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RETROSPECTION ON A BACCALAUREATE DEGREE IN MID-LIFE:

WHAT DOES IT MEAN IN A WOMAN'S LIFE?

A Dissertation

SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE FACULTY

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

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DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

By

Rebecca J. M. Kennedy
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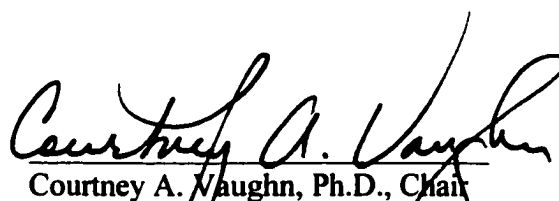
RETROSPECTION ON A BACCALAUREATE DEGREE IN MIDLIFE:
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A Dissertation APPROVED FOR THE
COLLEGE OF EDUCATION

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP AND POLICY STUDIES
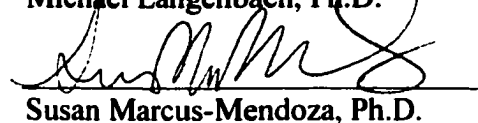
BY

Courtney A. Vaughn, Ph.D., Chair

Joan K. Smith, Ph.D.

Irene Karpiak, Ph.D.

Michael Langenbach, Ph.D.

Susan Marcus-Mendoza, Ph.D.

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DEDICATION

To Harrel, Beth, John and Carrie

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ABSTRACT

A national higher education public policy agenda enmeshed in economic issues threatens to diminish access and disregard the baccalaureate educational needs of women in midlife. The numbers of adult women attaining bachelor's degrees continues to rise despite societal rewards that favor men in salary and position. Yet, the meaning and consequences of baccalaureate attainment among women who earn degrees in midlife is unarticulated in the public policy arena. An uninformed national higher education public policy agenda threatens to limit adult women from accessing higher education and deprives society of the contributions women have the potential to make. To address this issue, this phenomenological study of eight women explored the meanings and consequences of a baccalaureate in the life experiences of women 9 to 22 years after mid-life degree attainment. Through higher education experiences, a majority of women were affirmed and nourished through relationships with others, grew in esteem and development of authentic selves, generated expectations for college completion in rela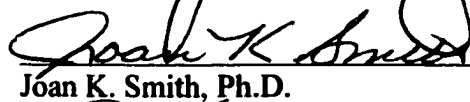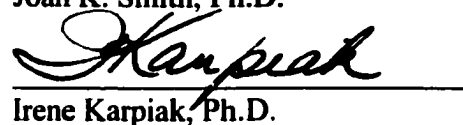tionships with others, and experienced perspective transformations relevant to relationships critical to them. The formal higher education experience in some way was integral to change in the lives of all of the women. Finding suggest perspective transformation occurred for some, but not for all of the women. Perspective transformation was directly or indirectly tied to baccalaureate degree pursuit or attainment. For a woman whose worldview shifted, the change in the way she thought about her life was emancipatory. The participants who renegotiated or disconnected from oppressive or limiting primary relationships incrementally arrived at a perspective transformation. Her changed perspective subsequently guided her way of thinking about

herself and shaped her decisions, permitting her growth and freedom in becoming authentic and self-fulfilled. Uncritically acquired meaning perspectives from cultural and parental sources powerfully influenced decisions in early adulthood. The majority of participants, most of the time, did not consciously recognize uncritically acquired meaning perspectives undergirding the decision to earn baccalaureate degrees. As transformative learning theorist Jack Mezirow (2000) posited, the women tended to depend on the meaning perspectives, acting on them uncritically in ways that maintained meaning perspectives. When a woman's meaning perspectives came into conflict with another of her meaning perspectives, she negotiated an accommodation or gave one priority over another without consciously examining the underlying assumptions of her meaning frames. In unconsciously choosing which meaning structure to give priority, participants chose a relational response. Participants attempted to negotiate an accommodation or to straddle the fence rather than disrupt critical relationship connections. When uncritically acquired meaning perspective served to suppress self authenticity, the affected woman tended to act to emancipate herself before consciously becoming aware of her meaning assumptions. The findings indicate midlife baccalaureate educated women are parlaying degrees into careers providing economic gain to society at large, encouraging others to attain degrees, and becoming move widely involved participants and contributors to society. A public policy higher education agenda responsive to the contributions midlife baccalaureate degreed women are making in society will design and implement strategies to increase the numbers of women accessing higher education and will develop strategies to curtail underutilization of women in the marketplace.

RETROSPECTION ON A BACHELOR'S DEGREE IN MIDLIFE:

WHAT DOES IT MEAN IN A WOMAN'S LIFE?

CHAPTER 1

THE RESEARCH PROBLEM

<u>Introduction</u>

The meanings and consequences of a bachelor's degree to women who earn the

credential between age 30 and 55 is predominately reduced to economic attributes by

society at large (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000; U.S. Department of Education, 1995; 1999;

2000; 2001a). While few would dispute the worth of these measures, economics is but

one dimension of the interplay higher education might demonstrate in the depth and scope

of a woman's life (Adleman, 1991; Astin, 1977; 1993; Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger &

Tarule, 1997; Conan, 2002; Daloz, 1999; Withey, 1971). In the public policy arena,

escalating higher education costs coupled with diminishing percentages of state resources

have renewed discussion over the purposes of higher education and heightened the

importance of research addressing meaning and consequence (Conan, 2002; Immarwahr,

1998; Jones, Ewell, & McGuiness, 1998; Richardson, Bracco, Callen & Finey, 1998).

Public funding shortfalls exacerbate tensions in the ongoing debate over whether higher

education is primarily beneficial to the individual or to society as a whole (Immerwahr,

1998; Richardson et al., 1998). Ascendent in the policy arena are those taking the position

that the investment in higher education accrues to the individual who therefore should

shoulder the greatest portion of the cost (Immerwahr, 1998). However, if individuals must

bear more of the cost and public funding is curtailed, student access is reduced,

potentially jeopardizing opportunities for midlife adult women seeking baccalaureate

degrees (National Center for Public Policy & Higher Education, 2002). Ultimately, the decision-making process to determine higher education public policy is more fully informed by a multi-dimensional narrative of the ways a higher education is holistically integrated into the individual and social matrix of women's life experiences.

Background of the Problem

Economic Attributes of Bachelors Degrees

Major societal indicators routinely updated by the federal government focus on the economic attributes of a baccalaureate education (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000; U.S. Department of Education, 1995, 1999, 2000, 2001a). Governmental agencies correlate salaries by age, gender, and job position to the level of educational attainment; track employment rates by educational attainment; prepare charts showing income levels in accordance with educational attainment; and calculate the worth of a degree over a lifetime in terms of income (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000; U.S. Department of Education, 2001a, 2001b). Reporting instruments present bachelors degrees tied to economic outcomes as a public measure of status, worth, and financial cost-benefit to society and to the individual (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000; U.S. Department of Education, 2001a, 2001b).

Gendered Economic Disparities

The economic consequences of higher education are substantially lower for women than for men on standard economic measures of salary and position (Adelman, 1991). The median annual income for men with a bachelor's degree working full-time in 1998 was $51,405 while women earned $36,599, 28.9% or $14,848 less than men (U.S. Department of Education, 2001b). Comparatively, men with a high school diploma earned a median annual income of $31,477, which is merely $5,082 less than a

baccalaureate educated woman but almost $20,000 less than a baccalaureate educated

man. Women high school graduates earned $22,780 (U.S. Department of Education,

2001b). The gender pay disparity is more marked in higher salaried positions. In 1998,

men outnumbered women 2:1 in jobs paying $50,000-$74,999, and men outnumbered

women 4:1 in jobs paying $75,000 and over (U.S. Department of Education, 2001b).

Only a portion of the salary discrepancy is due to women's career field selections (U.S.

Department of Education, 1995):

> Although females tend to major in different subjects than males in college, many
> of these differences have narrowed over time. But despite large gains in
> educational attainment and labor force participation, significant differences in
> earnings persist between females and males, even at similar levels of education.
> (p. 18)

Women bachelor's degree holders compared to men: 1) earn lower salaries; 2) hold fewer

top-paying positions; 3) have fewer full-time positions in the workforce; 4) experience a

higher rate of unemployment; and 5) are employed in lower-paying professions and

sectors of the economy (U.S. Department of Education, 2001b; Adelman, 1991). Not only

do women lose when their college degree is devalued, but society loses as well. European

automotive industrialist Kerstin Keen observes, "Americans are missing something.

You're not utilizing women as well as you have prepared them" (Adelman, 1991, p. 1).

Adult Women's Clamor for Degrees

Regardless of the economic gender differential, women embrace higher education

in astonishing numbers. Nearly one-fifth of the 14.6 million students enrolled in college

in 1998 were women over 30, a cohort expected to be a consistent client sector in higher

education throughout this decade (U.S. Department of Education, 2001a). In an

historically unprecedented gender turnabout, women earned more undergraduate degrees

than men every year since 1981-82 without exception, (U.S. Department of Education,

2001a). In all prior years, the majority of degrees were conferred on men. The nation has

kept numerical records of degrees conferred since1869 (U.S. Department of Education,

2001a). The swelling tide of women who achieved baccalaureate degrees marks a societal

shift in postsecondary educational patterns of economic activity, access and equity

(Bourgeois, Duke, Guyot, & Merrill, 1999). Notably, a sizable market share of the female

enrollment and graduation rates are attributed to the historically underserved population

of women over age 25 who returned to complete college studies or to enroll for the first

time (U.S. Department of Education, 2001b) . Their numbers have risen dramatically

since the rapid growth adult education movement began in the 1970s (Cross, 1981; Horn

& Carroll, 1996) . Among adults over 25 in the entire population, 23.1 percent of

women–4.4 percent below the number of men–have earned bachelor's degrees (U.S.

Department of Education, 2001a).

Cost Threat to the American Dream

A majority of Americans believe a college education is the ticket to "the

'American dream': a decent-paying job, a home, a secure retirement, and the promise of a

better life for their children" (Immerwahr, 2002, p. 14). A 1998 public opinion survey of

Americans' views on higher education found higher education esteemed as the key to a

middle-class lifestyle (Immerwahr, 1998, 2002) . A college degree, particularly earned at

an institution recognized as prestigious among the upper class elite, is a critical

determinate of position and salary (Bourgeois et al., 1999; Zemsky & Shaman, 1997).

Who goes to college, which college they go to, what they major in, and the degree they

earn are direct correlates to the most desirable jobs and the highest salaries (Bourgeois et

al., 1999; Immerwahr, 1998; Walker, 1999; Zemsky & Shaman, 1997). Employment, income considerations, and entry to particular career fields hinge on successful completion of a bachelor's degree . This societal seal of achievement translates into a credentialing criterion for a multitude of career fields, the standard prerequisite for gaining access to middle and upper class professions requiring additional tests and training (Bourgeois et al., 1999; Walker, 1999).

Despite disparate rewards compared to men, midlife women must overcome formidable cost barriers in their quest to attain a baccalaureate degree (U.S. Department of Education, 1999). Adult women who attend college are likely to be in lower income brackets (Adelman, 1991; Cross, 1981). At the bachelor's degree level, a students's average annual cost in the mid-1990s was $10,800 to attend a four-year public institution and $20,000 to attend a four-year private, not-for-profit institution (U.S. Department of Education, 1999). Annual tuition and fees for full-time students ranged from $4,000 to $18,000, a rate of increase that is rising faster than median family income (U.S. Department of Education, 1999). Student debt has risen correspondingly, and over 50 percent of students graduate under the burden of student loans (U.S. Department of Education, 1999). Present private and public institutional costs to run the higher education megalith are estimated to be well over $200 billion a year (U.S. Department of Education, 2001a).

Public policy-makers peer askance at escalating higher education costs in an environment of revenue shortfalls and worsening economic conditions (American Association of State Colleges & Universities, 2001a, 2002; National Center for Public Policy & Higher Education, 2002). Appropriations to higher education in a majority of

states have increased numerically, but declined as a percentage of overall state budgets over the past two decades (American Association of State Colleges & Universities, 2001, 2002; National Center for Public Policy & Higher Education, 2002; U.S. Department of Education, 2001a). Tuition revenues at public institutions rose from $1,696 to $3,512 per student from 1980 to 1998 (National Center for Public Policy & Higher Education, 2002). Anticipated higher education state appropriation cutbacks through 2005 are expected to hinder college accessibility for all but the wealthiest students (American Association of State Colleges & Universities, 2001, 2002; National Center for Public Policy & Higher Education, 2002).

Individual Gains Versus Societal Gains: Who Benefits?

Cost issues have rekindled debate over the purpose of higher education in the public policy arena. A longstanding argument over whether higher education predominately serves the individual or the common good is regaining the attention of decision-makers (American Association of State Colleges & Universities, 2001; National Center for Public Policy & Higher Education, 2002) . In a 1998 public opinion survey, a nearly two-thirds majority of business leaders but less than half of the academic and government leaders agreed with the statement: "Since students reap the benefits of going to college, they and their families should be responsible for paying most of its costs" (Immerwahr, 2002, p. 14). Those who take the position higher education's value is less about societal good and more about an individual's attainment of the "American Dream" also take the view the individual should bear the brunt of the cost (American Association of State Colleges & Universities, 2001, 2002; Immerwahr, 1998, 2002; Jones et al., 1998). As noted previously, increasing already high costs serves as a deterrent to all but

highest income midlife women seeking bachelor's degrees. Those persuaded a higher

education accrues to the common good argue a college-educated people protect

democratic ideals, enhance the quality of life, provide a technologically skilled

workforce, and enrich economic development for all of society (American Association of

State Colleges & Universities, 2001, 2002; Immerwahr, 1998; Jones et al., 1998). In

actuality, higher education's complex interaction for individuals and society has import

for both personal and common goods (American Association of State Colleges &

Universities, 2001, National Public for Public Policy & Higher Education, 2002). For

example, an individual's average annual income at the bachelor's degree level exceeds

high school attainment by $21,106 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). The substantially higher

incomes of bachelor's degree holders accrues a societal benefit in higher federal and state

tax revenues (Vernez, Krop, & Rydell, 1999). Society also gains financially through

savings in government assistance programs because people with college educations are

less likely to be on welfare or be incarcerated (Vernez et al., 1999). However, the public

policy agenda is silent on the views of women who have earned bachelor's degrees in

midlife.

<u>Significance of the Study</u>

In order to address the public policy agenda on the multi-dimensional individual

and societal aspects of higher education for mid-life women, it is essential to understand

women's perspectives on higher education integrated into their life experiences.

Women's stories told in the context of life experiences could serve to diminish the

almost singular focus on economics and illuminate the human dimensions of a higher

education. Policy-makers would be uniquely informed by the narrative reflections of

women's life experiences prior to degree attainment compared to those a period of years after earning a bachelor's degree. Their perspectives would reveal the individual and societal dynamics of women's experiences "before and after" bachelor's degree attainment. As narrative researchers Clandinin and Connelly (1999, p. 2) observe, "People are individuals and need to be understood as such, but they cannot be understood only as individuals. They are always in relation, always in a social context."

Emergent Meaning-based Research

A voluminous body of literature informs our traditional understanding of higher education outcomes. Comprehensive compilations of the studies demonstrate that the research predominately focused on traditional white, male students and was situated in empirical research traditions (Astin, 1977, 1993; Feldman & Newcomb, 1969; Knox, Lindsay, Kolb, & Feldman, 1995; Trent & Medsker, 1968; Withey, 1971). After the 1960s when the growing influx of adult learners began changing the face of the student body, literature grew regarding the impact of college on adults as well (Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Cross, 1981; Dill & Henley, 1998; Glass & Harshberger, 1974; Kasworm, 1980, 1993, 1994; Knowles, 1990; Kuh, 1996, Pace, 1979). Much of the research was conducted to ascertain the impact of college attendance on students during and immediately after graduation (Astin, 1977, 1993; Bowen, 1977; Cross, 1981; Feldman & Newcomb, 1969; Knox et al., 1995; Pace, 1979; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Trent & Medsker, 1968).

Diverging from these classic areas of higher education research, an emerging line of adult learning inquiry seeks to understand meaning and change associated with higher education consequences integrated in life experience (Brunt, 1995; Clark, 1991; Hayes &

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Flannery, 2000; Johnson-Bailey, 2001; Mezirow, 1978; Pope, 1996; Vogelsang, 1993; Weisberger, 1995). Situated in this formative literature, this study seeks to understand a woman's perspective of the meaning and consequence of higher education and how, or if, it is holistically integrated into her life experiences. In order to gain such an understanding, exploration is needed of women's views of the baccalaureate degree phenomenon in contrast and comparison to her life experiences with and without degree attainment (Clark & Wilson, 1991). An interpretive framework centered on transformative learning theory provides an avenue for understanding acquired meaning perspectives and change holistically integrated in life experience (Cranton, 1996; Freire, 1999; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999, Mezirow, 1978, 1990, 1991, 2000). The framework's focus also includes concepts of identity, connection and relationship drawn from women's development theory (Miller, 1976; Belenky et al., 1997; Chodorow, 1974; Gilligan, 1982; Hall, 1999; Schaff, 1985).

Statement of the Problem

A national higher education public policy agenda enmeshed in economic issues threatens to diminish access and disregard baccalaureate educational needs of women in midlife. The numbers of adult women attaining bachelor's degrees continues to rise despite societal rewards that favor men in salary and position. Women who earn baccalaureate degrees in midlife apparently imbue the degree with meaning and consequences unarticulated in the public policy arena. A rich body of predominantly empirical literature enriches understanding of the personal attributes, learning characteristics, and immediate outcomes of adult women who earn baccalaureate degrees. Still lacking is a useful understanding of the meaning and consequence of a baccalaureate

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education earned by midlife women integrated into individual and societal life experiences over time. A more complete picture drawn from the perspective of women who have experienced life with and without baccalaureate educations is needed to inform the national higher education public policy agenda. An uninformed agenda threatens to limit adult women from accessing higher education and deprives society of the contributions women have the potential to make. The lack of knowledge of women's historical and sociocultural meaning context limits our understanding of their higher education experiences integrated into their lives (Clark & Wilson, 1991).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to explore the meanings and consequences of higher education in the life experience of women who earned a baccalaureate degree in midlife. The study will examine the women's perceptions of the meaning and consequence of their baccalaureate education integrated into their individual and societal life experiences over time. On a theoretical level, the intention of this study is to contribute to the emerging literature on meaning perspectives and change within transformative learning theory. In this regard, the study's focus is on women learners in higher education concerning meaning perspectives and change integrated into their life experiences five to twenty-five years after earning a baccalaureate degree. On a practical level, the intention of this study is to contribute to the higher education public policy agenda by identifying characteristics that do or do not support the investment of public, private, and personal resources in the higher education of women in midlife. The study intends to contribute to an understanding of women's higher education experiences by expanding to the knowledge base regarding women's historical and sociocultural meaning context.

Scope of the Study

This is a phenomenological study using an oral history in-depth interview of eight women who earned baccalaureate degrees between the ages of 30 and 55. The women had 9 to 22 years of life experiences after baccalaureate attainment for retrospective comparison to their lives prior to attainment. The study uses an interpretive framework centered on Mezirow's transformative learning theory and women's development theory. These theories will illuminate the women's meaning perspectives and provide a way to discuss potential change each woman identifies in her personal and societal contexts regarding baccalaureate higher education.

Research Question

In retrospect, what are the phenomena surrounding the perceptions of a woman who earned a bachelor's degree in midlife concerning the meanings and consequences of higher education in her life experience?

Implications of the Study

Insight into the integrated individual and societal meanings and consequences of a baccalaureate degree in the life experiences of women who years earlier completed a bachelor's degree in midlife despite obstacles, high investment of resources, and economic rewards favoring men may:

- Shed light on public policy issues regarding gender equity, higher education funding priorities, investment in adult women's higher education, and qualitative meaning and consequences of higher education in the lives of adult women;

- Inform higher education administrators, faculty, and staff of higher

education perspectives of midlife women which may necessitate change in current practices or strategies of pedagogy, recruitment and retention; and transmission of culture;

- Provide information women may use to make more informed decisions regarding their postsecondary education choices;

- Enhance rather than diminish access and opportunities for adult women who choose to pursue a baccalaureate degree; and

- Contribute to the theoretical understanding of the ways meaning perspectives and change are integrated in life experiences.

Assumptions

For the purpose of this study, it is assumed individuals may attach positive, negative or neutral values to higher education as a social convention, institution, process or product.

This study assumes that individuals will respond truthfully.

CHAPTER II

INTERPRETIVE FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This chapter provides an interpretive framework for understanding a woman's

perspectives of the ways a higher education is holistically integrated into her life

experiences in the years after earning a baccalaureate degree in midlife. Drawn from

transformation learning theory and women's development theory, the framework was

selected to facilitate understanding of a woman's perspective of the meaning and

consequence of higher education and how, or if, it is holistically integrated into her life

experiences. These theoretical underpinnings direct our exploration of a woman's view

of the baccalaureate degree phenomenon through reflection, contrast, and comparison of

her life experiences with and without degree attainment. Transformative learning theory

provides an avenue for understanding meaning perspectives and change holistically as they

are integrated in life experience (Cranton, 1996; Freire, 1999; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999;

Mezirow, 1978, 1990, 1991, 2000). Also, this chapter provides a review of formative

meaning-based adult learning literature about adult higher education students (Brunt,

1995; Clark, 1991; Hayes & Flannery, 2000; Johnson-Bailey, 2001; Mezirow, 1978, 2000;

Pope, 1996; Vogelsang, 1993; Weisberger, 1995).

Interpretive Framework Literature

Transformative learning theory attempts to explain how adults know and act on

what they feel and believe, rather than on those meanings they uncritically, often

erroneously, acquired through socialization or acculturation in childhood from others

(Mezirow, 1978, 1990, 1991, 2000). Interchangeably known as transformational learning,

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transformative learning is a way adults may attain greater personal and socially responsible control over their lives (Mezirow, 1990, 2000). Mezirow defines a transformative learning process through which adults make meaning of their life experiences, critically assess, and reflect on the assumptions undergirding those meanings, participate in reflective discourse to revise or construct new assumptions and then take action as a result (Mezirow, 1978, 1990, 1991, 2000). Transformative adult learning theorists argue that critical assessment and reflection on assumptions uncritically assimilated in childhood is a maturation process and largely the domain of adults (Brookfield, 1986, 1987a; Cranton, 1996; Mezirow, 1991). Critical thinking is a defining characteristic of adulthood (Brookfield, 1987a). The transformative learning theoretical base is an exploration of how an adult comes to a change of mind, a conversion, in his or her mindset. Transformative learning theory is grounded in the assumption that adults need to make meaning of their experience. The theory provides a lens for examining how adults come to change their ways of thinking and integrate their changed views into their ways of living. "Transformative learning, then is a process of examining, questioning, validating, and revising those perceptions (Cranton, 1996, p. 26).

