act out behaviorally through fire-setting.

Finally, one has to wonder, given the behavioral difficulties described by participants, if fire-setting wasn't used experimentally in an attempt, as Kaufmann and Heims (1961) suggest, to bring attention to the family's difficulties. More likely, it would seem that our participants, attempted to use fire-setting to get the attention of a specific person. That is, all participants described their fire-setting behavior as encompassing a rather brief period of time, so it seems that fire-setting may have been a way to elicit a response, and, when the desired response was not given or they were disciplined, they abandoned that behavior.

Cultural Understanding of Fire-setting

In understanding the participants' fire-setting behavior, it is important to explore what aspects of this behavior may have been related to culture. Although there is some indication that Ramel and possibly Carlos used fire-setting to express emotions directly related to their family, it does not necessarily indicate that their fire-setting was pathological. In fact, when discussing this during the feedback session, each participant reiterated that for him fire-setting was just another example of misbehavior and placed little importance on it. Likewise, in looking at the examples of misbehavior provided by Ramel, it seems that his peers shaped his misbehavior and what was acceptable within that peer group. For example, he discussed his peers putting an animal in a microwave and expressed few emotions regarding this. This seems to suggest that misbehavior was somewhat normal in his peer group and that behavior that would be viewed as extreme by others was not considered so extreme in his peer group. Returning to the literature of fire-setting, in their review of early literature, Kaufmann and Heims (1961) present fire as attributed both positive and negative qualities and cite Biblical accounts of fire being

used by God to lead Moses and his people through the desert to the Promised Land, while the story of Sodom and Gomorrah presents fire as punishment for their moral transgressions. Given the religiousness of their families, one has to wonder if fire was a taboo that was explored through setting fires. This certainly seems to be the case with Ronald, who described a fascination with fire even after his fire-setting behavior had stopped.

Contributions of this Study

At the onset of this study, there were several contributions, both theoretical and practical, which I had hoped this project would make. In terms of theoretical implications, I hoped that the results would support or challenge previous ideas on fire-setting and provide accounts of the experience of children who set fires. In the end, however, such accounts were difficult to access and instead I was provided with beliefs and experiences by adult participants which could be used to understand the commonalities in the participants' childhoods. Although this information may be possible to develop with theoretical goals in mind, it seems that this current study did little to challenge already existing theories on fire-setting. It should be noted that although this project did challenge existing theories, there were some commonalities that emerged among all of our participants. Even though writers such as Dittman (2004) would likely categorize Ronald as an experimental fire-setter, while Carlos would be categorized as a "cry-for-help" fire-setter, there may be some commonalities among the different types of fire-setters such as ineffective communication, anger, and interpersonal disconnect, that lead to fire-setting behavior.

I had also hoped that the results of this study would be of some practical use to clinicians who work with youths who set fires. Given hypotheses that state that fire-setting is used by some to express emotions, it seems that the accounts of their family and social experiences as well as the emotions related to these experiences will help clinicians be better able to identify possible areas of concern and be more effective in working with clients to help them verbalize and express these feelings in a less destructive way. Specifically, our participants expressed feeling interpersonally disconnected, unable to communicate this disconnection, and ineffective in changing their relationships. Moreover, our participants expressed feeling as though they were to blame for their difficulties. For clinicians working with youths who set fires, this provides a starting point from which they could begin understanding a young fire-setter's perceptions.

Finally, I anticipated that parents of children who set fires would benefit from reading accounts of setting fires provided by other children and gain a better understanding of why youths set fires. For our participants there was a desire to have a connection to their parents but a belief that this was not possible or that their parents would reject them if they expressed their feelings. Given indications that youths who set fires may feel unable to express themselves verbally, the accounts provided may allow parents access to possible concerns/feelings their children may be having and make themselves available to discuss these areas with their children.

Limitations and Implications for Further Study

In concluding this study, it seems appropriate to discuss its limits as well as its implications for future research. One obvious limitation was sample size. Although understanding an individual's experience in life and what may have motivated his fire-

setting behavior is important, it is still only the account of a single individual. As the number of interviews increases, so does the information that might be applicable to others who engage in fire-setting behavior. From further interviews with other childhood fire-setters new and more specific experiences/beliefs might emerge that would offer us a deeper understanding of this phenomenon.

Besides a limited number of participants, there was no contact with other family members. Interviews with other family members in addition to the participant would deepen our knowledge of the context surrounding the fire-setting behavior and provide multiple accounts of a child's early childhood experiences. Given that early literature raises the idea of thought distortions as causal for fire-setting behaviors, obtaining information from other family members would help prove or rule out misperceptions of dysfunction in an otherwise stable situation. That is, other interviews could support or rule out the possibility that the participants were troubled children who created the problems they experienced. Information obtained from family members would also reveal and/or elucidate other behavioral difficulties.

Another limitation is that these interviews occurred with adults who may not remember the details as accurately as they would have in the moment. As people age memories fade, and especially memories of events linked to painful events or trauma. One would presume that accounts provided nearer the time of the fire-setting events would offer us more accurate information about and understanding of what the child's experience was truly like. Additionally, given the different typologies of fire-setters, it seems that categorizing fire-setters at the beginning of a study may allow for a better understanding of the individual differences among different types of fire-setters. Finally,

it is possible that motivations regarding fire-setting, like many other motivations, are unconscious and not easily accessible through an interview format.

Additionally, this study is limited by the lack of a comparison group to which I could compare the experiences of my participants. That is, without a comparison group, it is impossible to know whether other adult males who did not engage in fire-setting behavior as children would share the experiences described by my participants. Thus, a comparison group would allow me to delineate those experiences that are unique only to those individuals who set fires as children.

A final limitation would be the scope of interest. That is, from the onset, this project was designed to attempt to understand the meaning of fires to children who set fires. Literature on fire-setting proved insightful but did not seem to capture the context associated with fire-setting; therefore, my goal was to attempt to capture meanings of fire-setting by understanding the context in which fire-setting emerged and attempt to understand how it was that my participants chose to set fires. What emerged were case studies rich in interpersonal conflict and experienced guilt and shame. One would presume that a colleague reviewing the same interviews would spot areas of interest that I did not explore. That is, upon review it is clear that the information obtained was influenced by my scope of interest, and, in some ways, I, like other researchers, found those areas that I was looking for. Therefore, a future study with a broader area of interest, allowing for more theoretical diversity would prove beneficial.

Conclusion

In closing, common experiences/beliefs emerged through the interviews conducted that provide insight into fire-setting behavior. The participants in this study

felt isolated in their families and attributed this to a defect in themselves. Likewise, their sense of isolation extended into school and other social settings and they believed that there was something about them that was causing the isolation. Although the exact purpose of fire-setting was not determined, it seems clear that fire-setting reflected the participants' isolation and their confusion about their place in their families and school/social settings. In addition, fire-setting seemed to reflect their sense of helplessness and their anger at their inability to connect with people. Finally, it seems that fire-setting may have been a way for the participants to have impact on or some control over their environment.

Exploration of the feelings of those who engage in fire-setting behavior was unique to this study and its findings may have heuristic value for future study of fire-setting behavior. A study that included numerous meetings with children who were engaging in fire-setting behavior at the time of the study, obtained information from parents and teachers, and had a comparison group would likely shed further light on the experience of setting a fire as a child.

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APPENDIX A: SOLICITATION POSTER

Are you someone over the age of 18 who set fires as a child?

Do you want to help children who set fires get the help they need by talking about fires you set as a child?

HELP KIDS WHO SET FIRES

I am actively seeking adults who set fires as children to talk about the fires they set. Information gained through this project will be used to expand the understanding of why children set fires. It is hoped that by understanding why children set fires, better treatment of these individuals will result. Information will be gathered through an interview process and all identifying information gathered will be disguised to protect each participant's privacy.

If you have any questions about this research or would like to volunteer to participate in this study, please do not hesitate to contact Andrew Ward at (315) 382-6181.

Andrew Ward M.A. at Duquesne University in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania is conducting this research. This research is being done in partial fulfillment of requirements for a Ph.D. in Clinical Psychology.

APPENDIX B: INFORMED CONSENT FORM

INTRODUCTION: I, _____, have been asked to participate in this research study that has been explained to me by _____.

PURPOSE OF STUDY:

This research is being conducted in an attempt to explore why children set fires. This research is intended for the ultimate goal of improving treatment for children who set fires. Andrew Ward M.A. at Duquesne University in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania is conducting this research. This research is being done in partial fulfillment of requirements for a Ph.D. in psychology.

PROCEDURES: This study will rely on the use of the following: (1) information gathered during the interview regarding my history, including time in my life that fires were set, and (2) 3 taped semi-structured interviews concerning the fires I set and the circumstances surrounding these fires. During the final interview, I will be asked about my experience of talking about fires I have set in order to ensure that I have not become emotionally upset. It should be noted that if a participant expresses concern or seems upset, Mr. Ward will recommend that I seek therapy and will provide a referral if requested to do so.

BENEFITS: I will be assisting in the gathering of critical information regarding the understanding of children who set fires. As a result of participation it is hoped that a better understanding of children who set fires will lead to better treatment of such individuals.

RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS: Although it is possible that I may become upset by discussing fires I have set, there are no anticipated risks or discomforts of participation in this research, and anonymity of responses is assured. It should be noted, that if I become upset, I should discuss this with Mr. Ward and determine whether or not to continue with the interview. Regardless of whether or not the interviews continue, Mr. Ward will recommend that I seek therapy and will provide a referral if requested to do so. There is no penalty for early withdrawal from participation in this research project.

