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This qualitative study uses narrative research to examine how adult women college students process their collegiate experiences. Often, colleges and universities create programs for adult learners without recognizing that this population is not a homogenous group. Therefore, the needs of adult students, along with policies and programs that follow as a result, do not take into consideration the difference in learners. Although race, gender, class, religion and other characteristics are deemed important in various disciplines, including andragogy, those characteristics are not always given close attention. As a result, adult learners, especially women learners continue to enroll in adult education programs that do not fully recognize their differences. By collecting the life stories of six women who are completing their bachelor degrees for the first time at four year colleges and universities, this study looks at the differences women learners face educationally among race, class and gender. As a result, it was learned that a student's past and how she addresses it, can deeply impact how she will process her collegiate experience. By examining a variety of factors in one's life from upbringing to learning style, along with a level of resilience (or lack thereof), students can either experience a positive college career with challenges that help them mature, or a negative college career that hinder their growth.

MY QUEST FOR MEANING: WISHES OF ADULT WOMEN LEARNERS

by

Sydney Davis Richardson

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Approved By

Committee Co-Chair

Committee Co-Chair

APPROVAL PAGE

This dissertation has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of
The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Committee Co-Chair _____

Committee Co-Chair _____

Committee Members _____

Date of Acceptance by Committee

Date of Final Oral Examination

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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Overview of Topic

The education of adult women students can be transformational by focusing on non-traditional learning styles such as connected learning and individual demographic characteristics such as race and class. “One of the most important tasks of critical educational practice is to make possible the conditions in which the learners engage in the experience of assuming themselves as social, historical, thinking, communicating, transformative, creative persons” (Freire, 1998, p. 45). In order for Paulo Freire’s goal to exist, professors must not entertain the idea of the banking system of education where information is given to students to memorize for assessment (Freire, 2000). Instead learners should become collaborators in their educational careers. They can learn to take their previously held beliefs and knowledge and form them into knowledge that is global and considerate of other people, places and circumstances. In this way, educators guide students and allow them to use previous knowledge to enrich the classroom experience. Students do not enter college as empty vessels waiting to be filled, although that is often how they are seen. They come to college as knowledgeable beings with something to offer and something to receive, but this is sometimes forgotten by educators in the classroom (Kasworm, 2003; Dirkx, 2008). As a result, along with other influences such as family life, stressful jobs and relationships, students may question their decisions,

become uninterested in their educational careers and may decide not return to the classroom (Kasworm; Dirkx; Belenky et.al, 1997).

Adult students, especially adult women students, are rarely seen as needing a special focus of attention in their college careers because many programs generalize the adult student. They enter college with an array of life experiences, but those experiences are often overlooked in the arena of academic knowledge. Whether they have traveled the world, raised a family, worked multiple jobs, all three, or a combination thereof; their lived experiences are rarely seen as significant when taking a philosophy, biology or mathematics course. Instead, they are viewed similar to and sometimes less than traditional age students (18-22): people with subpar education in need of an expert to enlighten them. If educators “accept different ways of knowing, [and] new epistemologies” (hooks, 1994, p. 41) they will see that adult women students have much knowledge and experience to bring to their own educational careers.

History of Women in Education

Teaching in higher education follows a patriarchal model of learning through dictating, debate styles and constructing an authoritative relationship between teacher and student (Sadker & Sadker, 1994). This style of teaching formed the basis of higher education when women were not permitted into college. Comparing themselves to elite men’s colleges, many women’s and coed colleges modeled their academic rigor and teaching styles after elite male institutions of higher education (Sadker & Sadker, 1994). As more colleges and universities accepted coeducation, women and men were separated into different departments based on stereotypes of how men and women learn: liberal

arts, humanities and education for women; physical sciences, pre-med and engineering for men (Belenky et. al, 1997; Sadker & Sadker, 1994). So women who ventured into male dominated majors experienced an even more authoritative and oppressive style of teaching with little regard to other ways of knowing.

Early in life, women learn meaning making (Belenky et.al, 1997; Merriam and Cafarella, 1999) through an authoritative way of teaching just like men. They are told who they are, what they should do and are consulted very little, if at all about their life directions. If this type of upbringing continues, this girl evolves into a woman who is self-conscious about and self-silenced in making independent choices. At the same time, as a she matures, she learns about life in another way: via collaboration, discussion, and storytelling; also known as connected teaching (Belenky et.al, 1997). She learns *from* others and *through* others (particularly women) about the ways of life and her role in it. This type of learning occurs when making meals with the family throughout the holidays, participating in women's events in the community or at faith based events (Belenky et.al, 1997). Contrary to school teaching, this type of connected teaching involves knowledge of women based on the sharing of life experiences, not textbooks, which contributes to a woman's meaning making. As a result, she [the learner] has taken part in her education through life experiences of herself and others. She is taught to use her intuition/soul knowing, as well as advice from others (Belenky et.,al. 1997; Kasworm 2003) when making decisions because they are valuable tools for life. Intuition/soul knowing is often used in connected knowing and teaching.

Myself as a Teacher of Adult Women

My journey as a teacher of adult women began in the fall of 2004 as a Teacher's Assistant (TA) in my English graduate program. I had already taken my teaching course and was assigned one composition class to teach for the incoming year. I planned my syllabus based on the department's guidelines, and I was told the number of students I would have: twenty-four students. The course was to be fifty minutes in length and my students had to write four papers which needed to be four to five pages each, one research paper which was to be eight to ten pages, and they had to do some sort of writing every class period. That was it. I had no knowledge of their age range or how many male students I had versus female students; I did not know what their competencies were or the range of skills each student brought to the classroom experience. Yet, I felt that I had "arrived" because I was teaching a college course. If anyone had reminded me of pedagogy, it definitely went in one ear and out the other because although I had "arrived," I was extremely nervous as I got closer to the start of the school year. So, as I revised my syllabus repeatedly, I did it the way many of us new TA's had: I had fifteen weeks to teach, each week needed a certain number of reading assignments, I plugged in their due dates for each assignment and that was it. I assumed that all of the students were eighteen years of age, just graduated from high school and I was the authority figure on composition for them. Needless to say, my ego quickly deflated on my first day.

I strolled into my classroom ten minutes early because I heard that it was good to greet the students as they came in. This tactic was supposed to make them feel welcomed. One by one, my freshmen students (mostly eighteen as I assumed) came into

the classroom, said hello to me and shyly took their seats. As I waited for a few more empty seats to fill, I decided to write the first prompt on the board to get them started on their in-class writing activity. When I turned around to survey the entire class, I noticed that one of the students sitting in the remaining seat did not look eighteen, nineteen or twenty. As we introduced ourselves as part of a warm-up activity, this student proudly expressed to the classroom that she was seventy-four years of age and this was her first college course. Hopefully the shock and fear did not show on my face as I welcomed her and we proceeded with my lesson. That class period lasted exactly thirty minutes and I dismissed them early. My first note to myself was to start making lesson plans to fill the entire class period. After class, I quickly found one of the professors in my department who did not look too busy and asked him how I was supposed to teach a seventy-four year old woman? His response started with a chuckle and he told me to teach her the same way I would teach anyone else. At that moment, I relaxed and decided to do just that.

So, I taught my class writing concepts, gave them paper assignments, graded those papers and returned them, and quickly moved on to the next lesson because, after all, I had a lot to teach in fifteen weeks (not counting holidays and fall break). But, I knew that my teaching was not spectacular. I occasionally held in-class discussions, but kept it limited because it was not working out the way I envisioned. I always envisioned a dynamic class experience with everyone offering their ideas based on the texts read; I saw the class as being so invigorating that we would run over time, yet that did not happen once. Instead my traditional students barely spoke and my non-traditional student

told stories of her life, sometimes relating them to the class topic, and I did not help with steering the discussion back on course. Often when a traditional student visited my office, there was a complaint that he/she did not want to hear about seventy-four year old woman's life; on the other hand, my non-traditional student occasionally complained that she was not advancing in her writing the way she had hoped. My complaint to myself was that I wanted a do-over because I was encountering issues beyond the teaching of writing that I had not planned for. As I completed the grades for the end of the semester, some of my students did well while others did not; my nontraditional student was one of them who did not do well. Although our exchanges throughout the course were polite, I knew that she was frustrated and not too pleased with her grade. Yet my excuse was that I simply treated her the same way I had been treated: if my students did not understand something, then they had to work harder while my teaching remained the same. Since a do-over of the semester was not possible, I entered my grades, told my fellow TA's that I would see them the next semester, and drove home with a hate for teaching.

I'll Give it Another Try

After graduating with my Master's degree, I took a job as an adjunct at the same university and picked up an additional course at a community college. My classes at the four year university had no non-traditional students in it, which was a relief. I got a chance to start fresh. Yet, my classes at the community college were full of adult students ranging in ages from twenty-four to fifty-seven and mostly women. Although I knew that this would be the case, I was still surprised at the age range. This time, I decided to take a different approach. I continued with my daily writings, paper

assignments, and writing concepts that I was told they needed to know. Yet, when it came to classroom discussion, I decided to do something different at the community college. At the four year university with my traditional students, I asked questions and had them discuss the answers in groups before we talked about them. At the community college, I had them bring in questions and reactions to the assignment before I began my teaching. Not only did my non-traditional students begin discussion, they took control of it. They asked questions and answered them. I asked questions and they answered them. They asked me questions and I answered them as well. One question led to another question and I found that we were creating this dynamic experience that I had wanted the previous year. Even more surprising to me was that their reactions to the readings and questions led into my teaching lessons; it was as if they read my mind and knew where I was heading, and the classroom period flew by. I quickly realized that if I was to work with adult students, I needed to not only be a teacher, but a participant in the classroom. They did not need a sole authority figure depositing information into their brains (Freire, 1985). They needed someone who understood that they had something to offer to the classroom experience. Although they had information to learn from me, I also needed to learn from them; everything between our textual readings and our experiences needed to be balanced.

Getting the Hang of This

After a few years of teaching more classes at different community colleges, and gaining more non-traditional students at the four year university, I accepted a position as Writing Center Director and Instructor of English at a liberal arts women's college in the

Southeast. Once again, I was in for a shock. I had no idea that the adult student population on campus was as large as it was. It was not uncommon for my classroom of fifteen students to have eight non-traditional students in them. Luckily, I was able to take my lessons learned from the community colleges and apply them to my new environment. I learned to rely on my students for guidance in the classroom. Although I had lessons planned, it became easy to slow down the material learned if they needed it. When it came time for their paper topics, I no longer gave them a choice of material that I chose, but I had them choose their own topics and discuss them with me first. For my non-traditional students, I discovered that they could learn from me, while staying in control of their education. For me, it made complete sense: most of these women worked, had families to take care of and had multiple life experiences that enriched the classroom environment. Why not let them have a role in what they produced? With my traditional students, although some of them had an issue with non-traditional students being in the class, by the end of the semester, everyone was a family that learned from one another while getting from me what they individually needed. Also, some of my traditional students liked the independence I allowed in the classroom and the accountability I extended to them. It was hard on everyone and time consuming on myself to make this cohesive environment work, but it was worth it.

Once I got the hang of teaching non-traditional women students (along with traditional students), I was yet again challenged to enhance my teaching style. It was the last month in the semester and my students were working on their research papers, so I decided to have a question and answer session with them in case they needed help on

anything we had not covered earlier. After everyone gathered in class, I sat at the front and told them to express any frustration, fear, excitement, or questions revolving around the final paper. They instead, asked me to explain how I dealt with writing. I was immediately surprised, but not nervous. We as a class had created a community over the past few weeks so I was comfortable being honest with them about my own writing mistakes, frustrations and moments of triumph. As I told them about some of my experiences and especially about how I am a procrastinator at heart, their eyes shimmered and enlarged and I learned a new lesson: making myself *human* in my students eyes and becoming a part of my own classroom can sometimes be the best learning situation for everyone. The next day, I brought in a paper I did for a class. They were amazed by the number of track changes made and comments by the professor. They were even more amazed that with all of the red markings, my paper was still an A. This made me more relatable and made my students realize that what I said at the beginning of the semester was true- writing was a process that they were capable of accomplishing. Needless to say, my hate for teaching was no more by the end of the year, but I was still exhausted.

Learning about Non-traditional Students through Tutoring

I learned much from teaching in a classroom, but directing and tutoring in a writing center was a different experience because it was a more intimate setting. As I learned lessons teaching, I implemented those same concepts into assisting adult women students with their written pieces, but what I was not prepared for was how much more I would learn about the needs and experiences of women individually. Because these tutoring sessions (which lasts between thirty and fifty minutes) are between two people

and not an entire class, there is more to be shared and learned. The most learned session I experienced, which challenged the way I approached tutorials involved a non-traditional student completing an assignment for a Literature course. As we sat at a table in the writing center, this student (“Crystal”) expressed her anger for her teacher and her classmates’ lack of understanding the point she was trying to make. When she discussed the character of the story to me, she said,

Sydney, I just don’t see what the problem is. All this chick had to do was stay home and take care of her children. Women like us never had that luxury! Do you know how bad I wish I had been able to watch my kids grow up and not have to work all these jobs?

Crystal frustratingly said this to me as we worked through her essay on the oppression of women in a story in which she had to write a reaction to. Her assignment was to explain the way(s) in which the main character was oppressed, yet this non-traditional student was having a hard time seeing the problem. Crystal, a 52 year old African American first time college student, could not understand the issue her professor and traditional aged classmates were talking about in relation to feminism and oppression. On the other hand, her professor informed me that Crystal was not critically thinking about the story the way she was *supposed* to and her paper was suffering.

Although I am now ashamed to admit it, I was equally frustrated with Crystal because she was not processing feminist theory the way her professor explained it to her. So, I took a deep breath and asked her to explain her point to me and that was when I understood the problem. The problem had nothing to do with Crystal or the story. Actually, there was not a major problem at all, just another way of seeing an issue. The

main character in the story was a White woman who felt smothered in her creative pursuits, only being expected and allowed to care for her husband and family. She was trapped in a cage. But for an African American woman who never had that “luxury,” the main character seemed ungrateful, not realizing the opportunity she had to watch her children grow and be there for them. Crystal also had not been explained the historical context of the story.

As an adult woman college student with experience, Crystal was feeling conflicted. By entering the world of higher education, she was allowed to “acquire the keys to the kingdom, enter and flourish,” (Denny, 2010, p. 56) but she felt that she had to “leave her socio-cultural heritage [and experiences] at the gates” (56). As we worked through her thoughts, I was able to compare a bit of what Crystal was feeling to what the main character of the story might have been feeling. We also took turns role playing some of the major characters, but incorporating Crystal’s love of art into the creativity that would be oppressed, and that is when Crystal was able to understand what her professor was trying to say. As with my students in my classes, I learned that using Crystal’s life experiences and allowing her to voice her beliefs made the lesson easier to grasp. She was able to analyze the story and write the paper, while including her voice and experience. Finally, Crystal felt something she had not felt as an adult woman student during her first year in college: she felt heard and validated.

This experience was actually a lot more challenging for me than teaching a group because I could not plan the session in advance the way I could plan a class lesson. Tutoring in the Writing Center made me more alert; I had to keep more resources

mentally tucked away for whenever I needed them, and they changed based on who visited next. In classroom, when I made a mistake or stalled in trying to find the right word to explain a concept, there was always a student ready to offer another suggestion and I felt more comfortable in front a room of fifteen or more students. They all were more understanding. In a one on one session, I felt pressured to have all of the right answers in an instant, so this challenged me to be quicker in my responses and more up to date with the latest methods (and even older methods) of writing. Yet, this was such an enriching experience because it confirmed my readings by educational scholars and theorists: my way of teaching had to be something I truly believed in and lived on a daily basis. If not, I would live a life of trying to remember methods and strategies to help people. If my goal was to provide a transformative and enlightening learning experience, then I would always need to be a part of this process as well, and exercise the qualities that lead to transformation.

Through these various experiences, I learned a few more things: 1) non-traditional women students need to know that their life experiences are valued in academe, 2) professors should be willing to expose themselves in the classroom as a way to create a meaningful relationship with his/her students, and 3) whether it is with a professor or in an academic support setting, creating a safe space for students to voice themselves without fear of getting an answer wrong can enhance trust and the overall learning experience.

Colleges and universities have been enrolling adult learners for years and as the numbers of these students have increased, campuses have established programs geared

towards assisting adult learners. As a result of this growing campus population, faculty have been trained to teach with the needs of adult students in mind, offices have developed programs to assist these learners with college transition, and some courses have been developed that allow adult students to be in classes of just their peers. These are positive moves that show that higher education continuously understands what adult learners want and need, collectively and individually, in their educational careers.

Although a transformative educational experience can apply to all students, it is discussed most in the context of adult learners, especially adult women learners. Yet, because ideas such as authentic learning and connecting the spiritual self to education is still seen by some academicians as unscholarly, transformative education is a slow pedagogical movement, fighting for recognition and validity (Tisdell, 2008). For colleges and universities to provide a meaningful educational experience to adult women learners, educators will need to acknowledge and adapt their ideas of students' ways of knowing (Belenky et. al. 1997) and meaning making.

Is Higher Education Ready for Non-traditional Students?

Today, some colleges and universities have started marketing their campuses to non-traditional learners. Aside from community colleges, four year universities have recognized that the desire of a BA, MA and/or Ph. D. is found in everyone, regardless of age and new adult student programs prove this. Campuses have created day, evening, weekend, and online programs to accommodate the adult learner with multiple responsibilities and on the surface, these programs have been a success. Unfortunately,

like all wonderful ideas, unforeseen problems have emerged that have educators moving back to the drawing table.

Non-traditional learners take classes with traditional learners, enter the same majors as traditional learners, and are becoming immersed in college life. On one hand, this is great for adult learners who want the full experience of a college education; this population has also brought publicity and more students to colleges and universities. With the wonderful publicity and rise in student population, problems occur that are overlooked by administrators and educators such as the response from traditional students. Traditional learners are not always appreciative of the knowledge and experiences offered by their non-traditional peers. Sometimes, adult learners are seen more as “parents” to traditional learners than peers due to their outlooks on life. Adult students have many lessons they have already learned and they want to warn their younger classmates, but traditional students want to make their own mistakes and have fun. That *is* what college is for, right? Traditional learners come to college with a preconceived idea of how they should act in class and what they will experience on a college campus. Instead, they find that non-traditional learners test their ideas; their college campus experiences now include an age group that they feel do not belong. In other words, college is their territory and they do not want others interfering with it. As a result, some institutions of higher education feel the tense atmosphere on campus without knowing exactly where it originated.

This hesitation towards the non-traditional student is also felt in the classroom. Faculty who have prepared their courses with the idea of naïve eighteen and nineteen

year olds are immediately shocked to find that their students are eighteen, nineteen and fifty-two. The lecture for an audience of people who were supposed to know little about the subject is weakened by some students who not only know the subject through reading, but through hands on experience. As college administrators develop offices for adult students and class times are extended for this growing population, the rest of the campus is often left out of the decision making loop and feel the consequences. It seems as though no one made sure that these colleges and universities were truly ready for the non-traditional student. What about the adult learner? Who prepped him/her for college life outside of time management and work?

Problem Statement

There are many problems with current adult learner programs that effect non-traditional women learners, but I have focused on two: 1) Adult learners are grouped together as one category with little regard to race, class, or gender and 2) the epistemology of “connected knowing” (Belenky et.al, 1997, p. 112), which mostly applies to women, is not regarded as a respectable way to learn in academe. The first issue is problematic because presenting adult learners as a homogenous group prevents them from being viewed as individuals and relegates them to minority status on campuses where traditional age students are the majority. Numerous scholars (Belenky, et. al. 1997; Sadker & Sadker, 1994) point out that on average, women learn differently than men. Among women, race and socioeconomic status matters when it comes to ways in which they view societal concerns, and personal issues, which can impact the way they process knowledge (Hill-Collins, 2009; hooks, 2004).

The second reason the epistemology of “connected knowing” (Belenky et.al, 1997, p.112) is problematic is that as multiple learning styles have been acknowledged in higher education, connected knowing is still viewed as non-academic and as not aligning with traditional ways of teaching and learning (Sadker & Sadker, 1994; Belenky et.al., 1997; Hill-Collins, 2009). This concept, which is based more on intuition, personal experience, and subjectivity, contradicts the proper way of learning seen by college educators. Non-traditional women students are not allowed to bring their personal experiences and prior knowledge into the classroom, which creates or re-creates a pattern of self-silencing that many women have previously overcome; therefore, adult women learners who relate to this way of knowing struggle in the classroom.

For colleges and universities with a large population of adult learners, especially adult women learners, it would benefit them to learn more about the ways in which this group views their lives and educational experiences and whether it continues to differ based on characteristics such as race, class, sexuality and location. This information can also help educators make better decisions regarding adult women learners; based on the experiences they bring to their educational careers and what they hope to gain from the college or university they attend.

Purpose of the Study

My teaching and tutoring experience characterizes one of many that I have had since becoming a faculty member and writing center director at a small liberal arts women’s college. I have listened to women’s stories of struggle, heartbreak, perseverance, and resilience, but I never felt that I had a definite answer to some

questions: After everything these women have accomplished and endured, why did they feel the need to earn a college degree? Also, how were they handling the many aspects of college life? I had to know, but I never felt right asking these questions, and years of classes have taught me that I would not get the real answer by asking one, specific question. I needed more. I needed a story. So through this study, I hoped to find answers to these questions.

The purpose of this study is to gain insight into the ways first-time, adult women college students process their educational experiences through their life stories. Although times are progressing, women still balance multiple roles such as mother, wife, employee daughter, and student. I believe this positionality, along with overall life experience, plays into the power structure(s) they face in a college environment that mostly caters to traditional age students and a traditional and objective way of learning. My focus is on multiple characteristics of these women such as race and class, along with gender. From the participants' life stories, this study can assist colleges and universities in better accommodating a population of adult women learners.

Significance of Research

This study of adult women learners in four year colleges and universities is important to the field of adult education theory because it provides similar *and* different perspectives on the lives of adult women that are often separated in the field. Adult education theory is focused on adult functioning in a collegiate environment, but rarely does it look at a woman's past life experiences and its' impact on her collegiate experience. Women are juggling family, career and school and some of them are doing

this by themselves with no family support. This is in addition to recovering from past hurts that could impact their education. These learners usually come into college with a different way of processing knowledge and an array of experiences and life lessons that are taken for granted in higher education. If connected knowing and transformational learning is viewed as being significant to women, then it should be used to analyze how women may progress in higher education. In other words, a woman's personal life is just as important to higher education as her academic credentials, and this study suggests ways in which it is important.