Key Components of Transformative Learning

The major components of adult learning central to Mezirow's (2000) transformative learning theory are experience, critical reflection, reflective discourse, and decision-making on those insights. Mezirow proposed the terminology in a 1978 report of findings on reentry programs for women in community colleges (Merriam and Caffarella, 1999; Mezirow, 1978). Mezirow (2000) said:

> Transformative learning refers to the process by which we transform our taken-for-
> granted frames of references (meaning perspectives, habits of mind, mindsets) to

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make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change, and reflective so that they may generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or justified to guide action. (pp. 7-8)

Perspective Transformation and Meaning

A perspective is changed–transformed–when old assumptions are replaced by new ones. Assumptions are an individual's meaning schemes for making sense of knowledge, beliefs, values, and feelings. They are contextual and individual, based on biography, history, and culture (Mezirow, 1990, 2000). The relative nature of assumptions in human meaning systems underlies the observation "there are no fixed truths or totally definitive knowledge," in human knowing, but instead "a continuous effort to negotiate contested meanings" (Mezirow, 2000, p. 3). Perspectives, one's worldview, are based on the highly individual assumptions of one's perceiving, comprehending, and remembering symbol systems for interpreting the objects or events of experience. By creating meaning, perspectives determine "what, how, and why we learn" (Mezirow, 1990, p. 18).

Meaning perspectives are people's frames of reference for making sense of the world. To arrive at one's own meaning perspective through self-knowledge, free of self-deception is to develop one's authentic framework of understanding (Brookfield, 1987a). An adult achieves an altered perspective by replacing the underlying assumptions in one's meaning systems with alternative assumptions. This occurs by becoming aware of what the assumptions are and by consciously choosing to alter or replace them after critically assessing their truth, rationality and validity for one's self (Mezirow, 1990):

> Perspective transformation is the process of becoming critically aware of how and why our presuppositions have come to constrain the way we perceive, understand, and feel about our world; or reformulating these assumptions to permit a more inclusive, discriminating, permeable, and integrating perspective; and of making choices or otherwise acting upon these new understandings. (p. 14)

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Mezirow proposes a 10-step process of transformative learning among reentry

college women:

> 1) a disorienting dilemma; 2) self-examination: 3) a critical assessment of sex-role assumptions and a sense of alienation from traditional social roles and expectations; 4) relating one's discontent to similar experiences or to current public issues; 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) provisional efforts to try new roles; and 10) reintegrating into society on the basis of conditions dictated by the new perspective. (p. 12)

Transformation and Critical Reflection

Mezirow (2000) recognizes three major components in this 10-step process of

transformation learning. The first is critical reflection in which learners examine their

existing meaning systems and underlying assumptions in order to attain new or revised

assumptions. The second is a process of validation, in which learners engage in reflective

discourse to test the emergent assumptions. The third is action, in which learners plan,

implement and integrate the assumptions into their meaning system. Over the past two

decades, a substantive body of literature has been published on critical reflection. The

most prominent contributor to this line of thought is Stephen Brookfield who explores the

process and significance of critical thinking (Brookfield, 1987a; Merriam & Caffarella,

1999). "Critical thinking–reflecting on the assumptions underlying our and others' ideas

and actions, and contemplating alternative ways of thinking and living–is one of the

important ways in which we become adults" (Brookfield, 1987, p. x). Brookfield (1987a)

recognizes the relationship critical thinking forges between personal development and

social responsibility. The capacity for critical thinking, Brookfield (1987a) argues, "is at

the heart of what it means to be a developed person living in a democratic society" (p. 14).

This is a process that cannot neither be mandated nor imposed on individuals. Adults must

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come to their own conclusions in their own ways and at their own speed. Forcing adults to question the "assumptions under which they have been thinking and living is likely to serve no function other than intimidating them to the point where resistance builds up against this process" (Brookfield, 1987a, p. 11).

In addition to the conscious "mindful" process of critical reflection, Mezirow (2000) recognizes that the transformation of a frame of reference may occur without conscious thought. "Mindless" transformative learning may happen through uncritical assimilation as when one becomes part of another culture or through repetitive affective interaction as when one's peers repeatedly reinforce a particular viewpoint. Only "mindful" transformation of a frame of reference, in Mezirow's (2000) view, qualifies as a transformative learning process for it requires conscious steps of critical reflection on assumptions, reflective discourse on the new insights and an action decision.

Mezirow (2000) believes critical reflection can bring about a reframing of assumptions necessary for transformation of a meaning perspective in three domains of learning proposed by Habermas (1979). The domains he addressed are *instrumental* pertaining to task-oriented problem-solving, *communicative* pertaining to meanings communicated between people, and *emancipation*, redefined by Mezirow (1978; 2000) as the tranformative process itself. Critical reflection poses a challenge to presuppositions essential to the process of changing beliefs (Brookfield, 1987a; Mezirow, 2000).

Arriving at Critical Reflections

There is no single path an adult takes to arrive at a point of critical reflection. Thoughts or events triggering one person to examine his or her beliefs may have no effect on another just as one person may have repeated similar experiences without questioning

an assumption and come to a passage of time when such an experience instigates critical reflection. A "disorienting dilemma," of joy or distress might instigate critical reflection (Brookfield, 1987a; Mezirow, 1978, 1990, 1991, 2000). Positive triggering events of sudden insight, self-actualizing peak experiences, successful completion of a near-impossible task, a sense of fulfillment or recognition, the inspiration of a political or social activist can stimulate a person to think about an assumption in a new way (Brookfield, 1987a; Mezirow, 1978; 2000). Likewise, negative triggering events of divorce, disability, bereavement, unemployment, and other speed bumps and disasters in life might generate a reexamination of closely held beliefs (Brookfield, 1987a; Maslow, 1970; Mezirow, 1990, 1991, 2000). Dewey (1910/1997) identified doubt, discrepancy and emotional disturbance as the triggers stimulating reflective processes. Doubt is identified in psychological literature as a prominent trigger for women (Belenky et al., 1997). Whether positive or negative, self-examination is often discomforting and disconcerting (Brookfield, 1987a; Mezirow, 2000). Self-examination stirred by doubt may be particularly debilitating for women (Belenky et al., 1997; Brookfield, 1987a). Many women are filled with self-doubt, and doubt from without serves to confirm their "own sense of themselves as inadequate knowers" (Belenky et al., 1997, p. 228).

People may come to critique a premise through highly individualistic avenues. Mezirow (2000) acknowledges nine additional broad categories of approach:

> Self-examination with feelings of fear, anger, guilt, or shame;
> A critical assessment of assumptions;
> Recognition that one's discontent and the process of transformation are shared;
> Exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions;
> Planning a course of action;
> Acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing one's plans;
> Provisional trying of new roles;
> Building competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships; and

A reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's new perspective. (p. 22)

Also, objective or subjective reframing may bring about transformative learning (Mezirow, 2000). In objective reframing, a person critically reflects on the assumptions of others discovered through narrative or task problem-solving. In subjective reframing, a person reflects on his or her own assumptions discovered through narrative; economic, political, educational, cultural or other systems; the workplace or an organization; interpersonal relations and feelings; and his or her own way of learning (Mezirow, 2000).

Validation and Reflective Discourse

Once assumptions in mindful meaning systems are identified, individuals subject them to an "appraisal" process of scrutiny to determine their validity or dissonance with their experience and values (Brookfield, 1987a). Unless a concept can be proved empirically, judgment prevails. Mezirow (2000) believes this assessment of assumptions is accomplished by reflective discourse, defined as "that specialized use of dialogue devoted to searching for a common understanding and assessment of the justification of an interpretation or belief" (pp. 10-11). Communicating discursively with others requires emotional maturity, awareness, control, and empathy, as well as clear thinking and the ability to handle social relationships (Mezirow, 2000). This communication style is a way to understand one another's way of thinking, to negotiate common ground and differences, to tolerate the anxiety of uncertainty, and to build consensus in order to make a better or more reliable judgment. Active dialogue with others, fundamental to effective discourse, facilitates one's insight into the meaning of an experience (Mezirow, 2000).

While reflective discourse involves some form of communication with others, determining one's authentic frame of reference ultimately means making a personal

judgment. Dewey (1910/1997) provides a useful definition of judgment:

> To be a good judge is to have a sense of the relative indicative or signifying values of the various features of the perplexing situation; to know what to let go as of no account; what to eliminate as irrelevant; what to retain as conducive to outcome; what to emphasize as a clue to the difficulty. This power in ordinary matters we call knack, tact, cleverness; in more important affairs, insight, discernment. (p. 104)

In Brookfield's (1987a) critical thinking model, after assumptions are called into question, the next phase of the process is exploratory, a time people try to find others having similar experiences and new role models. Exploration is followed by a time of developing alternative perspectives. At this point, people are searching for new ways of explaining dissonance, testing actions and thoughts to fit new perceptions, and looking for new answers and information. Brookfield (1987a) believes integration comes out of this period of uncertainty when people incorporate their:

> ...new ways of thinking or living into their lives....Sometimes integration involves transforming attitudes and assumptions. At other times it entails confirming, with a renewed sense of conviction, existing stances. (p. 27)

Action on Transformed Perspectives

Navigating the passage of validation and reflective discourse enables people to develop understanding and skills for the action they choose to take on their transformed perspectives (Mezirow, 1991). If the transformative learning experience is mindful then an action decision is required (Mezirow, 2000). The action may be immediate, delayed or reaffirm existing action. The action phase closes the loop on the mindful transformative learning process. The learner consciously scrutinized the beliefs underlying a frame of reference; examined, tested and discursively arrived at judgments about new ways of believing; then internalized and acted upon the decision.

<u>Transformative Learning and Adult Learning Theories</u>

The theory of transformative learning has gained ascendency over two other

primary lines of inquiry, andragogy and self-directed learning, in adult learning

discussions since it was introduced by Mezirow in 1978 (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999).

Moreover, transformative learning concepts are reflected in critical theory, postmodern

and feminist perspectives of adult learning theory (Merriam & Cafferella, 1999).

Currently, there is no universally accepted general theory of adult learning. Even so, there

are areas of interconnection among these perspectives which are useful in considering

adult learners in higher education settings. Foundational to all are concepts that learning

derives from experience and that learning is lifelong (Merriam & Cafferella, 1999).

Andragogy, a term taken from the German folk-high school system of the 1920s,

is a concept meaning the art or science of teaching adults paralleling pedagogy meaning

the art or science of teaching children (Brookfield, 1987b; Knowles, 1990; Merriam &

Cafferella, 1999). Martha Anderson and Eduard Lindeman, who introduced the German

term in the United States, associated the concept with adult experiential learning, linking it

to a process of awareness through conflicting ideas, opposing views and critical discussion

(Brookfield, 1987b; Lindeman, 1926). Lindeman's notions are startlingly similar to the

central ideas of transformative learning theory more fully developed over the past two

decades (Brookfield, 1987b; Lindeman, 1926). Malcolm Knowles, who popularized the

term andragogy, proposes adults become self-directing as they mature; accumulate

experiences useful for learning; are ready to learn as the developmental tasks of their

social roles predicate; tend to be problem-centered in learning as they mature; and are

internally motivated to learn (Knowles, 1990). Knowles' assumptions are useful

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characteristics for understanding aspects of adult learning (Merriam & Cafferella, 1999).

Self-directed learning draws on a rich research base proceeding from Houle's (1993) seminal work, <u>The Inquiring Mind</u>, incisively discussing the sociological phenomena of adults who act on their desire to learn throughout their lifespans. Houle (1961/1993) introduced a definition, discussion and three categories of self-directed learners, setting them apart from adults engaged in traditional, formal learning. On this foundation, Tough (1971) examined the deliberate, learning efforts adults undertake in a the routine of daily living and provided a thorough description of self-directed learning. Self-directed learning has evolved to focus "on the process by which adults take control of their own learning, in particular how they set their own learning goals, locate appropriate resources, decide on which learning methods to use and evaluate their progress" (Brookfield, 1995, p. 1). Merriam & Cafferella (1999) define three major goals of self directed learning:

> 1) to enhance the ability of adult learners to be self-directed in aims;
> 2) to foster transformational learning as central to self-directed learning; and
> 3) to promote emancipatory learning and social action as an integral part of self-directed learning. (p. 290)

Goal one, enhancing the ability of adult learners to be self-directed, which like transformation learning is embedded in the humanistic philosophy of Maslow (1968, 1970, 1971), sees *personal growth* as the aim of adult learning. "People are interested in self-knowledge, self-awareness, and an understanding of how their past has shaped their way of being," (Cranton, 1996, p. 20). The second goal, fostering *transformational learning as central to self-directed learning*, is tightly tied to Mezirow's theory of transformative learning (Brookfield, 1986; Mezirow, 1990). Those who support the third goal identifying *emancipatory learning and social action as integral to self-directed learning*, find the

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second goal too limiting. Advocates of this position believe emancipatory collective social

action should be a result of self-directed learning (Brookfield, 1987b; Merriam &

Cafferella, 1999). Reconciliation of the issue in feminist pedagogy attempts to facilitate

women's development and social change (Hayes & Flannery, 2000).

Social Change, Emancipatory Learning, and Transformative Learning

The social action goal of transformation learning theory sharply divides Freire and

Mezirow. For Freire, individual emancipation and social change are entwined for the

purpose of overthrowing practices of oppression. Himself a member of the status quo

dominant culture, Mezirow believes the role of adult educations is to support learners to

understand the context of their beliefs to become able to navigate the steps he outlines in

the transformative learning process (Mezirow, 2000).

Brazilian education philosopher Paulo Freire and Mezirow are considered the

major transformative learning theorists (Merriam & Cafferella, 1999). Freire's (1999)

foundational emancipatory learning thoughts focus on social action outcomes. Freire's

(1999) thrust is on the learning process by which an oppressed people can become

consciously aware of their conditions and the power structure ensnaring them in order to

overthrow their aggressors. Influenced by Freire, Mezirow (1990) proposed transformative

learning as a framework for understanding individualistic approaches to emancipatory

adult education. "Transformative education is an organized effort to help the learner

challenge presuppositions, explore alternative perspectives, transform old ways of

understanding, and act on new perspectives" (Mezirow, 1990, p. 18).

The process each proposes has strong parallels. According to Freire (1999),

oppressed people are emancipated through a learning process of critical "dialogue"

unfolding into their subsequent reflective participation in liberating action. He believes

critical consciousness of social, political, and economic contradictions– *conscientizacao*–

is achievable through reality-based dialogue, reflection and action (Freire, 1999).

Conscientizacao is the path to authentic transformation and the humanization of men and

women (Freire, 1999):

> The truth is, however, the oppressed are not "marginals" living outside society, but 'inside'–inside the structure which made them 'being for others.' The solution is not to 'integrate' them into the structure of oppression, but to transform that structure so that they can become 'beings for themselves.' (Freire, 1999, p. 55)

The education of adults requires a process of collaborative inquiry so teachers and

students "both are simultaneously teachers and students" (Freire, 1999, p. 53). Instead of a

"banking" approach to education that deposits data into students and "submerges

consciousness," Freire proposes a "problem-posing" education based on critical reflection

and dialogue allowing the "emergence of consciousness" in the service of freedom (Freire,

1999, p. 62). "Problem-posing education, as a humanist and liberating praxis, posits as

fundamental that the people subjected to domination must fight for their emancipation,"

(Freire, 1999, p. 67).

Conceptualizing the dynamics of power, privilege, and oppression entwined in

culture and politics, Freire strikes a responsive chord among those who examine the ways

dominant societal structures oppress on the basis of gender, race, and class (Belenky et al.,

1997; Brooks, 2000; Hayes & Flannery, 2000; Hooks, 2000; Merriam & Cafferella, 1999;

Tisdell, 1998). In particular, Freire's emancipatory perspectives influenced liberatory

feminist pedagogy theory which "examines how these systems of oppression are

reproduced and resisted in education" (Merriam & Cafferella, 1999, p. 359). The power

structures of society are replicated in educational institutions, oppressing women, people

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of color, gays, and ethnic minorities (Merriam & Cafferella, 1999). "Liberatory feminist educators attempt to recover women's voices, experiences, and viewpoints and use them to make systems of privilege, power, and oppression visible" (Merriam & Cafferella, 1999, p. 359). Socialized to be a nurturer, women gain freedom by finding their own voice and through personal psychological development (Belenky et al., 1997). Relationships, connectedness, and a safe, collaborative environment are critical requirements for women learners (Belenky et al., 1997).

Elements of liberatory and gender feminist pedagogy are present in a poststructural feminist pedagogical model proposed by Tisdell (1998). She emphasizes connections between a person and systems of oppression and privilege with linkages to a person's identity and social structures in power. Tisdell (1998) contends identity shifts, discourse is disrupted, and capacity for agency increases when learners look closely at ways their personal identities are affected by social systems of privilege and oppression. Instead of one truth, the learner may discover multiple truths, including the insight that privileged members of social systems control knowledge and knowledge production (Tisdell, 1998). Tisdell's (1998) model attempts to bridge the difficult gulf between tranformative learning advocates for emancipatory social action and those pushing for individual emancipation. Her approach considers the individual learner factors and agency; psychological, social and political contexts affecting learning; emphasizes relationship and connections; and power relations (Tisdell, 1998).

Critics of Mezirow's Theory

Critiques of Mezirow's theory object to its egocentric focus on the individual, lack of social action, omission of learners' historical, political and sociocultural context,

dominant culture construction, and its emphasis on rationality (Clark & Wilson, 1991;

Merriam & Cafferella, 1999; Taylor, 1997). The lack of knowledge of historical and

sociocultural meaning context constrains insight into the spectrum of meaningfulness and

consequences of adult learning experiences (Clark & Wilson, 1991). In the evolution of

transformation theory, Mezirow (2000) has entered the dialogue, often accommodating

and incorporating ideas raised by critics. However, he is unyielding on the premise that

personal growth of the individual is foremost, the basis for social change and

responsibility for "what counts is what the individual learner wants to learn" (Mezirow,

2000, p. 31).

<u>Formative Meaning-Based Literature</u>

A formative line of inquiry bridges classic areas of higher education research and

adult learning theory to elucidate the meaning higher education has in the life experiences

of adults. This area of study seeks to understand meaning and change associated with

higher education consequences woven into life experience. The following overview of

classic higher education outcomes study and review of formative meaning-based adult

learning literature pertaining to adult higher education students provides a context for this

study.

<u>Classic Higher Education Research</u>

Outcomes of higher education have been the focus of a multitude of studies over

the past seventy years. Much of the research was conducted to ascertain the impact of

college attendance on traditional students during and immediately after graduation, and the

majority utilized empirical research traditions on white male student populations (Astin,

1977, 1993; Bowen, 1977; Chickering, 1969; Cross, 1981; Feldman & Newcomb, 1969;

Knox et al., 1995; Pace, 1979; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Withey, 1971). As student populations became more diverse and women over 25 began attending and graduating from college in ever-increasing numbers, studies were conducted on undergraduate populations to determine adult women's motivations for enrolling, aspects impeding or facilitating degree completion, and the academic, intellectual, emotional and developmental impact of the educational process and experience (Adelman, 1991; Darkenwald & Novak, 1997; Dill & Henley, 1998; Donaldson & Graham,1999; Gilman, 1993; Glass & Harshberger, 1974; Harju & Eppler, 1997; Home, 1998; Jarvis, 1992; Kasworm, 1993; Knowles, 1990; Merriam & Cafferella, 1999; U.S. Department of Education, 2000; Withey, 1971). These studies found women students often listed financial security and career advancement as reasons for entering college; but women also expressed a need for professional competency-based recognition and a desire for personal fulfillment. Some found adult learners' motivation for beginning or returning to college was not necessarily to earn a degree, but may be pursuit of personal development, job preparation, or other interests (Kuh, 1996). Life change events may positively influence a woman's decision to return to college (Blaukopf, 1981). Adult women students often acknowledged the importance of familial or educator support to help cope with the strain of multiple role expectations, racism, and patriarchy in the undergraduate experience (Gerson, 1985; Hall & Sandler, 1982; Johnson-Bailey, 2001; Mohney & Anderson, 1988). Adult students as a group exhibited distinct differences when compared to traditional students. In academic settings, they earned higher grades; had less anxiety and fears; were better at analytical problem solving; were more diverse and brought broader life experience to bear on their learning; interacted more with faculty; were more likely to be

married, to be caring for family members, and to have lower family incomes; and they were frequently more highly motivated and committed to education goals even though they were more likely to have deficits in high school preparation (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Dill & Henley, 1998; Graham & Donaldson, 1999; Kasworm, 1980, 1994; Knowles, 1990; Osterman, 2001).

Meaning-Based Transformational Learning Research in Higher Education

In a grounded theory study of women participating in community college reentry programs, Mezirow (1978) proposed that perspective transformation was "the central process occurring in [their] personal development" (1978, p. 7). As previously noted, Mezirow's findings subsequently formed the basis of transformational learning theory discussed in depth earlier in this chapter. Critics have suggested Mezirow's work separated the women from their historical and sociocultural context, limiting our understanding of their higher education experiences (Clark & Wilson, 1991).

Clark's (1991) phenomenological and heuristic study of various disorienting life events on the impact of context on meaning structure change in adulthood found that context shapes and structures learning. Her study suggests the possibility that higher education might have an impact on meaning structure change in adulthood. She affirmed Mezirow's assertion that a search for some missing dimension in a person's life, nudged by a disorienting dilemma, can trigger transformational learning. The search for the missing dimension can be conscious or unconscious and invites change. She also found that transformational learning is a multifaceted personal and social process (Clark, 1991). She also found that transformational learning is a personal and social multifaceted process (Clark, 1991). She identified three dimensions of a perspective transformation:

psychological changes in understanding the self; convictional revisions in belief systems; and behavioral changes in lifestyle Clark (1991).

A study purposefully conducted to develop forms of collaborative inquiry in order to democratize the research relationship found several factors central to women's transformative learning in addition to collaboration (Hayes & Flannery, 2000):

1) boundary permeability: flexibility in concepts and thinking;
2) holistic learning: cognitive, affective, and embodied knowing;
3) interconnectedness: among people and among ideas; and
4) mutability: capacity for change. (pp.144-145).

The research project was conduction at Teachers College of Columbia University and the University of Texas at Austin.

In a narrative inquiry, Pope (1996), sought to discover whether college triggered changes in thinking among 15 ethnically diverse working-class women who were first in their families to graduate from college, Pope (1996) found perspective transformation occurred over time, involved personal power development and supportive relationships rather than emanating from a positive or negative trigger. The study of Alaskan Native, African American, and Caucasian women found that personal empowerment defined the meaningfulness of the women's experiences (Pope, 1996).

A grounded theory study conducted by Vogelsang (1993) identified transformative learning experiences within the educational experiences of 20 adult women college students. The researcher found that "educational experiences seem to trigger and facilitate perspective transformations in some students but not in others" (Vogelsang, 1993, p. 130). The study also found stressful life events before college led to transformative learning. Further, the study concluded that meaning perspectives important to adult college women students' identity concerned their self-concept as well as their views on the role of women,

relationships, and religious values (Vogelsang, 1993).