CONTACT PERSONS: For answers to questions regarding this research or for additional information, I can contact Andrew Ward at (414) 687-2614. For additional information regarding my rights as a research participant, I may contact Paul Richer, chairperson of the Institutional Review Board at Duquesne University at (412) 396-5074 or Bruce Fink, Director of this research at Duquesne University at (412) 396-6516.

CONFIDENTIALITY: I understand that any information obtained during this research will be kept confidential. I also understand that all identifying information transcribed from the tape-recorded interviews will be disguised or deleted. I understand that at the end of the study all taped interviews will be destroyed. Until the end of the study, the

tapes will be stored in a secured locked place. I understand that Mr. Ward's research records may be requested by court order and may be inspected by governmental authorities and used by law enforcement for court proceedings against me. In any publications that may result from this research, no information will be published through which I can be identified.

 Signature of Participant

 Date

 Signature of Investigator

 Date

VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION: Participation in this study is voluntary. I understand that I am free to withdraw my consent for participation in this study at any time. I further understand that all data collected will be destroyed upon withdrawal from this study. Refusal to participate or withdrawal will involve no penalty or loss of status. I have been given the opportunity to ask questions about the research, and I have received answers concerning information I did not understand.

I will receive a signed copy of this form after I sign it.

SIGNATURES:

I willingly consent to participate in this research study and give to be audio-taped while being interviewed.

 Signature of Participant

 Date

 Signature of Investigator

 Date

APPENDIX C: SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Rapport Building

- Maybe we could start with you just telling me a little about yourself.
- What are your interests?
- Where do you live?
- Who do you live with?

General Background Information

Family Background

- Where did you grow up? Were you ever taken out of your parents care?
- What was your home like?
- What was your neighborhood like?
- Do you have any brothers or sisters? Ages? Where do they live now?
- Did you get along with them when you were younger? How about now?
- Tell me about your parents. Are they living? How old are they? How did they make money?
- Were your parents married? Are your parents still married? How old were you when they divorced? Who did you live with?
- Do you remember your parents ever arguing? About what? How would they argue? Did they ever fight physically?
- Was your family religious? Are you religious?
- Did anyone in your family ever use drugs and/or alcohol? What were they like when they were under the influence?
- Does anyone in your family have psychological/emotional problems? How did the rest of the family view this?

- Has anyone in the family had trouble with the police? Was there any adultery in the family? Was there any sexual abuse in the family?
- Who handled discipline in your family? How were you disciplined?

Friends and Social Background

- Did you have friends as a child? Were you ever involved in a gang?
- Did you ever get into trouble with the police as a child? What types of things would you do?
- Did you ever get into trouble for hurting animals?
- Did you ever run away from home? Were you ever placed in Juvenile detention?

Educational History

- Tell me about your education? What was the highest grade you completed?
- What were your grades like in grade school? High School? Was school hard for you?
- Were you ever in special classes? Were you ever diagnosed with a learning disability?
- Have you ever had an IQ/standardized tests done? How did you do?
- Did you ever get into trouble in school? Truancy? Suspension?

Medical/Psychiatric History

- What was your health like as a child? Do you remember being sick often? Hospitalizations? Broken bones?
- Did you ever have emotional/behavioral problems when you were a child? Did you ever have to go see a counselor, psychologist, or clergy about any of your behaviors?
- Did you ever have any trouble sleeping? Bedwetting? Nightmares?
- Do you remember ever thinking about or trying to hurt yourself as a child? What did you think would happen?

Sexual History

- How did you first learn about sex? Who taught you about sex?
- How was sex viewed in your family? Did anyone talk about it?
- When was the first time you had sex? Who was it with? What were the circumstances?
- How did you feel about it afterward? What was your relationship with this person like afterward?

APPENDIX D: SYNTHESIZED TRANSCRIPTS OF FIRST AND SECOND INTERVIEWS AND PARTICIPANT FEEDBACK

Subject 1: Carlos

Rapport Building

Q: Maybe we could start with you just telling me a little about yourself.

A: Umm. Well, I am 24. I am working as a waiter and am going to try and go to school next year. (For what?) Umm...I don't know.

Q: What are your interests?

A: Like socially? Um, I like to go out every now and then and have a drink or two...just relax and chill out.

Q: Who do you live with?

A: Right now, I live by myself. I have some family, well my grandmother lives in the city, but we don't really talk that much. (Why is that?) Well, it's a long and boring story...mostly boring.

General Background Information

Family Background

Q: Where did you grow up? Were you ever taken out of your parents care?

A: Which part? Well, in Long Island. It was just a small town. I mean, certain things about it were nice, but Chattanooga in Tennessee is where I grew into an adult and did adult things. But, in Tennessee, it was just small, period. Like when I first went to school in Tennessee, it was hard for me. The transition from NY to down there was hard. But, then, things got better in high school. It was nice. I had a nice life in Chattanooga. It was friendly. I mean, they had problems with crime and shit, just like any other town, but it was nice.

Q: What was your home like?

A: The first part of my life, it was me and my brother and mother. Then, my brother dies when I was eleven, and, then, it was just me and my mother. (Would you like to say anything about that?) Well, he had a girlfriend, and she had lived with us. And, then, she got an apartment, and he went to her house, and he wasn't supposed to be over there, and some guys thought he was someone else and shot him. From then on, it was me and my mother. I mean, I still had my niece and nephews and saw them...just in the house, it was my mother and me. Then, we like moved to Tennessee and there was like (quotes with his fingers) "The new guy." (How old were you?) Like, I was in the seventh or eighth grade, so like thirteen or fourteen or something like that.

Q: Do you have any brothers or sisters? Ages?

A: Well, I did have one brother. He was older than me, like nine or ten years older than me. But, he was killed when I was eleven.

Q: Did you get along with them when you were younger? How about now?

A: I mean, we were cool. He used to kick my ass when I wouldn't listen to him...but we were cool. I did kinda look to him as a father figure. Kinda sad. I still miss him sometimes.

Q: Tell me about your parents. Are they living? How old are they? How did they make money?

A: I mean, my mom and I got along fine up until she married my stepfather. Then, things did not end up so well. It was like, it was another her. (Now?) Now, everything is fine. We have the perfect relationship. She just recently moved from Tennessee to New York, and I paid for her to come up here. Up until the point he left her, we did not talk. After that, I think she realized... 'cause I was in jail, actually. Then, after I got out of jail, it was all set up that I would get a job as a quality inspector at my old job and live with her. I moved out of the house when I was like eighteen, second semester of my senior year I moved out. (What lead up to that?) Me moving out? She kicked me out. She told me I had to go. The first house we lived in Tennessee she owned, and, then, when she moved in with her husband, she got another house. But, she let me stay in the first house. It wasn't in really good condition, so I lived there and worked on it for her. So, she kicked me out, but she made sure I had shelter. She just knew that it would be better for me and that things were only going to get worse between me and her husband.

Q: Were your parents married? How old were you when they divorced?

A: Well, my mother and father were together until I was around nine. (Then?) Well, I guess they had problems, and he left when I was about nine. I saw him like once after that when I was around eleven. Actually, it was at my brother's funeral. After that, I never saw him again...just got a check once a month and a birthday card with ten dollars in it.

Q: Are your mother and your stepfather still married?

A: No, he died. I hated that bastard. He was so...mean. He was just...mean, for no reason. It was just that he made a nice life for my mother. The house was nice; the cars were nicer. He was a cab driver and owned his own cab company, so he had a little bit of money. But, it hurt me that she would allow him to say the things he said to me, just because. I mean, she is my mom. She should have stuck up for me. (And you didn't feel like that happened?) That she stood up for me? No. I mean, I felt her and why she wanted to move from NY, and she wanted good things for me. I just don't think she should have sacrificed our relationship.

- Q: Do you remember your parents ever arguing? About what? How would they argue? Did they ever fight physically?
- A: Not really. I mean, I was little when my father left, and, then with my stepfather, my mom just did what he wanted and tuned me out. I don't know. I spent most of the time in my room. I really only came out to eat. I had a computer and a phone, so I pretty much just stayed in my room and tried to stay out of sight. They had the perfect marriage. He put food on the table, she wash and ironed his clothes. It was the perfect marriage. She was like Mrs. Cleaver. (It doesn't sound like you felt like you fit into that?) I think I was in the way. I think he did not like sharing her with me. I don't know if it was because I wasn't his kid or what but he left my mom when he found out that she had lied to him...or something. Who knows? Basically, the guy was an asshole...that's it. He was an asshole. I mean, he used to make fun of my sexuality and shit like that. (And your mom never said anything?) No, I think she liked the money. (What did you make of that?) I thought it was bullshit...especially...**ESPECIALLY** 'cause she knew what James had done to me.
- Q: Was your family religious?
- A: Yes...well, I wouldn't say real religious, but you had to go to church. And, you couldn't do things on Sunday 'cause it was the Sabbath day and the Lord rested. You couldn't iron or do any housework really. (What type of church would you go to?) Baptist. My aunt was my Sunday school teacher.
- Q: Are you religious?
- A: Well, right now, I would say that I am away from God based on what I was raised to believe. I think I am distant from God right now. Like my lifestyle and how I choose to live is not the same as I was raised or based on what I was raised to think was right.
- Q: Did anyone in your family ever use drugs and/or alcohol?
- A: Well, my mom smoked weed. I really never like knew that that is what they were Doing, until I got older. They tried to keep it on the sly. But, as I was growing up, there were little things, like not dumping the ashtray 'cause my mom would want a roach out of it. Then, as I got older, I started to recognize the smell and kinda put two and two together. I never really saw it until I got older.
- Q: What was she like when they were under the influence?
- A: Well, I mean, it's hard to say. When I was younger, but she just kinda relaxed. You know, she would listen to some music and knit on the couch.
- Q: Does anyone in your family have psychological or emotional problems?
- A: My cousin, Mara. We used to say she was crazy. But, as an adult, I find out that she was an addict, like a crack head. But, she was seriously gone sometimes. Like she went through this stage in her life where Michael Jackson was God to her. Not just like an obsessed fan...she thought he was God! She had this album cover, I think it's BAD or something, and he is sitting on a throne, and there are horns

coming out of his head? Well, she said that she had a vision one day that it was picture of God, and she seriously, honestly believed that he was God. The family shunned her and everything, but she is cool. She is clean now and is back. She lives in Tennessee.

