

DISSERTATION

PERSPECTIVE TRANSFORMATION AMONG FEMALE REENTRY STUDENTS

AT AN EVANGELICAL CHRISTIAN UNIVERSTIY

Submitted by

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In partial fulfillment of the requirements

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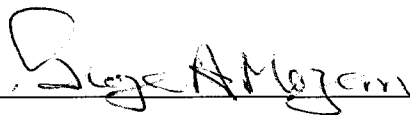
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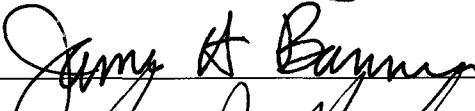
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WE HEREBY RECOMMEND THAT THE DISSERTATION PREPARED UNDER OUR SUPERVISION BY DEBRA HUNTER WADE ENTITLED PERSPECTIVE TRANSFORMATION AMONG REENTRY WOMEN AT AN EVANGELICAL CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY BE ACCEPTED AS FULFILLING IN PART REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY.

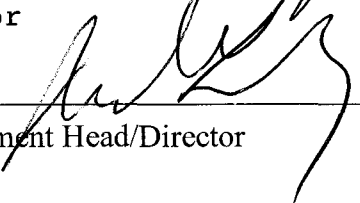
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ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

PERSPECTIVE TRANSFORMATION AMONG FEMALE REENTRY STUDENTS AT AN EVANGELICAL CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY

The unique context of this study on transformative learning is framed by the evangelical Christian worldview. Within the context of the evangelical perspective there are highly conservative, traditional proponents of the Christian worldview who hold very specific, often thought of as limiting, ideas of the role of women in society and their ability to function as counterparts to men in the workplace. This study engages a dialogue about the processes of transformation in reentry women who embrace a Christian worldview and choose an evangelical Christian academic setting to complete an undergraduate degree.

The process of transformation was understood through the storied lives of ten female undergraduate students between the ages of 35 and 63 who returned to college after an interruption in their post-secondary education of over five years and experiencing marital and family roles. A three interview process was employed to explore their lives as children and the messages they received as females; their experiences in the evangelical university classroom with other adult students; and their goals and plans for their futures after graduation. Their stories were analyzed to determine how the women assigned meaning to their lives given their evangelical Christian belief system, the traditional roles and identities they have assumed, and their goals after graduation. The interview protocol used open questioning to allow the women to narrate slices of their lives perceived as significant to the context of their enrollment at an evangelical Christian university. Field notes, an audio-taped journal, and communication with the committee

chair triangulated interview data. Narrative analysis and a grounded theory approach were used in the analysis.

A grounded theory of transformation for reentry women matriculating at an evangelical Christian university was developed based on the context of the women's past lives, present academic experiences, and the dialogic process articulated by the women as they told their stories. Findings regarding the process of transformation for these women were presented as a continuum occurring in four phases: (a) Conformity, (b) Self-denial, (c) Agency and (d) Empowerment. A model of transformation was developed demonstrating how the interplay of dialogic thinking, identity status/roles, and Christian worldview correlate to the four transformative phases.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Problem Statement and Context

In the 1970s and 1980s, the return of adult female students to the college classroom was considered revolutionary. Now, 20-30 years later, that phenomenon has had an enormous impact on college enrollments nationally. Most reentry women are between 25 and 54 years of age (Bradburn, Dempster-McClain & Moen, 1995; Padula, 1994; Clayton & Smith, 1987). Their absence from higher education is usually attributed to homemaking and employment choices, which makes the pursuit of a college education very difficult if not impossible. The rise in older students returning to college places additional demands on institutions to develop educational practices that recognize and support the unique characteristics of these students, particularly women.

Reentry women are motivated to return to college for many reasons. Most cite vocational preparation (Clayton & Smith, 1987; Padula, 1994) and self-fulfillment or loss of personal relationship from divorce or widowhood (Padula, 1994) as reasons to pursue a college education. Clayton and Smith reported other important reentry motives, which included contribution to the family from both a financial and experiential base, and a need to reexamine marriage and family roles.

Findings from *The Educational Progress of Women*, (U.S. Department of Education, 1995) pointedly describe the need to address the impact of reentry women students in American colleges and universities. To ensure success for these students

institutions are faced with recognizing, among other issues, how gender differences in learning influence educational activities. The primarily male-dominated academic environment can often be a culture with little or no flexibility to adjust for the needs or strengths of women.

Unlike 50 years ago, a woman can now choose career, family or both. Depending on her choice of career, the expectation may be that she acquires the same skills that males in the field possess in an academic environment designed by and for men. This places a woman at a disadvantage or as an “outsider”. With few alternatives, women are faced with maneuvering through college in surroundings that do not support, value or recognize the unique learning predispositions of women. At the same time, they are also expected to orchestrate the extra-institutional roles and responsibilities required of them.

The 1970’s women’s movement is distinguished by unprecedented awareness and social outcry for change in women’s roles. A manifestation of this phenomenon was the entry or return to college by adult females in larger numbers than before. The concept of transformative learning was pioneered by this historical trend. In response to the influx of adult female students, many colleges and universities developed “reentry” programs to address the demand. In 1978, Mezirow studied adult women who had returned to college after an extended interruption. Using a grounded theory field study, he evaluated 12 different adult “reentry” programs at community colleges, analyzed an additional 24 programs onsite; and collected responses from a mail survey from another 314 “reentry” programs.

The result of Mezirow’s research theorized the basis for perspective transformation as a principal learning process critical to the personal development of the

female students enrolled in reentry programs. The study found that when the female learner is given the freedom, support, and encouragement to explore assumptions, to engage in rational discourse with peers, and to test alternative assumptions, their attitudes, opinions or beliefs are changed or transformed (Mezirow, 1978). If the academic environment restricts these processes, it is safe to assume that transformation is inhibited.

According to Mezirow (1997, p. 5), “Transformative learning is the process of effecting change in a ‘frame of reference’.” This frame of reference is shaped by the individual’s perception, cognition, feelings and disposition and is gained from understanding an experience. The filter used by the individual to analyze or understand an experience is derived from those distinct principles held collectively by the individual’s culture.

Vogelsang (1993) used Mezirow’s Perspective Transformation Theory and 20 female students 25 years or older – both reentry and those in college for the first time – to investigate whether the educational experiences of female students in higher education produced transformative learning. While similar in some respects to my study, Vogelsang assumed that the potential for experiencing transformation was the same for the student in college for the first time, and the student returning after previously dropping out of college. There may be similarities in transformational experiences for all women by the nature of our gender however; it’s very likely that there are also distinct differences for females at different stages of life, diverse backgrounds, different educational histories, and a commitment to spiritual or religious beliefs.

The female who interrupted her college education may have done so to focus on family or job responsibilities. Often she is returning to college due to a need to reexamine marriage and family roles (Clayton & Smith, 1987) divorce or widowhood, or self-fulfillment (Padula, 1994). With the shift or disruption of role and/or identity, she may consciously or unconsciously recognize the need to alter perceptions of self and others. This study will explore the unique nature of women experiencing possible role shift within the context of the evangelical culture. This shift requires a transformation of the individual's frames of reference concerning self-identity and social role.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study will be to generate a substantive theory of transformative learning for reentry women at an evangelical Christian university, referred to from this point forward with the pseudonym of ECU. The motivation is to expand current knowledge on reentering women by examining the educational experiences of female reentry students in a Christian academic setting. Through the use of personal narratives it is hoped that the women's stories will contribute to the literature by better understanding how they order and find meaning in their educational experiences and the extent to which they integrate these with their present worldviews.

The unique context of this study on transformative learning is framed by the evangelical Christian worldview. This tradition is distinct from other religions sometimes referred to as "Christian", in that the worldview is specifically based on core biblical teachings. Noebel (1991) and Sire (1997) agree that, a worldview is a set of beliefs and assumptions that are foundational to an individual's basic concepts about

reality. These beliefs attend to the ideas of the physical world, human events, and issues of the mind and heart. The terms *Christian Theism* (Sire, p. 23) and *Biblical Christianity* (Noebel, p. 86) represent the Christian worldview that distinguishes a CCCU institution from other religious or church-supported schools.

Both *Christian Theism* (Sire, 1997) and *Biblical Christianity* (Noebel, 1991) embrace God as the foundation for all meaning and truth. The evangelical Christian tradition is often criticized for its rigidly held frames of reference on gender roles. Based on a biblical perception of male/female relationships, women in the evangelical Christian culture are often consigned to conventional roles that view females only in nurturing, reproductive or supportive functions (Gallagher & Smith 1999; Johnson, 1993; Padilla & Winrich, 1991).

This study is expected to unveil whether evangelical educational experiences for reentry women are transformational; whether they helped female students to become aware of the context and origin of their beliefs about self and the world; promoted critical reflection of their attitudes; and finally to be able to consider alternative meanings or beliefs and to act on insights gained from the critical reflection process. This study will increase our understanding of how ECU education promotes the purpose of higher education – growth and development. It is assumed that the educational experiences that do not stimulate transformative learning do not attain the goal of facilitating the purpose of higher education.

For this study, I will adopt a broad position that the purpose of higher education is to promote the growth and development of the learner through experiences gained in the process of pursuing higher education. These experiences can be academic and

nonacademic, cognitive and affective. They may contribute to intellectual achievement, social change or both. More significantly, the processes in which the learner is engaged to foster growth and development, possibly resulting in transformational change in perspective and behavior, are the desired outcomes of purposeful higher education.

In addition, identifying educational activities that promote transformative learning can assist in planning and implementing educational programs aimed at promoting growth and development of the learners.

Research Questions

1. Are the educational experiences of female reentry students at ECU transformative?
2. If so, what is the process of transformation in the context of ECU for reentry women?

Significance of Study

This study will explore the potential and probability for transformative change in reentry women who chose an evangelical Christian academic setting to complete an undergraduate degree. Within the context of the evangelical perspective there are highly conservative, traditional proponents of the Christian worldview who hold very specific, often thought of as limiting, ideas of the role of women in society and their ability to function as counterparts to men in the workplace.

The choice of a CCCU member school situates the context of the study in an academic setting that actively promotes conservative biblical principles and traditional gender roles. The significance of this study is grounded in the question of whether a female reentry student is encouraged by the learning environment to aggressively explore

prevailing frames of reference gained from the cultural and social setting in which she has lived. If the educational setting does foster the critical reflection necessary for transformation learning to occur, the second question addressed in this study will identify the processes by which this transformation result.

Significance for this study is further supported by a lack of literature related to the learning experiences of female reentry students matriculating at an evangelical Christian institution.

Researcher's Perspective

As the Center Director of adult degree completion programs for ECU in a large metropolitan city on the Eastern Slope of Colorado, the female re-entry college experience is of significant interest and concern to me. The more obvious outcomes, e.g., college diploma, job promotion or change, enhanced self-confidence, are the usual expectations for students successfully completing a bachelor's degree.

Based on my own reentry experience in an evangelical Christian institution at both the undergraduate and graduate levels, I believe the personal development benefits far outweigh the knowledge and skill acquisition inferred by the degrees. These benefits include the ability to practice critical self-reflection to transform distorted perspectives that are self-defeating. On one hand the Christian environment I experienced promoted vigorous discussion of beliefs and perceptions that fall outside the biblical tradition. This practice leads to the critical reflection essential to the growth and development of the individual. On the other hand, the patriarchal atmosphere was apparent in classroom interactions with faculty and students. This patriarchy can be a barrier to healthy

interaction between males and females and thus maligns the experience of the female participants by devaluing their input (Sandler, Silverberg & Hall, 1996; Steele, James & Barnett, 2002; Tisdell, 1993).

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

The review of literature comprises four major topic areas foundational to the purpose of this study. First, the purposes of higher education and specifically, evangelical Christian higher education are reviewed. Second, the literature discussing the trend of women returning to an academic institution to realize the educational goals postponed for family or employment causes will be explored in relation to this study. Third, aspects of feminist thought and pedagogy will be discussed and related to the context of women in traditional cultures such as Christian evangelicalism. Finally, the literature on transformative learning, supported by Mezirow's (1978) seminal work on perspective transformation, is examined using the context of reentry women matriculating at ECU.

The Purpose of Higher Education

There are multiple perspectives on the purposes for which institutions of higher education exist. According to the Carnegie Classification website (retrieved March 30, 2003 from: <http://www.carnegiefoundation.org/Classification/CIHE2000>) there are nine major categories of degree-granting institutions in the U.S. These categories range from Doctoral/Research Universities to specialized institutions including theological seminaries, medical schools, schools of engineering, technology, business and

management, art, law etc. In between categories include Master's, Baccalaureate and Associate's degree granting colleges and universities. In every case, the Carnegie classification of each school represents not only its highest degree conferred, but also the degrees offered in a variety of fields. For example, under Baccalaureate Colleges, there is a category for Liberal Arts and for General. One of the purposes of the schools in the Baccalaureate Liberal Arts category is to graduate students with a liberal education. Astin (1999) attributes to liberal education the purpose of stimulating students to ask basic life questions such as: "What is the meaning of life? What is *my* purpose? What do I think and feel about life, death, God, religion, love, art, music, history, literature, and science" (p. 98)? In the specialized categories, students would gravitate toward a theological seminary, medical or law school with the purpose of pursuing degrees specific to those fields. The Carnegie Classification system makes no attempt to categorize the fundamental nature or identity of institutions.

The type and character of academic institutions, in many ways, shape the purpose for their existence. Community Colleges, for example, exist to offer higher education and vocational training to local communities, with scholarship not necessarily a top priority (Astin, 1999). The National Profile of Community Colleges (Patton, 2000, retrieved April 10, 2003 from <http://www.aacc.nche.edu/>) reports that Community Colleges are generally perceived as more accessible to marginalized populations such as women and minorities. These smaller institutions also exist to provide specific training for vocational or occupational fields.

Likewise, institutions that target specific populations do so presumably, to meet the needs of that population. For example, the Women's College Coalition states that its

members “prepare women for the many roles they will assume in life, by offering an excellent academic education, by challenging them to become whatever they want to become and by connecting them into a network that will serve these women for most of their professional and personal lives”. These schools promote “a setting that is the most conducive to [women’s] achievement and ‘real world’ success” (Retrieved April 10, 2003 from: <http://www.womenscolleges.org/>).

Another specialized higher educational field is the historically black colleges (HBC) which exist to promote quality education for African-American students. According to Astin (1999), there is high probability that students attending HBCs are positively effected by increased intellectual self-esteem, satisfaction with college, choosing a career in science and graduating with honors among other benefits. Similarly, religious institutions seek to integrate the spiritual with academic learning. This variety in purpose and objectives of the nation’s institutions of higher learning suggests the prevalence in diversity of student learning needs. The success of these specific institutions demonstrates that many students may best be served in a setting other than a large university.

In addition to higher education’s purposes as structured by Carnegie classifications, there is a long list of educators and philosophers who have expressed their view of higher education’s purpose. John Dewey, one of the most dominant philosophers and educators both in America and internationally (Gutek, 1997), gained his reputation through an educational philosophy of “pragmatism and progressivism” (p. 321). As a pragmatist, Dewey believed that truth is derived from human experience and therefore is conditional, not universal nor absolute. This philosophy is in stark contrast to

Plato's idealism which advanced the ideals of "universal and eternal truth" leading to outcomes of human thinking and conduct which conformed to "perfect ideas" (p. 321).

As an educator, Dewey believed that the purpose of all education was to "create in learners an openness and willingness to accept the challenge of change" (Gutek, 1997). This involved structuring learning environments where students were immersed in problem solving real world challenges. As an outcome, Dewey believed that a sense of community was developed among learners who shared in the resolution of experiential problems. Further along this continuum, a democratic society evolved which would be free from the "absolutes that blocked truly experimental inquiry" (p. 326).

Some critics of Dewey's educational philosophy were "essentialists" (Gutek, 1997) who believed that the practices of experiential education weakened schools where the primary purpose was strictly to infuse academics with little or no distractions. It's interesting to note that the essentialism is very similar to traditional educational philosophies, several of which will be discussed below.

Other critics of Dewey's theory of experiential education include those who embrace the Judeo-Christian worldview. They viewed Dewey's theory as "dangerous relativism" (Gutek, 1997, p. 327). As I will elaborate further in the next topic area, the Judeo-Christian culture holds to certain truths considered to be universal and absolute regardless of changing times or individual circumstances.

Malcolm Knowles (1974), a renown adult educator, described two models from which institutions derive their "purpose". The older (and more prevalent) tradition Knowles refers to as the "mechanistic model" of man views man as a machine, which plays no part in the acquisition of knowledge but is only the receptacle to which the

“experts” deposit their expertise. According to this model, the purpose of education is to “transmit the culture, to fill the empty vessel, [and] shape the individual to a pre-determined mold.” This can be recognized as the “lock-step content-transmittal curriculum and teaching methodology that we all grew up in” (p. 300).

The alternative to the “mechanistic model” is the “organismic model.” Knowles (1974) uses the metaphor of a living, growing and developing organism to describe this model. It views the individual as active and spontaneous in the learning environment. The organismic model promotes the learner as the active participant in constructing knowledge and reality. According to this model, the purpose of education “is the continuous development of individuals toward their full and unique potential through their lifespan and the continuous renewal of the larger social systems of which they are a part through their constructive interactions with them”(p. 301). Using the words of Alfred North Whitehead (1930), Knowles advocates that higher education must not be satisfied with the one-dimensional role of “transmitting the culture”, but must adopt as its primary purpose the production of “lifelong learners” (p. 301).

Barr and Tagg (1995) follow Knowles’ lead by introducing a new paradigm for undergraduate education – the “Learning Paradigm”. Their position is that colleges exist to produce learning “with every student and by any means that work best” (p. 12). They contrast this with the predominant “Instruction Paradigm” which utilizes the passive approach of lecture-discussion where the faculty speaks and students listen. The authors punctuate their dispute with the “Instruction Paradigm” by citing Guskin (Fall 1994), “The primary learning environment for undergraduate students . . . is contrary to almost every principle of optimal settings for student learning” (p.12). The “Learning

Paradigm” casts a vision that each graduating class learns more than the previous classes due to the creation of learning environments and experiences, which actively involve students in the construction of knowledge. This environment employs students as community members who make discoveries, solve problems and share in the institutional learning milieu (Barr, & Tagg). Truly the purpose of an institution which embraces the “Learning Paradigm” is to foster an “organismic” (Knowles, 1974) environment.

Astin (1999) contends that higher education’s central mission should be “the development of those personal qualities that are crucial to civic life and effective democratic self-government: self-understanding, listening skills, leadership, empathy, honesty, generosity, and the ability to work collaboratively” (p. 11). As such, the nation’s colleges and universities are responsible as “effective agents of positive social change” (p. 12). Astin proposes that in order for these academic institutions to perform in this regard, each must be willing to admit “remedial” or “under prepared” persons into their classrooms. He argues that if we fail to develop effective strategies for educating these individuals we, as a nation, will never conquer poverty, unemployment, racism, and a host of other societal ills. This argument is based on the premise that those in prison, on welfare and detached from political processes are the least educated. Astin further asserts,

Beyond this, the issues of race relations and affirmative action are intimately connected to the issues of under preparation, since we have created a competitive, hierarchical, higher education system which dispenses privilege on the basis of measures – the GPA and standardized test scores – that put our two largest racial minority groups at a competitive disadvantage (p. 13).

The values and beliefs embedded in a free nation should be the benchmark of educational endeavors. Yet Astin (1999a) believes that we value “being smart” over

“developing smartness” (p. 14). If it is a primary purpose of higher education to develop the intellectual capabilities of the citizenry, one wonders why so many of our educational institutions select only those students with well developed and demonstrated intellectual abilities (Astin).

Daloz (1996) promoted higher education’s central purpose as “the cultivation of citizenship” (p. 10). To accomplish that, Daloz believed that a transformational process is crucial to student development that would grow away from the traditional or conventional ways of thinking to more discretion, tolerance for differences and the exploration of new possibilities. Daloz connected this transformation process to faculty as well as students to avoid customary simplistic thinking and ultimately, cynicism. Transformation is possible when students and faculty develop “multifaceted minds” (p. 12) and thus better prepared to deal with contemporary complexities.

Another aspect of Daloz’s (1996) philosophy of academic purpose is the encouragement towards “constructive engagement with otherness” (p. 13). Academic institutions can be a salient force in assisting students to become empathetic and readily accepting of others who are different than themselves. To cultivate this acceptance, Daloz recommended classroom settings where students and faculty were free to engage in authentic conversation about real issues.

Pivotal to the general purpose of higher education, Daloz (1996) maintained that faculty and administrators had the responsibility to ensure that the academic classroom shift contexts from “simply providing answers, merely exchanging opinions, or focusing exclusively on technical disciplinary expertise” to incorporate a “deeper quality of listening and collaborative learning. . . . and to linking disciplinary knowledge with the

search for practical wisdom” (p. 14). This is the path to what Daloz argues is higher education’s purpose; “serving the wider society in the cultivation of the knowledge and practice of citizenship – the cultivation of our humanity – upon which we all depend” (p. 14).

Some philosophies differentiate between the purposes of all higher education and purposes for specific populations of students. Mezirow (1991) believed that “the goal of adult education is to help adult learners become more critically reflective, participate more fully and freely in rational discourse and action, and advance developmentally by moving toward meaning perspectives that are more inclusive, discriminating, permeable, and integrative of experience” (p. 225).

Naugle (n.d.) suggests that the faith-based higher education institution integrates many of the purposes of secular institutions with a spiritual or religious aspect which is used in varying degrees to frame the teaching and learning environment. Of these institutions, the evangelical Christian college or university uncompromisingly integrates biblical principles with academic content (Retrieved April 1, 2003 from: www.iclnet.org/pub/facdialogue/24/naugle24). Holmes wrote, “. . . the Christian college is distinctive in that the Christian faith can touch the entire range of life and learning to which a liberal education exposes students” (p. 45). At the foundation of this distinction is the belief that everything that exists is created by God and therefore is of value, and “all truth is God’s truth” (p. 17) regardless of where it is discovered.

The goal of Christian education to “produce a certain kind of person,” according to Naugle (n.d.) includes:

- (1) to impact in a Christian manner the course of social, cultural and economic events at a national and global level;
- (2) to influence the

lives of ripened adult students personally, intellectually and spiritually; and (3) to perpetuate the Western educational heritage of adult education and to do so on the foundation of the Christian world (which until recently lay at the root of almost all major educational enterprises in the Western world) (Retrieved April 1, 2003 from: [www.iclnet.org/pub/facdialogue/24/naugle24, ¶ 44](http://www.iclnet.org/pub/facdialogue/24/naugle24,¶44)).

Believing that every human is, at the very core, a religious being, Holmes criticizes secular education for “fragmenting” or “compartmentalizing” this spirituality from the target of education, the mind. The academic institutions which espouse the Judeo-Christian or more specifically for this study, the evangelical philosophy of education do not blind their students from critical inquiry and questioning. Instead, this inquiry is framed within the tenets of the Christian faith. According to Holmes (1987), the questioning of truth is bound by certain “moral prerequisites: the willingness and determination to learn, intellectual honesty, a self-discipline that makes lesser and more selfish satisfaction wait” (p.18). In his view, this does not limit opportunity for academic enterprise, but is the catalyst for deliberate learning. The Christian educator has a responsibility to students to ensure that inquiry from this perspective is liberating, “enlarges horizons, deepens insight, sharpens the mind, exposes new areas of inquiry, and sensitizes our ability to appreciate the good and the beautiful as well as the true” (p. 19).

In *The search for excellence: The Christian college in an age of educational competition* Sandin (1982) proposes that some educator/philosophers view the sole purpose of education as the acquisition of general knowledge. According to Sandin, “A college is possible only under conditions of freedom of inquiry, and a Christian college is possible only if commitment to the truth of the Christian faith can be combined with free inquiry” (p. 31).

Within evangelical institutions, the fusion of free inquiry and dedication to truth is

complicated for two reasons. The first, according to Sandin (1982), is that evangelical culture has a tendency to create rules which are not essential to the message of the gospel. For example, some evangelicals hold to a very literal and restrictive view of women's roles in society. Dr. Gilbert Bilezikian, Professor Emeritus at Wheaton College suggests that to confuse biblical truth with "traditional assumptions" denigrates the church as "an authentic biblical community" (Retrieved April 3, 2003 from: www.cbeinternational.org/new/free_articles/challenge.html, ¶ 1). The belief of female subordination in society is not unique to the Christian worldview. It is pervasive throughout society, though sometimes cleverly covert in, what are considered to be, some of the nation's most progressive secular institutions. This will be addressed in more detail in a later topic on feminism.

The second reason free inquiry and commitment to truth in the evangelical academy is difficult stems from practices in some evangelical cultures to assign finality and authority to the policies or guidelines of the church, outside of biblical principles. Like most scholarly disciplines, Christian doctrine undergoes processes of historical development and interpretation. In the course of history, language and philosophical perspectives change from one generation to another. The relevancy of a given doctrinal creed or emphasis in one generation may be irrelevant in the next (Sandin, 1982).

In summary, it seems that for every philosophy of life or worldview there is a corresponding philosophy or purpose for educating the populace. Each worldview holds education as its primary source of transmitting its philosophy and culture, but embraces different methodologies to affect that goal. In the United States, we enjoy the freedom to design and deliver educational systems that target some specific needs of our nation's

learners. Of course much is still left to be done in this arena to ensure that all individuals have access to and can succeed in a learning environment at whatever level they may choose.

For this study, I will adopt a broad position that the purpose of higher education is to promote the growth and development of the learner through experiences gained in the process of pursuing higher education. These experiences can be academic and nonacademic, cognitive and affective. They may contribute to intellectual achievement, social change or both. More significantly, the processes in which the learner is engaged to foster growth and development, possibly resulting in transformational change in perspective and behavior, are the desired outcomes of purposeful higher education.

Feminist Thought and Pedagogies

Today it is recognized that women's learning takes place in every context of their lives – at home, in the workplace, community, formal and informal settings, etc. However, little recognition is given to the valuable learning taking place in these extra institutional environments (Hayes & Flannery, 2000). This is due to the recognition and expression of what constitutes reputable knowledge or truth that has been handed down by a patriarchal society. As the nation's foremost academic bastions were initially founded "by men for the education of men" (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986, p.5) it stands to reason that the values and principles historically guiding this society were developed by the patriarchy to be followed by men and women. An end result of this is the communication that formal education, such as college, is perceived to have more value than other learning venues.

According to Belenky et al. (1986), ". . . for many women, the 'real' and valued

lessons learned did not necessarily grow out of their academic work but in relationships with friends and teachers, life crises, and community involvements” (p. 4). In fact, the authors discovered that the women saw their formal education as secondary or unrelated to their basic developmental needs or interests. The women felt “alienated” (p. 4) by an academic environment that demonstrated no responsibility to acknowledging, much less developing, those educational needs or requirements that differed from men.

Women are the largest growing population in higher education (U.S. Department of Education, 1995) , and make up more than half the learners in formal and informal learning institutions and settings (Hayes & Flannery, 2000). Yet, the overt and hidden curricula across educational levels favors stereotypical roles and images of males and females (Sadker, Sadker, & Klein, 1991), and demonstrate a masculine bias at the very core of most academic disciplines, methodologies and theories (Gilligan, 1982; Hayes & Flannery, 2000; Tisdell, 1993).

Feminist pedagogy focuses on the processes of teaching and learning that specifically facilitate women’s learning (Hayes & Flannery, 2000). Tisdell (1993) suggests that feminist pedagogy “encourages personal transformation of individual knowers by attempting to expand consciousness, capacity for voice, and self-esteem as knowers construct and express new knowledge and become more fully authors of their own lives” (p. 155). One of the goals of feminist educators is to create and deliver learning activities and a classroom environment that promotes connection and relationship, employing both affective and cognitive modes of learning (Tisdell).

Tisdell (1993) proposes two models of feminist pedagogy. The first, the liberatory or emancipatory model, “deals with the nature of structured power relations

and interlocking systems of oppression based on gender, race, class, age, and so on” (p. 94). This model (or versions thereof) attempts to account for and deal with why it is that women (and minorities) are “often silenced or absent or that their contributions are overlooked or discounted in the public arenas of our society” (p. 94). Paolo Friere, a Brazilian born emancipator and champion of those who he viewed as “oppressed” by their societal class, had a significant influence on feminist education theorists who write from the liberatory model. His detractors claim he failed to address gender and race oppression and the combinations of interaction between gender and race with class in oppression (Tisdell).

Generated from the liberatory perspective is the philosophy of “feminist materialism” (Tisdell, 1993, p. 94). The reality of one’s gender, race, and need for food and shelter, etc. are the material realities that, in some manner, control many facets of people’s lives and their values. Decisions are based on material realities. For example, Tisdell uses the scenario of two individuals: a white middle class male and a black single mother with two children. The material realities of these two individuals most likely will dictate the value each places on education. It is more likely that the white male would have fewer difficulties in attending college than the black single mother. Tisdell explains that the white male is more likely to find a sense of validation by the college experience because the “experts” in any field will reinforce his white maleness. The learning materials, videos, textbooks, etc., will reflect the perspective of white males. It is no coincidence that the white male attending college finds satisfaction and validation in the academic environment – it is a composite of the values, perceptions and attitudes he has

been exposed to all his life. According to Tisdell, “Society at large has been taught to value what people that look, think, and talk like him have to say” (p. 95).

Conversely, for the person of color, most of the examples in curriculum are white middle-class males, or about people who are white and middle class. For the black woman, neither the “experts” nor most of the examples used in the books are about people who mirror her material reality. Even if she has the resilience to navigate the built in barriers of education to achieve a degree, it is very likely that she will not find employment that will value her education and skills as it does the white male. The educational experience does not return the same societal value to her that it does for others with different material realities (Tisdell).