The meaning perspectives of three graduate and five undergraduate reentry Black women are illuminated in a study by Johnson-Bailey (2001). The contextual, sociocultural narrative and heuristic study provides a contextual framework for understanding of their college experiences. Johnson-Bailey (2001) found the women's experiences and perspectives were unlike Anglo women and Black men. Themes of racism, sexism, and classism emerged in the women's narratives. Marginalized, isolated and oppressed, the women coped by responding with silence, negotiation, and resistence strategies (Johnson-Bailey, 2001).

Weisberger (1995) examined changes in the meaning perspectives of six midlife men who had completed two-semesters of full-time study at a community college. He concluded the men changed their perspectives of education and themselves; overcame aspects of meaning schemes that had inhibited their development, and grew as a consequence of challenges they faced in college. Weisberger (1995) found the support the men received from other returning students and college challenges they had overcome "has enabled them to transcend a previous construction of reality and build a new one..."(p. 105).

The meaning-based transformation learning research in higher education embraces the human aspect of adult learning situated in life experience. Studies centering on the context in which transformative learning takes places enables emphasis to be placed on the complex development of individuals as both self and self-in-relation. Transformative learning is by definition a dynamic process. By examining this dynamic of transformation on the self and self-in-relation, it is possible to consider how learning experiences shape

or guide meaning and change.

CHAPTER III

DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This study takes a qualitative research approach. Phenomenological methodology using an oral history in-depth interview is used to explore the meanings and consequences of higher education in the life experience of women who earned a baccalaureate degree in midlife. The study focuses on women's perceptions of their baccalaureate education integrated into their individual and societal life experiences over a period of years after degree attainment. A corollary examination of the women's uncritically acquired meaning structures provides insight into their retrospective reflections on a baccalaureate degree's meaningfulness in their lives. A qualitative design employing phenomenological methodology using an oral history in-depth interview was chosen for this study to facilitate understanding of the meaning and essences of experience derived from first-person reports of lived experiences (Moustakas, 1994).

Qualitative Design: A Search for Meaning

An understanding of meaning from the perspective of women with life experiences is essential to this study. Qualitative methods are recognized for their effectiveness in constructing meanings (Hara, 1995; Langenbach, Vaughn, & Aagaard, 1994; Oakley, 1998; Putney, Green, Dixon, & Kelly, 1999); Wakefield, 1995). The qualitative paradigm assumes the only "reality" that exists is the reality people create to make sense of their world (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Putney et al., 1999). Using a qualitative approach in this

study "allows discoveries to be made about the phenomenon under investigation" using the tool of interpretation to find out how people make sense of their lives (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999, p. 166). A qualitative approach acknowledges that the meanings, feelings and meaning structures of women who earned bachelor's degrees in midlife are subjective and value-laden (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Putney et al., 1999; Wakefield, 1995). Moreover, a qualitative research design enables the researcher to negotiate meaning with the women in the study, each of whom have a stake in the evaluation (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Putney et al., 1999; Wakefield, 1995).

Philosophical Underpinnings of Phenomenology

Phenomenology rises from a meaning-based philosophical movement founded in the nineteenth century by Czech-German mathematician Edmund Husserl (Hammond, Howarth & Keat, 1991; Solomon & Higgins, 1996). The term is taken from the Greek word, "phenomenon," meaning appearance (Hammond et al., 1991; Solomon & Higgins, 1996). Husserl's notion of phenomenology sought to reduce conscious understanding to the essence of an object (Solomon & Higgins, 1996). Meaning is created when a person experiences the object in nature and forms a conscious awareness of it (Hammond et al., 1991; Moustakas, 1994). Husserl believed to study a phenomenon–one's conscious idea of things–was by a process termed reduction (Solomon & Higgins, 1996). In the reduction process, focus was on "the things themselves"(Solomon & Higgins, 1996, p. 251). To achieve reduction, Husserl drew on the Greek concept "epoche," meaning "to refrain from judgement, to abstain from or stay away from the everyday, ordinary way of perceiving things," (Moustakas, 1994, p. 33). In this vein, Husserl communicated the idea of "bracketing" out preconceived notions of truth or reality (Hammond et al., 1991;

Moustakas, 1994; Solomon & Higgins, 1996). Husserl's philosophy looked at the *meaning* we attach to *how* we *think about* the *experience* of thinking about *what* we think about.

Alfred Schutz (1970) adapted the philosopher's ideas to the issues of sociology and social behavior research. Developing a practical application for phenomenology, Schutz extended Husserl's philosophical concept of being open to the meanings of conscious experience into a descriptive approach for finding meaning in everyday societal experiences (Cohen & Manion, 1985; Holstein & Gubrium, 1994). Schutz's (1970) work provides the basis for phenomenological theorizing in the group of reality-constituting interpretive practices of human science research (Holstein & Gubrium, 1994).

Phenomenological Methodology: Exploring Lived Experiences

Phenomenology, as it has evolved in the latter decades of the twentieth century, is a naturalistic research methodology concerned with researching life experience (Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 1990). In phenomenological methodology, in-depth interviews are conducted in order to gain contextual understanding of the phenomenon from the participant's own point of view (Bogdan & Taylor, 1975; Yow, 1994). An oral life history aspect directs understanding of how the phenomenon in question unfolds in the course of people's lives as well as how a person's meaning about the phenomenon is shaped (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Yow, 1994). Although there is no single view or definition of phenomenological research among non-positivist sociologists and educational researchers, Cohen and Manion (1985) present a workable broad view advocating the study of direct experience taken at face value and of behavior as determined by phenomena of experience. "In other words phenomenology is the systematic attempt to uncover and describe the structures, the internal meaning structures,

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of lived experience" (van Manen, 1990, p. 10).

Methodology of the Study

This phenomenological study using an oral history in-depth interview explores

women's perceptions of their higher education as they reflected on their individual and

societal life experiences a period of years after attaining the degree. The phenomenological

methodology was chosen for this study to facilitate understanding of the meanings and

consequences of a baccalaureate degree in midlife by exploring their firsthand life

experiences (Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 1990). Phenomenology is the exploration of

lived experience, a way of making meaning of it (van Manen, 1990):

> The aim of phenomenology is to transform lived experience into a textural
> expression of its essence–in such way that the effect of the text is at once a
> reflexive re-living and a reflective appropriation of something meaningful: a notion
> by which a reader is powerfully animated in his or her own lived experience. (p.
> 37)

In an effort to closely maintain the voice and context of the participants' experiences, their

stories are presented individually in this study. Care was taken to present them in a

readable format that conveyed the essence of the participants and their stories as expressed

in the interview. An oral history aspect couched within the phenomenological approach

illuminate meanings in the narratives told in their own voice (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998;

Yow, 1994). Oral history permits the researcher to capture the essence of life through the

recollected memories revealed in spoken narratives (Tesch, 1990). The "before and after"

memories are essential in this study to ascertain what difference, if any, degree attainment

held for the participants. Oral history recognizes the importance of emotions and feelings

in the reflected memories of experience (Yow, 1994). Participants talking about

experiences related to the consequences of baccalaureate degrees may recall feelings and

attitudes of significant meaning to them that adds to our understanding. The interpretive framework guiding the study is drawn from transformative learning theory in order to understand meaning-making acquisition and change relevant to baccalaureate degree attainment in the historical and sociocultural context of the women's lives. The framework also employs women's development theory due to the affiliative, relational ways women develop and think (Belenky et al., 1997; Chodorow, 1974; Gilligan, 1982; Hall, 1999; Miller, 1976, Schaff, 1985). Phenomenological methodology permits an in-depth way of exploring the way people interpret and experience their world through "epoche," that is through refraining from judgement (Moustakas, 1994).

Participants

The participants in this study were eight women who attained baccalaureate degrees between ages 30 and 55 and who had from 9 to 22 years of life experience after degree completion. The term "midlife" was used in this study to reference the 30 to 55 age span. The participants were located through contacts with an informal state-wide network of higher education personnel and community associates. Parameters for potential participants were: 1) female gender; 2) baccalaureate attainment between ages 30-55; 3) baccalaureate degrees conferred by a regionally accredited higher education institution; 4) have had at least five years of life experience since earning the degree; and 5) who are under age 65 at the time of the interview to avoid potential cognitive decline of older adults (Santrock, 1985). Of the eight women who participated in the study, one was American Indian and seven had European origins. The women were between ages 31 and 40 when they earned baccalaureate degrees.

Data Collection

Participants were contacted by the researcher and invited to participate. The purpose of the study was explained. Also discussed were the estimated amount of time interviews would take, confidentiality, informed consent, means of data collection, and specific interview arrangements. An interview appointment was arranged at a time and location agreeable to the participant (Yow, 1994). The in-depth, one-on-one, audio-taped interviews were generally one-and-one-half to two hours in length. Routinely, the interviews were conducted in a single session with return contacts as needed for clarification or additional information (Yow, 1994). Participants were asked to narrate an oral history centered around the research question. A warm conversational tone and non-directive approach was taken to permit participants latitude to tell their own stories in their own way to facilitate the phenomenological process of reduction. (Moustakas, 1994). An interview protocol served as question guide for keeping the narratives focused as needed. The researcher conducting the interviews had over 30 years of interview experience and had previously conducted thousands of interviews as a journalist and communication professional. Tapes of the interviews were transcribed by the researcher. The researcher verified the accuracy of the transcriptions while listening to each tape and reading the transcript. Transcriptions of the interviews were provided to two of the participants to assure accuracy (Tesch, 1990). Other than the participant herself, the transcripts were read only by the researcher and her major professor. Each participant was referenced in the study by a pseudonym assigned to maintain confidentiality.

Analysis Procedures

The transcripts were first reviewed for meaning units (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998,

Moustakas, 1994). Then meaning units were assembled from all of the participants. The

units were sifted, sorted, and synthesized into clusters of common categories (Moustakas,

1994). Through this coding process, the categories were organized and evaluated to

determine textures and structures of meaning. The categories of meaning were organized,

sorted, reflected upon, and discussed to determine emergent patterns and commonalities.

Categories of similar meanings formed themes and overarching themes. Transcripts,

meaning units, and categories were independently analyzed by the primary researcher and

her major professor who served as a co-researcher. The major professor has a life-long

career in historical and qualitative research. The meaning structures of each of the

participants were examined in the context of her life experience and cultural frame to

maintain her sense of significant realities. Care was taken to interpret the data within the

participant's frame of reference and to reflect her context of understanding. Nonetheless,

the analysis is limited by our interpretation of another person's construction of experience.

We are reminded that representing another's constructed reality is layered by our own for

"there is never absolute certainty about any event, about any fact, no matter what sources

are used. . . . We cannot reconstruct a past or present event in its entirety because the

evidence is always fragmentary " (Yow, 1994, p. 22). Overarching themes and core themes

were identified from the holistic contextual and structural patterns of the interviews in

combination with patterns, commonalities and meaning structures arising from the coded

elements.

Assumptions

- In phenomenological research, more than one reality or meaning may be revealed

  in the interview of a participant's experience (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Langenbach

et al., 1994).

- In phenomenological research, the researcher interacts with the participant and evaluates meaning through her lens of knowledge, experience and values (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Langenbach, et. al, 1994).

- Adult development is a lifelong process and people's growth or lack of growth is a complex process and a single influence, including that of achieving a bachelor's degree in midlife, does not act in isolation from other knowledge, experience, and values (Belenky et al., 1997).

- In a personal interview, the researcher relies on the veracity and open disclosure of the participant from which to make meaning.

Limitations

- The study is limited by the each participant's ability to remember, reflect, and synthesize memory relevant to the roles of meanings and consequences of their bachelor's degree in their life experiences over time. Within these parameters, participants may not have time or be able to remember events or thoughts helpful in discussing the phenomenon.

- Phenomenological research is useful in understanding and explaining the phenomenon of the specific participants in this study. Participants may not be representative of the general population.

- The researcher brings values, cultural traditions, and preconceptions to the interview. As such she may bring unintentional biases to bear on the data analysis. Also the researcher is a co-participant in the interview process. To help mitigate these limitations, a research collaborator independently analyzed the data.

CHAPTER IV

PERSONAL NARRATIVE PERSPECTIVES

Alice

In her forties, Alice believed herself to be a very much wanted child. Church-going and conservative, her mother stayed home with her and a brother, three years younger, while Alice's father sometimes supplemented government employment with part-time jobs to maintain the family's working to middle class status. The family lived in several states until Alice reached school age. They settled in a "white flight" suburb where she attended racially homogenous public schools and church.

Alice's mother held ambivalent attitudes about higher education. On one hand, she could imagine herself in a college research role. On the other, Alice's mother thought higher education faculty taught concepts antithetical to her religious beliefs. Alice's parents were both high school graduates. They encouraged her "to do whatever I wanted to do," although neither discussed college with her. In high school, Alice was socially involved and academically successful.

Alice described herself as a "daddy's girl" who "pretty much got whatever I wanted from my father." She considered him a positive force in her life. He was "strict" and belt-spanked his children for infractions such as interrupting. During adolescence, Alice resented her father's rigid control. Escaping, the 17-year-old married an 18-year-old before her senior year in high school. Alice disengaged at school to become "completely the opposite of what I'd been. . . not involved in any social activities." Through concurrent enrollment, she finished high school and vocational-technical cosmetology school. Alice, five months pregnant, graduated with her class.

The couple moved to a small city where he supported the family with a union-wage

factory job. Expecting a child and away from her parents, Alice encountered difficulties:

> Oh God. It was bad. It was your typical teenage marriage where I did everything he
> wanted to do. . . . And this husband of mine didn't attend church regularly, didn't
> attend church period. We got married at the church where his family went. . . and I
> regret that still because I couldn't get married at my own church. . . . He didn't help
> with the babies. He worked rotating shifts. . . . We were financially great. . . . I
> didn't have to work. . . . He was not a good father. That probably irritated me more
> than anything. . . . He was not a good husband. . . . He was domineering. He had a
> terrible temper. . . . He scared me. He was verbally abusive. He was mentally
> abusive. He was emotionally abusive. And in the very end, he was physically
> abusive. . . . On the outside, if people saw us, it was, 'oh we're so happy together.'

In their third year of marriage, Alice gathered the baby and returned to her parents.

There, she discovered she was carrying their second child. After one week of separation,

the couple reconciled:

> So I had made an attempt to leave but then I got pregnant, and you don't leave
> when you're pregnant. Or I didn't. I didn't have any way to support my children.
> So I hung in there. It was terrible for the kids. It was screaming and fighting. He
> liked to party. We had a houseboat and a boat and a motor home. We had all the
> toys. He didn't like me to work. He wanted me to stay with the kids. And I am too
> social to stay at home all of the time. I cannot do it. It was just one fight after
> another.

Alice recommitted herself to the troubled marriage. The gregarious woman found

an acceptable outlet for her need to be with others through involvement in her older child's

school activities, coaching t-ball, and volunteering in the classroom. Eventually, the school

hired her to substitute teach, overlooking her limited education credentials. Teaching

stirred childhood memories and ignited desires Alice had repressed:

> . . . when I was little, I would take all my little cousins, and put them in a row and
> start teaching them stuff, then show their work to the family. At a very young age I
> think I wanted to be a teacher even though I put it in the back of my mind and did
> other things. I really wanted to be a teacher. So, the more I became involved. . . . I
> wanted to be a teacher. I knew that I had to go to college to be a teacher.

Reflecting on her decision to seek a bachelor's degree in teacher education, Alice

recognized her innate leadership tendencies. "Looking back, I had some kind of leadership ability in me, because had I not, I would not have been doing leadership roles in high school, teaching my cousins, and putting on programs." Alice perceived herself to be a leader and teaching to be a form of leadership. " It's leading children, making a difference in their lives."

Alice, 27, enrolled her youngest daughter in kindergarten and herself in a nearby higher education center. A collaborative partnership provided a seamless two-year college curriculum transition to a senior regional university's teacher education program. She was relieved to find older students like herself in classes. As a freshman, Alice earned a 4.0 grade point average, yet, she struggled to accommodate both student and homemaker roles.

By the following year, Alice was a sophomore managing a full-time course load. Then, in mid-semester her husband moved out. The turbulent ten-year marriage headed toward divorce court. Emotionally, Alice was unprepared to sever the relationship. "Even though I knew it was probably the best thing, it was awful. It was heart wrenching. It was the worst experience of my life ever." Devastated at not meeting expectations of her own, her parents, or her church, Alice felt she had failed:

> I tried so hard to keep the marriage together. We tried counseling. I prayed. . . .
> Even though I was being. . . abused, I thought you were supposed to stay together. .
> . . It was a death to me because it felt like somebody went inside my body and tore
> my heart out. . . . I don't have any kind of education. How am I going to support
> these kids?. . . I had no income.

Alice missed a week of classes. Her parents stepped in to care for her children and to take her to a physician. She returned to the higher education center armed with antidepressants. The connections she had made with friends, staff, and faculty members carried her through

the disorienting emotional devastation of her broken marriage.

> It was a safe place for me. . . . I felt cared about in that place. . . . by those teachers, by the other students, by the staff. . . . I just felt very comfortable there and I wanted to be there all of the time because I felt good there. That's the one place that I could feel good and not think about anything but my school work.

Suddenly thrust into a single head-of household role, Alice regained her footing. She started a part-time, low-wage retail job and learned how to apply for financial aid. Alice concentrated on her studies. Days passed, her sophomore fall semester ended, a new semester dawned and "by the time January rolled around, I was feeling pretty good about myself because I got through a whole semester with a 4.0 and I hadn't died or anything. I survived."

An attempt to remediate the marriage failed, but this time Alice was prepared for divorce. Associate's degree in hand, Alice found a full-time job at the county courthouse. She gave herself a year before returning to college. "I just could not do it anymore. It was too much financially for me, and baby-sitting-wise, it was just too much. I couldn't do it." When she was ready to return, Alice negotiated an arrangement for flexible hours that let her resume classes and add correspondence work. Without setting foot on the university's main campus, she earned a bachelor's degree in elementary education five years after starting on her goal. By the start of the next school year, Alice, 32, was a credentialed teacher leading a classroom of youngsters. Alice forcefully expressed her views on a college education:

> College should be something that makes you think about things. And makes you change your attitude about life. Hopefully, so you can take somebody coming in like I was, and let them grow, academically and emotionally and every which way by letting them voice their opinions, by teaching them that there's different worlds out there. I think if college doesn't do that, they do an injustice to you. I had very good professors that did that. They opened my eyes to a lot of things.

Among the eye-openers for Alice was an altered perspective on women's equality. Her changed attitudes surfaced shortly after Alice had earned her bachelor's degree and began teaching. Alice reacted in defiance over a male minister's edict she believed was unfair. When he refused to bend, Alice joined a new denomination that welcomed women in leadership roles. Alice strongly embraced her changed perspective. "That's one difference that wouldn't have [occurred] had I not gotten my education," she said. "I wouldn't have been so strongly influenced about women, I think."

The bachelor's degree had a domino effect on other aspects of her life. Financially and professionally, Alice was elevated above the status she experienced prior to earning the degree. "My financial situation would certainly be different if I didn't have my education. What would I do? I wouldn't know how to do anything." In the fifteen years since she graduated, Alice completed a master's degree, principal's certification, and embarked on a doctorate. She taught successfully in rural and city school districts before leaving the public school classroom for marriage, relocation to a distant state and work in professional administrative positions in higher education. "I wouldn't be where I am today. I wouldn't have the job [I have]," she said. Her strong work ethic and perfectionist tendencies have remained constant.

Repeatedly, Alice spoke of the ways completing a bachelor's degree shaped her as a mother. Without a higher education Alice said, "I wouldn't have raised my girls the way I have." In discussions with her daughters, Alice reported using her own experience as an object lesson in what not to do. Working full-time, having full-time responsibility for the children, and working full-time on a college degree was demanding and wearisome. " I did not want them to do that." Alice taught her daughters to believe a college education was a

basic essential in life:

> Education has always been very important to them because of me. There was never a thing of, well I don't know if we're going to go to college or not. It was like, where are we going to college? So that was something that school did for me because I know how important it is. I didn't know it before. I know it now. I didn't know that growing up, but my kids knew it from the git-go. Their children will know it. . . . With a college degree they're going to be able to earn more money and do what they want to. . . . if they do get a divorce or their husband dies or something, they can support themselves and not have to worry about feeding their family like I did.

Alice reared her daughters to be self-reliant and college educated, specifically positioned to obtain work paying more than minimum wage. Both held professional positions, and at the time of the interview, were pursuing master's degrees "because they saw their mom do it." One was married and had a child; the other was single. "They're both very strong women. . . . They don't want to go through what I did."

Alice's initial experiences in higher education gave her "confidence to accept getting out of a bad marriage that was bad for me and to be very, very careful in selecting a mate the next time." Nearly seven years after her divorce, Alice said she married a man with whom she had similar interests and career goals. Without her bachelor's degree, Alice said, "I would not have met my husband because I wouldn't have been in education in the place where I was. I probably would be married to somebody working in the oil field or something around here." Alice discussed the conflicting instructions her mother imparted as she was growing up. She observed that her mother taught her to be independent, yet told her to depend on her husband "for everything." Eventually Alice sorted through her mother's mixed messages by deciding, " I'm not ever depending on another man for anything as long as I live. And I won't. Even though I love my husband, I'm not depending on him."

As an undergraduate, Alice was emboldened by faculty and staff who bolstered her self-esteem and supported her through personal difficulties. Several women in particular, she said, "changed my life forever. . . . They helped me through a real rough time." An adverse evaluation from a male professor who told her "I should not ever try to be a teacher because I couldn't write" inspired Alice to prove him wrong. "I took it as a challenge, and it made me mad." In her professional life, Alice appraised herself as a good writer, a skill she learned from her English composition teacher. Other college faculty "taught me how to get up in front of people and do things that I didn't think I could do." During Alice's classroom teaching career she developed relationships with two influential female administrators who convinced her to seek graduate degrees and positions in educational leadership. Their portrayal of her potential was instrumental in her pursuit of advanced degrees resulting in a higher education post advising and encouraging others to attain degrees.

Alice said her perception of higher education changed as a consequence of her experience. "I guess I always thought of higher education as being upper echelon, unapproachable. But my experience was opposite of what I was expecting because it wasn't like that," she reflected. In her pre-baccalaureate adult years Alice reared children, fretting over what would happen when her husband came home. Alice said, "I didn't have time to think about what I wanted." The post-baccalaureate years Alice described held the promise of career advancement plus the joys of continual discovery. Her degree had become woven into the full array of her life experience.

Anne

Caught in the unique crossfire of the sidetracked nursing goals of her youth and the

accomplishments of her adulthood, Anne expressed ambivalence over her series of formal degrees. At 50, she was an influential higher education administrator in a position in which a Ph.D. was a nonnegotiable requirement. Anne had earned all of her degrees in order to have the appropriate credentials for posts she already held. Her full-court press through the degree hierarchy left her unsated, hungry for a more fulfilling experience. Anne hoped to return to college in retirement:

> When I retire I want to return to school. . . . to become intellectually challenged. I want to become proficient in a foreign language. There are lots of things I know nothing about. . . . I want to go back to school; and I don't want to go for credit necessarily. There are a number of things I want to know a lot more about. . . . from art to foreign language, maybe even some business courses just to learn. It's interesting that I've evolved to that. And I am really looking forward to that. And there will be no pressure unless I put it on myself –I probably won't completely pull it off–but I'll be learning it because I want to learn it.

