Can Education be Healing?

Adult Women's Motivations for and Experiences with University Education.

A Dissertation

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree

Doctor of Philosophy in Educational Studies

Faculty of Education

Lakehead University

By

Janis Cox

November, 2009

Library and Archives
Canada

Published Heritage
Branch

395 Wellington Street
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4
Canada

Bibliothèque et
Archives Canada

Direction du
Patrimoine de l'édition

395, rue Wellington
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4
Canada

Canada

Lakehead
UNIVERSITY

OFFICE OF GRADUATE STUDIES

NAME OF STUDENT: Janis Cox

DEGREE AWARDED: PhD

ACADEMIC UNIT: Education

TITLE OF DISSERTATION: Can education be healing? Adult Women's motivations for and experiences with returning to university.

This dissertation has been prepared

under my supervision

and the candidate has complied

with the Doctoral regulations.

_____
Signature of Supervisor

_____
Dec. 16, 2009
Date

LAKEHEAD UNIVERSITY

FACULTY OF EDUCATION

DOCTORAL REPORT FORM

Candidate's Name: *Janis Cox*

Field of Study: *Educational Leadership and Policy Studies*

The undersigned members of the Supervising Committee certify that they have read, and recommend to the Graduate Studies in Education Committee for acceptance, the report of a Dissertation entitled

CAN EDUCATION BE HEALING? ADULT WOMEN'S

MOTIVATIONS FOR AND EXPERIENCES

WITH RETURNING TO UNIVERSITY
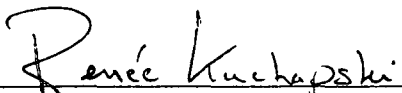
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Educational Studies.

_____
Supervisor: Hope-Arlene Fennell

_____
Committee Member: Constance Russell

_____
Committee Member: Renee Kuchapski

Date: October 30, 2009

Can Education be Healing?

Adult Women's Motivations for and Experiences with University Education

by

Janis Cox

Abstract: Previous research reveals that some women might pursue university education as a means to heal from experiences of violence, poverty, and trauma or to take control over aspects of their identity that have been sublimated by oppression and systemic inequities. This qualitative study explored eight women's motivations for and experiences with education at a mid-sized university in Ontario. This study also explored the possibility that women might be motivated to pursue university education as a means to heal from experiences of violence, trauma, and gender subordination, and if so, whether this motivation was fulfilled. Finally, this study documented the institutional and personal supports that women found beneficial to their experiences as students.

The findings of this study indicate that with sufficient financial, childcare, and emotional supports, women survivors of violence and trauma experienced healing through participation in university studies. Of significance to the women's positive experiences was the care provided by some professors. The findings of this study indicate the need for university policy development to better support women's return to and participation in university.

Acknowledgements

Appreciation is owed to many family, friends, and colleagues who provided essential words of wisdom and encouragement throughout this educational experience, which began long before acceptance in this program.

I owe thanks to M.A supervisors Dr. Randle Nelsen and Dr. Pamela Wakewich who planted the seeds of encouragement for my pursuit of PhD studies, provided references, and to Pam who provided feminist support in early days of discouragement. I thank my eldest brother, Jim Angel, who too encouraged me to "follow my heart" during M.A. days, and again through these PhD days, who walked some of this trip with me, and provided opportune words of encouragement at critical periods. Jim's partner, Ilona Willie, provided the priceless intuitive, empathic, "sisterhood" support that helped remind me of the value of my research.

My doctoral supervisor, Dr. Hope-Arlene Fennell, was an inspirational role-model and supported me through very rough drafts with extraordinary patience and kindness. Her high standards and encouragement towards my reaching them assisted my persistence. I also thank my committee members, Dr. Renee Kuchapski, who offered insight and important critical suggestions, and Dr. Connie Russell, whose diverse knowledge, high standards, and honest feedback, along with an ever present sense of humour, is exemplary. The positive feedback from examiners, Dr. Lori Chambers, and Dr. Si Transken was more affirming than I can express.

Thanks to all those in the faculty of Education who expressed interest and words of encouragement along the way. Thanks to Diana Mason for her administrative support and helping to ensure forms/details were properly taken care of.

My utmost gratitude is extended to my friend Val Dennison, whose enthusiasm from my initial decision to pursue this course of study, and which never waned through multiple readings and discussions of ideas about project and process, was invaluable. I cherish our tea and "philosophy" meetings that were an integral part of my developing through this project.

Thanks to Margaret Phillips of the Northern Woman's Bookstore for her continued interest and encouragement from undergraduate days, not just of me, but for so many women in our community.

Thanks to Lori Western, Tammy McKinnon, and the rest of my Board of Directors and employers who encouraged me to do whatever was needed to persist with this project.

The brutally honest and incisive critical feedback from my daughter Kara helped inspire more clear writing. My son Alex recognized my workload, both as a student, mother, and woman. I thank them both for patience, tolerance, and humor while I was immersed in reading, writing and tuning out the rest of the world. Thanks to them both for listening to presentations and counting the "um's" for me.

I am ever appreciative of the affection, entertainment, and walks shared by Lupo, Eddie, Cali, Sugar, Tiggy, Feather and Boo, who helped me to keep life a bit balanced over the past several years.

Thanks to the women who participated in this research and shared their stories, experiences, wisdom, and important and parts of themselves. Their courage, honesty, and generosity are inspiring and to them, and all survivors, this dissertation is dedicated.

Last, but most definitely not least, I thank my life's partner Brian. His unequivocal support and faith in my abilities, a faith which surpasses my own, has been without question, what helped me to continue. His patience and encouragement during my love/hate relationship with this dissertation was more than a partner could ask for and it was offered unconditionally and without hesitation.

Table of Contents

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

On September 16, 2003, Pereira reported that the gender gap in post-secondary education had reversed so that there were more women than men involved in post-secondary studies. I wondered about which women were contributing to the gender gap reversal, and what was motivating so many women to pursue post-secondary studies. Interest in these questions reflects my education in Women's Studies and Sociology, and 25 years of working with women in the social service sector. Here I observed that women who had experienced violence, marginalization, oppression, and traumatization, in a variety of contexts, sometimes chose a return to higher education as a means of liberation from past experiences. Thus I questioned whether women seeking to overcome past traumas were part of the gender gap reversal, and if so, whether education provided the experiences they desired.

Some of the challenges faced by women while attending university include finding acceptable childcare, financial difficulties, relationship breakdown, violence, isolation, systemic gender inequities, and multiple role-conflicts (Grace & Gouthro 2000; Gouthro, Taber, & Brazil, 2006; Horsman, 1999; Groen & Hyland-Russell, 2006; Home, 1996; Parr, 2000; Sheridan, 2004). Likely because of these difficulties, women who have returned to university later in life drop out more frequently than men (Home, 1998; Sheridan, 2004). Yet, despite these difficulties, many women persist to degree completion, and sometimes excel academically (Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002; Darkenwald & Novak, 1997).

Horsman (1999) described the challenges faced by women survivors of violence and trauma in their pursuit of learning. Women can be exhausted from dealing with flashbacks, nightmares, disrupted sleep, and depression as a result of their experiences, and educational institutions might not have policies in place that are supportive of these women. A cursory review of the research findings of Parr (2000), and Horsman (1999), along with my experiences of violence and returning to university as a mature student, and my education and employment experiences, led to my interest in pursuing this study.

General Statement of the Problem

In my study I explored the prevalence of violence, trauma, and gender subordination for women and higher education as a potential means of healing and self-restoration from their experiences. Violence against women is a complex matter that is linked to women's inequality in society. Despite success in achieving employment and pay equity legislation, gender inequity

prevails in Canadian society and is most evident in the higher rates of violence and poverty that women experience (Yalnizyan, 2005; 2008). Violence against women affects all of Canadian society and is felt by everyone, either directly or indirectly (Statistics Canada, 2006).

<div align="center">Purposes of the Study</div>

The primary purpose of my study was to explore adult women's motivations for and experiences with university education. A second purpose was to explore whether women survivors of violence, trauma, or gender subordination were motivated to attend university by a desire to heal or recover from these experiences, and if so, did they find their university education experience to be healing. A third purpose was to document what institutional and personal supports were beneficial to women's healing and participation as university students. Thus the questions which guided my research were:

1. What were the motivations for adult women's return to a mid-sized university in Ontario?
2. What were the experiences of adult women's return to a mid-sized university in Ontario?
3. Was the university experience healing for women survivors of violence, trauma, or gender subordination and if so why or why not?
4. What supports were beneficial to the women's healing and participation as university students?

<div align="center">Significance of the Study</div>

A review of the literature found no study that explicitly explored the research questions posed in my study. Rather, women's motivations for and experiences with returning to university were revealed in research studies about identity (Parr, 2000), experiences of challenges and role-conflict (Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002; Home, 1992; 1996; 1998; Grace & Gouthro 2000; Gouthro, Taber, & Brazil, 2006), effects of poverty and violence on women's experiences of learning (Groen & Hyland-Russell, 2006; Horsman, 1999; Murphy, 2005), and literature about experiences and needs of adults in education (Darkenwald & Novak, 1997; Kasworm, 2003, 2005; Sheridan, 2004). Parr's (2000) qualitative study of identity and women's return to post-secondary education revealed findings that most closely relate to the research questions posed in my study. She found that:

> A high proportion of this particular group of adult women students presented, unexpectedly and unsolicited, painful life experiences. I would not have expected around half of the students to present these kinds of experiences, but it did raise the question for me of whether there is this type of frequency in the population generally, or whether women with this type of experience are attracted to education for any particular reason. (p.129)

Parr's question became the final impetus for the overarching research questions for my study; that of exploring women's motivations for and experiences with returning to university, and whether one motivation could be to heal from experiences of violence, trauma, or gender subordination. Thus my study helps to address a gap in the literature about adult women's motivations for and experiences with returning to university and whether one of those motivations might be to heal from violence, trauma, or gender subordination.

The significance of my study is also related to addressing needs identified by Statistics Canada:

> Filling in the gaps, and examining the fabric of women's experiences—how violence impacts and interacts with other aspects of their lives—will reveal a more complete portrait. This can allow decision-makers and service providers to plan for the future, and hopefully to adjust current policies and services as needed. (Statistics Canada, 2006, p. 12)

Qualitative research about social problems, and on different interpretations of social conditions, is significant to policy development. My study adds to the collection of systematic knowledge generated by research which is important and necessary to policy development, particularly since research-based information is frequently lacking in the policy arena (Rist, 2000). My study provides information that might be beneficial to university policy development to support women's return to post-secondary education. My study is also significant in adding to the descriptive literature about women's experiences of pursuing education, which is valuable to enhancing an understanding of women's experiences and learning (Hayes & Flannery, 1997). My study also provides a conceptual framework with which to build further research about the effects of violence, trauma, or gender subordination on women's educational experiences.

Finally, this dissertation could help reduce some women's sense of isolation by reading about others with similar experiences as their own, provide encouragement to other women's efforts to challenge oppression, and could provide policy analysis and tools for women to use in their own efforts to pursue post-secondary education. Empowering women by providing a means of recognizing systemic oppressive forces allows women to act individually and/or collectively to change the conditions of their lives (Lather, 1991).

Background and Rationale

The "Measuring Violence Against Women Report" by Statistics Canada (2006) is the most current available data about the numbers of Canadian women who are victims of violence, and the effects of violence on these women. The data are incomplete, as acknowledged in the

publication, because of under-reporting by victims which suggests that rates of violence against women could be higher than the data show. For example, it is believed that just over one-third of spousal assaults and less than 10% of sexual assaults are reported to police. Victims are frequently reluctant to report their experiences of violence for a variety of reasons including fear, shame, and the personal nature of these experiences. There are also gaps in the data about the experiences of intimate partner violence and sexual assault for Aboriginal women, older women, immigrant and visible minority women, and women in same-sex relationships (Statistics Canada, 2006).

Data collected from victim services across Canada indicate that two-thirds of clients served are female victims of sexual assault, partner violence, or stalking. Women are more frequently subjected to more severe forms of violence from men, than are men from women. In 2004, twice as many women than men were beaten by their partners and four times as many were choked. Sixteen percent of women who were victimized by a spouse were sexually assaulted, and twice as many female victims of spousal assault reported chronic, ongoing assaults of 10 or more times (Statistics Canada, 2006, p. 19). Aboriginal women and women with disabilities experience higher rates of violence than non-Aboriginal and able women. Rates of sexual assault, stalking, and homicide are higher for younger women, with women under the age of 25 at the highest risk of spousal homicide (Statistics Canada, 2006).