Tisdell’s (1993) second model, the gender model, is directed by society’s preparation and expectation of women to fulfill a nurturing role. The author views the gender model as “emancipatory” in a distinctive psychological manner, but oppressive when the woman is confronted with relationships reflecting societal power. According to Belenky et al. (1986, p. 5), “All women grow up having to deal with historically and culturally engrained definitions of femininity and womanhood – one common theme being that women, like children, should be seen and not heard”.

The important research of Belenky et al. (1986) revealed, through interviews with a diverse population of 135 women, that the best environments to maximize learning for women are those that connect teaching and learning. This significance of this study revealed five major approaches in which women perceive and know:

Silence: women perceive themselves as mindless, voiceless and subject to the whims of an external authority; *received knowledge:* women believe they are capable of receiving or reproducing knowledge handed to them by external authorities, but they cannot create knowledge on their own;

subjective knowledge: women view truth and knowledge as personal, private, and subjectively known or intuited; *procedural knowledge*: women are invested in learning and applying objective procedures for obtaining and communicating knowledge; and *constructed knowledge*: women view all knowledge as contextual, experience themselves as creators of knowledge, and value both subjective and objective strategies for knowing (p. 15).

In *Women's Growth in Connection*, Jordan, Kaplan, Miller, Stiver, & Surrey (1991) reinforce the idea of connections between teaching and learning. The authors state, "Connected learning means taking the view of the other and connecting this to one's own knowledge, thus building new and enlarged understanding of broader human experience" (p.171). Further the authors contend that when opportunities to connect with a variety of viewpoints and beliefs increase, the individual benefits include a greater sense of "connection to and empower[ment]" (p.172) with a superior reality to the one previously experienced. Additional benefits are cited by Belenky et al. that in these connected settings women were able to recognize and adopt confidence in the value of their own beliefs and to use critical thinking principles to develop their own "voice" (p. 16).

Cunningham (as cited in Tisdell, 1993) argues that "adult educators have an ethical responsibility to create environments where people can come to an understanding of how the realities of their lives were created" (p. 93). To accomplish this, students must be afforded opportunities to explore how power and its attending relationships impact the reality of the student's life. For example, what does it mean to be an African-American, a child from poverty, or to be a female born into a rigid patriarchal family in terms of control or power relationships in one's personal life opportunities or for advancement in the workplace? In order to exercise the critical reflection necessary to

explore these meanings, students must feel that the student-teacher relationship or classroom environment is safe from the power relationships that inhibit this reflection and the attending discourse so integral to transformative learning (Clark, 1993; Hayes & Flannery, 2000; Mezirow, 2000).

In summary, different educational models have impacted feminist pedagogy in various ways. However, programs that recognize the importance of teaching to a diverse classroom share the following concerns: (a) How to teach women more effectively so that they gain a sense of their ability to effect change in their own lives, (b) An emphasis on connection and relationship (rather than separation) with both the knowledge learned and the facilitator and other learners, and (c) Women's emerging sense of personal power. All of the feminist pedagogy literature is emancipatory in the broad sense that it is concerned with women's personal empowerment (Hayes, 1989; Maher, 1987; Tisdell, 1993).

For this study, participants will be asked to describe their experiences in the classroom setting. It is anticipated that these narratives will give us a better understanding of whether participants' experiences in this unique environment promote transformative learning and if so, what those processes look like from the teller's standpoint.

Adult Learning and Reentry Women

The surge in adults returning to college has generated an interest in complexities very different than the traditional college student population. Adult educators have long recognized the significant differences in the way adult students learn and their particular

educational needs as compared to their traditional counterparts. Progressive institutions are wrestling with how to maximize learning for both student populations. Recognizing that teaching adults should be facilitated differently than teaching traditional students, several theoretical positions have surfaced. Many of these positions have developed from the perspective of Jürgen Habermas, who created a way to relate knowledge, learning and the human condition which then allowed both educators and students to better understand “the unity in the diversity of human learning processes and outcomes” (Welton, 1993, p. 82).

Habermas proposed that learning is facilitated in three different knowledge spheres: technical, practical, and emancipatory (Welton, 1993). The technical sphere is demonstrated through the interaction with nature in a scientific form to predict and gain control. The practical sphere, i.e. the hermeneutical sciences (sociology, history, anthropology, etc.) is the study of interpretation – how humans make meaning and ultimately reach consensus. The final sphere, emancipatory knowledge, is the result of humans’ basic desire to be free of domination in any form. It is this domination of some individuals or groups over others which may block or distort learning: “The conditions of our lives (the institutions and values that shape us) often prevent us from acquiring the competencies needed to develop and unfold our many-sided potentialities” (p. 83).

The literature on reentry women has predominantly focused on the institutional barriers women face when returning to college. Some studies have investigated the motivational factors attributed to a women’s college reentry.

In 1976, Maslin studied 250 female undergraduates, aged 26 or older, enrolled at Temple University in an effort to better define characteristics of this student population

(Clayton, 1987). Using the self-developed Continuing Education of Women Motives Questionnaire, Maslin identified motive patterns and then grouped the participants by motive-types.

In a replication of Maslin's study, Clayton & Smith (1987) surveyed 100 undergraduate reentry women aged 25 and older enrolled in a degree or certificate program. The purpose of the study was to determine if the participants' motives for returning to college could be grouped into patterns and motive-types. The research questions included: (a) Do general motives underlie specific reasons given by reentry women for returning to college? and (b) Are patterns of motives in individual reentry women used to categorize individuals by motive-type? The data collection employed a 70-item Continuing Education Women Motives Questionnaire. Eight distinct motives and eight motive typologies resulted from data analyses.

The results indicated that, in comparison with Maslin's study, four factors in the present study - vocational, family, self-actualization, and humanitarian appeared to be most similar in context to Maslin's findings. Both indicated that vocational motives were the most important for reentry women. For over 28.3% of the women studied by Clayton & Smith (1987), role change was a motivating factor for return to college. Many of the women involved in this research were single heads of households which may account for this finding.

Clayton & Smith (1987) surmised that the stereotype of "empty-nest" older women returning to college primarily for reasons of self-fulfillment would seem to be in question. However, the researchers warned that the motivations of reentry women in other geographic locations might be different. The authors cautioned readers not to

assume that identical factor structures, motive patterns, or motive -types found by Maslin (1976) will be found among other samples of reentry women, who may differ with respect to age, race, socio-economic status, or other pertinent socio-demographic characteristics.

Padula's (1994) meta-analysis of the literature on reentry women found similar definitions of reentry women as students reentering educational institutions after an absence ranging from a few years to as many as 35 years (Lewis, 1988 as cited in Padula). Some studies indicate the age of reentry women in the range of 25 - 65 years and older. The U.S. Department of Commerce (1990, as cited in Padula), reported that most reentry women were between 25 and 54 years at the time of the survey. Another finding was that studies of white women dominated the literature suggesting that cultural or social contexts play little or no part in women's experiences.

The seven studies reviewed revealed that the motivation most cited was vocational. Family variables were important motivators in four studies with increasing knowledge found as significant motivator in three studies. Other findings included problems for reentry students manifested as personal tension and anguish for beliefs about their roles, self and interpersonal dissatisfaction (Gilbert, Manning, & Ponder, 1980, as cited in Padula).

Most of the reviewed research employed quantitative methods which contributed very little about the study participants. Padula (1994) speculates that the lack of qualitative research on reentry women (at the time of the review) may inhibit the development of new ideas with regard to reentry women. It was also reported that the limitations of the reviewed research included: no information on ethnicity or

socioeconomic status of the participants in most studies; many studies did not have control groups; there was a heavy reliance on self-reporting measures; many studies were vague and lacked detail on methodology; and the replication of research findings were limited.

Tittle & Denker (1980) reviewed studies and national surveys to compile a broad description of the reentry women with implications for higher education policy. While over 20 years old, this work describes the early history of women's participation in colleges and the slow progress to today's record enrollments. This is a useful tool in understanding the history of women's educational access and its impact on contemporary college environments where though more women than men enroll in higher education, the barriers, attitudes and atmosphere have not changed significantly.

In Tisdell (1993) a personal account of the author's experience in an adult learning class punctuates Habermas' forewarning of traditional society's influence on the learning environment. This account describes an academic setting where females outnumbered males 3:1. Given separate group assignments, it became apparent during the presentations, that each group had chosen a male student for the lead role of narrator while the women acted out what the narrator explained. Tisdell claims that these situations do not occur by happenstance, but are generally unconscious processes conditioned by a culture which recognizes members of the privileged class as those who are male, white, middle-class, or able-bodied. As Tisdell's example demonstrates, the adult education classroom is not immune to this culturally constructed process.

It is also noted by Tisdell (1993) that males (particularly white males) have generally been socialized to volunteer for leadership roles and to speak with a distinct

authoritative style, which contributes to their propensity to be assigned leadership, than women. In contrast, women have been socialized to seek support roles, to take care of others, and to defer to men, many times to their own detriment. Tisdell states, “In general, males and those who benefit from greater privilege in our society because of their race, class, age, or experience have more power than do women, racial minorities, and members of the working class in the adult education classroom” (p. 92).

Welton (1993) suggests that feelings of powerlessness, meaninglessness, and uncertainty are pervasive and difficult to overcome in contemporary society. In addition, this demanding society insists that valid reasons for thinking and action are communicated. Without validating our beliefs and behaviors, we remain bound by a “cocoon of traditional, dogmatic societies” (p. 87). On the other hand, offering soundness for our thinking and action emancipates us from those ways of believing and behaving that are generated from someone else’s view of reality or truth (Welton).

The phenomenon of unequal power between those groups considered privileged (white, males, middle-class, able-bodied) and those groups considered oppressed (females, racial minorities, lower economic classes, disabled) is the topic in adult education literature to precipitate social change (Collard & Law, 1989; Freire, 1970; Kilgore, 2001). The identification of these unequal power relations places an ethical responsibility on the adult educator to create a learning environment conducive to students’ understanding of their personal realities. This responsibility also includes allowing opportunities for the adult learner to explore these power relationships and how they have factored into the student’s personal life. According to Tisdell, (1993):

The creation of an environment where students can examine the connection between their personal situations and the structured power relations between

privileged and oppressed groups in our society leads to a more conscious and informed understanding of their lives and may contribute to their emancipation (p. 93).

Schulze (2000) applied a case study design to investigate gender dynamics in an evangelical Christian college classroom and how these dynamics either contributed to or inhibited the learning experiences and ultimate aspirations of the female students. The sampling for the study was purposeful and emergent to allow for exploratory development. The researcher included in the purposeful sampling diverse classroom settings and teaching styles; participants who reflected nontraditional views of gender roles within evangelicalism; and participants whose experience would refute some of the assumptions the study was based on. Data was collected from student focus groups, individual interviews with faculty, and researcher's classroom observation.

Recognizing that an evangelical educational setting would, most likely, promote conservative gender roles and relationships, Schulze (2000) anticipated that the study could illuminate the challenge of discourse between students, and faculty and students. A participant in Schulze's study, describing her experience in a small group activity, stated "Men often took the formal leadership roles while the women felt responsibility for the group process and completion of the project" (p. 126).

There were numerous descriptions of traditional gender role enforcement – women were expected to be the note-takers and to assume other support roles. When questioned about these observations, the men and women in Schulze's study referred to their evangelical Christian and American cultural assumptions; these traditional role expectations created tension for both males and females in the study. The women viewed these expectations as restrictive stereotypes and the men were uncomfortable with the

concept of equality in gender roles. The data strongly inferred that tensions for both male and female that gender students occurred in the classroom, but the reasons differed by gender. According to Schultze:

Many women perceived the traditionalist gender message and the accompanying restrictive stereotypes as the norm in most classrooms. Tensions created within female students were reflected in their feelings about role expectations and certain types of instructional activities. Male students . . . were anxious and uncomfortable about a perceived movement toward egalitarian gender roles . . . (p. 127).

Within faculty/student relationships, the data (Schultze, 2000) suggested that female students experienced both positive and negative experiences with faculty related to the student's gender. Some students reported feeling demeaned, excluded, invalidated and discouraged by male faculty, who would joke about women's' capabilities or concerns or reinforce assumptions that woman should defer professional aspirations for family responsibilities.

In some cases, references of power and knowledge were directly related to male-only characteristics. Another significant effect of these gender dynamics relates to a female student's access to male faculty after class hours. In the evangelical community, there is sensitivity to avoiding all appearances of evil. This creates tension between male faculty and female students when meeting alone for mentoring or tutoring. While the female students observe that their male counterparts have a more relaxed relationship with male faculty, there is a sense of inequality, and thus disadvantage, acknowledged by the female students.

Schulze's (2000) findings confirmed the "chilly climate" literature (Hall & Sandler, 1982; Sandler, Silverberg, & Hall, 1996). Pearson, Shavlik, & Touchton (1989)

confirmed that “gender assumptions negatively affected the classroom environment for female students in several ways. . .”(p. 150). Schulze’s study is significant for several reasons: (1) It was the first of its kind completed on an evangelical Christian college campus by 2000; (2) The findings suggest that gender role assumptions negatively impact female students in the classroom (Flannery & Hayes, 1995; Kilgore, 2001; Sadker, Sadker & Klein, 1991; Steele, James, & Barnett 2002).

Hansen-Kieffer’s (2000) study used a quantitative approach to test faculty attitudes and students’ perceptions of faculty attitudes toward women at a Christian college. Employing the Osmond-Martin (1975) Sex Roles Assessment (SRA) scale and an independent t test analyses of means, the data were reported using means, standard deviations and frequency tables to describe trends and significant differences between groups.

Hansen-Kieffer (2000) surveyed the entire population (300) of full-time faculty at three Council of Christian Colleges and University (CCCU) member schools. In addition, she purposefully selected over 300 junior and senior students from every discipline from three CCCU member schools for survey distribution. Faculty surveys returned 53.9%. Student surveys were personally delivered and collected from 360 students. Only six student surveys were unusable.

The t test results indicated that male faculty has a traditional attitude toward women’s roles in society and specifically toward women with preschool children; and male faculty viewed career women as aggressive. Female faculty indicated a more egalitarian view of women’s roles in society. Student perceptions of faculty attitudes confirmed the traditional view of male faculty but also viewed female faculty as having

more traditional views of women's societal roles. Interestingly, male student perceptions of faculty attitudes toward women were significantly more traditional than female students' perceptions. Both faculty and students' perceptions of faculty suggested that career women are aggressive (Hansen-Kieffer, 2000).

Hansen-Kieffer's study is significant to my research because it reflects the attitudes that women are often confronted with in an evangelical academic setting. Not only do the results show that male faculty admit to traditional attitudes toward women's societal roles, but students perceive that this traditional attitude is far more pervasive and not confined only to male faculty. Results indicating that career women are viewed by faculty (both male and female) as aggressive contribute to the traditional female role held by many evangelical Christians. Aggressive behavior in a woman is often viewed as unbecoming or inappropriate and a threat to male authority. The danger of these stereotypical attitudes in an academic setting is the creation of a hostile environment for female students, especially if their behavior is not in accordance with traditional evangelical perspectives of female roles.

According to Steele (1997) as cited in Steele, James, & Barnett, (2002), the academic classroom environment that advances traditional gender roles for women promotes a threatening climate which may discourage women from pursuing a specific major, especially nontraditional majors for women such as math and science. In some cases, it may even discourage a woman from pursuing any educational goal.

In summary, the research indicates that the social contexts of women's learning are so important, that it cannot be understood outside of those contexts. Heaney (as cited

in Hayes & Flannery, 2000,) advocates that learning has a social quality which is not simply an “individual-in-the-head” process (p. 51). This social quality of learning impacts the individual’s social relationships and, through a transformative process, benefits society as a whole. Hayes & Flannery (2000) further develop this concept by suggesting that, for women and in all contexts, learning is much more than subject matter or skills. “They learn implicit and explicit lessons about themselves as women, and more specifically, about themselves as women of a particular race, class, and culture” (p. 51). It is in this context of learning which shapes a woman’s future learning experiences.

The study I am undertaking will employ a qualitative methodology unlike much of the extant literature. It is my interest that women matriculating at ECU give voice to their experiences and related perceptions of those experiences. Questions will be developed to explore power relationships, academic environment, classroom climate, and the participants’ feelings of connection or lack of.

Transformative Learning

Transformative learning is a process through which an individual questions those beliefs and attitudes learned unconsciously from the opinions and practices of the individual’s primary caregivers, often the family or culture. As the person grows, they develop methods of seeing the world, interpreting their experiences and acquiring values through the lens of those assimilated childhood beliefs. From a study in 1978 of reentry women returning to college after a long absence, Mezirow coined the term “meaning perspective” to identify those beliefs and behaviors which become characteristic of the individual – one’s worldview. Later he replaced “meaning perspective” with the term

“frames of reference” to reflect feedback from his colleagues which advised the use of more familiar terminology. Therefore, the term “frame of reference” represents a “habit of mind” with resulting “points of view” (Wiessner & Mezirow, 2000, p. 345).

Through empirical studies of adult reentry women at community colleges, Mezirow conducted structured interviews with 83 women in 12 programs in New York New Jersey, California, and Washington. He also interviewed 50 alumnae of the programs, professionals overseeing these programs and similar ones on 24 other campuses. Analysis of the fieldwork indicated a ten-phase process of personal transformation. The ten phases are:

1. Experiencing a disorienting dilemma
2. Undergoing self-examination
3. Conducting a critical assessment of internalized role assumptions and feeling a sense of alienation from traditional social expectations
4. Relating one’s discontent to similar experiences of others or to public issues – recognizing that one’s problem is shared and not exclusively a private matter
5. Exploring options for new ways of acting
6. Building competence and self-confidence in new roles
7. Planning a course of action
8. Acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing one’s plans
9. Making provisional efforts to try new roles and to assess feedback
10. Reintegrating into society on the basis of conditions dictated by the new perspective (Mezirow, 1978, p. 12).

Summarizing Mezirow’s (1978) ten-step sequence, the process of transformation begins when the woman identifies the assumptions society has imposed on her and how those assumptions have limited her potential; critically reevaluates the resulting roles and relationships constructed by those assumptions; and, where necessary, adopts new behaviors and attitudes that support the identity she desires.

In adulthood, the acquisition of new knowledge and skills requires the integration of new information and one’s “frames of reference”. This is often not an easy transition.

When the new knowledge creates contradictions or dilemmas, the individual is forced to examine those long-held perspectives inherited from many sources, and probably not fully understood. This process requires either the rejection of the new knowledge or the revision of the old. From the original research and subsequent study, Mezirow (1981) defined perspective transformation as:

the emancipatory process of becoming critically aware of how and why the structure of psycho-cultural assumptions has come to constrain the way we see ourselves and our relationships, reconstituting this structure to permit a more inclusive and discriminating integration of experience and acting upon these new understandings (p. 6).

Beginning with the assumption that there are no absolutes to truth or knowledge and it is the condition of humanness to carve out meanings from one's experiences, Mezirow's (1978) original study promoted critical reflection and rational thought as the primary processes in transformative learning. Since the original study, changes have been made to the initial theory that recognize context as a factor in transformative learning. For example, the context of Western rational culture, as well as individual unconscious, affect, and intuition have all been recognized as critical influences in the process of transformation.

Drawing on the work of Habermas, Mezirow expanded his theory of Perspective Transformation (1978) to develop what he called a critical theory of adult learning and education. Mezirow proposed that the most fundamental purpose of an adult educator is to help learners "become critically aware of the cultural and psychological assumptions that have influenced the way we see ourselves and our relationships and the way we pattern our lives" (Mezirow, 1991). In agreement with Habermas' domains of learning Mezirow proposed that a basic desire of all humans is to be freed from those forces that

inhibit our abilities to change the ways we think and interact with others. The interplay between Mezirow's "critical awareness" and Habermas' "emancipation" is that one precedes the other. In order for the individual to be freed from those forces inhibiting their growth and development, they first must become critically aware of what those forces are.

In a study of adult students in a nontraditional degree program, Hutchings (1996) used both qualitative and quantitative methods to examine the extent of perspective transformation experienced by the student sample. The participants were selected from a CCCU member institution, Southern Nazarene University in Oklahoma. The selected population (272 students) consisted of all adult students enrolled in the Management of Human Resources (MHR) degree completion program during an 18 month period. By gender, approximately half were male (49%) and half female (51%). The average age of the subjects was 34.3 years with an age range for the total sample of 25 to 53. These individuals were classified as college juniors, most were married and about half held management positions and half engaged in technical employment (Hutchings).

Hutchings' (1996) purpose differed from mine in two ways: (1) She included males in her study and, (2) She did not address the impact of the university's evangelical character on the students' transformative learning. Research questions were: (1) To what extent is perspective transformation experienced among adult students in a nontraditional, undergraduate degree completion program? and (2) What critical incidents were identified during the educational experience which supported perspective transformation? (Hutchings, p. 4)

Hutchings' between methods approach consisted of a two-phase design using quantitative and qualitative methodology. This tactic added breadth and depth to the study as well as covering issues of triangulation. The first phase of the study utilized a pre-post, quasi-experimental survey, the Personal Orientation Inventory (POI, Educational & Industrial Testing Service, 1963), to "determine to what extent perspective transformation was experienced among adult students" (p. 36). To identify the "critical incidents" which are known to foster perspective transformation, Hutchings employed an assigned comprehensive reflections paper required of participants when they completed the degree program.

The POI (1963) was used to reflect the values and behavior viewed as instrumental in the development of the self-actualizing individual, meaning one who has reached a level of independency, competency and value of their gifts and aptitudes, lives in the present rather than dwelling on the past or the future, and generally possesses a positive perspective of their world and others (Hutchings, 1996).

The POI was given twice, a week apart, to the participant sample with data analyzed to show means and standard deviations for the two test groupings and for male and female participants. The qualitative text analysis of final reflective papers used a template to establish clustered data. Frequency tables represented the established codes.

In response to Research Question 1 – the POI profile scores reflected an insignificant increase in the level of self-actualization attributed to the educational experience. However, the analysis of gender comparison indicated that female students entered the program at a higher level of self-actualization and also experienced a larger degree of change during the program than male students (Hutchings, 1996)

From the qualitative phase of the study, Hutchings (1996) reported the theme of participant's self-reflection as the most essential discovery. Through this self-reflective process, the student participants revealed that "gaining a new insight into 'self' and exploring spiritual aspects enabled the individual to deal with past experiences and issues, examine personal life direction, and prioritize what is important for successful living" (p. 74). In a gender analysis of the participants completing the degree program, results indicated that the female students continued to demonstrate higher levels of self-actualization overall than the males (Hutchings).

In response to Research Question 2, the text analysis revealed that reflection was the most significant activity to generate the critical incidents leading to personal change and transformation. Hutchings (1996) summarized that the activities for reflectivity allowed students to examine "self" through the lens of past experiences and issues, to explore a personal spiritual "self", and ultimately to prioritize what was most important to them. This reflectivity was ignited by "writing autobiographies, assessing career goals and personal direction, and exploring spiritual beliefs" (p. 66). Other important influences, which led to personal change and transformation, were the opportunities to learn within a cohort group; relationships with faculty; and the overall program model, which was geared toward the adult student (Hutchings).

Though some may question whether the processes incremental to transformation are cultivated in an evangelical Christian academic environment, Hutchings' study suggests that experiences at an evangelical academic setting can be conducive to transformation and in fact, that personal change and transformation was considered by the participants in the study as a crucial outcome of their experience. The freedom to

explore and express spiritual beliefs was reported as another critical component of the learning environment.

Learning aimed at transforming the individual is “learning that leads to some type of fundamental change in the learners’ sense of themselves, their worldviews, their understanding of their pasts, and their orientation to the future” (Hayes & Flannery, 2000, p. 140). In effect, according to Clark (1993), this genre of learning stimulates a significant change in the learner with an impact which subsequently influences the learner’s behaviors and perspectives far into the future (Boyd, 1989; Hayes & Flannery, 2000; Mezirow, 1981; Mezirow, 1991; Nowak, 1981; Tennant, 1995; Yorks & Kasl, 2002). This is significantly more than cognitive learning alone, though cognition may contribute to the transformation process. This transformation, or “metamorphosis”, creates an entirely new form of understanding. In contrast, general acquisition of knowledge simply produces an “adaptation of the existing form” (Hayes & Flannery, 2000, p. 140).

Possibly the most significant revelation from critiques of studies focused on male experience alone is that the resulting theories cannot be generalized to the female experience. Specifically, the many roles culture and society assign to women generate frequent disruptions to their lives. Josselson (1987) and Chodorow (1974) noted the nexus between women’s identity development and their relationships with others. Miller (1986) revealed the tendency of women to place others’ needs above their own. Gilligan’s (1982) work on moral and ethical development uncovered women’s inclination to consider their care of and responsibility to others when making moral decisions. Ultimately, these relational connections make the pursuit of any personal goal nearly

insurmountable for women.

Since Mezirow's (1978) development of Perspective Transformation Theory based on the experiences of reentry women at community colleges, more recent study indicates that, for many women, transformation does not follow Mezirow's stage process. Unlike Mezirow's initiating "disorienting dilemma" stage women experience transformation within the context of their relationships and over a period of time. Another interesting discovery of women's transformation process is the connection between the telling of stories and transformation. As women verbalize their feelings and experiences, new understandings, perceptions and revelations come to bear often resulting in a sense of personal empowerment to construct meaning and consider alternative ways of acting on those new meanings.

In contrast to the rational and abstract processes identified in Mezirow's (1978) theory, Bruner (1985) proposed that through the process of story-telling, narrators select parts of an experience or action and weave the parts into a whole that makes sense to the narrator. This process accounts for the divergence in people's actions and understandings.

This narrative process of transformation is especially significant for women for the following reasons:

1. It occurs interactively on a personal and social level.
2. It occurs as a by-product of personal story sharing.
3. It requires that the learner think both generatively and critically.
4. It requires the sharing of particular experiences and the collaborative development of abstract concepts

5. It includes a moral dimension as the narrator weaves a criticism of the past and implies an idea of a better future.
6. This process engages us mentally, emotionally, spiritually, and physically (Hayes & Flannery, 2000, p. 152).

Hayes and Flannery (2000) support the use of narrative story-telling in the development of a woman's right to be heard, "The intimate sharing of stories, usually with other women in a safe context, is a time-honored way in which many women have first claimed their own voices" (p. 152). As women relate their stories, they become aware of their patterns of thinking, the emotions assigned to the experience and, in some cases, a sense of spirituality, "Narrative allows all these aspects of human existence to be woven meaningfully together" (p. 152).

In summary, transformation does not always occur as outlined by Mezirow (1978) and in fact, the transformative process usually incorporates so much more than a cognitive level of judgment. For women especially, transformation occurs over time and in the context of her relationships, emotional and spiritual development, sense of identity and ability to express herself. The use of narrative can be a powerful tool in promoting a woman's transformation (Hayes & Flannery, 2000).

It is the transformative learning process that is the backdrop for this study of female reentry students enrolled in an undergraduate degree program at an evangelical Christian institution. Of particular interest in this study is the discovery of participant's transformation as a result of their educational experience. Questions were designed to learn how these women's educational experiences, in a setting commonly recognized as patriarchal, contributed to the transformation of long held frames of reference of self, designated family roles and their potential for growth and development.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This study will be designed to expand current knowledge on reentering women by qualitatively examining and interpreting the educational experiences of female reentry students at ECU. Two major questions will be explored: 1. Are the educational experiences of female reentry students at ECU transformative? And 2. If so, what is the process of transformation in the context of ECU for reentry women?

Exploring whether the educational experiences of reentry women enrolled at ECU are transformative is a purpose well suited to narrative inquiry. Mezirow's Theory of Perspective Transformation will be used as a conceptual framework for eliciting stories of the participants' experiences. The inquiry will probe a participant's awareness of her frames of reference and whether the student's educational experiences affected her perspectives and the meaning she assigns to these perspectives. According to Chase (1995), "... questions that invite the other's story encourage a shift of responsibility for the import of the talk. We are most likely to succeed when we orient our questions directly and simply to life experiences that the other seeks to make sense of and to communicate" (p. 12).

Merriam (2002) advocates that very basic communication and meaning-making derive from stories. The use of stories for understanding is pervasive to human experience and effectively utilized in settings beyond research such as education, therapy,

and more recently, in the workplace. Polanyi (1985) distinguishes stories from reports. Reports can be likened to sterile accounts of events. The responsibility for interpretation falls on the listener. In storytelling, the narrator shares information to make a point, to convey a message the narrator wants to share with others. It is the narrator who assumes responsibility for imparting the relevance of the message. Durrance (1997) suggests that a story “carries the shared culture, beliefs, and history of a group. Moreover, it is a means of experiencing our lives” (p.26).

This chapter describes the method that will be used to explore the transformation process for female reentry students at ECU. Components of this chapter include: (a) researcher’s role, (b) research design, (c) research questions, (d) setting of the study, (e) sample selection, (f) methods of data collection, (g) data analysis, and (h) issues of credibility.

Researcher’s Role

As Center Director, my responsibilities include serving as the chief academic advisor to approximately 150 female reentry students. Increasingly I have learned to offer support, encouragement, and sometimes discipline, along with academic advice, for the growth and development of the whole woman, a concept espoused by feminist pedagogy (Hughes, 1998; Maher, 1987; Ropers-Huilman, 1999; Tisdell, 1998). In addition, I challenge students to actively reflect on their perceptions and assumptions, the roles they play, and their future to better understand behaviors that may thwart their educational and professional progress.