Overview of Chapters

In chapter two I provide a synthesis of themes relevant to the literature on adult women learners, their connection to childhood mistreatment and its academic impact, and ways adult students make meaning, to name a few. Chapter three explains the methodology used for the study, my conceptual frameworks used for viewing my research, and a definition of key terms. I also explain narrative research, its components and I introduce my participants. In chapter four I describe the themes, in detail, about my participants' experiences with childhood mistreatment. Not only do I, with the women's voices, describe some painful events, but I also discuss factors which initially suppress their ability to be resilient and others which helped them build resiliency. Chapter five describes the nature of spirituality, the *human spirit* and how it all relates to education in my participants' lives. Each woman shared how her spiritual beliefs (some secular and some religious) were significant in her life. I then explain how spirituality and the notion of a healthy *human spirit* directly relates to democratic and transformative education.

The final chapter concludes with me explaining how, through my research, my view on the teaching of women has been enhanced. I also discuss what I believe education should resemble based on the stories of my participants, future research possibilities, and ways higher education can help this population of students.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview of the Chapter

This chapter examines literature about the needs regarding adult women learners and some solutions to the issues they face in their personal lives and academe. Using theoretical and practical methods, educating adult women students is an act of liberation from oppression. Adult students learn to create their own meaning of the world by obtaining power in various forms, which allows them to name the world in which they live by critically reading their surroundings (Lauzon, 2007). Doing this stops others from naming the world for them and gives adult learners autonomy and choice in their lives that they did not previously have or were not aware of having. They learn to use their lives and classroom experiences to their advantage and eventually continue their learning by educating themselves. Through the practice of collaboration, culturally relevant pedagogy and connected knowing, teaching adult women learners can be a truly transformative and empowering process.

My Search Process

Before I began my literature review, I read the book *Women's Ways of Knowing* (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule, 1997) to understand adult women students and their needs and desires. Although the book was written in 1997, I knew it had been a

powerful book that validated a learning style of some women that differed from a traditional, objective learning style. This book introduced me to the term *connected knowing* and made me question if this style was apparent in women of different ethnicities and socioeconomic statuses. When I finished the book, I researched more information on *connected knowing* since that was the key theme that emerged from that book. This key term led to other pieces of literature that dealt with multiple identities and challenges experienced by adult women students. At that point, I searched for articles and books discussing how learning differed based on race and class, which I found. I then continued my literature review by looking up everything I could find about adult women's experiences specifically. I had to branch out from their collegiate experiences because literature suggested that life experience intertwined with collegiate experience. I found more results involving male and female adult learners, so I had to specifically search for information on women learners.

Of the literature that did differentiate between male and female students, I was able to keep them, but I also reviewed the reference section of the articles I studied. From the reference section of many articles, I highlighted additional books and journal articles that seemed interesting for the moment; in order to make sure that I was not diverging from my chosen research topic, I decided to listen to and transcribe my participants' narratives before I researched any more literature. Once I divided my participants' stories into themes such as abuse, involvement in sports, and silencing, I reviewed my prior list of references to see if any of those articles and books would still fit. Luckily, many of them did. For the ones that did not fit, I put them in a pile just in

case I needed them later in my research. I then searched for literature with my themes in it that related to adult women. With each article that fit my study, I collected more literature from the reference pages. I especially paid attention to any authors who repeatedly emerged in articles and books and read their research as well.

The authors who focused on adult students as homogenous groups, and the ones who wrote about male adult students were eliminated if their results did not contribute to my study. It would have been interesting to read more about what male adult students experience, but I quickly realized from scholarly works that a study about men would be just as extensive as ones about women. Many of the men experienced oppression and abuse like women, but their internalization of it was different, so I was able to understand further that it is necessary to study non-traditional students separately based on gender due to the ways in which society expects us to behave as men and women.

Abuse and Academic Achievement

People are often surrounded with a number of protective and risk factors that impact their lives. Protective factors include “conditions that buffer, interrupt, or prevent problems from occurring” (Greene, Galambos, and Lee, 2003, p. 76). These factors can include family and friends used as support, involvement in church and community, and educational support which can be a confidence builder (Greene, Galambos, and Lee, 2003; Vliet, 2008). Risk factors are conditions that hinder a person from becoming resilient or overcoming challenges. Changes in children’s belief systems following sexual abuse may contribute to psychological and behavioral problems in adulthood (Breno & Galupo, 2007). When it comes to child sexual abuse, long term consequences include depression,

anxiety, low self-esteem, substance abuse, sexual problems and post-traumatic stress disorders (Jones, Trudinger, & Crawford, 2004, p. 455). Learning problems also increase as a result of sexual abuse, and children are more likely to be recommended for special education classes due to low academic and social performance (Jones, et. al., 2004, p. 456; Crozier & Barth, 2005). Breno & Galupo's study (2007) suggested that overall, when it came to self-recovery for young adults, their perception of their own power was most significant. In other words, if the women in the study recognized that they had power over their recovery, then the effects of past traumatic events were less than those who saw themselves as powerless (Breno & Galupo, 2007, p. 110). This was also similar to other studies (Gillman & Reivich, 2004; Moe, Johnson & Wade, 2007) which cited personal attitude as being a factor in resilience.

Many authors concluded that children who suffer from mistreatment score lower in academic performance, and have a low adaptive functioning (behaviors needed to live independently and function in the world) than non-abused, non-neglected children (Zolotor et. al., 1999, p. 20-21; Jones, et. al, 2004; Crozier & Barth, 2005; Whitney, Renner & Herrenkohl, 2010; Fantuzzo, et. al, 2011). Another conclusion was that increasing gestational age, increasing caregiver age, having a lower child anxiety/depression score, having a biological father in the home, and having a working caregiver correlate with better academic performance. For Zolotor et. al. (1999), mistreatment included neglect and emotional abuse as well as physical and sexual abuse. Other studies such as ones by Perez and Wisdom (1994) suggested that adults who

experienced abuse as children were more likely to be suspended or expelled from school, have repeated a grade or have a criminal history (cited in Zolotor et. al, 1999, p. 26).

Crozier & Barth (2005) investigated children who received social welfare services due to allegations of mistreatment. They then investigated the children's academic achievement. For this study, the risk factors included not having a support system, a lack of resources, and low socioeconomic status which prevented one from achieving her best in life. Children suffering from mistreatment with multiple risk factors had a low performance on standardized tests and negative social behaviors in school (Crozier & Barth, 2005, p. 204). The data from another study by Fantuzzo et. al. (2011) suggested that abused and neglected children (pre-kindergarten and post-kindergarten through second grade) perform poorly on "standardized assessments in reading, language, and science" (p. 1408). Compared to the results of peer groups, mistreated children, regardless of age and gender, "are not performing well...on tests of cognitive and academic achievement" (Crozier & Barth, 2005, p. 202). Combined with a low socioeconomic status, children's academic achievement worsened due to a lack of resources.

At the same time, Crozier and Barth's 2005 study showed that abuse outside of physical abuse such as emotional abuse and neglect yielded low academic performance as well (p. 203). Children also lacked basic social skills and learning behaviors necessary for academic achievement. "Children with histories of neglect and physical abuse disproportionately experienced higher rates of health, maternal, and social risks than children without histories of maltreatment" (Fantuzzo, 2011, p. 1409). It was suggested

through the studies that children of various ages suffered academically, but there was a difference when it came to race and class. African American and Hispanic students were more likely to score lower than White children; poor children, described as being at poverty level or below, had lower scores on standardized tests than non-poor children. At the same time, it is important to note that many of the authors' use of *non-poor* meant that although children were above poverty, it did not mean that they did not live in economically distressed homes.

Whitney, Renner and Herrenkohl (2010) examined risk and protective factors that affected academic performance among males and females. They determined that risk and protective factors work simultaneously in a person's life. Risk factors included physical abuse, exposure to intimate partner violence, low IQ, early problem behaviors, social and attention problems, and low socioeconomic status (p. 440-441). Protective factors included positive future orientation, involvement in religion, extracurricular activities, parental/peer disapproval of antisocial behavior, and perceived parental responsiveness and acceptance (p. 441-442). Although the results showed that "importance/involvement in religion, extracurricular activities, and parental responsiveness/acceptance are important protective factors for males and females" (p. 447), the category of parental/peer disapproval of antisocial behavior was more important for females as a protective factor. Also, results that showed adolescents with low protective factors and high risk factors showed low levels of academic performance as did the previously mentioned studies.

There were a couple of limitations with these studies combined. Many of the authors only focused on standardized test scores when examining academic achievement,

which meant that there was no knowledge of how the children fared in separate subjects. Standardized tests do not show what a child has learned throughout the year and low scores on standardized tests should not be used as the only measurement of success. Also, some studies only investigated children through a particular grade (usually in elementary school), so there is no way of knowing if academic scores or teacher reports improved as the children advanced in school. Although these studies are helpful, they only capture a moment in time and do not consider the children who are doing well in school, but may also have suffered with mistreatment.

Resiliency among Mistreated Children

Martinez-Torteya, et. al. (2009) measured resiliency among children who have been exposed to domestic violence. Risk factors (poor parenting, depression among mothers, low income, and race) as well as protective factors (positive parenting, easy child temperament and high cognitive ability) were used to further assess resiliency. In other research like that of Moe, Johnson and Wade (2007), ten protective factors were examined, which supported childhood resilience: effective parenting, connections to other competent adults, appeal to other people, good intellectual skills, areas of talent or accomplishment valued by self and others, self-efficacy, self-worth and hopefulness; religious faith or affiliations, socioeconomic advantages, good schools and other community assets, and good fortune (p. 384). Due to more protective factors than risk factors, authors found that more children exposed to maltreatment have the possibility of being resilient.

It was also concluded in studies that positive adaptation during adversity contributed to resiliency (Moe et. al, 2007; Martinez-Torteya, 2009; Sesar, et. al., 2010). Along with risk and protective factors, the authors discovered that the level of maternal depression and a child's easy temperament significantly determined resiliency more than factors such as "positive parenting, child cognitive ability, stressful life events, income and race" (Martinez-Torteya, 2009, p. 574). This suggested that mothers in good mental health can create a more positive atmosphere for their children and teach them to have better adaptive attitudes. Similar to Smith and Carlson's study (1997), positive parental involvement can also increase academic achievement, along with community services like Head Start (p. 244). Social workers can implement intervention strategies for children at risk of mistreatment by providing parents with resources for combating issues like substance abuse and helping mothers leave abusive relationships. Doing so not only helps parents, but also lessens and possibly eliminates risk factors for children (p. 242). It was suggested that other community services would be useful for social workers to connect to in order to recommend to parents ways to help children's social skills.

Sesar, Simic and Barisic (2010) researched the effects of people who suffered from multiple types of abuse in their lives noted that "exposure to multi-type abuse in childhood is a traumatic experience with long-term negative effects" (p. 406), but different coping strategies help young adults. Some coping strategies recognized as being useful included the use of protective factors. It is important to understand that even though protective factors lessen psychological and social problems later in life, they are not definite cures for low self-esteem, post-traumatic stress disorder, etc. In the author's

results, they surprisingly discovered that avoiding coping strategies helped adults in the short term when they suffered from physical abuse by “lowering the level of victimization and alleviating the consequences of the abuse experience” (p. 412); they also mention that other studies have proved the opposite.

Most importantly, problem solving coping strategies helped adults better in psychological adaptation (anxiety and depression) (p. 413; Coker, 2003). The authors suggested that people feel better when they have a problem to solve or when they develop ways to help themselves alleviate stress and improve relationships with others or their own environment (p. 412). Problem solving coping mechanisms also proved useful with Gilliam and Reivich’s 2004 study to place teenagers in the best position to problem solve their situations instead of immediately expecting the worst possible scenario. When it comes to coping, a person’s beliefs and values can serve as a resource to problem-based coping because it serves as a foundation (Smith & Carlson, 1997; Gillham & Reivich, 2004). Like previous investigations (Fantuzzo, et. al, 2011; Crozier & Barth, 2005), neglect, again, proved to be just as damaging to a child as other forms of abuse because it is often repeated throughout a child’s life and can go unnoticed by others.

Gillham and Reivich (2004) discuss a cognitive behavioral therapy program designed to help adolescents battle depression and build optimism and hope. Although they acknowledge that to some scholars, optimism and hope are two different things, they use the terms interchangeably. In their Penn Resiliency Program (PRP), various methods are used to help depressed teenagers recognize their emotions and teach them ways to focus on more positive outcomes and reality. For example, through “self-disputing” (p.

155), teenagers are taught to turn negativity into positivity by thinking accurately about problems occurring in their lives. Other strategies include putting things into perspective, goal setting one step at a time, assertiveness, and negotiation training (p. 155-156). Children will experience challenges in life, but the authors have discovered that over time, severe challenges increase anxiety and depression in children and as they mature, they are not finding ways to cope with it (p. 149-150). Whether they have learned negative behaviors from parents, teachers, peers or anyone else, it is negatively affecting how these children care for and help others. Without embracing optimism, having a positive attitude, and learning ways to overcome challenges and disappointment, people will not be able to see beyond their own lives and positively impact their community and the world (p. 159).

Self-silencing and Resilience as Adults

In the multiple studies, it was discovered that women and men self-silence, without one gender doing it more than the other. Although this was surprising to researchers, the conclusions for why genders self-silenced were mixed. It was assumed that men may self-silence due to a lack of language in order to express their emotion, while women mostly self-silence for a variety of reasons (Gratch, Bassett, & Attra, 1995, p. 513). Some of the reasons include: trauma, not wanting to destroy a relationship, being taught to stay quiet and accommodate their partners, or fear of seeming dumb.

It was also concluded that there was a correlation between self-silencing and depression among women, with Asian women and African American women self-silencing and experiencing depression more than White women (Gratch, Bassett, & Attra,

1995). The differences in depression among race and ethnicity show that culture does impact why certain women self-silence and how that relates to depression. As Beauboeuf-Lafontant's study (2008) suggests, African American women often present the "strong Black woman" (p. 398) persona, resulting in self-silencing as an effort to not show weakness. Although scholars could not conclude that self-silencing *directly* leads to depression, there was a correlation between women who self-silenced and depressed women. In other words, women who remained silent with no protective factors may eventually become depressed.

Self-silencing and depression related to resilience because it was determined that people, especially women, were capable of building their levels of resilience even if they suffered from traumatic events. Including a variety of protective factors in one's life showed scholars how people were able to have positive outlooks on their lives. It was shown by Lam and Grossman (1997) that protective factors "tend to reflect strengths which promote good adaptation in individuals and families" (p. 190). As stated before, having a network of family and friends to confide in and ask for help let women know that they did not have to endure any challenge by themselves. Getting involved in church and/or connecting with a higher power proved to show a change in women's attitudes when experiencing adversity (Greene, Galambos, & Lee, 2003, p. 80; Vliet, 2008, p. 239). Taking blame off of oneself and putting it where it belongs, or simply accepting that hurtful events occurred also caused a positive change in women, which aided in their resilience level (Feinauer & Stuart, 1996). Being able to do this helps women gain control over their lives and allows them to direct themselves.

Academic Resilience and Persistence

Many authors wrote about resilience as the ability to succeed in the face of adversity (Breno & Galupo, 2007; Crawford, Liebling-Kalifani, & Hill, 2009). When it came to resilience, the authors discovered that many protective factors can help women build resilience and persistence, especially in higher education. In some studies, the authors did not use the term protective factors, but instead used the term instrumental and emotional support to describe people who served as supportive figures throughout non-traditional students' academic career (Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002; Lundberg et. al., 2008). Emotional and instrumental support can be viewed as subcategories under protective factors such as praise, child care, encouragement, and financial support. For example, women can use college as a way to reconstruct their identities. Valuing roles such as being a mother can possibly increase resiliency because it helps women stay focused on a positive goal by setting an example for their children (Cox & Ebbers, 2010).

Support and encouragement for adult women going to college came mostly from their parents, their children, their partners, and their peers who were glad to see them earning their degrees, but moreso in the beginning of students' academic career than later (Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002; Lundberg et. al., 2008; Cox & Ebbers, 2010). Parents offered to babysit and adult women learners reported doing homework with their children. It was concluded that having emotional support from children served as a factor for persisting in college (Lundberg et. al., 2008, p. 66-67). This may be because children have their own ways of offering support and a lot is not expected from them in this area,

unlike from partners and families. As with one of my participants, Jessica's children seeing her work hard for her degree helps her stay positive and determined in school.

Coker's study (2003) offered additional perspectives from African American women learners. Many of the women saw education as a way to continue their personal, family and community development. For them, receiving their degree and securing financial stability meant that they were taking care of their families and positively affecting their communities. Their peers offered each other their personal contact information and information on community support services to help each other with balancing acts (working, studying, housework, raising children, etc.).

In the study by Lundberg et. al. (2008) most non-traditional students discussed their appreciation for the support they received from devoted partners and family members, but would have liked more. For instance, parents often stepped in to take care of the children when the student had classes and partners were noted for doing more work around the house and cheering them on. At the same time, students noticed that these same supportive people did not ask them about their academic progress or what they were learning, which the students took as them not being completely interested (p. 65-66). Overall, non-traditional students who progress well in higher education do so in spite of life challenges (Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002). This may be due to the level of persistence they have as adult learners and their reasons for getting their degrees.

Sense of self-worth was also a factor in resilience and persistence. Over time, the woman's identity comes from other people in her life. As with my participants, self-worth can come from previous abusers like parents and partners in relationships; this identity

can form from the woman trying to please abuser and value his/her needs over the woman's own needs. Being able to leave an unhealthy relationship, especially while trying to get a degree, is a major factor in persisting in school. This is a process and not a one-time event, but unfortunately, there are reasons why women are unable to leave a harmful relationship such as fear of the unknown, dependency, social factors and influences, and an idealized view of a happy relationship. It is important for her to regain a sense of control and have ongoing social support in order to leave. Excelling in school and connecting to peers can give the woman an ability to walk away from an abuser by proving to herself that she has what it takes to succeed on her own.

Challenges experienced by African American women and other adult women learners were due to issues dealing with race and the challenges of being an adult learner. Many of the participants in studies discussed feeling marginalized by White instructors and peers due to cultural differences, and not wanting to perpetuate the stereotypical aggressive African American woman (Coker, 2003, p. 668). The challenge of being an adult learner was similar to Cox and Ebbers (2010) study and Belenky et. al. (1997) in being an older student returning to college after years of being away from school, while at the same time having life experience that contributes to their schooling. Other challenges included women negotiating between being verbal without being stereotyped and figuring out ways to express themselves without being seen as emotional. Different coping mechanisms, whether hurtful or helpful, included using humor to confront difficult issues, self-silencing and focusing on passing the course and getting the degree, compromise, and confrontation only when they felt comfortable with certain people

(Coker, 2003, p. 670-671). Although women in the studies noted other negative experiences such as feeling “old” in some of their classrooms and experiencing a lack of diversity at some campuses, the positive experiences and their determination outweighed the negative. Cox and Ebbers (2010) attributed “aspirational capital (the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future, even in the face of real and perceived barriers)” (p. 354) as the women’s reasons for persisting in college. The importance of a positive attitude, getting involved, and forming positive relationships with people helped women achieve their goal of a college degree.

Connected Knowing and Women Learners

There are two major types of knowing that people subscribe to: connected knowing and separated knowing. Connected knowing is based on personal experience, intuition and an examination of a situation from another’s viewpoint to arrive at a ‘truth’ (Belenky et., al, 1997) whereas separated knowing follows the guidelines of traditional forms of learning. In separated knowing, if something *feels* one way to an adult learner, it is important for her to verify that her feelings match the *right* answer. This type of learner will search for the textbook answer instead of immediately trusting her instincts. If her instincts do not match the textbook answer, more than likely she will align with the *correct* answer than the answer that she truly believes if the correct one (Belenky et.al, 1997).

Contrastingly, a learner who identifies as a connected knower finds it hard to judge others because she can understand another person’s motive given the context. She does not see textbook knowledge and expert knowledge as all-knowing if it does not

align with her personal knowledge. Therefore, in the classroom, this learner may be seen as more of an independent thinker, which should be supported by the professor. “They [educators] support their students’ thinking, but they do not do the students’ thinking for them or expect the students to think as they do” (Belenky et. al, 1997, p. 218). In this scenario, knowledge is molded with each class member using one another for knowledge-construction through modes such as dialogue and collaborative work. With connected knowing, the student’s validation does not just come from the professor, but from classmates and her own experiences.

Connected knowing has a direct effect on a woman’s interpretation of how her college career *should* go and how it *is* going. The notion of using intuition or soul knowing (also part of connected knowing) is very important to women and their educational experiences because it is representative of their learning (Dirkx, 2001; Merriam & Caferella, 1999; Belenky et. al, 1997). For them, the educational experience and life experience are interdependent (Kasworm, 2003, February; Dirkx, 2001; Barlas, 2001) and the classroom should imitate this. By controlling the emotions of students, educators think they are keeping their classrooms academic, but emotions and experiences should be seen as a contributing learning experience, not a hindrance. If connected knowing is viewed as a significant point in a student’s learning experience, then modeling it in the classroom can better promote transformational teaching and learning. Students and professors forming a relationship of trust can help transformational learning occur.

Critiques of connected knowing

Although most women are connected knowers (Belenky, et. al, 1997), it is important to acknowledge that not *all* women are connected knowers; some are separated knowers because their knowledge is not based on intuition, but logic and analysis. Recognizing this difference in women learners prevents scholars from presenting women as a homogenous group. In *Women, knowing, and authenticity: Living with contradictions*, Leona M. English (2006) argues that women have been socialized to be ‘warm and fuzzy’ in life and learning; therefore, educating women needs “new lenses and a fresh perspective that is more complex, has fewer binaries or polarities, and is inevitably more challenging” (p. 19). Like separated knowers, not all women want to deal with feelings, emotions and connections to their overall life experiences. Some women are extremely analytical and objective and should not be left out of women’s ways of knowing. Therefore, it is important to understand various epistemologies and techniques that allow educators to teach to an array of learners, not just one type. Doing this brings forth a transformative educational experience because it also exposes other students to various types of knowledge building.