I have seen these rates and effects of violence against women reflected on a regular basis in my last six years of employment in a victim service agency. My observations include that the large majority of victims were women who accessed the service because of partner and sexual assaults. Many of these women have experienced a lifetime of violence, particularly Aboriginal women and Aboriginal women survivors of the residential school system.

Along with the prevalence of violence against women, it is important to recognize the potential effects of violence which are many and varied. Effects of experiences of violence can include injury, loss of productivity, fear for their lives, and multiple negative emotional consequences. "A single incident of physical or sexual assault can be a life-shattering experience and can have negative impacts on a victim's physical and emotional well-being, and women, more frequently than men, experience multiple assaults" (Statistics Canada, 2006, p.13). Although male victims of spousal assault reported negative psychological consequences, they were more likely than women to say the experience had little or no effect on them (30% of male victims compared with 6% of females) (p. 13).

In my experience, anecdotal reports from women victims of violence include experiences of child, physical, emotional, and sexual abuse, and growing up in homes where they witnessed their mothers being psychologically and physically battered by partners. As victims of partner abuse, women expressed fear for their own and their children's emotional and physical safety, and fear that they might be killed by their current or ex-partners. Common reactions to violence were guilt, self-blame, anxiety, exhaustion, and depression. While men occasionally accessed our service, only a few over the past six years did so because of partner or sexual assault. This might reflect men's reluctance to report these experiences. Men's experiences of child sexual abuse were occasionally described, particularly for Aboriginal survivors of the residential school system. Overwhelmingly, it was women victims of violence perpetrated by men who accessed our service. Many of these women were under the age of 25 which raised concerns for me and other victim service providers about the success of anti-violence educational programs and affirmative action efforts towards gender equity.

Violence against women occurs in public, family, and intimate contexts, and can be experienced by women at any stage of their lives. The effects on children living in a violent home can stay with them over the long term and can result in a repetition of violence through generations (Jaffe, Baker, & Cunningham, 2004; Statistics Canada, 2006, p.32). According to Statistics Canada (2006):

> The economic or financial costs of violence to victims and society are difficult to gauge. There are no studies that have examined the total economic cost of all types of violence against women. Four Canadian studies have estimated partial economic costs and indicate that the economic impact of violence on victims and Canadian society in a single year, including costs related to health, criminal justice, social services, and lost productivity, can range in the billions of dollars. (Statistics Canada, 2006, p.13)

Given these estimated costs of violence against women, social and political actions aimed at reducing gender inequity, violence, and the effects of violence are justified. It is important to support women's success in higher education because education is one means to strengthen gender equity (Klein, 2006; Murphy, 2005). Post-secondary education, especially university, can assist women to achieve a lifetime of economic independence and, for a single mother, can make the difference between raising her children with sufficient financial resources and raising them in poverty (Murphy, 2005).

Experiences of violence can affect learning for children and adults. For some children, experiences of violence at home might mean that school is a safe place so that they might work

harder at school and become successful learners. For other children, experiences of violence lead to a loss of self-esteem and self-confidence, and difficulty in concentrating while trying to learn, all of which can lead to illiteracy (Horsman, 1999). Large numbers of adult literacy learners have experienced violence. A return to education for these survivors of violence can mean experiencing triggers for memories of violence, and/or a reinforcement of feelings of stupidity given their failures to learn. Women students living in violent relationships might attend erratically because of pressure from controlling men, injury, and dealing with the aftermath of occurrences of violence (Horsman, 1999). Other sequelae from experiences of violence and trauma can include being too overwhelmed to learn, anxiety, depression, suicide attempts, and dropping out of school (Herman, 1997; Horsman, 1999; Matsakis, 1998).

Home (1998) concluded that the increasing presence of non-traditional women students in universities challenges these institutions to examine their responsiveness to these students. Because of the effects of violence on learning, and the statistical frequency of women's experiences of violence, educational policy should be developed with knowledge of the prevalence of violence and trauma, and the needs of survivors of violence and trauma (Horsman, 1999). Policy development could include providing support to educators at all levels to teach and respond adequately to issues of violence and trauma (Horsman, 1999). Adult educators are obligated to understand the social factors in the lives of women that affect learning and learning opportunities (Morris & Buchanan, 2001). It is not necessary for educators to learn about identifying survivors of violence in order to treat them differently; rather they should recognize that all teaching and learning should be facilitated in recognition of the needs of survivors of violence and trauma (Horsman, 1999).

Theoretical Influence

Feminist theory provides a vital lens for my study; it informs the research questions, methodology, and analysis and presentation of the data. The methodology chosen for my study was based in a feminist theoretical understanding of the social construction of gender, and the need to challenge gender-based oppression. The following description of feminism underlies the philosophical stance taken for my study.

> Feminism is the political theory and practice that struggles to free all women: Women of color, working class women, poor women, disabled women, lesbians, old women, as well as white, economically privileged, heterosexual women. Feminists engaged in academic work acknowledge that scholarship and teaching are political acts, and that feminist scholarship and teaching can, and should, challenge the multiplicity of ways in which women are oppressed.(Welch, 1994, p. 151)

The description of feminism offered by Welch (1994) refers to praxis, or linking theory with practices and vice-versa. Praxis can also mean "a political position in which 'knowledge' is not simply defined as 'knowledge *what*' but also as 'knowledge *for*.' Succinctly, the point is to change the world, not only to study it" (Stanley, 1990, p.15). Use of feminist theory and feminist methodology in my study involved linking theory to practice by striving for an egalitarian-based approach with participants. An egalitarian approach is important when working with survivors of violence who have been robbed of control by someone more powerful during episodes of violence. This approach is also based in principles of qualitative research which have moved to seeing the relationship of researcher and subject as collaborative and dialogical. This perspective allows researcher and participant to negotiate the processes, results, and uses of the research. Not all scholars agree with a view of relationship-based qualitative research, but my study is based on the assumption that egalitarian research is consistent with an approach of overcoming oppression as a joint endeavour between researcher and participants (Gergen & Gergen, 2000).

Steps taken to assist with an egalitarian research process included offering women information about myself as a researcher, informing them of the research process prior to their commitment to participate, providing limits of confidentiality in disclosures, encouraging women to talk as much or as little about the research questions as they chose, informing participants of their right to withdraw from the research at any time, and offering participants the opportunity to review and revise their transcripts and my interpretation of them. These steps were designed to maximize the control the participants had over their involvement in my study.

Practice linked to theory also means that results of my study might inform theory about the experiences of women survivors of violence and the possibility of education as healing. Praxis in my study also refers to Murphy's (2005) political claim of helping to maintain awareness of the rates and effects of violence against women.

Researcher Bias

A bias that informed my study is my sympathy with Murphy's (2005) claim that higher education can widen the social and economic distance between women, leading to successful women's indifference and an out-of-sight, out-of-mind view about the plight of less fortunate women. Murphy (2005) asserted that,

> Women who have chosen higher education and gone on to a successful career have moved into leadership roles in society, whether they intended to or not, and these roles carry social responsibilities, including the need to keep poverty [and violence] on the public agenda. (p.129)

Murphy's (2005) claim resonates with me and was part of the motivation for my study. Despite my own experiences of poverty and violence, and continued exposure through my employment to the violence and poverty of others, I find, at times, that in my middle-class, white, heterosexual, privileged existence, I feel distanced from other women who are still struggling. This feeling is described by Grace and Gouthro (2006) as a loss of critical consciousness; when it is not reinforced by our environment, we must be constantly vigilant. This potential loss of critical consciousness is troubling to me and hence I heed the assertions of Murphy (2005) and Grace and Gouthro (2006).

A second bias underlying my study relates to my support of qualitative research as a means to answer questions of value to humans through ethical and systematic means and to use those answers to influence collective societal thinking (Berg, 2001; Denzin, 2000). Qualitative research means different things to different people but generally it means studying things in their natural settings, and interpreting phenomena by the meaning people bring to them (Denzin, 2000). There has been ongoing debate about the validity and the general applicability of qualitative research when it is contrasted with quantitative research. One explanation for criticism of qualitative research is that it "provides a critique of the positivist methodology, or an attack on truth which is purportedly found in empirical research" (Denzin, 2000, p. 8). A search for truth is not one of the aims of my study. Rather my study aims to add to knowledge created in a specific setting (Badali, 2004). Qualitative research involves investigating lived experience where individual belief and action overlap with culture (Denzin, 2000). Based on a belief that the research method should be congruent with the methodology, and a consideration of what method of research would best meet the research purpose, a qualitative method was selected as appropriate for the purposes of my study.

Researcher Assumptions

One assumption when beginning my study was that the student body comprised women survivors of violence, trauma, and/or gender subordination. A second assumption I made is that survivors of violence, trauma, or gender subordination would want to participate in my study and share their experiences with me. A third assumption was that women who chose to participate would honestly describe their motivations for and experiences with returning to university. A fourth assumption was that the needs and experiences of survivors of violence, trauma, or gender subordination could be different from the needs and experiences of other university students. A

final assumption is that the needs and experiences of non-traditional women students could be used to inform the future development of university policy to better support such students.

Description of the University

The university website includes a description of the university as mid-sized with approximately 7500 students of which the majority (6000) is full-time graduate and undergraduate students. The university is located in a community with a population of 117,000, and the next closest university is 750 km away. The university offers nine faculties of: Business Administration, Education, Engineering, Forestry and the Forest Environment, Health and Behavioural Sciences, Science and Environmental Studies, Social Sciences and Humanities, Medicine, and Graduate Studies.

A review of the demographic date of the university was completed prior to the study to determine the number of non-traditional female students, versus male and traditional-aged students enrolled in the university. The Institutional Analysis Department of the University provided population data. According to the university statistical analysis report of 2007/2008, women have outnumbered men since 1997 in total enrollment, in full-time undergraduate studies, and, except for one year, in full-time graduate studies. In 1998/99, the number of male full-time graduate students exceeded full-time female graduate students by one. The numbers of female students exceeded male students every year in part-time undergraduate studies, and increasingly so, in part-time graduate studies.

The majority of students is under the age of 24 in both full-time and part-time undergraduate studies. The over-40 is the smallest group of enrolled students in full-time undergraduate and graduate studies. The number of part-time students in the over-40 age group is similar to the 30-39 year age group of part-time students. In summary, the university student body consists primarily of people of traditional-age, that of 19-24, with a larger percentage of female to male students. These were important data to keep in mind when women discussed their participation in the university and their feelings about their age.

Limitations of the Study

My study was limited by the small number of participants, women, who were recruited to participate from one mid-sized university in Ontario. Therefore the findings of my study cannot be applied generally to a broader population. A lack of diversity of participants allowed for minimal analysis of differentiating identities such as class, race, sexuality, and ability. My study was also limited by the lack of women's interest in participating in the study beyond completing

interviews with me. My hope was that women would be interested in further collaboration by reviewing my interpretation of their transcripts and providing feedback but none expressed an interest in doing so.

Delimitations of the Study

I concur with Horsman (1999) that research about violence against boys and men is important. However, several reasons influenced the decision to focus my study on women. These reasons relate to concern about the systemic gender inequity experienced by girls and women in Canadian society, the statistical prevalence of violence against women, the statistical increased severity of violence against women as compared with men, and my life's employment and volunteer experiences that involve efforts to change these disturbing statistics. Further, as a survivor of gender-based violence and oppression myself, I lack comfort, and hence ability, in approaching and exploring such issues with men.

Definition of Terms

Essential to qualitative research is providing clear operationally defined concepts to help with understanding (Berg, 2001). The following definitions clarify the use of these terms in my study.

Domestic Violence is also known as partner or spousal abuse, partner or spousal assault, family violence, and wife abuse. It refers to physical, psychological, financial, sexual, and emotional abuse in an intimate partner relationship. Emotional abuse by intimate partners can consist of jealous and controlling behaviour, verbal bullying, financial abuse, and criminal harassment, also called stalking, by ex-partners which is frequently a part of relationships where domestic violence is or has been present.

Gender Analysis refers to studying the differential effects of a political, economic, and socio-cultural system on the lives of women and men.

Gender-Neutral means an assumption of gender equality and a lack of recognition of the differential effects of a political, economic, and socio-cultural system on the lives of women and men.

Gender Subordination refers to a restriction of women's opportunities to obtain equal access to social, political, and economic opportunities. It includes a devaluing of women's position in society that is often internalized by women. Gender subordination is also referred to as gender oppression and gender subjugation in this dissertation.