My experience as student, instructor and director in a Christian academic environment introduces bias to this study. This dynamic is the influence of the researcher's "potential effects of self" (Glesne, 1999, p. 103) or subjectivity, on the research. Subjectivities are the biases, perspectives, and assumptions we carry into the research process. Once avoided in qualitative research, the researcher's personal "lens" (p. 105) or frame of reference (Mezirow, 1997) is now viewed as a valuable context to understanding the study. Subjectivities are contributed by both researcher and research participants. Glesne (1999) refers to this phenomenon as the interplay of subjectivities from the researcher and the participants. The personal lived experiences of researcher and participants further illuminate the context of the research topic and significance of the study to social science and serve an important role in the triangulation (Merriam, 2002) of the data.

On the one hand, I feel many of my experiences have been transformative, stimulating me to rethink long-held assumptions about self, family, relationships, and career. On the other hand, I am fully aware of how the Christian worldview can be used to dictate certain gender roles, responsibilities, and station in life.

Until my junior year of high school, my childhood was heavily influenced by the military career of my father, a Navy pilot. The military culture covertly demands that the very nature of family life remain focused on the advancement of the military parent, most commonly the male parent. I remember clear messages that as the daughter of a Navy officer, my behavior must be above reproach to avoid embarrassing the officer. Every part of our lives reflected on our father's competence as an officer. If the children were unruly, the officer's leadership credibility was suspect.

Aside from the military culture that pervaded our family life, I was fortunate to have parents committed to our broader education. In many ways my upbringing was one of privilege by some standards. We traveled to interesting places, visited art museums, monuments, attended historic events and experienced many things middle-class children outside of the military do not experience. I attribute my cultural sensitivity to the opportunity of living in other societies as a child..

In addition to the endemic authoritarian military culture, my family's adopted religious beliefs were most closely aligned with evangelical Christianity. As a result, I entered adulthood and marriage believing that men were the heads of households and the workplace and a woman's place was in the home. This worked well for many years until my spouse's illness forced my reentry into college and the workplace to support the family. As my confidence increased from success in college, I translated that competency into an aggressive climb up the ladder of higher education administration at ECU. Still, my conviction of male/female roles created enormous personal conflict as I tried to juggle school, work and family. I give all credit in working through that conflict to my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ whose truth, grace and strength have guided me to a clearer understanding of his purpose in my life.

While I am still a wife, mother and now, grandmother, I also enjoy my position as director for adult degree programs and influence in many spheres of the university's functions. I derive tremendous satisfaction knowing that God's purpose undeniably led me to complete bachelors, masters and doctoral degrees in preparation and development for my work with adult reentry students. I don't profess to have many answers to the gender role debate other than the very simple biblical scripture which states in Galatians

3:28 “There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (NIV). Regardless of the rules society wants to impose because of my gender, my equality has been established by the God I serve.

My own feelings, perceptions and experiences will be used to extrapolate the richest descriptions possible from the interviewees’ own experiences. To avoid a conflict of interest or unethical situation where participants might feel pressured to respond a certain way or to participate at all, the study will not include students directly under my advisement. This will lend a more balanced perspective to the themes or patterns identified and avoid issues of confidentiality, power and conflict of interest.

Research Design

Patton (1990) states that the researcher’s purpose controls the data collection, analysis and reporting. Patton describes qualitative methodology as a medium to:

understand situations in their uniqueness as part of a particular context and the interactions there. This understanding is an end in itself . . . to understand the nature of that setting – what it means for participants to be in that setting, what their lives are like, what’s going on for them, what their meanings are, what the world looks like in that particular setting – and in the analysis to be able to communicate that faithfully to others who are interested in that setting . . . (p. 1).

This study is designed to expand current knowledge on adult reentry women students by exploring and analyzing their experiences at ECU. More specifically, the major motivation of this study is an inquiry into the participant’s educational experiences and the extent to which they are transformative or contribute to growth and development. The desire to interact with study participants through personal interviews underlies the choice of qualitative methodology of this research analysis.

The specific use of the qualitative tradition of narrative inquiry encourages an evolving or emergent study based on the data gleaned through personal interviews with the participants. Narrative inquiry is a conversational interaction between researcher and narrator. It is used to inspire participants to speak reflectively about past experiences and how those experiences formulate meaning in the lives of the participant. According to Chase (1995), "All forms of narrative share a fundamental interest in making sense of experience" (p. 1). As participants are asked to reflect on their experiences, my observations and interactions with them will be focused on identifying areas where they interpret for themselves the meanings attached to their experience. Effective questioning will allow interviewees to tell their story and to take responsibility for assigning meaning to their experiences (Chase).

Analysis of the data will employ Strauss and Corbin's (1998) method of grounded theory. In a grounded theory approach, the researcher does not start with a theory and then prove it. Instead, an area of interest is identified and, through data collection, the concepts relevant to the study surface. This requires that the researcher employ a systematic inductive approach to collecting the data and analyzing it. This result may be substantive theory, which is "discovered, developed, and provisionally verified through systematic data collection and analysis of data pertaining to that phenomenon" (p. 23). Substantive theories focus specifically on groups or locations and do not necessarily apply to a broad scope of disciplinary issues (Strauss & Corbin). Charmaz (as cited in Merriam, 2002, p. 142) describes substantive theory as "slices of social life", a small piece of the social pie.

Mezirow's Theory of Perspective Transformation will be the framework by which participant's stories will be explored and evaluated as to whether their experiences at ECU allowed for, or even promoted, a critical examination of participant's frames of reference (as defined by Mezirow, 2000) resulting in transformation of previously held meaning schemes.

This study does not propose to test Mezirow's theory, but will use its principles in comparison to determine whether the participant's educational experiences have generated transformation. Personal narrative interviews expect to provide a glimpse into the process of transformation in this specific setting. The data may also implicate the lack of transformation processes, areas of impediment and the complexities of resolving a transformation of meaning schemes with the individual's Christian worldview.

Research Questions

The intent of this study is to explore the educational experiences of adult reentry women matriculating at ECU to determine whether their experiences have been transformative providing the student with opportunities for growth and development. Two research questions frame the interviews: 1. Are the educational experiences of female reentry students at ECU transformative? And 2. If so, what is the process of transformation in the context of an evangelical Christian institution for reentry women?

Interview questions were developed to examine participants' demographic profile and to probe the assumptions students possessed as they reentered college. The interview questions further explored the processes of transformative learning and its impact on the students studied.

Setting of Study

The setting for this study is a Christian college or university chosen from the Council of Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCU) member schools in the contiguous United States. The CCCU is a professional association of academic institutions with the mission of advancing Christ-centered higher education. Member schools are primarily four-year colleges or universities in North America whose curriculum is rooted in the arts and sciences.

CCCU schools are bound by a mission to “advance the cause of Christ-centered higher education and to help our institutions transform lives by faithfully relating scholarship and service to biblical truth” (Retrieved March 15, 2003 from: <http://www.cccu.org/about/about.asp>). U.S. institutions must have full, non-probationary regional accreditation to be eligible for membership.

Carnegie classifications for CCCU schools range from Baccalaureate Colleges-General (40%); Master’s Colleges and Universities I (23%) and one member school classified Doctoral/Research Universities-Intensive.

The CCCU represents 33 different religious or denominational affiliations. Across the membership, there are 323 undergraduate majors, 8,100 full time and 7,330 part time faculty, and 1.3 million alumni. The mission of the CCCU and its member institutions is the basis for choosing a school from this organization. Other schools may be considered “Christian” due to their support organization or mission, but do not practice the Christ-centered marriage of faith and learning which also include essential Christian beliefs such as incarnation, atonement and original sin.

The targeted institution, ECU, has been a CCCU member school since 1985 with a Carnegie Classification of MAI. The institution's Fall 2002 IPEDS and CDS reports (<http://www.ccu.edu/institutionalresearch/2002-2003/default.htm>, retrieved 6/29/03) indicate approximately 1,800 full and part-time undergraduates and graduate students are enrolled. The adult and graduate programs enroll approximately 606 full and part time undergraduates and 110 full and part time graduates. Males represent 43% and females 57% of the student population. Enrollment by race/ethnicity indicated; 4% of students are black, non-Hispanic, 6% Hispanic, 1% Asian American or Pacific Islander, and 14% did not report race or ethnicity. Data indicating specific demographics of the adult, non-traditional population and reentry student population by gender and race/ethnicity was not available at this time. More than 110 full-and part-time faculty members are employed at ECU, with approximately 50% holding terminal degrees. The library's collection includes 71,565 titles, 1,192 serial subscriptions, 4,200 audiovisual materials, an OPAC, a Web page (<http://www.petersons.com>, retrieved 6/29/03).

The evangelical Christian community is often criticized for traditional beliefs about women's roles and the headship of men. The interplay of power and patriarchal tradition, between students and faculty and student to student, in the college classroom, negates the basic epistemology of learning preferences for many women.

The physical site of the interviews will be a location convenient to the participants, possibly a classroom or conference room at the university or a nearby restaurant. It is critical that the participant feel that the interview location is comfortable and their responses will not be overheard.

Sample Selection

Choosing qualified participants from a CCCU member school defines the distinctive environment in which this study is focused. The ten students selected for this study were females between the age of 35 and 62 with an average age of 48 years who returned to college after an absence from an earlier college enrollment of 5+ years. Much of the literature (Clayton & Smith, 1987; Flannery & Hayes, 1995; Padula, 1994) uses the age of 25 to identify reentry students. For the purposes of this study the age of 30 was used as a minimum to allow for life experience in the role of wife and mother. In addition to age the selected students were married (or in a committed relationship) or have been married (or in a committed relationship), and have children. Collectively the study participants had 27 children among them. These criteria suggest familial role experience and a commitment at some level to the evangelical ideals of marriage and family (Gallagher & Smith, 1999; Hubbard, 1992; Johnson, 1993; Peek, Lowe, & Williams, 1991). Nine of the women are Caucasian and one is Hispanic.

Academically, the participants had completed a minimum of 30 semester hours of classroom coursework at the selected school. The 30 hours does not include CLEP or DANTES testing or the accumulation of credits through a prior learning credit program. This is to ensure that the student has been exposed for approximately one academic year to the evangelical classroom and academic environment.

The sample selection included ten female reentry students who met the criteria listed above. The predominance of literature on female reentry students has focused on the white, middle-class female experience. The sampling for this study included women from diverse ethnic origins and socioeconomic backgrounds. I received permission from

the Dean of Adult and Graduate Studies (AGS) to solicit female reentry students at least two separate sites. I also contacted the Center Directors of each AGS site for assistance in posting the recruiting posters (Appendix A) and reserving a room. Recruiting posters for qualified participants were posted at the selected adult sites in locations easily viewed by the adult students attending each adult site. Students who met the criteria self-identified directly to me via telephone call or email.

Participants were informed that they could decline my invitation to participate or discontinue participation at any time in the process. After contacting me via telephone or email of their interest in participating in the study, an introductory letter was sent to potential participants outlining their rights as a participant in this research study (Appendix B). In most cases this was sent by email. At the first interview, the Informed Consent (Appendix C) was read and participant given an opportunity to ask any questions about the study. They were assured through the Informed Consent and verbally by me that their answers would remain anonymous and confidential. All identifying data from interviews were disguised in the final research report by using pseudonyms.

Methods of Data Collection

Interested reentry students contacted me via telephone or email to volunteer for the study. After an initial telephone or email contact, the introductory letter was sent via postal mail or electronic mail and described the general purpose of the research study in addition to projected dates of the study and contact information. In instances where volunteers contacted me by telephone, I had the opportunity to return the phone call and

to respond to any questions or concerns they had. At that time we set a date, time and place for our first interview session.

At our initial meeting, we determined an interview schedule setting the time and place of each interview. I explained that each interview could last approximately one hour but full consideration was made of the participants' schedule and preference for when to terminate the interview. All interviews were audio taped (with the participants' permission) and transcribed at a later time. Once transcription was complete, the audio tapes and all other data, such as e-mails, the researcher's field notes and reflective journal, were submitted to the principal investigator for 3 years according to the *Human Research Handbook*, (Colorado State University, 2003).

Data collection protocol (Appendix D) was accomplished in three phases (Seidman, 1998) (corresponding to each of three interviews) with a fourth phase as follow up after initial meeting to clarify statements and perceptions, if needed. At the beginning of the first interview, the purpose of the interview was reviewed and the interviewee assured that the data would be treated confidentially. The consent form was presented for the interviewee's signature. Each participant received a copy of the signed consent form.

The first interview was used to establish rapport with the participant, to gather demographic information and to explore the context of the participant's life prior to returning to college. The participant was encouraged to tell me about their experiences and memories growing up: family/social role; self-perception; professional achievements; and reasons for returning to college. The second interview explored the

details of the participant's experiences upon returning to college. The third interview probed the meanings the participant attaches to her experience returning to college.

The interview questions probed deeper into the assumptions and perspectives owned by the individual prior to reentering college and as she progressed. Follow-up included telephone calls and e-mails asking participants to clarify some aspects of the narrative information and to refine the emerging themes. In addition to the interviews and e-mails, I kept a reflective journal using taped thoughts and also written field notes to record observations, insights, emerging themes and preliminary mapping of the themes.

At the close of interview three, participants were asked to describe what it was like to be involved in the interview process. The process of participating in a research study can be transformative for some individuals. The act of reflection and identifying meaning perspectives allows the individual the critical reflection necessary to affect transformation. From Mezirow (1991):

As we assess our assumptions about the content or process of problem solving and find them unjustified, we create new ones or transform our old assumptions and hence our interpretations of experience. This is the dynamics of everyday reflective learning. When occasionally we are forced to assess or reassess the basic premises we have taken-for-granted and find them unjustified, perspective transformation, followed by major life changes, may result (p. 192).

Data Analysis

Data analysis begins with interviews; a harvesting of words, so to speak. It is the process of transforming talk into written text requiring skills of selection and reduction (Riessman, 1993). Riessman recommends that the researcher begin with a rough first draft of each interview "to get the words and other striking features of the conversation on paper (e.g., crying, laughing, and very long pauses)" (p. 56). The next step is to go

back and retranscribe selected portions for a more in depth analysis. This retranscription and detailed analysis will generate themes by which the data can be organized.

The emergent themes were developed by reading and rereading the transcripts and pulling out common themes related to the participant's understanding of their socio/cultural roles, religious beliefs, and transformative structures. After the tapes were transcribed, each participant received a copy of the raw transcripts and was asked to read the transcripts for accuracy and to inform me of any misunderstanding or misperception of what they were trying to convey during the interviews. Of the ten participants, only four of the women communicated clarifications to me. The others expressed a reluctance to read the transcripts indicating they didn't have the time or didn't want to go back over all the past experiences they have tried to put behind them.

It is the process of "microanalysis" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) which involves a deliberate and painstaking examination and interpretation of the interviews, field notes, and/or other forms of written or verbal communications between the study participants and the researcher. Strauss and Corbin include two significant contributions to the data examination: 1. the data from participants gathered by the researcher and, 2. the researcher's and participants' interpretations of the data. Since the researcher, in this design, is an active player in the gathering and analysis of the data, a third contribution is made by the "interplay" (p. 58) between the data and the researcher as the data is reacted to and organized (Strauss & Corbin).

Riessman (1993) warns the qualitative researcher not to analyze a narrative for content or evidence of theory alone. It is important that the structure of the narrative is identified. The researcher is encouraged to unearth structures such as organization;

reasons for the recounting of the story in a particular way to the specific listener; the assumptions of teller and listener; and the specific social, cultural, and institutional associations the teller's experience is situated.

Riessman (1993) further alerts the researcher to understand and openly identify for the reader any issues of power relevant to the story and subsequent interpretation. It is important to identify the ownership of "voice" (p. 61) and how it is portrayed in the final analysis. Other areas of interpretation requiring candid disclosure include vulnerability of the story to other's understandings and how the researcher is "situated" (p. 61) in the narrative collected and analyzed.

Beyond disclosure of the structures mentioned above, the final outcome is dependent on the researcher's emerging research questions, the "theoretical/epistemological positions the investigator values" (p. 61), and generally the perspective and experience of the researcher (Riessman, 1993).

Strategies for Trustworthiness

A major concern for the qualitative researcher is credibility with constituents or readers with little or no knowledge base of the study's purpose or significance. The volume of time and work invested in the research process should command the author's commitment to trustworthiness. The nature of qualitative research implies a changing reality due to the unique perspectives of the researcher and participants (Merriam, 2002).

Merriam states that the qualitative researcher is:

not interested in how many or the distribution of predefined variables. Rather, it is important to understand the perspectives of those involved, uncover the complexity of human behavior in context, and present a holistic interpretation of what is happening (p. 25).

The primary data collection instrument in qualitative research is the researcher who uses observations and interviews to harvest rich stories of lived experiences.

To further the credibility of the data, several measures will be employed. First, the communications with my research advisor and the dissertation committee guided the research process, to ensure that the raw data is in agreement with valid interpretations. Second, I journaled my reflections using an audio tape and written field notes to record my observations, questions, biases, and tentative interpretations as I worked through the research process, especially during the interview stage and analysis of raw data. The journal serves as an “audit trail [for] the methods, procedures, and decision points in carrying out the study” (Merriam, 2002, p. 31). Third, using member checks, the participants were given the opportunity to view my preliminary interpretations to check for authenticity.

Another factor in ensuring trustworthiness is disclosure of the study’s limitations. Documenting the plans that did not occur in the data collection or changes in the sample, location or other unexpected dynamics of the data alerts readers to the context of the findings (Glesne, 1999). For the purposes of this study, my own biases contributed to the limitations and were identified early in the process and reflected upon during data collection and interpretation.

Interview Process

Through the use of taped interviews, each woman was engaged in the process of looking back at childhood experiences and messages, scanning the present as they navigate life as a student in addition to all the other identities and roles they play, and

then looking to the future by reflecting on past and present to derive meanings from which to move forward. As the reflective journey is engaged, the process of narrative inquiry also involves situating the participant and researcher in place (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). For this study, the physical place is not a destiny, but rather the current context from which the women were invited to explore their lives with me.

My first contact with each participant for this study was either an exchange of emails or telephone conversations. Through a process of self-selection, the women made the initial contact to indicate their interest in participating. Prior to setting up the first interview session, I ensured that each woman understood the purpose of my study and affirmed her qualifications. Two volunteers were not used because their family and work obligations made scheduling uninterrupted interview time unpractical. Another woman was disqualified because she did not meet the minimum requirement of having children.

At the initial interview, both the purpose and qualifications were confirmed again in an effort to stimulate any further questions from participants. A consent form was reviewed and signed by both the participant and myself with a copy of the signed consent form given to the participant.

It was desired that interview volunteers would come from a diverse cultural, social and religious backgrounds reflective of the adult student population in the adult programs at the chosen university. Nine of the participants were Caucasian and one was Hispanic. About half of the women revealed that they were raised in poor or lower middle class families. The other half came from middle-class families. None of the participants revealed characteristics of a privileged upbringing. A majority of the women were raised in alcoholic homes, were emotionally or physically abused, and/or were not

given any direction or vision for their future. In some form, all were either raised with or exposed to some degree of religious influence and at the point of the interviews, all professed to embrace the Judaeo-Christian worldview of Christian Theism (Noebel, 1991). For these women, the Christian Theistic worldview filters and saturates the context from which they view their past life experiences and their future purpose.

Each initial interview lasted approximately 75-90 minutes as we built rapport and explored their life prior to returning to college. Interviews two and three lasted approximately 60 minutes. Occasionally an interview was rescheduled due to work or family conflicts, but for the most part the interview schedule was carried out with few interruptions or cancellations. The participants demonstrated a serious commitment to my study, which touched me greatly. Except for one interview which was held in the study room of a public library, all others were conducted in an office or conference room at the participant's local program site.

The participants seemed to follow my questioning well and responded specifically to the questions. Sometimes the questions appeared to stimulate memories or understandings they felt were critical to communicate to me, but may not have been specific to the question asked. These narratives produced some of the richest and insightful data into the lives of the women and inspired my curiosity to explore so much more about the participant's life beyond the context of this study. At times the women were moved to tears or laughter recounting a memory or understanding. Laughter was often used when painful or awkward memories were relayed, as if to make the situation lighter. As I got to know these women, it was obvious that there is so much more to the lives and personalities that research could only begin to capture adequately.

The first interview was designed to probe the life of each woman prior to reentering college this time. Interestingly, their stories began in their married life, not in childhood. Through the course of the interview questions were asked to explore earlier childhood memories and messages. These were often painful memories for many of the women.

The second interview explored the participant's experience within the context of ECU where they were currently enrolled. Questions were asked about relationships with instructors, other students, and staff members of the university. The participant's perspective of the classroom environment was elicited and explored.

The third interview invited the women to consider the meaning of their present college experience in light of their childhood, adult life, goals and perceptions of self. It was apparent that assigning meaning to these experiences was a difficult process for the women. It was much easier to recount the concrete details of their life and college experiences than to articulate abstractly the meaning or understanding.

From *Interpreting women's lives*, The Personal Narratives Group proposes, "Context is not a script. Rather, it is a dynamic process through which the individual simultaneously shapes and is shaped by her environment" (1989, p. 19). Further, attention to context requires the interpreter to grasp the how and why of the narrator's frames of reference (Mezirow, 1997) as she tells her story. As an introduction to the lives of these women, brief profiles are presented first to illuminate the context from which each narrates her experience. Following the profiles major themes are defined and explored using narrative pieces from the women's stories.

CHAPTER 4: PARTICIPANT PROFILES

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to ground the reader in the lives of participants in the context of the socio-cultural messages they received in childhood, to highlight the significant dynamics of their lives prior to reentering college, and to reveal their motivation(s) for returning to college and choosing an evangelical Christian University to complete an undergraduate degree.

Abigail

Tall and attractive with hair pulled back in a ponytail, Abigail arrived at our first interview dressed very much like a typical college student in Levis, turtleneck sweater and vest. She was the only participant who was living on campus and explained that she was trying to fit in though she is old enough to parent most of the other students.

Abigail has an identical twin sister and two brothers, one is four years older and the other, who died tragically at the age of five years, was two years older than the twins. She grew up as one of two daughters of a Methodist minister and describes her parents as wonderful people who created a home environment that was very loving and compassionate. She describes her parent's relationship as "unique" in that her father thought he was the luckiest man in the world that Abigail's mother chose him. And his wife worshipped the ground he walked on.

Abigail described her father as a “forward-thinker.” She sensed that he would have supported a woman’s right to an abortion and co-habitation of unmarried couples, but she indicated that he never verbalized that to his children. Her mother, on the other hand, displayed very traditional domestic behavior which Abigail attributes to her own tendencies.

After high school she enrolled in a state university, met her husband and decided to leave school to marry. He graduated and had a job in another state. To keep busy in the early stages of the marriage, she attended some general interest classes at the junior college. She described herself as domestically inclined with no serious aspirations for a college degree or a career. Together they had three children to whom Abigail was passionately committed to raising as a stay-at-home mother. She attributes her husband’s infidelity to destroying their 23 year old marriage. That was 13 years ago.

Through a series of hospitalizations for depression and mental instability during the divorce, Abigail painfully realized she was unable to care for or support her children. Ultimately she chose to give full custody to her ex husband, a decision she still supports because she felt it was in the best interest of the children.

Abigail unabashedly claims a very personal relationship with God and Jesus Christ. As she describes her past experiences and current daily activities, her reliance on that relationship is very evident. She credits God with leading her, through a radio advertisement, to enroll at ECU to prepare for the rest of her life. Unlike many of the other women, Abigail did not describe a life-long desire to complete a college degree. She was very content as a wife and mother until her life took

a different path. Her motivation now to finish college is in obedience to what she believes God is calling her to do.

Amy

I feel like I have known Amy my entire life. She is funny, warm, *very* direct, and totally committed to her Christian faith and her family. I was always reluctant to end our interviews and on two occasions we sat and talked, off the record, about our lives, our children, and our purpose in God's world.

Amy was raised in a dysfunctional home with alcoholic parents. She describes her father as "authoritative, oppressive, abusive and not supportive of women." She viewed her mother as powerless to change the environment for her eight children. Amy is #6 in the birth order, arriving at a time when the family dynamics were at their worst. Two older sisters became pregnant out of wedlock perceiving that as their only option to escape their home life.

Amy excelled academically and athletically until the age of 16 when she too became fed up with her father's irrational, oppressive authority. She dropped out of school, became pregnant at 17, moved out of her parent's home and married the father of her child. She reflects that this course of bad decisions convinced her that she was no longer capable of achieving anything. She truly believed that you couldn't be a high school drop out, a teenage mom, and succeed. By 20 she was divorced, but had completed a GED.

After the divorce, her ex-husband stalked her continually. It preyed so heavily on her mentally and emotionally that, without support from her parents, she relinquished

joint custody of their daughter to her ex husband hoping that he would leave her alone. Unfortunately he continued the stalking until she moved 2,000 miles away from him and her daughter.

When they married 17 years ago, Amy and her current husband were convinced they didn't want to have any children. Both were raised in dysfunctional families and Amy's relinquishment of her daughter was still very painful to her. After seven years of marriage, they reversed their initial leaning and began a family. The couple was committed to Amy being the traditional, stay-at-home parent with primary care responsibilities and her husband would be the traditional provider.

As the primary caregiver for their two children for the past 10 years, Amy had convinced herself that she could not leave her children in daycare or with babysitters for any reason because they were her responsibility. As a military and commercial airline pilot, her husband is rarely available to relieve her from her childcare role.

Early in their marriage Amy made a couple of attempts to further her education through college coursework but never completed anything. When the children are in school, she volunteers at the Pregnancy Center counseling other women who are dealing with unwanted pregnancies. Through this experience she developed an interest in counseling, especially for women and the elderly.

Amy always believed there was a God and knew Jesus loved her. Like several of the women, Amy also depends on God as her source of direction and guidance on a daily basis. This spiritual relationship led her to reenter college to pursue a degree in Christian Leadership in preparation for graduate work in counseling

Charlie

Through initial contact with Charlie I learned that she is the wife of an evangelical pastor. This created apprehension for me as I anticipated the interview process. I was anxious about questions that would probe her faith; not wanting to appear critical, but not wanting to evade the issues either. After I met Charlie and we engaged in the first interview, I became more comfortable asking her reflective questions and she appeared to be at ease replying as openly and honestly as she could.

Charlie characterizes her upbringing as “definitely not Christian, but from a good family.” Though she refers to her parents as “good people,” she admits that they were alcoholics but not physically abusive. She credits them with meeting the family’s basic needs. As a parent herself, Charlie now recognizes that there was little or no emotional support from her parents and no direction or preparation for her future as an adult. As a teenager, Charlie was determined to get out of the house; to be able to do her own thing. She says she was not interested in college after high school, but also admits that it was never discussed as an option at home.

Charlie met her husband at church when she was 14. As the young couple became serious, they both planned to complete a college degree before getting married and starting a family. Charlie’s husband felt he was called, by God, into ministry. They started at a community college together but she dropped out after a year and their first child. Their second and third children came quickly after the first. During her third pregnancy, her youngest became very ill with meningitis which tragically resulted in a

total loss of hearing. For many years she was consumed with her responsibilities as wife of a pastor and mother, especially with the challenge of raising a deaf child.

Typical of the reentry woman who reaches the stage when her children become independent, Charlie returned to college to continue her education. This time it was to take sign language and deaf culture classes to improve her relationship with her son. When her father became ill with Leukemia, she dedicated herself to flying back and forth to care for him as much as possible. When he died, she became depressed and disinterested in continuing her education.

At the encouragement of a good friend, Charlie took a bold step to reenter college, this time a Christian college. But this time she felt no pressure to pursue a specific focus of coursework or major.

LaKeeta

By the time I met with LaKeeta for the first interview, I'd completed numerous interviews with the other participants. I was less anxious, and somewhat more focused in my questioning. Articulate and very direct, Lakeeta recounted a compelling story of self-discovery.

Until the age of 12, LaKeeta reflects fondly on her childhood. Her family lived in a small town, her father had a good job and the family attended church regularly. She referred to her parents as "outstanding community leaders." Then everything unraveled; her parents divorced when LaKeeta was 12. The divorce left her mother emotionally and financially unable to care for her six children adequately. LaKeeta's older sister ran away from home leaving LaKeeta, the second oldest, to care for the younger siblings.

Self-described as a “dutiful good girl”, LaKeeta never questioned her role as caregiver to her siblings and to her mother, who worked three jobs.

When her mother remarried to an alcoholic, life deteriorated even more for the children. They were evicted from their home and would have been homeless were it not for the generosity of the church which allowed them to live in a home owned by the church. There were vicious fights between her mother and step-father.

LaKeeta’s father didn’t do much better for his family by marrying a woman who abused both him and the children. Through a series of disturbing kidnappings and custody battles, LaKeeta and her siblings ended up living with her father and step-mother. To escape the intolerable environment, she ran away before finishing high school. During that time she also married an abuser and they had a child. She describes feeling powerless to leave her husband because she was determined to make the marriage work for the sake of the child. After the birth of her second child, she gained the courage to leave the abusive marriage. She completed a GED and enrolled in a Christian college in Oklahoma to pursue biblical studies. As a single woman in the 1970’s, there was a covert message that her options for studying ministry at the Christian college were non-existent. She was not accepted into the biblical studies major so she chose political science instead.

Working, going to school and raising two children created an economic crisis for LaKeeta who was dependent on financial aid for much of the family’s support. A federal decision to restructure financial aid cut LaKeeta’s support in half making it impossible for her to continue taking classes. Even with all the roadblocks placed in her path during

that time, she is thankful for that opportunity to study in a Christian environment; she attributes the rebuilding of her self-confidence to that experience.

She added one more child to her family and raised the three as a single mother for 21 years. Seven years ago she remarried. The high school graduation of her youngest was the catalyst for LaKeeta's return to complete the educational goal she'd begun almost 30 years ago. It was finally her turn.