Q: How did the rest of the family view this?

A: She was our family. I mean, if she didn't have anywhere else to go, she could stay with us. But, she would just stay for a couple days, and, then, she would be back out. Her and my brother got into a fight about it once, but she just did her own things.

Q: Has anyone in the family had trouble with the police?

A: (Laughs) All of us! Well, all of the boys. My Aunt Jerry had four kids, and one of her kids got hit by a car and killed, like two years before my brother. But, anyways, after that all her kids started getting into trouble for like drugs, stealing, and stuff like that. All of them are like in and out, like clockwork. It's funny 'cause my Aunt Jerry is the Sunday school teacher. She is like really religious. But all her kids are out there. (What was your mother's reaction to this?) Well, my brother got locked up once before he got killed. Like, right before he got killed. He got in trouble for drugs. The detectives came in on a drug raid. But, my mother wouldn't go visit him or accept his calls or anything until he came home. It was kinda sad that he had my nephew and was just getting his life back together when he was killed. Really sad.

Q: And your mother would not talk to him?

A: Well, if his girlfriend called on three-way, she would talk to him, but she would not accept his calls or send him letters. No phone calls or nothing. She was just like you got yourself into this, and you can get yourself out of it. It wasn't the money...it was the principle. 'Cause, when I went to jail, it was the same sort of thing towards me. She wanted us to know that she was disappointed and was not going to go out of her way for us. (What was the reaction when he got out of jail?) I mean, we were happy to see him. I remember coming home from school; and he was hiding; and I was so happy to see him. And when he was home, there was no problem. He had gotten himself out of trouble, so he was welcomed back. If he would have kept getting in trouble, it might have been different. But, he wasn't doing that.

Q: Was there any adultery in the family? Was there any sexual abuse in the family?

A: Well, no adultery. There was sexual abuse though. One of my Aunt Jerry's kids molested me, but I wouldn't necessarily call it abuse. Because it wasn't really all bad to me. I was like maybe eight or nine. I am not sure. My cousin was like seven years older than me. (Did you tell anyone about it?) Well, my mother actually caught us. Well, she didn't catch us, but she walked by the bedroom where we were sleeping and saw us try to cover ourselves. We didn't know anybody was up. So, then she called me into the bathroom and asked me what was going on. I don't remember what the conversation was. I just remember her

getting really upset, and there was a bunch of drama. Everyone had to wake up, and she hit my cousin. It was really serious. (How did the rest of the family react?) Well, nobody knew about it except the two families that were involved. You know my mom and my Aunt Jerry handled it. One of my cousins did know, though. (Did anyone take precautions with you two after that...you know, to make sure you didn't...) Do anything? (Well yeah.) Well, we were just staying at their house, like living there, and, then, we moved, so it didn't really come up again. We didn't really have the chance.

Q: You said one of your cousins knew about it?

A: Well, not at the time she didn't. But, like later, when I was an adult I was at a family reunion, and Aunt Jerry was there with her sons. So, I didn't really want to be there with them, so another cousin and me went on a walk. And, she asked me why I didn't want to be there, and I told her what James had done to me. (What was her reaction?) She got really upset 'cause he had done the same things to her, and no one did anything about it. (Did anyone know about it?) I don't know...but, I never knew anything about it 'til she told me.

Q: Who handled discipline in your family? How were you disciplined?

A: Well, my mom did...and my brother, when he was alive. Mostly, I would just get grounded or have something taken away. I mean, I have gotten spankings tons of times from my mom, but, you know, nothing major. My brother would beat me sometimes when I didn't listen, but, you know, I don't think I was abused or anything.

Friends and Social Background

Q: Did you have friends as a child?

A: Yeah, I had friends. Seventh and eighth grade were hard 'cause that was like the transition to a new part of the country, but into high school I started getting more popular and had plenty of friends. I never meet a stranger. (Were you ever involved in a gang?) No. I was always kinda the sissy boy. (What do you mean?) Well, I was always doing the girls stuff. Like I could double dutch better than throw a football. So, there would always be the boys playing and, then, me playing with the girls. (What did you make of that?) Well, I was supposed to do boy stuff.

Q: Did you ever get into trouble with the police as a child? What types of things would you do?

A: No, nothing really happened for me in life until I was eighteen. I moved out when I was eighteen. That's when I first went to jail. That's when I first tried drugs...everything. 'Cause, I think I was too young to be out there like that in the world. I think I needed the shelter of home 'cause maybe some of those things probably would not have happened. Like, after my brother got killed, my mother was scared to let me do too much. I had everything I needed at home but really didn't know as much about the world, and suddenly I am in it. But, I do

understand my mother lost one son, and she didn't want to lose another one. I mean, she told me that all the time, so like football games or concerts were out. I knew why. It just caused problems later. (How did you feel about that?) Well, I mean, I disagreed with it 'cause I felt like things could happen no matter where you were. But, at the same time, I respected her wishes.

Q: Did you ever run away from home? Were you ever placed in Juvenile detention?

A: (Laughs) Yeah, one time I walked like maybe four miles to my great grandmother's house. But, she didn't want me to stay. So she called my uncle, and he brought me back home. And I got in trouble...got on punishment. (How old were you?) Like fourteen. It was serious. I couldn't use the computer or talk on the phone for like two weeks. I got cursed out...like "you think you're old enough to be on your own" type of comments.

Educational History

Q: Tell me about your education? What was the highest grade you completed?

A: It was fine. I mean, actually, when I was younger, it was kinda a drag. Not really because of school, but, you know, I didn't really have many friends. Then, when I went to Tennessee, things change. (How?) Well, I mean, the first year or so I was there, it was like just transition time. But, then, like later in jr. high and definitely high school, I was the Bell of the Ball. I had these two girlfriends that I would hang out with, and we were all sassy. But, they were kinda cool, so I was part of the group. And, people just accepted who I was. It was nice. As far as school, I did graduate, but, after high school, I just needed a break. I hated doing schoolwork.

Q: What were your grades like in grade school? High school? Was school hard for you?

A: My grades were fine. I mean, I wasn't on the honor roll or anything like that, but they were good enough. Like, I said I didn't like doing schoolwork and didn't always get it, but good enough to get by.

Q: Were you ever in special classes? Were you ever diagnosed with a learning disability?

A: No, not really. Like, I said, I was the smartest kid, but I definitely wasn't the dumbest either.

Q: Have you ever had an IQ/standardized tests done? How did you do?

A: Well, just those school tests...you know, like achievement tests. But, I don't really know how well I did.

Q: Did you ever get into trouble in school? Truancy? Suspension?

A: Well, yeah, but not really too much. My mom just didn't really go for that sort of thing, and I think I was still scared of my mom when I was in school. Even high school, I might get sassy with a teacher a little bit, but I knew that I couldn't push it too far, or there would be some serious...umm, well, lets just say some serious problems.

Medical/Psychiatric History

Q: What was your health like as a child? Do you remember being sick often? Hospitalizations? Broken bones?

A: It was fine. I mean, regular kids stuff, like falling off my bike and shit like that. I was a pretty healthy kid. But, it wasn't like my mom didn't keep an eye on me...especially after my brother died. If I had a cough, I went to the doctor.

Q: Did you ever have emotional or behavioral problems when you were a child? Did you ever have to go see a counselor or psychologist about any of your behaviors?

A: I saw a shrink one time, and that was after my brother got killed. (Not after the abuse?) No, I don't think it was seen as something that you talked about. It really wasn't that big of a deal...I guess.

Q: Did you ever have any trouble sleeping? Nightmares?

A: Well, kinda. I mean, when I was little, I used to be real scared of going to bed. (Like how old?) Umm, well, probably nine or so. (So after the stuff with James?) Yeah, other than that, not really.

Q: Do you remember ever thinking about or trying to hurt yourself as a child? What did you think would happen?

A: No. I never did stuff like that.

Sexual History

Q: How did you first learn about sex? Who taught you about sex?

A: Well, like it would have been with my cousin. Even though that's kinda fucked up. You know what is really weird? We didn't really see each other after that until I was like sixteen. Then, at sixteen, I approached him and asked him if he wanted me to suck his dick. (What do you make of that?) Well, he turned me down and told my mother. So, I don't make much of it. I don't know what that meant, like if I enjoyed it.

Q: What about after that?

A: Well, I mean, there were some kids in the neighborhood whose moms called my mom 'cause I was touching them...boys and girls. (How was that addressed?) Well, I guess, get a beating whenever someone would find out. (And what do you remember getting told about it? Like why were you getting beat?) That gay shit! Then, they made me talk to the pastor. (What did he say?) I was damned to hell, and God didn't like that. (What did you think about that, I mean as a kid?) Well, I don't know if I believed it. I mean, I don't believe it now. I guess I just had to suppress my feelings. I still did it. I was just careful to make sure I didn't do it with people who would tell. I mean, I don't know what I believe now is not what I believed then. (What did you believe then?) That I wasn't going to go to heaven gay...period. (Now?) Now, I believe God created everybody...all of us. And, I think if you're a good person, overall, I mean, God looks at your heart.