Healing For the purposes of my study, healing was an overarching term I used to capture

women's sense of overcoming restrictions on their esteem, identities, and abilities that past experiences of violence, trauma, or gender oppression had placed on them. Healing for the women in this study included experiences of increased self-confidence, self-esteem, and self-worth, transformative learning, experiencing changes in identity from victim which connotes helplessness, to being empowered, and developing new insights into their experiences and social structures.

Non-traditional Students are defined as over the age of 25, enrolling in university after a break from education, and attending part or full-time. Non-traditional students are also referred to as adult or women students in my study. This is not to say that students entering university directly from high school are not adults, but to simplify the description of participants rather than reiterating the lengthy term of non-traditional student.

Retention refers to the continued participation of enrolled university students until graduation. Retention is also referred to as persistence.

Survivor in my study refers to a woman who has lived through child or adult violence and/or trauma.

Traditional Students enter "university shortly after completing their secondary education, are between the ages of 18-24, and who, owing to their prior socialization, schooling and attainment, are relatively well prepared for academic study"(Digby, 2002, p.86).

Trauma refers to a psychological reaction of intense fear, helplessness, loss of control, and the threat of annihilation that stems from threats to life or bodily integrity, or a close personal encounter with violence or death (Herman, 1997, p. 33). Trauma is not the incident but the reaction of the person who experienced the incident.

Violence Against Women encompasses domestic violence, and physical or sexual assaults against women, by partners or strangers.

<center>Summary</center>

Adult women's motivations for and experiences with returning to university can be gleaned from literature findings from a variety research focuses. Some researchers have discussed the rates and effects of violence on women's learning and educational experiences (Deskeredy & Schwartz, 1998; Horsman, 1999; Parr, 2000), the educational needs of survivors of violence and trauma (Horsman, 1999), and a possible link of education as a vehicle to assist with recovery from trauma, violence, or gender subordination (Horsman, 1999; Parr, 2000). The increase in women's participation in university, and interest in further exploration about the possible links between

women's experiences of violence and their enrolment in university, led to the development of the research questions for my study. Through qualitative research influenced by feminist theory and methodology with women who volunteered to participate, the goals of my study were to explore adult women's motivations for a university education; to determine a possible link between women's recovery from violence, trauma, or gender subordination, and university education; to investigate whether university education is healing for women survivors of violence, trauma, or gender subordination; and to name what the women found supportive of their educational participation. There is no definitive research indicating women's return to education to be motivated by a need to heal, or to gain control of aspects of their identities which have been sublimated by systemic inequities and trauma, but "anecdotal support from a variety of professional settings seems to support this link" (Parr, 2000, p. 129).

The social costs of violence against women, and the benefits of higher education in promoting gender equity, support the need for research and educational policy development to recognize and address the prevalence of violence against women, and the needs of survivors of violence. The findings of my study add to the descriptive literature about adult women's motivations for and experiences with pursuing university education; contribute to the development of a conceptual framework for further research about the effects of violence or trauma on educational experiences; could assist with potential university policy development to support adult women in their efforts to obtain a university degree; and hopefully will be of interest to and supportive of women in their pursuit of university education.

Organization of the Dissertation

This dissertation is organized into six chapters. Following this first introductory chapter is Chapter Two which contains a synopsis of the relevant literature reviewed for the purposes of my study. No research studies were found that focused specifically on the research questions posed in my study. Research findings in literature about adult students, attrition and retention of traditional and non-traditional students, adult and women's learning, and the social and economic factors which affect women's enrollment and persistence in university were searched to glean further details about women's motivations for and experiences with returning to university. Chapter Two summarizes the findings from these areas of research.

Chapter Three outlines the research design and the underlying methodology utilized for my study. Further, experiences of the research process, particularly those that did not meet my ideals of participant involvement, are described. The purpose in describing these experiences is to

aid in praxis where these experiences might further inform both the theorizing and practice of egalitarian-based research processes.

Chapter Four presents the findings of the research. As much as possible, participants' direct quotations are provided. This relates to my efforts for congruency with egalitarian-based research whereby including participant voice in research findings is important to help disrupt the privileging of the researcher's voice. Participants' voices are also included to help address an identified gap in all areas of attrition and retention literature; the gap in students' voices (Hermanowicz, 2004).

Chapter Five offers a discussion of the findings in comparison and contrast with research literature that was reviewed both prior to and after completing the research. Findings of my study both support and contrast with some of the findings in the reviewed literature, and identify some of the needs and challenges of women survivors of violence, trauma, or gender subordination, in their participation in university studies.

Chapter Six outlines the conclusions drawn from the findings of my study. Many of women's motivations for attending university remain consistent with the literature. The experiences of the participants in my study revealed that the challenges of childcare and inadequate financial supports have not much changed since Home's (1992) study of Canadian women returning to university as adults. For women survivors of childhood and/or adult experiences of violence, returning for a university education can be healing. Experiences of transformative learning, caring professors, and the empowering effect of taking control of this aspect of their lives, aided the women's healing.

CHAPTER TWO

A Review of the Literature

Introduction

The purposes of the review of literature were twofold. The first purpose was to provide an informational background to support the questions that guided my study. The main topics explored were adult women's motivations for and experiences with university study; whether education is healing for women survivors of violence, trauma, or gender subordination; and what supports were beneficial to the women's participation as university students and healing. The second purpose was to review literature that will later be used to discuss the findings of the study. The discussions are organized into the categories of women's motivations for pursuing university study, women's experiences of university study, and aspects of university experiences that supported women's healing and participation as students, and a brief synopsis of healing.

Women's Motivations for Pursuing University Study

Descriptions of adult women's motivations for attending university were found in literature about attrition and retention, adult student's learning, and studies related to women's experiences with returning to university. Women's motivations to attend university are many and varied, and often involve several inter-related factors of intrinsic desires, and external factors related to life circumstances.

Self-improvement

A theme of intrinsic factors of self-improvement or intellectual stimulation as a motivation for adult women's attendance at university was identified by Breese and O'Toole (1995), Carney-Crompton and Tan (2002), Faith and Sturrock (1990), Owen (1991), and Tinto (1987). Mohoney and Anderson (1998) also found that some of the 38 women in their study were motivated to attend university by a desire to demonstrate increased competency. These women felt good about themselves and their abilities, and a university degree would demonstrate their abilities and worth to others. Some women were motivated to be role models for children or because they had received positive family of origin values about education.

Conversely, other women felt that they were motivated to pursue university education to assist with moving away from internalized dysfunctional family values. These women wanted to identify their own values, goals, and beliefs, and to develop self-esteem. They enrolled without clear goals in mind but they wanted to explore options and take their time setting goals. (Horsman, 1999; Parr, 2000; Reay, 2001; Robson, Ryan, & Veltman, 1997). Motivations for self-

improvement also related to women's identity or a desire to redefine their identity (Breese &
O'Toole, 1995; Parr, 2000). Returning for education was:

> About achieving something for themselves, about proving to themselves and others their
> capabilities. It was partly about enhancing employment opportunities, but
> primarily about enhancing their own independence in many ways, from control of
> partners, parents, families, and their past experiences. To have created something for
> themselves by deliberate decision-making, a change from falling into marriage, parenting,
> or escaping family of origin traumas. Sometimes it was a love of learning, a long-held,
> maybe secret ambition, a feeling that they could do better than what they have done with
> their lives. Often it was about self-esteem and confidence building, developing a sense of
> control over their lives. (Parr, 2000, p.128)

In essence, these women were using a university education to help escape from the oppression of
prescribed gender roles that they had not consciously chosen and were finding stifling and
limiting. Similarly, some women were motivated to attend university when "the mind-numbing
damage of a typical unskilled job held by women sometimes takes a while to make itself known
to the young women working as a cashier, waitress, clerk, or other job holder in the service
sector"(Murphy, 2005, p.21). Pascall and Cox (1993) provided a related analysis that "doing
women's work and working alongside women might insulate women from the experience of
discrimination, even while it confirms their restricted place in the job market" (p. 46). Women
who recognized that they wanted to explore opportunities beyond what they had been socialized
for, seemed to want to challenge or change their ascribed and internalized identity.

Education as a means to change identity also related to social class in the study of Reay
(2001). She analyzed contemporary educational policy for working-class people via data from
three research projects, including a qualitative study of 19 working-class adult students on a pre-
university access course in England. These students were the first generation in their families to
aim for university. Two-thirds were women, one-quarter came from minority ethnic backgrounds,
and they "represented the contemporary working classes of lone mothers, social welfare benefit
recipients, and low paid, casual, service worker jobs" (p. 336). Women in Reay's (2001) study
described, unlike their younger counterparts, a strong sense that part of the purpose of going to
university was "to find themselves," or in other words, to define or redefine their identity. Finding
oneself could be interpreted as similar to findings from Parr (2000) and Robson, Ryan, and
Veltman (1997) where women wanted to explore their capabilities and to create something for
themselves.

Occupational and Economic Self-sufficiency Goals

When contrasted with men's motivations for enrolling in university, some authors (see Faith & Sturrock, 1990; Owen, 1991; Tinto, 1987) found that female students, much more than males, were without clearly articulated career goals, women were less pressured for occupational attainment than were men, and men studied for higher professional qualifications. Yet, more recent studies indicated that women's changing role in the workplace and a desire for enhanced occupational opportunities and economic independence have motivated women's return to higher education (Parr, 2000; Mohoney & Anderson, 1998; Sheridan, 2004). Pascall and Cox (1993) found that links between employment and domestic roles were important to understanding the context of women's decisions about returning to higher education. Their research with 43 women returning to higher education in Great Britain explored whether educational structures can offer routes to change. Choosing higher education reflected women's perceptions of a need for change and their findings included that education became an alternative when motherhood did not happen, or when the temporariness of motherhood was realized. Similarly, education was not seen as an alternative to marriage when the women were younger, but education became an alternative when marriages broke down (Pascall & Cox, 1993). Here, education also became a step toward developing economic self-sufficiency.

As a result of the experience of marriage breakdown, one woman in Murphy's (2005) study realized her restricted opportunities later in life and returned for higher education. She offered this advice to younger women: "Money is important in life. You will never realize it until you haven't got it. Get your education before you do anything else" (p. 62). A desire for economic independence through achieving higher education was also a motivation for women who had left abusive marriages, were single mothers, or whose husbands were ill or nearing retirement in Mohoney and Anderson's (1998) study. While escaping or avoiding poverty was part of women's motivations for returning to university as adults, many of these women were equally motivated by the personal development that can come from jobs. Women wanted education which leads to work where they could use their intellect, their creativity, and their interpersonal skills, opportunities that they felt they might not find in routine jobs or in the traditional work women have done in the home (Murphy, 2005).

External Factors

Motivations to attend university for adult women were also influenced by external factors such as their responsibilities and life events (Mohoney & Anderson, 1988). Enrollment was often

postponed until children were deemed old enough, family responsibilities were lessened, or even when co-workers or employers would not be inconvenienced. These decisions by women were contrasted with the usual sequence of events for middle-class men.

> Men in their late teens and 20's complete their education, begin a career (job), get married and have children. Even when men marry before completing their education or starting their careers, there is an underlying principle that marriage or children are not to interfere seriously with either education or career. By contrast, women's sequence was commonly, partial education, marriage, children, job, more education, and career. (Mohoney & Anderson, 1988, p. 272)

All of the 38 women in Mohoney and Anderson's 1988 study indicated that the "time is now," a sense that they were now able to take on the role of student and they "needed to do this for themselves" (p. 272). Important to the women's motivations was that they could take on the role of student without harming anyone else. External events precipitating women's enrollment in university were also studied by Breese and O'Toole (1995). They reported that their study was not about the individuals themselves, but about patterns of attitudes and related behaviours of 221 women over the age of 28. They used an open-ended questionnaire of 32 questions and completed 44 follow-up interviews which were not recorded but where notes were taken. Their findings included that the women's motivations to attend university were influenced by external events of death, divorce, and job loss. Although the focus of their research was about external events, these authors also found that women identified internal factors of desires to meet longstanding goals for education or self-improvement. This finding exemplifies the complexity of the context of women's decision-making about returning to university. Breese and O'Toole (1995) also found that for the women who experienced external factors as their primary motivator to attend university, their transition was considered more pressured without the luxury of exploring options. Rather their choices were more often affected by pragmatic concerns such as economics.