Lynee

I felt immediately at ease with Lynee. She arrived at each interview having come directly from her work, sometimes in between work and class. Lynee's work is very close to the university, but she and her family live 52 miles away.

The second oldest of five children with three younger brothers, Lynee was raised on a farm and characterizes her childhood home as "Christian" and a "great time." In the morning the boys went to the barn and the girls cooked breakfast. They attended church every Sunday and every Wednesday. Lynee's father was the head of this household and her mother "submitted" to him. When her father was home, her mother deferred to him. Lynee believes that traditional family structure did not inhibit her mother from being the person she wanted to be. On the other hand, she recalls some tension as a result of that structure, but acknowledges that her mother "knew her place." By contrast, Lynee remembers her parents encouraging all of the children to be whatever they wanted to be. At some point in her formative years she wanted to be a mother with 12 children and a teacher.

Lynce entered a Christian college right out of high school and spent three years completing approximately two years of college credit but did not earn an associate's degree. She dropped out and several years later met and married her husband. Other than a short military assignment to California, Lynce has lived in Colorado all her life. The couple has two children together (a daughter, 15 and a son, 13) and two sons (24 and 21 years old) from his first marriage. The older sons have produced two grandchildren as well.

Unlike most of the other participants, Lynce always worked outside the home except for the first six months of her daughter's life. She admits to a persistent feeling that her dreams were insignificant; that she existed solely to support her husband and the children. Through marital problems she felt responsible to keep the marriage together because "that is what God told her to do." This contributed to the self-talk that she was unimportant. Finishing a bachelor's degree has remained an important personal goal for Lynce as well as the financial opportunity it would afford her family.

Marina

I was delighted to add Marina to my participant pool as she was the only woman of the 10 who was not Caucasian. I was initially concerned that we would have difficulty understanding each other due to our different culture perspectives, but it was obvious right away that Marina, though still very much deep-rooted in the Central American culture, is decidedly Americanized as well.

The firstborn in her poor Panamanian family, her mother was 15 when Marina was born on the side of a creek one day without a doctor. The family consists of four

sisters and one brother. All the children helped their mother and grandmother in the fields picking coffee beans and rice, and planting corn. The country school was three or four miles away; a journey the children made daily without shoes. School ended around 2:00 pm, the children walked home and began their afternoon work in the fields.

The family volunteered to help build churches in other districts; a day's barefooted walk away from their home. The women and girls would cook for the men who did the building. Marina abandoned her assigned role as cook and instead carried sand and rocks up from the creek to help the men with the building.

Marina remembers early messages from her mother and grandmother to be respectful, do the right thing, and put God first. She also remembers very strong messages to work hard at whatever she could do – washing dishes, doing laundry, just about anything to earn her keep so others would not think of her as lazy.

Marina believes she was abused by her adopted father because she was different; she was the darkest family member. He would beat her using wood or whatever he could find at the time. Marina never met her birth father, the man whose dark skin she inherited.

Marina viewed herself as a “feisty” child. She acquired this self-perception and reputation by fighting with boys and girls after school. This enraged her father who would punish her severely. That didn't seem to abate the fighting, however. She recalls people referring to her as “the bad apple” or the “trouble-maker”, but she didn't understand why she was viewed that way. As a “feisty” child of poor Panamanian parents there was not much of a future for her.

When she completed high school her mother gave her two options: go to school to become a seamstress or get a job. She didn't want to learn to sew but had always wanted a professional career. She chose to get a job. College was not an option for poor families.

After her first marriage ended, she proudly completed a medical assistant program and became employed at a nursing home. She recalls living on 50 cents a day at some points during her training, but is obviously pleased with her perseverance and determination. She has been married to her current husband for 10 years and they have three beautiful children ages six and under. Though she was raised a Catholic, Marina poignantly recalls her salvation experience at her husband's church and considers herself a dedicated Christian woman, wife and mother.

Though determined, Marina secretly doubted that she had the ability to complete a college degree. Through the encouragement of friends, she learned about ECU's adult program and began to explore the possibilities for her. It's not been an easy journey for Marina because of language and cultural differences, but she is nearing the end of the bachelor's degree and demonstrates total amazement at her accomplishment. With her new found confidence, she is now looking toward graduate work.

Mary

Mary's first interview went very well and we developed a rapport immediately. As one of the few women whose childhood was not rife with abuse, alcoholism or other dysfunctionality, she appeared to relish discussing her past.

The middle child of seven, Mary recalls the family living in a small house until she was 10 years old. At that time her father landed a better job so they could afford a bigger house. Their new home was located right across the street from the church where they spent much of their time as a family.

While Mary remembers different role messages the girls and the boys in her family, she also recalls that occasionally the boys did the dishes. When the siblings were old enough to attend college, the message was that the boys definitely needed to go, and the girls could if they wanted to. However, Mary added that her mother really wanted all of the children to go to college.

At the age of 14, Mary met her husband in the church singing group. He was 17; they married four years later. He had one year of college to complete so after marrying they both attended college but of the two, he was the only one who graduated. Four years elapsed before their first child arrived. Once she became a mother, Mary expressed no interest in studying or “anything like that.”

Her mother persistently encouraged Mary to get a college education, so she finally completed an Associate of Arts degree in business with an executive secretary diploma. As she graduated with that degree, their second child was on the way. In Mary’s mind, that was all the education she would ever need.

In reflection Mary portrays her life as “successful.” She raised successful children and they had an “unbelievable” family life. Like most of the women in the study, she was committed to raising their children as a stay-at-home mother but recognized that exacted a financial toll on the family. Also like most of the women, Mary felt very strongly that her children were a gift from God and as such, she was

responsible for caring for them. When the children were older she went to work full time as an administrative assistant and has remained in the same position and department for the past seven years. Several years ago, her husband was in a very serious car accident resulting in a closed head injury which has dramatically changed their lives. Subsequently he lost his job and started a business, but that has been another struggle for the family.

Mary reveals a common conflict for the women in this study – a passion and commitment to traditional familial roles and values with a painful realization that those roles diminish with the growth of their children. The proverbial “empty-nest” syndrome hit Mary and her husband very hard. Not knowing how to reconnect once the children left home, Mary and her husband separated for a year. She realized that to fill the enormous hole her absent children left she would have to find something to occupy her time. Parallel to the empty nest was disappointment at work. She was passed over for a promotion. In an effort to alleviate the resentment she felt, she enrolled in a computer information systems degree program – “to show them.”

Mary Beth

I met with Mary Beth at her place of work during lunch break. The oldest of the participants, Mary Beth’s exuberance was readily apparent and, as my first interview, helped me to relax and enjoy talking with her. After 40 years of false starts, she was on the eve of completing a bachelor’s degree; an accomplishment she previously feared she would never experience.

After graduating from high school Mary Beth entered a nursing program. When the program lost its accreditation she transferred out of state to finish. She then decided to change her major to Medical Technician. On a trip to California with her brother to “test our wings,” she broke her neck in a serious car accident. After healing she returned to Colorado to continue college and met her future husband, a young man who had escaped from the Hungarian revolution. They were married for 28 years and have two boys, now 31 and 35 of whom she is obviously very proud.

Her husband purchased a motel in Eastern Colorado which Mary Beth managed while he pursued another career. She remembers loving the motel business because it allowed her to be with her children during the day. Recognizing that the future of the motel business would require computer skills, she yearned to enroll in courses at the local community college. Her husband prevented her from continuing her education viewing that as needless and threatening.

Mary Beth remained in the oppressive marriage because she realized that she would not be able to provide for her boys alone. Though she managed the motel, the title was in her husband’s name alone. Once the boys were grown and on their own she faced the reality that her husband’s possessive and oppressive personality had destroyed the marriage. She divorced him and won the motel in the settlement.

Eventually she remarried to a wonderful man, a retired wheat farmer. Always holding the goal of a college degree in the back of her mind, she finally felt free to pursue her dream with the blessing of her second husband.

Meg

A petite, immaculately dressed and soft-spoken woman, Meg personifies the airline flight attendant she once was. Meg's detailed account of life with a Vietnam Veteran reveals her inner strength and resolve to ensure stability for her children while sacrificing her own needs.

Meg's parents divorced early leaving the three week old baby girl to live with her mother until she was 15 years old. She was painfully aware of her mother's dysfunctionality and decided to live with her father from that point on. She remembers the environment with her father as "very guiding and Christian." She bounced between maternal and paternal homes, drawing strength from her life with her father when she visited her mother, who had remarried five times to equally dysfunctional men.

Meg describes her father and stepmother as very strict adding that her stepmother was also dysfunctional. Even though it was not normal, that environment was much more pleasing to Meg than the one she had with her mother. Since her father graduated from college he wanted the same for her. After high school, she entered a junior college even though her father really wanted her to attend a state university. She completed two years but didn't earn an Associate's degree asserting that she was not adjusted enough to be successful. She continued to resist her father's pressure for her to attend the state university.

When her step-mother wrongfully accused Meg of illicit behavior and gave her husband an ultimatum to choose between her or Meg, he turned his back on Meg forcing her to leave their home and find a job. She was hired as a flight attendant for a major

airline as an on the job trainer and also did publicity work for the airlines. On a vacation to Rome, she met her husband, a Marine at the embassy.

Typical of many women who did not graduate from college by the age of 22, Meg always wanted to finish a degree. After they married, she enrolled in a community college because the price was right. At the same time her husband went to the state university and finished his degree. This time Meg managed to finish an Associates degree and upon graduating received a full scholarship to study special education at the state university. She had finally found her passion. By this time the young couple had two children – an infant and a toddler.

Meg's husband began to demonstrate patterns of extreme instability. He was consistently changing jobs, moving the family from state to state on the promise of a job, and unable of settling into a career to provide for his family. Though keeping her family together was her first priority, Meg was very disappointed that she was forced to give up her scholarship to follow her husband to another state for another job.

This pattern of instability lasted for many years until Meg's husband was diagnosed with delayed stress syndrome from Vietnam. She recognizes now that this syndrome was most likely the causal factor to the years of instability. With her husband incapable of coping and keeping a job, Meg was on her own to provide financially and to stabilize the family.

In reflection, she believes that her overarching determination to provide stability for her children arose from the instability she had growing up. Her children came first. Leaving her husband was not an option because she was serious about the marriage covenant they made with God. She stated that her goal to complete a college degree

covenant they made with God. She stated that her goal to complete a college degree never disappeared, but it had been shelved while she accommodated her unstable family life.

When she felt ready to pursue college again, she investigated two state universities in her area but realized that her credits many years ago and her life experience would not be valued in a traditional academic institution. She found the adult program at ECU and immediately felt at ease and at home.

Sarah

Sarah presents an imposing poise and self-assurance. My first impression was that, though she volunteered to participate in the study, she was uncomfortable revealing the details of her life. As a result, I felt our first meeting was somewhat strained. I later learned that she feared her husband finding out the things she was relaying in the interviews. She asked that transcripts be mailed to her office rather than her home. She also requested that we complete the second and third interviews in one session because her husband did not want her to be away from home another evening. I felt the psychological presence of Sarah's husband throughout our meetings.

Sarah grew up in a small town in Georgia, the child of very poor parents. Her father was an alcoholic and her mother worked three jobs to provide for the family. She was never home. It was her grandmother she credits for raising her and exposing her to a Christian worldview and lifestyle. Sarah refers to her grandmother as her "saving grace" because she made sure Sarah attended church and had a Christian upbringing. Sarah's "saving grace" died when she was 16.

Unspoken messages about female roles were very clear -- you will get married, have children and possibly work outside the home too. At the age of 19 Sarah decided to join the Air Force. She can't explain why she chose the Air Force other than that it was an escape from her life and the only future she knew. Her first assignment was Germany.

She was assigned to conventional munitions (bombs and missiles), a highly male dominated field. It didn't take her long to figure out that survival meant learning to accept and understand the men she worked with. Though she observed many military women assuming masculine traits to fit in, she decided that wasn't for her. She describes being sexually harassed but chose not to make it an issue.

When asked if, as a young child, she had any hopes or dreams about her future she couldn't recall any nor being encouraged to dream or aspire to anything more than what the culture dictated. Due to the family's poverty, father's alcoholism and mother's absence it was difficult to think beyond that, to think that there might be another kind of life for her.

Sarah began to take courses from the Community College of the Air Force while she was active duty, but found it difficult to remain focused on anything specific. She married while in the military, had a child and eventually divorced sharing custody of the child, a daughter. She remarried in late 1995. Her current husband was active duty military until last summer when he retired. Their blended family includes his three children, her daughter and then a child together.

Sarah separated from the Air Force when a new assignment to a remote area threatened to separate her from her four year old daughter. The assignment would have been a significant step towards becoming a Chief Master Sergeant, but Sarah was not

willing to risk custody of her child. She took a position as a civil servant, left that to join a national abstinence ministry, and returned to civil service when the ministry lost funding for her position.

It was her position with the abstinence ministry that exposed her need to complete a college degree. She recognized that she had little or no credibility in an environment where her co-workers did have degrees. After leaving and returning to civil service, she became aware that her GI Bill education benefits would run out if she didn't return to college immediately. Unlike many of the other participants, Sarah did not speak of a long-held goal to earn a college degree. That desire developed later in her adult life and was precipitated mostly by the impending expiration of educational benefits.

Sarah entered college this time believing that she had the world by the tail and had life pretty well figured out. As ex-military she described herself as "hardened and calloused," a no-nonsense personality. Sarah is an example of someone who initially didn't follow society's expectations for her as a woman, but now views her roles of wife and mother with more favor. Through the process of completing her degree, she dramatically changed her perspectives about work, family, and her purpose in the world.

Summary

The diversity of participant backgrounds: emotional and/or physical abuse; marginalized socio-economic status; various religious conditioning although predominantly Christian; and distinct cultures contributes textured perspectives of the transformative process. Each woman can reflect back to specific messages and training that channeled her into distinct socio-cultural and religious normative behaviors. Early

messages that their lives are lived for and through others, within “God’s plan”, set up an internal power struggle between self and others and self and God. As they reenter and progress through their college experience, those early messages establish the origins for the transformation process.

Though diverse in their backgrounds, it is clear that the socio-cultural and religious messages connect the women with common commitments to their families and the roles therein.

Through analysis, I derived five themes from the women’s stories: 1. Socio-cultural roles and assumptions; 2. Evangelical Christian norms; 3. Experience at ECU; 4. Self and Voice; and 5. Transformative Structures. Essential to this analysis is the recognition that all women do not experience, assimilate or respond to cultural, social or religious norms in the same manner contrary to what was once thought (Hayes & Flannery, 2000). The following five chapters represent each of the themes.

CHAPTER 5: SOCIO-CULTURAL ROLES AND ASSUMPTIONS

Introduction

Given their past histories and present lives, the very decision and act of college reentry represents a critical part of the transformative process for these women. The decision to add “student” to the collection of identities and roles each claims, or has had imposed on her, did not transpire without considering the impact to those within her sphere of care and responsibility.

The Rock and the Daffodil

The manner in which the women narrated their stories revealed inner conflict as a result of overt and covert messages, delivered over time, about their roles as women within their social and religious belief systems. The most insightful affirmation of these internal conflicts is often apparent in their own language.

It was Meg who used a metaphor from *My Grandfather's Blessings* (Remen, 2000) to illustrate her marital relationship. Remen describes a vivid dream she had where a daffodil bulb planted deep in the ground was covered by a huge rock. Due to its weakness and fragility, the bulb was unable to overcome the obstruction created by the rock. Remen interpreted the dream as symbolic of her relationship with a patriarchal figure who was trying to protect her from a threatening world. Recognizing that the need

to bloom was its life purpose, the bulb begged the rock to move. As Remen reflects, some people would view the rock as safety and a desirable protection from the threatening world. But for others, the rock is the obstacle to the bulb's true purpose.

Using the daffodil bulb as a symbol for women inhibited by socio-cultural norms, the rock may symbolize a family member, self-concept or worldview. Sharing this metaphor with friends in a book club, Meg found that others related to the metaphor:

We shared a little bit and I said, "You know, sometimes I feel like my husband's the rock and I'm the daffodil that never got to fully bloom." And they shared that they also feel like that, that a lot of their backgrounds in their marriages has been that of . . . not full bloom. I think my life would have taken a different path if I were a man. I would have finished my degree sooner (Meg I, 16)

Mary Beth mentioned a similar relationship with her first husband. He saw no need for her to have an education and therefore prohibited her from attending the community college:

I had always wanted to go back to school but he did not want me to go back to school. He thought that was running around or whatever. I mean it was . . . anything he could find as a reason for me not to go back to school he just didn't want me to do it. And I figured you have to choose your battles so I didn't create any problems. (Mary Beth I, 2)

As the child of alcoholic parents, Charlie's narrative uncovered fear as an identifiable rock in her life. She was fearful of others finding out about her dysfunctional family life. This fear resulted in behaviors of passivity and silence:

I think the children of alcoholic parents experience low self esteem because part of it is, you know, they're hiding things. They're hiding that their parents have this problem and so they always have this feeling that people are going to find out. And so I think that's where my intelligence thing comes in, you know, people are going to find out that I'm just stupid so you know, just don't say anything. (Charlie I, 8)

As the wife of a Baptist pastor, Charlie's blossoming was further inhibited by the

needs of his profession, her children, and eventually her terminally ill father. She also admits that her own need to justify her actions may, even now, limit her ability to grow:

I think, yes we have to justify everything we do. And I still find myself justifying going to school. And that's not because my husband . . . my husband is 100%, he always has been . . . go, do it, we'll find the money, do it. My kids . . . you know. So it's not that I have to justify it, but in my mind I do. (Charlie I, 9)

Charlie's childhood legacy carried into and intensified in adulthood made returning to college even more difficult for her. Rather than thinking of college as a necessity for her own growth and development, she views it as a reward for which she is unworthy.

When she could muster enough agency to consider returning to school, the tide of responsibility would sweep in and bury her desire:

I could have gone to school 10, 20 years ago. You know he [husband] would say "I'm happy for you to do it" and we'd talk about . . . Ok, if I'm not here can I count on you? And that doesn't always work out. And part of that is his vocation because he never knows when he's going out. He's always supported it but there's a period of time I couldn't because I didn't think it was worth being away and somebody's got to be at home and that kind of thing. (Charlie I, 10)

About 6 or 7 years ago I started back at the Community College taking some sign language classes and deaf culture classes. And then my dad became ill and eventually died from Leukemia. I lost a drive to do it. I think I've always wanted to, but especially after my dad . . . he was very ill, he had Leukemia and I was flying back and forth from here to Birmingham and watching his demise so to speak. And um . . . at that point I think I was just tired physically and emotionally and felt I just didn't have that desire. And it's taken a while to get it back. (Charlie I, 2)

An interesting twist to the rock and daffodil analogy is narrated by Lynee who described herself, prior to her current college experience, as a controlling perfectionist with her family. Working 52 miles from home and attending school close to work placed more responsibility on her husband to assume an active leadership role with the children. By relinquishing control to her husband in her absence, Lynee was actually surrendering

major pieces of her traditional role as the consummate wife and mother which allowed her to pursue goals outside of that prescribed role. By engaging in a dialogue with self to make meaning, dialogic narrative (Josselson & Lieblich, 1995), Lynee recognized that this role reversal allowed her husband to “bloom” by assuming a more active leadership role in raising their children:

My dad’s a very wise person. One day he said to me, “It’s amazing what things happen when you get out of the way and let it.” And I have to remember not to undo that position. I have to remember that he [husband] is the leader and what were to happen if I’d stepped out of the way years ago [Laughing]? (Lynee, III, 1)

Lynee is beginning to recognize that her compulsion to control everything at home created a barrier to growth for her as well as her husband. This dialogic moment reveals an internal conflict and abdication of power to God. She sees how damaging her controlling behavior was to the family dynamics yet she seems to be saying that unless God had revealed this dynamic to her she had no power or agency to change and, in fact, was inhibiting God’s ability to transform the situation. This is a common way of thinking for evangelical woman that the impetus for change is stimulated by a revelation from God:

So sometimes we’re so willing to complain but until God changes the circumstances you do not see what you’re doing . . . how am I in the way of this happening? Well I had to get out of the way! (Lynee 3, 1)

Commonly women find that they have to give up their high standards for homemaking and childcare when they want other things in their lives too. The interesting piece is that Lynee credits God with changing her circumstances, but she made the decision to accept a job so far from home. The fact that not only is she a working mother, but she also has this long roundtrip journey to and from home makes it

impossible for her to live out the perfectionist standard she set for her home and family. In some form, accepting the job far from home freed her from the restrictive responsibility of her domestic role – that made the abandonment of that role more acceptable to her and her family. She's providing financially much like the traditional male role which justifies, in her mind, reasons for her absence. Once Lynee freed herself from believing she was the only parent who should have primary responsibility for home and children, she could then entertain the idea that those responsibilities could be shared with others.

This is a significant paradigm shift for the evangelical woman whose identity is often entrenched in her role as a wife and mother. When they relinquish old restrictive roles, they are faced with reframing their identity and making sense out of God's role in their lives. It's a justification for change: God ordained me to be a wife and mother, then changed His mind and put me to work outside the home and sent me to school. This is a persistent internal struggle for the evangelical woman and one which I had to face myself at the onset of my husband's illness. I was the homemaker, the primary caregiver for my children, how could God allow the male "provider" to become sick and force me out of my role and therefore my home? It was an enormous conflict for me to reconcile.

In a secular context where roles do not carry the weight of divine obligation, freeing one person from self-defeating and restrictive role identity is perceived to have a positive effect on the family system; a recognition that home and childcare are shared responsibilities and not just the job of the female parent. Within traditional evangelical conventions, family roles are perceived to carry a divine purpose and therefore require significantly more negotiation and identity realignment if change is to be made.

The Rock and Daffodil metaphor can also be applied to Mary's life. Her narrative indicates that she relishes a socially conventional, submissive role in her marriage, as well as an employee and student. On the other hand, her language reveals inner conflict between assumptions and conventions embraced from her evangelical faith and the reality of her life as an employee:

. . . in my heart of hearts I am a homemaker and that's what I want to do. I mean. . . the best job I had was raising my kids and making my home. And once you do that, one you have the best job in the world, it's awfully hard to go out anywhere and be contented in a job. (Mary I, 4).

Mary's claim that motherhood and homemaking were the best jobs she's had is confirmation of her commitment to traditional socio-cultural norms. In the following narrative she enlarges her understanding of her traditional role by describing her perspective of her role as a student in a classroom which was predominantly male. She refers to her view about men and God's order as "weird" and yet it is this view that is one of the foundational tenets of the evangelical worldview:

I have kind of a weird view about men and God's order. And so I just, you know, I just think men are wonderful. God made them first and they're to be our head and they are to allow God to be their head. And when I stay in that submissive mindset, I get along really well [laughing]. It's when I step outside of that like; you know . . . I actually kind of enjoyed it because at work . . . you know how women can be . . . so it's been refreshing to not have that. (Mary II, 11)

Mary reflects a feeling shared by many women. When they step out of their "comfort zone", even when those zones are threatening or oppressive, they are forced to grow in another way. This change can be extremely challenging if not painful and many women simply do not want to endure what that might mean for their life:

From my perspective they [male classmates] are the ones that really need this information. And they were the true leaders. I always felt like I was in a supportive role. And that's totally my perspective. I mean nobody

ever insinuated that. That's who I am. That's coming from me. And um, when I see these guys, you know, trying to go to school and trying to raise a family and trying to make a living, I just really admire them. Because they are out there trying to make a better life for their families. And . . . which is what I was doing too. (Mary II, 12)

The emphasis on submission even with her male classmates further supports a subordinate identity – not just within her home but anywhere she encounters males. She reveres men on the one hand and undermines the women in her workplace hinting that she prefers the subordinate role to possibly competing with other women in the workplace. There's a hint of superiority in her statement “. . . you know how women can be.” Invoking the rock and daffodil metaphor, rather than pleading with the rock to move so she can bloom, Mary covets the protective relationship with the rock. For Mary and many women whose values mirror hers, the rock is virtually any male not just their husbands.

Mary makes a statement right out of the traditional evangelical handbook, “God made them first and they're to be our head and they are to allow God to be their head” and confining women to submissive supporters. And yet she is adamant – “nobody ever insinuated that. That's who I am. That's coming from me.” She rationalizes her supportive role to help them achieve because she really doesn't need the education. Inner conflict is evident when, almost as an afterthought, she recognizes that she too is very much engaged in educational activities equal to her male classmates. Rather than acknowledging that she has the right to an equal status in the classroom, her language reveals considerable inconsistency in her religious beliefs and how she fits in the world of college and work.

Social Role Messages

Conservative social and religious norms impose early, deep-rooted meanings of femininity and womanhood. For example, a common conservative view of women repeats the old adage for children; “they should be seen and not heard.” These culturally defined roles create the very barriers that prevent women from experiencing transformative change. Further confirmation of socio-culturally ingrained roles is found in the stories from other participants as well:

It was kind of a, you know, if you’re a female you’re going to grow up, you’re going to get married, you’re going to have kids and you might work outside the home, you might not, but that’s going to be your life. It was never said, but that’s the way it was. There seemed to be no other way. (Sarah I, 2)

There were definitely roles that the girls, you know, we did the dishes. When we got old enough to go to college, for sure the boys needed to go, and the girls could if they wanted to. Except my mom really wanted us to. (Mary I, 2)

When I grew up it was still pretty unconventional for a woman to have a career apart from marriage and home. I remember my mom communicating to us that we needed to have an education so that we could support ourselves if we ever needed to . . . as a back up plan. But the message I think we received much more clearly and loudly was that our role was pretty much to be, you know, wives and moms. There was also a mindset of “boys will be boys”, but girls are supposed to be good. (Abigail I, 3)

In the morning the boys went to the barn and us girls cooked breakfast. It was very ingrained in all of us that dad was the head of this household and mom submitted to him. But I was told I could be anything I wanted to me but to follow God’s plan. (Lynee I, 2)

After I graduated from high school my mother gave me two choices. I could go to sewing school or get a job. But she really wanted to marry me to a rich man. (Marina I, 2)

I didn’t have a dad that was supportive of women at all, you know, just not at all. I grew up in an alcoholic, abusive family and even though I proved

him wrong because I was an honor student prior to that. It was just a real authoritative, oppressive environment. (Amy I, 1)

We just wanted to get married, you know? That was the focus. That was the end of all things. (Charlie I, 1)

These gender role messages were often manifested through the overriding mantra to “do the right thing.” This included embracing parental rules well into adulthood, keeping an abusive marriage together and being the caregiver for other children or dysfunctional parents:

My mother and my grandmother always told me, “just do the right things; be respectful.” (Marina I, 1)

I didn’t divorce my first husband when the boys were young because I had them to think about. I still feel like I did the right thing. (Mary I, 10)

There was just something in me that has always been instilled that you do the right thing. I’ve been called by other people their “rock”. Sometimes I feel like if people look at me that way then, you know, they’re leaning on me but who do I have to lean on? If I’m their rock, who’s my rock? I was only 12 when my parents divorced. My mother worked three jobs. And she, you know, she needed me to lean on to take care of the kids. (LaKeeta I, 4)

When asked why she remained in the abusive marriage: Again the dutiful girl . . . Gonna make this marriage work no matter what because it’s the right thing to do. That’s what God said. (LaKeeta, I, 7)

The messages we received from our mother about our duty as the daughters of a pastor really set me up to be a people-pleaser, to be very conscious of what others think, to conform, and to not really be that much of an independent thinker or a self-oriented. I think I was very much other-oriented in my upbringing. (Abigail I, 4)

As the women entered adulthood, these gender role assumptions were transferred to their adult relationships. The majority of the women enthusiastically embraced the role of wife and mother in their marriages. This was the fulfillment of social expectations

and, for some of the women, a chance to create a family life superior to the one in which they grew up.

Summary

Each woman described a fierce commitment to protect and nurture their children regardless of the circumstances in their marital relationship. When faced with difficult life choices, the children always came first. For Abigail and Amy, this resulted in relinquishing custody of their children, believing that they were doing the right thing. For Sarah it meant giving up a career path so she would not lose custody of her child.

Inherent in the women's return to college, is a complex decision-making process which involved assessing the status of her maternal role and the impact the time away from her children to attend classes and complete assignments would have on the family dynamics. These are powerful considerations when the woman's entire identity is invested in her domestic roles and it suggests that there is something very powerful that allows the woman to abandon these restrictive roles. .

Chapter 6 will explore the evangelical Christian norms foundational to many of the women's religious worldview, their identity as a woman, and the context in which they make decisions.

CHAPTER 6: EVANGELICAL CHRISTIAN NORMS

Introduction

The construction of a substantive theory of transformation for this population of reentry women requires an analysis of the tensions that exist between their religious worldview, in this case evangelical Christian, and socio-cultural roles. As a purpose of higher education, learning must include opportunities to assess prevailing assumptions about self and others to develop a more inclusive and integrative frame of mind. This may require students to reconstruct new meanings and to adopt new behaviors in line with their more inclusive and integrative approach to learning.

Complexity of Transformation

The process of transformation within the context of the evangelical community is more complex than outside of the evangelical community. Transformation for the evangelical woman requires sensitive negotiation with her family and faith community which, by all accounts, is permeated by patriarchal conventions that are stated and implied. It also requires of the evangelical woman a critical assessment of her relationship with God aside from the role assumptions her family and faith community may have imposed. In other words, she must understand her transformation as a growing sense of empowerment to become an actor in her own life in partnership with God (M. Macleod, personal communication, 4/12/04).