Q: How was sex viewed in your family? Did anyone talk about it?

A: Well, it wasn't something you talked about too much. Especially me. (You?) Well, with the whole gay thing. I mean, that's why you had pastors, I guess. (But no one in the family talked to you about sex?) Not really...maybe cousins or my brother might have said something. But, no one really sat me down and had the-birds-and-the-bees talk, if that's what you mean.

Fire Setting

Q: How many fires would you guess that you set?

A: Umm...well, I mean, I never burnt down anything big, just little shit like toys and shit. Maybe ten or so. I really have never counted. (More than a couple?) Definitely. Probably more than ten. I would have to think about it.

Q: Maybe you could tell me about a fire you set. A specific time that you set a fire that sticks out to you. How old were you?

A: Well, the one I remember was when I was like nine...thereabouts. Well, my brother was still alive, so I was younger than eleven. I set a trashcan on fire.

Q: What were the circumstances? What do you remember about it?

A: Well, I remember I came home from school and, you know, went and watched T.V., or whatever. Then, like my mom comes in and starts taking a shower and getting dressed up and all that. (Uh huh) And, I asked her if we were going somewhere. At first, she didn't even answer me. She was like all excited and listening to music. So, I just started getting dressed to go out with her. You know, got all dressed up, like a little man. So, I am like sitting on the couch, and she comes out, and I am like all proud of myself 'cause I thought she would be happy that I was all ready to go. And, then, she says that she is going on a date with some guy. Well, I was just a kid, so I was like "I want to go." And, she said that I couldn't go...like, "No." So, I started crying and kept asking her. And, she said that I couldn't go, and she left me with my brother. So, then, I was in my room,

and I was crying and upset. I took this piece of paper and lit it on fire and threw it in my garbage can and watched it start burning.

Q: What happened?

A: Well, like I was watching it, and I guess my brother wanted to see what I was doing, so he came in my room and told me to put that shit out. (Was he mad?) More annoyed, I think. I mean, he was like high-school age and was like, "What the hell are you doing? Do you want to burn down the God damn house." (Did you?) Well, I didn't want to burn down the house.

Q: What did you think would happen?

A: Well, I don't know what I thought would happen. I think maybe I just wanted my mom to come home...you know what I mean? I used to do that when she would go out on dates. I would set shit on fire. (Just when she went out?) Mostly...yep, I mean, I played with matches but never set things on fire.

Q: What was the family reaction?

A: Well, I mean, I don't remember it being a big deal. My brother told my mom, and she was like, "Well, he was probably just mad." I think she thought it was cute.

PARTICIPANT FEEDBACK

Overall, Carlos seemed to resonate with many of the ideas presented during the feedback session. Carlos acknowledged feeling different from his peers and felt isolated both socially and in school. Speaking about this, Carlos attributed much of this isolation to his sexuality. Carlos stated that he often felt as though there was something about him that was different than his peers, but was unable to identify this as related to his sexuality until he was older. Carlos added that although he did not feel as though he was able to discuss his feelings of being different with his family, he felt that much of this was because he was not fully aware of what was different about him.

With regards to his family, Carlos agreed that he felt isolated at time and attributed this to the religion in the family. Carlos reiterated that he felt his sexual acting out was "weird" and that he was sure his mother did not know how to handle this behavior. Carlos was persistent that despite some of the feelings he experienced as a child that he felt close to his mother. When asked about some of the times he felt that his mother was not supportive of him, Carlos stated that some of his mother's decisions were hurtful to him, but added that he felt like she had her own issues. Carlos went on to say that at times he felt like his mother was too critical and judgmental of him and his brother, but added that he felt like she wanted to protect them and that this was her way of doing this. Despite these high expectations, Carlos admitted that he felt that it was his responsibility to meet the expectations and that his mother would often intervene only when he had difficulty.

When discussing fire-setting and why he chose to set a fire, Carlos stated that he did not really understand his actions. Carlos was adamant that although he wanted his mother to come home, he did not want her to discover the fire he set. Carlos added that he

thought his mother would be upset by his fire-setting and was actually surprised when she was not upset. When asked what he thought about his reaction, Carlos stated that it was confusing but that he was glad he didn't get in trouble. When asked about participation in the study, Carlos stated that he felt good about what we talked about and that it was good to be able to get some of the stuff from his childhood "off his chest."

APPENDIX E: SYNTHESIZED TRANSCRIPTS OF FIRST AND SECOND INTERVIEWS AND PARTICIPANT FEEDBACK

Subject 2: Ronald

Rapport Building

Q: Maybe we could start with you just telling me a little about yourself.

A: I'm a doctoral candidate in clinical psychology at [a Pennsylvania school].

Q: What are your interests?

A: Umm...interests. Well, lately everything has focused on graduate school. Before that, I was very interested in science and have an astronomy hobby.

Q: Whom do you live with?

A: Wife and two-year-old daughter.

General Background Information

Family Background

Q: Where did you grow up?

A: I grew up in [a small town in PA]. A very rural place, low SES and working class. I spent most of my time when I was growing up in a house off of a main road that was very much a rural area. It was sort of a loose neighborhood. There was a fair number of kids around this loose connection of houses. (Whom did you live with?) I lived with my mother and father and my sister.

Q: Was there ever a time you didn't live with your parents?

A: Umm...Well, I had a brother when I was still very small. He was born when I was eighteen months old and died when I was three years old. During that time, I was transferred from relative to relative because he was very sick and had cerebral palsy and all kinds of things, and he needed a lot of intense care. So, my parents would be going down to Pittsburgh and to Philadelphia. I would stay with aunts and uncles.

Q: What, if anything, do you remember about how you were told about that?

A: I have always thought I had an emotional sense of that. My mother told me that it was very hard on her. She said that they would get back from being out of town, and she would come to give me affection, and I would be so angry at her for not being around her that I would push her away. So, I did resent it, and I think it developed into and has had some effects on me. I don't think I would have had a hard time if things would have...I never went to school until the first grade. I mean, the school where we were living at that time didn't have a kindergarten. So, I don't think I was as emotional or social as some of the other kids.

Q: What was your home like?

A: Umm...my home was very idyllic. Outside of the home, I had some friends who were actually my cousins and some other friends too. But, then again, I was always the kid who got picked on and so on. Um...which I think had to do with me not being a well-socialized kid. I was also quite a bit bigger than other kids. I would get picked on to a point, and, then, I would start fights with other kids and defend myself. I was big enough...significantly bigger than other kids, so I could do some damage. So, I would get into trouble for those fights.

Q: What was your neighborhood like?

A: Umm...it was rural, so I wouldn't say it was really a neighborhood. It was connected but a lot of people living in trailers, and you kinda had to walk a little to get to the neighbors. My parents were quite religious, so they had very rigid expectations for us and who we could associate with. A lot of the kids in the area didn't have good supervision, so there was a lot of crazy behaviors. (Can you give me an example?) Umm...just, there was a lot of sexual play and that sort of thing.

Q: Do you have any brothers or sisters? Ages? Where do they live now?

A: I have a younger sister four years old. I mean, four years younger than me. And, I have a deceased brother, who died when I was about 3 years old.

Q: What was your relationship like when you were younger?

A: Well, it was conflictual. We fought a tremendous amount. When I was by myself, I was a pretty nice kid. But, I had a first cousin who was a brother to me really. And, he would pick on my sister, and so would I. Even though he and I were only two months apart in age, I always looked up to him and kinda followed his lead. I actually feel kinda bad about it now. So, I was kinda hard on her. (And how did your parents react to the fighting?) Well, I think they were just more frustrated with me. I don't think they quite knew how to handle it. Compared to some of the kids I see now for evaluations, I don't think we were all that bad. It wasn't extreme sibling conflict. I just don't think my parents knew what to do about it.

I mean I have never sat down and thought about what was going on with my mother, but, losing a child like that, I have heard...people have told me, even my mother has told me, that she nearly did not get through that time. So, she felt like she was not there for me as much. She got pregnant with my sister several months after my brother died, and that kind of pulled her back. I think that also caused conflict between me and my sister. My sister had asthma pretty bad when she was a child and had a condition with her sweat glands where she didn't really sweat. This was when she was very young. She eventually grew out of it. I can remember middle of the night trips to the emergency room...a couple of times, she nearly died. Because of this, my mom was very protective of my sister and doted on her. I had a lot of chores I had to do. We had a fairly large garden, a couple acres. It is a source of sustenance and is significantly bigger than what people have in their backyard. Even as a child of six or seven years old, it was my job to weed that, and I felt like it was too much work for a little kid. And, I

resented it. My mom always felt like if you were around, you should be doing work. So, I would weed, or do dishes, or do laundry. I was always doing something. My sister didn't have to do anything. So, I think maybe that's why there was some conflict between me and my sister was because I resented her.

Q: What impact do you think this had on your relationship with your mother?

A: I think the impact was that my sister...my mother always loved me and, in many ways, she was a good parent, but I do think she definitely favored my sister. I just found out a few years ago that when my mother was twelve, she was raped. I think that had just as much impact on the way she treats me and our relationship. She is very controlling, and she has to control. And, so, she is very controlling of my father, and she tries to control me. My wife comments on how my mother still tries to control me...even today. I have long since thought about this and made my peace with it, so I just sort of let it roll past me. But growing up, my sister and I definitely did not get the same treatment.

Q: How about now?

A: Umm...I would like to be closer with my sister, but she has her own family. She has three sons. She has been raising here family. My brother-in-law and her don't seem to be very invested too much outside of their family. I mean, I don't think it's anything personal. It's just how they view family.