Another difference that should be acknowledged among women learners is their cultural history. Women of different ethnicities may come from cultures that value dialogue, storytelling and obtaining knowledge from elders rather than textbooks and authority figures outside of family (Hill-Collins, 2009; Merriam & Cafferella, 1999). It is not uncommon for knowledge to be passed from generation to generation via oral history, community gatherings or other events where women learn from one another through

dialogue and observation. At the same time, women of color may believe a concept to be true based on their similar racial experiences with other women. In this case, they cannot fully relate to women outside of their cultural make-up because their experiences are not completely common. Unfortunately, this truth is dispelled because it does not fit within the realm of academic or scholarly knowledge (Hill-Collins, 2009).

As described in *Women's Ways of Knowing* (Belenky et. al, 1997), women raised in lower to middle class backgrounds are often more likely to accept messages from authority figures that tell them who they are (smart, unintelligent, worthless) and what they should think (Belenky, et.al, 1997) than women raised in upper-middle to upper class environments. Although women in upper class households can also be oppressed, they are more prone to have availability to resources such as extracurricular activities, teachers and mentors who can serve as a “surrogate family” (Belenky et. al, 1997, p. 162) and aid in their personal and intellectual growth.

Women of lower class backgrounds will not have access to these resources and will often struggle with what they feel versus what they are taught. A woman from an underprivileged household may have family members who do not value education highly (Belenky et.al, 1997); therefore, this young woman learns that leading her own life and getting a higher education is unattainable. Unlike an adult student who may be raised in a privileged household and learn when and how to speak for herself, the underprivileged woman may have the desire, but not believe it is possible (Belenky et. al, 1997; Merriam & Cafarella, 1999). In this instance, she needs to know that her intuition and prior knowledge is valuable to her educational achievement (Belenky et. al, 1997; Kasworm,

2008; Dirkx, 2008). Because of this, women of color just like connected knowers and women with limited resources silence their voices and remain oppressed.

Transformational Teaching and Learning

Part of transformational learning is realizing one's agency and educators can help students realize that they are dynamic individuals capable of making changes in their lives and communities. For example, it is believed by Mezirow (1996) that adult literacy cannot be taught the same way it is taught to children. For adults, literacy is not about reading words, but making meaning from those words. Therefore, in order for education to be transformative, it needs to relate to the lived experiences in order to impact change. Concurring with Elbow's (1973) philosophy of learning happening outside of teachers, transformational teaching helps adult students learn with the teacher acting as facilitator and guide, which can continue beyond the classroom with the teacher acting as mentor or being completely absent.

Jack Mezirow's explanation of transformative theory and its relation to adult education is that through transformative theory, students use critical reflection and rational discourse to rethink their past beliefs and discuss new concepts open mindedly to redefine old ideologies and make them new. Critical reflection is "principled thinking; ideally it is impartial, consistent, and non-arbitrary" (Mezirow, 1998, p. 186). Mezirow understands that human beings want to stay in a level of comfortability and as a result are prone to resist change; at the same time he knows that we all have a desire to learn and understand our experiences in a simplified way. Reflection allows adults the opportunity to see if their childhood beliefs work for them as adults given their various life

experiences. This often occurs through problem-solving because people are used to finding answers to common issues, yet Mezirow (1994) advises that we focus more on the premise of the problem (p. 224). To do this, it is better to focus on communicative learning (Mezirow, 1998, p. 225; Mezirow, 1996) and rational discourse, which requires that we pay attention to meanings behind the words we and others use in order to arrive at a consensus (Mezirow, 1997, p. 6). This works better than focusing on empirical data to arrive at a conclusion when using self-reflection because the focus is on purposes, values and feelings (p. 6).

Learning to think autonomously with the help of critical reflection is a key element to transformative learning. Often, adults hold beliefs based on their upbringing, religion, or authority figures without critically examining these ideologies (Mezirow, 1998). Similar to Donaldo Macedo's example of the good student who obeys the teacher without questioning anything she is being taught (1997), adults who do not engage in transformative learning are at risk of repeating damaging values and beliefs. By learning to think independently and becoming critically aware of one's surroundings, adult learners will be able to focus on more societal issues instead of personal short term issues (Mezirow, 1997). This allows them to become a participator in social reform.

Discussing transformational teaching for non-traditional women students means acknowledging that they have different needs than traditional age women students (18-22 years old) and many male students. Therefore, it is not unreasonable to suggest that the teaching style vary when this group is part of the classroom. Transformational teaching can apply to any type of student, but the non-traditional woman student has certain

characteristics which differ from others: she (on average) has had more life experience and responsibilities (jobs, marriage, children) and she has been out of school for an extended period of time; therefore, her knowledge is not the same as someone entering college directly from high school, and her upbringing is more traditional than the 18-22 year old students (Merriam & Caferella, 1999). As a result, her perspectives on course topics may likely be different as well. According to the theory that women have ways of knowing different from men (Belenky, et.al, 1997) and given the difference in age between traditional and non-traditional learners, the teaching style should be flexible instead of modeling the traditional form of learning, which is often male centered.

Critique of Transformative and Democratic Education

A critique of patriarchal teaching can be said of transformational learning as well. “Examining the traditional role of the university, it is painfully clear that biases that uphold and maintain white supremacy, imperialism, sexism, and racism have distorted education so that it is no longer about the practice of freedom” (hooks, 1994, p. 29). Transformative learning and democratic education needs to be spoken of carefully because it has the ability to perpetuate White privileged male thinking (Merriam & Caferella, 1999) when it is broken into specific parts of focus such as critical reflection and analysis, which are characteristics of separated knowing, a predominantly masculine way of thinking (Belenky et.al, 1997). “When we’re [students] learning something, what we’re [students] essentially doing is trying to make sense of it, discern its internal logic, and figure out how it’s related to what we know already” (Merriam, Fall 2008, p. 96). In this case, incorporating personal experience is central to learning, regardless of labels.

If critical reflections suggest that a woman analyze her situation, critique previously held beliefs and examine her motives and actions from a scholarly viewpoint *only* (by providing documented support from experts on a particular subject area), then following her intuition in making a decision is not considered rational or acceptable because it is not based on proper research. In this case, critical reflection reinforces separated knowing and omits connected knowing; therefore a group (connected knowers) is always being marginalized in the learning environment. Separated knowledge and teaching is not wrong, but it oppresses many women and cultures when it is the only form being emphasized in education.

In the examination of transformational teaching and democratic education, it is also important to discuss the non-traditional woman student as an oppressed person due to past experiences, gender and cultural history. This oppression can occur in the context of women raised in an environment where they are taught to be seen and not heard. Oppression may also represent experiences where women have been placed into specific disciplines such as humanities instead of the physical science they desperately wanted (Sadker & Sadker, 1997). It could also relate to married women not being allowed to receive an education by former/current spouses, which continues today. According to Newman (as cited by Merriam and Caferella, 1999),

Adult teaching and learning should...deal with oppression at the same time that we [educators] encourage learners to examine themselves in order to build up their skills, increase or regenerate their knowledge, and rework their meaning perspectives in order to be better able to carry out those strategies. (p. 336)

Not only should educators understand certain forms of oppression experienced by their adult female students and how they can teach them in a transformational way, they should learn teaching techniques to foster positive change in the individual. All of this does not mean that all students should be grouped on the basis of learning styles, cultural history, gender, or other characteristics. Instead, a universal way of teaching that acknowledges multiple types of learners is more reasonable.

Conclusion

Transformational teaching involves educators learning more about the students they are teaching. Many adults are returning to school and it is important that faculty know the needs of these students because “the more we know about how adults learn the better we are able to structure learning activities that resonate with those adult learners with whom we work” (Merriam, 2008, p. 93). It is also important that those involved in the lives of these adult learners understand that their life experiences are full of juggling multiple roles, remaining positive, and battling past hurts. If adult women students are seen as connected learners as well as separated learners, then the activities that foster growth must include modes of learning that address experience based knowledge as well as academic knowledge. This will not undermine the rigor of academia, but enhance it because “education should be a place where the needs for diverse teaching methods and styles would be valued, encouraged, and seen as essential to learning” (hooks, 1994, p. 203). In other words, teaching and learning should be interdisciplinary in order to reach as many students as possible.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Theoretical Framework

For my research, I have done a qualitative study using narratives from my participants. My analysis is based on the critical feminist perspective with attention paid to constructivism in order to understand the ways in which women process their life experiences. Hopefully, this will help researchers understand how non-traditional women students process their educational experiences. Klein and Janoff-Bulman (1996) state that “Narrative methodology permits us to learn how people interpret their own traumatic experiences” (in Thomas & Hall, 2008), p. 149). My purpose in using narrative methodology is to have as much of my participants tell their stories and interpret them as possible. I believe that having my participants’ own words in this study is vital to the study’s validity versus having me being the sole interpreter. At the same time, I am also aware that this method of narrative research shows the participants “at a point along the way” (p. 163), and that “their life trajectories continue to unfold” (p. 163). Therefore, my analysis is not the final ruling on life experiences of non-traditional women students.

By using a critical feminist perspective, I had to imagine myself in my participants’ place while remembering my role as researcher because, as Patti Lather (2003) suggests, “We are not able to assume anything, we must take a self-critical stance regarding the assumptions we incorporate into our empirical approaches. Method does

not give truth; it corrects guesses” (p. 188). It would be easy for me to keep my biases regarding adult women learners, but researching them from a feminist perspective provided me the opportunity to correct mine and others theories about the needs of these individuals. To do this successfully, I examined the language learners used, the context in which they spoke and their positionality, along with my own.

Definition of Key Terms

I use multiple terms throughout my study to explain my participants and their experiences. These terms sometimes differ in meaning when used in various disciplines such as Sociology, Psychology, Social Work, Philosophy and Education. Therefore, I have chosen to define these key terms based on the way in which I use them for my study.

- 1) Adult women learners/non-traditional women learners are used interchangeable throughout the study. They have the same meaning which is a woman over the age of twenty-two who is in college obtaining her undergraduate education.
- 2) Resilience is a characteristic that someone has when she is able to *bounce back* from the challenges in life. These challenges can be as low as failing a course to as high as sexual abuse. A resilient person is someone who is able to use positive attributes in her life in a way that helps her transcend beyond her current situation so that she can make positive decisions that will enrich her life. A person who is resilient often has a high number of protective factors and a low number of risk factors.

- 3) Protective factors represent positive components in a person's life that cause her to have a healthy identity, make right decisions, and have the ability to be resilient in almost any situation. We all have protective factors in our lives, some more than others. These include things such as: positive parental reinforcement, extracurricular activities, church or spiritual involvement, positive peers, community involvement, caring and helpful teachers, etc. Having these protective factors can often offset obstacles that occur in life.
- 4) Risk factors represent negative components of a person's life that prevents her from being resilient and often keeps her in a position of low self-esteem. As with protective factors, we all have risk factors in our lives, and hopefully, those risk factors are very low. These include aspects such as: negative or harmful parental reinforcement, negative peer group or no peer group, isolation, lack of spiritual or church involvement, etc. Risk factors are not challenges in a person's life, but areas that limit a person from rising above a challenge. For instance, scoring a low grade on a test is not a risk factor, but an obstacle. Having friends encouraging that person to not study because school is not worth the hassle is a risk factor.
- 5) Silencing occurs when one person's voice is silenced by another or a group. This can happen when a person's opinions and values are dismissed by someone else. An example would be women who are silenced in a classroom that is majority male. If her classmates speak over her, dismiss her arguments, or if her professor

does not call on her as much as the men, then this woman is being silenced.

Being silenced can also lead to self-silencing.

- 6) Self-silencing refers to someone who limits her own voice due to being dismissed repeatedly, out of shame, or fear of another. A child, who is taught that her views are not important, may begin self-silencing. In this case, the parent may believe that the child is well behaved when, in actuality, the child has chosen not to speak.

Self-silencing, although seen as common in women, is also common in men, but for different reasons. A woman may self-silence after being abused by her spouse out of fear. A man may self-silence after being abused by his spouse out of shame. A person may also self-silence without knowing it or knowing why. As a society, women are viewed as inferior to men and we have been taught to silence ourselves out of respect for our fathers, husbands, brothers, uncles, male bosses, etc. In this case, it is not uncommon to engage in self-silencing without realizing that it is being done because that is what women have been taught to do.

- 7) The human spirit is a term used throughout literature that contains various meanings depending on the context. In this study, *human spirit* refers to the moral conscious of a person that guides her decision making in life. Whether one has a healthy or poor human spirit is based on her self-identity, self-esteem and awareness of herself and the world around her. *Human spirit* can be secular or religious and intertwines with various parts of our lives such as resilience and transcendence. For example, a person with a low human spirit may not have the ability to make wise choices due to low self-esteem. She in turn may surround

herself with like-minded individuals who continue to limit her ability to make decisions that will enrich her life (risk factors). Surrounding herself with protective factors could positively impact her self-identity, which further impacts her decision making abilities, which strengthens her human spirit. This eventually helps her build resiliency in life. I have written more about the human spirit and its relation to resiliency and spirituality in Chapter 5.

- 8) Transformative learning is a theory used in adult education that was coined by Jack Mezirow and expanded by other scholars like John M. Dirkx and Sharran B. Merriam. Since then, transformative learning and transformative education has increased to include the spiritual and subjective aspects of learning, along with the objective parts of meaning making. Essentially, transformative learning involves using key areas such as critical reflection of oneself and the world, knowledge through texts, and dialogue to redefine past beliefs and learn new beliefs. It is not wholly objective and it is not wholly subjective, but a mixture of the two. The objective side may involve readings about a concept to better understand it. The subjective side involves personal experience and the experiences of others related to the concept. Once these two sides are combined, one can arrive at a better understanding of the concept and how it relates to herself, people like her, and people not like her.
- 9) Mistreatment is used in this study instead of *maltreatment*. *Maltreatment* is a term used in various disciplines such as psychology, sociology and even social work to describe a person who has been treated inhumanely or with severe

cruelty. This term usually refers to physical abuse and sexual abuse, but some scholars have expanded its definition to include emotional abuse and neglect. *Mistreatment* means to treat someone badly; this term has been used to discuss incidents that are less severe than ones that would leave visible marks. Therefore, *maltreatment* is seen as severe and *mistreatment* is seen as something that is not as detrimental to a person. For this study, I listened to stories from women who were witnesses of domestic violence, sexually abused, physically beaten, emotionally tortured, and completely neglected. One story was not worse than another because they were all damaging and left lasting consequences on these women's lives. Therefore, *maltreatment* did not seem to be the fitting term, but *mistreatment* did because it included anyone who is or had been treated badly, regardless of the situation. As a result, *mistreatment* is used throughout this study.

Research Participants

For this project, I collected life stories of six first time non-traditional women learners, attending colleges in the Southeast. Two of my participants attend a large research university in Virginia and the remaining four attend a small, liberal arts women's college in North Carolina. All of the women have no previous degrees, are between the ages of thirty-one and forty-eight, and attend a four year college or university. Two of the women attempted college previously, but did not finish their schooling. Three of my participants were White women and three were African American. As far as socioeconomic status, some of the women were low-income, while

others consider themselves middle class; yet, the ones who were middle class experienced low socioeconomic status at some point in their lives. To conceal their identities, I have given them all fictitious names.

“Miranda”

Miranda is an African American woman in her late 30s, who is the oldest daughter of two blue collar workers. She and her younger sister grew up in a rural part of Virginia, where education was constantly stressed in their homes. Although her parents did not attend college, they emphasized the importance of receiving an education from the moment their girls were young. Miranda and her sister watched their parents work hard and they acquired the same strong work ethic. They had a choice in which schools they wanted to attend due to the fact that the house in which their parents built were claimed by two counties and their parents paid taxes in both counties. Miranda enjoyed school and enrolled in college immediately following high school with hopes of becoming an engineer. Unfortunately, this first attempt was short lived. She is married to a pastor, has one son, and is in her final year of college in Virginia.

“Darlene”

Darlene is a white, 31 year old woman in her first year of college and is a stepmother to her partner’s two children. She does not consider herself homosexual, but states that she “dates whoever makes me happy.” Darlene is the oldest of two children, has a younger brother, and has spent the early part of her life with her mother in North Carolina. When she was a child, her parents divorced and her mother received custody of Darlene and her brother. Darlene was physically abused by her alcoholic mother before

living with her father and stepmother. Although she was not physically abused by her father, she suffered emotional abuse due to his neglect, which hurt her deeply because she previously believed that she was “the apple of his eye.” As a result, Darlene found solace in school and sports; after graduating high school, she left North Carolina to take control of her life by working various jobs, living multiple places and “doing things that made [her] happy.” She is now in North Carolina and is a first-year student at a small, liberal arts women’s college.

“Marty”

Marty is a 47 year old white woman and the youngest of two children (her older brother is deceased) who grew up in the Triad of North Carolina. Her parents are divorced, and as a child, she watched her father abuse her mother and her mother, who turned to alcohol, abused her. Like Darlene, Marty believed she was the “apple of my father’s eye” as well. At sixteen, she married her first husband and her father signed the consent form, against her mother’s wishes. She has been married twice to abusive husbands and has two adult sons. She as well loved school and always had hopes of getting her college degree. She now cares for her elderly mother, attends school full-time as a first-year student at a small, liberal arts women’s college in North Carolina, and regularly spends time with her sons and their families.

“Monica”

Monica is an African American woman in her mid-30s who was raised in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. She is a twice divorced, single mother of four children, one of whom is a special needs child with cerebral palsy. Monica was also a child of

divorced parents and she watched her father abuse her mother. She describes her observation of this as “more emotional than physical” and a “result of [her father] being in the war.” Describing herself as a “B student” who enjoyed school, she went through a rebellious period and married at the age of sixteen (like Marty, her father signed the consent form). Monica experienced physical and emotional abuse at the hands of her two husbands and is now in school part-time while working part-time. She attends a small, liberal women’s college in North Carolina.

“Kelly”

Kelly is a 30 year old, African American woman raised in Virginia who attempted college once, but left with the hope of returning soon. She instead re-enrolled six years later. Kelly is an only child who was raised by her single mother and she experienced sexual abuse at the hands of acquaintances of her father’s. Soon after her mother found out, she was no longer allowed to spend time with him. Like the rest of the women, Kelly loved school, but also went through a rebellious period when she was placed in a school that did not recognize her intelligence and, in her words, was “very racist.” She too found her solace (and a sense of control) in sports activities; following high school, Kelly enrolled in college with hopes of becoming an engineer. She left school before accomplishing this, and has re-enrolled under a different discipline upon learning that engineering was not her passion. She attends a research university in Virginia.

“Jessica”

Jessica is a divorced, white woman in her early 40s with a college age daughter and a young son; she was raised in and resides in North Carolina. As with some of the

other participants, her parents divorced when she was very young, she witnessed her father abuse her mother, and she went through her own abusive relationships. She occasionally experiences depression, anxiety and has been diagnosed with post traumatic stress disorder and sees her survival of childhood as being “by the grace of God.” Jessica has never previously attempted college and has just completed her first semester with high marks in her courses. This has helped her continue to build her self confidence after struggling with, in her terms, “a cognitive disorder” where she “can read, but not fully comprehend.” She is a first-year student at a small, liberal arts women’s college.

Data Collection

I found my participants using the snowball method. This method consists of requesting names of people who may fit my study description and then asking the requested individuals if they would like to be a part of my study. I decided to ask for recommendations from my colleagues, friends, and family. I provided each of them with a description of my study and my intentions and they all gave me names of women who they felt may be interested. I then contacted the women via email, providing them with the same brief description. For those who were interested, I gave them more information upon speaking with them again. When I met with them individually, I asked my participants to tell me the story of their lives. This question about their life stories provided me with the information I sought because their storytelling was uninterrupted and led by them. In this way, the participant decided what she would disclose and how much.

I not only gathered my six research participants, but recorded all of their narratives using a traditional tape recorder and a digital recorder as back up. I also took notes throughout the narratives, focusing on body language, tone of voice and anything that was said that sparked my interest at the time of the recording. Although six participants seem like a small number, it is not uncommon for narrative researchers to collect transcriptions totaling hundreds of pages for a small number of participants. I used my personal home computer to transcribe all of the narratives.

Research Setting

All of the participants had a choice as to where their interviews took place. Marty chose to tell her narrative in an eatery on her campus. Monica and Darlene told their stories in closed off rooms in their campus libraries. Kelly shared her story in her pastor's office of her church. Her pastor allowed us to use his office while he was away. Miranda told her story in the comfort of her home living room, while her child was sleeping and her husband was at work. Jessica revealed her narrative in my office before work. Meeting early with me to share her story prevented us from being interrupted by anyone. I wanted my participants to choose the places where they would disclose their lives because I felt that the more comfortable they were, the more they would reveal and the less apprehensive they would be. I also wanted them to know that they were truly a part of this research and the determination of what they chose to reveal was their choice.

Reflexivity

Reflexivity is "the process of personally and academically reflecting on lived experiences in ways that reveal deep connections between the writer and his or her

subject” (Goodall, in Hatch, 2002, p. 10-11). In my case, reflexivity allowed me to connect with my participants by seeing their lives and education through their eyes because they were co-authors in this study. I could not tell them what to think or how to make meaning out of any given situation; therefore, I became the listener. This created a complex situation of trying to balance my participants’ stories and themes with my interpretation and research. I often found the lines between active researcher blending with enthused and sympathetic listener. Although this was not a bad thing, I found myself questioning whether or not it was alright to be so engrossed with a person’s story for fear that I would lose my focus for my research. Therefore, when I replayed their stories, I had to allow them to tell me what to look for when I analyzed their stories and themes. Their words led me in specific directions, and once I gave up control, transcribing, identifying patterns and placing their commonalities in order become easier.

As I watched some of the women cry from the moment their stories began, my heart broke for them. For others, my heart broke as I watched them remain strong and stoic through their narratives, allowing tears to collect but not fall. I wanted to hug them, cheer them on, and swing pom poms in the air as I marveled at all of their resilience through some horrific life events. I also found myself wanting to follow them through life because I just needed to see what happened next. Some of the characters in their stories reminded me of characters in different novels I have read. As Darlene spoke of her mother, I thought of Hannah’s character in Linda Hogan’s novel *Solar Storms* and how much she resembled Darlene’s mother. Hannah was partly a cannibal who tortured her daughter, but as a reader it was easy to see that there was an illness that made her do it.