Depending on the messages received about her role within the evangelical community, departing from a passive-receptive status (M. Macleod, personal communication, 4/12/04) to one of complete engagement with God's specific purpose can be threatening to the woman, her family, friends, and church community. This negotiation process can feel like being caught in converging ocean tides; each force capable of pulling her out to sea or worse.

Early messages of conformity

Many of the women used language revealing a direct connection between how they understood their socio-cultural roles and their evangelical Christian worldview. It's important to recognize that it is common that traditional domestic roles are communicated to females whether they embrace a traditional evangelical norm or not. The young girls and women who adhere to traditional evangelical Christian norms find the expectation that she fulfill submissive, maternal purposes is promoted by her religious community *and* her social culture, possibly the two most powerful influences in her life. How she experiences her relationship with God is often a direct reflection of her relationship with her husband and other males in her life. This influences how she is situated as an active participant in the patriarchal arena of the evangelical community.

Without exception, the ten women in this study espouse an evangelical Christian worldview although how and to what degree that is manifested in their lives varies for each woman. These participants represent diverse religious backgrounds and current stages of spiritual development and maturity. Each attested to a level of reassurance and power (though defined differently among the women) in their relationship with a supreme

God. For some, early childhood messages defined or influenced this spiritual relationship.

Lakeeta remembers receiving instruction from Christian women in her church prior to marriage. When she didn't follow that instruction, any self-respect she had was destroyed. By making choices that were not "approved" by her church community, she fell outside that community's norms and expectations and felt lost and alone. This situates the woman as an outcast in some cases:

As a teenager, I was discipled by Christian woman who said, "you need to marry a Christian man and you need to have this in your life and this is the way you need to act" . . . and then I went from this to being married to an abuser . . . a lot of self esteem and self respect went straight out the window because it was completely not what they had told me it should be (Lakeeta, I, 1).

In the last statement, Lakeeta's language suggests that though she did not marry the type of man the Christian women told her to marry, for some reason she still expected the same outcome if she had married a Christian man, as if that's a guarantee of a healthy marriage. When she relied on her own knowledge and made a decision outside of the women's' recommendation, the consequence was abuse and divorce. This experience taught her not to trust her own decisions and further rooted her submissive character.

Lynce reveals a childhood profoundly influenced by church attendance and traditional role patterns between her mother and father.

We were raised in a Christian home. We went to church every Sunday. We went to church every Wednesday. If the doors were open we were there. And, and of the five of us, three of us are serving the Lord wholeheartedly. It was very ingrained in all of us that dad was the head of this household and mom submitted to him. When my sister and I graduated [from high school] women from the church asked us when we were getting married (Lynce I, 2 - 6).

While asserting that her parents encouraged both boys and girls to be whatever they wanted to be, the general message was “to follow God’s plan.” For women in traditional evangelical communities, following God’s plan is understood as a dictate for submissiveness and subordination to men, and obligation to domestic roles. Asked what she, as a child, dreamed of being when she grew up her response further supported the traditional maternal expectation; a mom with 12 children and a teacher, two distinctly traditional female roles.

Mary also describes a childhood steeped in church involvement. Her family lived across the street from the church so they all attended whenever there were activities:

Church was a big part of our life. And, um . . . that was were I met my husband. We were in a singing group together (Mary I, 1).

By contrast, Charlie was not raised in a Christian home:

I did not grow up in a Christian home um . . . grew up in a good family so to speak, but um . . . definitely did not have an influence of the Christian faith (Charlie I, 1).

After high school, Charlie moved out of her parents’ home into an apartment with friends. She implied that her experiences during that short phase of independence motivated her to adopt the evangelical Christian faith. Her language mirrors that of the evangelical tradition, “trust in Him” and “I came to know Him”:

Even though I felt I was a Christian because I knew about Him [God] and knew, you know all the facts. I had never truly trusted in Him and it was during this time that I came to know Him (Charlie I, 1).

Marina was raised in the Catholic faith. She remembers her grandmother as being the significant religious influence in her life.

I used to be Catholic; we didn’t used to read the Bible as much. My grandmother always tell me be honest, be loyal, hardworking, just do the right thing and for some reason she always talk about God. She always is

like, God is always first. And for some reason that stuck to me more than what my mother told me. I think my grandmother was more uh, closer to God. (Marina I, 3).

Also raised in the Catholic Church Amy recalls not being able to discuss the Catholic faith at home and feeling conflicted about what she viewed as a double standard:

My dad led my mom to the Catholic Church. She was not raised in any kind of a belief or religion or anything. And um . . . he literally put a rosary in her hand and said come on; I want to take you to church. And um . . . how . . . you know, all Christians are sinners, you know, how it snowballed I have no idea. But, um, anyway, um . . . my mom, you know, became a believer so . . . We were required to go to church every Sunday; we were required to go to Catechism Monday nights so my homework never got done. And um, however their lifestyle, specifically his, was so incredibly contradictory and actually the priest at that time was also a raging alcoholic and um, so um . . . without ever knowing the term “double standard” it was just extremely apparent, you know. You all are not telling me how to live. (Charlie I, 11)

Motivated by the double standard she observed in her father and the parish priest, Amy chooses to separate spiritually from the family’s Catholic tradition; an early sense of agency that she could control how she worshipped and whose truth she embraced.

Due to her father’s alcoholism, Sarah’s mother was virtually absent working to try and pay the bills. Fortunately for Sarah, her grandmother became her primary caretaker and spiritual guide:

My grandmother raised me because my mother was always working and again my dad was an alcoholic so, um . . . until I was oh, 16 when she died. She was at least um . . . I call her my saving grace because she made sure I had church and she made sure I had the Christian upbringing (Sarah, I, 1).

The “Christian upbringing” Sarah refers to reinforced the socio-cultural messages she received that her future was defined by marriage and family.

Meg chose to live with her father and stepmother which guaranteed religious influence. However, it eventually became a source of contention between Meg and her

father when, in early adulthood, his demands on her church attendance were viewed by Meg as his continued effort to control her life:

I had always gone to the Lutheran church; in fact I went alone to the Lutheran church. Their church was Congregational. It wasn't a radical change; it was just that they wanted me with them. I think it was a manipulation. (Meg III, 12)

Meg's suspicion supports other accounts of her father's controlling behavior: a self-described "good girl," dating and driving were not encouraged. Her father's behavior patterns are not uncommon for conservatively religious men who view their role as rulers over the women in their families and are threatened by any hint of impropriety.

I was a very responsible child. I followed the rules and had a very strict father. Even in college I hardly dated because no one wanted to knock on my door. My father wanted to know their religion, what their intentions were and all they wanted to do was take me to a movie. I took the school bus to college because I couldn't have a car and then I went to a part time job after my classes and always had to find a way home because I wouldn't have transportation, it was a pretty restrictive environment I didn't do what I wasn't supposed to do. I would go to parties but I would not drink because my father told me not to. (Meg III, 11).

Self vs. God

The nexus of cultural and religious norms creates a powerful influence on developing children whether male or female. Females receive messages of submission and silence and males receive messages of domination and aggression.

Abigail's marriage to an emotionally abusive husband reveals these conflicts between self and God. Abigail explained that this event occurred before she became a Christian even though she was raised the daughter of a pastor. Once she became a believer and her marriage continued to deteriorate due to her husband's infidelity and

controlling behavior, Abigail struggled with God's purpose, the realities of her marriage, and her maternal role:

I became aware that the destiny of the marriage was out of my control, out of my hands. I was beginning to recognize that, very clearly apart from God's divine intervention, the marriage wasn't going to last. I didn't want a divorce. And I think I really had hope right up to the divorce actually being final that something would change, you know. I had stayed in the marriage, you know, with the hope that by reverencing God and what I understood His plan to be, that He would take care of us . . .

I think I went through a phase where, in a way, I felt like I had to prove, in essence, all the things he was saying about me and pictures he had painted through the restraining order and stuff as not true.

In a way I think God probably used that sort of impetus to get me recognizing that I did have some, I want to use the word empowerment. He used that to kind of empower me, you know, in sort of a turn-about way. I think it forced me then to really recognize the reality of my situation and with the help of some people that I was working with to recognize what I needed to do to be able to move forward given the situation. But I just . . . I'd done a lot of processing on a spiritual level and I feel like, I can't make sense out of it, but it makes sense to God and He does use things for good. And when you see His faithfulness over the years, then you can see his hand in it even though it's not easy when you're going through it. (Abigail I, 2)

I would never ever in my wildest imagination thought He would have allowed it to go the way it did. (Abigail II, 1)

Several of the other women expressed evidence of internal tension between their will versus what they perceived to be God's will. Lakeeta begrudges a perception by family, friends, and coworkers that she is the person they can lean on. Her inner conflict is revealed in acknowledging that she believes that it is God's will that she prepare to further her care-giving role:

I'm so tired of being people's rock. But you know, then I think about it and I pray about it and I have to repent because I feel like the Lord is calling me that way, perhaps to start a non-profit organization to care for people who need it. He's taking me in a direction I didn't think I would go. And I'm still struggling with; it is really where I want to go? But it

really isn't an issue where I want to go . . . it's where He wants me to go.
(LaKeeta I, 9)

LaKeeta's lament reveals a different kind of care-giving. This is service, but it also reveals opportunities for her to assume a leadership role by recognizing her gifts and how she can now take a place in the world beyond her home. In this illustration the meaning of the rock is not suffocating or oppressing but serving or empowering others.

Lynne recounted her excitement over a brother's college graduation as the catalyst to enter college at an earlier time. She attributes her "miserable" failure to jumping the gun and not waiting for "God's time." Her thinking patterns continue to support conflict between her will and what she perceives to be God's will. When her decisions don't work out as expected, Lynne attributes the negative outcome to not following God's will suggesting that she is not empowered to construct a positive outcome:

It really ignited in those of us who didn't finish college to go back and do something. And I immediately jumped in. It was not the right time, it was not God's time and I failed miserably. (Lynne I, 1)

Amy describes her desire to return to college as improbable because of finances, childcare and low self-esteem. Unable to overcome these obstacles herself, she attributes her current enrollment to God's will and believes that her submission to Him results in feelings of value and purpose beyond her maternal role. This compassionate, benevolent heavenly Father is the direct opposite of her earthly father:

But . . . um . . . I've just really come to a point . . . and I had been here for a couple of years that the Lord wants this to happen and so I'm letting Him let it happen. And letting Him take care of the logistics of anything. And He is very faithful and He has not failed me. And I know that it will continue to come because it's His plan for my life and so essentially what that means to me is that I am . . . um. . . worthy in spite of my own feelings about myself because of God's value for me. He has shown me

over the past five years . . . that really when you let Him take the helm, which is His job and His position that you just have to sit back and let Him be God . . . (Amy, III, 1)

Mary sees God as the guardian of all the knowledge and understanding she believes she is incapable of handling. This is common for evangelical believers, especially women, that something outside of them is the owner of and authority for all knowledge and understanding. Whether male or female, this belief renders the believer powerless to make any adjustment, or to participate actively in the course of their life. It may also be a way for women (evangelical or not) to assume power through God's will, not theirs. Others might view this as the woman's internal divinity or intuition. Regardless of the terminology assigned to this power, it exposes a level of wisdom about a power greater than self at work in the life of the individual. By trusting that intuition or God, we open ourselves up to possibilities for growth and transformation:

I know the reason I'm still in the position at work that I'm in is because the Lord wants me to learn contentment. And I'm working on that. And, you know what, I think I'm gaining. There are moments of course, but I have grown with just being content with where I am and enjoying more where I am instead of always wishing I was somewhere else. (Mary II, 4)

God knows where you are and He knows why you're there and He knows all about it. We don't have to understand because He does and our brains aren't capable of understanding it. And that's certainly where I came through a lot of this stuff. God, you know why, I don't . . . He doesn't tell you because He knows your brain is not big enough to understand it. You wouldn't comprehend it anyway so why does He bother? (Mary II, 13)

Mary's perception that God views His creation with such little regard is congruent with evangelical as well as very primitive fundamental religions such as Muslimism. This perpetuates the patriarchal assumption that ownership of knowledge and understanding is entrusted to one gender; that women are mindless beings and therefore cannot be trusted

with knowledge and understanding; further supporting women's submissive and subordinate status.

In contrast Meg, one of the older women participants, views God as someone who favors women and specifically mature women. In a society that, in many ways, no longer values the wisdom and experience of its senior members, Meg is optimistic about her future because of the trust God had in older Biblical women to accomplish great things. While her husband has discouraged her from graduate school because of her age, Meg views her knowledge of God's relationship with other women as motivation for her to continue her education:

When you read the Bible you discover all these amazing women He [God] chose to do these miraculous things and He *chose* the *older ones*! He liked, or likes, older women [laughter]. (Meg, III, 15)

Summary

Considering the breadth and depth of internal conflicts the participants experienced, their perseverance is evidence of the human spirit to survive. What these ten women share as the motive for their resolve, the foundation of their drive and commitment to growth is a relationship with God and their understanding of what that means for the remainder of their lives. Whether they view God as a heavenly benefactor and conductor of all circumstances (Amy, Lynee & Marina); a bewildering conductor of life's trials and triumphs (Abigail and Lakeeta); the long-suffering owner of all knowledge and understanding (Mary); or a champion of mature women (Meg) their stories reflect a range of perceptions about His role in their lives and their empowerment to be an active partner with God in their future. It is ironic that while religious norms

contributed to their suffering and oppression, their relationship with God is what ultimately will lead them to transform and develop fully as human beings.

To what extent does their re-entrance to an Evangelical Christian University support this questioning process? Chapter Seven shows how they are beginning to value their roles as mothers and can see how it relates to their authority as knowers; they are gaining voice and a new sense of self.

CHAPTER 7: SELF AND VOICE

Introduction

A woman's identity, self-concept and voice reflects the spoken and unspoken messages received in childhood, through her adult relationships, and the perceived value her culture assigns to acceptable female roles. Lacking academic opportunities and situations to develop her intellect and voice within a supportive environment, a woman's entire lifespan is confined to a sense of invisibility, incompetence and sometimes shame. Try to bring in some scholarly discussion here about these important issues.

Origins of Self

For Meg, the lack of a bachelor's degree weighed heavily and adversely affected her self-concept. She avoided conversations about education with her friends who had college degrees; feeling that her lack of a degree was equal to failure.

Mary Beth lived with a feeling of not doing what she "should" have done until she returned to college this time. Her language implies a sense of shame that she created the very situation that prevented her from attending college:

A friend asked me "why didn't you ever finish school?" And then I thought, well that's kind of a lame excuse [laughing]. *What did you think was a lame excuse?* Just not doing it because somebody wasn't letting me do it. You know, I was thinking that's not a very good excuse you should be, you should have done it anyway. (Mary Beth I, 5)

Abigail recalls that her mother's principal concern was that the children's (specifically the girls') behavior represented their father well to support his ministry:

I think there was a lot of um . . . messages . . . from my mom . . . that our behavior and choices and stuff were very . . . um . . . significant in that our dad was a pastor, you know. I remember her saying things like . . . "how do you expect other people to support your dad in the church if his own family isn't supporting him?" I think she meant well, but I think it did put a lot of . . . I think it really set me up to be a people-pleaser, to be very conscious of what others think, um . . . to conform, and um . . . to not really be that much of an independent thinker or self-oriented. I think I was very much other-oriented in my upbringing. (Abigail I, 4)

Sarah felt that she would not be *heard* by those who did have a degree, that she could not be effective in her job at the abstinence foundation.

Sadly for some of the women, their childhoods and adult lives were impacted by physical, emotional and/or psychological abuse. The infliction of abuse from one person to another is always about power and the withholding of love. Over time the victim of power loses their sense of self and voice which follows them into adulthood.

Marina believes her adopted father mistreated her because of her darker skin color:

He was hard on me. He would spank me. He used wood or whatever he found and he used to hit me pretty bad. It was very, very harsh. I was different I guess because I was the darkest person in the family so they treated me more kind of darker. I don't think he truly loved me. (Marina I, 6)

Amy described abuse by her alcoholic father as more emotional and psychological:

I grew up in an alcoholic, abusive family, you know. And even though I proved him wrong because I was an honor student prior to that. When I gave up, I gave up big, you know. I just finally gave up I just got to the point where I was tired of constantly being told "no" by my dad, you know. No, you can't have new clothes, no you can't, we can't afford to take you to the dentist, no, you cannot go see your friends, no you cannot

ride your bike down here, you know. It was just a real authoritative, oppressive environment. By the time I was 17, I moved out of the house got pregnant and eventually married the father. (Amy I, 4)

Another child of an alcoholic home, it is difficult for Charlie to name her dysfunctional childhood caused by her parents' alcoholism. While she acknowledges that her parents' lack of vision and direction for their children's lives was a form of neglect, earlier in the narrative she referred to them as "good people":

It's not that my parents were abusive because they weren't they took care of all of our basic needs. But that was a difficult issue for me so I basically wanted to get out. I think my parents didn't really . . . there was no focus or goal. It was just here's today and you do today and you get up tomorrow and you do today, you know. There wasn't any goals, any goal orientation. (Charlie I, 1)

As I've looked back as a parent, there was no emotional support. And it was because that's what they used – that was their emotional support, the alcohol. So um . . . as I look back I can see that I think it definitely played a part in the lack of instruction and trying to give us a direction for our lives. (Charlie I, 3)

At this point in her life and with her primary maternal role ending, Charlie is still struggling to find direction and vision for her life. This may be complicated by her traditional evangelical values evidenced in her marital relationship. Though she works outside of her home, it is in a traditionally female support position as an administrative assistant. Summarize what these excerpts say about early self-concept development

New Identity Conflicts

Finally able to reenter college and, for some, to realize life-long goals of a college education, the women still are not free from the internal conflicts of their multiple identities. Mary Beth, Meg, LaKeeta, Lynee and Marina recalled wanting to get a college education from the time they were very young. As Amy, Sarah and Mary became adults;

they saw the benefit of a college education and began to think about integrating college into their lives while still committed to their maternal roles. Abigail and Charlie acknowledge that, while they understood the need to further their education, they were focused on more domestic interests and roles. At this point in their lives, the women were thoroughly enjoying their renewed role as student but those who still had children at home felt that their classes and coursework robbed them of time with their family. For some there was a sense of guilt or regret about how their absence and inaccessibility impacted their families as well:

My children are always a huge concern of mine. So my initial concern with who's going to take care of the children because I'm extremely uncomfortable leaving the home at night; not just for my safety but for theirs. I'd much rather do things during the day while they're at school. And um, but I knew that God, I knew what God had called me to do so I knew He would work out the details. I just knew that God would bring to fruition His plan as long as I was a willing servant. And I was and I am and He has worked things out. (Amy II, 8)

My concern was time and family. I didn't realize until the second semester just what a sacrifice it was, not just for me but for them. The most affect it's had on my family is probably with my husband. He hasn't been totally comfortable with the idea of me being away that much. There's been times when he actually made me feel bad about doing this. He would say that God will use me whether or not I have a degree. He would also speak poorly about people who have college degrees. There were a lot of times that I felt, oh I don't know, not betrayed, but kind of felt like . . . I don't know what to say. (Sarah II, 8)

Sarah has difficulty articulating how she feels implicating a "silence" in effect: What can't she say? Why can't she say it? Or does she even have the language for saying "it"?

I want to do my best, but I don't want to short change my family. That's probably been my biggest thing. Am I shortchanging my family? I feel like they're sacrificing so much for me. (Lynee II, 10).

The maternal identities assumed by these women are deeply rooted engendering conflict with their aspirations to accomplish something apart from that identity. In many cases they have spent years denying their own needs to care for the family.

College was a goal I had that meant a lot to me. I really wanted to complete it. I also wanted to work with special needs children. But because of my husband's instability, I chose to give up a full scholarship to follow him to another job . . . to keep the family together. Every time I started back to school there was something really, really big that had precedence over my education. (Meg, III, 10)

I wanted to go to school but my family was more important at that time to provide for their future than to worry about mine. I felt that my time would come if I needed it. My goal was to see that they grew up to be responsible citizens who were able to take care of their own families. That was my main goal and then I felt that whatever I needed after that would be fine. (Mary Beth, I, 5)

I always thought I was there to support him and the children. That's my job. I really felt I was unimportant, there's no time for me. (Lynce, I, 8)

For reentry women, the idea of returning to the academic environment they abandoned many years ago is frightening and provoking complex, contradicting feelings. They worry that they cannot compete academically, that they no longer have the intelligence or thinking skills to succeed, and that the years they spent raising children and homemaking do not hold value by society's standard. It is difficult for them to assume the identity of student:

The importance of motherhood is very down-played. I've raised my children then I come into the classroom or workplace and, even though I'm, you know, 35 years old or whatever, I have to start at entry level. I have worked every bit as hard as those other ladies who have been in the workforce 20 years, but I don't get any recognition or compensation for what I've done. It counts for nothing. And that's totally wrong because it should be one of the priorities of our society. (Mary III, 1)

I truly thought that with all the apprehension it was a dream I was incapable of making happen at times. It's just that every time I started

there was something really, really big other than the first time that had precedence over my education. (Meg III, 10)

My concerns were whether or not I could do this. Can I make the grades? Do I have the brains to get through this? (Lynee II, 9)

I didn't even think I could get a bachelor's degree. When I first came here I was walking by the grace of God because I truly didn't think I could do it. (Marina, III, 4)

Summary

The assignment of identity through early childhood conditioning, socio-cultural and religious norms embed identity so deeply that, regardless of a woman's desire to assume new identities, the resolution of inner conflict over her responsibilities and values is difficult to achieve. The transformative process requires conditions and situations which challenge her to rethink old assumptions and begin to visualize new ways of thinking and being.

So then given this understanding of the complex role of gender norms and religion in these women's transformative process, what is the role of the Evangelical Christian University environment in that process? Chapter Eight will give examples of how the evangelical Christian environment at ECU creates opportunities promoting women's transformation processes or further impedes transformation by perpetuating traditional evangelical and socio-cultural norms for women.

CHAPTER 8: EXPERIENCE AT ECU

Introduction

This chapter will explore the women's descriptions of the overall environment; integration of Christian perspectives and practices, classroom dynamics, and indicators of gender role bias experienced at ECU. Analysis of these narratives focused on identifying those experiences that either impeded or enhanced the women's growth and transformation.

Integration of Christian Perspectives and Practices

The evangelical mission of ECU was cited by the women as key to their educational experience and equated this environment as one of support and encouragement. Given the difficult circumstances many of the women had encountered in their lives, the notion that they could get a college degree within an environment that, for the most part, supported their values and beliefs was significant to their growth and development. Without exception, they cited the academic community at their local program site as essential to their success.

Lakeeta valued the Christian educational experience as one that would allow her to move forward in her life and to do so in an encouraging and supportive environment:

[I knew] that if I was ever going to put my life back together and on track I needed to go back into an environment that was totally Christian, totally

absorbed in seeking Christ. And that was one of the reasons I went to a Christian college because I knew that within a community of people I could absolutely do that. (Lakeeta III, 1)

Abigail viewed God's clear direction to attend ECU as a symbol of His love for her and a validation of her relationship with Him. She believes this was her destiny:

Of course I love being in a Christian University where the Lord is the foundation and everything and not all the professors would pray with the class . . . even if it wasn't specifically talked about it was the underlying foundation. And then the fact that you could talk openly about it and even pray and approach the learning experience and integrate your faith with all of that, I love it. I think God can accomplish His purposes anywhere, anytime, and anyway He wants. It's just that my relationship to Him and my love for His people, it is a natural fit for me to be [here] and completing my education in the context of He is the foundation; He is what it's all about and everything we have comes from him and belongs to him. I think it's a part of His loving on me to let me be here. I was finally at the place where I really was always, I think, destined to be here. I am in my niche. (Abigail III, 8)

The freedom to share and explore her beliefs in the classroom was cited by Charlie as a confidence-building testing ground. Recalling her childhood fear of being perceived as stupid, for the most part Charlie found a safe educational environment which encouraged her to express her beliefs openly:

I think the environment of being . . . I mean it's an educational environment but it's also a Christian environment and that does give me a confidence of saying, well, maybe they don't agree with me or they don't like it or they've never even heard of it before, but I'm in an environment that tells me I can say this. That's definitely true. I'm going to definitely say what I believe. . . whereas in another environment I might not feel that I should share even. (Charlie,II, 7)

Mary Beth noted that it was not just those who share the institution's evangelical mission who were encouraged to express their beliefs:

I think going to a Christian university you are able to express how you feel where you may not be able to in a secular setting. I can tell what my beliefs are and anybody here, even if they're not Christians, can tell what they believe. If we had a Muslim come into our classroom, they can

express their beliefs with no discrimination. And nobody saying “you’re not supposed to talk about this because . . .” (Mary Beth II, 8)

The usually guarded Sarah demonstrated rare animation while recounting the following story of a professor’s sensitivity to the students’ demeanor one evening:

I have to tell you this because this is so important. We all came to class one night and it had just been a really bad week for, I guess about four of us in the class. And that day particularly, that Thursday had been really bad. The women were practically in tears and he [the professor] picked up on it right away. He would always go around the room and ask us how we were doing and, you know, he stopped, you know, we were pretty far into the class and he just stopped and said, let’s pray because I know you guys need to pray. And we prayed. And I went back and I told everyone who knew I was going to school, I said, “That’s why I choose [this university].” You know it isn’t just about how much can I cram into four hours. (Sarah, II, 5)

The freedom to express and to explore the meaning of one’s Christian beliefs in the context of liberal arts and business/management principles, and to integrate the practices of their evangelical tradition in the classroom were viewed by the women as beneficial to their learning processes. In addition to the academics objectives they found an environment that extended learning and growth beyond pure acquisition of academic knowledge. A common secular perception of an evangelical Christian education is one which is limited, narrow and non-inclusive. That may be true for some evangelical academic environments. However, the participants shared stories of challenge and struggle reconciling their beliefs and understandings with their experiences in the classroom.

Classroom Dynamics

The women were asked to describe their experiences in the classroom and relationships with professors and other students. They were encouraged to relate specific

situations where they felt their views were not valued; they were not free to engage openly in class discussion; or in any manner felt threatened by the classroom environment. They were also encouraged to describe situations that were favorable to their growth and development as an educated individual:

Charlie describes a Sociology class where she felt the professor's views were contrary to hers and what she understood to be the University's. While obviously disturbed by what she was experiencing in the classroom, she seems to be uncomfortable discussing her dissatisfaction with the instructor and dismisses her feelings by alluding to his young age and single status:

My last class has been the most negative for a couple of reasons. One reason was the instructor and it wasn't that I disliked the instructor, he was very witty, he was fun to be with, but I just wasn't comfortable actually with the things he was teaching. He used some profanities and things which really bothered me. Not what you would call the really bad ones, but still. And it made the rest of the class feel more comfortable using profanity too. So there was, you know . . . I just don't want to hear that. So um, that was negative. And again not the whole class. I have real mixed feelings about that class. I really did. Every time I left I was real disturbed because again I just felt like I wasn't sure where he really stood himself with his relationship with the Lord. And he made some pretty interesting comments. And he's a young guy um . . . single guy . . .
(Charlie II, I)

Charlie's speech patterns waver between criticism of the instructor's views and assertion that she liked him and he was "cute as a button." Again, she seems to dismiss her discomfort by mentioning his favorable traits and demonstrating a need to maintain a social relationship with him on some level; commonly considered a benefit of adult education:

It wasn't a personal thing because I really liked him and uh . . . he's cute as a button, you know. But just some of . . . I felt for the class, the Sociology class some of his viewpoints were a little too extreme. Comments like um "if a man marries a woman and she can't have his

children then he has every right to divorce her.” And again, he’s single, he’s never been married but that’s a flippant attitude for something that serious and that’s part of what’s wrong . . . yea. I felt and that was just some of the comments. But that one I truly was concerned about. (Charlie II, 2)

When asked to describe how she processed her feelings in this situation, Charlie faltered in her recollection. Initially she voiced a strong indictment of the instructor’s views but then used language indicating she was insecure articulating her concerns; offering excuses for the instructor and dismissing her perceptions as a result of his “rapid-fire speech and quick wit.” Charlie discloses the difficulty for her to disagree with someone in an “authority” position and her lack of confidence in argumentation:

I’m a pretty quiet person I mean I don’t try to disrupt or anything. I do try to interject my thoughts, I guess. He talks really, really fast and so a lot of times I wasn’t even aware of what he was saying [laughing]. And by the time I figured it out it was too far to go back. But um, just trying to interject what, I felt, was truth. And it wasn’t that he just stood there and, and just gave out all these non-Christian type things. It’s not that. It’s just that it wasn’t uh, clear enough or specific enough um . . . so I would just try to interject some of my thoughts. I didn’t talk to him . . . um I’m not particularly a confrontational type person. So I didn’t specifically go to him. Other than that I guess that’s how I dealt with it. (Charlie II, 2)

Given the uncomfortable environment described, I asked Charlie how her comments or challenges to the instructor’s words were received. The importance of this piece of the narrative is that, even though Charlie was uncomfortable with the instructor’s views, she felt free to express her views without censure from either the instructor or other students:

I didn’t feel anybody being negative necessarily . . . just uh sometimes it’s thrown out there but it’s not really heard. Um, but I mean it wasn’t that the instructor or anyone else took it and was critical about it or anything like that. I didn’t get that reaction. For the most part I felt safe in saying things. Um, so I didn’t feel . . . I can’t think of the word I’m trying to think of . . . um . . . I didn’t feel like anyone was getting angry or, or vindictive, maybe that’s the word. (Charlie II, 2)

The following reflects an inclusive and integrative standpoint as she considers the instructor's profession as an attorney. She recognizes that his views may be a result of the legal world in which he practices. At this point she adds that he made derogatory comments about women; possibly an indicator of her growing sense of self as a woman. However rather than communicating outrage at this verbal assault on her gender she laughs, as if brushing off the offense:

And I appreciate a lot of his viewpoints from the career field he is in, but at the same time, sometimes I don't know, he had a negative view of a lot of things. . . Women. [laughing] (Charlie II, 3)

Charlie's faith teaches that one person is not to judge another. She is hesitant to voice her opinion about the events in the class that were disturbing to her; to say the "wrong" thing about the instructor regardless of the right she has to make those judgments as a paying "customer" of the university:

I want to be careful because I don't want to say anything wrong about him, just that . . . (Charlie II, 3)

Overcoming her apprehension of saying the "wrong" thing, she suggests that his youth and lack of inexperience mar his credibility to teach a class about the social world. The instructor has considerable academic qualifications but because he has not experienced marriage and family life, Charlie does not see him as a plausible teacher of adults. For Charlie, and many women with traditional gender values, their social world is filtered through the lens of marriage and family life, possibly obscuring views of any other social constructs. On the other hand, their unique perspective allows them to have a fuller, more complete and complex view of the social world:

I just felt that he has some very flippant views of women . . . um and the importance of a relationship, say marriage. And that bothers me . . .