Q: Tell me about your parents. How old are they? How did they make money?

A: Well my father was a laborer in a factory. He did that for 47 years. My mother, she had lots of odd jobs. When I was younger, she was cleaning other people's houses. She sold things door to door. She and my father actually met in the factory where my father worked. She quit when she became pregnant with me. When I was late in junior high, my mother got a job working for the school district preparing food. She actually spent about 20 years there after that. She actually worked herself up to a director position. So, she really worked herself up. She didn't have a high school education. (She did not?) No. My dad did. They are retired now. (Are they living?) Yes. They still live in the same area. They don't live in the same house that I spent my childhood, but the same area. My maternal grandmother died. My mother and father did some work on that house...actually, a cottage, and live there. We were always really poor when I was growing up, but, you know, they are pretty comfortable now. They have enough money to be able to take trips and go on vacation.

Q: Were your parents married? Are your parents still married? How old were they when they got married? Who did you live with?

A: My parents were actually kinda old when they got married. At least for that time and place, they were old. My mother was 23, and my father was around 27. (And how old when they had you?) A year later. It was young for today, but, back then, it was considered rather old.

Q: Do you remember your parents ever arguing? How would they argue? Did they ever fight physically?

A: They never separated or got divorced, but I can remember some pretty disturbing fights between them, and, during those times, my mother would threaten divorce and that. But, it was just drama. I think it never had a chance of happening. My mom could be quite dramatic. She still can. (What would they fight about?) I don't remember exactly. I do remember them being pretty stupid and irrational things. Mostly, I remember...well, my dad is so very laid back, and it seemed to me at the time that my mother didn't have enough drama in her life and needed to create drama by fighting with him. I can remember like 10 years ago, they hardly fight anymore. It's much less now that they're growing older. But my mom was on this kick that they should have prepared more, saved more, for their retirement. She didn't feel like they had enough money to retire. She would just make life difficult for my dad because she would just keep bringing this up and bringing this up. And, there was really no point to the argument because, you know, they had done what they had done to prepare for retirement, and there was no way to change it. It was after the fact. So why irritate yourself and your spouse. But they never fought physically.

Q: Was your family religious?

A: Yeah. I grew up in a church called the Church of the Brethren. And the Brethren are only two steps away from the Amish. You have the Amish, the Mennonite, and then the Brethren. The women wear prayer veils to church. Some of the churches have men and women sit on separate sides. They practice a ritual of feet washing, which is what Jesus did to the disciples before his death. It's an exercise in humility. The church is intensely conservative. Dancing is wrong. Playing cards is wrong. Stuff that people would generally think of as not having a problem with, morally was a sin. Even as a child, I remember not being able to do laundry or play on Sunday. Definitely no swearing, no drinking, no smoking. So, really almost aesthetic. (How did that carry over to the expectations of the house?) You were expected to be good, to be very moral, to be very Christian. They looked down on people who did not have the same beliefs. Growing up, even into early adulthood, I did not question our beliefs at all. If I would have a beer, there would be this intense guilt and fear that my parents would find out. Even today, if there is beer or wine in the house, I will hide it before they come over. It's primarily my mother. I don't think my dad would mind that much. I just don't want to deal with the fallout. (What would be the consequence?) You know, just the disapproval. I mean, they believe that if you are immoral, you are going to hell. I mean, they believe that you have to be born-again, and, if you don't believe the way they believe, you are going to hell. They think Catholics are going to hell.

Q: What about you today? Are you religious?

A: Umm, I'm agnostic. I'm willing to consider the existence of a supreme being. I guess, my belief in sort of traditional Christianity has been educated out of me. I don't believe in an after-life because, you know, it defies the laws of nature. I think when you die, you die.

Q: Did anyone in your family ever use drugs and/or alcohol?

A: No, not really. I mean, even extended family, like cousins and people, we were all locked into the same belief system. I did have a few cousins who strayed from the flock and would do drugs or drink...and, I don't even mean they were addicts. They just strayed from our beliefs. One cousin of mine was a very talented pianist who studied at a conservatory and fried his brain on LSD. You know, in the 60's. And, I think everyone viewed that as his punishment from God.

Q: Does anyone in your family have psychological or emotional problems? How did the rest of the family view this?

A: Not really.

Q: Has anyone in the family had trouble with the police?

A: I have a cousin who is in jail. It came out that he had been having sex with his sisters, for like four or five years, and this was prosecuted. But, really, this is not something discussed. I mean, my extended family and my family is very close, and, so if you screw up, you're not going to be ostracized. My aunt and uncle are upset by this. He is actually my second cousin, their grandson, and they are quite upset. But, they try and visit him and have extended every love and care that they can. I have a couple of cousins, a lot younger than me, and they both have had run-ins with the law, but really they didn't give them much attention. I think they just figured out a lot of things for themselves, the hard way. You know, stealing things, drugs...that sort of thing.

Q: Was there any sexual abuse in the family?

A: My sister was molested when she was a child by some neighbor boy. My sister told my parents who was doing it, and they called the parents of the boys. And, the parents without even checking into it denied that it happened and said she made it up. And, there wasn't anything more done about it. Kinda just hard feelings between the families...you know, but, again, different area and time.

Q: Any adultery?

A: No. I would be shocked if there was.

Q: Who handled discipline in your family? How were you disciplined?

A: I would say probably my mother more than my father. Mostly spanking...you know, just the hand type of spanking. I do remember getting the belt at times, but I don't remember it being the norm. But, then again, some of the stuff I did was pretty outrageous. I don't really believe in spanking too much, but, looking back, I really can't see a way that they could have dealt with some of the things I did without spanking. I think the things that did more damage to me as a kid were the things that were said. My mother did not really have good self esteem. She denies it now, but she would call me stupid or tell me I was lazy. This doesn't seem like much, but I really internalized that. I think it really slowed me down from achieving more at an early age.

Friends and Social Background

Q: Did you have friends as a child?

A: There was a family that lived near us, and they had five boys. So, I spent time with them. I had a bit of trouble getting along with other kids, so we would get together and play a lot. But, I am not sure I would call them friends. Really, I spent time with those kids, but we never talked about things I think it was more convenience. We lived close.

Q: Did you ever get into trouble with the police as a child? What types of things would you do?

A: No. As an adolescent...well, my grandparents had a small country store, and I remember seeing the gum and candy and helping myself to some of that stuff. But, again, I didn't do it to do something wrong. I just thought, you know, they are my grandparents, and I'm their grandson. My parents found out about it and were really upset. I had to take the candy back and apologize. As an adolescent, I remember shoplifting some candy a few times, but the guilt was just too much.

Q: Did you ever get into trouble for hurting animals?

A: I never got into trouble for it, but I do remember being mean to puppies and kittens. I remember catching a black snake once and kind of torturing it until it died. But all this stuff was before the age of like...when I was quite young. I don't think it was a conduct disorder. I just didn't know better. I think as I got older, I think I developed more empathy.

Q: Did you ever run away from home? Were you ever placed in Juvenile detention?

A: When I was four, I ran away several times. But, it wasn't to get away from home, it was to get out and explore. Several times I would stay gone too long, and my mom would call the police. Actually, at this time, we lived more in the city part of town...before we moved. And, I just would start walking around to see a friend and play or have lunch. Just never let anyone know I was leaving. But, I remember coming home and seeing my mom standing on the sidewalk with a yardstick. I mean, she was really pissed. But, I didn't really know there was a problem until I saw her. But, really, our home was quite idyllic, which caused me to be somewhat of a homebody because I had such problems socializing with other children that I would just stay home.

Educational History

Q: Tell me about your education? What was the highest grade you completed?

A: Um...I finished high school. I was working in a McDonalds, and I knew I didn't want to work in McDonalds the rest of my life. So, I joined the Army, even though I am an extreme pacifist. I was in the Army for three years. Then, I worked in a factory. I was eventually laid off and had the Vietnam Era GI Bill that paid \$500 a month. It didn't pay tuition, but I had financial aid and stuff for that, so I went to [a state university]. I started at [small campus] and, then,

finished up at [main campus]. When I started college, I was very afraid that I was out of my element. I was in therapy by that time, and my therapist was saying, “You should really give college a try.” But, I thought I was not that smart. She convinced me to take a couple of classes locally, and, when I was laid off, I just took the plunge. When I was signing up and meeting with the counselor at [the university], he said, “Based on your transcripts from high school, I really don’t think this is going to work for you.” And, I was really hurt, scared, but also mad about that, and I studied intensely and got a 4.0 GPA. I also have a couple master’s degrees, one from [an Ivy League school] in teaching and another master’s [from a different Ivy League school] in English.

Q: What were your grades like in grade school? High school? Was school hard for you?

A: My grades were abysmal. I can remember going off to the first day of school and not having any clue about what was going on. I remember just feeling out there. And, then, I took my report card home, and my parents were instantly angry. But, I didn’t know what was going on. I didn’t know what a report card was. I didn’t know what was expected of me. (Was it ever spelled out?) No, it wasn’t really spelled out. My family...I would say, they didn’t put a high value on education, but they were working class, and my mother grew up on a farm. So, it wasn’t that important. I don’t really remember anyone worrying about if I got my homework done. I remember them helping me a little bit but not a whole lot. So, they kinda just left me to my own devices, and I did horribly in school. Now, I feel like I probably had ADHD. I can remember just looking out of the window much of the time or getting up and down a lot. My second grade teacher actually tied me to my seat ‘cause I wouldn’t sit down.

Q: Were you ever in special classes? Were you ever diagnosed with a learning disability?