Darlene described her mother in similar ways as she says, “When she’s sober she’s a great lady. I’ve forgiven her. It was the alcohol that made her do it [abuse her].” Through my own reflectivity, I focused on being a part of the research instead of an objective viewer.

Data Analysis

The data analysis for this study involved me transcribing the narratives and listening for patterns in my participants’ stories and language. These patterns revealed commonalities and differences among my participants. Four areas in which I paid close attention to were selectivity, silence, slippage and intertextuality.

Selectivity

Selectivity is where a person’s story begins, ends and transitions. Oftentimes, people will begin their narratives with their earliest memory, while others will begin their stories in the middle of their lives, such as in their mid-30s. Although I did not ask a participant why she began her story where she chose, I paid attention to the beginning of her story and where she took me from that point.

All of the participants began their stories at young ages, mostly at age two and jumping to the approximate age of six. It seemed that narratives taking place before the age of five involved information told by my participants mothers, while events that occurred at age six and beyond were ones they personally remembered. For example, many of the women would share something that happened at a very early age and end it with, “At least that’s what my mother/mom said.” Miranda’s mother told her that she

loved to read as a child and Kelly's mother told her about how strange she acted after spending a summer with her father [acquaintances of his sexually abused Kelly].

Most of the stories were told in chronological order, but there were times when the participants needed to "backtrack" in order to make sure I understood minor events that led up to major ones. For instance, after Kelly discussed her abuse due to her father's neglect, her story jumped to her being in the fourth grade and her experience in public school. She then stopped and explained that,

Til that time I was always in private Catholic school. I was raised Baptist, but usually private Catholic schools have open enrollment. You don't have to be a member of their church, so from Montessori school to third grade, I was always in somebody's Catholic school. So 4th grade I was introduced to public school [her mother could no longer afford Catholic school].

For her, it was important for me to know that she was accustomed to a private school curriculum and teachers. This way, when she later explained some issues she experienced in public school (i.e., a less demanding curriculum), then I would better understand why it was occurring. Other stories jumped in chronology, so one person's story began at age two; then it jumped to age six, fourteen, twenty-two through twenty-five, and then it jumped to age thirty-six. Kelly's story was the only one that seemed to follow a direct timeline without skipping too many ages.

Silence

One of the patterns I looked for was silence within my participants' stories. Silence, which emerges in the form of pauses within language, says a lot about a person. It tells me areas where my participants feel comfortable talking about their lives and

where they do not. Silence allows me to notice which life moments are sad, joyous or complex based on when the pauses occur in the stories and when they end.

Within the narratives, silence rarely occurred, except when a sad moment arrived. Most of the participants paused before sharing a tragic event or revealing a vulnerable side to themselves. Monica paused before telling the story of her oldest child developing cerebral palsy. Out of everything she shared, I realized that talking about her daughter was the hardest for her to discuss. Darlene paused within the first minute of her story and then proceeded to tell me about the abuse she suffered from her mother (her mother tried to kill her). Marty paused before speaking about a time when she discovered her child had been molested. She paused before admitting it and after telling about her finding out. Kelly was the one person who did the opposite of pausing. When she discussed uncomfortable situations, her speech quickened. For instance, she spoke rapidly when she revealed her molestation and other physical abuse at an early age. Miranda only paused when she spoke of leaving college the first time. During these moments, I made sure not to write down anything. Instead I nodded my head and occasionally smiled to let the women know that I was still paying attention and was not standing in judgment of them. This was difficult for me because at awkward or emotional times, my reaction is to ignore the situation or do something else. Since I could not do this, I was much more aware of my actions during times of silence.

Slippage

“‘Factual disparities’ or discontinuities in oral history become...alternative epistemology, sources of valuable insight, not problems of distortion” (Popular Memory

Group in Casey, 1993, p. 234). Slippage takes place when one part of a narrative or conversation does not match another part. This can tell me very much about my participants as in what they remember, what they choose to remember and how they have processed a memory.

Intertextuality

Intertextuality allowed me to find similarities and differences among my participants. There are always places where people come together in their thoughts, ideologies and experiences. Although my participants differed according to race, class and religion, I paid attention to areas in their narratives that overlapped in an effort to acknowledge their similarities. When I did this, multiple themes emerged from their stories. There were some themes such as spirituality and the human spirit, silencing, and resiliency. Since intertextuality acknowledges differences as well, I also included themes in which only a few of the participants related to such as race and education, and the use of sports as a protective factor.

Positionality

A challenge I dealt with was related to my position to the women. For some of these participants, I was not only the active listener, but outside of this project, I was future academic counselor, future teacher, and “sister.” As part of my job as a Writing Center director at the college some of these women attend, I have reviewed some of these women’s academic papers before they turned them into their professors and until this point, they only knew me as someone with enough knowledge to help them in their academic careers. Some of the other participants who attended the college in which I

work, already planned on registering for my classes the following semester. Two of the women knew of me through my sister who is a minister at their church; in their eyes, I have been part of their family for years. Because of this closeness with them, I wanted to make sure that they only saw me as a doctoral student working on her research project. At the same time, I sensed apprehension from some of the women, as displayed by their initial slow speech in the beginning of their narratives. It seemed as though they spoke slowly, waiting to see if they were telling me the information I wanted to hear. Once they realized that I was truly interested in what they had to say, and that they were in full control of their stories, they spoke a little faster and an ease came over them. That is when their stories fully emerged and my positionality to them was active and interested listener.

Myself as a Researcher

As a researcher on adult women learners in higher education, it was important for me to understand the position of my participants, their life experiences, and their understandings of their educational experiences. Because of my teaching and tutoring experiences with non-traditional women students, I felt particularly close to them and their lives because of what I understood about them simply through my job. Yet, during this research process I kept reminding myself that I have never been an adult learner. I have no idea what it is like to be forty-three years of age in school with traditionally aged students (18-22 yrs. old), take care of a family, and work a full-time or part-time job while juggling many hats; therefore, I had to first examine my own biases and stereotypes about adult women learners and the characteristics that make them different from adult

male learners and traditional age college learners. Even in this matter, I had to realize that I still had biases regarding this unique population. For example, as much as I felt comfortable teaching non-traditional women students, there were times in my own career when I overlooked the numerous challenges they faced. I often forgot that time management was a completely different issue for them than it was for traditional students. So if one of my non-traditional women students asked for an extension on an assignment, I could not immediately assume that they waited until the last minute to complete the assignment. Oftentimes, a sick child or rearranged work schedule got in the way and I had to be flexible with this, while remaining fair to my other students. I also made sure not to compare their life stories to mine or one another because parts of them differed based on race, class, learning style, marital status and upbringing.

For the women in this study, I also had to readjust my role because I knew all of them either because of my job or my acquaintance with someone who recommended them. I made it my duty to turn myself into a student only and not a teacher, director or friend of a friend. This was done through simple things such as emailing them from my school account and not my personal account or job account. I asked them to choose the dates, times and location where their storytelling would take place and left my schedule open for them. I also let them know that they were under no obligation to continue as a participant, which made me vulnerable should any of them choose to omit themselves from this research. Finally, for the women who were once students in my center or future students of mine, I asked them not to refer to me as Mrs. Richardson or Instructor Richardson. Instead, I became Sydney, which lightened the mood for us all.

From a critical feminist perspective, I also had to “keep in mind that what seems to be is not necessarily what really is” (Dillard, 1995, p. 545). I entered this study assuming that a white woman’s story or a middle class person’s story would not be as traumatic as an African American woman’s story or someone of low socioeconomic status; I was quickly mistaken. Ashamed to admit this now, I assumed that my minority participants would have more horrific narratives because they were battling two characteristics: 1) being a minority and 2) being a woman. At that moment, I no longer viewed this study from only a critical feminist paradigm, but also a constructivist paradigm.

From a constructivist framework, I needed to see the position of my participants and their experiences through their eyes because “Researchers and the participants in their studies are joined together in the process of co-construction; . . . it is through mutual engagement that researchers and respondents construct the subjective reality that is under investigation” (Hatch, 2002, p. 15). This in turn became problematic as I transcribed and analyzed their narratives. There were moments when parts of their narratives would greatly impact my research, but because our lives blended due to my closeness with them, I felt the need to protect them and not reveal parts of their stories that they so willingly shared. I also had to remind myself that their experiences do not represent all non-traditional women learners, but there are some who will be able to relate to their journey, which is a positive thing. As a result, I had to decide which events were helpful and necessary for my overall research goal, and which ones were just interesting and inspiring tidbits.

Asking the participants to tell me the story of their lives did not give me *everything* I needed to understand how women perceive their collegiate experiences. Although my participants answered the question, directly or indirectly, of why they returned to school, telling me their life stories prevented me from digging deeper into their insights because I was not able to ask specific questions. I felt torn by this because I also understand that asking specific questions could have harmed my study in two ways: 1) it would have interrupted the story and by gaining a direct answer, I could have lost pertinent information that may have greatly enhanced my research, and 2) asking specific questions would have directed my participants toward what I wanted, instead of allowing them to direct my research and truly making them co-authors of this study.

Madeline Grumet says that storytelling “is a negation of power. Even tell a story to a friend is risky business; the better the friend, the riskier the business” (cited in Casey, 1995, p. 219). For this study, narrative research was risky business for several reasons. As stated previously, my positionality with my participants ranged from barely knowing one another to feeling like family. Therefore, trust and honesty was key for the women to allow their life stories to unfold with me. Also, I did not know which themes would emerge among my participants or if the women’s stories would truly relate to one another. Although I knew patterns would emerge, not being in control of them was frightening, especially for a project like this. Also, some of my participants who wanted to help and were excited became nervous and wanted an easy route when it came time to record the stories. Miranda repeatedly asked, “Can’t you just ask me questions? I’m not good at talking about myself.” Jessica wanted me to tell her what I wanted to know

exactly so that she could steer her story to meet that goal. I found it difficult to not change my research style in order to accommodate their needs and make them feel more at ease. Instead, I told them that I simply wanted to hear about their lives and I reassured them that I would only use information that would enhance this research and that information revealing them would not be used (i.e., real names, names of relatives, etc.).

Another reason narrative research was risky was because I simply became exhausted. I only listened to six interviews, but I had no concept of how the stories would impact me emotionally. As I stated before, I wanted to hug my participants, cry with them and cheer them on; many times I took a longer route home just to process everything I heard and felt. I found myself questioning my own paths in life, especially the parts of my life that resembled my participants' narratives. For example, many of the women talked about why they chose to marry and I found some of their reasons being similar to my own before I married. Other women discussed ways in which they silence themselves so they will not be seen as weak; I realized that I often did the same thing and for the same reasons. Nowhere in my study on narrative research methodology did anyone say that it could be mentally and emotionally draining and that the researcher could, at times, carry the emotional burden after the interviews ended. Therefore, I had to find different ways to debrief after the interviews. Aside from taking a longer route home, I also took walks around my neighborhood and occasionally talked to myself about what I heard from my participants, how some of the stories related to my life, and what I thought about the entire study and process.

Possibilities of the Study

A possibility of the women participating in this study was to hopefully influence policy decisions as it pertains to adult women learners. I also hope this study will better teacher/student relationships. Often, rules and regulations about adult learners are made as though they are a general, homogenous group. Unfortunately, the adult learner is automatically seen as male. For example, Jessica said that she wanted colleges to think more about the times they schedule their classes because for women with children, public school ends at three in the afternoon; therefore, mothers cannot take a class that does not end until three thirty in the afternoon. If they do, then they have to pay for after-school care.

In classrooms, faculty, at times treat adult learners the same way they treat traditional learners, which can be detrimental to their educational success. This may come in the form of forgetting that adult students are not entering directly from high school, which means they 1) have life experience and 2) do not remember everything that was taught in high school. The truth is that adult learners have various experiences based on multiple characteristics and that has to be recognized in order to improve their educational careers. Participating in this study could possibly influence the way decisions are made by adult educators and the way faculty relate to them in the classroom.

Another possibility of this study was that forgotten memories could have resurfaced and/or information that a participant would have rather kept silent would be exposed. It is not uncommon to say something and immediately wish to take it back. Also, people expose the things they remember and it is possible that past events could

have been emotionally hurtful. This did occur during the narratives. As the participants became comfortable disclosing information, some hurtful past events emerged. I allowed the women to decide whether or not to stop the recording and they all chose to continue. They also chose to keep hurtful events included in the study. As many of them stated, “I want to help in any way I can.”

Timeline

My IRB (Institutional Review Board) application was completed and approved within two months. I collected the names of my participants, gathered their signed consent forms, recorded their narratives and transcribed their stories within three months. Analyzing the narratives and collecting additional research, based on new and emerging themes, took an additional four months.

Constraints of Theoretical Framework

Although feminist research methodology and constructivist theory is appealing for qualitative research, there are some areas where consideration and care are important. Constructivism has been revised over the years, which has caused problems with the way it is used in research. Because constructivism suggests multiple valid points, it can no longer be used as a method for detecting truth. “The constructivist procedure is not considered as a way of tracking independent facts, but rather as a way of creating, or constructing, such facts” (Enoch, 209, p. 322). If A caused B, then there would be no construction. It would simply be cause and effect. The construction comes in the meaning making of what takes place between A and B. As Ronzoni (2010) states, “Although conclusive answers about the independent existence of competing values are

not available, this need not entail that the justification of some authoritative moral principles is equally impossible” (p. 75). In other words, constructivism gives us a set of truths, but we must acknowledge that there are other truths just as prevalent, even though we do not know them at the moment. They are meant to be reflected upon and analyzed; instead they are often taken as a definite. Since using the term “truth” is not accurate for constructivism, it makes more sense to “call constructivist principle valid, than true” (Ronzoni, 2010, p. 81) because there are other valid points out there. A problem with constructivism is when others who claim constructivism *deny* that there may be other valid points possible. Therefore, when it comes to a study such as this one, the emerging themes are not the only themes relating to non-traditional women learners. They are simply themes relating to the participants in this study who are non-traditional women learners.

The constraints that occur with using feminist research methodology come in the forms of elitism within language and generalization of women along race, class and space. Not enough attention is paid to language use; feminist research risks being accused of elitism and racism by letting the “dominant White voice control the shape and tone of academic text” (Jaggar, 2000, p. 4) by omitting other voices and languages that seem improper. Among many reasons, feminists have argued that the purpose of feminism is to educate women, yet many scholars like bell hooks (2004) say that the education of women is not occurring due to theoretical jargon.

Feminist writings are often modeled after traditional academic writings when “there are places within the United States where men and women do not know what

feminism really means” (hooks, 2000, p. 109). This makes for an elite group who understands theory and the various terms used in feminist studies, but exclude an entire section of the population who do not understand this language. It keeps feminist theory from being educational to women who need to know their rights in the world and ways to break free from oppression. Only a select few actually read and understand feminist, academic work and they are often not the ones who need empowerment. The women who need empowerment, along with advocates are often oppressed by their surroundings, are illiterate or semi-literate and have other concerns besides worrying about theory that they feel is not relative to their everyday lives.

Having an elitist language within the written works also keeps minority scholars from reaching audiences because their writings are often not seen as being worthy due to language being viewed as too common or not scholarly enough (Hill-Collins, 2009; hooks, 2000). As a result, feminism has been seen as oppressive and reserved for those who do not encompass the wide audience that feminism strives to reach. If my purpose is to speak to adult women learners as well as scholars and practitioners, it is imperative that I find a balance in the language I use within my writings. In other words, it must appeal to both sides.

The same can be said with the generalization of women’s issues within feminism. Feminism still has a hard time of acknowledging minorities within the discipline because there is a large focus on issues pertaining to White women with the assumption that other women of various cultures can relate (Kim, 2006). There is not enough discussion of race and space and how they affect the lives of women. As many ethnic feminists such as

Hurtado (2000), Hill-Collins (2009) and hooks (2004) have stated, feminism places White and Western women as superior figures over minority and Third world women, under the assumption that “race and class have to be invisible for gender to be visible” (Mohanty, 2003, p. 107). Therefore, African American women, Chicana women, Third world women and other women of color are seen as foreign; they are viewed as if their concerns do not relate to others in the world. For example, as Hurtado (2000) mentions, White feminists may see male domination as an issue within Chicana culture because it is an issue within White culture, whereas Chicana feminists may see internal racism or homophobia as a major problem within their culture. In some studies, attention is not paid to women’s experiences culturally, but Hill-Collins (2009) and Mohanty (2003) feel that women of various ethnicities have different experiences and ways of knowing, which should be discussed and analyzed; therefore, feminism should not be a generalized subject.

At the same time, feminists such as Kim (2006) and Jaggar (2000) argue that spatiality needs to be taken into context, along with cultural history because that effects how circumstances are seen. Third world women are often viewed as victims of religious ideology and male domination, but all Third world women do not experience the same things for the same reasons. The same can be said for African American women of the United States having different concerns as African American women living in London (Hill-Collins, 2009; Kim, 2006). Instead women should “situate their struggles and subjectivities in the geographical spaces from and within which they derive their resources, meanings, visions, and limitations” so their stories stay within context (Kim,

2006, p. 116). Although there are similarities among all women, this is not enough to make them a collective group. Therefore, one group that seems similar to another cannot truly speak for that particular group. Combining women of a geographical zone and culture without recognizing their differences only sheds light on one part of their lives.

In my study, my participants are different according to race, socioeconomic status, and upbringing. Therefore, it is imperative to incorporate those aspects into my analysis because they matter to how my participants interpret their experiences. This in turn affects ways in which I view their situations. All women are not alike and I cannot treat them as such. For constructivism, my participants' voices are used along with mine to achieve the best expression of adult women learners. I stayed aware of my language at all times so that I did not commit the crime of further oppressing those I hoped to assist.

Conclusion

Understanding the needs of adult women learners will take time, but it is important that they are not viewed as a homogenous group. As with all human beings, women hold other labels besides *woman*, and those labels impact their daily lives. Education described as transformative, democratic and culturally relevant sound exceptional, but those dynamics need to be combined with a clear understanding of gender, class, race and other characteristics that define a person. Knowing how to relate to adult women learners, their perspectives and their cultural histories will afford educators the opportunity to create environments that truly cater to the students' learning needs.

CHAPTER IV
CHILDHOOD MISTREATMENT, RISK FACTORS, AND PROTECTIVE FACTORS

Overview of the Chapter

In this chapter, I have analyzed the similarities and differences among my six participants regarding childhood mistreatment, risk factors, and protective factors that influence resiliency. Risk factors and protective factors are influences in a person's life that either positively or negatively impacts her direction (Crozier & Barth, 2005; Martinez-Torteya et. al, 2009; Whitney et. al, 2010; Cox & Ebbers, 2010; Fantuzzo et. al., 2011). Some risk factors are a result of stressful events that are too difficult to handle such as abuse or neglect, and protective factors are things that can help a person *bounce back* or become resilient, or alleviate the harm of such challenges. An example of a risk factor could be neglect from parent to child, which could cause a child to not strive in school. A protective factor would be community support, which would allow a child or an adult to seek help when needed or voice concerns. Each of the women, except for Miranda, either experienced abuse at the hands of her parents and/or acquaintances, or witnessed domestic violence, which shaped the course of her life. My participants discussed their own protective and risk factors. For Darlene and Kelly, sports provided an escape from their home environment, which helped them with discipline and self-control in their lives.

Contrary to studies suggesting that mistreatment leads to poor academic achievement and social problems (Fantuzzo et. al, 2011; Whitney et. al, 2010; Jones et. al., 2004) each of my participants say that they loved school and were quite good at it. Similar to other studies, it is possible that being optimistic about life, coupled with having a high list of protective factors and low risk factors positively influenced their schooling experiences (Smith & Carlson, 1997; Gillham & Reivich, 2004; Whitney et. al., 2010). All of the women envisioned themselves attending college at some point in their lives, and two of the women (Kelly and Miranda) experienced oppression due to their race and gender at different times in their educational careers. Not knowing how to deal with the ordeal affected their next courses of action as to whether or not they would continue their studies, despite their previous “love” of education.

Even though there were glimpses of resiliency in all of the women’s stories about childhood and adolescence, it truly emerged when they spoke about their current situations and how they overcame obstacles such as depression. As with any other challenge in life, people respond to difficult times differently and many of my participants self-silenced as a way of avoiding their situations. Coping by avoidance is a technique used by children and adults alike, and though it works for a period of time, continuing it for too long is not recommended due to damaging long term effects (Smith & Carlson, 1997; Coker, 2003; Sesar et. al., 2010). The effects my participants experienced was depression and post-traumatic stress disorder, which served as their “wake-up call” and afterwards, help was sought and more protective factors were put in place for the future, although it was not as methodical as this.

Childhood Mistreatment

Childhood mistreatment is any sort of abuse or ill treatment from one person to a child. The assumption usually is that mistreatment is physical or sexual, but it includes emotional abuse, witnessing domestic violence and neglect as well. Some episodes of mistreatment in children are noticeable through their actions; from there they are reported and easily substantiated while other forms of mistreatment are not (Fantuzzo et. al., 2011). For example, teachers and family members may not recognize neglect in a child's life if it is not severe, yet neglect is an ongoing form of abuse that can have dire consequences on the child if not corrected. At the same time, physical abuse not resulting in bruises and scars, or emotional abuse may not be recognized by others as well and may be difficult to prove. For unsubstantiated allegations of abuse, the child rarely receives necessary care, which causes disruption in other areas of her life such as academic achievement.

Researchers (DeMeulenaere, 2010; Lam & Grossman, 1997; Breno, & Galupo, 2007; Zolotor, et. al., 1999) have listed multiple risk and protective factors that impact a child's success academically, socially, and emotionally in life. More risk factors include things such as a lack of parental support, low socioeconomic status, low academic performance and even life challenges that prove to be more difficult than a child can bear such as abuse. Protective factors can positively impact a person's life and include things such as positive parental support, higher socioeconomic status, church affiliation, community support, and involvement extracurricular activities. Although everyone experiences these things throughout life, low risk factors coupled with high risk factors

can better help a child or adult cope with life stressors, and these factors are evident in my participants' stories.

Five of the women experienced similar upbringings in regards to familial abuse. For two of them (Darlene and Marty), their abuse, whether mental or physical, came from their mothers. Both of the women say their mothers were hostile towards them because their fathers gave them the attention that was not given to their mothers. Part of their mothers' coping strategy involved alcohol, which resulted in harmful consequences.