Sociology deals with our social world and what's going on and of course marriage is talked about. So um, I just felt like his view of life at this point, and again he's young, he's unmarried and has no children and all of that makes such a difference in the way you . . . but he was teaching the class. (Charlie II, 3)

Charlie reflects a concern for the other adult students in the class; adopting a maternal concern that they will be easily swayed by what she considered to be glib viewpoints from the authority figure in the classroom:

And it wasn't just a student saying these things. If it had been a student, I mean I still would have given my thoughts, but um . . . a lot of students in there um this was an interesting group too. And so I felt like they were easily influenced. And that was my concern because I knew some of the . . . again we talked about this last week, but they had religion in their background, but um I don't know that there was any personal relationship going on. (Charlie II, 3)

Charlie attributes her survival of this course based on prior experience. She suggests that had this been her first course at ECU, she may not have taken another. She is demonstrating the ability to reflect thoughtfully on a class experience, positive or negative, but implies that one negative episode could have ended her degree pursuit another time. While "forgiving" the instructor for his mistakes, in the next sentence she describes being so disturbed over the attitudes reflected in the class that she cried on the way home after class one night:

That's the only experience like that I've had and so I would not, because I've been going all year, I wouldn't see that as my only experience. Now if that had been my first class I might have had some reservations. I don't know. I also know that people make mistakes and you've got to give people a second chance, but um . . . it was concerning. It really was. As a matter of fact, I mean I left crying one night because I felt, I just felt that . . . the same thing I just said, that these flippant attitudes just do so much harm sometimes. And that's not all his fault, I mean pretty much everybody in there you know had, not everybody, but had similar attitudes. (Charlie II, 2-3)

Asked to explain what was said in the class that caused tears afterward, Charlie's response is key in understanding that women learn by connection as opposed to the individual, separate and autonomous learning bias of many males:

I think it was a combination of things. I think I was, not upset, but sometimes you're emotionally . . . you're ready to have a good cry. And um, I was driving home and I was thinking about all this. I guess just um, I think that's the night he said that about the women and . . . um and on my way home I saw an accident and it looked . . . so it was just like together the combination and the accident was an awful one. It is upsetting and I think I was thinking about the people in the classroom thinking how many of themselves know the Lord. You know? (Charlie II, 4)

Charlie's tears resulted not just from a flip comment made by a professor. They were the result of several connections she made that night: concern for her classmates' relationship with God, the heart wrenching experience of seeing a tragic accident, and possibly fear for her self-identity provoked by the expression of sociological values contrary to those values which are the foundation of her self-identity. Charlie's tears may be a sign of her discomfort recognizing that authority figures are flawed too.

Charlie's reaction to this experience may reflect her emergence as a constructivist knower (Belenky, et al., 1997). As a woman, she is learning on multiple levels. She is bringing her experiences as a wife and mother, as a mature woman to understand this instructor's perspective and she doesn't accept it without criticism. As she reflects on it, and brings to bear her multiple selves, she is growing and transforming.

The discomfort Charlie expresses may be due in part to her growing sense that she has authority as a knower. The "certainty" is being dispelled – education is a social construction. The fact that she needed a good cry is likely connected to the inner conflict she is feeling. Irritated by the professor's insensitive attitudes toward those social

constructs she holds very dear, the typically passive, quiet and nonconfrontational Charlie was forced to defend her values to the power figure in the classroom.

Earlier in this interview Charlie made a point to say that she had wonderful class experiences prior to the Sociology class. Considering the inner conflict and self-identify issues provoked in the Sociology class, I am wondering if previous classroom environments allowed her to hold on to her role as the unassertive and submissive pastor's wife. This perceived safe environment is one of the main reasons Charlie chose ECU in the first place. Encountering the environment in the Sociology course required Charlie to either sit passively as if accepting the instructor's views or to speak up, an uncomfortable position for her to assume. When she did speak up, she did not feel that her voice was heard:

For the most part I felt safe in saying things. I didn't feel anybody being negative necessarily . . . just uh sometimes it's thrown out there but it's not really heard. Um, but I mean it wasn't that the instructor or anyone else took it and was critical about it or anything like that. I didn't get that reaction. Um, so I didn't feel . . . I can't think of the word I'm trying to think of . . . um . . . I didn't feel like anyone was getting angry or, or vindictive, maybe that's the word. (Charlie II, 2)

When a woman receives little or no response to her words, it's as if she was invisible and the depth of her life experience is of no consequence in the broader context of the educational environment. This can be a devastating road block to learning for the woman seeking a safe and supportive environment outside of her home. If she's growing and transforming, these challenges may further her progress rather than impeding it because they force her to reflect and adjust.

Gender Role Bias

Several of the women relayed stories of gender role bias in their classrooms either between themselves and the professor or themselves and male students. Indicating just how embedded traditional gender roles can be two of the women reported situations where they voluntarily participated in furthering the stereotype of male leadership and women's subordinate status in the classroom.

Given Sarah's military background and adoption of some masculine traits while serving in the Air Force, it is surprising that she still looked to a male to lead a classroom activity:

I remember in our first class we had to do this little team building project where we had to create some type of mechanism or whatever that would keep an egg from breaking when it falls off the table. It was me, another female and him in one of the groups. Right away I said looking at him, "how are we going to do this?" I expected him to take a certain role (Sarah II, 3).

Meg recognizes that her tendency to promote males as leaders is a result of social-cultural conditioning. She refers to this as a protection for the male ego; to avoid any discomfort for him. She goes on to describe how the male student took the lead position without questioning and relied on the women to support him. His efforts were ultimately disappointing because he was unprepared:

I do monitor what I say to the opposite sex. I'm careful not to challenge and to keep my responses limited and I think that came from experience. We did let the male always take the lead. We always put him there. I think we felt that he needed to be there because I think it's just how we're trained. So we would put him there and he just took over. We all channeled everything to him for the final thing and he did not have it thorough enough. Those were the dynamics in that group. We actually protected him, didn't we? We protected his position (Meg, II, 8).

Meg also told how an instructor referred to the differences between the writing ability of the male students versus the female students:

He made reference to the work we'd done where the male students wrote so he could really read it and it had a lot of clarity but the women, "you ladies, you're going to have to try to get more organized because I have a hard time following you . . . you're all over the place (Meg, II, 5).

This instructor also asked Meg to make him some tea prior to class and when he complained that the tea was too strong, Meg made it right for him. She attributed this behavior to the instructor's age. He was retired and according to Meg, "they expect it." As she relayed this story to me, she laughed about her tendency to "take care of" others. I wondered if she was truly amused by this or embarrassed at the absurdity of the situation.

Amy described class discussions where, after making a contributing comment, two of the males in the class responded by yelling at her. Describing herself an anti-conflict, she concedes that she becomes "quiet" when confronted in such an angry manner. Women of silence submit unquestioningly to authorities for survival. These women often come out of abusive or dysfunctional families (Belenky, et al., 1997) and do not learn to trust or even listen to their own voices.

Charlie's childhood conditioning silenced her when confronted with forceful responses from male classmates. She also told of inappropriate, often sexually charged comments in class, and disclosed that others in the class allowed this to continue:

Sometimes they are sexually derogatory comments, but people don't know how to react to it. He will specifically make remarks about females more frequently than he does males. And a lot of times, if somebody makes a derogatory comment, if we don't say anything it'll go away and you'll watch people let it pass. (Amy, II, 4)

Amy describes a situation where she refused to follow the lead of a particular male classmate when he prepared a presentation with content that was objectionable to her:

I said I need you to know I'm not going to participate in this. Other students defended him because he was the only one that came with a typed up idea. And I thought, wow, isn't that fascinating how they're not seeing what I'm seeing. But you know I put my foot down and said this is unacceptable and another woman in the group said the same thing. The other men didn't say a word. He threw down his work and said, "Then somebody else lead." He got angry, which I expected because he's that easy to read. (Amy, II, 3)

Summary

The role of the university to promote transformation can be impeded or promoted by attitudes and assumptions the students and professors bring to the classroom. How the women experience the educational environment at ECU reflects how they perceive themselves as active participants and knowers in their world. In an accelerated format like that of the adult programs at ECU, the potential for the women to master academic content areas *and* experience transformation emotionally, psychologically and spiritually requires intentional curriculum development and community building. It is important that these women are recognizing these instances of sexism even if they are not yet always confronting them in the classroom.

Chapter Nine theorizes the transformative processes experience by the women through their critical reflection of old assumptions and roles, their development of self and voice and the reframing of their relationship with God in light of their new meanings.

CHAPTER 9: THEORIZING TRANSFORMATION FOR REENTRY EVANGELICAL WOMEN

Introduction

This study focuses on transformational processes experienced by the participants while enrolled at ECU. As stated earlier, these processes are more complex for women who espouse an evangelical Christian worldview. Depending on their relationship with and understanding of God and His role in their lives, experiences may be perceived to be outside of their control.

A woman's decision to return to college, given the extent and variety of roles and responsibilities she plays, requires transformation on some level. If she has always viewed "student" as one of her identities (though suppressed), the decision to return to college may not require the transformative process of someone who never envisioned themselves completing a college degree. Several of the women held a life-long goal to continue the college education they started and were denied for many years. Others possessed a dream to earn a college degree but never really believed, outside of divine intervention, that it was possible given their early socio-cultural status and/or family responsibilities. For those women, adopting the role of student required a significant reassessment of self-concept and confidence to act, processes required for transformation to occur.

The development of a substantive theory of transformation for this population of female reentry students entails analysis of the narratives for transformative structures supported by the research (Bruner, 1985; Hayes & Flannery, 2000; Hutchings, 1996; Mezirow, 1978). From the women's narratives, I have identified three major structures of transformation. The structures are (a) critical reflection of beliefs, roles or assumptions; (b) epistemological change; and (c) integration of new roles and beliefs. The use of interviews as the primary methodology for participants to tell their stories provided a social and interactive environment for critical reflection, an important precursor to transformation.

To provide continuity of the women's transformational stories, rather than organizing the chapter by individual structures, narratives from three of the women will be analyzed to illustrate how these structures evidence transformation within their stories.

Mary Beth

At the time of the last interview, Mary Beth had just completed her program of study and was looking forward to entering a graduate program. She identifies a difference between the way she perceived and processed information before returning to college and how she perceives and processes now, suggesting a deeper level of cognition with an enhanced integration of other perspectives:

Um, I think . . . my thinking processes have changed. I think I'm able to look into things a little more deeply and to ascertain or to discern maybe, let's put it that way, what I'm really . . . how I really feel about them. And I've noticed that I'm enjoying . . . uh . . . that type of thing more than I did before because I think I was hitting the surface before and not really getting into things. So I've really grown, I think. And I think my understanding of other people has grown. (Mary Beth III, 4)

Through a reflective process, Mary Beth connects a better understanding of herself to a deeper understanding of others. Still holding onto the caregiver identity, she has broadened her ethic of care from her family to the adult students she comes in contact with as a staff member in an adult program. This care and support of students is what she understands as her “purpose.” Committed to sharing the confidence she’s gained through her college experience, especially since she finally succeeded at the age of 62, she wants to be a catalyst for others to follow her lead. This is possible because of the work she has done to become more integrative and discriminating in her relationships with others. According to Belenky, et al. (1997), Mary Beth’s transformation is part of becoming a “constructivist” knower, “Constructivist women aspire to work that contributes to the empowerment and improvement in the quality of life of others” (p. 152). And, as Gilligan (1993) found, as women develop, they bring an “ethic of care” to their morality rather than a judgmental approach:

In view of the evidence that women perceive and construe social reality differently from men and that these differences center around experiences of attachment and separation, life transitions that invariably engage these experiences can be expected to involve women in a distinctive way. And because women’s sense of integrity appears to be entwined with an ethic of care, so that to see themselves as women is to see themselves in a relationship of connection, the major transitions in women’s live would seem to involve changes in the understanding and activities of care (p.171).

There is a reference in the following narrative to the evangelical worldview that reprimands one person for judging another. This inner conflict between critically assessing relationships and understanding others through discriminating “judgments” reveals the difficulty women have distinguishing between their religious beliefs and the

skills often required to operate in the world of work relationships. Mary Beth's narrative indicates that she is more interested in understanding than in judging right or wrong:

I probably would have been on the surface more – a surface evaluation of somebody. And I'm not saying you should evaluate people but you have to, in a way, understand their base before you can . . . uh. . . make judgments. And you're not supposed to make judgments anyway so that's not exactly what I want to say. I think that you have to understand where they're coming from before you can help them. And before you can really . . . um . . . you have to understand them thoroughly and . . . you can't understand them thoroughly if you don't understand yourself and your own problems. So, I think that it's really helped me look into myself and now when I see others with problems . . . But the whole process that I've been through this last year has helped me understand where they're coming from. (Mary Beth III, 4)

As Mary Beth came to know herself and reflect on a deeper level she revealed other changes as a result of her reentry experience. Though claiming a Christian worldview most of her life, she avoided expressing her beliefs with others. Rather than engaging with another person on this level as an opportunity to know them better, she felt that voicing her beliefs would “interfere” with those held by others. This language indicates that at some point in her life she had received the message that to express her religious beliefs was an imposition to others.

Through a class on the literature of C.S. Lewis, she developed a voice to defend her evangelical beliefs; gaining confidence to vocalize externally what she believed internally. Still, she refers to “we believe” rather than “I believe” possibly indicating that she lacks confidence to affirm *her* beliefs and needs the collective “we” to substantiate what she wants to say:

Well it was just like all of a sudden to understand . . . in *Mere Christianity*, to understand what our position is and how to defend what we believe. And I had never really done that before . . . before that, I'd always been a little shy because I always felt like well this is your belief and I really

don't want to interfere with that, you know. But if somebody will ask me I can tell them now. And that makes a difference. (Mary Beth, III, 1)

Gilligan further differentiates a child-like care for approval from a mature woman's sense of morality, "When the distinction between helping and pleasing frees the activity of taking care from the wish for approval by others, the ethic of responsibility can become a self-chosen anchor of personal integrity and strength" (p. 171). It was common throughout these women's stories that as they experience transformation, their desire is to help and empower others to do the same.

Another significant transformation for Mary Beth occurred as she recognized that with the completion of this degree, she is now "free" to pursue the things in life she really wants to do. Through interviews I & II, she described wonderful memories of her childhood and parents. However, at the end of interview III, and on the eve of completing her degree, she revealed that even before her disastrous marriage, a domineering mother prevented her from pursuing her dreams. The freedom now to do what she wants to do is cherished and viewed by Mary Beth as giving "meaning" to her life:

My mother kind of always wanted us to go into the medical field so I think it was a dream of hers and so we kind of followed along with that and I never was really completely happy doing that. So, I'm thinking that I'm finally, because of the experience of going to school and having the opportunity, it has added meaning to my life in that I'll be able to do what I really like to do. It's given me an opportunity to move beyond where I am. (Mary Beth III, 10)

Through the processes of critical reflection and epistemological change which frees her to pursue anything she wants, to delve deeper into relationships with the goal of understanding others, and to consider new ideas and concepts, Mary Beth is able to envision how she will integrate these transformations in her life. She reflects that between

her prior life experiences and her recent college experience, she has gained a capacity as a life-long learner which she values as keeping her young and vital. She refers to the need to feel useful, again that care giving identity but in a form she chose and which she can control and own:

I've finished what I've done so I have more enthusiasm to go on and do more. I'm really getting excited about going on for a Master's. And, um, maybe stronger because I know I can do it . . . and the knowledge that I gained. Some of it was repetitive because some I'd learned from experience. In some ways it was a totally new experience for me. And I just feel that that keeps you younger and more vibrant because it gives you that extra little push for achieving more and wanting to learn more. I don't think you ever want to stop learning, you know. I really think that, that, um that's what makes us young . . . and it keeps us useful. And to be useful is probably the best thing. I think when you're not useful anymore you might as well just go sit somewhere. (Mary Beth, III, 8)

For Mary Beth, the essence of transformation is the ability to shed old, problematic frames of mind and replace them with new perspectives and ways of knowing and behaving. The beauty of her story is that at the age of 62 she is enthusiastic about the opportunities ahead of her and reveals a sense of responsibility to continue growing and serving as long as she is physically and mentally able. She sees herself as fundamentally the same person who reentered college, but recognizes that her growth has refined and affirmed perceptions she's had of herself all along but which were not allowed to bloom. She attributes her growth and the ability to express herself to the experience at ECU:

I think that basically I'm still the same person and I have the same beliefs. I am stronger . . . because of the additional experience and knowledge that I've gained. But I still am the same. I still have the same feelings for things that I had before. But I think I recognize my feelings better, too. And that's helped me. Maybe being able to express how I feel where before I might not have known how to express how I felt. And I think going to a Christian university you are able to express how you feel where you may not be able to in a secular setting. (Mary Beth III, 8)

I can draw from those experiences and um ensure that certain things don't happen again. I think they're a training ground almost and I think you have to take them as positives in your life even though they're negative at the time. Make you stronger and persevere, and it gives you an experience base that is unique. No one else has had that same experience you had. And so you can use that for teaching other people and guiding others. I learned that you can't change the whole world but you can certainly change part of it. So, if you touch one person you've accomplished something. (Mary Beth, III, 4)

Through her growing sense of agency and personal power, Mary Beth has pulled it all together to make meaning for herself. She views her past life experience as preparation for her future role as a teacher of adults. She makes sense out of her life by recognizing the uniqueness of her experiences whether positive or negative. And, like many women who have experienced difficult lives, she expresses a need to help others; not necessarily to avoid the same mistakes, but to navigate through the difficulties and to find hope.

Sarah

Sarah's narrative revealed two distinct transformations as a result of her reentry experience. The first recognition that, while she valued the Christian influence of her grandmother, the classes and course work she completed at ECU gave her new insight into her evangelical worldview. As she reflects on her experience in a Worldviews class, she reveals a confidence to shed the messages or covert assumptions learned early for new meanings and ownership of her faith based on her experience and the knowledge she has gained:

Worldviews was more life changing for me because I realized I don't just have to accept my grandmother's religion because it was her religion and she took me to church. I realized that I can think about why I believe what

I believe and actually go and seek, you know . . . ok . . . what does the Bible say? And rather than just reading it as a cold document, you know, and oh this is what I have to do because that's what all good Christians do, you know, realizing that it's more about the mind. It is about faith but it's also about the mind. And I never had that explained to me before. And that was probably the biggest personal growth that I had out of this. (Sarah, II, 2)

The worldviews class motivated her to reflect on how her grandmother's religion had shaped her life. Using the knowledge gained from the class, Sarah weighed the beliefs adopted from her grandmother and used course resources such as the *Bible* to develop new ways of thinking about her faith. Through a process of reflection and clarification, she began a new journey to renegotiate her evangelical beliefs and assumptions with the goal of owning her faith and better understanding the tenets of her belief system.

Sarah described the manifestation of this transformation as having implications in her life outside of her personal faith. She recognized that, much like other habits she had developed, following her grandmother's beliefs created a "rut" for her that had become deep and controlled her ways of thinking and perceiving. By discovering another path for her belief system and avoiding the "rut" caused by the old path, Sarah recognizes that she can transfer that process to other areas of her life such as her marital relationship:

It transfers into my relationship with my husband. It transfers into you know, it probably would even apply at work, you know, because sometimes you get stuck in a rut and that's just the way we do things. That's easy, especially in the military to get stuck in a rut. So, you know, just having that idea that you can . . . um . . . investigate and think creatively and not just accept because that's the norm, you know. (Sarah, II, 2)

Transforming perceptions of the importance of her career and education in relation to her family and others was another outcome of her experience at ECU. Unlike

the other women whose primary roles had been wife and mother, Sarah's years in the military saturated her identity as a professional:

I think what happened for me was it wasn't a "light bulb" as much as over the course of a couple of semesters I realized that not having enough time with my family has made me realize how precious and important they are. And maybe realized how important my role as a mother is and a wife and that . . . um . . . education is very important and you . . . you should make time for it, which was what was attractive to me about this program was I could carve out this amount of time and know that I'm going to be done. So I think, if anything, just being able to prioritize and realize that, even it made me realize that my career, and most people come to college for their career, but it made me realize that my career isn't everything. That being able to have good relationships with people and spend time with your family is more important than all of it. And realizing that time is precious, relationships are important, and this has just brought all that together for me. (Sarah, III, 5)

In contrast to Mezirow's (1978) transformation theory which states that a critical event precedes a change in perception and ultimately transformation, Sarah demonstrates how perspective change over time can fuel transformation. The time away from her family to work, attend class and study elicited a realization of how important her family was to her and how important her role as wife and mother was to them.

Further affirmation of Sarah's transformation process is reflected in her assessment of her interactions with others. While previously a self-described "calloused and hardened" persona at work, her college experience has motivated her to reorder and revise prior assumptions about others and to become more people-oriented in contrast to job and task oriented. She is working to bring compassion to her work:

It's helped me be more aware at work of kind of the dynamics that are going on between employees or my peers and how to react to that in more of a positive, controlled kind of way instead of letting the situation control me. I've learned how to sit back and not analyze so much as just try to understand where people are coming from when they, you know, do something stupid at work or they want to make a change that right away doesn't make sense to me. And one of the things too that I realized

through taking these kind of classes was that work isn't just about work [laughing]. It's more about people than about work.

I go to work and I think I have this job to get done and while I love to socialize, when I'm at work, you know, I'm kind of on a mission. And you know I may have someone who wants to chat about something and before I, you know, it's still hard for me but I try to do more of a balance, I guess, when I'm at work. And try to find out a little more about the people that I'm working with and why they think the way they do. Well it helps me to be less . . . um . . . stressed about, you know, if there are distractions because I don't like distractions at work. It's helped me to realize that it isn't that this person's just trying to annoy me [laughing]. There's a person inside that body. (Sarah, III, 1)

Sarah describes how her change of perception has altered her behavior. By recognizing that people are important, both at home and at work, she is taking action to make her relationships the priority in her life. Her transformation from the no-nonsense, calculating woman shaped by a childhood of abuse and military life restructures her identity and allows for personal relationships to be the driving force in her life. It appears that Sarah is integrating more "feminine" behaviors into her personal and work life and trying to negotiate a balance between her personal and professional self:

And it isn't that I'm . . . I mean I love people, it's just that I'm serious about my job. And just realizing that it isn't just about getting the paperwork done, you know, that I need to spend time letting other people know that I care that they have a life. But of course one of the neat things about taking these organizational management classes that . . . this course talked a lot about, you know, this person might be that way because, you know, they grew up in inner city Chicago or whatever and have very different experiences. (Sarah, III, 2)

Sarah's transformations came about through challenging old religious norms, her grandmother's religion, and finding meaning in her interpretation of biblical concepts with the help of a class on Worldviews. The academic environment at ECU provided opportunities for critical reflection which led to Sarah's change of perspective and ultimately a change in behaviors. She began to reframe her belief system, connect with

her feminine roles as wife and mother and to abandon the hardened and calloused civil servant mentality to find new meaning in her relationships.

Abigail

Abigail's story of transformation during her matriculation at ECU exposes the substantial vulnerability and powerlessness that were effects of her childhood and abusive marriage. Throughout her interviews it was apparent that dependence on a benevolent, though perplexing God, was Abigail's principal survival mechanism. Her narratives reveal significant inner conflict between her complete trust that God will provide for even the smallest of her needs and the realities that life just wasn't going the way she wanted regardless of how much praying she did. Thirteen years after the end of her abusive marriage and the relinquishment of her three children, Abigail's narratives portray a child-like faith and trust in God to provide in every facet of her life. Explaining how she came to enroll at ECU, the following narrative encapsulates the frame of mind she was in at the time of our first interview:

I just knew in my heart that what I was supposed to do . . . and before when I had thought about maybe going into counseling, women's ministries or something I thought well . . . maybe I could help other women that have gone through similar things and stuff. Then I thought who would ever come to you? You can't even get your own life together. Your life is such a mess, you can't even support yourself, can't find a place to live on your own. I feel like especially with my family, for example, I feel like they really look at me as the ultimate example of failure. And I thought my family will think I'm crazy and who are you thinking you could be a counselor for somebody else when you're so messed up. (Abigail II, 13)

I really kind of just buried that in my heart but when I heard that [radio] announcement it was like God was saying this is it and the time is now. And I didn't look back. I didn't look around me I didn't think how am I going to pay for this I just went to the information meeting, I enrolled that

night, all my focus then was on just getting into the program. (Abigail II, 10)

After almost a year of classes, Abigail reflects on her reentry experience and how success in her coursework has allowed her to begin to revise old perceptions of self:

I've had some less than perfect papers and some struggle with online quizzes and felt my grade slipping, but this has been God working in me because the normal me would be my security and safety depends on my performance and my acceptance (Abigail II, 12).

One of the biggest challenges for the evangelical Christian seeking higher education is the inner conflict created between their relationship with a supreme God and the expectation that their intellectual development will result in a greater sense of independence, self-worth, integration of ideas, etc. Abigail's experience reflects this inner conflict. On the one hand she is trying to gain competency in knowledge areas, but on the other hand, her language refers to receiving knowledge from God, "I need to learn what He wants to teach me . . ." This language can be misconstrued by the nonbeliever as mindless submission to an abstract source. But for the Christian, knowledge gained is all about the bigger picture, the lessons that transcend a course or grade. Abigail is trying to separate herself from her old modes of thinking and behaving; those things that kept her "safe" such as her appearance and behavior:

God has me here and I need to learn what He wants to teach me so that I can apply it wherever He takes me once I get through this process. And I don't want it to be just about checking off one more class, getting all A's you know. It's like if I learn what I'm supposed to learn and I get a C out of the class, I need to be OK with that. Because it's not about my performance, it's about being here to learn everything He intends for me to learn. It can ultimately make no sense to me but I trust that God is in control and one way or another He's going to use it for good. That's what I have to hold onto. That's been a transition for me too in terms of returning to school, being on campus and taking classes and always keeping my world safe by what I did and how I looked and all that stuff. (Abigail II, 12).

Abigail's faith mirrors that of many Christians who believe God orchestrates everything in heaven and on earth much like a puppeteer. Other believers hold a more liberal view of God's desire, or even ability, to direct everything. These Christians acknowledge God's omnipotence, but act out their lives believing that, through His love and compassion, He empowers His people to use the intelligence and gifts He gave them.

God has taught me so much about His grace and it's not about whether we get it right or being good. And I really don't imagine myself sitting in a counselor's seat and counseling people. Maybe He does have me here to get a better understanding of life, my life. I mean God has been so good. I just feel like He's giving me the gift of recognizing what a privilege it is and what an opportunity it is and that it isn't about me and He does take our brokenness and our woundedness or our failures or whatever. You've got all that how can it be anything else but wonderful (Abigail II, 13).

As Abigail continues to reflect on her reason for being at ECU, she acknowledges her need for a better understanding of her life. She is searching for answers and expecting that God will deliver them. Her transformation is sealed in the following narratives as she begins to recognize that at least some answers will come in the form of empowerment to act.

In our first interview, Abigail disclosed a dilemma she faced over paying for her first semester's tuition. Believing that God had directed her to enroll, and confessing that she acted on faith that God would provide for her, she fully expected that a large check would arrive in her mailbox to cover her bill. When the first semester's bill arrived, her euphoria over being in college was doused by the realization that, while God led her to return to college, He had somehow failed to provide her with funds to cover the expense:

There's something about me that has a child-like naiveté that I just, you know . . . I'm going strictly by faith. I'd walk on campus trying to figure out how to pay my rent or different things about being in school and I thought literally every step I was taking was trusting God was going to lead me to the Promised Land [laughing].