The second of three daughters, Anne was reared in a small rural community. Her father provided the family a middle class living as a fuel middleman and owner of a string of service stations. Her mother was a homemaker, assisting with the business part-time after Anne was in high school. Her parents both had high school diplomas. Her mother had completed some college coursework. Education was not an emphasis and neither was college. Anne grew up with books, reading those "typical" for her age. The abiding ethic in Anne's family was doing one's best. "I would not say that education was overly stressed in our family. We were certainly expected to go to school and to do our best, but we were expected to do whatever we did in that way, including education."

Her rural high school was highly academic with a solid record of sending students on to college and professional careers. Anne was "always on the honor roll" in high school. The teachers were good, but none were role models or of "great personal influence" in her life. Rather than encouraging her to attend college, "I think they

discouraged me," she said. She enrolled in college after graduating from high school because "that was just, I guess, the thing to do." She chose a public comprehensive university because it was where her fiancé attended. "He and I became engaged when I was a senior in high school, married a year later and that's why I dropped out. . . . And basically I was biding time until I got married."

Anne achieved the dean's honor roll during her freshman year majoring in nursing. She was uninspired by the large lecture classes in her 3,000-student baby boomer class and did not engage in extracurricular activities. For employment while her husband completed his senior year, Anne took a nurse's aide job in a local nursing home. She had done such work as a summer job in high school. "If you're a nurse's aide in a nursing home, you know that's not something you want to do for the rest of your life," she said. However, the medical aspect appealed to her. She moved on to receptionist work in a dental office for better pay and conditions. Nonetheless, Anne's nursing home experience was a touchstone in her life course. Anne learned "humility; that no work is below anybody; that all work should be valued." She reflected:

> I've always said the most I've ever learned in my life was while being a nurse's
> aid. It's the most valuable job I've ever had. It prepared me more for life than any
> other job I've ever had. That was bathing people, cleaning up after people and
> emptying bed pans.

After her husband's graduation, the couple moved to a suburban area for his career opportunity in journalism and broadcasting. She worked as a secretary in local government, soon advancing to a supervisory position typically requiring bachelor's degree credentials. "So I knew that to advance, I certainly needed to have a baccalaureate degree."

Anne re-entered college part-time when she was 25. Her former university hired

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her as a secretary in an academic office. There, once again, she was promoted before attaining higher education credentials in an environment where degrees were the currency of advancement. Motivated to move up, Anne said:

> When I was at [the university], I knew I was going to have to have the bachelor's degree first to get the promotions and then if I was going to go up, I had to have the master's and doctorate. So my motivation always in continuing pursuit was the opportunity for professional advancement. As you well know, in the university community you have to have the doctorate. So that was my motivation. For the most part, I got the jobs before I got the education that technically qualified me.

Salary incentives impelled Anne as well, although a personal need weighed more heavily. "I was interested in the financial gain, absolutely; but I think more, I have just kind of an internal drive." Anne's sponsor and mentor was a high-level administrator. "He was very supportive and encouraging, all the time." She worked for him throughout her tenure as both student and employee at the institution. She progressed through bachelor's, master's and doctoral degrees, always rising in rank before acquiring the requisite degree. Anne's drive also spilled over into her desire for good grades. Except for a B in volleyball, every grade she earned after reentry was an A. "I really became very obsessive about it, an A wasn't enough. I had to have the highest A. But I think you find that with older students."

Holding positions of responsibility in a degree-producing institution where positions of authority are invariably held by people with advanced degrees created discomfort and occasional embarrassment for Anne.

> There was an awkwardness in not having it. Everybody assumed I had, at a minimum, a baccalaureate if not a master's. Of course they had a doctorate. But there was an awkwardness and an embarrassment of not having even a baccalaureate degree in the position I held in the university community. I think that's the main thing I remember in terms of the feeling, was just an embarrassment.

Anne recalled a particularly "humiliating" instance when she was asked to join the

American Association of University Women, then discovering and telling her colleague

that she did not have the qualifications to join. "And there would be other times. I'd be in

some kind of university group chit-chatting and someone would say, 'Where did you get

your degree?' and I would say, 'I don't have one.'"

Consciously taking care to maintain a high level of integrity in her social

interaction, on this issue Anne was conflicted. Unless asked, she did not volunteer the

information she had not completed a bachelor's degree:

> I always try to present myself very honestly, warts and all, but I can honestly say when I didn't have a baccalaureate, yet, that *that* was something I didn't offer. If somebody asked me directly, of course I answered honestly, but it wasn't something I just offered. I didn't pretend to have it, but I just would be silent about it.

After baccalaureate attainment, Anne no longer felt disadvantaged and embarrassed

because she lacked an appropriate minimal credential in her workplace. Anne found the

degree helpful not only in the way others responded by according her "entree to be a full

participant," but in her self-thoughts as well. "Mainly, my insecurities and feelings of

inadequacy emanated because of how I thought others perceived it."

In addition to working full-time and attending school part-time, Anne gave birth to

a son while she was an undergraduate and to a daughter not long after graduating in her

early thirties. During her bachelor's degree process, Anne said her parents did not

understand why she was doing it. "They were not supportive." They thought she "was

trying to do too much." Anne complimented her husband for his consistent support of her

educational and career pursuits. Both worked in academe and both esteem people for their

abilities, not their credentials. On the day she earned a doctorate Anne said her husband

presented her with a pin, "which I still have," imprinted with the slogan, "Another Good

Mind Lost to Higher Education." He does not feel in anyway threatened by her graduate degrees.

Having a bachelor's degree, Anne said, did not make "me any more competent in my job. I didn't, I'm sorry to say, learn anything that just really made a difference in the performance of my job. I'm sure had I stayed in nursing, I would have." Completing the degree gave her self-confidence and a sense of accomplishment in the same way as personal crises and challenges had done:

> . . . anything you accomplish gives you self confidence even if it's a bad experience–and I'm not saying education is a bad experience–but I'm saying when I delivered both my babies and didn't have any anesthetic. I mean, to me, that built character and gave me self-confidence. . . . So I think when you achieve a degree or degrees, it gives you a sense of having accomplished something and self confidence that you've survived it.

Overwhelmed with work, pregnancy, family, and college, Anne did not have the goal of earning advanced degrees while she was in her undergraduate program. However, while she was in her master's degree program, her goal became the doctorate. Perpetually "playing catch up" in the mismatch between her positions and her credentials, Anne began a master's then doctor's degree programs at once, juggling home and work. She recalled "for the most part," thinking "this is pure hell. Get it over with as soon as possible."

Anne, who prefers that others bask in the limelight, declined to go through baccalaureate commencement ceremonies. She limited her master's ceremonies to the hooding with only her parents, husband and son permitted to attend. Anne was persuaded to go through doctoral ceremonies with extended family members watching. "They were very proud of me," she said. Witnessing the ceremonies was "important to my parents." Further, seeing her formally graduate was "probably good" for the children. "Had they not been in the audience, it wouldn't have had any real meaning for me." The time studies

took from her time with her children and husband were a source of regret. "The only thing I care deeply about and regret is the time away from my kids and husband."

Anne's children had expectations of attending college themselves. Also, Anne expected them to attend college and graduate school. Anne advised her children to attend after high school:

> I think one of the things you miss when you get your baccalaureate degree after age 30: you don't have a regular college experience. You don't get to experience the fun side of college. You don't get the football games, the dances–at least I don't think you do. I want that very much for my kids. I want them to have a traditional college experience.

Cindy

Youthful at 50, Cindy was a secretary for an academic dean at a regional state university. She was admired by her colleagues for her familiarity with administrative procedures and easy, quiet way with students. She had recently divorced her second husband and was supporting her two teenage children through college. Growing up, Cindy remembered moving every few years as her father was transferred by his employer. She lived in small cities until she was a fifth-grader. The family moved to a metropolitan area where she attended large schools and did not have many friends.

Cindy's father provided a middle-class lifestyle and her mother filled a traditional homemaker role. Her mother earned a high school diploma a year after marrying at age 16. Her father had one semester of college. Cindy described an idyllic home experience. "We had a fifties sitcom house. We were a happy, content family. . . . we didn't have a lot of fights and troubles, unless I was completely blind." Her parents made sure she and her brother did homework every night. They prepared a quiet study area at home for each of them. Both were expected to go to college. "It was always just a matter of fact that [my

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brother] and I would go to college. There was never any question about it." Her brother completed but one year at a private, religious-based college, a severe disappointment to her father.

In high school, Cindy described herself as a "wallflower" with "a few friends." Isolated among the 800 students in her class, she joined a smattering of school groups, maintaining a low profile in them. "I didn't go out a lot. My friends and I did go to the football games and all the school things and all the church things." In academics, Cindy carried a B grade average. Her parents remained the most significant influences in her life. "The most important things I learned from my parents were to do the right thing; and tiny things, things that stick with you all your life, like how you treat people and [that] everyone at work was equal." When Cindy's mother began a child care business in their home to earn money for her and her brother's college, Cindy resented the intrusion. "It was *my* house and *my* mama."

She enrolled in a regional state university as a traditional-age student immediately after graduating from high school at about the same time her father's job transfer took her parents out-of-state. The college had about the same number of students as her high school, but seemed smaller and warmer, "a different world." Cindy said, "It was a new experience for me, actually. I was still rather shy, but I did make friends." Cindy joined a sorority and majored in home economics, switching later to business. She stopped-out after two-and-one-half years because "I decided I didn't want to do that any more for awhile." She moved in with her parents who had been transferred out-of-state.

After a couple of part-time jobs, Cindy accepted a full-time position with a telephone company, which eventually transferred her back to the state where she had been

attending college. There she married, had two children, and divorced after eight years.

While with the telephone company, Cindy had several office jobs, including one dealing

with customers. "That job really did me a lot of good because that forced me to talk with

the public which I had never done before. . . . It really made me a person that could deal

with people on a business basis." Cindy had planned to quit work when she had her second

child and stay home to rear her children. For three years she did just that, but divorce

forced her back into the workplace. She reluctantly relinquished the stay-at-home-mom

role:

> I never got over going back to work and leaving my kids. I hated it. I loved my job,
> but I *never* wanted to leave my kids. . . . I don't regret it because I had to do it. It
> was just never a good thing. I didn't want to leave my kids. I wanted to work but I
> wanted to be with my kids when they needed me there. But it didn't hurt them, you
> know.

After Cindy's father's death, her mother relocated to the small town where Cindy

previously attended college. Cindy, 34, followed with her children so her mother could

care for them while Cindy worked. She was hired as a secretary to a grant program

conducting scientific research when she made the decision to re-enter college. "I was

looking around. I was on the university campus, and everybody I'm working with is a

Ph.D. I thought 'I really don't have a degree.'" If she earned her bachelor's degree, Cindy

reasoned, "I would be smarter. I would be as smart as these guys." Hesitantly, she

approached her male supervisor about a flexible full-time work schedule in order to finish

her business degree. He responded with encouragement:

> I had a thought of finishing my bachelor's degree and I said if I did, I could start
> with this 7:30 class but that means I wouldn't get to work at eight-o'clock. I said,
> 'If you don't want me to do that, I won't do that.' And [my supervisor] said, 'If you
> have a chance to finish your degree, do it, now.' So I said, 'Oh, all right, I will.'

During the five years it took Cindy to complete her course work, her supervisor continued

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to provide a flexible schedule and permitted her to study at her desk.

Cindy also received encouragement from a close, long-time campus female friend and from a female professor who took a personal interest in her, providing advice and scheduling flexibility. "In a situation like that, you're going to have to work around things. An instructor and advisor who will help you do things like that is important." A network of support enabling her to successfully manage work, school and family responsibilities came from several other directions. She said:

> I didn't do it by myself. My Mama supported me by taking care of my kids, while I was in class. The school helped me because I got to do it at half price. My bosses helped me because they let me go to class. And God helped me every day because I was working, and not married and had kids and a house.

Cindy devoted herself to excelling and earned an A in every class she took as a reentry student. Through persistence she achieved her goal to bring her overall average up a full grade. "It's harder when you're older, or you take it more seriously," she said.

An excited Cindy participated in commencement ceremonies with her children and mother in attendance, the first in her family to graduate. She believed the degree "helped me with my children," but considered her important relationships unaffected by her higher education degree. "I know the people around me, my family and my good friends, were proud of me. . . . I don't think they would have thought any less [of me] if I didn't go back and get a degree." She entered a second marriage after earning the degree but did not consider her college education to be relevant to that relationship or any others. Cindy found she had learned to be more self-disciplined, and she discovered her experiences as a student enable her to connect to the large numbers of students she works with daily. "I do think it helps me relate more to the students I work with every day because I've been there" she said.

Except for exposure to computers, Cindy believed her knowledge base was not expanded by attending classes. "I knew the work because I already had been working in this field for awhile. Cindy said she had been motivated to resume pursuit of the degree to fit in among the educated people at her place of work, but stayed with it for intrinsic reasons:

> I started doing it because of them, but that went by the wayside pretty fast. I was doing it for me. I wanted to have a degree to give me the feeling that I accomplished something. I set out to finish my education and I did. I earned that degree because I worked really hard.

Cindy expected that the degree would make a difference for her financially and professionally. "I remember thinking how I'd get this big raise and some new opportunities. The money–that didn't happen." Her job did change from secretary for a soft-money grant program to a regularly budgeted secretary of a school within the university, but at a substantial drop in salary. The achievement of a degree "made no difference at all" as a factor in securing the job. "Having a degree or no degree at that time made no difference in the world," she said. More important were her familiarity with the position and with university operations. In her opportunities with the university, both professionally and financially, Cindy found no change. "The degree didn't help me much." Cindy noted that she would have more opportunity if she lived in a larger city and could work for a "larger corporation." Still, she felt the degree did permit her to find employment allowing her to remain in the community. Given the lack of employment opportunities in her community, she believed she worked for "the best place in town" at a job she "enjoys very much." She did not anticipate continuing her education.

Having a college degree positively altered her self-confidence, sense of empowerment, and self-esteem. "It did make me feel even better about myself. It made me

feel not a quitter, not a dropout—someone who accomplished what they set out to do."

Cindy noticed a difference in her confidence level, an aspect threaded throughout the 22 years since she graduated. "Having that degree benefitted me most inside," she said. "Doing that over a period of five years made me confident. It helped me do all my jobs because I know that I can do whatever I have to do. It made me more sure of myself."

Julia

Effervescent and gregarious, Julia drew people to her. The 57-year-old counselor and placement coordinator counseled welfare recipients who were attaining skills that would enable them to be self-supporting. Julia's parents were working to middle class dairy farmers. The family moved from the mountainous foothills to wheat country when she about 11. From her parents, Julia learned that marriage was a partnership. "My mother and dad were equal. They were good about deciding things together. You couldn't play them against each other." The third of four children, Julia believed she was well-parented and considered her childhood happy irrespective of her rebellious teenage years. "When I was a teenager I hated them all. I thought they were stupid and dumb and didn't know anything at all."

Describing her parents as "self-educated," Julia said both held strong convictions about education. "It was the important thing in their lives because [they believed] whoever was not educated got nowhere." Her father attended college for a couple of years and her mother graduated from eighth grade, later completing a GED and licensed practical nursing training through a hospital program. "My daddy said. . . . 'If you pass the day and you haven't learned something, you've wasted the day. I don't care if you've learned to change a tire faster, if you've learned something, then you've enriched the day,'" she said.

Julia grew up without television, but not without books. Her mother taught her to read before she started school. "I love to read. I come from a family who read."

Perpetually enthusiastic about learning, Julia was "almost a straight A student" in high school. A business teacher took a personal interest in Julia and her best friend. Julia said:

> She had three boys at home. She didn't have girls. It was almost as if [my girlfriend] and I became her girls because she recognized something in both of us–maybe a need or a want. She went out of her way to help us do things, buying different things: books that I wanted to read. . . . She was wonderful. She had this great big poster that she had made. It said: you can be anything you want. I had never heard that before. This is in 1957. . . . Boys were always real encouraged; girls were not encouraged to do that.

However, neither the teacher's interest nor a promise to her mother was sufficient to keep Julia focused on a high school diploma after she quit at 16 to marry. Julia and her 20-year-old husband moved across state for his good-wage factory job.

At first, the young couple thrived. Her husband drove a late-model car, earned good wages, and "we had everything you need." Julia missed beloved brothers, sisters, and parents. She felt "intimidated because I was just 16" among people and customs unfamiliar to her. "I think I really expected life to be like it was at my home and it wasn't." Her second-generation European immigrant husband expected subservience and dependence from his wife. Their rocky marriage endured for 25 years but only "did real good for probably about five or six years." Julia's expectations and perspectives changed after he was drafted into the military and she matured. A pregnant Julia remained behind while he was stationed overseas. She had intended to complete high school, but her husband objected. She recalled:

> I thought, 'I'll just go to school.' Well, he didn't want me to do that. It didn't dawn on me for a long time that this was one way of holding on and maintaining some

kind of ownership over me. [Going to school] was easy to let it slide so I let it slide. [While he was overseas] I sold Avon. [He] never wanted me to work. He was in Germany and he didn't know. So when he came home I had had a baby, I had grown up, I had been independent and made money of my own, and I was a different person. He didn't like me because when he left I was this person who said "I won't buy that dress if you don't like it,' and I didn't buy it. That's the way our life went because it was just he and I. Something about having a child changes your life. . . . I learned a little more assertiveness which he didn't like.

Over the next two decades, they persisted but the relationship continued to crumble. Her husband started drinking heavily in the military. The habit worsened over time, bringing with it anger and violence. Julia was belittled and blamed for his drinking:

. . . to the point where I really believed I was the reason he did it: 'If you'd just do something right once in a while. If you could just cook right. If you could just clean.' And you know, it never was perfect. And it never was right.

Regrouping, the couple relocated and had a second baby. Still, her husband's alcohol abuse escalated. "He developed some pretty violent tendencies to the point we had to run away and hide a couple of times." The couple's unspoken agreement allowed him to hit Julia without fearing the consequences, but not the children. One time when he pushed the boundaries too far, Julia left him. She recalled that her inebriated husband "picked up a rifle and tried to shoot me." Julia escaped into a ditch with their four- and seven-year-old children where they hid until a neighbor rescued them. Shortly afterward, Julia went back. The couple tried afresh. His alcoholism deepened despite a new job and life in a new town. Julia said:

I was working for a maid service at that time. It was getting worse. He drank more and he was gone. He'd be gone all week and then he'd be home on the weekends. The weeks were wonderful. The kids and I had a wonderful time. You could just see [tension] build up to the weekend, you know, 'Daddy's coming home this weekend.'

When her youngest child entered school, Julia became a homeroom mother. The school also brought her into contact with teachers who saw potential she could not. "I had

gotten to be real close friends with some of [my daughter's] teachers at school. They were

on my case about getting my GED." Julia went to GED classes because the teachers

"nagged me until I had to do something to shut them up." On the second night of classes

the GED teacher "told me 'Julia, take the test.' I said, ' I can't do that.' And he said, 'take

the test.' So I took the test. I passed it with a 66 and you had to have a 35 at that time. I

was amazed." Julia was gratified by the accomplishment but resisted the teacher friend

who urged her to take another step:

> I don't need to do anything else. I've accomplished this. She said, 'What am I
> going to do with you? Do you not realize you're working for a maid service for
> minimum wage and you're cleaning other people's toilets? Do you want to do that
> all your life?' Lord no, I don't want to do it all my life, but I don't have to work if I
> don't want to.

Julia coasted along, gradually reassessing herself. The coach at the grade school where

Julia had been assisting nudged her along. His pivotal comment permitted her to form a

new vision of herself. "He said, 'You know, Julia, you're a natural. You ought to go to

school and be a teacher.' He is the first person that said that." Julia, 35, seriously

considered the idea. She recalled a number of extended family members who were

educators. "It was kind of like, 'Look, I could do that.' So, I just thought, 'I want to look at

this.'" Thirty-five-year-old Julia initiated contact with the senior regional state university

located where she lived to find out about starting a degree program. Without her husband's

knowledge and "scared to death," Julia entered college. Her experience was epic:

> I found out how much it cost. I'm going, 'Oh geech, what am I going to do here?'
> Things were deteriorating between [my husband] and I to say the least. It was
> getting to the point where, my God, we hated weekends. So what I did, I went to
> the bank and I got a short-term loan for $500 and I enrolled in 12 hours of school. I
> didn't say a word [to my husband]. I bought my books, everything. I started in
> January of 1982 and he didn't find out about it until spring break. They had some
> bad weather and he couldn't work and he was home the week before spring break.
> Well, I'm going to school but he didn't know that, but he was home. I had to tell

him what I'd done. He was not happy to say the least. Well, he got pretty imbibed; pretty drunk that night. He tore all my books up, took them out to the back yard and burnt them. I just gave up. I just thought, well, I quit. After spring break, I went back to talk to them. I ran into [a friend who] was working in the rehab office. She wanted to know what I was doing. 'Well,' I said, 'I'm going to withdraw.' She said, 'What do you mean, you're going to withdraw? . . . no you're not going to quit.' I said, 'I don't have any money to pay for books. There's nothing I can do.' She said, 'You come with me.'

Her friend's intervention ultimately resulted in medical evaluations. Julia's long-term arthritic condition was so severe she qualified for education rehabilitation assistance benefits. "They paid for my bachelor's degree. . . I maintained my average. I graduated with like a 3.75 or a 3.78. . . . I loved school. My God, that was the most wonderful three-and-one-half years of my life." To cover costs Julia cleaned houses, worked food service, tutored, taught GED classes, and gave swimming lessons.

Julia's teenage son and daughter cheered each small classroom achievement. When she wearied of the heavy work and school load, her son pressed her to keep going and read her textbooks to her. "He thought that this was a way for me to get out, to change my life, and I didn't. But he could see that," Julia recalled. All three relished weekdays but feared and dreaded weekends with an abusive husband and drunken father.

In Julia's senior year matters with her husband "got worse and worse and worse. . . and he tried to kill me. He choked me until I was unconscious." Julia regained consciousness on the floor with her daughter crying over her. This time Julia ended the marriage with one semester of student teaching between her and December graduation. She borrowed money from a costly loan service to pay for the divorce. Julia and children moved into a shabby "shotgun house" for $200, all bills paid. Julia was 40; her son was a college freshman; and her daughter was in high school. She graduated that semester, weeks away from her first teaching job in a nearby rural school district.

Julia's father died knowing she was about to graduate. "You know, my father said, 'I am so proud of you. That was the proudest moment of my life. . . . That was akin to him saying 'I love you.'" She likened degree attainment to a story her father told her in childhood: Riders who pulled a ring from its holder won a free ride on the merry-go-round. "It was like I got the gold ring this time, man. I have got it. I realized that later on I had to do other things, but still. It was, 'I did this,'" Julia said.