A: I do remember in second or third grade they gave an IQ test, and my IQ came back way above average, and, so, they sent me to a psychologist that I saw a couple times to try and figure out why I wasn’t doing better in school. But, nothing really came of that. (What was your parent’s reaction?) Well, I think they were concerned. I just don’t think they knew what to do, and, at a certain point, they just gave up. They didn’t know how to make me study. They didn’t know how to motivate me to do better. I really didn’t like school. I had trouble socializing in school, and the other kids picked on me. All kinds of fights. (But this doesn’t sound like you were being defiant?) No, I was just lost, and school wasn’t a very reinforcing situation. And, this was all the way up and through high school. High school was the same story. You know, I had big dreams and everything. I wanted to be an astronaut and do all that sort of stuff. I could just never make myself settle down to do the studying. I had pretty low self-esteem and was pretty down on myself.

Q: Did you ever get into trouble in school? Truancy? Suspension?

A: Tons. Fighting and impulse control problems. I was suspended on several occasions. On one occasion, when I was in second grade, I threw a firecracker out of the window of the school. No truancy, but I would play sick a lot to try and get out of going to school.

Medical/Psychiatric History

Q: What was your health like as a child? Do you remember being sick often? Hospitalizations? Broken bones?

A: As a very young child, I had some problems. When I was in first grade, I had a ruptured appendix and was in the hospital for about a month for that. So, I missed like two months of school during that time. They really should have held me back, but my first grade teacher had had enough. So, they passed me. And, I was not socially, emotionally, or even academically ready for that. After that year, just normal things, like chicken pox or tonsillitis. I was pretty healthy.

Q: Did you ever have emotional or behavioral problems when you were a child?

A: Looking back, I think I had some pretty serious problems, but nothing was ever diagnosed. My parents would take me to talk to the pastor. Their whole thing is that you have to have faith and trust in the lord, and, if you don't, you have problems. I remember in like 8th or 9th grade thinking, "I'll try this." And, I got saved and was still screwed up so...

Q: Did you ever have any trouble sleeping? Bedwetting? Nightmares?

A: I had a few night terrors...still do. But, it wasn't that frequent.

Q: Do you remember ever thinking about or trying to hurt yourself as a child? What did you think would happen?

A: Not actively try to hurt myself...but just did stupid stuff. Like my cousin and I would climb up the rocks at a strip mine, and it was like a 50 or 60 foot drop. I would never do anything like that or let my child do anything like that. Just dumb things like that. And, actually, some of that dare-devil stuff persisted into early adulthood. Like riding my motorcycle at 100 miles an hour with no helmet.

Sexual History

Q: How did you first learn about sex? Who taught you about sex?

A: I remember being told about sex by my cousin...but I didn't believe him. I just didn't grasp the mechanics of it all. You stick what where? How? I just thought he was messing with me.

Q: How was sex viewed in your family? Did anyone talk about it?

A: It definitely wasn't talked about. Then, when my sister was abused, my dad sat me down and talked to me about it. I was pretty old by then, and I pretty much knew most of what he was telling me. My mom was really upset that he talked to me about it. She just didn't think it was something I needed to know... about sex.

Q: When was the first time you had sex? Who was it with? What were the circumstances?

A: There was a little girl in my school, and we did the whole show me yours and I'll show you mine. Then, after that, I really didn't have much experience with girls. Then, I went into the military, and I had virgin written all over me, so some of the guys in my platoon took me to a whorehouse in Panama. And, that was it. I was actually quite upset because I am a bit of a romantic, and that wasn't how I imagined things being the first time. Also, I remember feeling extremely guilty and scared that people would know and that God would judge me.

Fire Setting

Q: How many fires would you guess that you set?

A: Umm...two. After the second time, I got caught setting a fire. I got into so much trouble, I never did it again. But, I have always been fascinated with fire and even called the fire department once.

Q: Maybe you could tell me about a fire you set. A specific time that you set a fire that sticks out to you.

A: Umm...when I was about seven, there was an abandoned house down the road. Myself and several of the neighbor boys were able to get inside the house. The basement was filled with trash. I remember trying to light the trash on fire, throwing matches on it, lighting pieces of paper and throwing it in the pile. Fortunately the house didn't ever catch on fire. However, it turned out that the house wasn't really abandoned. It was on the back of property, and the guy who owned it came out one day and saw the evidence of the fires. He started asking around, and the first place they went to look were the houses that were closest. That was me and my neighbor's house. The other time, the neighbors were burning some property, and they had some tree stumps and branches in a pile. On top of these tree parts, they threw some old furniture. I tried to set the couch and chair on fire, but they were really wet and just started smoking. Then, my neighbor came over and told my parents. (After that?) Well, after that, I remember getting in trouble and deciding it wasn't worth the punishment. But, I was always fascinated by fire and even called the fire department once just to see them come over. (Huh?) Well, I called the fire department and told them there was a fire. Then, I got scared, so I called back and pretended to be my mother and told them that a child was playing with the phone. (Laughs) But, then the fire department called back and told my mother.

Q: What happened?

A: It wasn't about being destructive or antisocial or anything. It was really about curiosity. I just wanted to see what would happen. I just wanted to see a house burn. I think by and large that I was a pretty sweet kid...sensitive kid. I don't think there was too much in me to do things just to be bad.

Q: Did you feel any social pressure from the kids you were with?

A: Well...yeah, kinda. But, I think sometimes I was the leader.

PARTICIPANT FEEDBACK

When discussing the results of this study, Ronald voiced agreement with the other subjects in how he experienced his childhood and that at times he felt very isolated. Ronald went on to say that even as an adult he still feels as though he still feels different than most of his family. Ronald explained that he felt like religion played a major part in his feeling different than his family and as a child he did not feel like he had much choice as to what he should be doing because it was prescribed by the church and enforced by his family. Ronald added that there didn't seem to be much room for discussion about rules or morals in his family and he often felt like he was labeled as being problematic. When talking about his feelings of isolation, Ronald stated that he did perceive his sister as being treated differently than himself and that this often made him wonder why he was different. Despite all this, Ronald stated that he felt like he had a pretty normal childhood and felt that his parents did the best they could to raise him in the way they thought was right.

In addition to feeling isolated in his family, Ronald seemed to resonate with feeling isolated in school and socially as well. Ronald reiterated that school was a difficult place for him and that he rarely seemed to understand what was expected of him. Ronald maintained that he felt he was a pretty good kid and attributed much of his difficulties in school to not really understanding the expectations and being able to meet them.

When discussing his incidents of fire-setting, Ronald was adamant that he saw the isolation he experienced in his childhood as separate from the fire-setting. For Ronald fire-setting was just misbehavior. In fact, he felt like most kids played with fire growing up. Ronald added that he definitely did not see his fire setting as an attempt to elicit help from his family and went on to say that he knew he would get into trouble if his parents discovered his behavior. Ronald consistently described himself as a well-mannered child and denied that he was motivated by destructiveness or aggressiveness to set fires. In fact, Ronald stated that after his fire-setting was discovered and he was disciplined he did not continue to set fires. For Ronald this seemed to convey to him that he was testing limits. When asked about participation in the study, Ronald stated that he thought that it was a fine experience but maintained that he viewed his fire-setting as different than that of the other participants.

APPENDIX F: SYNTHESIZED TRANSCRIPTS OF FIRST AND SECOND INTERVIEWS AND PARTICIPANT FEEDBACK

Subject 3: Ramel

Rapport Building

Q: Maybe we could start with you just telling me a little about yourself.

A: Well, I'm 31. I just moved to Syracuse not too long ago...hmm. Well, I have a daughter who lives with me. (How old is she?) She is going to be eight this summer.

Q: What are your interests?

A: Um...well, you know just hangin' out with my daughter, going to work. (Where do you work?) Umm...I'm a salesperson. I do telemarketing. I don't really like it that much, but you know.

General Background Information

Family Background

Q: Where did you grow up? Were you ever taken out of your parents care?

A: I grew up in New York City with my mother. I was always with my mother.

Q: What was your home like?

A: It was nice. I mean I think I had a pretty good childhood. We had fun. (Who?) Me and my friends. We used to do have all kinds of fun.

Q: Do you have any brothers or sisters? Ages? Where do they live now?

A: Yeah, I had like three sisters and one brother. I was right in the Middle. Two sisters older, and then a brother and a sister who were younger. The oldest sister is five years older than me, but we were all pretty close in age. Some of them still live in the city. We are kinda spread out now, and I don't really talk to them as much as I should.

Q: Did you get along with them when you were younger? How about now?

A: Yeah, we had a pretty tight family. I mean there are always going to be problems, but nothing major. (Now?) We are still pretty close, except everybody is kinda spreaded out. Everybody got older and just moved around.

Q: Tell me about your parents. Are they living? How old are they? How did they make money?

A: Yeah, both of them are still alive. My mom is almost fifty, and my dad is a couple years older than her. (Do you know how they met?) I think they went to high school together and grew up together. My mother was a nurse, and my father did construction work.