I really went into this having no idea how God was going to make it happen. It's really an issue of faith and trusting Him but I don't want to be so heavenly minded that I'm no earthly good, you know. (Abigail II, 10)

In her last statement, Abigail recognizes that her language implies a state of mind, "heavenly minded," that may not be realistic in practice. Presented with a financial aid award, she resisted accepting student loans rationalizing that would mean she wasn't trusting God. Eventually she exposes an anomaly in that rationale by indicating she would refuse the loans but pursue grants and scholarships. Explaining that by accepting the loans she would be trying to resolve her financial status on her own, she does not clarify how she sees a pursuit of grants and scholarships as more consistent with trusting God. This inconsistency may be directly related to her beleaguered self esteem. She cannot envision how she would ever repay student loans whereas grants and scholarships generally rely on the student's performance while in school and require no commitment to the future:

When the bill came for my tuition I think I was immobilized by fear because I was afraid of making the wrong decision. I was afraid that I would take away the opportunity for God to provide for me being here in some miraculous way. Just that kind of a confirmation of His direction and His provision for me and um . . . struggling with whether student loans were a part of that or if that was taking the world's solution and trying to make it happen on my own. I've done plenty of that. Now I'm dealing with decisions about going into debt again to be able to afford this education. I know that God works in mysterious, miraculous and supernatural ways but the reality is He often uses things of the world to accomplish His purposes. But I do feel like I'm compromising if I take the student loans so I've pretty well decided this morning that I'm going to not take the loans and do everything I can to get grants and scholarships. (Abigail II, 10)

Using paradoxical language she clutches to the certainty that God directed her to return to school but is not providing in a manner she believes would be consistent with

trusting Him. In effect, Abigail is not able to see student financial aid as an expression of God's provision believing that grants and scholarships are more in line with what God should do for her. In effect, Abigail says she trusts God, but then qualifies that trust with specific stipulations. As an ultimatum, she considers that if tuition money does not come in the form of grants or scholarships, she will walk away from a college education again:

So it was really a big struggle. I was really feeling like, you know . . . I was going to totally trust God for the provision and if it didn't come through then I would just walk away (Abigail III, 1).

Consistent with received knower status (Belenky, et al., 1997); Abigail exhibits a dependency on literal, unambiguous and predictable information. As she encounters a situation that cannot be resolved within the confines of this precise worldview, she cannot conceive that there is anyway that she may be empowered to resolve the dilemma; that her only alternative is to "walk away."

In a rare reversal of perspective and display of agency, she considered the consequences of not accepting the financial aid and walking away:

The more I thought about it I thought it would be far harder for me to deal with that scenario than to um . . . be able to stay in school. And when I thought about how much I love it and I know I'm supposed to be here it was like, am I willing to give all of that up? As far as I am able I want to feel like I have the opportunity to make decisions and choices that will um . . . kind of forge my path, trusting that it's under God's control. And I thought, you know, signing for the loans as much as I hate going into debt, but this was an opportunity for me to say I love this, I want to do this, I know this is where I'm supposed to be and it was like taking some ownership and responsibility for making that happen, I mean helping God to make it happen.(Abigail III, 2)

As Abigail begins to sort out what walking away would mean, her process of dialogic reflection began a powerful shift in how she viewed her ability to control this dilemma. She recognized two faulty perceptions inhibiting her ability to act. The first

perception revealed that going into debt was not about God's lack of provision; it was about her personal hatred for debt, probably based on prior experience. The second faulty perception advanced the idea that she had no power to help God make this happen on her behalf. By recognizing the error of these perceptions, Abigail began to take ownership of the situation:

And another thing was I thought you know what, He could put a million dollars in my mailbox before I even got the bill or as I'm trying to figure out how to pay the bill or after. But if He's going to provide and supply, He can do that anytime, anyway He wants and it's not a matter of waiting for it to come through and if it doesn't come through then it's over. So I thought I'm just going ahead to try and be proactive instead of . . . because I really could see how, you remember I shared with you about how my brother just made my life miserable, and with my marriage and stuff, I've been in positions where I was busy just trying to survive that I didn't have any sense that I could be a master of my own fate. (Abigail III, 2)

Having internalized oppression at the hands of first her brother and then her husband for many years, the revelation that she was empowered to be an active participant in her life, and in partnership with God, transformed Abigail's self-concept and forged a new identity. Like many of the women in this study, she is now free to pursue those dreams and goals that for so long had been repressed by her relationship with others. And critical to Abigail's development of self as an evangelical Christian is the understanding that God is still omnipotent as an important source of strength, encouragement, hope and comfort in her life:

I recognized that this was an opportunity where I felt like God was empowering me and He was saying you don't have to be a victim of waiting for the world or somebody else or me to come through for you. You can make decisions and choices, and when you are very aware of your own failings and faults, and afraid to make those mistakes again, you can own your responsibility for where you are. So I did sign the loan! (Abigail III, 3).

By acknowledging the satisfaction she felt in pursuing education at ECU, she began to dislodge old perceptions of dependency on others for her existence and happiness in exchange for a new trust in herself and empowerment to control her reality. Abigail has completed a transformation of self and identity by embracing her own authority and ability to act on her own behalf. Realizing that by signing for the student loans she would be able to remain in school to live out God's plan, she felt empowered to take on debt as a means to an end. This act of agency freed Abigail to be an active partner with God in preparing for her future.

Summary

This chapter focused on the stories of three participants whose educational experiences at ECU stimulated perspective transformation at some level of their self-concept, identity, and ultimately their view of the future. For Mary Beth, transformation meant freedom to complete something she always knew she wanted to do but was repressed first by a domineering mother and then an abusive husband. To compensate for that repression, she assumed a role of nurturer and protector of her sons and now other students. As she considers the possibilities for her future due to the transformation of self, it is important to her to marry her new future with continuing to help others.

Sarah's transformation was two-fold. First, through coursework in a Worldviews class, she was motivated to reform her evangelical Christian worldview to reflect the work she has done unraveling what she had espoused from her grandmother's Christian influence and what has meaning and significance for her now.

Sarah's second transformation generated a reprioritizing of her multiple identities. Consumed by work and school, over the course of a couple of semesters she started to question the time she was spending away from her family and the impact that has on her and them. The indifferent and tough professional predisposed by military experience, began to reorder and reprioritize her roles as professional, student, wife and mother. This reprioritizing confirmed for Sarah the value and significance of relationships, at home and at work. She took steps to interact in a different way with coworkers in an effort to get to know them on a more personal level. As for her family relationships, she is looking forward to completing her undergraduate degree so she can dedicate her time away from work solely to her growing family. She expressed a desire to pursue graduate work at some time in the future, but not until her children are more independent and require less of her attention.

The transformation process for Abigail encompassed multiple layers of self in relation to others and in relationship to God. Repressed for years by childhood messages of submission and other-orientation, followed by an abusive marriage and eradication of her identity as wife and mother, Abigail was close to suicide if not for a belief in a compassionate, omnipresent and omnipotent God who would orchestrate the vestiges of her life.

Transformation for Abigail resulted from a conflict between self and God; her conviction that God's direction clearly had been for her to return to college and her limited perception of how He would financially provide for her. Through a process of critical assessment of the dilemma and the problematic assumptions it brought forth, self-dialogue and narrative reflection through this interview process, and an instructor's

lecture in class Abigail realized that she was restricting herself by restricting God's way of providing for her. In a stunning reversal of thinking, Abigail recognized that she was empowered to either walk away from an experience she valued or accept that God's provision may be in her empowerment to accept student loans. She signed for the loans and released herself from years of feeling that her life was controlled by someone or something outside of herself.

In the final chapter of this study, a substantive theory of perspective transformation will be defined using the data gleaned from analyzing the participant's lived experiences. Following the theory definition, a summary of the study, implications for future study and the conclusion will bring to a close my own long held goal to earn a doctorate degree.

CHAPTER 10: SUMMARY, IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Introduction

Distinctive in setting and perspective, this study of reentry women who chose an evangelical Christian university in which to complete an undergraduate degree contributes new understanding of the range of transformative structures. Mezirow's (1978) influential work on perspective transformation for reentry women in community colleges proposed a rationale and predictable process for transformation beginning with critical reflection and culminating with emancipation. Contemporary researchers have continued Mezirow's work proposing alternative structures to the ten steps he developed. This study was undertaken to further investigate transformation processes for a distinct population of reentry women whose worldview is framed by an evangelical Christian perspective.

The literature reviewed as preparation for this study included the constructs of adult learning, Christian higher education, feminist thought and pedagogy, and transformation theory. These constructs were used to frame the interview protocol which guided the narratives of ten participants. Participants were asked to explore their lives prior to reentering college, the present experience matriculating at ECU, and to project their future after completing an undergraduate degree. Analysis of the women's narratives uncovered the meanings assigned by the women to their assumed roles and identities, the foundational worldview that significantly influenced their roles and

decisions, and the processes engaged to transform long-held assumptions about self in preparation for their future. The original research questions were: 1. Are the educational experiences of female reentry students at an evangelical Christian university transformative? and 2. If so, what is the process of transformation in the context of an evangelical Christian institution for reentry women? After 30 interviews with the ten participants the analyses of narrative themes led to collapsing the original questions into one focused question: What are the processes of transformation for these reentry women within the context of their socio-cultural roles, spiritual beliefs and their enrollment at an evangelical Christian university to complete a bachelor's degree?

This final chapter is a reflection of my analysis of the data in light of the revised research question designed to identify the meaning of socio-cultural norms, evangelical Christian beliefs and reentry experiences in the processes of transformation.

In agreement with the extant research on transformation (Hayes & Flannery, 2000; Hutchings, 1996; Clark, 1993; Yorks & Kasl, 2002), a data analysis identified three basic stages that are foundational to the transformation process: 1) Critical reflection of beliefs, roles or assumptions; 2) Epistemological change; and 3) Integration of new roles, beliefs and meanings. For these women, the transcendence of each stage required negotiation internally and externally. This negotiation integrated the reevaluation of conventional familial roles, identities and relationships; her view of self in relationship with God, and her understanding and definition of her future in light of her changing roles and academic success.

The three stages are not discrete nor should it be assumed that there are definable beginnings and endings to the processes of transformation. The data revealed that

transformation for these women is not a destination but rather an ongoing means of evaluation and renegotiation; perpetually transforming.

The development of a substantive theory of transformation for this study is grounded in the data elicited through reflective biographical story-telling. Narrative analysis of themes uncovered three transforming phases central to the identities, beliefs and operating assumptions of each woman. Each phase is linked to particular stages in the women's lives in which they assumed certain roles based on their cognitive views, Christian beliefs and their motivation to return to college.

Figure 1 illustrates the interconnectedness between a woman's status and role, how she perceives a relationship with God and the related transforming phase. Using the dialogic thinking model (Safarik, 2000) the three roles and phases were further isolated to show how *either/or* and *both/and* thinking is linked to roles, worldview and transformation.

Each of the women described their early adulthood roles as a wife and mother. Some of them even attempted to continue college during this early period of their lives. Phase one of this substantive theory begins prior to the women's college reentry at ECU. Tied to their familial roles is the Christian worldview that endorsed the submission and subordination of women to their husband. Conforming to this expectation meant that the women denied their own needs to care for their husbands and children. Cognitively, the dialogic *either/or* thinking eliminated the possibility of assuming roles outside of the home which would detract from their familial responsibilities. This was consistent with their Christian beliefs as well.

college at ECU. Through classroom experiences, study, and interaction with professors and other students, the women assumed the role of student while maintaining the roles of wife and mother. However, their new academic role stimulated a growing sense of agency and accountability. With each new challenge and success, the women began to see themselves differently. New purpose emerged as they considered a professional future separate from their long-held familial identity. Intellectual stimulation and academic success affirmed their talents and abilities. Family time and responsibilities were renegotiated or, in some cases, sacrificed so the student could succeed. This new role challenged the women to rethink their relationships within the home and with God. No longer were they confined to a subordinate or self-denying status. They were free to explore purpose outside of their homes while maintaining the family role so dear to them. Dialogic both/and thinking is evidenced by their consideration of new meaning and identity outside of traditional familial roles.

Projected for the third phase are the roles of graduate and professional. Several of the women were nearing this stage and described a sense of empowerment to make choices outside of those previously made. While they were discovering this new empowerment for self, they indicated an evolving sense of empowerment in their relationship with God. They were shedding old attitudes and assumptions which had disempowered them as women. Empowerment to make new choices and to think of their future in new ways brought about a greater sense of responsibility both to their world and to their faith. The cognitive dialogic both/and thinking is developed even further in this phase.

Figure 1: Conceptual model of transforming phases: conformity to empowerment

Transforming Phases related to ECU Experience	Cognitive Viewpoint	Roles	Status	Christian Worldview
Phase I Pre-enrollment	Either/ Or	Wife/ Mother	Conformity/ self-denial	Submission/ Subordination
Phase II Enrollment	Both/ And	Student	Agency/ Accountability	Affirmation
Phase III Pose Enrollment/ graduation		Graduate/ Professional	Empowerment	Partnership with God

In either/or thinking, roles and identities are limited to those socio-cultural norms befitting each gender. Females are expected to conform to the norms or risk disconnection by their families and community. There are no options outside accepted norms. Contributing to the conformist model are conservative religious norms which elucidate the traditional mindset that all little girls are destined by God to be wives and mothers and submitted to the rule of a husband as the head of the household.

Obediently conforming to the traditional norm, the adult woman finds herself in a dualistic position that excludes the possibilities of considering roles outside of those caring for her husband and children. This is not to diminish the nature of childcare and homemaking which can be intense at best. But for generations it was thought that a commitment to family was a full time job precluding any other goals the woman might have. Fortunately, in most socio-cultural communities that mindset is changing. For those socio-cultural communities that continue to embrace an “all or nothing” mindset of

motherhood, it is improbable that women have any opportunity to fulfill dreams outside of the norm.

Within traditional evangelical Christian communities, either/or thinking is promoted in the name of preserving the family structure and therefore “God’s will.” Thinking outside of that norm is viewed as threatening to God’s plan, suggesting that all humans are assigned to traditional family roles and lifestyles. Some women who fulfill evangelical traditions exclusively may find themselves in dissatisfying marriages with little support for their roles as mothers much less for any other aspiration she may have. Other women enjoy the protection evangelical traditions afford them to choose marriage and motherhood as their primary careers. This works well for them until that career ends with the departure of their adult children.

Dialogism (Safarik, 2000) takes the form of both/and thinking freeing the woman to consider both the rewards of marriage and motherhood and the possibilities of realizing goals outside her family relationships. It also allows her to consider multiple alternatives in decision making and problem solving. The dualistic patterns of either/or thinking are abandoned empowering the woman to reflect on options which would have been impossible under either/or thinking. Adopting both/and thinking enhances the evangelical woman’s relationship with God by acknowledging her responsibility to the relationship and actively partnering with God to accomplish those purposes utilizing her gifts and goals.

When roles are constructed by a society or culture and the expectations are delimited to the subordinate gender assigned to fulfill that role; there is little room for negotiation without consequences to those who attempt to redefine the role. In the case

of motherhood, redefinition of the role requires that others, either spouse or family members, actively assume some of the expectations assigned to the role allowing the woman to pursue other interests and goals. Less than half of the women in this study still have young children at home but only two of them felt that their husbands were actively supportive of their educational goal and assumed some of the childcare and homemaking responsibilities. The other six women admitted that their return to college at this point was due to the last child leaving the home. Of these women the support they received from their husbands was primarily verbal.

The following sections will identify and define the three transforming phases for this population of reentry women. The first phase in the substantive theory begins with conformity brought about by femaleness and endorsed through early socio-cultural messages. The ability to accept any truth other than that promoted by her family and community is lacking. To survive, she must conform to the normative pressures of her culture.

Conformity

Without exception, the women shared stories of conformity beginning in childhood with messages, spoken or unspoken that, as a female, their destiny lay in traditional roles of marriage and motherhood. Unspoken messages came in the form of the roles they observed their own parents playing out in the family dynamics. In some cases these messages were promoted by parents who held conservative evangelical Christian beliefs about the roles of women. In other cases traditional role messages were conveyed by the woman's peer group, or community. In at least one case the vocalized

message was “do whatever you want to do,” but the model was a highly conservative family structure. Sometimes the message of role identity was communicated by an absence of choice or direction from parents, which left the woman unprepared to assume any role other than dependence on a male partner. Abigail described how childhood messages primed her for an abusive marriage and blocked her ability for dialogic thinking:

The messages we received from our mother about our duty as the daughters of a pastor really set me up to be a people-pleaser, to be very conscious of what others think, to conform, and to not really be that much of an independent thinker or self-oriented. I think I was very much other-oriented in my upbringing. (Abigail I, 4)

As the women approached adulthood, the next stage in conforming to the socio-cultural and/or religious norm was marriage. For many of the women marriage was viewed as an escape from a childhood of neglect or abuse. For others, marriage was a way out of an economically restricted life with no promise of opportunity. When they entered into a marriage relationship, it was understood that the male was the head of the household and their role was to care for him, the children and the home:

I married an abuser! I was at his mercy. Where he wanted to go I went. We had a car, it was my car, but what he wanted to do was what we were going to do and I was going to do it or he was going to whip me for it. And he whipped me when he wanted to whip me. (Lakeeta, I, 2)

It was still very ingrained in all of us that dad was the head of this household and mom submitted to him. . . . when dad came home, mom deferred to him. And I won't say there wasn't some tension once in a while but basically mom deferred to him and said, you know you're the head of the household. (Lynee, I, 1)

God called men as leaders um now that doesn't mean women don't lead, it just means that the head of the home is a leader and I totally believe God called men to be the head of the church. But the man is the head. He is, just like Christ is the head, he is the head. (Lynee, II, 7)

Without exception the women, as mothers, were fiercely protective of their children's well-being, internalizing and buffering any adversity to maintain a sense of stability and support for the family structure. They were just as fierce in their commitment to the marriage contract which they believed transcended the human relationship. As a result, their lives were consumed with caring for others and denying any dreams or goals they had for themselves. Any opportunity to further their education was either interrupted or delayed by the demands of raising children and enabling their husband's professional goals.

The second phase of this substantive theory is self-denial. Having conformed to the expectations of socio-cultural norms and pressures, the woman becomes immersed in caring for others. In this phase, dialogic thinking is absent or underdeveloped as the woman understands her world in terms of either/or and sees the normal structure of home as hierarchical (Safarik, 2000).

Self-denial

The phase of self-denial was linked to the women's stories of conformity to traditional female roles; abdication of self and agency to the husband's instability, irresponsibility, abuse or betrayal; and, in three cases, the custodial relinquishment of their children to the spouse or interruption of career to maintain custody of a child. The women who tried to assume the role of student in addition to their other identities found their efforts cut short when the needs of children, spouse or other family members took precedence. In each case, they were convinced that their needs were not important, that the needs of the family outweighed any aspirations they had for a college education:

I always thought I was there to support him and the children. That's my job. I really felt I was unimportant, there's no time for me (Lynee, p. 19).

This was not true for all the women, however. One of the participants admitted to always wanting to be a wife and mother, believed it was "the best job in the world" and seemed to resent pressure to do anything outside the home:

In my heart of hearts I am a homemaker and that's what I want to do. I mean, I never had . . . the best job I had was raising my kids and making my home. And once you do that, once you have the best job in the world, it's awfully hard to go out anywhere and be content in a job. So, when I say I don't think I know what it is to have a job I like, that's not true. Because I have the best job in the world. (Mary I, 4)

Agency was identified as the third transforming phase in this theory. The woman gains a sense of control over her ability to make and carry through with major decisions that will invariably change her life and that of her family. She becomes more dialogic as she matures and develops with the influence of new experiences and a more inclusive standpoint.

Agency

The nature of reentering college at this point in their lives exposes a level of agency for these women. After many years suppressing their desire to pursue higher education, both internal and external conditions shifted to a point that inspired the decision to seek an academic environment that would fit their needs as an adult student and prepare them for the future:

I realized that I can think about why I believe what I believe and actually go and seek, you know, OK, what does the Bible say? And rather than just reading it as a cold document, you know, and oh this is what I have to do because that's what all good Christians do, you know [laughing], realizing that it's more about the mind. It is about faith but it's also about the mind. (Sarah, III, 2)

The issue of agency for the evangelical woman is complicated by her belief in a God who directs or guides her life. As evangelical Christians, inherent in their ability to act is the belief that no significant decision is sound without a feeling, or for some people a voice, from God that sanctions the decision. Several of the women in this study viewed a radio advertisement or endorsement of a friend as the divine inspiration which led them to ECU. For others while researching several options, the reception they received on inquiry gave them the feeling that ECU was a safe and supportive haven for those who had been out of college for an extended period of time.

Even those women who faced objection from their spouse pursued enrollment based on an assurance that doing so was submission to God's will for their lives. For these women, agency is never an act of self-will; it is an act of what they believe to be God's will. Conversely, not to reenter college would be viewed as disobedience to God's will. When asked what the stimulus was for returning to school at this time and what they attribute to their academic success, most of the women referenced their relationship with God:

God. Part of it is prayer. I honestly believe part of it is prayer. This is not mine, this is God's and as long as I keep it in that perspective. When I take it out of that perspective I'm going to fall on my face. Not that I won't take it out of that perspective [laughing] because there is that tendency to want to be proud of that on my own and it's not. And I know that God has given me the ability to do this. I could never have done this on my own. And He's worked in my family. Two years ago this would not have happened. Three years ago this would not have happened in my family. It would *not* have happened. (Lynee III, 4)

Lynee reflects on a common internal conflict for evangelical Christians – the dichotomy between self-pride and selfless belief that they are nothing apart from God's power in their lives. Lynee's words, "Not that I won't take it out of that perspective . . ."

demonstrates dialogistic nature of her thought patterns. She wavers between it being God's will and her own will; utilizing both/and thinking over either/or thinking.

This relationship between woman and God is difficult to make sense of in light of secular constructs of agency and self-will. Those who do not espouse an evangelical Christian worldview may view feelings of obedience or submission to an abstract authority (God) as not much better than submission to a human authority (spouse). This is true for those women whose marital relationship is abusive, restrictive and disempowering. On the other hand, many Christian women experience a vast difference in these two relationships. The first is perfect, loving and empowering while the later may be flawed, painful and limiting.

Abigail recognizes a different but equal stance on gender on the one hand, but her later comment suggests that there is a socially constructed power differential between men and women not established by God. Her language indicates both/and thinking: men and women can be different *and* equal:

You know this whole thing in the Bible about God's hierarchy and that He sees men and women as equal and um that it's not a matter of better or less than, it's just a matter of differences. And I think that um, God wants us to be empowered. He wants us to feel that we're not just victims of what the men in our lives do or what life throws our way, you know. (Abigail, III, 3)

The fourth and final transforming phase in this theory is empowerment. As the women succeed in the academic environment, they gain self-confidence and a new sense of self; one that is more inclusive, discriminating, and dialogism is more finely tuned.

Empowerment

After years of restrictive gender messages, the battle for confidence and self-

worth destroyed by childhood or marital abuse and self-denial to care for husbands and children the women doubted their ability to compete in an academic environment yet the need or desire to achieve the goal of a bachelor's degree eventually outweighed the self-doubt. And just as they persistently navigated their difficult childhoods and adult lives, the women were working out the challenges in college and succeeding beyond their wildest imagination of what they were capable of doing:

I've already said there's no reason I can't do management. You know? There's *no* reason! I would never have *considered* doing that before. And if I can do this I can do anything. I can do anything. (Lynee II, 9)

While previously thinking that her needs were not important and her sole purpose was to provide and care for her family, Lynee no longer feels limited by her circumstances; her experiences at ECU have transformed her thinking to include possibilities she would never have considered before. Lynee is using both/and thinking to consider new opportunities for her future.

Abigail's narrative is a pointed example of how thinking becomes dialogic and therefore transforming. Using her past history, concepts learned in a Leadership class and dialogic thinking during the study's interviews, she becomes aware of her own power to consider alternatives to old assumptions:

I just decided, it was like, you know what, I don't want to do that anymore. As far as I am able I want to feel like I have the opportunity to make decisions and choices that will um kind of forge my path, trusting that it's under God's control. And I thought, you know, signing for the loans, as much as I hate going into debt, but this was an opportunity for me to say I love this, I want to do this, I know this is where I'm supposed to be and it was like taking some ownership and responsibility for making that happen, I mean helping God to make it happen. I thought I'm just going ahead to try and be proactive instead of . . . I've been in positions where I was busy just trying to survive that I didn't have any sense that I could be a master of my own fate. (Abigail, III, 2)

At this point in their lives, the critical reflection of problematic identities and assumptions is filtered through their faith. This can be problematic if the filter is colored by the same conservative norms they are questioning. These women were discovering a new empowerment in that freedom but not without some inner conflict between their traditional role of wife and mother and their new role as student, learner and master of their fate.

Empowerment for Sarah is explained by a quiet confidence that she no longer has to “prove” herself as she has had to do in the military and civil service. She is learning to be comfortable just being herself; a characteristic of the “constructed” knower (Belenky, et al., 1997), who learns “to live with compromise and to soften ideals that they find unworkable” (p. 152). The constructivist learner is further described by Belenky, et al. as a “refreshing mixture of idealism and realism” (p. 152). This was evident in Sarah’s last interview where she mentioned that she was considering graduate school, but her family and job were the priorities right now. Graduate school might be something to look forward to in the future when her children were more independent:

I don’t think I have to try everything that comes along. I think that I’m more confident in a sincere way. I almost said more of a humble way realizing that there are things I know I can do and that I would be good at or am good at and there are those things I don’t need to do, or I might not be good at [laughing]. And I don’t have to prove myself. (Sarah, III, 4)

Sarah reflects that where once she thought others had all the knowledge, she now recognizes that even though she’s gained knowledge, she doesn’t know everything . . . and therefore neither do “others.” As Belenky, et al. (1997) explain, “When women accept the responsibility for evaluating and continually reevaluating their assumptions about knowledge, the attention and respect that they might once have awarded to the

expert is transformed” (p. 139):

... it's like I have this little thing here that's special to me, but I don't need to use it [laughing] and it's more a quiet confidence but it's also more of a ... humbling ... , so what, I have this and I don't have to use it. I could just be who I am, you know, and isn't that weird that's just strange [laughing]. I know how much I still don't know and that means you don't either”. [laughing]. Whereas before I might have thought they did.
(Sarah, III, 5)

With an emphatic response, Marina indicates that she is empowered by the confidence she has in relationships, her job potential and her future; and recognizes that, as a woman, education is key to her continued success. Those childhood messages to work hard and do the right thing resurface and are connected dialogically to her present success and future potential:

Confidence? Yes! Um, like I say I'm confident now with some of my friends. I'm confident that if I keep working hard, if I keep going to school, if I can keep doing the right thing, I can truly get a good job ... It's like the more education you get, the better life you get. Or the better job you can get as a woman. (Marina, III, 3)

Asked what academic success means to her:

It means that Marina has grown up ... that I have achieved something, that ... I don't know, I'm a professional person. I'm someone who, when you don't have education not many people respect you. You can work ... and the higher people with education they all get at one table in one group and people who have no education they're at the other little table. I like to be at the big table. To me it means I have achieved something, it means I really ... I have to tell myself, I think that I can do this! And because of this I can do more things. I can go higher. It means victory! I made it! I did it! (Marina, III, 6)

Marina's vivid word picture compares how she saw herself before returning to college and now; resembling the delineation between a child and adult. As a wife and mother without the education she saw herself as someone who sat at the “little table” and refers to people with an education as “higher.” Without the education she was a child;

with the education she is an adult worthy of respect. For Marina, the impact of this transformation is the power to envision going even “higher.”

The decision to return to college at this point in their lives has precipitated reflection of long-held roles and assumptions. Especially considering that for over half of the women, their primary maternal role is diminishing with the growth of their children. Where once the idea of entertaining alternative roles or identities was inconceivable due to immersion in meeting the needs of their families, the more mature and inclusive women were freed to consider another chapter of their lives. This presented challenges as the old roles were deeply embedded in their psyche. Citing incidences where they readily resorted to a supportive or submissive role within the classroom or interactions with male classmates or instructors, the very act of reflecting on these events led the women to question the purpose of furthering this posture outside of their families. It is through dialogism and reevaluation that epistemological change begins.

Transformation may result from “learning that leads to some type of fundamental change in the learners’ sense of themselves, their worldviews, their understanding of their pasts, and their orientation to the future” (Hayes & Flannery, 2000, p. 140). Each participant described occasions, within the context of the ECU experience, which served as a catalyst for critical reflection on the socio-cultural roles; their Christian belief constructs; and their sense of self and voice.

The women’s tendencies to care for and support the males in their lives, whether at home, in the office or in the classroom is about who they are as decisively created beings with gifts, empathies, predispositions and leanings purposefully designed to care for others. Further supported by the work of Belenky, et al. (1997), compared to the

positions of silence, received, subjective and procedural knowers, the constructivist knower, a more complex position of knowing, is wired to care and relate to others. As Abigail's dialogism exposed in thinking of how God views male and female, "it's not a matter of better or less than, it's just a matter of differences" (III, 3). Chodorow (as cited in Gilligan, 1993) explains the socialization of gender roles in developmental terms:

they emerge . . . with a basis for 'empathy' built into their primary definition of self . . . [they] emerge with a stronger basis for experiencing another's needs or feelings as one's own . . . Furthermore, girls do not define themselves in terms of the denial of preoedipal relational modes to the same extent as do boys. From very early . . . girls come to experience themselves as less differentiated than boys, as more continuous with and related to the eternal object-world, and as differently oriented to their inner object-world as well (p. 8).

The educational experiences as narrated by the women affirm that during the course of their matriculation at this evangelical Christian university, they were presented with situations, assignments, or dilemmas which stimulated a rethinking of the way they viewed their ability to control the outcome of their future. Their narratives reveal threads of early childhood messages that shaped and defined assumptions about self they carried into their adult relationships. The transformation processes are identifiable in the dialogic nature of their stories: questioning prior definitions of self and their world, assuming new ways of thinking about self, others and their world, and finally implementing new ways of thinking, behaving and responding to change their world.

For women espousing an evangelical Christian worldview, the lens of that worldview can be tainted by man-made conventions designed to keep women in their "place" or possibly worse, to infer that only autonomous, individuated, separated and rational thinking is valued and feminine traits of connectedness, maternal thinking, and care are maligned as "less than" inferring that God would not look on His female

creations with as much favor as He would males. As Abigail stated so expressively:

. . . guess I just decided, I made up my mind that I'm going to choose to believe that God is good and he is loving and tenderhearted, gentle, kind and faithful. And yes He holds us accountable and responsible and we do have our part. (III, 8)

The conflict of autonomy versus connectedness is not specific to the conservative evangelical community. It is pervasive throughout contemporary societies and continues to promote a hierarchical gender role structure where "masculine" autonomy is valued over "feminine" connectedness. Women in all walks of life, professions, socio-economic and cultural communities experience very similar messages of their worth and place in the world. The fact that many of them continue to flourish in the face of these obstacles is a tribute to the female human spirit and the ethic of care they demonstrate to each other.