The achievement was an empowering and self-affirming experience for her. "I affirmed the fact that I was a real person, that I exist," she said. Julia claimed ownership of personal qualities, noting, " I was smart enough, and I had the tenacity to hang on and do it and accomplish it and complete it." She gained a sense of self; the right to be. "The bachelor's degree, what it did for me was prove I was a person." For Julia, the achievement demonstrated she could succeed at something she and some others had thought she could not do. "I proved not only to them but to myself that I could do it." Her freshman goal was an identity shift from invisible to visible. "I would not be who I was. I would be someone," Julia said. "I would exist. People would say, 'That's Julia, she's a schoolteacher.'"

Reflecting on her doubt and insecurity prior to her adult educational experiences, Julia spoke extensively about the importance of people she met through education. For over two decades she had internalized her husband's denigrating assessment of her. Her perspective changed through her connections with educators subsequently allowing her to reshape her self-image:

> I [graduated] with help from people who didn't even know me who cared enough or had enough faith in me that I had to have faith in myself. That was a real experience to learn how to have faith in myself and to believe in me, because it had taken a long time for me to get to where I could believe in myself. For so many

years when people tell you, 'You're stupid and you can't do this, and you can't do this, and you can't do this,' you believe that.

The camaraderie she enjoyed with three faculty members in particular who "were like family" contrasted sharply with the isolation her husband had imposed on her at home. The importance of male and female faculty friendships continued to influence her life and drew her back for teaching credentials and master's degrees.

Over the next 17 years, Julia advanced in public schools. She relocated as necessary when opportunities opened. She earned state certification in special education and two master's degrees: one in teaching, the other in counseling, all from the institution where she achieved her bachelor's degree. Julia said her income and benefits are good. She uses her discretionary income to purchase new cars and travel with her children, grandchildren and extended family. "My quality of life is great," she said. Her son graduated with a bachelor's degree and became a law enforcement professional. Her daughter completed two years of school, married and had a child, and works in the medical field.

Prior to entering college, Julia said she was placebound and restricted to lower income levels in factory work or house-cleaning jobs because of her lack of skills. In her own eyes, Julia did not see herself in a teaching role despite her love of working with children. "I never really thought about it because I didn't think I could do it. I mean teachers have to have education. They have to do degrees. I didn't see the opportunity ever being there." The bachelor's degree changed her expectations. "Without that start, I never would have gone on. I would never have been able to be where I am today without that." Achieving the degree required perseverance to overcome deterrents along the way, according to Julia. The accomplishment "was my first measure of success. . . . It was the

first time in my life that I actually did something that I wanted to do and completed it."

Several years after earning a bachelor's degree, Julia came to the realization she

had chosen higher education as a way to escape an oppressive marriage. She recalled:

> When [my husband] found out I was going, that's the first thing he said, 'Yeah, you just want to leave me." And I swore, 'that's not what it is, that's not what it is.' But you know, I think it was all along. I think what they gave me, the whole idea of the education, was an avenue to not only better myself and do what I really wanted to do but to get out and to be able to get out.

Julia's perspective on her higher education decision changed during a graduate abnormal

psychology class when she was presented with concepts for understanding "how people

hide their feelings. . . . " Although discomforted and resentful of the professor, Julia

analyzed herself in light of the information presented. "I don't think I really realistically

accepted the fact that [a degree] was my avenue to get out until then." Escaping the

marriage literally was critical to her survival.

> I think education saved my life. . . I think that if I had not done what I did and gone and taken care of it, I don't think I would have survived the marriage. . . and I don't think I would have seen another way out. I don't think I would have lived.

In the years that defined her after earning a bachelor's degree, Julia became a

different woman from "that nonexistentent person" who sat in silence while life passed by.

She learned how to be in the present, to give voice to her thoughts and opinions:

> I learned how to say what I want. . . . I don't want to be a piece of furniture anymore. I was a piece of furniture for years. It's not a comfortable place to be. I like where I am now. College did that for me. . . . I'm more assertive. I'm not afraid to say what I think.

Julia controlled her own time, managed her own money, made her own decisions, and

enjoyed a full, self-directed family, social and religious life. She attributed her self-

assurance, "confidence in what I can do, in my abilities," and altered sense of self to her

college experience.

> I am sure I am a person. I have something to contribute. What I have to say is important, it's not incidental. It's not something you just dismiss. Having the bachelor's degree made me feel capable. It made me feel an equal to a lot of people I knew, even at church. That may sound snobbish, but by Godfrey it was good.

Her background provided a valuable bridge to reach the "browbeaten," mostly unskilled, female adults like herself who came out of abusive relationships with children to support. Julia said, "I tell them 'I was where you are. I've been there, done that. I got a t-shirt and two kids to match.' They like that. They can relate."

Karen

Exuding warmth and vitality, Karen, 51, preferred the background to center stage. She intuitively sensed people's needs and used her vast network of church and community connections as an informal support system to voluntarily assist people. She worked for a public school system in financial services. Karen anticipated retiring from the district. She married her high school sweetheart, a college professor. They have a grown, married son. Karen grew up in a rural community. Her father had a high school education. He worked for the same company throughout his career and provided a middle class lifestyle for the family. Her father expected Karen and her younger sister to attend college. He conveyed the message clearly when they were growing up. "He expected us to go to college and to graduate. It was something that he thought not only we should do, but that anyone my age should go to college. . . . I don't think that I ever had a choice of not going to school." Karen's mother was a registered nurse who earned her nursing credentials after high school through a hospital training program. Although her mother was not "as verbal" as her father, "she expected you to continue your education," Karen recalled. Her parents demonstrated attention to early childhood education, enrolling her in a private kindergarten program because it was not offered at the local public school.

Karen went through twelve years of public school in a small, rural system. She earned a B average but scored poorly on a college entrance exam due to illness the night before the test. The low exam score resulted in discouragement from her high school counselor regarding Karen's college aspirations. Persistent encouragement was provided by two women teacher "role models" who urged her to get a higher education. Karen was active in sports, 4-H, competitive speech, and an innovative office technology program.

On the basis of grades, Karen was accepted to a state comprehensive university where her boyfriend attended. She began the summer after high school graduation. Although unprepared for the demands of that summer's freshman English, Karen persisted through the class with extensive outside assistance and private tutoring. Strongly influenced by her positive experiences in 4-H, she majored in home economics with the intention of becoming a county home extension agent.

University life presented Karen with some unpleasant encounters unlike those she experienced in her conservative church-going community. She was taken aback by shifting from "having thirty in a class to where you were in an auditorium of twelve-hundred kids." She changed her major from home economics to business. After two years including summers, she decided to stop-out and get married. She reasoned that she was tired of school, dissatisfied with her average grades, and in need of wages in order to support her husband through school. On campus, Karen initially found office employment at the university doing secretarial work and later administering tests. Her competence and the respect she earned in these positions gave her a strong sense of worth and accomplishment.

In retrospect, Karen regretted not going back to college during those years her

husband continued in pursuit of a doctorate. "I didn't go back to school. I kept kicking myself. . . . if I had just taken one class a semester. . . I would have eventually graduated." Karen harbored the goal of finishing her degree. The couple had a child and moved to a small town where her husband joined the faculty of a regional state university.

After a few years, Karen decided to return and finish her degree while working in a secretarial job for a grant-funded project for the same university. "Almost everyone who worked there had a bachelor's degree of some kind." Fearful of losing employment when grant funds expired, Karen sought a major providing the quickest route to graduation because, "I was just more concerned about being able to keep a secretarial job." Graduating was important "because I really felt in my lifetime, for a better job, you would have to have a degree. . . . " Karen observed people around her who "were being hired in grant situations but they had to have a degree. It really didn't make any difference what their degree was, but they could work on these different grants as long as they had a degree." Aside from her immediate motivation for returning, Karen also identified two personal reasons. "I had always just wanted to finish because I thought it would mean so much to my dad. Plus I'd just wanted to have this degree."

With support from her supervisor to return to college, Karen adapted her schedule. "I probably could not have not finished my degree at the university had I not had the flexibility to take some of the classes during the day. . . because the courses aren't offered at night." Often, Karen would go to work early, leave for a morning class, work during lunch, and then take an afternoon or evening class. In this manner she completed the final two years of course requirements and earned a baccalaureate degree when she was 35. Multiple demands on her time posed a formidable hurdle. Karen strained to keep up

community involvement, juggle a full-time job, part-time school, and to maintain a home for her husband and active grade-school-age son. Earning a degree would have been out of reach in her location "if I had not worked on campus."

When she achieved her goal, "I was, well, kind of relieved that I did finish it, that I did finish it," she said. Although urged to do so by family and co-workers, Karen declined to go through graduation ceremonies. Re-entering college in her thirties was a highly personal matter for Karen. She overcame feeling a bit "embarrassed about being a nontraditional student and going back." Because she chose to forgo the ceremonies, Karen doubts her son knew when she finished. She said her husband was at ease with whatever choice she made. Her parents "were pleased that I did finish." Both their daughters earned baccalaureate degrees.

Karen said she had hoped the degree would enable her to secure her employment in grant programs at the university, qualify her for a better job, and assist her professionally. In the 19 years since she graduated, Karen has held a number of business and office jobs and found the degree "helped me in all of my jobs that I have had." The degree gave her an edge in securing employment but marginal career and financial advancement in the small city where she lived. Specific classes were helpful, but the degree itself was more important as "it is the fact that you *do* have a degree," she said. Since her employment with the public school district, Karen considered returning to college for an elementary teaching certificate. She took two classes before discarding the idea because of "busy work" involved and time constraints.

Of those in her high school class, Karen said only one other girl earned a baccalaureate degree. Karen gained a "kind of inner satisfaction that, yes, I did it, even

though probably the high school counselor did not encourage me to go on." Her college education, Karen said, "makes me feel a little more confident," in life. Through higher education, Karen found she encountered an enlarged world. "I was just horrified when I had to take Art and Life. . . . it was really quite interesting. . . . You're exposed to things that I never would have been exposed to. . . ." Karen believed higher education had brought only benefit, not detriment, to her life.

Karen was as uncomfortable speaking about herself as she was adamant about the importance of higher education in modern society. Moreover, she spoke at length regarding the obligation of a university and its programs to be more inviting and accessible for first-generation and nontraditional college students.

Laura

Laura, an ordained minister and the ranking administrator for a Christian organization, mulled over her thoughts with deliberation and poise. At 61, she was the oldest participant. Her father was a career bank employee who provided the family a middle class lifestyle. An only child, Laura was born in the city where her life was ordered around home, school, and church. All were within a two-mile radius.

Her mother completed high school, and her father was a two-year business school graduate. Laura's parents have "always thought that I am wonderful. The downside of that is that they never really encouraged me or had goals for me outside of what I happened to think up for myself." A "good student" involved in "typical outside activities" growing up, Laura focused most of her attention in high school on a boyfriend . Even though she did not remember her parents specifically advising her to marry, "I somehow knew that *that* was what I was supposed to do." The "only goal" ever expressed for her by her parents

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came from her father who, "because of his view of the world, he thought that if I could become a secretary for an oil company, that would be a top profession for a woman," she said. So, taking her cue from a social circle of friends who were planning to attend college after high school graduation in 1957, she enrolled at a state comprehensive university where she pursued secretarial studies.

Unmotivated and dissatisfied with her courses, Laura sampled two religion classes in the second semester of her freshman year "because my relationship to the church had always been a pivotal, key, foundational place for me." That summer Laura married and the newlyweds moved to a metropolitan area for the start of his career in aeronautical engineering. The couple intended for Laura to continue her studies at a nearby denominationally affiliated, private Christian college. "But–and get this–we decided even though he had a wonderful salary, we thought that we couldn't afford that $20 [per credit hour.]" Bored and twenty, Laura fulfilled her father's goal for her and "got a job as a secretary in an oil company."

After the birth of their son a year later, the couple returned to the city where she had grown up. During her twenties, Laura gave birth to a daughter and another son. Her life revolved around family and extensive volunteer work at church. She and her husband became the congregation's youth directors, working with teenagers. The minister recognized leadership potential in Laura, and he "became my first mentor and the first one who ever really encouraged me to think about my life in larger terms." Through him, Laura and her husband affiliated with a nationwide ecumenical movement. His mentorship profoundly affected her life. She recalls:

> The minister sent me to workshops to learn more about theology. He recommended books. He and I studied a series of the theology books together. He sent me to a

class by Dale Carnegie so that I could be more comfortable speaking to the group and learn about leadership. He got me involved with an organization that was seriously studying and worshiping together in a really radical way in the '60s. That has really been a thread throughout the rest of my life because of the seriousness of what they were doing. It's not casual, as most regular congregation study is but seriously addressed my life and hundreds of other lives. . . . I was a part of a pedagogic team here in Oklahoma that later taught hundreds of people in local congregations serious theology about the renewal of the church. . . . At one point later, families were organized in particular cities across the country and lived together. And my family lived together for a year with another 20 or 25 people. We were experimenting with what a family order would be like. It was another real pivotal time in my life in terms of having a larger view about what a human life is supposed to be about and how to find a place in that. It was this minister that got me involved with that as well. I can look back and see that he was very important in my development.

Laura entered her thirties. "I had taught every age level in the church. I think I had served on every kind of committee." In a tumultuous time of social unrest, Laura said a different minister in another congregation "told me that it was because of my Sunday school class teaching adults that the church was growing because we were really doing some serious life issues there, and it was the best draw of the church."

A critical factor in Laura's personal journey during her twenties was a spiritual struggle that her work with her congregation's youth group accentuated:

Theologically, I was always raising the question that I had raised as a teenager of what God wanted me to do in my life. Then I began working with that youth group in my early 20s. They just knocked me out. They were asking questions those questions at a much deeper level, a more serious level, than I had as a teenager. . . . In my work with them that question deepened until it really made me restless.

Laura said she began to "articulate that I was struggling with God. . . . " She read voraciously and was intensely driven to know what God wanted of her. " It was my job to figure out what God wanted and figure out how to be able to do it," she said. Laura read theological philosophy, pressed by a sense of "hurry" and a "great curiosity. . . . I just wanted to know more. That's why I loved to read so much. I couldn't get enough."

Also during her twenties, Laura became disenchanted with the role of a volunteer,

recognizing in herself the desire to be esteemed as a "professional person." As she

grappled with "something welling up inside me," new friendships proved invaluable.

Guided by a female consultant who "helped me understand the difficulty of working alone,

I began to think maybe I didn't want to be that isolated. Maybe my personality would be

more satisfied in a group situation of some kind." Through another friendship, Laura also

grappled with her palpable hunger for something. Laura said her friend:

> . . . helped me. . . to identify that there was some other step for me to take in my
> life, that perhaps I had more value than I thought I had. And since I had identified
> and performed some functions that seemed to be valuable, that perhaps I could,
> with a college degree, I might even get paid for some of them and then have that
> kind of recognition of my work.

Her husband brought a college completion degree program for adults to her attention.

Laura, 36, entered the program in a private university in Christian education. She

completed her baccalaureate degree when she was 39. In college, she was guided by a

male advisor who assisted as she "began to integrate some of the things that I did know

already."

The unconditional support Laura's parents previously provided was missing from

this endeavor. Her parents, neither of whom could relate to having a college education,

were puzzled over her decision to "extend myself that way." Laura said:

> They were very clear. They could articulate that I had a good husband and three
> children and a lovely home. Why would I want to go back to school? They didn't
> say I shouldn't go. And they never were upset with me that I know of. It was just,
> 'Why would you do that?' They just couldn't understand.

In her own role as a mother, Laura expressed lingering guilt over "not doing all the things I

might have" with her children while she was completing her degree. However, Laura's

positive attitude about learning and education spilled over into her own child-rearing

where she stressed the importance of college for both sons and daughter.

Initially supportive of her return to college, Laura's husband's attitude soured. He "came to resent the time I was spending in study:"

> He never liked to come home and see me reading a book. So the way I learned to deal with that was I did my reading during the day and did my house work when he got home. While I was on a path there that I knew I had to follow, wherever it was leading me, I didn't receive that much support from him.

The erosion of their marriage was a "wrenching experience" for Laura. Even though they sought the help of two different professional therapists, the couple could not reconcile their differences. Laura was not the same person she had been. Others saw the change in her:

> He saw I changed a lot. People said I was changing. There was kind of a new life about me. He came from a school [of thought] that said family was supposed to be the most important. . . Even though he could say it himself, that he didn't want me to necessarily to be like his mother–to be a stay-at-home wife and mother–still, there's a lot to be said for having meals on the table at the right time and a wife that wasn't distracted with books all the time. Maybe some couples worked around that but for us it got to be more and more divisive.

The couple divorced three years after she earned her bachelor's degree. Laura believed her pursuit of a baccalaureate education, "had a lot to do with" their decision to divorce.

Laura's decision to earn a degree was predicated on her desire to achieve the "validation" and "salary" awarded to professionals but not to volunteers. Salary was secondary. "We didn't particularly need my salary at that time. It wasn't that. In fact, the first job that I took was not a great boon to our budget, but it was absolutely the biggest thrill of my life then." Her first professional position was on the religious education staff for a regional office of her denomination. Laura was a colleague among professionals with whom she had once served as a volunteer. "I was so excited I just couldn't wait to get up to this place to these people to work with the wonderful people in education." Her

assignments were "things that I loved," and things "I knew how to do," Laura said. She

felt recognized for her skills, knowledge and effectiveness:

> But what was fulfilling was that I discovered that I could be a professional. . . .
> This was the big question that I had been struggling with: Was I good enough to do
> these things that I felt God wanted me to do? Even though the salary was not that
> good, the fact was, someone was *paying* me. So I did get that validation. . . .

Later, Laura discovered her experience was "an inspiration to several other women like

me." Among them was a woman without a degree or work history who told her, "'I just

want to go back to school and get a job. I want a job like you've got.'"

Through her regional office work, Laura became acquainted with an extensive

circle of Christian educators, many of whom were associate pastors. Knowing and

watching them, Laura developed a desire to "learn more about the theology." She enrolled

and commuted to her denomination's seminary, a three-hour drive from home. The first

six hours of seminary classes "just whet my appetite and that's when I made a shift to go

on for a master's of divinity." With a master's at 46, Laura continued to progress in career,

salary, and credential opportunities. Eventually, Laura remarried and relocated to a new

city. She administered her seminary's fledgling outreach program. She taught classes

which led her to complete a doctoral degree at 52 from the institution. After the marriage

failed, Laura took her present position, an ecumenical executive post allowing her to

continue to develop her multifaceted interests in spiritual, humanitarian and educational

arenas.

Pamela

Pamela, 50, gentle and self-assured, was the middle-child of three. A full Native

American, she worked in a middle-management service position at a tribal public health

hospital in former Indian Territory. Pamela's parents divorced when she was very young,

and true to her tribe's cultural tradition her father and his family had nothing more to do with her and her siblings. The children lived in a remote, rural area with their reluctant mother, grandparents, and an unmarried uncle. Her uncle provided a lean but stable income for the family. Rearing children was beyond her mother's interest and capacity, fostering early self-reliance and responsibility in Pamela:

> Mom really didn't particularly want us, but she kept us and she raised us. She wasn't bad or mean to us or anything. We just didn't turn out to be a very close family. I laughingly refer to us as a bunch of strangers that happen to be related to each other. . . . I've been pretty much on my own since I've been about 10 years old, and everything. . . . Have you ever known anybody that just never grew up and never could accept responsibility for their own actions? That was mother. I didn't know that until may be like, now. . . . She could not handle that responsibility.

Four years younger than her brother and two years older than her sister, Pamela had numerous household duties. Pamela was closest to her brother and uncle, the primary breadwinner. Her grandparents died before she was out of her teens.

She attended a small rural school where she was successful in the classroom. Urged by her uncle to go to college, Pamela dreamed of becoming a medical doctor. After high school she commuted to a junior college as a traditional-age learner, where she encountered searing prejudice and rejection:

> I never thought I was different until I went to college. That's when I found out I was. And I. . . thought I was just like everybody else. But I found out I was different, that not everyone was accepting of Native Americans. . . . The guy I was dating,. . . we had talked about the future,. . . and then one day he broke it to me, that. . . he could never ever take me home to meet his parents. . . . [Eventually] I figured out my skin's a different color, but I'm like everyone else.

After earning an associate's degree, she transferred to a nearby regional state university. She experienced a semester of rejection from one of her professors who "had a reputation for picking on one student and going after them." Overall, the college was socially and academically nourishing. Pamela was invited to join a sorority where she found friendship

and acceptance. Too, a few of her professors took a personal interest in her and fostered her success.

Pamela had been accepted to medical school contingent on college gradation and was within 12 hours of graduation when her uncle died. For her, assuming her uncle's head of household role was the only course of action. "It never occurred to me to think otherwise." Unhesitatingly, she left school to provide for her mother and sister, promising to return someday. Pamela said:

> [My uncle] had passed away and so we needed another source of income. . . . there were just things you have to pay. The bills had to be paid. So I left school and went to work for the [tribal nation]. . . . But I made a vow to myself that someday I would come back and finish school. I wanted that college degree. I knew someday I would do it. I would do it. So it was okay.

Pamela continued to financially support her mother and sister. In her career with the tribe, she advanced into better positions with more responsibility and higher salaries. In her mid-thirties, Pamela's sense of being "trapped" along with disappointment in an important relationship triggered a year of soul-searching. On leave from her job, she left the state to live with her college-educated brother and sister-in-law. With her income from temporary employment jobs, she continued to send money to her mother and sister. Pamela discussed her life crisis with her brother. She followed his advice to think about those things in life she had always wanted to do. After a period of reflection, Pamela knew the answer with certainty: "I wanted to finish the degree." The long ago sacrificed goal of becoming a physician might be unrealistic at 37, but earning a bachelor's degree was not.

Pamela sought the personal gratification of completing an unfinished goal. Returning to her career, her family, and her previous university, Pamela announced her decision to finish her baccalaureate degree. Her mother and sister objected and offered no

support. "I'm going to do it anyway whether you like it or not" she told them. Standing up to her mother and sister marked a change in Pamela. Up to that point, Pamela had always done what her family wanted. He refusal to deny herself in submission to their desires by re-entering college was a significant departure in her lifelong pattern of behavior. Repeatedly in the college years ahead, her mother and sister would question and criticize her decision to seek a degree. "I always go back to that—then I wanted to go back to college they were not there to support and encourage me."

Resolute, Pamela garnered support from a close friend and her boss, who approved flexible hours so she could work full-time and attend college part-time. "I went to work at seven; I worked late; I worked weekends a lot of times; anything I could to make up time." A single working woman without children, Pamela did not qualify for grants and need-based scholarships. Characteristically, Pamela shouldered the burden with aplomb. She improvised a pay-as-you-go system:

> . . . talk about a shoestring budget. I went back to school and got my degree on a VISA card. . . . I charged it up at the beginning of every semester and paid it off by the end of that semester, then I charged it back up again. That's literally how I got my degree. . . . Getting a 99-cent movie on the weekend was a real big luxury. But that was okay. I wanted it. I was willing to make those sacrifices. . . . Even people that worked with me said, 'I've never seen you so focused on doing something as you are this.

Impeded by work time and class scheduling, Pamela abandoned her pre-medical course of study and switched her major to English, minoring in chemistry and biology. In particular, two women professors in her major provided encouragement and assistance.