Understanding Past Experiences

Women have also identified that further education is part of a search to make sense of experiences of abuse and survival, or returning to school can be part of an attempt to make changes in their lives, either to escape a violent partner, or to move on from other violence in their past (Horsman, 1999; Mohoney & Anderson, 1998; Robson, Ryan, & Veltman, 1997). Robson, Ryan, and Veltman (1997) found that their experiences of working with an increasing number of non-traditional women students who identified as having co-dependent characteristics inspired their further study about these women's struggles to succeed in higher education. These authors explain that "co-dependency for adults' stems from growing up in family environments that

include alcohol abuse, sexual and physical abuse, emotional neglect, violence, and other unhealthy dynamics" (p. 9). Focus groups with 10 Caucasian participants ranging in age from 29 to 53 revealed that these women were motivated to attend university by wanting to get away from something, such as a difficult family situation, or to escape depression.

Similar findings were identified in the study of Groen and Hyland-Russell (2006) who analyzed the stories of students who had graduated from at least one pre-university humanities course designed for marginalized students, and who had chosen to pursue studies within the mainstream university. Some of these students identified the desire to overcome past limitations on both their opportunities and their perceptions of their abilities to participate in university. One woman in this study said, "I wanted to go to school, but my entire life I had heard I would not amount to anything. This program was a good step in between and I could prove people wrong" (p. 104). At some point in their studies, the participants decided that they were capable students and they were thus motivated to continue their post-secondary education (p. 105). Some women recovering from trauma or violence might not return to school until they reach the stage of believing that they "deserve an education" (Horsman, 1999, p. 75), a finding which shows the damage to self-esteem that experiencing violence can cause. It is commendable that these women take the risk of challenging such internalized messages by returning to education.

While the research discussed thus far presents women's motivations from an individualized perspective, by contrast, some Aboriginal women are motivated by a more collective view of pursuing post-secondary education as adults. This collective view means that their education might benefit all their people; it is not primarily pursued for personal advantage. Some Aboriginal women's writing includes their experiences of receiving inequitable educational opportunities which have affected them inter-generationally (Perrault & Vance, 1997). This motivation is exemplified by one Aboriginal woman who wrote, "I feel that my education is an investment for the future, as well as an avenue to break the cycle of poverty so prevalent in Native society (Anaquod-Williams, 1997). It would be interesting to further explore this motivation for Aboriginal, and indeed, any women.

Summary of Women's Motivations

Some researchers have noted that motivations for non-traditional female students are related to intrinsic factors of personal enrichment, self-improvement, and personal growth rather than extrinsic factors of improved job, career, and financial opportunities (Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002; Faith & Sturrock, 1990; Tinto, 1987). By contrast, studies by Parr (2000), Sheridan,

(2004), and Murphy (2005) indicated that women's changing role in the workplace and a desire for enhanced occupational opportunities have motivated women's return to higher education. The many documented motivations for women's attending university relate to personal and occupational goals, life events of death of spouse, separation, or divorce, job loss, and attempts to leave violent partners or violent histories. Life-changing events and motivations to attend university were not always traumatic. Sometimes the recognition of a lack of education and a yearning for more knowledge motivated women to pursue higher education. Other motivations for women's attendance at university included a desire to escape prescribed gender roles, exert control over their lives, and to understand experiences of violence. For Aboriginal women, higher education might mean hope to further the socio-economic position of all their people. Such a wide range of motivations should not be surprising, reflecting the diversity of women's experiences.

In relation to my study, the reviewed literature provided a basis for comparison and contrast with the motivations expressed by participants. Given that exploring women's motivations for returning to university was one of the primary purposes of my study, it was important to ascertain the findings in previous studies about this research question. The specific question of women's motivations for returning to university has been explored through an analysis of external factors affecting decisions to enroll by Breese and O'Toole (1995), and Mohoney and Anderson (1988), and through an analysis of women's identity by Parr (2000). However, women's motivations to enroll in university, rather than being a specific research question in these studies, were included in research about women's experiences in education. No literature was found that explicitly asked whether women were motivated to attend university by a desire to heal from violence, trauma, or gender subordination. Rather implicit links to this motivation were uncovered in the research by Parr (2000), Groen and Hyland-Russell (2006), Horsman (1999), Mohoney and Anderson (1988), Murphy (2005), and Robson, Ryan, and Veltman (1997). Thus my study adds to the literature about women's motivations for returning to university, and adds to the findings in previous literature that one of those motivations could be a desire to heal from violence, trauma, or gender subordination.

Women's Experiences with Returning to University

Introduction

Descriptions of adult women's experiences of university education were found in literature about attrition and retention, adult education, adult learning, and policy papers about women's access to higher education. Research reviewed for my study included descriptions of

some challenges faced by adult women students and what experiences supported them to persist in university.

Experiences Described in Attrition and Retention Research

The recognition by universities of the importance of student retention led to an explosion of research and policy reports to assist with student retention (Tinto, 1993). Several researchers note that the majority of traditional and non-traditional students is now female (Breese & O'Toole, 1995; Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002; Gouthro, 2002; Hayes & Flannery, 1995; Home, 1992; Yalnizyan, 2008) so the continued success of post-secondary institutions might depend on the ability of universities to understand and accommodate women's situational and institutional needs (Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002; Tinto, 1987). Despite this claim, most attrition/retention research is focused on traditional students and lacks a gendered analysis. As well, results from attrition/retention studies of traditional students are frequently erroneously generalized to adult students, even though the experiences of adults frequently differ from those of traditional students (Grayson & Grayson, 2003; Graham & Donaldson, 1999; Tinto, 1993).

Attrition and retention research ranges in focus and purpose. Psychological models of research relate to measuring students' psychological attributes such as motivation and skills. In these models, motivation is defined as a characteristic that drives students to engage in the pursuit of academic-related behaviours, whereas skills are defined as the proficiency to perform well academically (Le, Casillas, Robbins, & Langley, 2005). Other attrition/retention research focused on the characteristics of students and/or universities, or both (Ennis, Mueller, Ettrick, Chepyator-Thomson, Zhang, Rudd, et al., 1989; Grayson & Grayson, 2003; Tinto, 1993; Waggoner & Goldman, 2005). Purposes for attrition/retention research range from societal demands for universities to retain students to meet labour market needs, to governments' reluctance to fund students who do not complete courses (Castles, 2004; Digby, 2002; Francis & Kelly, 1990; Waggoner & Goldman, 2005). A review of Canadian research on student attrition by Grayson and Grayson (2003) found few publications, and of those available, most have relied on American data dominated by Tinto's (1975) interaction/integration model. Grayson and Grayson (2003) concluded that the American research findings should not be generalized to Canada because of the differences in the post-secondary systems in the two countries. Despite this caveat, it is important to understand Tinto's model given the influence it has had on attrition and retention research.

Tinto's (1975) interaction/integration model and his follow-up research (1987, 1993) examined the compatibility of traditional students and a university environment. Tinto's (1975)

model has reached paradigmatic status (Grayson & Grayson, 2003) and has influenced much other attrition/retention research. Tinto's (1975, 1987, 1993) examination included students' interactions with the university culture, perceived social support, social involvement, and academic engagement. The primary finding for Tinto (1987, 1993) was that successful student retention is the responsibility of the institution, and students' withdrawal should not be blamed on the characteristics of students. He stated that:

> There is little evidence to support the notion that there is a unique personality profile which describes the withdrawing student as different from the persisting student. At one time or other virtually every attribute of personality has been cited as being related to the likelihood of departure. (Tinto, 1987, p. 44)

Instead, Tinto proposed that positive or integrative experiences, where a student is supported by the university culture to become well-integrated into the educational and campus environment, reinforced the likelihood of retention. Conversely, negative, or mal-integrative experiences weakened the intentions and commitments of students, especially commitment to the institution, and thereby increased the likelihood of students' leaving (Tinto, 1975, 1987, 1993).

The possibility of retention of adult women students being supported by university policy and practices is encouraging, because this perspective counters women's frequent self-blame when they struggle against systemic obstacles and drop out. Women tend to feel guilty rather than question whether expectations of others and of themselves are reasonable (Erwin & Maurutto, 1998; Hayes & Flannery, 1997; Home, 1998; Williams, 1997). Stress regarding expectations of women students, from others or internalized, relate to their multiple responsibilities. Much of the attrition/retention research provided descriptions of adult students' multiple role-conflicts as significant to their experiences as university students although there was less focus on policies to support this challenge for adults.

Adult students' experiences of role-conflict. Virtually all students experience some difficulty in making the transition to university (Tinto, 1987). Several researchers, including Donaldson (1999), Graham and Donaldson (1999), Grayson and Grayson (2003), Kasworm (2005), Perin and Greenberg (1984), and Thomas, Adams, and Birchenough, (1996), report that the experiences of multiple roles and role-conflict for adult students, much more so than for traditional students, are a significant challenge and reason for withdrawal from university. Thus, developing supports for adults based on results from traditional student research, such as encouraging adult students to participate more in student activities to become better integrated, might produce more role-conflict (Graham & Donaldson, 1999).

Adults who have multiple role constraints are less likely to become involved in student activities and social groups, and are less likely to spend significant amounts of time on campus interacting with other students and faculty. Despite their reduced levels of social and academic interaction, adults perform as well, or better, academically than traditional students, results that are not well explained by the dominant interactional model (Darkenwald & Novak, 1997; Graham & Donaldson 1999; Grayson & Grayson 2003; Kasworm, 2005; Tinto, 1987). Another deficit in the research of adult's educational experiences is that it tends to focus on attrition factors, not on what leads to success (Castles, 2004).

One consistently noted factor for retention with adult students struggling with multiple role-conflicts is a supportive "other," either a partner, friend, tutor, or faculty member (Bruyere, 2003; Castles, 2004; Sheridan, 2004; Tinto, 1987; Williams, 1997). Many adults noted the importance of a relationship with a faculty member which included acknowledgement of and respect for their adult status, or even just the faculty member's knowledge of the student's name, and sometimes work or family situation (Kasworm, 2003). The findings of the value of a supportive "other" were indicated for adult students in general without differentiation by sex, race, or class, or other variables.

Non-traditional women students. Many authors (Darkenwald & Novak, 1997; Graham & Donaldson 1999; Grayson & Grayson 2003; Kasworm, 2005; Tinto, 1987) described adult students' role-conflict without differentiation by gender, race, or class. Other research (Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002; and Home, 1992, 1996, 1998) focused specifically on women. Research focused exclusively on men's experiences of role-conflict was not found. Research about adult students "frequently cites gender as a variable but it primarily reflects a stereotypical, dichotomous characterization of women and men" (Stalker, 1996, p. 100). There is a limited analysis of women as adult learners, a lack of social critique of women's roles and resistance, and lack of attention to factors of race, class, culture, and the diversity of women's experiences (Hayes & Flannery, 1995; Sparks, 1998).

Home (1992, 1996, 1998) is one of the few researchers found in the body of literature on attrition and retention who focused on Canadian women with multiple roles who pursue post-secondary education and the institutional responses to the needs of these women. Her research showed that while multiple roles can be personally enriching, most of the students studied experienced role-strain. Conflicting and overwhelming demands on the women's time, particularly if parenting was one of the roles, resulted in women dropping out more frequently

than men for non-academic reasons (Home, 1998). Nuclear and extended family support was valuable, even essential, to retention (Home, 1992), but Home also found that women students received less support from their spouses than did men in the reverse situation, and that women students were expected to maintain traditional roles of wife and mother (see also Castles, 2004; Sheridan, 2004; Tinto, 1987, 1993; Williams, 1997).

Decisions made by women concerning their studies were often based on meeting family and work demands first. Women described their lives as "constant juggling acts." An example of role-conflict experienced by women was when children were ill and women faced incompatible demands between roles of parenting and student. Role-contagion, a preoccupation with one role while performing another, occurred when women moved rapidly from the role of parent to that of student. Study time was often not ideal, such as late at night after children were asleep (Home, 1992, 1998). Frequently, prior to enrollment, these students did not realize how difficult it would be to manage the demands of school with their other responsibilities (Home, 1992). Orientation sessions led by veteran multiple role students might help women to develop realistic expectations and negotiation strategies to help keep demands manageable (Home, 1998). By contrast, and encouragingly, Home (1998) explained that, while intense demands might increase role-strain, strong support can mitigate its effects, and perceived support is as effective as actual support (see also Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002; Castles, 2004; Wooller & Warner, 2001)

In contrast to Home's finding of supports for some women, other women have experienced a withdrawal of support from others when they become university students. Grace and Gouthro (2000) examined women's work in the home in relation to graduate education in the US and Canada. They analyzed the institutional and individual barriers affecting women students' access and accommodation in graduate education. They found that the women's positions as graduate students were at times contested in the home which made home life painful and disruptive. The women's new learning challenged the role of dominant male partners, altered previously held beliefs about the gendered division of labour, and disrupted existing family and community relations. These authors found that through further education, a woman can experience a change in her self-image and behaviour to become increasingly confident, capable, and independent, and these changes can lead to conflict with her family and spouse's expectations. These challenges can make continuing with education difficult for women and can lead women to dropping out. These findings were also noted by Williams (1997), who completed

a study of women's experiences of social support after their return to education, and Sheridan's (2001) doctoral research about adult student attrition from university.