The process of transformation for females is rarely, if ever, completed in an environment of separateness. The process of transformation experienced by these ten women is resonant in the influential work of other scholars (Belenky, et al., 1997; Gilligan, 1993)

As evidenced in the 30 interviews completed for this study, women's experiences of adult development and re-entry in higher education is gendered. Specifically, the ways women perceive and understand their world depends on their roles in relationships. And, as Gilligan (1993) exposed, a woman's ability to experience transformation is inherently tied to her relationships with others and impacts their lives. Empathically aware of the influence she has on her children, spouse, and others, every consideration for change must be negotiated through these relationships (Gilligan, 1993). When there is external resistance to her growing, transforming self, tension ensues as in the case of Sarah who

was guarded in her interview responses and did not want her husband to have any knowledge of what she was relating in her story.

In summary, the complex nature of the evangelical Christian woman's perception of her relationship with God and others is juxtaposed with her own heart's desires requires careful dialogic reflection in challenging perceptions and transforming old assumptions and behaviors. As demonstrated in this study, a supportive educational environment can provide opportunities for reentry women to engage in the reflective processes necessary to generate transformation. For the women of this study, the preferred educational environment was one in which they felt comfortable that their traditional female roles would be supported but at the same time they would have the freedom to explore new roles and thinking in preparation for their future. The ECU environment afforded them the support and challenge conducive to their growth as Christian women and life-long learners. I think the ECU environment also provided opportunities for them to be aware of socially constructed roles, and to navigate these – decided which ones to accept, which to resist, which to question – all in the process of transformation

The narrative process itself further promoted the women's ongoing transformative processes by stimulating them to think about and explore assumptions about their roles as women, their Christian worldview, and their prospects for the future as maternal roles diminish with the age of their children. Open ended biographical interviews elicited stories of early childhood messages and how those messages shaped the women they were upon reentry at ECU. Stories of experiences within the ECU environment and dialogic contemplation revealed several dramatic transformative changes that will

ultimately reshape the future for some of the women. Without exception, each woman discovered something new about her abilities, her tendencies, strengths and weaknesses that empower them to continue on a path of transformation.

Reflections on the Process

The challenges of this study were numerous. Though care was taken to avoid participants having knowledge of my position within ECU, my title was inadvertently revealed to several of the women. I was concerned that this knowledge would influence my relationship with the participants in two ways. First, that once a woman was aware of my administrative position within the university, she would be inhibited in the interview process. And second, that due to my university position the participant would focus more on her pet peeves or current concerns than tell me the story relative to the study. Fortunately, there was no indication that knowledge of my position in the university affected the participant's responses.

Another constraint was time. As a full-time director for a busy adult center, a wife, mother and grandmother, my own relationships impacted the time to complete this study. When travel was required to complete interviews, it usually meant an overnight stay, time away from work and from my spouse. It was difficult to arrive home from work every night and face the growing hours of audio-tapes. Often there was little time between interviews in which to transcribe the previous interview to better prepare for the next. I relied on field notes and a journal audio tape to record questions or topics I wanted to cover from one interview to the next. But I also realized I was better at speaking into the tape than listening to what I'd recorded. As I transcribed the interviews

I became aware of other trajectories I could have pursued for clarity or deeper information to understand the full nature of the narrative. As coding began, again I was aware of underdeveloped themes which may have contributed more depth to the analysis.

My initial intent was that there would be more ethnic and religious diversity among the participants. The reality is that in the majority of CCCU member institutions, the ethnic composition is 12% Hispanic, African American and Asian to 88% Caucasian (Bergen, R.S. 2002). Generally those who seek out an evangelical Christian university do so because it reinforces their own beliefs. However, from my experience adult students choose ECU's programs for the accelerated and compressed formats rather than the evangelical worldview. On the other hand, as stated previously, traditional gender messages are not restricted to the evangelical Christian community.

Another issue was the busy schedules of the participants. As wives, mothers, employees and students, the commitment to a three-interview process was significant. I sensed that once the first interview was complete, the women began to see the potential benefits to talking about their past, present and future to sort through some of their own lack of clarity and confusion. Once the tapes were transcribed, I mailed them to the participants and asked that they read them and offer feedback. I only heard from two of the women and their response was that they really didn't want to take the time and energy necessary to read back over old history and relive or rethink the painful past. Even if I had gotten more feedback from the women, I recognize that the full responsibility for all interpretations is mine.

Implications

Women are the largest growing population in higher education (U.S. Department of Education, 1995), and make up more than half the learners in formal and informal learning institutions and settings (Hayes & Flannery, 2000). Yet, the overt and hidden curricula across educational levels favors stereotypical roles and images of males and females (Sadker, Sadker, & Klein, 1991), and demonstrate a masculine bias at the very core of most academic disciplines, methodologies and theories (Gilligan, 1982; Hayes & Flannery, 2000; Tisdell, 1993). Given the statistical data, it is apparent that institutions of higher education must address the specific needs of over half of their learners, women. Regardless of age or stage of life, there is no lack of research suggesting that the needs of women learners are vastly different than their male counterparts.

Implications for Curriculum Development

As discussed in Chapters One and Two, the reentry experience is both exhilarating and fearsome for most women. The participants in this study expressed similar feelings. On the other hand, they attributed the adult program curriculum and format at ECU for easing many of the fears and concerns they had prior to reentry. Specifically, they cited the cohort model, small class size, supportive staff and faculty, and individual attention as fundamental to choosing ECU over other institutions.

Creating an educational environment conducive to perspective transformation requires deliberate attention to a balance of content, objectives, assignments and activities. Curriculum that stimulates dialogic thought and transformation requires the student to actively engage in the learning process. It is not enough for the student to

show up for lecture and then regurgitate knowledge from notes and memory on an objective exam. This is not learning that stimulates transformation; it is simply a transmission of information from one vessel to another with very little evidence that the second vessel absorbs and reprocesses the information.

Learning structures designed to foster transformation require students to think dialogically about the knowledge area concepts, and to engage in integrating the concepts into actionable and meaningful synthesis and evaluation. To do this, course activity must include opportunities for the learner to associate what they already know or believe to new information with the goal of producing new perspectives and meanings. Objectives must be designed intentionally to include the principles of higher order and dialogic thinking processes.

Where appropriate, curriculum design must include a balance of research and theory based on the work of older as well as contemporary theorists. The research of Freud, Piaget, and Kohlberg, among others, generalizes males' responses and development to all humans suggesting that females respond and develop exactly like males. Fortunately these flawed theories have been discounted by the work of Gilligan and other feminist scholars and reveal that, while males and females do share some commonalities, their development -- physically, ethically and psychologically, is very different from males.

A good example is the comparison of the works of Kohlberg (as cited in Gilligan, 1993) and Gilligan (1993). Kohlberg's model of moral maturity was based on his work with young boys and developed to reflect discreet, rational stages linked to the ways boys and men think through ethical decisions. The problem is that Kohlberg and others use his

findings based on the way boys think to generalize a theory of moral development for all humans – male and female. In her work with Kohlberg, Gilligan began to observe differences between the ways males and females interacted with their worlds and therefore the different ways of responding to their world. Regrettably, many early researchers viewed this difference as a deficiency on the part of women rather than accepting the differences at face value.

The last course I took in my undergraduate major was Ethics. Kohlberg's theory was presented as "the" theory of moral development. As an assignment, we were asked to identify, using Kohlberg's model, our stage of moral development based on our decisions to several ethical case studies. As I read through the case studies and compared my responses to Kohlberg's model, I became painfully aware that, according to Kohlberg, at the end of my undergraduate work moral development was Stage 3 or 4, average at best.

Consistent with other class exercises, the instructor asked us to reveal our case study decisions, defend them and identify our moral stage based on the findings. I remember feeling ashamed and embarrassed that, in the important work of ethical decision-making; my skills were deficient according to Kohlberg's model. As we went around the room disclosing our findings, I recall an interesting pattern that made no sense to me at that time. All the male students identified their stage of moral development as six to seven, the highest levels of moral development in the model. The women's responses were linked to Stage four or below.

Afterwards, the instructor made a couple of feeble attempts to explain the male/female differences in terms of women's dependent status and compulsive concern

for others, but the message was clear: the males' moral development was superior to the females'. For the adult classroom, curriculum must be designed to expose the truth of all relevant theories and the manner in which they were developed. Not to help women understand how their thinking and perceiving differs from each other and from men is a breach of trust.

While curriculum design is critical to the process of creating an inclusive learning environment, it can easily be circumvented by a faculty member unwilling to change old patterns and perceptions about classroom dynamics and to develop new ways of engaging all learners in the classroom. Meg's example of the professor who compared male and female writing styles is a sobering reminder that old perceptions of a woman's inability to excel in the college classroom still exist:

He made reference to the work we'd done where the male students wrote so he could really read it and it had a lot of clarity but the women, "you ladies, you're going to have to try to get more organized because I have a hard time following you . . . you're all over the place. (Meg, II, 5)

Therefore faculty development is key to the success of curriculum designed in promoting an environment conducive to all learners.

Implications for Faculty Development

Unfortunately most curricula in higher education are developed by males for males (Belenky, et al., 1997). The autonomous, rational, and separated ideal of adulthood targets less than half of the student population of today's institutions of higher learning. To create a learning environment in which all students in the adult classroom benefit, it is vital that the faculty have periodic training sessions addressing the differences that gender presents to the adult classroom and to understand the value of

alternative forms of assessments in evaluating learners' understanding and assimilation of the course concepts.

When I first began teaching adult learners, I was exasperated by some female learners who needed to verbally process, what seemed like, every point I made during a class session. They questioned persistently and then engaged me and others in lengthy discussions that were tied directly to the own experiences. I had a difficult time managing classroom discussions for that reason and had it not been for the curriculum design, I may have resorted to a more didactic style of teaching. Now that I am more familiar with Gilligan and Belenky, et al., the women's' classroom behaviors make more sense to me and I look forward to resuming teaching and utilizing my new understanding to help women exploit their "socially constructed" tendencies.

Therefore, more than just intentional curriculum design that allows for dialogic thinking and discussion, the environment of the classroom must be supportive to the diverse learning styles of all learners. To achieve a supportive environment, faculty must be proficient in classroom management of open discussion and exploration of often sensitive or controversial content areas, especially if an integration of religious worldview is an expected outcome of students' learning. Very often faculty teach as they were taught – using an authoritarian, positivist approach that inhibits learner participation in the learning process. For institutions that value a manageable student-teacher ratio, there is no excuse not to create an environment where learners actively participate in and share responsibility for the educational process.

The most challenging work of faculty professional development is in changing old perceptions and assumptions about how men and women learn, think, communicate,

and relate in the adult classroom and to become more aware of how normative gender roles advantage men and disadvantage women. In a positivist approach to learning, the faculty member's responsibility is to deliver knowledge, assess the receipt of knowledge, and to assign a grade based on the receipt of knowledge. Students sit passively while the content is lectured. Lacking exposure and training in more active, constructivist methodologies faculty will continue to teach using methods most familiar and comfortable for them.

Faculty must also take responsibility to seek out new ways of reaching all students in their classroom. An effective professor knows the audience he/she will be addressing and prepares to use the best teaching methodology to impact students' learning. Diminishing higher education budgets result in diminished resources at the departmental level and often professional development is sacrificed as funds continue to be funneled directly into concrete resources for students. Faculty who are passionate about their profession and have a commitment to the transformation of students should pursue trainings outside of the academy which will enhance their abilities to deliver curriculum to all learners and also model the philosophy of life-long learning. How can your related this more closely to your study (re-entry women with evangelical, Christian worldviews?

Implications for Institutional Policy Development

The very context of the evangelical Christian university requires deliberate dialogue within the institution regarding the spoken and unspoken messages communicated about women's status and roles in society and how those messages affect

the educational experience of reentry women. While promoting traditional conventions for women, the institution also consigns traditional roles to men thus precluding opportunities for both males and females to consider alternative roles; to be open to the possibility that their relationship with God will lead them in a direction outside of their socio-cultural norm. As Holmes (1975) advocates:

Christian education should not blindfold the student's eyes to all the world has to offer, but it should open them to truth wherever it may be found, truth that is ultimately unified in and derived from God. It should be a liberating experience that enlarges horizons, deepens insight, sharpens the mind, exposes new areas of inquiry, and sensitizes our ability to appreciate the good and the beautiful as well as the true (p. 19).

Transformation within the Christian academy must be defined across all disciplines and include open dialogue regarding the pedagogies appropriate to the fulfillment of transformation. The very nature of evangelicalism is to expose others to the grace and truth of God with the expectation that their lives will be transformed dramatically. This is a crucial part of the mission of the evangelical Christian institution. However, it is not the end of transformation for the believer; in fact it is just a beginning. Awareness of transformative processes on the part of administration and faculty is crucial to the delivery of all knowledge areas. Professional development and open dialogue are the foundation to pedagogical change within the institution to ultimately change student lives.

Implications for the Evangelical University

Evangelical institutions of higher education are often caught in the conversation between traditional and contemporary evangelicals. The traditional evangelicals expect that what they are taught at ECU is a traditional biblical doctrine with all the traditional

conventions such as patriarchal family structures. Contemporary evangelicals recognize the changing face of society and encourage academic freedom to discuss the meaning of change for the evangelical Christian. Evangelical institutions committed to Christ-centered education must recognize the necessity of critical dialogue between students and faculty and reject the notion of indoctrination. This is especially true for the institution whose mission includes reentry adults who enroll for the accelerated, adult-centered classroom format more than the evangelical environment. This is not to suggest that the institution compromise its Christian mission in the adult programs. However, the opportunity to create a rich, investigative and dialogic environment for adults spiritually as well as academically requires an open environment where adults can examine their worldview, learn to critically defend their beliefs whether Christian or not, and understand how their worldview plays out in their lives. Institutions committed to indoctrination risk losing adult students who would benefit from the Gospel message of hope, but who are repelled by the institution's tactics.

Evangelical institutions have a responsibility to be especially responsive to the needs of adult women who are survivors of abuse, identity crises, or self-defeating behaviors. These women need to know that they are valued, they can succeed to be all that God wants them to be, and that they hold very special gifts to help others. It is not biblical to tell a woman she cannot preach, cannot hold a leadership position within a church, or cannot lead men. These are lies that have been promoted for thousands of years by self-serving patriarchal structures bent on demeaning females to keep them powerless. As Kassian (1992) eloquently writes,

Men *have* self-centeredly attempted to shape truth and reality. But their actions do not overturn reality. . . The reality of God exists independent of

our human distortion of that reality. God's pattern exists even if not one male or female on the face of this earth ever acknowledges it or lives by it (p. 241).

The danger of traditional evangelicalism, as with any dogma, is the misuse of interpretations created to fit specific human needs of those in power in order to control the powerless. As Kassian stated, this does not change the reality of God's word, but it can generate significant hurt, pain and suffering for the powerless.

Implications for Reentry Women

Returning to college under the very best circumstances is daunting at best for the woman who has been out of school for many years. Her fears can be so intense that the inner noise from early childhood messages or feelings of inadequacy in adulthood may obscure her experience to the point that there is no perceptible growth between reentry and graduation. While it is incumbent on the institution to ensure that curriculum is designed and faculty trained to enhance a woman's ability to learn, the woman must accept some responsibility in the process as well. She must be willing to critically evaluate her old ways of thinking, weigh them against her newly formed thinking structures and to act on a decision to change or to remain the same. This may require that old wounds are reopened for reevaluation but that may promote a deeper healing in the long run.

The female reentry student must be willing to negotiate new ways of thinking, to bring her relationships along with her transformation, and to forgive herself and others if everybody does not get on board immediately. She must remain true to her goals and aspirations, persevering when the challenge becomes overwhelming, and maintaining

support of her relationships. As Lynee illustrated so well in her story, sometimes a woman must be willing to get out of the way so God can do his work. This may mean reframing her religious beliefs in a way that allows her to love self, to feel self-worth, ultimately to be full human beings whose purpose is to serve God and to complete His purpose in her life; to be in full partnership with God for the fulfillment of the life He created in her.

Summary

The presence of adult female learners in the academy classroom poses numerous implications for curriculum and faculty development, institutional policy and development of the women learners. It is not sufficient for institutions to open their doors to this population of learner, take their limited financial resources, and then educate them as they would an all-male student body. The fact that female reentry students still navigate and succeed in the patriarchal classroom environment is more a testimony to their determination than it is to any inclusive instructional intent.

Curriculum designers must respond to the diverse perspectives women bring to the college classroom and incorporate assignments and activities which test old perspectives and assumptions in a supportive, dialogic manner. This is true of faculty developers as well. The nature of transformation requires an environment of safe inquiry, discussion, and exploration and ultimately supportive of the outcomes demonstrated by the women.

An understanding of how transformative processes inform pedagogy are foundational to promoting transformation within the classroom and educational

environment as a whole. Administration and faculty must be willing to engage in open dialogue and seek professional development as a means of transforming their own old assumptions and beliefs about the learning environment, gender roles, and the messages communicated within the classroom that further flawed thinking.

With a little assistance, the reentry woman is capable of overcoming her past and achieving great things. The Christian reentry woman must be willing to examine those old roles and assumptions that have kept her from fulfilling her dreams and quite possibly the purposes God has ordained for her. She must be willing to risk some relationships that discourage her transformation. And she must be willing to walk in faith, understanding that God has empowered her to be an active partner with Him in accomplishing great things.

Recommendations for Future Research

As I complete this work, I'm inspired to follow these ten women beyond their ECU experience to see where their lives will take them, in five and then ten years, to gain a better understanding of how transformation at ECU impacts their lives. It would also be significant to gain their perspective on their experience once the stress of completing the requirements is over. I remember at the time I graduated at the undergraduate level I felt completely numb and when asked what the greatest thing I'd learned was, I couldn't think of anything. However, as the months passed, all the knowledge and understanding gained throughout the experience started to emerge in my conscious and I was amazed at the vastness of the learning I'd assimilated. As I interviewed the participants, I couldn't help but wonder if they were experiencing the same thing at the end of their senior year

and would be better able to respond to my questioning six months to a year beyond graduation.

Further research should include appropriate assessment measures for reentry women to determine what aspects of their experience produce learning in cognitive and affective domains. For the evangelical institution, assessment of the integration of faith in learning is a critical need across all student bodies. However it is apparent from this study that the manner in which women learn to integrate their faith in their learning may be very different from males due to the meanings women have been taught to ascribe to their identities. Learning is always filtered through the lens of the individual. How women are conditioned to see themselves in the world ultimately influences how they learn and what they learn.

Further research could elicit the stories of evangelical reentry men: How do the socio-cultural roles they are assigned enhance or impede their learning? How do their view their maleness outside of their family role? Do female classmate's perceptions of their roles impact their engagement in the classroom? How do they integrate their faith with the emerging reality that women are assuming greater leadership in society?

This study has also inspired me to seek a better understanding of the traditional aged female student's experience in the evangelical academy. How does she reconcile traditional female roles and the enormous responsibility of caring for home and children in light of her significant financial and time investment in a college education? Are the messages she received as a child different from those received by the women in my study? Has culture change significantly so that young females have more support to develop self outside of evangelical traditions?

There is no end to the possibilities for future research in the field of adult education and specifically reentry women. As our society changes there are increasing demands on both men and women to be financially productive; the demands to raise children with moral and ethical values who are good citizens and critical thinkers increases as well. Unlike any other time in our nation's history, there is more opportunity for women to work outside of the home, but not without tension within the family to ensure stability and security for all family members.

Summary

The purposes of higher education, specifically Christian higher education as proposed by Naugle (n.d.) “to impact the course of social, cultural and economic events and to influence the lives the adult students personally, intellectually and spiritually” (Retrieved April 1, 2003 from: www.iclnet.org/pub/facdialogue/24/naugle24, ¶ 44). The life stories of ten female reentry women matriculating at ECU contribute several themes to the dialogue on Christian women in higher education. First, their lives are impacted personally, intellectually and spiritually through their experiences at ECU. In a variety of ways, these experiences have prompted the process of critical reflection, epistemological change, and adopting new thinking and behaviors resulting in transformation. The women's stories illustrated that transformation is often gradual and a result of multiple interactions, processes, activities. Abigail's dilemma to accept or reject student loans is one such example where course concepts, dialogic narrative during our interviews, and reflection of past experience and perspective converged to transform her frame of mind and resulting decision.

The second theme from the women's stories is the need for policy makers, faculty and curriculum developers to better understand the unique context in which many reentry women return to college, how that context influences their learning experience, and the significant role the institution can play in stimulating the woman's growth and change. In the context of an evangelical university, there is even greater need for understanding and responsiveness to the religious norms that shaped her earlier life and the complexity involved in renegotiating long-held beliefs. It is also important for the curriculum decision-makers to adopt an inclusive position ensuring that textbooks and other teaching materials present a balanced view of male and female roles and issues. Faculty sensitivity to these issues is helpful in classroom discussions and interactions. Amy's story of sexually derogatory comments allowed to persist within the classroom without faculty intervention is a good example of unspoken messages delivered when these issues are not confronted. Female students deserve a classroom free from covert or overt messages designed to remind them of their "place."

The third theme is the nature of femaleness and its intrinsic ethic of care. The lives of the participants have been defined by their love and commitment to their husbands and children to their own disadvantage. They sacrificed their own dreams and goals to provide nurturance, stability, and security for their children, often in the face of overwhelming odds and difficulties. Now, engaged in an opportunity to satisfy a longing for education and, in most cases, to prepare for a new chapter in their lives the women are developing new identities and gaining a voice; they are gaining power over their own lives.

The fourth theme is one of their personal faith and spiritual belief. The attainment of self-worth and voice allows the women to conscientiously construct new meanings for their beliefs and thus their purpose in God's will. They are free to participate as active partners in carrying out what they perceive to be His purpose for their lives from this point forward. They are no longer constrained by traditional roles or identities that weaken their sense of self and agency. In fact, most of the women now believe they have a responsibility to emerge from old thought patterns to prepare for the future. And for most, that future is one of care and support for others in need of their gifts and experience.

The women of this study reentered college fearful of many things: being thought of as stupid, having their goal interrupted again, not competing academically, not fulfilling their familial roles and sacrificing time with their children and spouses. Several even questioned whether the expenditure of time and money was wise and would be viewed as selfish. They are completing an undergraduate degree with an increased sense of self and voice, new identity and self-worth, confidence that they can achieve anything they decide to do, and a connection to God's purpose for their life beyond their maternal role. In closing I offer the women's plans for the future as evidence of transformation resulting from their experiences at ECU:

Mary Beth is preparing to teach basic education courses to adults who need remedial reading and writing before reentering college.

Amy has been accepted in a graduate counseling program in preparation for career counseling on some level.

Marina sees herself completing a master's and possibly doctorate program at some point, but is immediately interested in a profession where she can help other Hispanic women realize their goals.

Meg would like to become an advocate for parents with special needs children as a result of her experiences raising her son.

LaKeeta is confident she is supposed to continue her caregiver role in a professional capacity but is unsure exactly what that will be at this point. She is planning to enter a graduate program in the near future. She is also writing a book on the Holy Spirit.

Lynnee is relishing the idea that she can progress into a management position in her large organization. She will graduate with a double major.

Mary sees herself eventually progressing in management of information technology to use her people skills to draw out the more technical-minded employees.

Charlie is still tentative about her future, but recognizes a need to further her education, for education's sake, and to gain more understanding of the deaf culture to remain connected with her deaf son.

Sarah is looking forward to more time with her family. Her education has given her a quiet confidence that, at least for now, is satisfying to her.

Abigail feels a called to counsel victims of abuse and abortion, but is concentrating most on healing and doing well in her studies.

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APPENDIX A: RECRUITING POSTER

Colorado State University

Female Volunteers Needed for Doctoral Research Study

Title of Research: Perspective Transformation among Female Reentry Students at an Evangelical Christian University

Female bachelor degree-seeking students needed to participate in a research study looking at women's educational experiences at an evangelical Christian university

Requirements

- 1) Returned to college after an absence of 5 or more years.
- 2) 30 years of age or older.
- 3) In a committed relationship or have been in a committed relationship.
- 4) Have children.
- 5) Completed a minimum of 30 semester hours since reentry at Colorado Christian University

Volunteer participation includes **three 60 – 90 minute personal interviews** over a **45 day period** with possible follow-up via telephone communication.

If you are interested and meet the requirements, please contact **Debra Wade at 1-800-484-6300** for further information.

Principal Investigator: Lynn Safarik, Ph.D. (970) 207-9952

APPENDIX B: INTRODUCTION LETTER TO PARTICIPANTS

June 29, 2003

Dear

We are writing to request your volunteer participation in a research project. We are conducting a study to explore the experiences of adult female students who have returned to college to complete an undergraduate degree. We are interested in learning about the ways in which your educational experience may or may not have helped your growth and development as a female adult learner. The research will be used as the basis for a dissertation at Colorado State University.

The data will be collected through three one-hour, face to face interviews which Debra Wade will conduct. The interviews will take place over the span of two months and at a mutually agreed upon location. It is expected that the interviews will be conducted in the months of August and September. After the interviews are completed, it may be necessary to contact you by telephone or e-mail for clarification of information given in the interviews.

In order to maintain confidentiality, a pseudonym will identify all participants and only the researcher and principal investigator will have access to that information.

Debra will be contacting you in the next week to answer any questions you may have and to determine your interest in participating in this study.

Sincerely,

Debra H. Wade
Doctoral Candidate
School of Education
Colorado State University

Lynn Safarik, Ph.D.
Principal Investigator
School of Education
Colorado State University

APPENDIX C: INFORMED CONSENT

COLORADO STATE UNIVERSITY
INFORMED CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH PROJECT

TITLE OF PROJECT: Perspective Transformation among Female Reentry Students at an Evangelical Christian University

NAME OF PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Lynn Safarik, PhD., School of Education, Colorado State University

NAME OF CO-INVESTIGATOR: Debra H. Wade, Doctoral Student, School of Education, Colorado State University

CONTACT NAME AND PHONE NUMBER FOR QUESTIONS/PROBLEMS: Debra H. Wade, (719) 622-1520

PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH: The purpose of this research is to explore your experiences as a female reentry student at an evangelical Christian University. You will be one of 12 participants. Data for the research will be gathered through individual interviews. Each participant will be interviewed three times with follow up by telephone or e-mail if necessary. The interviews are expected to last approximately one hour each. You will be asked to respond to questions about the meaning of your educational experiences at Colorado Christian University.

With your permission, all interviews will be audio taped to maintain accuracy of our dialogue. Audiotapes will be transcribed by the researcher or a contracted transcriber. All information regarding your participation in this research will be kept strictly confidential. Upon successful completion of the study, all audiotapes, transcripts and coded analyses will be held by the principal investigator according to Colorado State University research protocol.

RISKS INHERENT IN THE PROCEDURES: There are no known risks to participants in this study. It is not possible to identify all potential risks in research procedures, but the researcher(s) have taken reasonable safeguards to minimize any known and potential, but unknown, risks.

BENEFITS: There are no known benefits to the participants other than the potential for participants to reflect on their educational experiences at Colorado Christian University.

Page 1 of 2 Participant's Initials _____ Date _____

CONFIDENTIALITY: Any personal information obtained or recorded in connection with this study will be kept confidential. Each participant will have a confidential file with a code which will serve as a way to identify information specific to them. This file will only be accessible to the principal investigator and the investigator. Each participant will have the opportunity to receive a copy of her transcript. All audiotapes will be held by the principal investigator according to CSU research protocol.

LIABILITY: The Colorado Governmental Immunity Act determines and may limit Colorado State University's legal responsibility if an injury happens because of this study. Claims against the University must be filed within 180 days of the injury.

Questions about participants' rights may be directed to Celia S. Walker at (970) 491-1563.

PARTICIPATION:

Your participation in this research is voluntary. If you decide to participate in the study, you may withdraw your consent and stop participating at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

Your signature acknowledges that you have read the information stated and willingly sign this consent form. Your signature also acknowledges that you have received, on the date signed, a copy of this document containing 2 pages.

Participant name (printed)

Participant signature

Date

Witness to signature (project staff)

Date

APPENDIX D: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Interview One: Focused Life History

1. Tell me about your past life up until the time you enrolled at Colorado Christian University – go back as far as possible (limit 90 minutes).
2. What made you decide to enroll in college at this time in your life?

Interview Two: The Details of Experience

1. The purpose of this interview is to concentrate on the concrete details of your experience at CCU. As best as possible, reconstruct the details of your experience.
2. What made you choose your current major?
3. Talk about your relationship with other students, instructors, staff, your mentors and the wider community.
4. Reconstruct a day in their role as a student at CCU from the moment you wake up to when you fall asleep.
5. What stories can you relate about your experience as a reentry student at CCU?
 - a. What were your initial concerns and thoughts about going to college?
 - b. What were your concerns and thoughts during your time in college?
 - c. What classes did you find interesting?
 - d. How do you perform academically?

Interview Three: Reflection on the Meaning

1. Given what you have said about your life before you reentered college this time and given what you have said about your experience as a student at CCU, what meanings or understandings can you assign to your experience at CCU?
2. What were significant non-college related experiences?
3. What effect does college have on the family of the interviewee?
4. Did you experience advantages over traditional students?
5. Where there any issues that you were/are dissatisfied with?
6. What plans do you have for the time after graduation?