Pamela graduated three years later at 40. She was elated with her accomplishment but crushed by her mother's and sister's refusal to attend graduation. Her boss and close friends were in attendance and her brother sent congratulations. Their pride could not

cover the hurt of her mother's and sister's absence:

> The day I walked across the stage, my family did not come. They told me they had no intention of coming. . . . They were not there. It hurt. I have to admit it hurt because this was so important to me I wanted to share it, but they chose not to be a part of it. . . . I look at that as the beginning. . . for seeing things as they really were. I'll always look back at that point in time as when I wanted to do something for myself, they were not there to encourage me and support me. . . . That was the beginning of my eventually. . . seeing things as they really were. . . . I can remember after graduation all the families were around and they were congratulating and hugging their family members. . . . everybody else was going to go eat and I was alone. I was alone. But that was okay; I did what I set out to do. I did it. Everybody said I couldn't do it, but. . . I did it. I felt so good, I can't tell you. I felt so good. I felt like I had really done something.

After her mother's and sister's refusal to support her decision to return to college and their refusal to attend graduation, Pamela gradually gained awareness of her transformed perspective of her relationship with them and her need for familial belonging. Pamela described her insight at graduation ceremonies as an "awakening." It was a pivotal point in her relationship with those for whom she had once sacrificially given up her dreams of college and a career as a physician.

Years after graduation, Pamela looked on the change in her understanding of her family and her hunger for family as a vital and profound consequence of her higher education. While her transformed perspective was a sudden awakening in one respect, in another the pieces fell together slowly over time. Of the change in her views she said:

> I learned to stand on my own. . . . I learned, 'If you don't want me to do this and you didn't like it, well that was your problem.' And I'd never done that before. . . . because as the years went by, I realized that no matter what I did or how hard I tried, we were not going to be a family. I could not keep together something that was not going to be and I had to learn to let go. . . . It took a long time. It was a very gradual process, but I learned how. . . . I think everybody has a need to belong; to say 'I'm a part of something.' And that's the only thing I ever wanted in my whole life was family. But letting go was a healing. . . . When I let go, I let go of a lot of hurt.

She believed her grasp of the situation would not have come about, or would have come

more slowly had she not earned a degree and that her life was better for it. Self-discovery

accompanied her new understanding. She said:

> I have found out that in spite of what people say, I *am* very capable; I *am* a hard
> worker, and I *can* do things. I can accomplish. I've shown myself that once I set my
> mind to something, I can do it. I can make the sacrifices necessary to accomplish it.

At first, Pamela was a reentry student doubtful of her ability to compete with

younger classmates, "scared to death," and questioning the sanity of her decision to go

back. During the process, college became her venue for redefining her self image. She

described herself as a "quiet, just very reserved" person who sits backs and watches

everyone else. Through her classroom experiences, Pamela learned to respond and express

her opinions in class. Much to her astonishment, classmates treated her as a person of

worth with thoughts of value:

> Those other kids, they would *listen*. They just said, 'I've never really looked at it
> from that point of view,' or 'that's really observant.' I found that very amazing that
> they were interested in what I thought when everyone else I had known, everyone
> else that was important to me, didn't think what I was doing or what I thought was
> really very interesting at all. . . . So they just thought I really was kind of smart. All
> of a sudden I wasn't as bad as I thought I was. . . . I wasn't so bad after all.

The curriculum and the process expanded her knowledge base and her conceptual

abilities. "I can't tell you how much I really enjoyed going to school this time. . . . These

professors opened up new thoughts and ideas I never knew were there," she said. I just

loved it," she reiterated time and again. Pamela said:

> It brought out a strength and courage in me I didn't know was there. Then when I
> brought strength and courage out, it helped me to keep on climbing and never give
> up. If I hadn't gone to school I don't think I would have found what was inside of
> me.

Immediately after earning the credential, Pamela received an automatic pay raise.

Since then, her employer adopted career development criteria that would have made

advancement and professional development opportunities impossible without a

baccalaureate degree. "I wouldn't have the job I have or make the money I'm making."

She has been promoted and was given the task of creating and implementing a new

position, something she "probably wouldn't have had the chance to do" without a

baccalaureate degree. In developing the position, Pamela encountered formidable

opposition. She approached the issues with self-assurance, believing the personal qualities

she had discovered in herself as a consequence of the degree experience gave her the

security and tenacity to see it through. Pamela married for the first time when she neared

50. Her satisfaction in the relationship overshadowed any intrusion into her once solitary

lifestyle.

Her university experience in midlife was a time of personal growth, awareness and

self-discovery for Pamela as she revised her self image. The new ways in which she saw

herself were in sharp contrast to the ways she had previously viewed herself:

> I learned a lot about myself. It was good. It was very good. . . . It opened me up to
> me. It made me more aware of me. I guess I had let other people's ideas or
> viewpoints or perspective–whatever you want to call them–shape my own idea of
> who I was. All of a sudden, I thought, you know, that's not me at all.

The baccalaureate experience "opened up possibilities that I never thought were open to

me before."

Tamara

Tamara, 52, spoke in a hushed voice occasionally tinged with a hint of stutter, the

remnant of a disabling congenital cleft palette her family could not afford to repair until

she was a young adult. The youngest of six, Tamara was a toddler when her parents traded

the life of migrant fruit pickers in California for sharecropping in eastern Oklahoma. The

whole family worked in the fields raising cotton, hogs, pigs and chickens to survive.

Tamara's disability was "a major thing" in her life, resulting in health problems and making "a difference in how people perceived me," she said. "My dad perceived me as kind of fragile so I was kind of petted and didn't have to work quite as hard as everyone else." Still, the constant battle for survival weighed on her father. He was a "very strict person" who was "harsh" though "not physically abusive." Tamara said her father held the view "you had a duty and if you let down on your duty you let everybody else down."

The family's nurturing role was provided by Tamara's "very quiet and sweet" mother who was "kind" as well as "patient." Tamara's mother took the children to church while their father stayed behind. She said her father held traditional ideas of men's and women's roles, believing "sons could do labor; girls could labor, nurse, or teach" for a living. In the home, her parents emphasized the importance of a high school education. All but one sibling earned their diplomas. Tamara said:

> Education was a priority so all my brothers and sisters graduated from high school. That was something my parents really stressed. . . . They didn't stress college, but they stressed a high school education. . . . [My dad] said 'you're never going to get any type of a really good job if you don't;' and he didn't want us to have to struggle like he and my mom.

From the time Tamara was nine, her mother worked in a sewing factory. Tamara's mother completed the eighth grade. Her father had "no education, not even a year."

Bound closely to her mother, Tamara was heartbroken and traumatized when her mother abruptly died at home after work the summer following Tamara's high school graduation. Tamara, 17, changed plans. Tamara had intended to go away to a university because "I loved school." Instead, she commuted to a two-year college in a nearby town. "When she died I knew I needed to stay home with my dad. . . " After she finished the associate's degree, her father stunned her by announcing his intention to move in with a

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divorced daughter and grandchildren. Tamara "knew I couldn't do that," so she married a man she had known merely two months. "He asked me to marry him, and I was foolish enough to think, 'I don't have a home so why not?. . . In [my father's] mind, he was probably preparing himself for me leaving, but I didn't understand that emotionally."

Tamara's spouse was an "overbearing" man with a work ethic opposite of hers. Moving from state to state, she held a number of jobs, and he "lost a lot of jobs" through irresponsible work behavior in the early years of their marriage. They were in California when her husband left her and their two young daughters:

> When I divorced, I was devastated even though I knew that that was what I needed to do. It was really hard. I was real conflicted. . . . this was not what you're supposed to do. It was real, real hard, and real hard for me to see myself as single. I saw myself as being married for probably three or four years afterwards. I was really upset. . . . my Christian walk was, and still is, important to me. I sat down one night and I just knew, in my mind I knew: 'give yourself a year'. . . . Go through this. Go through all you're going to do, but give yourself a year. Things will be better. So I wrote down some goals. I still remember those goals and I have those. They were on my refrigerator for years and they are all yellow. The goals were: to raise my girls in the love and admonition of the Lord, which is the Scripture; to finish my bachelor's degree–and then it became my master's degree; to buy a new car because my car was horrible–an old Pinto; buy a home; get a good job in counseling. Those were my five goals. And then I had an extra one. It said: 'get a Ph.D.' Then I put, 'Wow!' I thought that would never happen. That was just a big pie in the sky thing. This was before I ever started back to school. When I was working, and all of those were being checked off, a Ph.D. was not anything I even wanted to do. It was just that night, as my hand started writing, that came out as an addendum.

Tamara enrolled for classes at the regional campus of a state comprehensive university, earning a baccalaureate degree in liberal arts and psychology when she was 34, and a master's in vocational rehabilitation counseling three years later.

She was emphatic about the positive aspects of the baccalaureate degree on her life, particularly where her children were concerned. Her relationship with them, their quality of life, and their relationship with others benefitted. "I think it made them proud of

me. I think that they are where they are today because I did what I did." Both daughters have earned baccalaureate degrees. One completed a master's degree. Tamara refused to let finances be a deterrent, always finding a way to resolve funding barriers. "I pushed them. I know I did at times, but they're very thankful that I did. They're proud of themselves. I can see that and I love that. . . . I was their number one cheerleader. . . ." Gratified her daughters completed baccalaureate level degrees at a traditional age, Tamara believes their lives will be better for it. " They're different people because of that. I know they are."

Empowered by the strong work ethic instilled by her parents, Tamara tackled college, work, and children with dogged determination. "I was working full-time, going to school full-time, taking care of my two children full-time, and I was so tired all of the time," she said. "It was a big sacrifice, and it was hard work." Tamara consciously integrated child-rearing with her life as a student, taking care to guide and set an example for her daughters. To those who asked if she neglected her children during those years, she said:

> Definitely not. I was with my children at school. I got to be there with them. . . . When I did my homework, once a week, we would go to this pizza place. I would take all my books. I would sit at the back table. It had this playground inside, all kinds of slides and stuff. We would get water and pizza. We would talk about what we'd done that day. And when they were ready to go play, they'd go play and I'd sit there and work. When they came up I'd stop what I was doing. We would go to the park and I would read and work while they played. I really tried to improve my children and do my school work. When we'd sit down at night when they'd do their homework I'd have my time as a family. . . There was not one negative! It's all been positive. It was hard. That was the only negative. It was hard work, physically draining, emotionally draining. It was good. I wanted to make sure they saw me graduate. I wanted to make sure I walked across stage, that they were there. . . They were there. Students I've had would say, 'I'm not going to walk,' I would say, 'you need to walk especially if you have children. They need to be there and see you do that. It needs to be a memory they have in their mind.'

When her children were small, Tamara remembered wanting her children "to think highly

of themselves," and she wanted them to "see themselves as having a better life."

Ironically, earning a baccalaureate degree, she discovered, had that effect on her. "I

felt better about myself." Tamara said higher education:

> . . . made me feel like I'm smart. It made me feel like I did have some good
> qualities. For about 15 years, I had emotionally been put down and did not feel that
> I had any talents, [I felt] that I couldn't do much. The only thing that I felt I could
> do at that time was take care of my children. I was made to feel I couldn't even be
> a good housekeeper or a good cook or anything. So after I divorced, went back to
> school, and got my degree; it gave me the encouragement to try different things. It
> gave me the encouragement to venture out, cook big meals for people or invite lots
> of people into my home, almost anything; any kind of a new adventure that I
> wouldn't even attempt before. Now, it's like I can do that. I can probably do that. It
> just gave me the encouragement to try things, to be more open. I think it allowed
> me to see more of the world, because as a child in rural Oklahoma, the culture that
> we have here–that was all I saw. So when I went to college, especially the last part
> of my bachelor's and master's degrees, it opened up the world to me. I learned
> about different cultures. I learned about other occupations. I learned about all kinds
> of interesting things; not just counseling–that's my love–but I'm real interested in
> all kinds of things.

Tamara identified herself as a lifetime learner and believed she had been so since

childhood. Tamara said she was the same person she had been "inside as a little girl"

before she was oppressed by her father's strictness, her limiting disability, her abusive

husband, her timidity, and her family's poverty. "All of those things closed me in, and I

couldn't be who I really wanted to be." A college education was her avenue to herself.

During and immediately after earning a bachelor's degree, Tamara worked for the

state department of education, then in state rehabilitation counseling with specializtion in

sign language and other services for the deaf. She became an adjunct sign language teacher

at nearby colleges, then relocated to Oklahoma where she accepted similar state

rehabilitation counseling and college adjunct teaching positions. In the 17 years since

earning the baccalaureate degree, Tamara's life had progressively improved. She made

"good money" at a "good job," lived in her own home, and taught part-time for two colleges. In recent years another opportunity presented itself. Tamara accepted a full-time faculty position that would require her to earn a doctorate. "Everything was going good. And this was going to be a pay cut. Deep down inside, that little girl said, 'Go for it.' And I'm looking at that paper [on the refrigerator] that says, 'Get my Ph.D. Wow!' she said. Tamara believed remuneration would improve after she attained the doctorate.

Tamara's bachelor's degree provided a compelling career, recognition from others, and a measure of status. She identified the fulfilling rewards:

> Had I not gotten my bachelor's degree. . . I would have probably stayed in a really mundane job, that would have probably been not as interesting as I would have hoped for. . . . I could have been a worker anywhere. I have worked in lots of places. I've been a waitress. I've been lots of different things. I would have always worked. I would never have had the challenge. I would never have had the fun jobs that I've had. To me, I think all of the jobs I've had since my bachelor's degree have been fun jobs where I can use my talents but also where–this is a little bit egotistical–where people can kind of look up to you a little bit. That may not be the best thing in the world to say but you kind of like it. I think most people kind of like that, to have your peers that you went to school with say, 'Oh, cool job. You did really good.' You like that. Most of us like that.

All that prevented Tamara from taking every class she possibly could were "the money and the time." Of the role her baccalaureate degree played in her life she said, "There was not one negative! It's all been positive."

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, AND IMPLICATIONS

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore the meaning and consequence of higher

education integrated into life experience from the viewpoint of eight women who earned a

baccalaureate degree in midlife. This phenomenological study using oral history in-depth

interviews focused on women's perceptions of higher education as each reflected on her

individual and societal life experiences a period of years after attaining the degree. The

interpretive framework guiding the discussion in this chapter is drawn from transformative

learning theory and women's development theory. Deliberately directed by stories each

woman told in her own voice, this study sought to take a fresh look at the ways she

entwined baccalaureate education into her life.

An overarching theme of relationships emerged, flowing like a river through every

woman's life experiences. The women's stories were told through the filters involving

connections with others. How they saw themselves, how others saw them, the ways they

processed the significance of experiences to them, what they considered important to

communicate were all in the context of their social and significant relationships. The

meaningfulness of a woman's higher education and its consequences was frequently

expressed through marker connections and disconnections in her most closely held

relationships (Belenky et al., 1997; Chodorow, 1974; Gilligan, 1982; Brown & Gilligan,

1992; Miller, 1976). A second overarching theme of personal development predominated

in womens' assessment of the higher education consequences most meaningful to their

lives. These two concepts are not mutually exclusive. Interwoven into the women's

stories, the findings affirm Chodorow's (1974) observation that the process of female

development evolves around relationships, a notion termed self-in-relation. Relationships

engage women in ways that enable them to shape thoughts of themselves and come to

embrace authentic selfhood (Daloz, 1999; Gilligan, 1982; Kegan, 1982; Miller, 1976).

Women's development theory informs us that women define themselves differently from

men in relation to others, emphasizing connectedness over separateness (Belenky et al.,

1997; Gilligan, 1982; Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Miller, 1976).

Concepts of transformative learning theory illuminate our understanding of the

meaning perspectives uncritically formed by the women in childhood. Such perspectives

are useful in examining the interplay of experiences and thought processes that brought the

women to college. According to transformative learning theory, meaning perspectives are

often uncritically acquired in childhood through the process of socialization and

acculturation (Mezirow, 1991, 2000; Taylor, 1997). The collective meaning schemes made

up of an adult's values or attitudes about something collectively become the meaning

perspective an adult relies upon to process and know the world (Mezirow, 1991, 2000;

Taylor, 1997). A changed–transformed–view requires a shift in an adult's meaning

perspective. As described earlier in Chapter II, Mezirow (2000) observes a progressive

series of steps that occur when conscious transformative learning occurs of reflection,

discourse, and action. However, most transformations unfold little by little before

capturing our attention. Daloz (1999) observes:

> Transformations rarely, if ever, come about abruptly. Rather, they slip into place
> piece by piece until they become suddenly visible, often to others first and only
> later to ourselves. Yet it is possible sometimes to see key moments that seem
> central to the change. (p. 59)

Examining the changes and transformed views women attribute to having earned a

baccalaureate degree in the context of women's development theory expands our understanding of the meaning and consequences of the degree in individual and societal life experiences over time (Belenky et al., 1997; Gilligan, 1982; Hall, 1999; Miller, 1976; Schaff, 1985).

This chapter is presented in two sections. The first explores meaning perspectives uncritically formed by the women in childhood. This lens is particularly focused on the ways uncritically acquired meaning perspectives influenced decisions leading to midlife baccalaureate degree attainment. Such perspectives are useful in examining the interplay of experiences and thought processes that brought the women to college. Insight into these processes is central to understanding the meanings and consequences women accord to baccalaureate degrees in sociocultural and historical contexts (Clark & Wilson, 1991). Concepts of transformative learning theory direct our understanding of the women's uncritically acquired meaning perspectives (Mezirow, 1978, 1990, 1991, 2000). The second section explores the women's retrospective narrative of the meanings and consequences of a bachelor's degree contextually in life. Emergent core themes of the women's experience are: Self-in-Social-Relation; Esteem and Authenticity; Generativity; plus Self-in-Significant-Relation, Disconnection, and Meaning Perspective Transformation. The overarching themes of relationship and development are interwoven into both sections as they are in the women's narratives. This two-section presentation format directs discussion of the contrasts between the women's lives with and without a baccalaureate degree.

Uncritically Acquired Meaning Perspectives

This section begins by profiling aspects of the childhood socialization,

acculturation, and significant life experiences of the participants. This background

information directs attention to assumptions and beliefs conveyed by the women that

suggest uncritically acquired meaning perspectives. These frames of meaning provided

structure for the assumptions and expectations they used to make sense of the world

(Mezirow, 1990, 1991, 2000). Often, meaning perspectives are unintentionally assimilated

from the culture or primary care-givers (Mezirow 1991, 2000). Such uncritically acquired

meaning perspectives developed in childhood through socialization and acculturation

provided a viewpoint for actions each will follow automatically unless meaning frames are

consciously or unconsciously transfomed (Mezirow 1991, 2000). Following the

socialization and acculturation profiles, are segments on late teenage to early adult life

choices and pathways to midlife baccalaureate degrees. Next is a segment discussing the

women's relationality and uncritically acquired meaning perspectives. The section closes

with an exploration of the ways uncritically acquired meaning perspectives directed her

entry or reentry into higher education.

Family of Origin Socialization and Acculturation

Socio-economically, the women grew up in lower to middle class households in

predominately racially and ethnically homogenous environments. Pamela was an

American Indian tribal member. The other participants were of European origin. All but

one participant were reared in two-parent homes. The exception, Pamela, "was on her

own" since childhood. She was reared in a dysfunctional extended family situation with an

uncle providing income but with a mother unable provide her with emotional sustenance.

All grew up with from one to five siblings except Anne, an only child. Regular church

attendance was expected of a majority of participants.

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Tamara's formative years were overshadowed by poverty and an unrepaired cleft palate which fostered overprotective parents and heath problems. Tamara felt extremely close to her mother who died the summer of Tamara's high school graduation. Tamara and Alice described their father-figures as " rigid," "strict" or "harsh." Alice considered herself a "daddy's girl." Cindy's most important influences in life were her parents. She maintained a tight bond with her mother through adulthood.

Gender roles predominated most of the family perspectives. Participants were acculturated to view men in head-of-household, primary provider roles and women in homemaker and sometimes supplemental provider roles. Only Julia, whose parents were dairy farmers, perceived her parents as "equal partners" in decision-making. The notion of gendered work roles was specifically discussed by three participants, and embedded in the traditional women's career and education choices of all but Pamela who adopted her uncle's sense of responsibility for the family.

Formal Education Socialization and Acculturation

All of the participants attended public schools and reported earning As and Bs. None considered themselves ostracized or excluded from social activities. Five attended high school in rural communities; one attended a suburban school and two attended schools in large cities. At least one significant adult or parent in the childhood homes of all of the participants expected them to graduate from high school. All but one of the participants earned a traditional high school diploma. Two participants married during high school. Both immediately withdrew from school social involvement. One did not complete high school despite her mother's objections. The other remained in school, simultaneously earning a diploma and vo-tech cosmetology certificate.

Parents and significant adults at home influenced more participants than high school personnel regarding postsecondary decisions. Karen and Julia spoke positively of particular teachers who inspired them and took a personal interest in their success. Anne felt she was discouraged her from attending college. Karen's teachers encouraged her to pursue higher education, while a counselor was disdainful of her college aspirations. Julia's teacher imparted the notion to her that a woman could become anything she wished. Julia recalled, "Boys were always real encouraged; girls were not encouraged to do that."

The educational levels modeled by parents or significant adults in the participants' childhood homes ranged from no education to some college. None had baccalaureate degrees; the majority had high school diplomas. Tamara's father had no education, and her mother had an eighth grade education. The mothers of Julia and Karen earned nursing credentials through hospital training programs. Laura's father completed a two-year business college program. Cindy and Julia's fathers as well as Anne's mother had some college credit course work.

In their childhood homes, a baccalaureate education was expected of three participants: Cindy, Karen and Pamela. The parents of the other five participants did not emphasize or make higher education a goal for them when they were growing up. Learning and education were highly valued by Julia's parents. Her father believed "If you pass the day and you haven't learned something, you've wasted the day." Laura's parents did not give her educational direction. Alice's mother was wary of higher education because she suspected faculty taught ideas inconsistent with her religious beliefs, but at the same time imagined herself as a researcher had college been an option for her. Tamara's parents

emphasized the importance of education, stressing high school attainment, but not college. Anne and her siblings were expected "to do our best" in every endeavor including education.

Late Teenage and Early Adult Life Choices

Immediately after high school, four participants enrolled in baccalaureate degree programs, two enrolled in junior college degree programs. The two participants who married in high school did not attempt postsecondary education. Of those enrolled in baccalaureate degree programs, Anne, Karen, and Laura enrolled in doctoral-granting comprehensive universities. Cindy enrolled in a master's granting regional university. Pamela and Tamara enrolled in two-year colleges and completed associate's degrees. Among the six traditional age enrollees were all three of those whose family of origin expected them to earn college degrees. Alice and Julia married in high school. Alice simultaneously earned a cosmetology license and high school diploma. Julia did not finish high school, breaking a promise to her mother.