Darlene recounts her mother trying to kill her after becoming inebriated:

I've never seen her that drunk . . . and she [her mother] jumped on me [she was 12 years old]; next thing I knew I couldn't feel my arm; I don't wanna be beat anymore. I don't care. So I let her do it. She got the money [dollars and coins] down my throat, I passed out . . . She bit a hole in my arm the size of a baseball; He [her brother] said he kicked me in the stomach cause he didn't know what to do . . . cause I was turning colors; he was nine. It gave me enough air to cough up the money.

Whenever her mother was drunk, Darlene was abused, yet she noticed that her younger brother was never harmed or spoken to roughly by her mother. She recognizes now that her mother suffered from alcoholism, but does not understand why the abuse only related to her. Her conclusion was that even though her parents' relationship was worsening, she and her father had a good relationship and her mother desired that connection.

For Marty, the abuse from her mother was more emotional; she understood where her mother's anger originated. She says,

My father was an alcoholic and abusive to my mother. My mother was abusive to me. I remember her telling me how much I did not know how to love and how incapable I was of loving.

Similar to Darlene's story, Marty believed that she and her father had a strong bond that her mother wanted as well, yet she never mentions her father beyond the age of sixteen; only then, it is when he consents for her to marry. Also similar to Darlene's story, Marty never remembers her mother being abusive to her older brother. For him, she says that her mother "would do anything." In both narratives, although the women felt that at one time they had a great relationship with their fathers, they never mention their fathers preventing their mothers' abuse.

After Kelly's parents divorced, her mistreatment was her father's neglect; during her summer visitations with him, he would leave her alone with other people. She recalls that,

When I was six and I came home that summer, I was beat up real bad, my hair was broken off, my clothes were torn and I was acting very strange. And that was the end of spending time with my dad. Essentially my dad, he would leave me places since I could remember; he would take me to another baby mama and just leave me there or a cousin's house and that's how my clothes would get torn up and I would get beaten up cause normally I'd be around people that didn't care about me. So that was the end of seeing dad for the summer.

Kelly never spoke in detail about what happened that caused her to have torn clothes, broken hair and bruises, yet she later mentions doing things such as "pulling down my pants" in front of family members. For her, she thought it was "what I was supposed to do," until her mother stopped and corrected her; her family then realized that she was being sexually abused, and they ended visitations with her father.

Jessica witnessed domestic violence between her parents. She states that she only has three memories of her parents being together. One memory involved,

My father beating my mother up against a storm door and there was blood everywhere and I was very young, very, very young. He was very violent with her verbally and physically; he ran around on her a lot.

When her parents divorced, she and her older brother lived with her father, but they were neglected by him: “Living with my dad, he had his own personality issues. Living with my dad . . . he didn’t set any goals, he didn’t have a vision for us as a future. We just were.” Jessica and her brother were left to figure life out for themselves since there was no parental direction.

In Monica’s case, she was not physically or emotionally abused by either of her parents, but like Jessica, she remembers her father abusing her mother.

Daddy came back [from the Coast Guard] with a lot of issues from being in the service. There was a lot of abusive things that went on, verbally and physically. So by the time I was two, my parents were divorced and my mother was a single parent raising me on her own.

For three of the women participants, remembering some form of abuse as adolescents unfortunately began a cycle that they would later repeat in their relationships. All of the women found an outlet through some form of education, but Kelly and Darlene also found an outlet through involvement in sports activities.

Learning on Grandmother’s farm

Jessica’s educational outlet did not occur within school walls, but on her grandparent’s farm. For a time period when she and her brother were not living with her

father, they stayed at their grandparent's house. On that farm was where Jessica learned values, ethics and the meaning of hard work. I noticed that the only time she genuinely smiled was when she spoke about her grandmother and the farm, even when it came to punishment.

I lived with my grandmother some and I think those were the most memorable times in my life. The most memorable times of my childhood were on that farm. [When it came to the farm] all that technology [television, games, videos] just faded away. My grandmother was very kind and polite, but she'd womp you one [if you did not act properly].

Living with her grandparents gave her and her brother the discipline, guidance and love that they needed, but did not feel they received from their parents.

Sports as Saving Grace

The role of sports activity as a way to build resilience among women is often overlooked, but there are valuable skills learned through physical activity and the joining of sports teams that many children carry into adulthood. For Darlene and Kelly, getting involved in sports was a saving grace for them. They learned to exercise control over their lives, build confidence and build resiliency in order to move forward in their pursuits. As Bailey et. al (2009) suggests, skills learned by being involved in sports form social capital for individuals and "helps them to develop resiliency against difficult life circumstances" (p. 9). This is evident in the women's need to succeed at any level. Playing sports became a passion that took them away from the stress of home and provided a mental relief from life. As Kelly states,

[I] played all the sports they [school] had. [I] was figuring out that sports was my passion. I played soccer for the rest of high school. I started coaching soccer in high school- the girls were under 8 years old.

Sports have the ability to help students better structure their time, become more organized and stay out of trouble (DeMeulenaere, 2010, p. 130). In Kelly's situation, her teachers suggested that she get involved in sports to combat the trouble she was running into in school. She explained that she was very good at school, but when she had to switch from a private school to a public school (in the middle of the quarter) due to financial setbacks, she suffered academically. Because tests for AG (academically gifted) students had already been given, she missed taking the tests and was immediately placed into what she calls "regular" classrooms. As a result, she was not challenged academically and became bored. As with many students in similar situations, Kelly "got in trouble for talking too much" and her teacher suggested that she not only be allowed to take the AG test, but get involved in sports. Although her mother allowed Kelly to play sports, she did not support it and showed this by not attending many games or taking her to and from practice. Since Kelly enjoyed playing sports, she found any way she could to be involved in them. She often scheduled car rides with teammates in order to attend practice and games. She also admitted to forging her mother's signature so she could play another sport when one sports season ended. Sports gave her an outlet to achieve success outside of academics by allowing her to stay busy and gain significant skills. She admits that she keeps her busy, active schedule today.

After Darlene felt rejected by her father who told a family friend that he would choose her stepmother over her, she poured herself into her schoolwork (she graduated

with an A average) and sports (specifically basketball and softball). She was awarded approximately sixty-two athletic scholarships to colleges that her “family didn’t even know about; they never came to a game.” Aside from the disappointment in familial lack of support, Darlene enjoyed athletics. Wankel and Kreisel (1985) found that “intrinsic factors, such as excitement of sport, personal accomplishment, and doing skills were more important for young people than extrinsic factors such as winning, rewards and pleasing others” (in Bailey et. al, 2009, p. 13). Some students, like Darlene, are excited about having something they can control in their lives. When reflecting on Darlene’s narrative, I noticed that she became the most excited when discussing her involvement in sports and succeeding in body building. For her, it was more about the feeling of accomplishment and self-control that thrilled her. As with Kelly, intrinsic factors were much more important to Darlene than extrinsic.

Love of School

Many times, there is an idea that non-traditional students were not good in school, which is why they did not continue on to college following high school. It can be difficult for people to see non-traditional students are those who are in school because they enjoy it not just because they are trying to gain a degree, and these participants admit that they have always enjoyed school and were “good” at it. Monica says,

My schooling [was] wonderful- I was always a B student. I was captain of the flag team; I was in drama club, made a lot of accomplishments in high school. And education was just something that was always important in our family . . . I came from a family that was . . . well they were teachers and educators.

Because Monica's family was involved in education, she already knew how to succeed in academically (study, get involved, connect with teachers and friends). For Darlene, it was after moving in with her father and experiencing disappointment that she poured herself into her schoolwork. She was still living at home when she overheard her father say to a family friend that if he had to choose between Darlene and her stepmother, "I'd choose my wife because my daughter's gonna grow up and move out and I don't want to be alone." It tore Darlene apart knowing that the man she cared for, loved, and "almost died for" would not choose her over his new wife. That is when school and sports became important for her. She says history, figuring things out and "solving problems are fascinating."

Marty, Miranda, and Kelly also enjoyed school and were good students. They always envisioned attending college. Marty never seemed to have a problem with school and the work seemed to come naturally to her. She says that, "I was always an honor student...it [school] was always so easy for me. I knew I wanted to go to Lenoir Rhyne for college." Kelly, as stated previously, suffered from boredom at some moments, but her teacher found a solution that did not cause her love of school to waiver. She recalls that,

I was just excited to go to school, I loved school. Um, I loved my teachers. [At her new school] I basically resort to being a little hellion cause I'm bored to tears and I don't understand, I don't know what's going on and I'm getting good grades cause I can do my work. I remember...my 4th grade teacher. He said, "Kelly is one of my brightest students I've ever had, but she will not shut up." I became like a classroom tutor kind of thing. I finished my work and then my responsibility was to help everybody with their work. And as the school year went on they recognized I was gifted and they started to move me into the different classes so I could be challenged more.

Miranda liked school, but for her, it was more about learning in school and outside of school.

I don't think I ever really not liked school. My mom said when I was younger that she could have read certain stories to me enough that I could pick the book up and recite it because she read it to me and people would think, "Oh she can read at 3!" I pretty much liked school most of the time. In my graduating class there were 72 people. I was second out of 72.

All of the women have a love of learning, which was apparent at an early age, and life circumstances did not stop their love of education or the value of it in their lives. For these women, there seemed to be protective factors already apparent for resilience such as having an interest in learning, enjoying school, and getting involved in extracurricular activities. There were people around them, whether close or not, who looked out for them educationally. As a result, these women continued to enjoy their schooling.

Race and Gender within Education

For four of the women (three white and one African American) race and/or gender is not discussed as playing an important role in their educational careers, but it was mentioned in two of the narratives. Kelly and Miranda were shocked that those around them (classmates and academic advisors) showed their prejudices towards them. They felt that these people were supposed to be allies, mentors and guides to help them succeed. In Carla O'Connor's research (2002), African American women discussed prejudices they received in higher education due to stereotypes about what they could accomplish as African Americans and as women. Sadker and Sadker (1994) similarly report on the discrimination of women entering disciplines originally occupied by men

such as the hard sciences and law. One of my participants, Miranda, continues this observation as she recalls her first enrollment in higher education when she wanted to major in Engineering:

I ran into some racial tension initially. I had an academic advisor midway through my freshman year [of college who] told me, ‘You people don’t tend to make good engineers. People like you make good educators. My wife is a teacher, you should consider it.’ How I took it, the ‘you people’ were African American people and the ‘people like you’ were women.

Miranda did not say anything to the advisor, but continued with her path of becoming an engineer, which she did not complete. For years, women have been re-directed into jobs and disciplines that society felt was for them, i.e. education, secretary, social worker and maid, and African Americans have suffered the same discrimination by others not believing they were intelligent enough to advance in life. Miranda quickly realized that being intelligent did not surpass being a woman and being African American. Kelly’s issue with prejudice occurred in high school. She states,

So another big divide—high school starts. I hated it, very racist, dealt with a lot of racial issues. It was open lunch- and I remember we [she and her friends] were on our way back to campus and we were on the same side of the street as the high school. Opposite side of the street going in the opposite direction was some white kids and they were dressed in black trench coats, like trench coat mafia. So all of a sudden we hear, “Hey nigger, why don’t you get the hell outta here. We don’t want you.”

Kelly was stunned because she could not understand where the racism originated. As she later said, “Even my friends who weren’t black were offended.” The mood among her group of friends changed as they headed to their separate classrooms; when she went

home that day, she shared the event with her mother, who then sought another school for her. Switching schools did not eliminate racism, but being at a less racially tense school allowed Kelly to focus on academics and sports again.

The second incident for Kelly came when two parents (who were White) of the children she coached, advised her about not applying to a certain college. “Two of the parents sitting me down and saying, *You don’t want to go to [name of college]. We would only tell you this because we love you like you’re our own, but there are too many racial issues there.*” Kelly followed their advice and did not apply to that particular school. In this case, she felt honored that these parents would look out for her, but still discouraged that she had to consider racial discrimination as a factor when applying to colleges and universities.

For both of these women, they were excited about college because, like many students, they had arrived and could do anything. As with O’Connor’s research (2002) on African American women in higher education, obtaining their degrees was more than a personal aspiration. It proved to family, friends, and those who discriminated against them that they were capable of being successful. To experience oppression due to race and gender was overwhelming and unbelievable for them because it had nothing to do with their intellectual capability. Both of them did eventually return to college and although discrimination was not the main reason behind them leaving college the first time, it was a factor in their re-evaluation of what having a college degree could do for them.

Self-silencing and Depression

Academically and historically, women have been taught to be seen and not heard (Sadker & Sadker, 1994), especially in the presence of authority figures. All women have a voice, but it can become silenced when they feel that someone else is smarter than they are (Belenky et. al, 1997), when they experience shame, or when they do not want to jeopardize a relationship (Jack, 1991). “Self silencing” (Stevens and Galvin, 1996, p. 382; Tan and Carfagini, 2008, p. 6) or the “silencing paradigm” (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2008, p. 392) is common for women due to pressure to conform to traditional female gender roles such as cooking, cleaning, not showing anger, caring for children and taking care of the home. As Monica stated when her husband was incarcerated, “it was up to me to maintain the home.” Maintaining the home involved not revealing the trouble she was in to anybody, including her family; it also involved keeping up with appearances. In society and education, women are supposed to be quiet and accommodating, but this meekness and conformity can lead to self-denial and depression.

Low socioeconomic status, low self-esteem, limited access to resources, and a limited education can also heighten a person’s level of self-silencing and depression (Greene, Galambos, and Less, 2003; Vliet, 2008). As with Monica, having a child with cerebral palsy, no degree and relying on welfare proved to be a deterrent in attaining her goals and was also a lot to handle on her own:

Every program that I tried to get help from would only work with me based on a deficit, so because I had enough money to work and I had a car- the car was the problem. And I was like, “how do you expect for me to get to these appointments with a baby on oxygen and diuretics and not have a car? I can’t stand out here with her in the snow and the rain and the wind and heat on a bus

stop.” But everything I tried, it did not fit in with what I needed as a parent with a special needs child.

Marty found herself in a similar predicament as a new mother with only a GED and an “abusive husband” living “857 miles away from home.” Not having the necessary resources to survive can cause shame, especially in women. This shame can cause women to not seek help; instead they will hide and isolate themselves from the rest of the world, thinking that they need to get out of their situations on their own. As they move past this thinking, seek help and acquire access to needed resources, the process of resilience can begin. Like the findings with Greene, Galambos, and Lee (2003), my participants became “more resilient as they develop[ed] and [had] access to resources” (p. 80) and education. Until that point, self-silencing and shame led them into a depressive state.

Four of the participants spoke about their moments of depression, which related to earlier stories in their narratives of self-silencing and low self-esteem. Both Monica and Marty felt silenced in the hospital when their children were sick. They did not have the courageous voice to speak against the doctors and staff when their intuitions told them otherwise. Although they were intelligent, their confidence levels were not high enough for them to recognize it. Marty says, “I started him [the oldest son] on Similac. I tried to breastfeed, but I, I couldn’t.”

Her son was a large baby and needed food, which her body could not provide. Since her husband, at the time, was in the army, Marty took her son to the doctor on the military base because she did not know what was wrong with him when he was crying.

She says, “Now I know he was just mad [because he was hungry]. They [the doctors] performed seventy-two spinal taps . . . they were convinced he had spinal meningitis. I was helpless against the military.”

Monica’s silence also occurred after delivering her daughter prematurely and discovering that she had cerebral palsy. She recalled having training in medical assistance at the time, but doctors and nurses assumed that because she was a young mother, she was ignorant.

I can remember sitting in the NICU (Neonatal Intensive Care Unit) and they would talk so down to me. [As though] I didn’t understand what was going on; and I was trying to explain to them I’m not stupid, I know I was caught in the situation I was caught in, but I was actually in my first year of medical assisting and I understood what the repercussions of my daughter being born early were. I understood what cerebral palsy was. I knew she had suffered a lack of oxygen from the brain, but they really . . . look down on me.

Although Marty and Monica are intelligent women, they were treated as less than that because of their statuses at the time as young mothers without degrees and very little money. This in turn affected them further because neither one of them had anyone that they felt they could rely on for assistance.

When it comes to depression, social isolation and a paralyzing feeling can occur, which will push the depressed person further away from people, including loved ones out of fear of judgment. For example, after Darlene graduated from high school and left her father’s house, she remained by herself, traveling from state to state and doing “everything from working in a deli to being regional manager of a fortune 500 company.” She never mentioned being attached to anyone, except her current girlfriend with whom

she shares a home. During her time of travel, her goal had nothing to do with forming relationships, but being on her own and doing what she wanted to do.

As Monica and Marty mentioned, when they were in trouble, they did not reach out to their mothers because they didn't want to hear "I told you so" or anything that would make them feel worse about their situations. Marty says that, "I knew my mother would not help me" as she nodded her head, reflecting on moments when she thought about calling her. Therefore, they suffered in silence.

Kelly self-silenced after telling her mother about her teenage sexual encounter, in which her mother (who previously encouraged her daughter to tell her everything) "called me a bitch and said I was gonna be a whore" and told her to leave the house. She quickly learned not to talk about sex. Like the other women, Kelly self-silenced after experiencing shame, which caused her to no longer reveal her true self, but instead conform on the outside and battle her *self* (emotions, ideas, values) on the inside. As Tan and Carfagnini (2008) suggest, "In such cases where self-silencing is a factor in depression, the women would need to question aspects of the traditional female sex role that bind them to self-sacrifice and learn to adopt a more balanced perspective where their own selves also matter" (p. 15).

Eventually, both Marty and Monica experienced moments where they stopped caring about what others said and thought, and made decisions based on what they knew was right. Marty questioned the methods the doctors were performing on her baby and called a family doctor in North Carolina who then spoke to the doctors at the military base. After the call, the doctors at the base wanted to take her son to Florida for more

tests without Marty. This is when her intuition (i.e. connected knowing) and confidence was stronger than the doctors' knowledge. As she says, "I refused them taking him [the baby] to Florida."

When she was able to get her son to North Carolina to his regular doctor, they found that the baby had colic and nothing else was wrong with him. It took getting to a moment of refusal before Marty found her voice, regardless of how she appeared to the doctors. Unfortunately, Marty self-silenced again when she endured other issues.

Depression

Along with self-silencing, depression was a factor in four of the participants' stories. Before asking for help, women have to acknowledge that something is wrong. At the same time, acknowledging anything deemed as a weakness is not easy to admit. Jessica discussed her self-silencing and depression as a culmination of events from her childhood. Yet, it had the most impact during her second marriage to a husband she called, "Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde." It was during their marriage that she felt as if a shock took over her body. This man, whom she had dated, the "good old boy who'd give me the shirt off his back," became someone else as he had nowhere to hide his other self. His nice demeanor turned to anger and suspicion the longer they were together, which then turned to physical abuse with Jessica as the victim. Depression, again, really hit her after the birth of their son when her husband left her two weeks after their son was born. When she realized that he was not coming back, she went through the daily actions of caring for her children (her oldest child was school age). Her doctor described it as although her "mothering instincts kicked in, my mind had checked out." She was simply

going through the motions of the day. Although she was taking care of her son's basic needs, she was not showering or getting dressed regularly. Jessica says that she would not leave her house and when she "did want to get out, it was at night so that I wouldn't have to interact with anybody." Her depression and PTSD (post traumatic stress disorder) was horrible and eventually affected her cognitive reasoning.

My cognitive [reasoning] was so bad that even my lists of where I wanted to go [and she had lived in the same city since she was a teenager] contained directions. As much as "out of the parking lot, turn . . ." I have a child that's an infant and another child that's dependent on me and I don't even remember where I'm at. That's really scary.

When Jessica contacted her doctor to find out what was really wrong with her, she began reflecting on her past to make herself, as she says, "emotionally and physically healthy."

Monica also spoke specifically about her depressive state, while Kelly and Marty barely mentioned theirs. It was through Monica's story that another description of what depression looks like emerged:

The depression of what had happened with her [her daughter having cerebral palsy] and the depression of my family saying "If you had taken a different route" is when I first realized I was gonna have some really serious issues in dealing with life and dealing with depression and being anxious, but at the time I didn't have time to help myself cause I was trying to help my baby (tears streaming down her face) be okay.

[Her coworker suggesting she put her daughter away] was what sent me over because it was like "Monica, why don't you, why don't you give up? Why do you try so hard and everything you're trying to do, is like a door is closed?" All the times I've thought about committing suicide . . . , all the times that I wanted to die; I wanted to go to sleep and not wake up...you know people say- "well how could that woman take her children and drive them into the water like that"- it's a disparity that if you've never been there, you wouldn't understand. Now I wouldn't necessarily ever do anything to hurt my children, but when you feel as

though you have nothing- it's the lowest point that you can ever have- I mean nothing of nothing.

Monica paints the perfect picture of being depressed and believing that no one is available to help. For her, having “nothing of nothing” meant that it did not matter if there was someone available to help her; she would not be able to acknowledge the help in order to accept it.

Marty suffered from depression and turned to alcohol two different times: after the physical abuse of her first husband where he “threw me out of a second story window and [severely damaged] my back,” not straining it as she originally thought, and when her second marriage fell apart. “Bruce [her second husband] out of the blue, after dinner one day said he was leaving.” It was then that she began drinking. She never states how she stopped drinking, but now she only likes to be around “positive energy.”

Kelly mentioned depression briefly when she said that she went through a depressive period when she “had no money and was overweight.” For her, returning to low-class, which she had not experienced since she was young and being overweight when she was used to exercising and being fit was enough to make her want to change her life. That was the only time she mentioned feeling down and not being healthy. For these three women, being low-income, feeling as if there was no one to help them, and having no open doors of opportunity aided in their self-silencing, isolation, and depression.

Race and Silencing

Throughout the narratives, my participants showed emotions differently. Three white participants had moments of tears, laughter and seriousness throughout their stories. Darlene cried from the moment she opened her mouth until the story ended, yet she thought this would not happen and she would be, in her words “strong.” Marty and Jessica swayed between laughing and crying during intense moments in their stories. Yet Miranda, Monica and Kelly showed a different set of emotions. They portrayed the stereotypical “strong Black woman” Beauboeuf-Lafontant (2008) mentions in her study on the silencing paradigm among Black women.