- Q: Were your parents married? Are your parents still married? How old were you when they divorced? Who did you live with?
- A: My parents were married, but they didn't stay married. They split up when I was young. I don't really remember much about it because I was little. (About how old were you?) Umm...like six or seven. Then, I stayed with my mom. (Did you see your father?) No, I didn't really grow up with my father too much after that. I never really spent time with my father, even before that really.
- Q: Do you remember your parents ever arguing? About what? How would they argue? Did they ever fight physically?
- A: I remember them fighting about money. Or my father would come home and have a drink, and they might start arguing about something. (Was this ever physical?) Not really. Maybe a broken plate or something (laughs).
- Q: Was your family religious?
- A: No not too much. Growing up as a kid, my grandparents took us to church. (Grandparents?) Yeah, after my dad left, we ended up moving into an apartment with my grandparents...well, in their building. (In the same building?) Well, they owned a building with four apartments, and they lived in one; we lived in one; and my aunts and uncles lived in one. We kinda all just went back and forth. That's how our family was. (Are you religious?) Well, not too much. I mean, I believe in God and Jesus, but I haven't been to church in like five years. But I am a Christian. I do believe in the Lord.
- Q: Did anyone in your family ever use drugs and/or alcohol? What were they like when they were under the influence?
- A: Well, I mean people liked to have drinks from time to time, but it wasn't anything too major. Everybody just seemed to relax and chill out...most of the time (Most of the time?) Yeah, I mean it was worse before my dad left cause he would like to argue and shit, but it really wasn't a big deal you know...when he wasn't around.
- Q: Does anyone in your family have psychological/emotional problems? How did the rest of the family view this?
- A: No, not too much. Nothing that I really know of. I can't say too much about everyone in the family, but not that I know of.
- Q: Has anyone in the family had trouble with the police? Was there any adultery in the family?
- A: Yeah, my brother has had trouble with the police. Actually, he still does have trouble with the police. (laughs) For all sorts of things...I mean nothing major, just stupid things. (Like?) You know, like writing bad checks or credit cards.

Q: Was there any sexual abuse in the family?

A: No, nothing I ever heard about or knew about. At least, not in our house. (Not in your house?) Well, I mean, I am sure that people were doing things like that, but we never really knew about anything.

Q: Who handled discipline in your family? How were you disciplined?

A: Mostly my mom. But my uncles and grandparents too. My uncles would try and talk to me. I didn't really listen. I was kinda hard headed, so my uncles would try and talk to me, so my mom wouldn't kill me. (Laughs) But they taught me right from wrong and let me know when I wasn't doing good or needed to stop doing something. (What if you didn't listen?) Umm... well, they would put me on punishment or take things away. I mean, they would whoop me when I was younger, but they would try and talk to me if they could first. But sometimes, I just didn't want to listen.

Q: You had mentioned earlier that your parents split when you were younger. Did your mother ever date or re-marry?

A: Well, she didn't re-marry, but she did have a boyfriend for quite a while when we were younger. He was cool. I guess you could say he was a role model for me. I mean, it wasn't like he was my dad, but he was cool. He took care of us like he was our own father; made our Christmas nice; bought our school clothes.

Q: Is there anything else you want to tell me about your family?

A: No. Not too much. I had a happy childhood. I mean, my mother tried to give us everything we...needed. I'm not going to say want, but everything we needed and let us have fun. She made us happy and did the best for us. I enjoyed my childhood. I did good things, and I did not so good things. Like I said, when you're a kid some things happen. I would say my childhood was like 75% good and 25% bad. (What made the 25% bad?) Not going to school. Disobeying my parents. Stealing. Not paying attention in school. Smoking weed...drinking...all that shit adds up. (When you were younger, what did you imagine things were going to be like?) You know a pretty wife, a good job...finish school. That was my goal. I mean, but shit falls back. Things don't always turn out the way you wanted them, so you have to just make the best of it and just move on if you can. (What do you think would have made things work out the way you had wanted?) Well, if I knew now what I know then...staying away from negative people and paying attention in school and getting good grades would've made my life a whole lot better. (What do you think the other people in your family think about you?) Me? I mean, they love me...like unconditional love. I think they just wish that I would have done those things too. I think they thought I could have done more, but it really didn't work out like that so much. I mean, shit, they are all doing well- have cars, and families, and house. (What do you think is different?) Well, I am not going to say I am different from them, but I will say that I made different choices growing up. I had a choice between the right road and the wrong road, and I didn't choose the right way very much. But I am paying for that shit now. I mean it was my choice. I just chose the wrong road. Hanging out with cats

I thought were cool and wanted to experience that shit. I mean, I am sure everybody has things they want to experience...problem was for me is that I always wanted to experience things that got me in trouble (laughs). Know what I mean?

Friends and Social Background

Q: Did you have friends as a child?

A: I had plenty of kids growing up. Boy did I! It seemed like I was always out doing something. I was hardly ever in my house. Always playing basketball or riding bikes. Anything to just be out in the neighborhood and see what was happening. We would build go-carts and race them in the streets...play football. Then, when I got a little older, we would steal, play hooky from school, play tops for money. We had fun. I had a good ass childhood.

Q: Were you ever involved in a gang?

A: Yeah, I guess you could say we were a gang. I mean, they were all the kids that I knew when I was little, but as we got older we all kinda stuck together and...lets put it this way, nobody was going to come into our neighborhood and do anything to any of our friends, and, between all of us, everybody had friends. I mean, if it wasn't for the kids in my neighborhood, things wouldn't have been the same for me.

Q: Did you ever get into trouble with the police as a child? What types of things would you do?

A: Nah, I was too smart to get into trouble with the law. (Huh?) I was way too smart for that. I would see all these kids getting into trouble, so I would try and be sneaky so I wouldn't get caught. You know what I mean. My uncles would always tell me that you were going to get in trouble sometimes but not to get caught doing anything too serious. So I would do stuff but just not get caught. I was the one who would think a lot and just try to lay low.

Q: Did you ever get into trouble for hurting animals?

A: I can't stand cats. I hate cats. We put a cat in a microwave one time. I mean, I was a little kid, but some kids, like older kids in the neighborhood, put this cat in the microwave. (How old were you?) Oh, I don't really remember. I was pretty young, maybe first or second grade. It was weird, but at the same time I kinda wanted to see it cause it was something different. (What did you think about it?) Well, I mean, I felt bad because of it, but I didn't want to look like a baby.

Q: Did you ever run away from home?

A: Yeah, a couple of times. I just wanted to be a grown up and do what I wanted to do. I already felt like I was grown, so I figured that I shouldn't have to listen to people...so I didn't. (How old were you?) Like thirteen or fourteen. I mean, I

always came back eventually. Just sometimes, I needed to get out and get a taste of the world or something.

Q: Were you ever placed in Juvenile detention?

A: No, not really. (Not really?) Not at all really.

Educational History

Q: Tell me about your education? What was the highest grade you completed?

A: School? I hated school. Really, I hated school with a passion. The only thing I liked about school was the lunch, gym, and recess. (Laughs) Nah...school was alright. I just didn't do that well, like in math. School just felt like something that got in the way of better things. Like, I hate getting up in the morning, so going to school meant I couldn't stay out as late. Have to get up on these cold ass days and walk to school. So, I didn't really like school too much. (How did you do in school?) Umm...I probably averaged about a C+ average. I mean, sometimes I would do better, and sometimes they would fall. It really just depended on how much I applied myself.

Q: Was school hard for you?

A: Hell yeah, the work was hard! I am not even going to sit here and lie. It was hard as hell. I mean, it was probably hard cause I didn't understand it. You know, when you don't understand something, it seems a lot harder. If I could sit there and listen it probably wouldn't have been too hard, but I made it hard on myself. (How?) Shit, by just not going, clowning around, getting into fights with kids...lots of stuff like that.

Q: Were you ever in special classes? Were you ever diagnosed with a learning disability?

A: No, not really. I mean, they used to say I was slow as a kid, but I don't really think so. I just never really got into school or studying, so people thought I was stupid. But, believe me, I have more sense than most of those people ever will.

Q: Have you ever had an IQ/standardized tests done? How did you do?

A: Yeah, we did those tests. You know, when you are in school and don't have any classes, so you can take these tests all day, and you got snacks halfway through. I remember those. I did pretty good in most of my grades. Mainly, I made things hard on my self. If I would have just done what I was supposed to have done, it would have been a different story, but since I didn't, it was a lot harder than it needed to be. I never got held back or anything. I even graduated. It's just that now I think that things just could have been different if I had done better.

Q: Did you ever get into trouble in school? Truancy? Suspension?

A: Yeah, I had all kids of trouble. I got into fights, picked fights. I mean, if you was going to the school that I was going to, you would have probably been doing the same thing too. I was just about, you know, letting people know that they couldn't

fuck with you and sometimes that would mean getting into a fight...know what I'm saying.

Q: What do you think about school now?

A: I think now I realize that I should have done different. Actually, I knew that I had messed thing up at graduation. I barely got through school...just lucky, but when it was all over, I just remember feeling like I was on a rowboat heading down to Chinatown...you know? (Uh-Uh not really.) Like everyone was heading forward, but I was floating away. I knew right then that I should have done better, 'cause now it was real, and I was expected to do something. (How did you feel about that?) Scared.

Medical & Psychiatric History

Q: What was your health like as a child? Do you remember being sick often? Hospitalizations?

A: I was pretty healthy as a kid. I mean, I was in the hospital once. I drank some Clorox, and they had to pump my stomach. (How old were you?) Oh, I don't know, maybe eleven. I was thirsty, and I didn't have anything to drink. So, I just poured a glass of that Clorox and drank it. I mean, I wasn't being stupid. It was in a different kind of bottle, like a soda bottle. I thought it was like alcohol or something (laughs). Guess it wasn't (laughs). (Any broken bones?) Umm. Actually, come to think of it, I did break my arm when I was like...well, right before I graduated from middle school. I remember because I had to go across the stage with a cast on. It was kinda stupid. My mom and I got into a fight, and she threw me down. And, I broke my arm. (Did you and your mom fight a lot?) Hell no! I mean, maybe only two times. That's how I got my arm broke. Most of the time she would just make me stay in the house or put me on punishment. She tried...just, sometimes I just didn't want to listen. (What happened this time that you two got into a fight?) I don't really remember. I think I wanted to go somewhere and she didn't want me to go. Something like that.