The relationship between supports, psychological functioning, and academic performance for two groups of female students was examined by Carney-Crompton and Tan (2002). In their study, one group was traditional-aged, 18-22, and the second group was non-traditional, aged 25 and older. Findings from this study showed that non-traditional students showed better academic performance despite having fewer sources of support. These authors described this finding as unexpected and thought it could be explained by self-sufficient, motivated, and committed women choosing to attend university. The women in the study might have been individuals who felt competent to manage the role of student without severely compromising their other roles and responsibilities. Still, these researchers found that many students experienced a significant degree of adjustment because although they were aware of the actual class time required, they were unaware of the amount of time required for out-of-class reading, written assignments, and other course activities. These researchers recommended orientation programs offered by the university to help women prepare for the demands and time and energy requirements. Such programs would also need to be based on an understanding of the needs of the potential culture, race, and class diversity of participating women students.

Cultural identity can affect the experiences of attrition and retention of women students. Harklau (1998) found that immigrant women might have different roles and expectations from those commonly understood in the North American Anglo middle-class, and these differences might be related to differences in attrition or retention. More cultural analyses are necessary in attrition and retention research. In particular, I would be intrigued to see if the literature on immigrant women's experience has relevance to Aboriginal women's experience and which supports are relevant to these women's retention.

Analysis of effective supports for women includes contradictory findings about distance education. Home (1998) and Ross and Powell (1990) found distance education to be beneficial for adult women's retention because of the higher degree of flexibility and control women can exert over their studies. Considered to be one of the most adapted programs designed to support students, it is perhaps ironic that there is a high drop out rate and distance education rarely attracts low-income women (Home, 1998). Further analysis of why distance education leads to a higher drop out rate would be of benefit to the body of literature about attrition and retention.

Another gap in the attrition/retention research is the lack of student voice, a gap summarized most effectively by Hermanowicz (2004): "The students themselves, the people doing the staying or leaving, are hidden from view, their actions are unobserved and their voices are unheard, in retention and attrition research, from all theoretical perspectives of psychological, economic, societal, and organizational" (p. 76). Given that there is not a monolithic adult student identity, the voices and experiences of a wide range of students, traditional and non-traditional, are needed and would help universities understand their students and develop policy accordingly (Kasworm, 2005; Morrish & Buchanan, 2001; Robson, Ryan, & Veltman, 1997).

Perhaps because of the diversity in adult student identity, much of the attrition/retention research is contradictory and few studies have "articulated effective institutional responses to adult learner attrition" (Sheridan, 2004, p.26). A number of factors are attributed as primary to retention or attrition, but research results cannot be generally applied because of the different ways that Tinto's and others' models were utilized (Grayson & Grayson, 2003), or because of inaccuracies in statistics provided by institutions (Salinas & Llanas, 2003). While many of the causes of attrition appear to be obvious, such as role-conflict for adult students, few researchers asked students what experiences promoted retention and success, a gap in the research noted by Castles (2004).

Summary of Experiences found in Attrition/Retention Research

Attrition and retention research ranges widely in focus and purpose but most attrition and retention research is focused on the traditional-aged student despite the trend of increasing enrollment of non-traditional students. Tinto's (1975, 1983, 1997) research provided the foundation for much subsequent research by others. Of significance to my study is the premise of Tinto's model which is that the retention of students is most affected by university policy and practices, not the characteristics of students. This means that university policy can be developed to support the retention of a variety of students. Retention efforts based on research results from studies of traditional students might not be effective to support adult students whose attrition is frequently attributed to the multiple role challenges they experience. While multiple role challenges are not unique to women students, women frequently experience role-conflict, role-strain, and role-contagion, particularly when one of their roles is parenting, which can lead to their dropping out. This finding relates to internalized expectations and expectations from others, that women maintain other responsibilities while students, expectations that do not seem as prevalent for male students. This finding indicates the importance of a gendered analysis when studying

attrition and retention, an analysis that is frequently lacking in the body of attrition and retention literature.

A lack of gendered analysis of women's socioeconomic positions, and how this affects women's opportunities for and experiences with university, and women's retention, is a also a significant gap in the reviewed literature. Further research specifically focused on the needs and experiences of adult women could benefit women students and the success of university retention efforts directed towards those students. The results of my study add to this literature and can assist with closing the gap about the needs and experiences of adult women.

Critical Challenges Affecting Women's Experiences with University

Financial and childcare challenges are the most frequently reported by women when returning to university (Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002; Gouthro, 2005; Home, 1998; Thomas Adams & Birchenough, 1996; Wooller & Warner, 2001). These findings relate to women's inequitable position in Canadian society and insufficient financial aid for students. Home (1996) suggested that if adult women students who are sole parents or caregivers had adequate incomes or financial support, they could avail themselves of the resources needed to successfully cope with the pressures while attending university. In order to understand the experiences of financial difficulty for women students, the socio-political situation of Canadian women and the political position of universities today need to be contextualized within provincial, federal, and global politics. The purpose of including a global to local perspective is to demonstrate how it eventually trickles down to effects on opportunities for, and experiences with, education for individual women.

Global and federal policies. Every policy, from health care to housing to taxes to education has costs, benefits, risks, and most importantly, winners and losers (Klein, 2006). Policy analysts, including Bakker (2006), Doherty-Delorme & Shaker (2004), and Yalnizyan (2005, 2008) have reported on federal and provincial policies and their effects on women's economic status and access to publicly funded higher education. Bakker (2006) advocated a gendered budget analysis for all budget decisions. Gender budgets are not separate budgets for girls and women; rather they can show the differential effects of national and local budgets and policies upon men and women. Sixty countries in the world are using some form of gender budgeting. The Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) requires an analysis of gender effects in their funding initiatives in "developing" countries. Yet no level of government in Canada has adopted a gendered budget practice despite documented and persistent economic,

political, and social inequalities between women and men in Canada (Bakker, 2006). A gendered budget analysis shows that women are differentially affected by government budget and policy decisions because women are in unequal positions in society (Baker, 1998; Bakker, 2006; Yalnizyan, 2005). Women have less economic, social, and political power, while carrying the majority of care-giving responsibilities for children and extended family, which can, at the least, limit their employment and education choices (Baker, 1998; Bakker, 2006; Yalnizyan, 2005). An example of a decision that differentially affects women is budget cutbacks leading to a freeze or reduction in the available supply of regulated and/or subsidized childcare (Bakker, 2006).

Decisions that differentially affect women are counter to Canada's participation in a number of United Nations' commitments to equity. One of these commitments, "The United Nations Beijing Action Platform," signed in 1995 by 189 countries, including Canada, outlined detailed plans for addressing women's poverty, economic security, and health, and identified the gender bias in political and economic decisions (Bar, 2006). For Canada, progress on these commitments should be relatively easy when compared with that of countries struggling with overwhelming basic survival needs or war-torn countries, yet significant inequalities in life experiences and opportunities remain between women and men in Canada (Yalnizyan, 2005). A special general assembly held by the United Nations to review progress five years after the action platform was signed determined that a lack of political will has resulted in little progress towards commitments of the plan. The same results were evident five years later, in 2005. Despite progress, in some countries, in areas of legislation and education, women remain the primary victims of poverty, violence, and HIV/AIDS (Bar, 2006). In January 2003, the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) identified that under-funding of key social supports for women was counter to Canada's signed commitments of human rights for women (Bakker, 2006).

Yalnizyan (2005), senior economist with the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, produced a report for the Canadian Feminist Alliance for International Action (FAFIA), "Canada's Commitment to Equality: A Gender Analysis of the Last Ten Federal Budgets (1995-2004)" and an analysis of the 2008 federal budget called "Budget 2008: What's In It For Women?" Both reports demonstrated Canada's persistent neglect of commitments to women's equality. Through the gendered analysis of Canada's federal budgets, Yalnizyan (2005) indicated that in both good and bad economic times, the deficit era (1995 to 1997) and the surplus era (1998

to 2004), federal priorities were in opposition to the commitments made in the Beijing Platform. Yalnizyan (2005) commented:

> Since the beginning of the surplus era, the federal government has not redressed the damage done during the deficit era, let alone advanced the agenda for action promised to the women of Canada in 1995. The way the surplus was allocated between 1998 and 2004 ruled out any serious response to the systemic problems faced by women and the most vulnerable and marginalized people in Canada. Instead, initiatives were selected that essentially redistribute resources towards those already more advantaged. (p. 6)

In the 2008 federal budget, gender inequity was acknowledged by a promise of an action plan the following year to improve women's economic and social conditions and participation in democratic life. The budget, however, provided tax cuts that favour high-income men. Women could most benefit from investments in affordable childcare, housing, and affordable university and college tuition, none of which appeared in the 2008 budget (Yalnizyan, 2008).

Part of the explanation for the failed enhancement of the position of women is that the World Trade Organization (WTO) and G7 governments, including Canada, began to move towards economic and trade policies which run counter to the commitments made by signatories of the Beijing Platform. Policies of privatization and commercialization of health, education, and welfare restrict citizen participation and democratic decision-making rights which are necessary to achieve gender equity (Bar, 2006). These policies also affect access to and experiences with post-secondary education.

Effects of federal budgets on post-secondary education. Along with women's experiences of poverty that are affected by governmental policy decisions, their access to and experiences of higher education are affected by policy decisions about the funding of post-secondary education. Examples include increased tuition and user fees for university which are purportedly off-set by tax credits, tax relief for interest payments on student loans, and the development of Registered Education Savings Plans (RESP). These tax processes are called the "fiscalization of social policy" and they mean that people must have the money "up front" and receive tax rebates later (Yalnizyan, 2005). The development of RESP rewards parents who can save for their children's education, but does not assist those who do not have sufficient income to allow for savings (Doherty-Delorme & Shaker, 2004; Yalnizyan, 2005). Saving for education can be challenging for many parents and is even more challenging for adult women who have the same hopes for their children while striving to fund their own post-secondary education. While this fiscalization

of social policy can affect all students of higher education in Canada, provincial policies also differentially affect students.

Higher education in Ontario. Doherty-Delorme and Shaker (2004) edited the fifth in a series of five analytical reports about funding and student access to Canada's universities, "Missing Pieces V: An Alternative Guide to Canadian Post-secondary Education." Contributors to this report include Spooner and Shaw, and Rosenfeld and Kaufman. This report exposed the increasing amount of private money and private interests entrenched in public educational institutions, and the ways in which this potentially undermines accountability to the public.

The concerns of Doherty-Delorme and Shaker are shared by others. Tudvier (1999) and Turk (2000) outlined the potential detrimental effects of increased corporate involvement in universities. Robertson, McGrane and Shaker (2003) specifically focused on public/private partnerships in Ontario's universities. A major concern expressed by all these authors is that with increased corporate involvement and corporate funding, higher education will become less rather than more financially accessible. With increased reliance on corporate funds, post-secondary expenditures are increasingly geared toward tax credits for tuition and education credits, and student loan interest rather adequate tax-based funding. As public funds for education are reduced, students are expected to self-fund rising tuition costs. An example is with "with respect to at least the 11 largest Ontario universities, funding decreases were not absorbed within university operating budgets, but passed on to students through increased tuition" (Robertson, McGrane & Shaker, 2003, p.31). Increased tuition is one of many challenges for university students in Ontario when compared with other provinces.

The Missing Pieces V Report (2003) also analyzed and ranked provinces according to their commitment to providing high quality, equitable, publicly accountable, and financially accessible higher education. Ontario ranked second last of the provinces because it had the second highest university tuition fees in the country, the highest additional compulsory fees, high levels of private finance, and low levels of provincial funding for higher education. Ontario's universities utilize high levels of private finance through public/private partnerships, also known as PPP's or P3's. PPP's were developed along with the federal government's shift from publicly funded social supports, to a market-based, privatized, profit-making economy. Policy analysts warn that these partnerships ultimately undermine our social welfare structure and public good because of the different mandates of public welfare versus that of private companies, which is profit (Bakker, 2006; Franklin, 2000; Harris, 2003; Murphy, 2005; Tudvier, 1999). Private sector

funding reinforces inequities between universities, between departments, and between students (Robertson, McGrane & Shaker 2003); some universities and departments are able to attract more research funding than others which reinforces inequities between institutions and departments (Polster, 2006; Robertson, McGrane & Shaker 2003; Rosenfeld & Kaufman, 2004; Spooner & Shaw, 2004). An example of this was in 1999-2000 where, "Fifty-eight percent of students at Ontario's seven best-endowed universities received almost 92% of provincial sponsored research funding, while 42% of students at the 10 smaller institutions received 8%" (Robertson, McGrane & Shaker, 2003, p.2).