When it came to race and family, the three African American women spoke about the strength and attitude of their parents and described ways in which they worked hard. Monica watched her father abuse her mother, but she quickly moved on to say that her parents divorced when she was two years old. After that, her mother was the caring figure who rescued her daughter when she was depressed and suggested that she enter a facility to help her get back on her feet. Kelly spoke of her mother as the strong working woman, working multiple jobs to make ends meet, getting her Master’s degree while Kelly was in grade school and still “having to file bankruptcy” because she did not make enough to cover the debt she accumulated trying to take care of a child by herself and returning to school. To Kelly, her mother resembled strength and hard work by, as she says, “pulling herself up by her bootstraps.”

Even Miranda spoke of her parents, especially her mother, as hard working individuals who did what was needed for their families. She never mentions her parents

being upset due to a dream not coming to fruition; they accept whatever comes their way and move on. When her house was claimed by two counties, her parents did not fight it, but “paid taxes in both counties.” Because of this, she and her sister were able to choose which school in either county they would attend, choosing the better of the two.

Although these are important characteristics to learn, these women showed through their stories and their own emotions that they learned that “fear, uncertainty, and need” (p. 399) were not attractive qualities to have; therefore, they did not portray them as they revealed their narratives. For all of my participants, they saw characteristics of “struggle, selflessness and silence” (p. 399), which affected the way they told their stories and interpreted their past.

When telling their narratives, compared to my white participants, my African American participants showed very little to no emotion. Monica spoke the most about her depression in order to help me understand what it was like to feel as though there was nothing to lose. Kelly mentioned that she battled depression and nothing more. Miranda did not speak of depression, yet left major gaps between her leaving school the first time in her early 20s and returning in her mid 30s. Miranda and Kelly remained straight-faced with an almost mechanical tone while speaking about their lives. There were no tears, but an occasional laugh when speaking about something uncomfortable, as in Kelly’s statement of being neglected by her father and abused by strangers. “That was the end of spending time with my dad” she said, followed by a snicker. I found myself emulating these same characteristics. I wanted to show some sort of emotion when parts of their narratives hit me the most, but I “stayed strong” and simply nodded my head. Even when

I felt the tears form, I fought them back to display my strength; I, like my participants, was taught directly and indirectly to push through hard times and not show weakness, as if having emotions were weak.

Rejection of Connected Knowing

Like Belenky et. al. (1997) describes, women are taught in school to be separated knowers, but learning to separate oneself in order to critically analyze and reflect can be a detriment instead of a benefit. Women have rejected their “gut feeling” in exchange to do what they were *told* was right. Although it is no longer 1997, women still show this pattern, but some finally follow their instincts after learning multiple life lessons. Marty and Monica spoke of taking trips down the aisle and staying in abusive relationships, knowing that they were simply doing the familiar and not what they truly felt was right. Marty says, “I did not want to get married. He [her husband] comes home [after leaving her for another woman] . . . I still love him . . . we get back together . . . unhappily married for 3 years . . . It took me a total of 13 years [to leave him].”

In spite of her educated parents and her own academic success, Monica explains that,

I got involved with my first child’s father who was involved with drugs and gangs and that type of thing. Being involved with somebody that was involved with drugs and that type of thing, you get involved in it too. You say you won’t. You say, you know, the money that they make just takes care of your household, but eventually you know you start to play a part in it.

Both women repeated the patterns again. For Marty,

He [first husband] leaves me . . . again for another woman. I welcome him back with open arms of course and a few months later, he leaves me again. After our first date [with second husband], I knew I was going to marry [him], but I know it was wrong . . . but it was security.

Monica says, “So I got involved with another young man and I actually married him. And I dealt again with him [his drug addiction]; you know it’s a cycle and I realize that now.”

Both of the women intuitively knew that the decisions they made were not the right ones, but convinced themselves that it would work out. It was not until they learned to trust themselves that they gained the confidence to change the course of their lives.

Kelly and Miranda rejected their intuition in relation to academics. For Miranda, unaware of her own limitations, she did what she was told academically, although she felt uneasy about it. In Kelly’s case, she took the advice of entering a discipline she did not enjoy. Kelly states,

I’d just been told since I was a sophomore in high school, “You’re smart, you should do engineering.” I just stuck with it, even when I knew I didn’t like it. Get to college and I get my first C in life. But I didn’t know what to do. I always got straight A’s...I didn’t know what a C looked like on a paper, um I didn’t handle it well.

Miranda’s recollection takes place in her first collegiate attempt,

He [her advisor] told me that if I didn’t stick to the rigorous course that had been set, which meant [taking] 18 hours [semester hours] that I would fall behind and not graduate on time. I forged for his 18 hours. At the end of my first year, I had a 1.5 GPA. I spent [time] trying to pursue an engineering degree and then I sat out for a few semesters...realized I did not want to be a civil engineer and kind of quit the school thing.

As a result of improper advising and not following their interests, both women left higher education. Marty and Monica unfortunately experienced abusive patterns multiple times before doing what they *felt* was right for them, which was leaving their spouses and following their own interests. Carol E. Kasworm (2010) suggests that non-traditional students feel that they have to compete in order to succeed in higher education (p. 150). Although this is a valid conclusion, for what these women have endured, it is important for them to know their own capabilities and trust themselves. Miranda felt that she had to compete as a traditional student from rural Virginia. As a result, she chose to listen to others in authority and not follow her intuition, which hindered her academic progress. As an adult student, she still has to compete, but it is now on her own terms and has nothing to do with what other people want.

Resilience

When it comes to self-silencing, shame, and depression, the hope is that individuals become resilient through multiple protective factors that were previously discussed (building confidence, connecting with others, gaining access to resources, educational attainment). Many of the women exuded resilience in some part, if not all, of their narratives, such as Jessica having the courage to tell her abusive ex-husband, “Don’t you ever come back. If you ever come back, I will tell what I know.” There were multiple tales of falling down and starting over in life, and as the women aged, the starting over part became easier because they all wanted something better for themselves. At the same time, they acknowledged that there would be more challenges because they were starting over later in life, but it was still something that had to be done if they

wanted better opportunities for themselves and their families. Marty stated after her abusive marriage was falling apart, “I got to start over” [after her husband]. “I can’t live in this space anymore.”

Monica showed her resilience after her coworker advised her to put her daughter, who had been diagnosed with cerebral palsy, away so she would not have to take care of her. “And I told her, the first thing that came to my mind was, that’s quitting and quitting is not an option. I’ve made it this far, I have to keep going-I have to keep going.”

Lam and Grossman (1997) discovered that women who reported childhood abuse, especially childhood sexual abuse, and incorporated protective factors into their lives displayed higher levels of resiliency than others. By displaying resiliency against adversity, adult women are better able to adapt to life circumstances, which can aid them in achieving their goals. Out of multiple aspects that aid in resiliency among abused women, my participants displayed some of the following: a) formation and utilization of relationships for survival, b) conviction of being loved, c) optimism and hope, d) having relatives and neighbors available for emotional support (Lam and Grossman, 1997, p. 176-177).

Jessica’s resiliency comes from reflecting on and processing her past with a professional who can help her safely do this. Marty portrayed conviction of being loved when she recalled words her mother spoke to her such as being “incapable of loving.” These words pushed Marty to show love for others. Now, she makes sure to have family get-togethers with her sons and daughters-in-law, gets involved in multiple service

opportunities on her campus, and cares for her ailing mother. By being told that she was incapable of loving, Marty made sure to act in the opposite way.

All of the participants have a support system to help them through school and life. Monica and Miranda have family members and friends who help them with childcare when they attend classes. Despite her past relationship with her family, Darlene lives close to her father and stepmother, whom she visits regularly. Kelly spoke of her church members as her “family” who provide emotional support, and she refers to some of the women in the church as her “sisters” who are available to her for comfort and “fellowship.” Support groups such as these can also help women get to know themselves again, outside of their multiple positions in the world. As Beauboeuf-Lafontant (2008) says and Monica and Jessica explain, “Such emotional knowing leads to the realization that parts of her *self* have been missing from her earlier identity” (p. 393). Monica states,

I didn't realize that I had lost myself. I was no longer Monica. I was mama of a special needs child; I was employee for all these different places; I was the ex-wife of an abusive husband . . . I was this person that was dealing with some mental issues and I was just so thankful that I have the opportunity to take this time to get myself together.

In Jessica's situation, knowing that she does have PTSD, a cognitive disorder, and anxiety has helped her realize that there truly was a time she was lost. She never mentioned who helped her seek help, but she recognized that in order for her children to have a different life, she needed to be stable and healthy.

Asking for Help

As a result of resiliency, other factors emerged in the women's lives, such as no longer feeling embarrassed or ashamed to ask for help. Asking for help is something many people have trouble doing, especially college students. Monica explained how this occurred for her at an early age,

And you have to, to learn to deal with it and because of my socialization as a child of "you don't talk about things, you don't tell things, what goes on in your house stays in your house," I was never able to get any help.

There is an assumption that asking for help means that one is not intelligent enough or strong enough to work hard and succeed. I have even had this conversation with my colleague in academic support and the question appears every semester: Why don't they [students] seek help? Why do they wait until the last minute? From the perspective of keeping personal things private, children learn to remain silent and not ask for help, which affects other areas of life and even academic success. As Jessica mentions, being "ashamed of my past" stops students from asking for help because they think their questions and/or issues are unimportant; often they do not know *how* to ask for assistance. As Kelly reflects when speaking of her first try at college and getting low grades, "I had always been a tutor. I didn't know how to go get one." Some adult learners, especially women learners who have had to remain strong and fearless bring those ideologies of *if I ask for help then I'm a failure* into their collegiate careers, and some need to be taken by the hand (figuratively) and taught how to ask for assistance before they need it. Jessica states this difficulty perfectly as she recounts the strength

learned from her grandmother, lessons she taught her, and how her past affects her college environment:

She could cook and do just about anything and I miss her horribly. But you become ingenious about using things. If you wanted it, you better figure out how to make it with what you had.

I feel like I came from kindergarten to college because so much has changed. But to transition as an adult into college as a mother, there are most people who are working, but those transitions are very hard. You kind of feel inadequate. It would have been nice to have had maybe a mentor, guidance, but you don't know to ask.

All of the women showed, through their stories, that they did not know *how* to ask for help, but learned over time as resilience and confidence increased. As Carol E. Kasworm (2005) explains, maturity impacts ways in which adult college students negotiate their education because “they believed they were more confident and less inhibited in the classroom” (p. 11). Miranda realized that in order to truly succeed, asking for help was a requirement.

I was sitting in one of those sophomore level engineering classes being twenty-four, twenty-five and twenty-six and . . . having everyone think you're eighteen like they are; it's no longer an issue to say “I don't understand can you do that again?” I don't care . . . It was something that I...if I don't understand, I need to ask for help.

Monica reached a point where she did not care what family members thought about her.

My grandmother had a fit [when she went away for counseling] and said “Well God I hope nobody knows” but I was like “Grandma it's about me now, it's about my babies now. I have to make it.” The same family that, I really didn't want to

help me finally had to come in and say “It’s okay, we love you, we want to see you do good. We want to see you get back on your feet.”

Returning to School

Regardless of their past events, three women spoke about a turning point that helped them decide to pursue higher education. As Monica shows in her narrative, her son helped her realize that she had made it through some challenging and painful events.

The joke of it is my children never knew why I was gone-they thought I was off to the special school (mental health facility). When he [her son] asked me did I finish school I thought about it and I said “Monica you have been to the school of hard knocks and you graduated. Now it’s time for you to go get that piece of paper that says you are smart, you can do it and you can help other people.” But if it takes me, you know, going to school and getting this piece of paper so that you’ll let me in the door just to listen to me- that’s what I’ll do.

After six years of working and being rewarded for her hard work, Kelly also knew that she would remain at an entry-level position at any job without an official degree. “I realize that I’ll always have to start at entry level because I don’t have a piece of paper. So in my mind, I have to get a degree to get out.”

Marty always had college in the back of her mind and eventually chose to pursue it, regardless of the advice of others. “I wanted to go back to school [after her grandson was born] . . . I always wanted to go back to school . . . I let everyone talk me out of it [before].”

Some adult women in college, as Kelly, Marty and Monica explain, know that they have the life experience and capability to be successful. Yet they also show “conflicting feelings of being an adult in college, yet believ[ing] that they needed to be there for the knowledge, the credential and a better future for them and their families” (Kasworm, 2005, p. 9).

Conclusion

Each of my participants had protective factors to help them build resiliency and confidence during hard times. These protective factors helped them to end self-silencing and realize that what really mattered in their lives was doing what was best for themselves and their families. Although their childhood observations and challenges were horrific, and caused negative outcomes in the early parts of their lives, they had more encouragement than discouragement from family and friends telling them to get better. Like previous studies mentioned, low risk factors and high protective factors gave my participants what they needed to turn their lives around for the better.

CHAPTER V
SPIRITUALITY, THE HUMAN SPIRIT AND RESILIENCE

Overview of the Chapter

This chapter analyzes the ways in which spirituality, whether religious or secular, influences the *human spirit* and effects resiliency. Having a sense of spirituality has been known to help women heal in relationships, move past hurtful events and accept that their lives have more meaning than they once thought (Banks-Wallace & Parks, 2004; Heath, 2006). Studies such as one by Walker, Reid, O’Neill and Brown (2009) suggest that women who experience abuse early in their lives, have a relationship with God/a higher power that increases, decreases and or is a mixture of the two can help them as they continue to deal with past hurts. For them, God is sometimes seen in a negative light, especially when there are not answers to questions of why an abuse occurred. Likewise, my participants of this study are no different. Spirituality or a connection with a higher power is prevalent in all of the six participants’ stories. Two of my participants mention being involved with a church and the positive impact it has had on their lives. For example, Jessica never mentioned having a spiritual relationship with God in her childhood, but she did discuss it as being relevant in her adult life. Today, being involved in church activities and being surrounded by people of a similar faith as hers has helped her heal from her past and embrace the life God has given her. Although Darlene, Monica, and Marty do not affiliate with a particular religion, they have not ruled out the

existence of God. At the same time, they are not eager to join any faith-based group that they feel may be limiting for them. Their spirituality is more about being surrounded with positivity than negativity.

When speaking of spirituality, it is important to understand what is *not* meant by the term. Following religious doctrine is not the same as spirituality in the way the women and scholars discuss anything relating to God. Kelly, Miranda, and Jessica attend church regularly and see their spirituality as an ongoing religious experience that enhances their personal growth. Jessica and Kelly openly speak about their connection with God and God's working(s) in their lives through sentences and phrases such as, "women in the church are my sisters", "My life is God ordained," and "church family." Darlene, Marty, and Monica mention God and give examples in their narratives to better explain their idea of spirituality. Marty, Monica, and Darlene do not follow a particular faith-based group and do not consider themselves to be religious, but they do acknowledge something outside of themselves working in their lives. These ideas are shown through phrases such as "God was on my side," "I'm here for a reason," and "God really does watch after babies and fools."

Religious and Non-religious Human Spirit

In a religious atmosphere, it is only through a person's experience with the Holy Spirit and knowledge about God that awareness outside of oneself can occur (Cross, 2009). Through prayer and worship, this takes place when one is asked to focus on nothing else outside of the love of God. For example, in a church service when a person concentrates on the Holy Spirit, a connection with Christ's spirit can occur, causing the person to

become overwhelmed with emotion, relief and the belief that life is larger than herself and her problems (Roberson 2002). But, this can also take place outside of a traditional religious experience, such as in the company of like-minded individuals. Examples of this include the way in which Kelly, Jessica, and Miranda are involved with their churches. Miranda is a pastor's wife and finds spiritual fulfillment when she gathers with the women in her church for fellowship. Kelly has created her own group of "sisters" with the women in her congregation with whom she can express her feelings. They not only offer her a sounding board to express herself without judgment, but help her reflect on her beliefs and values to help make her a better person. Jessica found a church family that helps her and encourages her throughout her life. Getting another person's perspective (from a Biblical standpoint) gives these women the chance to safely rethink some of their values and actions, which aid in their transcendence.

Some women see spirituality as a central part of their lives (Livingston & Cummings, 2009) and Jennifer's relationship with God is helping her see that her life has a purpose beyond herself. Although she cannot fully explain where her life is going, she welcomes the opportunity to allow God to direct her steps, even if it is for the purpose of someone else:

My coming to [name of school] was totally God ordained. It just fell right into place. Coming here [to school] has been extremely emotional coming from my childhood. I think I cried and threw up every day for two weeks [at the thought of returning to school]! It took me about a month before my eyes would not well up with tears every time I had to interact with someone over school. I also know that my being here is not for myself. Whatever the aspects are that I came here, they are for someone else and I know that.

Even Monica, who is not a part of a particular faith based denomination, connects with women of various faiths for spiritual and emotional support, which is reflective in the actions she takes in her everyday activities such as mentoring youth and being a role model for her children and others. As in Roberson's study of midwives connecting with the spiritual (2002), my participants share their career and personal experiences with other people, offer support, pray with and for others, and encourage others to be better people. By being involved with many women who share similar beliefs, Miranda, Kelly, Jessica and Monica are able to use their knowledge and experiences, as well as those of other women, to encourage one another in any way needed and get a multitude of views about life. Getting these different ideas from a positive connection with others serve as a protective factor that can aid in resiliency.

All of the participants have a spiritual connection, but not all of them view their resiliency as religious. Their human spirit can also be secular. According to some scholars, the *human spirit* is the moral consciousness that guides a person's values, beliefs and actions in life (Roberson, 2002; Helminiak, 1998; Cross, 2009; Draeggar, 2008; Halstead & Affouneh, 2006; Tisdell, 2008). Other scholars such as John Dewey see the *human spirit* as equivalent to a person living a life of hope. Helminiak (2008) discusses the *human spirit* when he explains ways in which one uses her conscious to arrive at a higher mental state through knowledge and life experience (similar to reflection and connected knowing). Personal experiences are used to create understanding and gain new insight about previously held values. Through knowledge gained, decisions made, and actions taken, a person may be able to see beyond herself

and view the world critically, thereby ensuring a better life for herself and those around her such as family, friends and community.

Spirituality and Resiliency

Resiliency is not something that immediately happens in a person's life, but is an ongoing process involving successes and pitfalls. On a spiritual level, pitfalls can be seen as obstacles which challenge religious beliefs and practices. As some of the participants discovered in their lives, there was a difference between following God (praying, reflecting, connecting spiritually with a higher power) and following people (parents, peers, spouses). When speaking of their previous spiritual beliefs, the women of this study discussed experiencing difficulty when they had to make decisions that did not align with traditional religious beliefs such as divorce and homosexuality. Making these decisions caused them to question what it really meant to be spiritual women or women who followed the life God had for them. Like the participants in the Banks-Wallace & Parks study (2004), "[their] stories indicated that they initially perceived enduring the abuse or forgiving the abuser as indications of being strong spiritual women. Some women viewed moving out of these [harmful] relationships as breaking covenant with God" (p. 34). This was a scenario Monica struggled with. She made the painful decision to take her children and leave her second husband who was abusive and addicted to drugs. Her in-laws tried to convince her not to do this by repeatedly telling her that "divorce is a sin." As she states,

When I decided to leave my husband and file divorce his family no longer speaks to me; they don't do anything for the children because they believe that it was a sin for me to divorce him despite the fact that I was sleeping on my keys, to keep him from stealing my car at night.

She had to choose to either stay in the marriage while suffering emotional and physical abuse or leave. Like the women in the Banks-Wallace and Parks study (2004), Monica eventually realized that abuse was not part of God's plan, regardless of what other people told her.

Similar to Monica making tough decisions, Darlene had to decide whether or not to live for herself or for others. When it comes to relationships, she has decided to be with (as she states) "whoever makes me happy," which means a man or a woman. At the moment, she is with a woman. Making decisions like these can cause inner conflict for people who wonder whether they are still following God's plan or not. The result can be rejection by family and friends, which Darlene and Monica experienced. Although Darlene's father and stepmother accept her and her partner now, at one point, she was not allowed in their home. Eventually, some of my participants realized that following God means making hard decisions and finding peace within themselves, regardless of what others believe.

For Jessica, following God means dealing with her childhood, past decisions (good and bad), her parents and her relationships with her siblings. Before coming to college, she was engaged to a man whom she did not feel comfortable marrying. She ended her engagement and chose to return to school part time; this life changing event caused her to rethink her values and future life path because, as Livingston and

Cummings (2009) state, going through life transitions can cause people to rethink previous religious beliefs and develop spiritually (p. 226). Jessica knew that she needed time to take care of herself and follow her own dreams. For her, rethinking spiritual and religious beliefs means confronting childhood events that have impacted her adult life. She began to realize that as her parents' marriage was heading towards divorce, their lack of vision for her family and hurtful relationship with each other contributed to her and her siblings not forming effective relationships (with one another and with other people). As she says,

I've realized that I carry a lot of anger with my parents over my childhood; so it caused . . . even as an adult now, my brothers and I don't have a relationship. He [her father] doesn't accept any blame himself [for the family dynamics] and it's been four and a half/five years since I saw my father.

As part of her healing, Jessica met with her father to discuss her childhood and the broken home she observed. In her father's opinion, the fault lies with her mother, not him and any resentment held by Jessica and her siblings are unacknowledged. Her mother realizes that everything Jessica and her siblings endured as children was unfair and she and Jessica have since rebuilt their relationship. Jessica no longer has a strong relationship with her brother [who has withdrawn from the family] and she is still learning to accept that not being in contact with her father is something that has to remain for now in order for her and her children to have healthy lives. Therapy is also helping her deal with her anger, and her spirituality through church involvement, prayer and reading the Bible is helping her deal with forgiveness.

According to Banks-Wallace & Parks (2004) “The ability to transcend negative life circumstances [is] critical to women’s well-being. Generally, women’s spirituality is rooted in a very personal relationship with a higher power (O’Brien, 1998) and strengthened through interactions with others (Daly, 1989; Lauver, 2000)” (p. 39). An example of this kind of spirituality can be found in Darlene, who does not attend church due what she terms, “the hypocrisy of religion.”

Darlene claims that there were moments in her life when “God was on my side” such as when she did not die when her mother forced money down her throat, beat her, and left her to die in their home when she was young. Although Darlene does not practice religion and cannot define her spirituality, part of her healing is evident in her acceptance of her past, such as in her forgiveness of her mother and understanding that “she [her mother] had a disease [alcoholism].” When reflecting on her life experiences, she says that she “believe[s] everything happens for a reason.” She may not know the reason, but the fact that she is alive is enough for her right now. Over the years, she has made friends and formed lasting relationships with people who positively impact her life, including her current partner and her two children. Darlene is an example of a woman whose spirituality is not connected to a denomination and its rules, but is connected to self-healing and a higher power instead.