Baccalaureate goals and reasons for leaving school varied among the six who enrolled in college. In the group with family encouragement to attend were Pamela, Karen and Cindy. Pamela wanted to become a physician. She earned an associate's degree before transferring to a nearby regional university. During nearly four years of college, Pamela experienced blatant racial prejudice and was rejected by a significant boyfriend who refused to take her to meet his parents because of her skin color. She recalled, "I never thought I was different until I went to college. . . That's when I found out I was different, that not everyone was accepting of Native Americans. . . ." Then, when Pamela was one semester short of graduation and already accepted to medical school, her family's provider

died. Unhesitantly, she assumed head-of-household responsibilities for her mother and sister. Pamela left school and took a full-time, entry-level position with her American Indian tribe. Karen aspired to a bachelor's degree to become a county home extension agent. Eager, Karen started college the summer after high school graduation where her soon-to-be-fiancé attended. Karen left school after completing over two years. She was dissatisfied with average grades, newlywed, and needed to work to help support her husband through school. Cindy initially majored in home economics then switched to business. Her parents moved out-of-state as she settled into an in-state regional university in a rural area. Cindy enjoyed positive, socially-enriching experiences at college but moved back with her parents because "I didn't want to do that anymore for awhile." Returning home, Cindy found entry-level work with a phone company, then married and had two children.

Participants who did not reference any specific adult influences on decisions to attend college were Anne, Laura, and Tamara. Anne entered college because "that was just, I guess, the thing to do." She followed her fiancé to college, biding time until they married a year later. Anne helped support her husband through his senior year. She worked as a nursing home aide and then as a dental office receptionist. Laura entered college because peers were doing so. Guided by her father's perception of secretarial work as a good career for women, she enrolled in a secretarial program. Laura left after her freshman year to marry a man she met in college. The couple moved out-of-state for a job launching his engineering career. The couple felt they could not afford her college costs. Bored, Anne found entry-level secretarial work for an oil company, unconsciously fulfilling her father's career goal for her. Tamara had planned to go away to college after high school

because she "loved school." The unexpected death of her mother the summer she graduated from high school changed her plans. Instead, Tamara remained at home to be with her father. She commuted to junior college where she earned an associate's degree. The summer after graduation her father told Tamara he had decided to to go live with her sister. Unprepared for the change, Tamara responded by meeting and marrying a man she had known only two months. Over the next few years, the couple had two daughters and moved to another state.

Uncritically Acquired Meaning Structure Discussion

The narratives indicate that parents' expectations of educational attainment were woven into the women's uncritically acquired meaning perspectives in childhood. Participants were parented by those who expected high school graduation, by extension a message of educational endorsement. The only participant who did not finish high school regretted and remembered breaking a promise to her mother to graduate, illustrating the meaningfulness of the expectation to her. All of the women reported academic success in school, another uncritically acquired meaning that shaped a positive perspective of formal education. Those women parented with a clear expectation to go to college did so which suggests the pull of that uncritically acquired meaning perspective. Others without parental expectations of college were influenced to attend through relationships with peers and boyfriends. Whether the women were primarily influenced to attend college by family or friends, they took actions steps to enroll, attend classes and complete courses. They were consistently making positive progress toward degree attainment. None was forced to leave school due to academic failure. Participants' comments about higher education and degree progress was suggestive of a meaning perspective with at least minimally positive

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meaning schemes toward higher education. Possible racism in the classroom and clearcut racism in an important male-female dating relationship with a student was experienced by the American Indian woman of color during her traditional college experiences. Her experience with racial prejudice was unlike that of the Eurocentric women, a finding Johnson-Bailey (2001) found in a contextual meaning-based study of African American college reentry women. The experience did not deter her from overcoming significant obstacles in making progress toward her degree. She expressed highly positive attitudes toward her higher education experiences and the meaningfulness of its consequences.

Simultaneously, as young women the participants demonstrated the meaningfulness of relationships to them (Belenky et al., 1997; Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Chodorow, 1974; Gilligan, 1982, 1990; Miller, 1976). In this period flowing from late adolescence to early adulthood, the young women tended toward disconnection from families of origin toward new connections with young men. Except for one, all of the participants separated enough from primary family of origin relationships to form primary husband-wife relationships. All the participants but one married. The woman who did not marry experienced racial rejection in a meaningful relationship. She also experienced a life crisis requiring a decision between her own self-interests and the autonomy of disconnectedness or the interests of her family of origin and connectedness. She chose to pursue a connected family relationship, a decision which would figure heavily in a perspective transformation later in life. The women who married all put husband and child relationship considerations ahead of their own. At this point, the women's stories suggest they had established worldview meaning perspectives of themselves as connected, relational women consistent with women's development literature on the way women

define themselves as more connected than separate from others (Belenky et al., 1997; Chodorow, 1974; Gilligan, 1982; Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Miller, 1976). The women's narratives illustrate the formation and existence of uncritically acquired meaning perspectives developed in childhood (Mezirow, 1991, 2000). Also, the women's stories demonstrated ways they relied upon these meaning perspectives to make sense of the world and make decisions (Mezirow, 1991, 2000). When an individual woman's uncritically acquired meaning perspectives clashed, she chose relationality over autonomy (Belenky et al., 1997; Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Chodorow, 1974; Gilligan, 1982; Miller, 1976).

Pathways to Baccalaureate Degrees

This segment considers experiences and decisions leading the women to enter or re-enter higher education and complete baccalaureate degrees. Included are profiles of the women's partnership, childbirth and socio-economic status. Specific direct and indirect factors informing the integration of experiences with a decision and action progression varied by participant. Relevant portions of narratives are recapped to demonstrate the ways their uncritically acquired and evolving meaning perspectives operated in the decision-making processes. Particular focus is placed on decisions made when uncritically acquired meaning perspectives were in conflict with one another.

All of the participants except one were married before age 25. All of the married participants gave birth; six had two children, one had three, and one had one child before reaching 30. The unmarried woman, Pamela, had broken off a serious relationship with a college classmate who declined to introduce her to his parents because of her skin color. All were in working to lower middle class economic status, except Laura whose husband

earned a professional middle class salary. Narratives all pointed to a meaning perspective

perceiving husbands in the role of primary provider. In the early marriage years, three

participants put aside personal college aspirations. Two held working class jobs while their

husbands completed baccalaureates or pursued advanced degrees. Among the others, two

women were prohibited from seeking jobs by factory employed husbands, and the

remaining three worked in entry level office jobs. Eventually, five marriages ended in

divorce. A variety of life experiences and decisions led the women to become reentry or

new baccalaureate-seeking students (Blaukopf, 1981). Entering they were between ages 26

and 37. Upon attainment, they ranged in age from 31 to 40. The women's reflections were

made 9 to 22 years after earning degrees. The majority worked full-time, attended school

part-time, and cared for dependents. All earned good grades, interacted with faculty, had

life experience, were highly motivated, demonstrated traits of self-directed learners, and

were committed to education goals consistent with adult learning literature (Adelman,

1991; Bean & Metzner, 1985; Cross, 1981; Dill & Henley, 1998; Graham & Donaldson,

1999; Kasworm, 1980, 1993; Knowles, 1990).

Alice was committed to staying in a marriage with a verbally, mentally,

emotionally, and physically abusive husband. Her needs to be in social relationships

conflicted with his cultural expectations of a woman's role in the home. Alice negotiated a

compromise, becoming a substitute teacher where she gained affiliation and affirmation of

her worth. Her experiences reawakened childhood dreams of being a teacher. Taking

action, Alice enrolled in a nearby two-year college with the goal of becoming an

elementary school teacher.

Julia, who like Alice married in high school, was also in an extensively abusive

marriage. The couple was conflicted by divergent culturally-based views of men's and women's roles. Julia's parents were equal partners in marriage. In his parent's marriage, the husband ruled; the wife obeyed. Her husband's involuntary military duty overseas stimulated Julia's independence at home. "So when he came home I had had a baby, I had grown up, I had been independent and made money of my own, and I was a different person," she said. He resorted to alcohol, anger, and violence. Julia bore the brunt of his rage. Verbal, emotional and physical abuse squashed her self-image and esteem. He threatened her survival. Julia feared for her life. Julia became a parent volunteer in her children's schools. From the affiliative school teachers, she achieved recognition, affirmation of her worth and a sense of belonging (Gilligan, 1982; Maslow, 1970). The teachers' persistent "nagging" stimulated Julia to complete a GED and contemplate college. She resisted until a school coach portrayed her in way she had not as "a natural. . . . a teacher." Julia was galvanized by his conceptualization of her as a teacher. She processed the idea, moving from the thought she "could do that," to the thought, "I want to look at this." Julia took action. She applied for admission, secretively borrowed money and embarked on a degree program at a nearby university. Her goal was to become a baccalaureate educated, certified teacher.

Cindy, who recalled growing up in "a happy, content family," did not discuss the issues ending her eight-year marriage. Her central emphasis was on being a mother and on the goal of not working so she could stay home with her small children, which she did for three years after the birth or her second child. Upon divorcing she became a secretary at the university in town and her mother helped care for her children. She broached the desire for the esteem of peer recognition and belongingness, observing that everyone she worked

with held a doctorate, and with a degree "I would be as smart as these guys" (Maslow, 1970).

Tamara was in an emotionally and verbally abusive marriage with an "over-bearing" man who "lost a lot of jobs." Acculturation conflicts in the marriage arose over differing work ethic values. Gender work roles were traditionally defined in her family but everyone was expected to work because "if you let down on your duty you let everybody else down." Tamara's value perspective was antithetical to divorce. She was devastated when her husband left "even though I knew that that was what I needed to do." Her divorce recovery time was purposeful. Tamara gave herself a year to recover. Directing her next steps, she established goals. "I still remember those goals, and I have those goals." Tamara posted them on the refrigerator. Her goals were oriented toward spiritual, educational, career and shelter needs and self-actualizing goals (Maslow, 1970). Her baccalaureate degree motivation was to provide for her children and to become a counselor.

Pamela previously had abandoned aspirations of becoming a physician just short of finishing a bachelor's degree. Instead, she took on the mantle of bread-winner for her mother and sister after the death of the family's only provider. Years afterward in her mid-30s, Pamela deliberately entered a period of reflection and self-examination about her life (Brookfield, 1987a; Mezirow, 1990, 2000). She was distressed over the direction of her life and a recent broken relationship (Mezirow, 1978, 1990, 1991, 2000). Intentionally taking a year away to think things over, Pamela determined she wanted to complete her baccalaureate degree. She returned to her full-time job, intensely committed to her goal.

Karen had dropped out of college to work in order to help support her husband's

pursuit of advanced degrees. Her university office job among highly educated people engendered esteem and affirmed her positive self image. She was remorseful over leaving without having earned her degree . Relocating for her husband's work, she took another college secretarial job. Karen was surrounded by co-workers with bachelor's degrees. Discomforted by her lack of credentials, she quietly re-entered college. Achieving her educational goal had intrinsic meaning for her. "I had just wanted to finish because I thought it would mean so much to my dad; plus I'd just wanted to have this degree," she said. Karen's goals were to attain degree status, secure her present level of employment, become qualified for better career opportunities, and professional enhancement.

Anne had dropped out of college to marry. She earned wages while her husband completed a baccalaureate degree. Several new jobs and moves later, the couple returned to the university town. Anne recognized "that to advance, I certainly needed to have a baccalaureate degree." At the comprehensive university, Anne began a full-time academic support staff job with the intention of completing her degree part-time. Salary rewards were secondary to her "internal drive" to achieve. Her progression into increasingly responsible academic positions was mentored by a high-ranking administrator. Anne was embarrassed and at times humiliated because co-workers in the university community assumed the higher level positions she held also meant she had a bachelor's or master's degree, but she did not. Her expectation when she re-entered a bachelor's degree program was to attain the college credentials appropriate for her position and to open doors for advancement.

Laura dropped out of college to marry a newly-minted aeronautics engineer. She intended to resume studies when they relocated for the start of his professional career in a

new city. The couple balked at college costs. Laura went to work as a secretary for an oil company, unconsciously fulfilling the only career goal her father had expressed for her. In the early years of marriage, Laura and her husband shared values placing him in the role of provider and her in the role of homemaker caring for three children. Laura's outlet for esteem, connection to others, and self-fulfillment came through her ever-expanding volunteer work in religious education through church. She characterized her personal journey as a spiritual struggle to discover "what God wanted me to do in my life." She felt a sense of urgency and hunger for intellectual knowledge and stimulation. For her, a baccalaureate degree was a tool for finding "that perhaps I had more value that I thought I had" and paid "recognition of my work." Laura entered a bachelor's degree completion program her husband found for her at a nearby private university.

Although the stories differ in detail, participants were drawn to midlife higher education entry and reentry decisions in accordance with uncritically acquired meaning perspectives from childhood. For the majority of participants, formal education meaning perspectives were shaped around generally positive experiences, values and assumptions (Mezirow, 1991, 2000) about common school and higher education. The outlier in this group, Alice, transformed her view as a consequence of a multiple positive higher education experiences. "I guess I always thought of higher education as being upper echelon, unapproachable. But my experience was opposite of what I was expecting because it wasn't like that," she concluded. Among the three women for whom higher education was a parental expectation, the meaningfulness of the degree goal manifested itself as unfinished business. They had conventional societal income and career expectations of the consequences of the degree. Yet, persistence was closely tied to

attainment of the goal itself. Into degree programs, all three were deeply committed to earning the degree because of the meaning completion held for them individually. Cindy, who realized negative economic consequences after graduation, observed the achievement "made me feel not a quitter, not a dropout–someone who accomplished what they set out to do."

For the midlife college women, relationship conflicts among those who divorced or became divorced before graduation were direct or indirect factors in decisions to seek degrees. In that same vein, a broken relationship played a part in the unmarried participant's college reentry thinking process. These participants reinforced personal meaning perspectives through actions, then encountered conflict in significant relationships. Resulting actions were integral to the decision-making process that brought those particular participants to seek baccalaureate degrees in midlife.

Uncritically Acquired Meaning Perspectives and Degree Pursuit Discussion

The following segment explores how participant's were guided by uncritically acquired meaning perspectives from childhood as they made midlife higher education entry and reentry decisions. A distinction is made between uncritically acquired meaning perspectives that the women 1) relied upon and maintained without conflict and 2) found to be a source of conflict. Participants' culturally defined meaning perspectives acquired uncritically during childhood socialization and acculturation, as discussed by Mezirow (1991, 2000), surfaced in the interactions of significant relationships during adulthood.

All of the participants who married reflected the values modeled in families of origin. Those who married accepted household and childcare responsibilities as their mothers had done. The unmarried participant, Pamela, had adopted her uncle's quietly

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assumed responsibility of financially providing for the family.

The women lived and viewed life experiences in the context of uncritically acquired meaning perspectives (Mezirow, 2000). Narratives suggest those who were married and in support roles for primary provider husbands initially accepted those roles as the natural order of life. The unmarried woman whose stability and survival depended on her uncle modeled his values, taking up his bread-winner responsibilities when he died. Her potential development, her hopes of finishing a baccalaureate, her aspirations of becoming a physician, were set aside.

The majority of participants, most of the time, did not consciously recognize uncritically acquired meaning perspectives undergirding decisions to earn baccalaureate degrees. They tended to depend on the meaning perspectives, acting on them uncritically in ways that maintained their meaning perspectives (Mezirow, 2000). When a woman's meaning perspective came into conflict with another of her meaning perspectives, she negotiated an accommodation or gave one priority over another without consciously examining the underlying assumptions of meaning frames. For example, although Cindy's conflict was unvoiced, her narrative suggests her perspective of her parent's expectation she attain a college education muddied by her unformed expectations of college came into conflict with her more dominate uncritically acquired self-image of herself as a mother. Cindy's uncritically acquired meaning perspective of central significance was the connection to her mother. Cindy's most important expectation in life was to mother children of her own. Her uncritical reason for leaving college at a traditional age was "I don't want to do this anymore for awhile." Her uncritical action was to move in with her parents, reaffirming the importance of the connection. Cindy reaffirmed her uncritical

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desire to be a mother to her children and her central connection to her mother after an eight-year marriage ended in divorce, moving to live near her mother who could help with child rearing while Cindy worked to provide for them. Cindy's need to work to provide for her children led to a secretary job in a university grant program, in proximity to the degree expectation uncritically acquired in childhood.

Further, Anne, who consciously and critically acquired a meaning frame that all work should be valued when she was a nurse's aide, also maintained the uncritically acquired meaning perspective to "do our best. . . whatever we did. . . ." In combination with her innate drive to realize her potential, Anne's uncritically acquired meaning perspective was uncritically maintained as she devoted herself to succeeding in her career before earning conventional credentials and in her "obsessive" drive for the "highest A" when attaining those degree credentials.

Turning to Karen, she uncritically maintained her uncritically acquired meaning perspective of husband as head-of-household, primary provider by taking a secretarial job to support his professional goals and degree attainment. She juggled to balance this drive with another uncritically acquired parental message embedded in her meaning scheme "to go to college and to graduate." Karen had persistently attended college, but had not graduated. Instead, she put her husband before herself and sacrificed her personal goals of earning a college degree and becoming a county home extension agent. Later, Karen would express deep regret over not continuing in college along with her husband. Further, when she did return she underscored the importance of the parentally influenced perspective. "I had always just wanted to finish because I've thought it would mean so much to my dad; plus I'd just wanted to have this degree," Karen said. Karen's uncritically

acquired meaning perspectives co-existed. Her consciousness was not challenged in a manner that caused her to transform either point of view. Instead, she successfully accommodated both meaning perspectives.

In Laura's experience, her uncritically acquired meaning perspectives were uncritically maintained through her ready acceptance of marriage with a husband as primary provider and of a job as secretary for an oil company. Both were notions she had unquestioningly acquired from her parents. Her meaning perspectives shifted over time, eventually resulting in the dissolution of her marriage after baccalaureate graduation. Her transformation in this regard is discussed in a later segment on disconnection and connections.

Meanwhile, Pamela demonstrated the uncritical adoption and maintenance of an uncritically acquired meaning scheme modeled by her uncle by taking up his bread-winner responsibilities when he died. Her potential development, her hopes of finishing a baccalaureate, her aspirations of becoming a physician, were set aside.

On the path leading to college entry or reentry three participants, Julia, Alice and Tamara, encountered challenges to their uncritically acquired meaning perspectives. These women 1) did not consciously evaluate those uncritically acquired meaning perspectives, but 2) did identify meaning frames in opposition to theirs, although 3) they acted uncritically in ways that maintained meaning perspectives. In this group were the women in oppressive marriages.

These women—Alice, Julia, and Tamara—were in oppressive marriages. Each consciously identified key points of conflict in opposition to her spouse's meaning frames. Alice's and Julia's husbands believed they were to be subservient and that a woman's

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place was in the home. Alice's uncritically acquired meaning perspective replayed internal tapes of her parents telling her she could "do whatever I wanted to do." Julia's uncritically acquired meaning perspective told her a husband and wife "were equal" and "were good about deciding things together." Tamara's husband lost a number of jobs because working was not a serious matter to him. Tamara's uncritically acquired meaning perspective told her "you had a duty, and if you let down on your duty, you let everybody else down." The women did not question the validity of uncritically acquired meaning frames. Instead, they relied upon them as they made decisions. Tamara supported the family; Alice and Julia stayed in homemaker roles by becoming volunteers in their children's schools. Julia straddled the conflict with her husband when she began operating a home-based cosmetic product business. In this manner, she could be the homemaker that befit his meaning perspective and yet earn money on her own, more akin to her meaning perspective of husband and wife as equal partners. By these adaptive means, each woman's action became a way her uncritically acquired meaning scheme perspective could co-exist with his without going so far as to irreparably break the relationship. Severing the relationship likely would have surfaced other important uncritically acquired meaning schemes regarding religious beliefs and family cultural values. None of the three severed the marriage connection prior to adult pursuit of baccalaureate degrees. In addition to connected relationship perspectives, the women's desire for esteem also surfaced. All three recognized individual needs for esteem were unmet in marriage relationships. Alice and Julia found a way to be esteemed as human beings by volunteering at their children's schools. The esteem they gained as a consequence of public school volunteer work was a major factor in decisions to enter college. The esteem Tamara received for her success in

the workplace and in providing for her family was not offset by her husband's verbal

denigration of her.

Meanings and Consequences of Degrees Among Adult Baccalaureate Women

The following section profiles core themes in the women's specific perceptions of

the meaning and consequences of the baccalaureate degree as they look back across the

years after attainment. The women had earned the degree from 9 to 22 years prior to

reflecting on life with and without the degree. Emergent meaning and consequence core

themes are: Self-in-Societal Relation; Esteem and Empowerment; Generativity; and Self-

in-Critical-Relation. An examination of transformed meaning perspectives associated with

relationships and baccalaureate consequences is included within the Self-in-Critical

Relation theme. The previous portions of this chapter provided meaning perspectives

integrated into the sociocultural and historical context of life experience which enlightens

the women's retrospective views of the degree's meaning and consequence.

Self-in-Societal-Relation

Initially, all of the women had expected baccalaureate degree attainment to

improve career and advancement opportunities as well as salary levels. In the years since

graduation, six of eight moved up in salary and career level, their advancement emanating

from having first acquired a bachelor's degree. Of the six who advanced, five earned

graduate degrees and three of those five also earned credentials required in chosen

professions. Two of the five with graduate degrees earned doctorates and two more

pursued doctorates. The two with doctorates were in executive level positions previously

held by men. Among the three who remained at the baccalaureate level, all were

placebound with limited opportunities. One of the three received salary and career

advancement directly tied to the baccalaureate degree. The specifics of economic and career meaning and consequences are provided contextually in individual stories in the following paragraphs:

Choosing not to separate from communities or family where they had established relationships, Cindy, Karen, and Pamela remained in the vicinity where they had been located while earning bachelor's degrees. Baccalaureate credentials assisted one with career and salary advancement. None of the three earned an advanced degree. Degree attainment gave all three a job security edge over those with less credentials in a small job market.

Alice, Julia and Tamara were partially motivated to earn degrees in order to provide a middle-class living for dependent children. Subsequently, all three achieved middle-class lifestyles. One remarried; two remained single. All earned professional credentials, master's degrees and two entered doctoral programs. They advanced to mid-level positions of authority in the helping professions, aided by graduate credentials. "My financial situation would certainly be different if I didn't have my education. What would I do? I wouldn't know how to do anything. . . I wouldn't be where I am today. I wouldn't have the job [I have]," Alice said.

In the years after baccalaureate attainment, Anne and Laura rose in their careers to hold executive positions previously held by men. Both earned salaries commensurate with position levels. Doctoral credentials built on the foundational baccalaureate degree base factored into career advancement and salaries.

Esteem and Authenticity

The women cited consequences of esteem and development of authentic selves

emanating from higher education that were integrated into life experiences, a finding

consistent with the work of Belenky et al. (1997), Daloz (1999), Hall (1999), and Merriam

& Caffarella (1999). All of the women articulated esteem consequences attached to the

degree of meaning to them. Baccalaureate degree attainment itself was a meaningful and

lasting accomplishment or a mark of closure with consequence for the participants.

Expressions of esteem identified by the participants included feelings of self-confidence,

worth, strength, capability, adequacy and the right to exist in the world corresponding with

Maslow's (1970) definition. The majority of women voiced empowering consequences of

self-discovery, self-esteem, and identity development as described by Belenky et al.

(1997), Chodorow (1974), Gilligan (1982), Maslow (1970), and Miller (1976).