Q: Did you ever have emotional or behavioral problems when you were a child? Did you ever have to go see a counselor, psychologist, or clergy about any of your behaviors?

A: Well, I was a badass sorta kid. I mean I was always doing something that I shouldn't have been. I would make other kids bring me money at school. I remember, I told this one kid to bring me a nickel. My mom heard me and beat my ass. (Really? What did you think?) I remember that clear as day. I still remember that whole thing right now. If I saw that kid now, I would probably smack him for the beating I got. I mean, I knew she was right, and what I was doing was wrong. But, I was a kid and was just being a brat. But, she gave me a beating for that one...I still have the bruises to prove it (laughs). But, I never really went to talk to anyone. We would just talk to family if we were having problems. It's not like there wasn't anyone around (laughs).

Q: Did you ever have any trouble sleeping? Bedwetting?

A: Yeah, I used to have trouble going to sleep. I never wanted to go to bed. I wasn't scared of the dark or anything, just didn't like to go to sleep. I used to wet the bed when I was younger, but I stopped when I was like nine or something. (Nightmares?) Yeah, I did have some nightmares as a kid. I don't really remember them too much...just that sometimes I would wake up and try to get in bed with my mom. (What was her response to it?) Well, I mean, when I was just a little kid, like four or five, she was cool about it. But, when I got older, there were younger kids who needed to sleep in there, so she would just send me back to my room. (How did you feel about that?) Well, they were littler than me, so I kinda had to learn to take care of myself. (But it does sound a little scary for a kid?) Well, hell yeah, it was scary. I mean, you have a dream and get scared and have to go back to bed. It was scary. But, like I said, I wasn't the baby anymore. (Did you want to be the baby?) Not really. But, it is nice (laughs).

Q: Do you remember ever thinking about or trying to hurt yourself as a child? What did you think would happen?

A: Yeah, a few times. I cut myself with glass. Burnt myself with cigarettes once. I don't really remember how old I was. I just remember doing stuff like that. (Do you remember why you did those things?) Not really. I just had a hard time dealing with my anger, so sometimes I would do things like that to get it out.

Sexual History

Q: How did you first learn about sex? Who taught you about sex?

A: Well, one of my uncles taught me about sex when I was little. Nothing major, just kinda talked to me about it and all that. (What did you think?) Nothin' really. It wasn't a big deal. It was just more of him just letting me know what it was about.

Q: How was sex viewed in your family? Did anyone talk about it?

A: Sex? Well, you know, like my grandparents went to church and didn't really want to know about things like that. My mom, she knew we were doing things and would have my uncle talk to me, you know, man to man. But, it was more of just one of those things you figured out on your own. You know what I mean. I guess they thought that you would figure it out eventually.

Q: When was the first time you had sex? Who was it with? What were the circumstances?

A: Umm, well, I was like twelve or thirteen. It was with this neighbor girl. We were just playing round one day, and I guess we just were curious.

Q: How did you feel about it afterward? What was your relationship with this person like afterward?

A: Well, I mean, it was pretty much the same. We just were curious and figured some things out, but that was about it. I mean, we still talked and hung out, but it wasn't like true love. I mean, it was just kid's stuff.

Fire Setting

Q: How many fires would you guess that you set?

A: Umm...I don't know, maybe a couple three or four. I really couldn't say. I mean, I lit a lot of shit on fire when I was a kid, but it was like a piece of paper. And, then I would throw it in a trashcan.

Q: Maybe you could tell me about a fire you set. A specific time that you set a fire that sticks out to you. How old were you?

A: Umm...I was probably about eight, seven or eight.

Q: What were the circumstances? What do you remember about it?

A: Well, it was the summer, and everyone was outside and all that. You know, just doing kid's stuff, like riding bikes and shit. And, it was the summer, so, you know, the ice cream truck started coming around and all us kids got excited and shit. So everybody went home to get money from their parents so they could get ice cream. So, I went home to get money too. (And?) Well, I ask my mom for money, and she said that she didn't have any to give me. So, I looked around the house for some change or something. I mean, I figured there would at least be some change or something. So, I looked everywhere, hit all the spots in the house I could think of. But there wasn't any, so I decided that I was going to look under my mom's bed for some change. And, then I just set the whole bed on fire.

Q: You set the bed on fire?

A: Yep. Well, I started to set the bed on fire. But, one of my sisters smelled something, and they came in and pulled me out from under the bed. See, I crawled under the bed to look for change and was using a lighter like as a flashlight. (Ok. Then?) Well, when I saw that there wasn't any money, I started putting the lighter up on the, you know, like the bottom, and the lining shit caught on fire.

Q: What happened?

A: Well, like I said, the bottom started burning and my sister pulled me out of the bed. It was kinda funny though 'cause they acted like I was just under the bed without a clue that it was on fire. I mean, that's how they acted. They came running in screaming and grabbed me by the legs and drug me out. And, then she like ran me to the bathroom and put water on me. (Water on you?) Yeah, well, I guess I was on fire. (You guess?) Well, that shit that was on the bottom just took off, and it ended up catching my hair on fire. But, luckily only thing that got burnt was my hair. (That was the only thing that got burnt?) On me, yeah, but the bed got caught on fire. I mean, they drug me out of the bed so fast and someone called 911. The ambulance came, and they took me to the hospital. Firemen got there in time and put that fire out. It wasn't that bad. I mean, it didn't burn up my mother's room. Sometimes I still get nightmares thinking about that shit. (Still?) Hell yeah! I just had no idea it would catch fire that fast.

Q: What did you think would happen?

A: Well, when it all got fire like that, I thought I was going to die. For real! I thought I was going to die...get burnt up. Shit! That was the first thing I thought...I'm about to die. I was just a little kid. Know what I'm sayin? I went into like shock a little bit.

Q: What was the family reaction?

A: Shit, they were kinda scared too. I mean, my like sisters looked at me like I was Stupid, but at the time they were scared. After it all happened, we just started talking about it. You know, like two months down the road...a year down the road, we started talking about it. But, at the time, they were scared...you know? At the time it happened, they were scared kids like me.

Q: What was the adult reaction?

A: First of all, they was mad, upset, and angry that I could have really hurt myself. Second of all, they was mad because I set the place on fire. I mean, I didn't get a beating or nothing. I didn't get on punishment because they didn't know I did it on purpose. They just thought it just kinda happened, I guess. (What do you mean?) Well, I mean no one saw me under there. My sister just saw the flames and pulled me out, and then, like in all the chaos, it was kinda just forgotten. I mean, I sure as hell wasn't going to say anything about doing it on purpose. I think everyone just thought I was screwing around. So, they told me not to play with fire anymore. (Did you?) Well, after that time, I didn't because it really scared the shit out of me, and I really thought I was going to die.

Q: I know you told me at the time you thought you were going to die, but before the bed caught on fire, what did you think was going to happen?

A: You mean, like when I was under the bed? (Yeah) Well, I was just mad. I mean, I knew that all my friends were going to have ice cream, and I was going to be the one sitting there staring at them...like watching them eat their ice cream. I was pissed and just didn't know what else to do. I mean, money wasn't going to just pop up. (But setting the fire, how was that going to help?) Well, I don't think it was going to help...I was just pissed. That's it. I was just pissed.

Q: So, it sounds like you were mad at your mom?

A: Not really. I mean, I was, but what the fuck! I knew we didn't have money. You know what I mean? Like, I knew she didn't have it. I didn't really think about it as her fault. I was just pissed that I couldn't get ice cream. (And that your friends could?) Yeah, exactly. That was the big thing. I just knew the other kids would get money, and I wouldn't...just pissed me off. (Why do you think it bothered you so much?) Because, I never got ice cream (laughs). I mean, I was always the one without. Know what I mean? Old shoes. Old clothes...just got tired of it.

Q: Anything else you would like to say about that?

A: No, not really.

PARTICIPANT FEEDBACK

When discussing the commonalities that emerged from the interviews, Ramel had mixed opinions. Ramel agreed that he thought that his childhood was hard on him and that school was difficult. Ramel added that he really felt like school was the toughest place on him and that he rarely seemed to do well or get along. Ramel acknowledged that some of his behavioral difficulties in school were because he did not like to be there; however, he was quick to add that he went to a “rough” school and that everybody had problems in school and that most kids would get into fights at school. Likewise, although Ramel acknowledged that he felt isolated in his family, he was quick to add that the adults had bigger issues to worry about. Ramel did admit that he did not understand this as a child but as an adult has come to understand the stress his mom and relatives were under.

With regards to his family, Ramel stated that he felt like his mother did the best she could given the circumstances and that he has a tremendous amount of respect for her. Overall, even though Ramel acknowledged feeling isolated in his family, he was adamant that he loved his family and had no ill feelings towards them. Ramel added that even though he was angry when he set a fire, it was not because he hated his family or wanted bad things for them. When asked about his reasons for setting the fire, Ramel stated that he didn’t really understand why he had done that and that he had never even really given it much consideration until we spoke about the incident. Ramel was clear that he saw his fire-setting as misbehavior but did not feel like he was trying to send a message to his family or get attention. Ramel went on to say that he already received a great deal of attention for getting into trouble and didn’t think that he would have wanted anymore attention because of the fire-setting. Although Ramel acknowledged having behavioral difficulties as a child, he added that he often wondered why he seemed to get into so much trouble when other kids seemed to be able to stay out of trouble. He added that he often felt this way with regards to school and within his family. When asked about participation in the study, Ramel stated that he thought that it was an unusual topic for a paper and was curious how you could help children who had set fires. Ramel added that he was comfortable with the topics discussed and did not have any negative feelings regarding his participation.