Another example can be found in Monica’s story. When thinking about her past experience with depression, Monica, who does not practice a specific religion, but has been exposed to various ones, says,

I wanted to go to sleep and not wake up. God didn't see fit for it. We've all had moments of grace- there's always been something that's carried us through. You know I tell people all the time, all those times you should have been gone and you weren't, you're here for a reason no matter what religion you have, no matter what your spirituality is, there is life force. The reason you wake up every day, there's a reason for that.

Similar to Darlene and Jessica, Monica believes that she and other people in life have a purpose for being alive. Her words and phrases are more religiously based than my other participants (i.e. grace, God didn't see fit), and part of her healing and resilience is in knowing that she is not the only person who has had challenges in life. She, like the other five women, has a purpose for being alive and she is determined to complete that purpose. One of the ways she does this is by being an advocate for parents who do not have the ability to speak for their children in school. When a child is having difficulty, whether it is with learning or behavior, the parents or parent may call Monica to help solve the problem when they do not know what to say. Monica has many times served as guardian when it came time for parent-teacher conferences. If a parent cannot make it to school to pick up their child if the child is sick, Monica will fill that role. She sees this as part of her purpose- to help wherever she is needed.

Sometimes, when speaking about spirituality, participants use stories to explain their connection to a spiritual self. One example is discussing how spiritual moments are used to tie up loose ends in life or used to define moments that could not be clearly explained. Marty demonstrates this when she describes a dream she had about her brother who dealt with drug abuse. She and her mother had not seen him in years. She says,

And [in the dream] he's [her brother] like "Sis I don't have time right now, I can't talk to you I just came to tell you that I love you" . . . he gives me a hug and a kiss and says, "I got to go, I'm sorry I just want you to know that." And then he goes; he just walks away. And when I get up the next morning I remember this dream vividly. I have got to find him. Where to start? I've got to find him.

As stated before, Marty does not subscribe to a religious doctrine and she occasionally uses the term higher power, gods, or positive energy. Out of all of the participants, she is the only one who did not use the term "God." At the time the dream occurred, Marty and her mother had not seen her brother in years and this dream was her sign that she needed to find him. It took months for Marty to find her brother and many times, she was told by her mother to stop the search. In her mother's eyes, her brother was gone for a reason and she was scared he would be in a terrible state if they did find him. Marty, on the other hand, had a *feeling* that she needed to find her brother. When she finally obtained information on him, she found out that he died the night that she dreamed about him. For her, this was not a scary moment, but a purposeful one that proved that she needed to continue to listen and follow signs that have meaning in her life, even if she does not know where those signs may lead her. As a result, she is more open to moments that can be seen as opportunities and believes that when a moment to do something presents itself, it is important to act. For her, recognizing these moments and being open to receiving them are spiritual.

Relationships Leading to Well-Being

Relationships among childhood families, church families and friends were also significant in the women's lives and contributed to their overall well-being. "The majority of women's stories [in the study] indicated that spirituality was inextricably

connected to the health and well-being through its impact on women's relationships with other people" (Banks-Wallace & Parks, 2004, p. 32). Relationships with others, especially women, helped Kelly find a safe space six years ago in her church family. Having women to fellowship with, vent to, pray for and with and learn from helped her learn more about herself and continue her healing from her past. Being around like minded women who could serve as spiritual mentors brought her closer in her relationship with God as she states, "I started going to church six years ago and I love it. There's never an end to learning about God."

Jessica clearly showed her connection to God and the impact of her faith on her life through her story. For her, God has always had a plan for her life.

Being here [in school] and having furthered my education would enable me better . . . but also, [my] self confidence to do whatever it is I feel that God has for me to do. [When it came to this story] I didn't know what to say and what parts to leave out cause I felt like all that wasn't necessary. I felt in my spirit that God said that "even your past is mine." How I ever outgrew my childhood, it took me years to overcome it. How I survived . . . it was totally by the grace of God.

Although all of the women did not clearly define their spiritual beliefs, it was clear that they acknowledged that something higher than themselves allowed them to survive their ordeals and realize that there was a reason for being alive, which included coming to college. They all have personal reasons for getting a college degree, but part of those reasons has to do with an obligation to get it, regardless of whether it is for God, for their children, for younger people looking up to them, or for themselves. Having relationships with other supportive, like-minded people simply provides fuel for them to achieve their life's purpose.

Influence of Community and Relationships

Through spirituality, the hope is that humans recognize their connections to one another and understand how their actions affect themselves and those around them. Doing this allows people the ability to see beyond their immediate needs to find a larger purpose in life (Halstead & Affouneh, 2006). A woman looking beyond her personal wants will allow her to feel for someone in need, which will possibly affect her next course of action. Along with this, a person reflecting on her life's journey allows her to connect with people who may have had similar experiences; like my participants, this may also help her acknowledge that her life is not completely her own, which will continue to affect her future actions. Through understanding, decisions can be crafted after careful evaluation of a person's situation in order to make right and moral decisions (Helminiak, 2008). This does not always happen for everyone and depends on the ways they have allowed past experiences to positively or negatively affect their lives. If a person sees her life in a negative way, she may have an unhealthy *human spirit* which will prevent her from positively moving forward.

An Unhealthy and Healthy Human Spirit

A poor *human spirit* would be similar to having a life without hope where people have nothing to live for and do not live for others. This type of *human spirit* was apparent during the years of depression in my participants' lives when some of them no longer wanted to live. Some of them had challenges that caused them to reach a point where nothing in life mattered. Having a poor *human spirit* causes people to make immature decisions that can lead to self-destruction. For Marty, this was evident in using alcohol

as a buffer for her unresolved problems (conflict with mother, first abusive marriage ending in divorce) and getting involved in a second marriage that was, unfortunately, abusive. For Monica, it was getting to such a depressive state where she no longer wanted to wake up and felt she had nothing to lose. As she says of that time, she felt that she had “nothing of nothing.” She could not hear the advice of family or friends because for them, things could not get worse and they were tired of trying. For both of them, these moments did not occur when their spirits were “healthy,” but during a time when they could not see beyond their immediate circumstances.

Alternatively, a person with hope who lives for something bigger than herself could be perceived as having a healthy or good *human spirit*. To live a life of hope incorporates recognizing failures and successes, but not dwelling on them and remembering that they are temporary. Society can learn from its past and celebrate success, while allowing those positive and negative moments to enrich the present. This contributes to one’s future decisions and actions. Dewey states that,

Hope and aspiration, belief in the supremacy of good in spite of evil, belief in the realizability of good in spite of all obstacles, are necessary inspirations in the life of virtue. It involves a radical venture of the will in the interest of what is unseen and prudentially incalculable. (in Fishman & McCarthy, 2007, p. 19)

Dewey alludes to the idea that living a life of hope is built on faith that things will work out if a person does her best and makes intelligent and moral decisions for the betterment of society; resilience can help adult women learners make this happen, but overcoming oppression is often a challenge.

Oppression Limits the Human Spirit

When a person is oppressed, she cannot have a positive view of herself, which limits her ability to critically view the world and form positive relationships. Therefore, this person is not able to be a part of social reform or anything transformative. In order not to focus on the negative parts of life, a person needs to have a good identity to overcome oppression. As with spirituality, if a positive identity is not in place before something such as abuse occurs it will be harder for victims to form a strong identity, spiritual life, or healthy *human spirit* afterwards (Gall, 2006).

As a result, if the *human spirit* is about moral consciousness, which can only take place through experience, understanding and having an open mind to make right judgments and ethical actions, then a person with a poor *human spirit* will barely get past the part of understanding her identity. This will cause her to remain close minded about issues beyond her current situation, which may negatively affect her future actions. Because some of my participants did not have a strong self-identity during their adolescent years, it was harder for them to make decisions that would enrich their lives. If someone with a healthy *human spirit* lives for others and has proper moral and ethical development (Halstead & Affouneh, 2006), then with a low *human spirit*, she cannot live for others and operate morally and ethically in her full capacity.

A Healthy Human Spirit

Building on the notion of the *human spirit*, scholars such as Draeggar (2006) voice the need to focus on the value of caring for and about individuals. Even in a more culturally aware society, there is still discrimination of all kinds (i.e. race, class, gender,

sexuality, religion). As moral agents, human beings can care about the needs of others, even when the oppression or cause for concern does not directly affect them such as with atrocities taking place in other countries. A mature person with intelligence, confidence, morals and a sense of duty to do what is good and right in life can be said to have a strong *human spirit*. Her ability to effectively assist others and reach new levels of consciousness due to an open mind and an open heart would happen, not out of force of habit, but because certain morals and values have been instilled throughout life (Kant, 2007). For adults who may not have had these morals and values instilled at an early age, it is through others that they can gain this awareness. Monica's time in rehabilitation allowed for an opportunity such as this in which she was reminded of her importance as a person. Monica recounts one woman telling her,

“I feel like that you won't be here long Monica, but while you're here, you're in transition. It's time for you to make some changes in your life. The first thing that I want to tell you, I always hear you talk about you have nothing left- I want you to realize that you don't realize that God is all you need until God is all you have. The 2nd thing that I want to tell you is if you continue to be a store with a sign that says free groceries, what do you think people are gonna do?” [Monica says] But you don't look at life like that until you actually have someone come and say “you are special, you are important.”

Having this happen to her at the right time caused Monica to re-evaluate her life choices and not only see that she was important, but that she could change her life for the better.

Kelly's moment came from an unlikely source: a little girl she coached in soccer. Kelly recalls what was said to her by one of her soccer students: “Coach Kel, can I talk to you about something? I really like you and you're so cool and I just think it's awesome that I can look up to you cause you're brown like me.” Through this little girl, Kelly saw

that something small to her (the color of her skin) was significant to someone else, which made her consider her actions carefully.

For these women, having an outsider genuinely tell them that they mattered gave them a new and different perspective on why they were alive and who was noticing them. A person with a healthy *human spirit* and identity who acknowledges herself as a moral being in the world connects emotionally with oppressed people, leading her to hope, right action and change. Without embracing optimism, having a positive attitude, and learning ways to overcome challenges and disappointment, people will not be able to see beyond their own lives and positively impact their community and the world (Gilliam & Reivich, 2004, p. 159). Services performed by my participants today are evidence of right action and change, which include volunteering in their communities, taking part in service projects on campus, and following career goals that allow them to give back to society and not just make money. For example, Marty, who wanted to major in Political Science and was considering law school, now wants to major in Women Studies and advocate for the needs of women, especially minorities. Kelly is reconsidering her career goals because although they provide her a competitive salary, her current path is not fulfilling. Jessica is trying Creative Writing, something she always wanted to do, but was scared of trying.

Hope and Our Past

In order to live a life of hope where people live for others, we must first be grateful. Living a life of hope means that people live a life of belonging where they have a sense of purpose and connection to others through nurturing and encouraging

friendships, family relationships, and community involvement (Gillham & Reivich, 2004, p. 159). By doing this, individuals learn to not focus on the despairing parts of life that can cause detachment spiritually and relationally. By being grateful for things such as overcoming actions made by ancestors, people can understand who they are as individuals. Dewey suggests, “Gratitude to our ancestors and responsibilities to our progeny can provide the willpower to go on, the sense of belonging and purpose that often leave us in the presence of grinding poverty, injustice, and mortality” (in Fishman & McCarthy, 2007, p. 6). As many of the participants have suggested, it is in helping others (often youth) that keeps them determined to succeed. For example, Darlene desires to adopt children one day; Monica counsels youth (in her spare time) and advocates for them in schools when their parents cannot do it, and Marty purposes to become the mother and grandmother she hoped her mother would be. Having these ambitions keeps them driven in their personal pursuits.

Along with this, people also need to understand that the future of their families and the world is dependent on their current decisions. When a person realizes that consequences (good and bad) affect the future and those around them, she begins to live a different life, one of hope and purpose (Draeggar, 2006; Fishman & McCarthy, 2007). This aids in building resilience and allows the individual to overcome her obstacles and move forward in life for a common cause.

Having care and gratitude for the past, present, and future impacts one’s next course of action. As Helminiak (2008) suggests, living a life of hope and having a good *human spirit* involves making intelligent decisions, living for others, and acting morally

and ethically (Heliminak, 2008; Fishman & McCarthy, 2007). For this to happen, Dewey suggests using a method of intelligence - altering one's current position and environment to make it presently suitable for new situations (in Fishman & McCarthy, 2007); Freire refers to conscientization - breaking apart from the old self to become a new person- (1998; in Fishman & McCarthy, 2007), which the women portray through their actions in adulthood. Accomplishments such as leaving abusive relationships, returning to school and getting involved in church helped the women form their new identities.

Spirituality and Education

In relating a spiritual experience to transformation leading to a deeper awareness of self, learning in the right conditions can be seen as spiritual (Tisdell, 2008). A spirited epistemology, also referred to as transformative learning, moves a learner towards a deeper awareness of one's meaning and purpose in life that could possible lead toward action (Vella, 2000, p. 10). The three ways education can help women learners on a spiritual level is through self -reflection, dialogue with others, and positive relationships through authenticity. "To be an act of knowing, the adult literacy process demands among teachers and students a relationship of authentic dialogue" (Freire, 1985, p. 49). All of the women participants have not achieved resiliency without ever experiencing obstacles again; challenging circumstances arise, but my participants were able to overcome them because of the relationships formed and personal transformation that occurred. Adult educators have a role in making this transition in the classroom easier for learners.

As a result, the adult woman learner has a new outlook on life and makes the necessary decisions to continue bettering herself and eventually help others in need. In this case, she is able to reach a level of transcendence by intelligently recognizing her position in the world first. Education can help her in these efforts by not being skill driven and career oriented only, but incorporating global and social awareness that connects to her life (past and present). Although skill and vocation are important, schools should find ways to involve the recognition of values, responsibility and opportunities for social reform (Fishman & McCarthy, 2007). For learners such as Jessica and Monica who want to “give back,” this is significant in their education.

Freire (1998) reminds educators that their work is with people who are “in formation, changing, growing, redirecting their lives, becoming better, and, because they are human, capable of negating fundamental values, of distorting life, of falling back, of transgressing” (p. 127). Once a person reaches a transcendental state, equivalent to the *human spirit* in good form, it does not mean that she is incapable of regressing to a former state. Any form of education, whether K-12, college, nonprofit or people coming together for a common cause, has a purpose in nurturing the *human spirit* and keeping it in good standing. As with any other person, educators can create an environment of communication within the classroom and be a good listener to their students (Fishman & McCarthy, 2007).

Engaged dialogue and practice (especially in the classroom or in an interview) should lead to awareness and change, otherwise it is useless. “Dialogue means that we design in such a way as to listen to the adult learners’ experiences and knowledge base,

and to build on that which is known with what is new” (Vella, 2000, p. 11). Unlike Freire’s banking system, dialogue in a classroom allows students to remain decision makers in their learning and contributors to their learning environment. The professor contributes his/her knowledge to the classroom to expand this learning. Everyone learns from one another. Awareness and change affects both the listener and speaker. The listener is affected by learning new information and becoming open to another person’s experiences. The speaker learns to view her situation in an alternative way, leading to transformation and strengthening of herself. It is important to understand that transcendence does not occur each time awareness unfolds. It does not mean that a person will always be in a transcendental state (or immediately resilient), but it means that she will be in a position to reach that state, regardless of her current situation. This person learns to self identify with the positive and not dwell in a negative moment, but move beyond it for the betterment of herself and society. It is important to understand that creating dialogue takes creative planning on the part of the educator. Dialogue incorporates asking questions, offering challenging and insightful viewpoints and fostering a creative environment for learners to do the same individually and to one another to create knowledge.

Relationships

Vella (2000) uses the term *respect* while others such as Elbow and Dirkx use the term *relationship*. A spirited epistemology values the relationship a professor has with his/her students and the foundation of that relationship is respect for the learners. “Educators must help learners become aware and critical of their own and others

assumptions. Learners need to practice in recognizing frames of reference and using their imaginations to redefine problems from a different perspective” (Mezirow, 1997, p. 10). Through discourse learned in class that is guided by the teacher, adult learners can practice effectively discussing issues with one another and creating new meaning amongst themselves. Unlike pedagogy, andragogy is student centered and treats students as individuals who contribute to their own education and the classroom environment (Merriam & Cafarella, 1999); therefore, establishing relationships between teacher and student can aid in classroom development.

For this to occur there has to be a level of authenticity conveyed by the professor, which will allow the student to trust her, thus enriching the learning process. Because “language and reality are dynamically intertwined” (Freire, 1981, p. 1), students know when their learning is culturally relevant to their lives (Irvine, 2010) and when it is not. Gramsci (1973), Freire (1985), Elbow (2000) and Howard (2003) speak of education as a socially just, power inducing move for the learner; they understand that learning cannot equal power for students without caring, trustful educators who know how to relate to them.

In order to do this, educators need to connect with their students by learning more about them individually and culturally. At the same time, educators should be more transparent in order for their students to learn more about them. Gramsci felt that any educator who failed to form a relationship with his/her students was not doing his/her job (Mayo, 1999, p. 42). Without connection, a group cannot learn to produce its own intellectuals because a collaborative environment built on relationship, trust and dialogue

is not formed. For example, in Carole Barlas' (2001) study of a cohort of students who engaged in challenging and open dialogue, students learned more about themselves and groups of people they previously held as one dimensional. As one participant retells this experience "developing trust allows us to continue going to the deep dark places, the conflictive places" (p. 4). In this relationship with other students and the teacher, the atmosphere of the room was enhanced because many of the students felt respected by the teacher. When transformative and spirited epistemology uses creative dialogue and mutual respect between all involved participants, the possibility of transformation is easier to achieve. This type of teaching and learning was not designed to give people an immediate warm and fuzzy feeling because transformative experiences and spiritual ones (whether religious or secular) involved a process one has to go through to achieve awareness. Elbow further emphasizes this non-collaborative establishment existing when educators favor their own viewpoint over their students.

Forming a democratic society in which human beings care for one another, empower each other, and intelligently better their lives begins with a healthy *human spirit*. Regardless of a person's religious or non-religious history, women learners have the ability to positively reshape their identities. By reshaping it for the better, they can connect with one another and work to help alleviate oppression. By using intelligence, understanding, and critical awareness of the world, one can morally and ethically work towards social reform and achieve a transcendental level where life's purpose is larger than oneself.

Conclusion

This chapter analyzes the theme of spirituality (secular and religious) that my participants shared in their stories of their adult experiences. Their moments in connecting with their *self* through religious experiences and secular experiences similar to what one would have religiously contributed to their levels of resilience and a transformation of their *human spirits*. This transformation not only improved their self-esteem, but the reflection involved in this process improved their *human spirits* and awareness of the world.

Although spirituality is a factor in resilience, resilience is still a multifaceted process; it is not static and has multiple characteristics associated with it. Things that aid in resilience include, but are not limited to, having a level of spirituality/connection with a higher power; connection with others (family, friends, spouse, community); education and educational support; access to resources; and control (Lam and Grossman, 1997; Greene, Galambos, and Lee, 2003; Feinauer and Stuart, 1996). Being in relationship with others and having a positive attitude can help people become more confident in themselves, which will positively affect their resiliency level (Vliet, 2008).

The use of protective factors, which my participants did not have a lot of in their childhood, and lessons learned from self-reflection and from outsiders such as family members, therapists, and temporary caretakers aided in the women's ability to make better choices for their lives. Putting blame where it belongs and/or accepting what has occurred and moving forward also helps in building resiliency to life's adversities (Feinauer and Stuart, 1996, p. 39). Darlene mentions forgiving her mother in spite of her

attempting to kill Darlene. Although her relationship with her father is not at its best, she continues to have a relationship with him which, as she says “I still struggle with.”

People who are trapped and oppressed can, through critical thinking of the world and self-reflection of their position, move out of their circumstance once they recognize what is causing their oppression. This allows them to change their environment for the better. Also, developing one’s spirituality helps them see how their life contributes to a larger purpose of bettering society. For the participants, it is not about following a set of rules, but about forming and building a relationship with God/a higher power and positive individuals, which helps them cope with life, release control over hurtful events and positively impact others.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

Overview of the Chapters

In chapter one of this study, I provided information as to the nature of non-traditional women learners, along with a statement of the problem and overall purpose of the study. I discussed my position that began this research and discussed what I hoped to gain in doing this research in detail. Chapter two is a literature review of themes prevalent to the needs of adult women learners such as connected knowing, democratic and transformative education, and ways adult students make meaning, to name a few. I described how I began my review of literature and built upon resources I discovered. In this chapter, I also provided a synthesis of the many themes that arose from literature that was significant to my research. Chapter three explained the methodology used for the study, including conceptual frameworks such as feminist research methodology and constructivism. Within the chapter, I defined key terms that were used throughout this study and highlighted key concepts in narrative research such as silence, slippage, intertextuality and subjectivity. I gave a brief introduction of my participants, described my data collection and transcription process, and discussed myself as a researcher. Chapter four examined the themes relevant to the participants during childhood such as mistreatment. In order, those themes created a picture of the ways in which these women showed resiliency in their lives. Chapter five was used to describe themes under the

categories of spirituality and the *human spirit*. Each woman showed how spirituality whether secular or religious was significant in her life. I then explained how the *human spirit* is a reflection of a person and how it enhances or limits her ability to help society. The final chapter concludes with me explaining how this research impacted my view on the teaching of women, what I believe education should resemble, ideas for future research, overall lessons learned about the participants, and ways to assist adult women learners better in higher education.

How This Research Impacted My Idea of Teaching

In the beginning of this study, I mentioned that my pedagogy was challenged early in my career during a writing class with traditional and non-traditional women learners, and during a writing center session. Through the course of this study and my consistent reflection of my teaching and learning methods, I am further challenged to constantly find better ways to allow my non-traditional women learners to bring their experiences into classroom discussions in order to enhance their meaning making. Discussions need to be treated with balance and sensitivity, which I have not always been good at doing. In a classroom of 20 plus students where the topic relates to everyone, it is difficult to squeeze in a meaningful discussion while making sure we do not venture off topic in an hour and fifteen minutes. Yet, if I wish to be the type of teacher who promotes democratic education and enhances the *human spirit* of others, then my ultimate goal has to focus on finding the best way to construct a collaborative learning environment for everyone in my class; not to lecture on as many things as I possibly can so that I can say I covered everything in a course.