One concern resulting from the influence of PPP's is that universities are being changed from publicly funded and public-serving institutions to contract centres for private sector research and development. Here, education and knowledge become commodities or stock. Private sector funders expect accountability to them, a process which can undermine universities' obligations to meet students' needs and to carry out commitments to public service (Shaker & Delorme, 2004). Aside from economic benefits, publicly funded education has long been recognized as a structural means for Canadian society to manage social problems, to fulfill common goals, and more recently, to provide means for individuals to compete in the global economy (Harris, 2003). Other benefits of higher education include that graduates: Have healthier lifestyles which reduces health care costs, a higher sense of wellbeing, more involvement in children's education and activities, are more tolerant of others, and volunteer more often. These benefits are consistent for gender, age, and social class as evidenced from two major longitudinal studies (Shaker & Delorme, 2004). Thus the financial justifications for supporting participation in higher education are well documented.

Along with changes in funding policies of universities, attitudes about who is responsible for higher education have changed, from that of a collective social responsibility to that of individual responsibility (Baker, 1998; Murphy, 2005). In order to have the public accept changes in funding and increasing tuition fees and student debt, the rhetoric about higher learning has changed. Parents and students are told they must take "some responsibility" for saving for higher learning. The language of "rights" has become the language of "merit," as in "every deserving student" or "every qualified student" should have access to a post-secondary education. The language of "reasonable debt levels" is promoted to encourage the use of personal loans to fund education (Doherty-Delorme & Shaker, 2004). Promotion and acceptance of the rhetoric of individual choice about enrollment in higher education denies systemic factors which affect

people's access to post-secondary education (Sparks, 1998). Some of this rhetoric has been challenged by the Canadian Federation of Students (CFS) which represents member university and college student unions from across Canada and lobbies federal and provincial governments for accessible post-secondary education.

The CFS reports that federal funding has increased in 2008 to bring funding back to what was available in 1994, but universities and colleges must still address large cumulative funding deficits. In February 2008, a new federal grant program of $350,000 per year was launched to help improve access and reduce student debt (Canadian Federation of Students, 2008). Benefits from receiving grants might be offset by the Ontario Premier's abandonment in 2007 of a tuition fee freeze to allow for tuition increases of up to 20% by 2010 (Canadian Federation of Students, 2008). It will be interesting to see what further changes develop in response to the federal government funding increases and student demands for reasonable tuition. For now, forcing students to finance their education through loans is downloading debt onto those who can least afford it (Shaker & Delorme, 2004).

In contrast to the above arguments, some might blame the current economic climate as the cause of inequitable access to higher education and women's poverty. Yet Shaker and Delorme (2004) state:

> The evidence and the contradictions are overwhelming in a country that has recorded an unbroken string of seven surpluses …that the depth of poverty continue[d] to deepen among those defined as poor and is more prevalent for the single elderly, the disabled, visible minorities, Aboriginal populations and recent immigrants (and in all these groups women are the most disadvantaged). Inequality has grown more rapidly since 1995 than at any other time since records have been kept. (p. 19)

Murphy (2005) adds to the analyses about Canadian women's poverty. She explained that among the contributing factors to the poverty of women, and subsequent barrier to post-secondary education, is the longstanding typical result of divorce or separation where women become financially poorer because of maintaining primary responsibility for childcare with less money. Only 19% of separated mothers receive child support from their husbands or partners (p. 28). The increased rate of marriage breakdown over the last 20 years has added to a larger welfare caseload. In the late 1990's, over 40% of all individuals receiving welfare in Canada were single mothers and their children (Murphy, 2005, p. 49). It is important to recognize these systemic factors when studying women's access to and experiences with post-secondary education to counter a populist perspective of victim-blaming around women's poverty and choices.

Summary of Critical Challenges Affecting Women's Experiences with University

The global shift to a market-based economy has been similarly followed at federal and provincial levels of government in Canada. Of significance to my study is that this economic shift has led to fiscal constraints on the university system and increased influence by private sector funders which trickles down to inequalities for women in access to, participation in, and experiences of post-secondary education (MacGregor, 2006; Mackenzie & Rosenfeld, 2002; Rosenfeld & Kaufman, 2004; Spooner & Shaw, 2004). A growing culture of autonomous individualism means a lack of recognition of the effects of systemic factors that influence how individuals access and participate within the university. Differences and disadvantages are under-recognized and under-studied, and are instead glossed over (Gouthro, 2005; Gouthro, Taber & Brazil, 2006; Wallace, 2002). Equity is closely connected to accessibility and accountability, and a great degree of contextualization is required when analyzing whether conditions are equitable (Shaker & Delorme, 2004). It is clear from the reviewed literature that equity for women has not been achieved in Canada. Global, federal, and provincial policy decisions and economic factors affect universities and students. Women students are differentially affected because they experience higher levels of poverty and reduced access to economic, social, and political power to change their socio-economic position (Bakker, 2006). Part of women's inequity relates to their traditional role in society as caregivers which often limits their ability to access programs and opportunities intended for all Canadians (Statistics Canada, 2006).

Given the above findings in the reviewed literature, a gendered analysis is important when studying women's experiences with returning to university, hence the inclusion of a gendered analysis in my study. This analysis and the findings of my study add to the literature about the systemic factors that affect women's access to and experiences with university, and their decisions about pursuing a university education. The findings of my study add to the body of literature that can be utilized for policy analysis and recommendations for political and educational policy development.

Women's Experiences of Violence, Trauma and Gender Subordination

Introduction

Given the higher reported rates of violence that women experience (Statistics Canada, 2006), it is inevitable that the university student body will comprise women survivors of violence. Thus it is important in my study to include an analysis of the rates and effects of violence against women, including an exploration of the experiences of women university students.

Rates and Effects of Violence Against Women

    Rates of violence. Statistics Canada, through the work of the Status of Women Canada, has been tracking the incidence of violence against women for the past three decades. This research has led to progress in acknowledging the severity of different kinds of violence and abuse, but the problem persists. Spousal assault severity and prevalence can now be compared over time periods of the five years prior to the 1993 Violence Against Women Survey (VAWS), and the five years prior to the 1999 and 2004 General Social Survey (GSS). There were attempts to make these surveys as similar as possible but differences in their designs make comparisons difficult. The VAWS contained a single focus on acts of male violence against women, while the GSS is a general crime victim survey with a special module of questions designed to measure the prevalence and consequences of spousal assault against both women and men (Statistics Canada, 2006, p.16).

    The 2006 Measuring Violence Against Women Statistics Canada report emphasized the prevalence of violence against women across all socio-economic classes and ethnicities.

> If you don't look for it, you won't see it. It happens in every town and city, in every neighbourhood, in every country in the world. No extended family, no ethnic or religious group, is immune. If you have children, they are playing with abused or bullied children at school. If you have colleagues at work, some will be quietly struggling with the impact of abusive relationships as they try to earn their living. The consequences—the hurt, anger, fear, violence, injuries, and exhaustion—affect all of us, over generations. (p.12)

    The 1993 Violence Against Women Survey showed that 39% of Canadian women reported having had at least one experience of sexual assault since the age of 16. These rates of sexual assault have remained constant between 1999 and 2004 (Statistics Canada, 2006, p. 24). Statistics Canada (2006) reported some stabilization in reported incidences of violence against women between 1999 and 2004, but women continued to experience high rates of sexual and physical assaults, and physical, sexual, and psychological abuse from intimate partners. Women continued to experience more violence than men, and Aboriginal women in Canada were at a significantly higher risk of all forms of violence than non-Aboriginal women. Aboriginal women reported higher rates of spousal violence, and higher rates of the most severe and potentially life-threatening forms of violence, including being beaten or choked, having had a gun or knife used against them, or being sexually assaulted (54% of Aboriginal women compared with 37% of non-Aboriginal women) (Statistics Canada, 2006, p. 65). These percentages for Aboriginal women have remained unchanged since 1999. Ethnicity, culture, age, relationship-type, and economic

status can all affect the rate and effect of violence against women and more research is required in these areas (Statistics Canada, 2006).

Women were two-and-a-half times as likely as men to report the most serious forms of violence of being beaten, choked, threatened with a gun or knife, and sexually assaulted. The estimated number of women and men who experienced these types of assaults over the five year period was 254,000 and 89,000, respectively (Statistics Canada, 2006, p. 20). Women represented 87% of victims of partner assault from 1998 to 2004 (Statistics Canada, 2006, p. 21). In 2004, three-quarters of incidents of criminal harassment reported to the police were directed at female victims and in half of these incidents women were stalked by a person with whom they had an intimate relationship (Statistics Canada, 2006, p. 27).

Women are more likely than men to be victims of the most severe forms of spousal assault, as well as spousal homicide, sexual assault, and criminal harassment. Emotional abuse includes jealous and controlling behaviour, the use of verbal bullying, and financial abuse, and such behaviour is a stronger indicator of physical violence towards women in relationships than alcohol use, income, or education (Statistics Canada, 2006). Included in the report is a caution that the statistical indicators are limited because victims often avoid reporting their experiences of violence, partly because of the personal nature of these experiences.

Effects of violence. Measuring the effects of violence against women is also difficult given the range of potential psychological and physical effects which differ by individual women. It is difficult to measure the societal costs of providing services to victims. One incident of physical or sexual assault can be a life-shattering experience with negative effects on a victim's physical and emotional health. Children living in a home where violence occurs can experience long-term effects and their learned behaviours of violence can be continued over generations. Female victims of spousal assault often described the psychological effects of the violence as: being upset and confused; suffering lowered self-esteem; suffering depression and anxiety attacks; suffering shame and guilt; suffering sleep problems; and fearing for themselves and their children (Statistics Canada, 2006).

Male victims of spousal assault also reported negative psychological consequences but they were more likely than women to say the experience had little or no effect on them (30% of male victims compared with 6% of females) (Statistics Canada, 2006, p. 32). There are other important differences between the experiences of violence of men and boys when compared to those of women and girls. Men are more likely to be injured by strangers in a public or social

venue while women are more likely to experience violence from intimate partners in their own homes. Women are at greater risk of sexual violence and the more pervasive fear of violence experienced by women can prevent them from participating as full citizens in their communities.

Violence, poverty, and gender inequity are inextricably linked. Women experiencing violence from intimate partners are sometimes forced to flee their homes with their children, which can result in unstable living situations and economic insecurity. Sixty-eight percent of all single mothers reported experiencing violence in previous marriages and common-law unions (Statistics Canada, 2006, p. 34). As described in the previous section of this literature review, the larger percentage of welfare recipients is single mothers and their children because of a lack of financial support from ex-partners (Murphy, 2005). The other link between poverty and violence is that experiencing violence at any age can affect mental health and psycho-social functioning, which can affect learning, education success, and employment opportunities.

An analysis of community interventions for child protection in Canada and the United States showed that women living in violent relationships frequently find it difficult to extricate themselves for many reasons (Jaffe, Baker, & Cunningham, 2004). Women with young children face the most challenges when trying to leave abusive relationships. Often, a lack of access to affordable housing and lack of financial support lead women to stay with abusive partners rather than live in poverty. Unwillingness to deprive children of a two-parent home can be a deterrent to women leaving. Promises of change on the part of the abuser cause women to hope for the end of violence, so they remain in the relationships. Threats of death by abusive partners if women try to leave, frequently force women to stay in the relationships (Jaffe, Baker, & Cunningham, 2004).

These are not idle threats. The Office of the Chief Coroner in Ontario produces an annual report about domestic violence-related deaths in Ontario. This report provides an analysis of factors that lead to the deaths and provides recommendations for improvement to agencies working with victims of domestic violence to help prevent violence and further deaths. Between the years 2002-2006, 121 women and 20 children were murdered by 46 men in Ontario in domestic violence incidences (Office of the Chief Coroner, 2008, p.5). Leaving an abusive partner does not guarantee safety for women: "The majority of domestic homicides occur in a residence, with most occurring in the couple's shared residence, or in the residence of the victim, if separated" (Office of the Chief Coroner, 2008, p. 8). Fear from these threats greatly affects women and children's lives, and frequently these effects are demonstrated in experiences of education and learning (Horsman, 1999).