Baccalaureate degree attainment itself evoked expressions of relief among some of

the women. The majority spoke of a confidence-building sense of achievement and

accomplishment. Completion was a milepost, something the women marked on a lifeline

continuum. Julia recalled that persevering to graduation "was my first measure of success.

. . . It was the first time in my life that I actually did something that I wanted to do and

completed it." For Laura, degree attainment was overshadowed by the validation of her

first professional position, made possible by her baccalaureate credentials:

> We didn't particularly need my salary at that time. It wasn't that. In fact, the first
> job that I took was not a great boon to our budget, but it was absolutely the biggest
> thrill of my life then. . . I was so excited, I just couldn't wait to get up to this place
> to these people to work. . . .

Anne concurred. Degree achievement "gives you a sense of having accomplished

something and self-confidence that you've survived it."

Meaningful self-discovery, identity development and self-esteem consequences

were common among the women, a finding consistent with the work of Belenky et al.

(1997), Gilligan (1982), Hall (1999), and Maslow (1970). The degree "opened me up to me," Pamela related. For Cindy, growth in self-confidence and a sense of accomplishment has stayed with her over the 22 years since she graduated. She said, "Having that degree benefitted me most inside... It helped me do all my jobs because I know that I can do whatever I have to do. It made me more sure of myself." Julia's degree poignantly affirmed her worth and existence. "I affirmed the fact that I was a real person, that I exist... . The bachelor's degree... what it did for me was prove I was a person." Alice was able to recognize leadership qualities in herself that had been suppressed since childhood.

Esteem consequences in relationships with others were also meaningful for a majority of the women (Gilligan, 1990; Maslow, 1970; Miller, 1976; Schaff, 1985). This theme crosses the boundaries into the other themes, a reminder of the overarching flow of relationship and development. Karen, who knew from childhood that her parents had college expectations of her, was affirmed because her parents "were pleased that I did finish."Julia's relationships with others opened her to the possibilities within herself. Her connections with others gave her a new vision of herself. Her new vision brought esteem and self-discovery:

> I [graduated] with help from people who didn't even know me who cared enough or had enough faith in me that I had to have faith in myself.... My interaction is better because I'm surer of who I am. I am sure I am a person. I have something to contribute. What I have to say is important, it's not incidental. It's not something you just dismiss. Having the bachelor's degree made me feel capable. It made me feel an equal to a lot of people I knew, even at church. That may sound snobbish, but by Godfrey it was good.

Karen, who knew from childhood that her parents had college expectations of her, was affirmed in her relationship with her parents because they "were pleased that I did finish." Pamela's baccalaureate commencement triggered a dawning awareness that her needs for

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family of origin belongingness would never be met (Maslow, 1970). Her discovery

initiated a perspective transformation discussed later in this chapter. Tamara was rewarded

by the esteem she received from her children. "I think it made them proud of me," she

said. Anne was able to ally "insecurities and feelings of inadequacy" born of her

perceptions of how she thought others perceived her without the degree in an environment

where academic degrees were the currency of power and respect. Moreover, the impetus to

complete higher level degrees came through affiliative relationships for four women.

Generativity Meanings and Consequences

The meaningfulness of the bachelor's degrees had a distinctly generative

consequence in the lives of others with whom the women were connected. In this

"generative" sense the women are bring something into existence by stimulating and

encouraging others to attain a bachelor's degree. In the manner of Erikson's (1978) broad

view of pyschological generativity as "a mature drive to generate and regenerate

produducts and ideas," the women plant and nurture the idea of degree attainment on

behalf of others in their spheres of influence (p. 7). As a result of higher education

experiences, the women imbued the bachelor's degree with positive attributes. They

readily passed this perspective to others across the spectrum of societal and significant

relationships Almost all of the women prodded, pushed or persuaded others in their

spheres to earn degrees, generating a demand for higher education among adults and

children with whom they were connected.

Generativity was an especially prominent consequence regarding the women's

children. The women expected their children to complete bachelor's degrees. All of the

offspring who were old enough had completed high school. All of those offspring had

completed some college, and most had earned baccalaureate degrees. Some had earned, and others planned to earn, graduate degrees.

In the course of daily work, four participants facilitated adults' entry and passage through higher education. Each believed her midlife higher education experience gave her an empathic connection they could, and did, use to encourage adult learners. Alice, a former high school dropout, connects with her female adult clients who have basic educational and skill development needs. "'I tell them, 'I was where you are. I've been there, done that. I got a t-shirt and two kids to match.' They like that. They can relate."

The participants' generative push on behalf of higher education degree attainment was most acute in mother-child relationships. Participants' children were expected to go to college as traditional students after high school. The majority communicated college goals to their children from an early age. Some consciously modeled themselves as successful college students and graduates to their children. More than any other participant, Tamara talked about the deliberate, generative efforts she made to see that her daughters had good self-esteem and a "better life." She admitted she "pushed them. I know I did at times, but they're very thankful that I did. They're proud of themselves and I can see that and I love that." One daughter has a bachelor's degree, the other a master's. Tamara's degree generativity began when she re-entered college and her girls were small. Tamara wrapped family experiences together with her baccalaureate studies. She consciously modeled degree completion by having them at commencement ceremonies. Tamara said:

> When I did my homework, once a week, we would go to this pizza place. I would take all my books. . . . We would talk about what we'd done that day. And when they were ready to go play, they's go play I'd sit there and work. When they came up, I'd stop what I was doing. We would go to the park and I would read and work while they played. I really tried to improve my children and do my school work. When we'd sit down at night, they'd do their homework. . . . I wanted to make sure

they saw me graduate. I wanted to make sure when I walked across stage, that they were there. . . . They need to be there and see you do that. It needs to be a memory they have in their mind.

The children of participants who had completed high school tended conventionally to enter and complete college degrees without breaking stride. Anne not only expected her children to acquire a formal higher education, she stressed the worth of a traditional college experience.

Self-in-Significant-Relation, Disconnection, and Perspective Transformation

As Chodorow (1974) observes, self-in-relation was a principal dynamic. The women tended to grow and define themselves by the touchstone relationships significant to them (Belenky et al., 1997; Gilligan, 1982; Hall, 1999; Miller, 1976; Schaff, 1985). The process of degree attainment played a part in the lasting disconnection of primary relationships and attendant transformed perspectives of five of the participants. The consequences of these changes were meaningful in directing the remainder of the participants' lives. Two marriages ended after reentry and before degree completion, one marriage ended afterwards, and one child-parent relationship was permanently altered. Even as these five women disconnected from significant primary relationships, they maintained or made other inner circle connections to be in relation with significant others. The women who disconnected from significant relationships also arrived at a transformation in meaning perspectives. Higher education experiences were integral to perspective transformation to the extent the experiences played a role in the women's redefinition of views of themselves or previously held assumptions (Cranton, 1996; Mezirow, 1978, 1990, 1991, 2000). The women's individual transformed meaning perspectives are briefly recapped below:

Alice

Over time, Alice's ambivalent perspective on a husband's role in marriage was transformed. Alice's mother had given her conflicting messages to be independent, but also to depend on her husband "for everything."Alice eventually rejected her dependence meaning perspective. "I'm not ever depending on another man for anything as long as I live. And I won't. Even though I love my husband, I'm not depending on him." Alice shifted her perspective through a gradual process of critical reflection on her experiences and through her self-identity development to become consciously aware of the change in her point of view. Alice drew on pivotal bachelor's degree experiences for identity development and evaluation of uncritically acquired meaning frames. Self-in-critical- and societal-relation experiences redirected her life. Faculty and staff "changed my life forever. . . . They helped me through a real rough time." Her transformed meaning perspective surfaced in consciousness gradually in a lengthy nonlinear process that included critical reflection, affirming experiences, personal development, relationships with others, reevaluation, decision-making and action.

Julia

While mulling over relevant psychology concepts in graduate studies, Julia began to transform her perspective on her baccalaureate degree pursuit. Critical reflection brought her into agreement with her husband's assessment. "I don't think I realistically accepted the fact that [a degree] was my avenue to get out until then. . . . I think education saved my life. . . I don't think I would have survived the marriage. . . and I don't think I would have seen another way out." The progression in Julia's meaning perspective transformation process suggests action without critical reflection until well after she had

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changed her image of herself and her role in the marriage. At the point she became

consciously aware that she was a person of worth who had been marginalized and

oppressed in her marriage, she was already living a self-fulfilled life. Julia transformed her

perspective of herself from "that nonexistent person" who sat in silence while life passed

by, to a person who had a right to take space on the planet and express a point of view. "I

affirmed the fact that I was a real person, that I exist. . . . The bachelor's degree, what it

did for me was prove I was a person. . . . I am sure I am a person. I have something to

contribute. What I have to say is important, it's not incidental." Julia's critical reflection

on the actions she had taken was triggered by new concepts acquired in the classroom

years later. As Alice had done, Julia moved through a nonlinear process of critical

reflection, affirming experiences, personal development, relationships with others,

reevaluation, decision-making and action in an unconscious manner before consciously

making claim to a changed perspective.

Laura

As Laura progressed through her degree program, the change in her esteem was

noticeable to herself and others. Gradually, Laura reflected on her uncritically acquired

meaning perspective of her marriage role as her relationship. She shifted her previous

point of view incrementally, even as she herself was changing. Laura's perspective on her

role in life transformed gradually from being a stay-at-home mother and wife to a

professional woman. Laura unsuccessfully tried to negotiate and accommodate a middle

ground in her views. When her view of herself and her purpose solidified, the gap between

her husband's point of view and her transformed view widened to divorce. As Alice and

Julia, Laura was in a nonlinear process of perspective transformation. The components of

her meaning perspective change included critical reflection, affirming experiences, personal development, relationships with others, reevaluation of assumptions, decision-making and action. Laura's process suggests conscious awareness of the change in her commitment to her goals before she was consciously aware of the change in her meaning perspective.

Pamela

Reflecting back across time, Pamela considered commencement an "awakening" leading to her perspective transformation. She eventually arrived at a transformed understanding of her family meaning perspective by recognizing the reality of her situation was removed and separate from the need she had for a close family relationship. Pamela eventually confronted her lifelong need for belongingness (Maslow, 1970) which was unmet by her family. "I could not keep together something that was not going to be and I had to learn to let go. . . . It took a long time. . . But letting go was a healing. . . . When I let go, I let go of a lot of hurt." Pamela's baccalaureate experience was integral to her transformed perspective. "It opened me up to me. . . I guess I had let other people's ideas. . . shape my own idea of who I was."

Consistent with Alice, Julia, and Laura's perspective transformation, Pamela moved through a gradual, nonlinear process of perspective transformation. The components of her meaning perspective change included critical reflection, affirming experiences, personal development, relationships with others, reevaluation, decision-making and action. Pamela articulated the way in which her conscious awareness of her transformed perspective developed by citing a specific moment of dawning awareness, "an awakening," something the other women did not do. Perhaps her reflectiveness on the

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subject is suggestive of the profound and deep impact her primary family relationships had on her development and growth. The women who transformed meaning perspectives about themselves and their roles in significant relationships did so painfully and gradually. All experienced discomforting life experiences Mezirow (1978, 1990, 1991, 2000) termed "disorienting dilemmas." Looking back, the women in troubled relationships recognized that such elements of unease or distress were a catalyst in decisions to earn baccalaureate degrees. Few spoke of engaging in discourse with others in conscious recognition of transformed perspectives. For most of the women, as Daloz (1999) observed, perspectives changed before awareness bubbled to the surface of consciousness. Laura acted to self-actualize her own potential and spiritual needs before she critically reflected and entered into discourse with others about the assumptions underlying her marriage roles meaning perspective. None of the women followed, nor were they led to follow, Mezirow's (1991, 2000) ten-step cycle of mindful, conscious transformation. Elements roughly corresponding to a majority of the steps were part of the women's reflected process, however the process was nonlinear. Only two of three major component Mezirow (2000) considers essential for mindful, conscious transformative learning were reflected in the women's narratives. Although there were clear exceptions, most of their remembrances did not refer to reflective discourse until after their perspectives had changed.

CONCLUSIONS

The adult women participants in this study tell us they led lives meaningfully changed as a consequence of baccalaureate degree attainment. Among the participants are a few women whose stack of possessions likely grew no higher than it would have without a degree. Alongside them are more women who have careers and lifestyles that would not

be possible for them if they had not earned degrees. These extrinsic consequences are a measure that the participants find important, but simply not as important to them as the intrinsic consequences of personal development and relationship. Through higher education experiences, a majority of women were affirmed and nourished through relationships with others, grew in esteem and development of authentic selves, generated expectations for college completion in relationships with others, and transformed perspectives relevant to relationships significant to them. Emergent in the women's narratives, these core themes were tagged: Self-in-Social-Relation; Esteem and Authenticity; Generativity; and Self-in-Critical-Relation and Meaning Perspective Transformation.

Self and Societal Consequences

The participants expressed esteem characteristics of confidence, accomplishment and assurance derived from baccalaureate attainment. Growth in esteem and affirmation from others provided a context for personal development contributing growth in self-image and self-discovery of authentic selves. More fully authentic, the participants engaged in society in a different way. Most advanced in careers and salary. Most chose relational professions, helping others and engaging in society in a way they had not prior to degree attainment. After attainment, most of the women contributed talents and skills in a larger arena than they had previously. Participants tended to encourage those in both their significant and general societal relationships to earn college degrees. All of those with children expected degree attainment of them. All of their children who were college age attended at a traditional age. Almost all had earned baccalaureate degrees. Some had earned master's degrees. The majority of the participants themselves had earned master's

degrees. Two had earned doctorates.

Emancipatory Consequences

The formal higher education experience in some way was integral to change in the lives of all of the women. The narratives suggested that perspective transformation occurred for some, not for all of the women. The women's transformation was directly or indirectly tied to baccalaureate degree pursuit or attainment. For a woman whose worldview shifted, the change in the way she thought about her life was emancipatory. The participants who renegotiated or disconnected from oppressive or limiting primary relationships incrementally arrived at a perspective transformation. Each woman's changed perspective subsequently guided her way of thinking about herself and shaped the decisions, permitting her growth and freedom in becoming authentic and self-fulfilled.

Uncritically Acquired Meaning Perspectives

The participant's narratives suggested uncritically acquired meaning perspectives from cultural and parental sources powerfully influenced decisions in early adulthood. The majority of participants, most of the time, did not consciously recognize uncritically acquired meaning perspectives undergirding the decision to earn baccalaureate degrees. They tended to depend on the meaning perspectives, acting on them uncritically in ways that maintained meaning perspectives (Mezirow, 2000). When a woman's meaning perspectives came into conflict with another of her meaning perspectives, she negotiated an accommodation or gave one priority over another without consciously examining the underlying assumptions of her meaning frames. In unconsciously choosing which meaning structure to give priority, participants chose a relational response. Participants attempted to negotiate an accommodation or to straddle the fence rather than disrupt significant

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relationship connections. When an uncritically acquired meaning perspective served to suppress self authenticity, the affected woman tended to act to emancipate herself before consciously becoming aware of her meaning assumptions.

<u>Need for Further Study</u>

Further study in meaning-based transformation learning research in higher education is needed to determine if the findings from mostly small, qualitative studies apply to other populations. Study is needed to determine if the strategies women used to negotiate personally conflicting uncritically acquired meaning structures follows a pattern or priority order and the source of significant influences affecting their decisions. The generative consequence of midlife women's degree attainment suggests the relationality of women may be playing an unrecognized role in the numbers of adult women seeking college degrees. Further study is needed to expand understanding of higher education generativity.

IMPLICATIONS

The participants' experiences suggest the investment of public and personal resources into baccalaureate degrees for midlife women is a societal benefit. Although findings are not generalizable from this subjective exploratory, qualitative study, they suggest society is overlooking a rich resource by failing to fully utilize the women who are successfully attaining a baccalaureate education in midlife. The findings indicate midlife baccalaureate educated women are parlaying degrees into careers providing economic gain to society at large, encouraging others to attain degrees, and becoming more widely involved participants and contributors to society. Omitting these midlife women from a baccalaureate degree could have had disastrous effects on them and their families. Instead,

a woman's life, the lives of her children, the lives of those touched through her work, and society as a whole is ultimately enlarged. A public policy higher education agenda responsive to the contributions midlife baccalaureate degreed women are making in society will include design and implement strategies to increase the numbers of women accessing higher education and will include development of strategies to curtail underutilization of women in the marketplace.

Among the specific actions to consider nationwide are favorable policy incentives and financial support to institutions that facilitate adult women students by providing alternative course delivery systems, times, and locations; encouraging and increasing positive faculty-student and staff-student relationships; 24/7 client-oriented service approaches for adult students in admissions, enrollment, learning resources, academic counseling, scholarship, placement, and financial services; institution-wide implementation of adult learning teaching techniques; encouraging and facilitate inclusion of significant others in the learning process; and programs bridging obstacles in academic fields underrepresented by women, among others. Adult women's decision-making is limited when they are uninformed of the differentials in male-female salaries and career opportunities. Honesty in marketing and career counseling approaches demands that adult women be informed of the tremendous opportunities higher education provides for them to become fully authentic selves and to realize their potential as individuals and members of the larger society.

Higher education is a social institution of huge reach in American society. Even as individual institutions respond to their student populations, the societal institution of higher education tends to remain staid. Change is blocked by a national policy mindset

struggling to let go of the idea of college as mostly a place young people newly graduated

from high school go to prepare for careers and accept the notion of college as a source of a

diverse, multiplicity of education resources for all adults for the purpose of developing

themselves and subsequently developing society. From this viewpoint, higher education is

a staple of adult development, empowering and nourishing a free society.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

INFORMED CONSENT FOR PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH

This research is being conducted under the auspices of the University of Oklahoma at the Norman campus. This document serves as the participant's consent to participate.

INTRODUCTION

The study, "Perspectives of the Roles Higher Education Played in the Lives of Women who Earned Bachelor's Degrees in Midlife," is being conducted by Rebecca J. M. Kennedy and Dr. Courtney Vaughn. The University of Oklahoma sponsoring faculty is Dr. Courtney Vaughn.

DESCRIPTION OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study is to find out women's perceptions of the roles a bachelor's degree had in their lives in comparison to the roles society ascribes to this educational attainment level, and to identify characteristics that do or do not support the investment of public, private and personal resources in reaching this level of educational attainment. The knowledge resulting from this study will expand the knowledge base in women's life-span development and the knowledge base in higher education long-term outcomes assessment. As a participant, you will be asked to participant in an in-depth interview which will include a life history before, during, and after earning their bachelor's degree as well as self-reflective answers about your life course, including career, financial considerations, and relationships since earning a bachelor's degree. The in-depth interview can be expected to take approximately two hours.

POTENTIAL BENEFITS AND RISKS OF PARTICIPATION

This study may give you personal insight into your own self-development as an adult and it may stimulate you to reflect on the course your life took as a result of your higher education degree in contrast the course your life might have taken without completion of the degree. The study will add to knowledge about the expectations and outcomes middle age women experience in their personal development as a consequence of completing a bachelor's degree. It is the intent of the researchers to publish and/or present findings from this research. If you become uncomfortable talking about your life and personal development, you can delay, postpone, or terminate the interview at any time. Counseling referrals will be made to Mental Health Services of Southern Oklahoma at (800) 522-1090 if you find the experience of talking about your personal life development is traumatic.

PARTICIPANT'S ASSURANCES

Participation in this study is purely voluntary and you may withdraw at any time. Your confidentiality will be protected at all times by keeping records in a locked file cabinet. Identifiable date will be destroyed when no longer needed. You will not be identified by name or title in transcripts, written notes, papers, or published reports. If you have any questions about the research itself you may contact me, Rebecca J.M. Kennedy, at (580) 310-5650 (office) or (580) 436-6112 (home); or Dr. Courtney Vaughn at (405) 325-1518 (office). If you have questions about your rights as a research participant please call the Office of Research Administration at (405) 325-4757.

I agree to participate in the study described above and I agree interviews with me for the purpose of the above study may be audio-recorded:

_____	_____
Participant's Signature	Date
_____	_____
Researcher's Signature	Date

APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW QUESTION GUIDE

Post Baccalaureate Perspectives and Experiences

1. Tell me about your life after earning a degree.
2. What expectations did you have for your life because of the degree?
3. Did your personal life change as a consequence of earning a bachelor's degree? If so How?
4. Did your professional or work life change as a consequence of earning a bachelor's degree? If so how?
5. How are you the same and different as the person you were before earning a bachelor's degree?
6. Would you be in the job you are in now if you had not earned a bachelor's degree? Explain.
7. Would you be in the same personal relationships your are in now if you had not earned a bachelor's degree? Explain.
8. Are your goals different now than when you graduated? Explain.
9. Did the degree make a difference in your financial well-being? Explain.
10. Did the degree make a difference in your social status? Explain.
11. Has your work or career changed as a consequence of earning the degree?
12. Do you perceive yourself differently than you did before earning the degree? Explain.
13. Do those close to you perceive you differently than they did before you earned the degree? Explain.
14. Do those in your social setting perceive you differently than they did before you graduated? Explain.
15. Do those in your work setting perceive you differently than they did before you graduated? Explain.
16. In what ways did a bachelor's degree serve as an advantages to your life?
17. In what ways did a bachelor's degree serve as a disadvantage to your life?
18. In what ways did a bachelor's degree meet your expectations?
19. In what ways did a bachelor's degree not meet your expectations?
20. What questions have I left out about your view of the roles a bachelor's degree played in your life?

Baccalaureate Background

A. What did you earn your degree in at college?
B. Why did you go to college?
C. What were your goals when you entered college
D. Were your goals the same or different when you graduated?
E. Who was significant in preventing or causing to attend college?
F. Who was significant in preventing or causing you to succeed in college?
G. How would you characterize your college experience?
H. Were you the same person after you graduated as you were when you started college?

Post Baccalaureate Education Background

A. Do you have postgraduate experience?
B. What degrees or certifications have your earned since earning your bachelor's degree?
C. What adult learning and training have you experiences since earning your bachelor's?

Life History Background

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A. How would you describe yourself to yourself?
B. Where were you reared? What is your age?
C. What is your race? Religion? Marital status?
D. Where did you attend preschool? Grade school? High school? College?
E. When did you graduate from college?
F. How old were you when you started? How hold were you when you finished?
G. Tell me about your career history?

Educational Environment/Influences Background

A. Tell me about your formal education as a child.
B. Tell me about your father's formal education.
C. Tell me about your mother's formal education.
D. Tell me about your father's attitude about your education.
E. Tell me about your mother's attitude about your education.
F. What was your father's expectation about your education after high school?
G. What was your mother's expectation about your education after high school?
H. How were your expectations the same or different from your parents?
I. Were there others in your life who took a special interest in your education?
J. Were there others in your life who encouraged you to attend college?
K. What kind of a student where you in grade school? High school?
L. Did you attend vo-tech or pursue some other specialized training program before earning your bachelor's degree?
M. Did you participate in informal learning activities in childhood?
N. If so, what were they?
O. Who was significant in preventing or causing these learning activities to occur?
P. In what ways/activities did you spend your free time?