This is a difficult feat to accomplish, but I realize more than ever that becoming a transformative teacher is a process that will not occur in one year of teaching. Being transformative is a lifestyle, which is reflected in my teaching. For example, transformative teaching is about respecting an individual. Forming meaningful relationships with students, accepting various learning styles, working to enhance one's human spirit, and possibly being a protective factor in one's life cannot happen without respect and care for an individual. Respecting and caring for someone is not something that should only occur in a classroom, but in our everyday actions. Learning how to best show respect to and for another person is also a daily task and my actions will filter into how I treat my adult women students. By focusing on respect and care, I can begin my journey to being a transformative educator.

What Conclusions can be made about this Topic?

Children who suffer from mistreatment constantly deal with the impact of these horrific events as adults. As children, these impacts can affect their academic pursuits, but the same can be said as adult learners if past hurts have not been dealt with. If adult learners continue without learning ways to overcome such obstacles, depression can become a result. Depression is not as simple as feeling "down in the dumps" and it is not a short term issue. It may last for a long time, involves moving from one level of depression to another, and negatively impacts other areas of a person's life. For an adult

woman learner who is returning to school and is still dealing with depression, post traumatic stress disorder, anxiety or any other harmful results of mistreatment, academic life can pose a larger challenge for her than the “normal” student. Something as small as having her style of learning rejected by a professor can have a dramatic impact such as self-silencing and/or not succeeding in her courses. In order for her to succeed in life as well as in college, resiliency needs to be built, which can be done through the use of protective factors.

Although protective factors usually involve people close to the non-traditional woman learner (parent, children, church group, etc.), the role of a supportive faculty member, college counselor, student-led groups, and academic advisor should not be discarded as a protective factor. These people can provide valuable insights into a woman learner’s situation and help her view academic and life challenges in different ways. Seeing experiences from new perspectives can help a person cope in life. Building resiliency works alongside developing a healthy *human spirit*, which helps the learner move towards larger concerns such as social action and community development.

What Should Education Resemble?

My idea of education is to create consciously aware individuals who live in a democratic world and are productive, free citizens with good character and sense to make positive changes in society (Fishman & McCarthy, 2007; Kant, 2007; Freire, 1985; Schoeman, 2010; Halstead & Affouneh, 2006; Mayo, 1998). Regardless of the type of institution serving learners (community college, research university, liberal arts college), the overall goal is to have the learner transform into something better than she once was

by not only connecting to others, but connecting to her inner self through critical reflection and self reflection.

Government, business, art, religion, all social institutions have a meaning, a purpose. That purpose is to set free and to develop the capacities of human individuals without respect to race, sex, class or economic status. And that is all one with saying that the test of their value is the extent to which they educate every individual into the full stature of his possibility. (Dewey in Schoeman, 2010, p. 138)

Realizing a person's potential is not just the duty of the learner, but the educator as well. Unfortunately, due to superior and inferior thinking on the part of dominant society, this vision gets lost in education and the "cultural reproduction" (Macedo, 2006, p. 14) of damaging ideologies persist.

Within education, Jack Mezirow (1996; 1997; 1998) suggests that participating in critical reflection and rational discourse to arrive at a meaning that will call adult learners to social action is often a utopian concept, but it should not be dismissed. At the same time, he believes that as educators, "we have an ethical commitment to help learners learn how to think for themselves rather than to consciously strive to convert them to our views" (Mezirow, 1994, p. 230). Eventually, transformation for the adult learner should lead them to social reform whether it is within their families, communities, or on a national level politically. This transformation may take place not only in a classroom, but through a person's experience and activities.

Unlike Mezirow's view of transformative learning, John M. Dirkx's (2001) view of transformational learning aligns more with Belenky et. al.'s (1997) view of soul knowing or connected knowing. John M. Dirkx refers to transformative learning as soul

work or inner work that is more holistic and relies on subjectivity through reflection. “It is one that reflects the intellectual, emotional, moral and spiritual dimensions of our being in the world” (Dirkx & Mezirow, 2006, p. 125). In Dirkx’s notion of transformative learning, we recognize our part in the world and the way in which we connect with each other through everyday experiences and interactions. This involves interacting with the personal and is sacred. Although some may see it as spiritual and view it as having no place within academe, Dirkx (Dirkx & Mezirow, 2006) believes life experience and subjectivity, which is part of meaning making, is a personal and a sacred experience (Dirkx & Mezirow, 2006, p. 130). This can be incredibly valuable in the classroom when it occurs individually and when it occurs with classmates and the professor.

In Antonio Gramsci’s view of adult education (1973; Mayo, 1999), it was important for adults to learn to speak for themselves. Much like Peter Elbow, Gramsci encouraged adult learners to take power over themselves and not allow others to suppress their voices. Collaborative groups and student led organizations permit students to debate topics important to them and take on leadership roles where “they learn not to simply advance personally, but to help realize their dream of a better society” (Mayo, 2008, p. 424). In this way, education not only stays within a four walled classroom, but moves to other parts of communities. Dewey (cited in Fishman & McCarthy, 2007), Kant (2007) and Freire (2007) have other terms for making democratic education real through the use of conscientization, method of intelligence and balance at an early age.

Part of Freire's steps in conscientization is "To transform the world is to humanize it, even if making the world human may not yet signify the humanization of men" (Freire, 1985, p. 70). According to Freire,

Conscientization, which is identified with cultural action for freedom, is the process by which, in the subject-object relationship the subject finds the ability to grasp, in critical terms, the dialectic unity between self and object. That is why we affirm that there is no conscientization outside of praxis [practicing of reflection and action], outside of the theory-practice, reflections-action unity. (Freire, 1973, p.118).

This concept involves being open to reflecting upon oneself (questioning one's life and choices), knowing oneself in the world, and critically reflecting on the social order. As he states, "Only beings who can reflect upon the fact that they are determined are capable of freeing themselves" (Freire, 2000, p. 40). For conscientization to occur, one needs to participate in critical reflection of the world and self reflection. In other words, turn the objectification of the world on oneself. When this happens, transformation through humanization can occur. Through transformation, [wo]man may take part in eliminating dehumanizing processes, but not before transformation. Conscientization allows [wo]man to free herself and others by becoming aware of the world around her (Freire, 1973; 2000).

The ruling class cannot take part in conscientization because they are the dominating group. Their awareness would simply lead them to recognizing that they are the dominating group; the people they are dominating are not the people they would help become critically aware of the world and everyone's position in the world. For a people working toward action, they must utilize conscientization with "historic viability" (Freire,

1973, p. 119). In other words, a group of people working for change must recognize their action within the total historical context, not just within that one moment. This will help them take the right steps towards liberation. Similar to a person having a healthy *human spirit* that allows her to see beyond her own life, taking part in conscientization involves critical reflection leading to social reform.

Dewey states that, “Democracy means freeing intelligence for independent effectiveness—the emancipation of mind as an individual organ to do its own work” (Dewey, 1903, p. 193). His “method of intelligence” (Fishman & McCarthy, 2007, p. 50) is a way of altering one’s current position and environment in order to make it suitable for present situations, which prevents her from becoming static. In many of Dewey’s pieces, he referred to a democratic education for youth, but the same concepts apply to adult education; the ethics of education is to feed one’s intellect and make it a personal and spiritual experience that leads to awareness. This awareness is brought about through collaboration in the classroom between teacher and student when Dewey says,

What does democracy mean save that the individual is to have a share in determining the conditions and the aims of his own work; and that, upon the whole, through the free and mutual harmonizing of different individuals, the work of the world is better done than when planned, arranged, and directed by a few, no matter how wise or of how good intent that few. (Dewey, 1903, p. 197)

If education’s principle is to free the mind, then by doing this, a person can learn to use critical thought, inquiry, and self-reflection as a means of analyzing the world and her role in it. In higher education, faculty can make this happen by helping students investigate occurrences globally to help them understand how oppression, conditioning

and liberation take place. With this knowledge, individuals must trust that their decisions and actions will work for the good of society, regardless of impending challenges. By acting intelligently and using collaboration, inquiry, and reflection in the classroom, we are better able to “have faith in our choice of goals and live in hope of a better future” (Fishman & McCarthy, p. 50-51).

Immanuel Kant desired that a person’s mind have balance between right and wrong. In his view, a child with good character is someone who learns obedience and a sense of duty at an early age (Kant, 2007), which helps him develop into a right-standing individual who displays confidence and is trustworthy. In order for this to happen, educational institutions have a duty to replicate society and create democratic communities in which students learn to achieve their purpose, identify a common goal and live to improve society. Through the formation of communities and relationships among individuals, educators can truly teach “freedom, liberty and responsibility” (Schoeman, 2010, p. 135). The duty of educators is to bring learners to a place where they intellectually, physically and emotionally form a connection with the rest of the world and not be consumed with the self if society is to be democratic.

Power via Critical Literacy

A way for adult students to gain critical knowledge of the world is for them to learn the rules and codes of the majority in order to gain cultural capital, while retaining their cultural language and history. As Gramsci stated, “Someone who only speaks dialect, or understands the standard language incompletely, necessarily has an intuition of the world which is more or less limited and provincial” (Gramsci in Mayo, 2008, p. 429).

Without this knowledge, there is no social movement for the students and they remain static characters in life because they only know their own language, customs and norms. By learning to alternate between formal and informal language, learners obtain agency of their own. This type of education allows the student to enhance her original knowledge and skills without completely abandoning them, giving her the ability to change her surroundings and attempt to free others in her community from the chains of limiting ideologies (Macedo, 2006).

Society often acts on the basis of hegemony where the dominant class has the power to reproduce its ideas through influence (Mayo, 2008; Femia, 1981). Social institutions such as schools, the media, and other educational establishments reinforce dominant ideology and are not neutral territories for people to express their various opinions and knowledge. As with the “good student” (Macedo, 2006, p. 19) who does exactly as he is told without question, Gramsci viewed education as a way of “cementing the existing hegemony” present in the world (in Mayo, 2008, p. 420). This allowed those seen as inferior by dominant society to remain inferior. To alter this, if education is to change for the better, one cannot be blind to the things occurring in the world, but must instead “direct one’s attention violently towards the present as it is, if one wishes to transform it” (Gramsci, 1980, p. 175). By not doing this, people cease to change institutions and ideologies in which they do not agree because they are not seeing these institutions and ideologies realistically.

Through literacy of the world, Donaldo Macedo (2006), in his conversation with Paulo Freire, explains that a lack of critical literacy that helps people access the world is

equivalent to being semi-literate because one cannot understand, analyze or evaluate the different forms of text that affect people (news, media, music, etc.). Being semi-literate or a “good student” (p. 14) means that a person accepts things as they are which “produces divisions along the lines of race, class, gender, culture and ethnicity” (p. 12). The vision of educating adults for agency and liberation gets demolished because the oppressed never improve educationally, which hinders their socioeconomic progression.

Critical literacy develops the “good student” (p. 19) into a concerned individual who recognizes that the world is not exactly as the textbook or teacher indicates. But if students learn to critically read the world, they can bridge a gap between lines of division. One way of doing this is through Freire’s method of problem-posing theory of education, which allows teachers and students to co-investigate a problem posed by the students. In this case, as with education outside of an institution, “the objective of education changes: [it is] not [an] integration into the prevailing system by transformation of the structures of oppression so that the oppressed as ‘being for others’ can become ‘beings for themselves’” (Lloyd, 1972, p. 8). Through problem-posed theory of education exercise, “the educator enables the learners to reflect on the codified versions of their reality in a process of praxis” (Mayo, 1999, p. 63) based on critical thinking and reflection. The students pose a societal issue and they work with the teacher to solve it, relying on each other’s areas of knowledge and experience. If the student is taught to rethink her values and carefully analyze the world, then transformation can occur where the student is front and center.

Power via Language

Elbow (2000), Gramsci (in Mayo 1999), Macedo (2006), and Freire (1985) view education as imitating the dominant culture in its rules, assessments, and codes. Because of this, minorities are often told that their cultural languages and customs are wrong instead of “different” from dominant society (Elbow, 2000). These students, whether traditional age or non-traditional, should be allowed to use their cultural voices and experiences to enhance their education, because “when people feel that the [dominant] culture is calling their habitual voice illegitimate or scholars are calling it irrelevant, they are more likely to insist that a piece of their identity is at stake in their textual voice” (Elbow, 2000, p. 192). Teaching students that anything not aligning with the majority is wrong reinforces the ideology that they are truly not accepted within academe. The student then has to make a decision to abandon her prior knowledge and customs or possibly face rejection. Educators being knowledgeable about the diverse population they teach would prevent an anti-racist pedagogy from forming; this would allow individual women and their cultural histories to be important in the classroom (Howard, 2003).

For an adult student with years of experience and multiple dialects outside of the classroom, a biased attitude from educators makes learning more difficult (Belenky et. al, 1997), leaving her marginalized in her ways of thinking and learning. As with culturally relevant pedagogy “they [teachers] need to bridge the gap between the known (students’ personal cultural knowledge) and the unknown (materials and concepts to be mastered)” (Irvine, 2010, 59-60). Validating an adult learner’s cultural history and knowledge allows her to connect her life to her academic learning.

Collaboration in the Classroom

In an effort to form collaboration, Gramsci's philosophy of praxis brings together educators (i.e. intellectuals) and students (the average person) to form a learning environment (Mayo, 2008). Philosophy of practice combines theory and practice to form a better view of the world and the way students see it. It takes "common sense and transforms it into good sense" (p.430) to critically read the world and relearn it by having learners use their knowledge about issues and connect it with the educator's theoretical expertise of the issue to form new ways of seeing society. As Carol E. Kasworm (2003) suggests in her study, "student's meaning making is enhanced by instructors who integrate adult-identified prior knowledge into the course content" (p. 85). This is important because educators know how to analyze and use theory, and the student has life experiences, but an inability to theorize them.

According to Gramsci, "every teacher is always a pupil and every pupil [is] a teacher" (Gramsci, 1980, p. 350). For the teacher, being a constant learner who can relate to his/her students enhances the educational experience; especially if the teacher is an intellectual who is "organic to the subaltern groups and politically committed to those they teach" (as cited in Mayo, 2008, p. 426). By learning from one another, along with the teacher's advanced knowledge of the world and its systems of power, students slowly become intellectuals themselves, but it is a process. As Gramsci shows through his letters from prison and other writings, this knowledge production is "long, difficult, full of contradictions, advances and retreats, dispersal and regroupings" (p. 334). In order for the teacher and student to learn from one another, the student must be open to new ideas and

ways of the thinking. At the same time, the teacher must be open to hearing and understanding the student's views and current ways of thinking in order to reflect on his/her teaching practices, and the two must continually work together for social justice to occur (Howard, 2003). One way for this to happen is for the teacher to be knowledgeable of various ways of knowing common to adult students, especially adult women students.

Although Freire's, Dewey's, Gramsci's, and Kant's views of transformative education are enlightening and purposeful, it is important to recognize that they do not take full consideration of a way of knowing that is not objective or fully critical. In order for their concepts to work with adult women learners, subjectivity needs to have a larger role than objectivity. For example, critical reflection which is significant to all of the theorists' concepts requires that we look at our situation from an outsider's point of view to redefine our values and arrive at various conclusions. Although this is helpful, for someone who is more subjective, intuitive and sees the private and public space as one, critical reflection can be confusing to her. In education, it would be better to combine the subjective with the objective. In other words, use self-reflection along with critical reflection for meaning making, with more emphasis on self-reflective activities. This will aid in a person making right judgments for herself and still positively influence society.

Ways Higher Education Can Help

“College is a stressful time for students; they're on their own for the first time, learning how to manage their time and coursework, and navigating new social situations and relationships” (Nett, 2011). Although this statement is true, there are many people in higher education who forget that college is no longer for the eighteen to twenty-two year

old student population. Non-traditional students are not by themselves for the first time; they are managing their schedules differently, but they have a lot more to think about than coursework. My participants gave great insight into ways in which higher education can help adult women students better acclimate to their environment and succeed in unknown territory. Some of the ideas are common for traditional students, but marketing them and making them relative to nontraditional students as well could provide great benefits.

Counseling services have increased throughout the years for a number of reasons such as increased violence, students being dependent on prescription drugs, and students not being able to cope with the stressors of college life (Young, 2003). Aside from campus violence, traditional students are often given information about counseling options for them to help with depression throughout the year. Marketing for counseling departments are needed just as much for non-traditional students. Knowing that there are services where they can seek counsel or get a listening ear outside of their already formed support group can further help women during the adjustment to college, especially in their first year.

Training of faculty to serve the needs of this growing population: Centers for Teaching and Learning are sprouting among many college campuses to assist faculty in constructing new courses, discussing issues relevant to their classes and students, and learning about new methods and strategies to help them teach among other things. As Confrey (1990) states,

When teaching concepts, as a form of communication, the teaching must form an adequate model of the student's ways of viewing an idea and s/he [educator] then must assist the student in restructuring those views to be more adequate from the student's and from the teacher's perspective. (p. 109)

Teaching faculty ways to make concepts relevant in their classrooms in order to benefit the students and themselves will enhance the teaching and learning experience. This also helps faculty put into practice strategies to assist traditional and non-traditional students alike.

Helping faculty understand what the adult woman learner brings to her education and rethinking general misconceptions about what occurs in their classrooms with these learners can help them make better sense of what they are viewing. For example, a student may be self-silencing in class instead of simply "not participating" and it is important to understand how one can encourage this student to voice herself. As Carol E. Kasworm (2005) suggests, "They're learners who could use their experiences for supporting and enhancing their success in the college setting" (p. 11). Centers for Teaching and Learning can illustrate ways in which educators can use their students' experiences to better connect them to lessons learned in class and college life.

Another area that could be of help is through the use of adult student mentors for new incoming adult students. As Miranda mentioned in her narrative, it would have possibly made a difference the first time if she had had students on her campus tell her that her advisor's way of getting through engineering was not the only way. When she returned to college, she made sure to have a support group, but not everyone knows to do

this or knows *how* to do this. Jessica also mentioned the need for mentors to help non-traditional students the way they help traditional students:

And to kind of help you along, I don't want to say hold you by the hand, but you do need a one on one...to give you a little confidence about what you're doing and where things are [on campus]. Those little things mean so much.

Many colleges have peer mentor programs and buddy systems established for first-year students, but this is often for traditional students only. Having this option available for adult students could help them better acclimate to academic life and help them know that they are not the only ones juggling many hats. Although the participants in this study learned to ask for help, two of them mentioned that they had to *learn* first. Mentoring programs for newly admitted non-traditional women students can help them get the assistance they need sooner, which could possibly aid in retention and further build resiliency.

Future Research

From this experience, there are many new directions that can stem from this study. My research focused on the stories of white and African American women attending colleges in the South. The women happened to be low to middle class, so upper class women were not represented in this study. It also used women who made up two races only. It would be interesting to hear the stories of women of one race and one socioeconomic class, women of more than two races and similar socioeconomic classes, and women of different races, different socioeconomic classes and different geographic locations. As with feminist research methodology, it cannot be assumed that these

women represent *all* women; although there may be similarities, it could provide a better picture of non-traditional women students and their experiences. Another future study might also focus on all of the women attending particular colleges such as women's colleges, liberal arts colleges, state universities and community colleges. Since self-silencing was proven to be apparent in many men through studies, it would also be interesting to do a comparative study of adult men and women learners and how self-silencing impacts their education.

One more avenue I feel would be interesting and helpful for future research is the use of personal narrative writing. I would request the same information (tell me the story of your life) from my participants, but instead of the participants sharing their stories with me verbally, they would write them. As someone who constantly journals, I know the impact of writing out thoughts and reflecting on them; having participants do this could give me better insight into how they view their past and how it impacts them presently. As Emily Schnee (2009) says of her participants, "Composing in the privacy of their homes or workplaces, with just the computer screen between them and their inner thoughts seemed to allow their stories to flow in greater detail and honesty" (p. 50). Not having the tape recorder in front of the participants may allow them to reveal more; having the participants later read their own personal writing about particular events may help them reflect and analyze in different ways that could benefit their lives.

Back to the Question

So how do women process their collegiate experiences? This question guided my research, and my answers to this question came from my participants' narratives. My

participants decided to pursue higher education because it was something they always envisioned doing, but due to life circumstances, it did not happen when they originally preferred. They know what a college degree can get them (better pay, better job, a sense of validation), but that is not their only reason for entering college. Getting a degree is something that positively impacts them and their families. It teaches their children that education is important and highly valued. It provides a sense of accomplishment and opens doors in areas they feel they may not have had otherwise. Most important, it provides my participants with a sense of fulfillment because they are doing something for themselves and studying in areas that truly interests them.

The way adult women students process their college experiences is based on the way they process their life experiences, and how far along they are in the area of personal growth. I believe that the way a person processes and copes with her life experiences, whether good or bad, is an indication of how she will process her college experience; her past has a great deal to do with this. For example, if a person sees her life as a series of horrible events that have occurred and she has not sought counsel, then it is possible she will view college in the same manner. This student may be someone who sees life as something that is happening *to* her, while leaving her powerless against it. She might not have reached a point where she feels that life is something in which she can be an active participant and decision maker now that she is an adult. I use the phrase “now that she is an adult” because children who are in damaging situations do not have the ability to leave that situation and repair their lives the way adults do.

In a different way, if another student has dealt with past hurts, learned ways to cope with challenges, and has surrounded herself with a supportive group of people prior to entering higher education, then she may see her overall college experience as a positive one. In other words, the same coping mechanisms and supportive strategies she uses in life will filter into her higher education experience. So an event such as receiving a low grade on a history paper or biology exam may seem like a minor obstacle that can be worked on and improved upon to this student. She may in turn use academic support services, study groups and her professor's advice to help her improve. In Lundberg, McIntire and Creasman's study on non-traditional students (2008), students seemed to have a greater sense of accomplishment when they participated in small groups such as study groups than students who did not (p. 59). All of these serve as protective factors effecting resilience and academic success.

Resiliency in an individual coincides with having a healthy *human spirit*, which will cause her to participate in activities that will enhance society. All of my participants do this. Some of them have done this by carefully redefining their parental roles to serve as positive models for their children. Others take part in community service events throughout the year and help others in need, especially people who are where they once were socially and emotionally. Some of my participants also take part in campus political organizations and campus outreach services. Their lives are no longer divided into separate parts, but all-encompassing parts, meaning that their past experiences have made them who they are and their college experience is a continuation of their identities.

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