Effects of violence, trauma, or gender subordination on women's experiences of higher education. Given the rates and effects of violence against girls and women, it is inevitable that educators will work with survivors. Some of the sequelae from experiencing violence and trauma include women being exhausted from dealing with flashbacks, nightmares, disrupted sleep, and depression (Horsman, 1999). Robson, Ryan, and Veltman (1997) used the term co-dependency to describe some of the sequelae of childhood experiences of alcohol abuse, sexual and physical abuse, emotional neglect, violence, and divorce. As a result of learned behaviour and coping patterns, students from families with histories of violence might find it difficult to adjust to and be successful in a higher education setting. For most participants in the study of Robson, Ryan, and Veltman (1997), self-esteem and self-confidence were low as they entered the university. As survivors, many judged themselves harshly and felt that they had to prove themselves to everyone around them while simultaneously feeling tremendous self-doubt and lack of self-confidence in their abilities as students. Their inability to meet internalized expectations to perfectly perform the roles of student, mother, and wife led to further self-doubt for some of the women. Struggles with establishing a separate identity from the family and/or the role of caregiver, and with balancing their own needs with those of family members were common. This challenge appeared to be ongoing as family demands and school requirements changed. Many of the women were trying to break a pattern of pleasing others that they had adopted as a coping mechanism in dysfunctional settings. For example, some had taken courses or chosen majors that pleased family members, professors, or advisors, but were not what they wanted. Some of the women described difficulty in deciding what were appropriate behaviours in the university setting, such as not knowing when to challenge or comply with restrictions or demands from the university (Robson, Ryan & Veltman, 1997).

In addition to managing post-trauma reactions, women can continue to experience violence and gender subordination on campus which further adds to their challenges. Dekeseredy and Schwartz (1998) produced a report, *Woman Abuse on Campus: Results from the Canadian National Survey* which described results from a large scale study of the rates of violence and gender subordination experienced by female students while attending university. While the focus of their research was primarily on traditional-aged women students, their analysis has relevance to women of all ages. These researchers discussed how the hidden curriculum in education teaches such things as racism and sexism and how these lessons perpetuate the abuse of women in heterosexual relationships (p.2). Violence and sexist statements experienced by female students

fostered an atmosphere of fear and insecurity for women and served as a powerful means of social control for women students (see also Horsman, 1999). In Dekeseredy and Schwartz's (1998) study, all the reported sexual assaults were committed by a known fellow student (p.3; see also Grace & Gouthro, 2000). Inadequate attention to safety and security issues for women students in universities were described in Johnston's (1998) study conducted at York University, Ontario, Canada, where women reported that they often had to wait up to 45 minutes for the campus safety escort service, and that security patrols were too infrequent.

Along with insecurity about physical safety, Dekeseredy and Schwartz (1998) also found that women's unequal status in the paid workforce and in cohabiting/marital relationships was similar to the inequality women experienced on campus. They found the following:

> A large empirical literature base that shows that females are less valued by many professors, are given less attention in lecture halls and seminars, and their experiences and achievements are largely left out of curriculum material or are treated in a sexist fashion, along with the hidden curriculum that men and women are taught. (Dekeseredy and Schwartz 1998, p.32)

Experiences of gender subordination were also exacerbated by past experiences of educational failure for working class students in the study of Reay (2001). These students then spent energy guarding against a fear of being made to feel inferior. Their experiences of earlier academic failure permeated their decision-making and they were continually negotiating a balance between emotional safety, risk, and challenge. For most of these students, feeling a sense of emotional safety was their main priority, which is understandable given the often painful schooling many of them had experienced. Fitting in and feeling happy were particularly important goals for these students (Reay, 2001).

The primary focus of Horsman's (1999) work was about the effects of violence and trauma on adult literacy learners, and her findings can extend to girls' experiences of violence and learning, and to other educational settings for adult women survivors. Horsman (1999) identified challenges to learning for survivors including students seeking to escape violent relationships often finding the violence escalated when they began to attend school. Survivors who are faced with learning difficulties as a result of their experiences of violence can find a lack of support or empathy by society and learning institutions. Horsman (1999) wrote:

> In societies where literacy is highly valued and part of schooling, it is easy to frame the learner as the problem, with a deficit of skills. In the deficit model, only the individual learner needs to change, to correct their deficits, thus society can be left unaltered. (p. 30)

Another societal response to violence is that for those who speak publicly about the experiences of violence, they risk their own credibility and can attract the stigma that attaches to victims (Herman, 1992; Horsman, 1999). One repercussion from this stigma is that women will remain silent about their own experiences of violence and/or their knowledge about violence against other women in order to fit in.

Women students have sometimes found that fitting in was made more difficult by social and educational policy. Naples (2003) collected data from in-depth interviews, focus groups and ongoing contact with 17 older women in higher education. Women discussed with her the problems they were having in classes, with public assistance, with their children, and ex-husbands. The women described gaps between daily life activities and individual needs that conflicted or contrasted with the demands of welfare and higher education policy and practices. For example, the women criticized the requirement that they show proof of attendance in class by having instructors sign a daily attendance sheet in order to receive their social welfare benefits, a practice which was demeaning to the women.

These experiences of women, and the gap in available policies to support women survivors, has been attributed to the patriarchal structure of adult education which does not always lead to a valuing of women's experiences, voices, expertise, and knowledge (Morrish & Buchanan, 2001). Dekeseredy and Schwartz (1998) concluded that "too many university and community college administrators trivialize or ignore woman abuse on campuses and their immediate surroundings," (p. 125) and "administrators must develop the will to take action against women abuse" (p.137). As older women enroll in university, these authors recommend that those who conduct research and provide services on campus should be aware that women might have experienced the most severe violence long before their attendance at university (Dekeseredy and Schwartz, 1998, 90).

Recommendations

Given the effects of poverty, violence and trauma on women's learning and access to education, poverty, health concerns, and violence in the lives of women must be addressed by universities in order to facilitate empowerment for women through adult education at these institutions. Recommendations include improved awareness on the part of university staff about the systemic nature, frequency, and effects of violence, poverty and other inequities women experience, particularly for women who are seeking to escape violent relationships and who might find that the violence escalates when they begin to attend school (Horsman, 1999).

Examples of policies for addressing the systemic nature of violence include making violence visible at all levels of the education system, providing visible referral information for shelters, hotlines, presentations, and anti-violence posters showing men and women of different ethnicities and abilities (Horsman, 1999). It is helpful when educators can create a safe space for the telling of individual's experiences of trauma while also encouraging means to understand these experiences in ways which support broad social change (Horsman, 1999). For example, "the vast majority of people believe that poverty is a voluntary condition" (Horsman, 1999, p. 37), a myth and stereotype which needs challenging. Similarly, a common refrain is that women who stay with abusive men deserve the abuse, a naïve and simplistic response.

It is important that the recognition of potential effects of trauma on women's learning and participation as students does not mean understanding survivors through a deficit or "sickness" model, a view which sometimes leads to suggestions that a woman should heal first before returning to school. This could cause a woman to wait her whole life (Horsman, 1999). Instead, education could be part of a woman's healing, a searching for understanding of abuse and violence. Higher education might offer a particularly important means for women to challenge limiting self-perceptions and to link gender subordination to the collective experiences of women (Morrish & Buchanan, 2001). It is important that the social, economic and political dimensions of sexism be taught and addressed in higher education which can also support women to understand their experiences from a systemic view to reduce self-blame (Hayes & Flannery, 1997; Horsman, 1999; Leonard, 1994; Conrad, 2001; Morrish & Buchanan, 2001). Naples (2003) found that older women in higher education experienced a growth in self-esteem and personal power which enhanced their resistance to, and critique of, patriarchal strategies embodied in welfare and educational policy.

Summary of Women's Experiences of Violence, Trauma, and Gender Subordination

Of significance to my study is that the findings of the reviewed literature demonstrate the importance of educational policy to recognize the needs of women survivors of violence, trauma, or gender subordination in their pursuit of higher education. Educational policy should address the continued inequities of violence and poverty, where statistically women are over-represented, and the often persistent recurrent repercussions of these traumas. Women's experiences of violence can affect their self-esteem, health, learning, and decisions about education, and are linked with poverty which also affects their choices about and experiences with education.

Women's Experiences of Support in Education

Introduction

The diversity in students indicates that supports which are beneficial for one woman might not help another (Home, 1998; Kember, Lai, Murphy, Siaw, & Yuen, 1999). Home's (1992) study of adult Canadian women's experiences of university provided recommendations for universities based on what the women in her studies experienced as supportive to their retention as students. University policies ranged from removing some constraints on requirements for adult participation, to separate programs for adults, to integrating adaptations into regular programs. Flexible schedules, admission and administrative procedures, and student services geared to the needs of adults were also supportive. Faculty demonstrated helpfulness by understanding the needs of multiple role adult students, respecting the experience of adults, offering content related to real life, and ensuring student participation, all of which were important to enhancing the satisfaction of some women (Home, 1992).

Ironically, Home's (1992) research found that services designed to help women students develop study skills, handle stress, and manage time were often not accessible to these students who were too overloaded with responsibilities to participate, or they were held at times unavailable to the women. Grace and Gouthro (2000) recommended that those who develop policy and design programs in universities should understand that commitment is intricate and has diverse meanings for different women engaged in graduate education; their recommendations could equally apply to undergraduate adult women students. They found that commitment to education for the women in their study involved the renegotiation of family responsibilities, struggles to attain financial support, and organizing childcare, along with the confrontation of dispositional barriers of low self-esteem, low self-confidence, and views that family life experience was inferior to topics discussed in university. University policy and staff can therefore support women students by reflecting a valuing of mothering, by acknowledging that women have other obligations, by offering understanding and flexibility to enable the learning process, and by supporting means to overcome dispositional barriers (Grace & Gouthro, 2000).

These recommendations of Grace and Gouthro (2000) are mirrored by Robson, Ryan, and Veltman (1997) who recommended that:

> Faculty and professional staff need to actively advocate for continual program improvement and development as the needs of students change. Administrators, faculty, and staff responsible for student development, need to be tolerant of fluctuating participation in student development activities and maintain support for small numbers of participating students. (p. 93)

Many of the policy recommendations described by Grace and Gouthro (2000), Home (1992), Horsman (1999), and Robson, Ryan, and Veltman (1997) as being supportive to women could be understood as being based in an ethic of care, meaning that attention is paid to the individual needs of women. Prior to discussing an ethic of care, a brief review of its meaning is given. This is followed with suggestions as to why policy development influenced by an ethic of care could be supportive to women in their return to education.

A Brief Overview of an Ethic of Care

Burton and Dunn (2005) noted that much of the discussion of ethics in the last two centuries has focused on ethics based on moral principles which should be followed. These principles are meant to be absolute and incontrovertible. When forced to make an ethical decision, one must decide what so-called universal moral principle to apply to that situation. In contrast to decision-making based on moral principles, the caring perspective is based on understanding the particular context of a situation, and developing a decision in response to that context. Principles can be guides, but they cannot be hard-and-fast rules (Burton & Dunn, 2005).

Of particular relevance to my study is Gilligan's (1982) influential theorizing about gender and an ethic of care. She developed a theory of moral development because of concerns that girls and women had been subsumed in psychological theory and theories of human development. She looked at the interaction between experience and thought, conceptions of self and morality, and experiences of conflict and choice, to help understand moral development. After research with women, Gilligan developed the idea of moral development based in an ethic of care, in contrast to her predecessor Kohlberg's focus on rational cognitive thinking. For example, rather than turning to rights or rules for moral decision-making, which the boys did in Kohlberg's research, Gilligan found that girls tended to consider relationships, responsibility, and responding to need, or what can be summarized as an ethic of care, in their moral decision-making. From this research, Gilligan developed her thesis that women often have a different psychological development from that which had been described in the psychological literature to date. She proposed that rights and care are complementary and that women and men are capable of both, even if they often go through different developmental pathways to get there (Gilligan, 1982).

Gilligan explained that morality as fairness is tied to the understanding of rights and rules, while morality based in care means an understanding of responsibility and relationships. Thus while Kohlberg's subjects worried about people interfering with each other's rights, Gilligan's

subjects worried about not helping others. A view of the world from a caring perspective thus focuses on relationships and human connection, rather than a system of rules. Included in this is an ethic of responsibility that recognizes the interconnection among people so that the stranger is still another person of a group to which you are connected by virtue of being another person. "The ideal of care is thus an activity of relationship, of seeing and responding to need, taking care of the world by sustaining the web so that no one is left alone" (Gilligan, 1982, p. 62). While an ethic of rights or justice is based on a notion of equality where everyone should be treated the same, an ethic of care rests on non-violence, or that no one should be hurt (Gilligan, 1982). Gilligan's work has been considered groundbreaking and has also provoked much controversy.

Criticism of Gilligan's work. McLaughlin (2003) noted that few researchers have been able to replicate Gilligan's findings; hence her research and methodology have been questioned. As well, Gilligan's theory of moral development was based on the responses of white, middle-class, heterosexual, women, thus diversity was not represented. Feminists have also expressed concern that if women are seen as the "natural" carers, this might perpetuate their devalued private sphere care-giving roles (McLaughlin, 2003). Gordon (1996) expressed concern that when an ethic of care is individually focused, it does not address larger systemic issues. Finally, Gilligan's model of caring is based on relationships but does not explain how we make moral decisions about people unknown to us, typically the majority of the people in the world (Gordon, 1996). McLaughlin (2003) countered this interpretation, indicating that Gilligan said that an ethic of care condemns exploitation and hurt, which can include those unknown to us.

Other criticism of Gilligan's work includes that feminism must understand care from a political perspective to make care a social practice rather than a dichotomy between care-giver and care-recipient. Caring should not be dependent upon individually caring people, rather a systemic understanding of caring recognizes that in different settings and different times, all humans move between the role of care-giver and care-recipient, and all humans are at times vulnerable and dependent (McLaughlin, 2003; Tronto, 1998). Of relevance to my study, care as a social practice could begin with policies that reflect an individualized equitable response to people's needs at the higher education level.

Care in Higher Education

Noddings (1999) is well known for her promotion of caring as a consciously adopted moral basis for teaching. She described caring as responding with care when the need arises, which also models or shows others how to care. Dialogue is an important part of caring and

involves a search for understanding and empathy to help inform decisions under consideration. In other words the outcome is not determined prior to dialogue (Burton & Dunn, 2005; Noddings, 1999). In contrast to an ethic of care, an ethic of justice involves the idea of rights and impartiality. Predominant in today's theory of justice is the question of who has a right to what, and often times justice is seen as fairness. People have rights, people are to be regarded as individuals, everyone should have a fair chance, and if the rules cannot remove inequalities, they should at least favour the most disadvantaged. On the surface this sounds unproblematic. Yet Noddings argued that in order to enact justice and fairness, people must be capable of rationality and disinterest, and adopt this stance at the beginning of their deliberations. In order to enact justice and fairness, people must be able to disregard emotions and feelings, and limit themselves to the facts. This stance contrasts with the empathy involved in an ethic of care.

An ethic of rights and justice also emphasizes individual autonomy and value neutrality which makes it difficult to respond to individual differential needs, and can be seen as a justification of indifference and unconcern (Bates, 2005; Gaskell, McLaren, & Novogrodsky, 1989). Applying these ideas to my study, with an ethic of justice, unique needs of adult women might not be considered. Instead consideration would be given to needs that fall within a larger collective of a generic student body, which means the "traditional" student. While there have been many advantages and benefits brought to society with justice ethics, many argue that it is not enough and that an ethic of care should accompany an ethic of justice (Blizek, 1999; Noddings, 1999; Strike, 1999).

Burton and Dunn (2005) explained that caring cannot be captured in the idea of universalized decision-making rules and principles. Rather, caring centres on allowing for an understanding of the uniqueness of individuals and their situations. Care policies are based on an underlying moral sensitivity where context, personal relationships, and individuals are important, instead of detachment from these contexts (Burton & Dunn, 2005). In Waggoner and Goldman's (2005) discussion of university policy development to support student retention, they cite the importance of a climate of care. Universities can define their policies and rhetoric to reflect a caring and student-friendly campus environment, which has been shown to positively affect student retention (Waggoner & Goldman, 2005).

Thus educational policy can lead to or deter care-empowering practices (Campbell, 2002). An example of a care-empowering practice is the inclusion of the full range of stakeholders in educational policy development which includes diverse women and their life

experiences. To develop policy based on an ethic of care, asking people what they need and assessing the effectiveness of the proposed policies on the population affected are required (Campbell, 2002). Yet, frequently this reflexivity and the voice of students are not considered in research about post-secondary education (Hermanowicz, 2004; Noddings 1999). Along with students, professors' voice and experience should be considered in policy development.

Acker and Feuerverger (1996), Bagihole, (1994), Caplan (1992), and Davies, Lubelska, and Quinn (1994) have studied the experiences of women university professors and have discussed some of the challenges of providing care in higher education. Acker and Feuerverger (1996), Gaskell, McLaren, and Novogrodsky (1989) and Strike (1999) all note that some caring is evident in adult education especially at the graduate level where students seek a mentoring relationship with a professor. At all levels of schooling, it is generally expected that teachers, especially women teachers, will care about their students, and women academics frequently take the nurturing of students seriously, supporting students with personal and academic issues in ways that exemplify an individualized ethic of care. The importance of mentoring and network development to the experience of women is significant at all levels of academia (Davies, Lubelska, & Quinn, 1994). Caplan (1992) voices a word of caution, however; when it comes to caring, women academics can be in a double-bind. If they do any nurturing or caretaking of colleagues, other staff, or students, it can be either ignored, or when acknowledged, seen as lacking in professionalism. At the same time, a lack of nurturing behaviour can be negatively interpreted as women being cold (Caplan, 1992). Given these challenges to providing care in higher education, one might wonder about the possibility of doing so. Yet there is evidence of educational programs that are based in an ethic of care approach.

Care-based Supports for Women

A program in Australia to enhance women's enrollment and success, "Women into Science and Technology" (Woller & Warner, 2001), demonstrated an effective institutionalized response to women's needs that exemplifies an ethic of care approach. The first step of the program was to identify barriers to women's enrollment. Strategies to overcome these barriers included making computers and internet access available, having women participate in consciousness-raising to overcome their socialization that they "cannot do" science, math and computing, and having women exert control by ensuring flexibility at all levels of progress. The flexibility of the program meant that students could enroll at any time of the year, they worked at their own pace with no assignment or course completion deadlines, and they could not fail as they

could continue to re-submit assignments until the required standard was met. There were no prerequisites, and phone tutorials and counseling were readily available. Personal support contact lists were provided to overcome lack of encouragement by family and friends. Success stories include growth from an initial enrollment of 20 students in 1989, to 2000 students in the year 2000, and two students who initially doubted their abilities at the undergraduate level enrolled in post-graduate science courses (Wooler & Warner, 2001, p. 204). The women's success was attributed to enhanced self-esteem through reassessing their abilities and doubts about themselves, and the women critically examining their own positions within society. In order for this program to be successful, awareness of the needs of women was required.

The WIST program required knowledge of which students were more vulnerable and which supports were needed for women. In contrast, an example of a Canadian university's lack of knowledge of students needs was evident for Home (1998). When she began her research, none of the 17 programs chosen for sampling could identify which women had multiple roles (p. 87). The WIST example could be used as a model to implement assessment of, and developing supports in response to, women's needs.

Women survivors gave detailed feedback about campus services and support systems that they felt were, or could have been, beneficial to them in the study of Robson, Ryan, and Veltman (1997). Their feedback provides tangible examples of what could develop from an ethic of care approach to meeting the needs of women survivors. These women made several recommendations including the need for assistance from advisors, faculty, and professional staff, upon enrollment, and throughout their academic careers, in identifying choices available to them and opportunities to explore options and how choices could affect their lives. The women thought that access to information about supports and services in areas of admissions, orientation, registration, and academic advising that described available courses, methods of instruction, and available resources would have been helpful. Also suggested was the opportunity to explore courses and majors before declaring a major in order to find an appropriate fit between an emerging identity and a career interest. A personalized academic advising process to help tailor academic schedules to fit their lifestyles, and help determine realistic planning with other responsibilities such as work and families would have assisted some of the women. Finally, peer advising, especially from "someone who has been through it," was a recurrent theme and one that was also reported as important to women by Home (1992) and Carney-Crompton and Tan (2002).

The women in the study of Robson, Ryan, and Veltman (1997) also suggested ongoing seminars designed to address particular concerns of survivors such as classes designed to teach adaptive/transitional skills, study and time/management skills, handling stress, and balancing personal/family needs; as well, most of the women agreed that professional or peer counseling was essential to address personal issues. Several of the students advocated peer groups to help meet the social needs of adult students, opportunities to get to know one another and to develop informal support systems. Still, some women said they would not have attended social events because of other commitments (Robson, Ryan & Veltman, 1997). This was similar to Home's (1992) finding that women were often too busy to access support services, or they were held at times that did now allow women to attend due to other commitments.

The women in Robson, Ryan, and Veltman's (1997) study praised the efforts of advisors, instructors, and others who took time to listen and respond to their individual concerns. Some women felt faculty, professional staff, and office staff were open, friendly, and helpful and that a supportive attitude was important to them. An example of a caring and supportive attitude was expressed by one student who was so anxious over an assignment that she could not get started. "She said that an instructor told her to relax and that she would be good at the task. She wondered if he knew anything about co-dependency and was grateful for his understanding and patience" (Robson, Ryan & Veltman, 1997, p. 89). Overall the women made more suggestions for improvement or expansion of services for survivors than feedback indicative of satisfaction with available programs and resources. The many suggestions for institutionalized supports for adult women students, particularly those who have experienced trauma and resultant co-dependency characteristics, can be effectively summarized as based in an "ethic of care [that] encourages close and respectful attention to students' lived realities, including their race, ethnicity, language, family and social class, as well as their interpretations of their present, past, and likely future circumstances" (Bates, 2005, p. 36).

In order to develop such an ethic of care, universities must have means to be cognizant of their students' needs and to develop supportive mechanisms that can respond to the needs of individuals. To have a systematic effect, an ethic of care based on responsiveness, not abstract principles of rights should be formalized as a part of an institutional plan (Bagihole, 1994). Yet universities' organization around an ethic of rights rather than an ethic of care, and around a discourse of economic and global competition, might deter an ethic of care approach; indeed establishing policies based on an ethic of care in the midst of powerful economic priorities might

seem difficult (Gaskell, McLaren, and Novogrodsky, 1989; Gouthro, Taber, & Brazil, 2006; Harris, 2003; Wallace, 2002). Yet, this might be all the more reason for developing such care-based policy because as described earlier in this literature review, when policy is shaped primarily by market forces, women are frequently disadvantaged. An emphasis on competition and individualism excludes systemic inequalities that need to be addressed for more equitable learning opportunities (Gouthro, 2005; Wallace, 2002). Benner and Gordon (1996) concurred and stated that:

> In a highly individualistic society, such as a university community, the importance of caring is denied while paradoxically this kind of society actually needs highly developed caring practices. For example, as we see ourselves as separate and unique individuals we require caring practices to show us how to engage in meaningful, genuine human responses. (p. 47)

The university community as described by Benner and Gordon (1996) could be considered a microcosm of the larger society where caring is denied despite its need. The forces of the larger society inevitably affect conditions of its smaller communities. Thus without policy development to support an ethic of care, it seems unlikely that an institutionalized practice of an ethic of care will occur in the university community.

Summary of Women's Experiences of Supports

Of significance to my study is the acknowledgement in the reviewed literature that care is of particular importance for disenfranchised women who might choose to attend university to escape marginalized positions and move past negative life and educational experiences. Unlike younger traditional students, adult women students might be struggling to discover more about themselves, what they can achieve, and of what they are capable (Parr, 2000; Reay, 2001). It is easy for women who have past experiences of trauma to be triggered by insensitive educators and policies. Thus it is important for policy developers to hear from these women in particular to both develop policy and assess the effectiveness of such policies (Campbell, 2002). Underlying such an ethic of care approach is the understanding of all people as interdependent, having rights to be part of, and receive just forms of care, and citizenship that values empathy and care responsibilities (McLaughlin, 2003).

Adult Women's Learning

Introduction

Descriptions of women's experiences of university education were also found in literature about adult women's learning. Some research indicated a belief in different learning styles and

needs for adults in comparison with children (Brown, 2002; Donaldson, 1999; Graham & Donaldson, 1999; Merriam, 2001; Schapiro, 2003). Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1986), English, (2005), and Gaskell, McLaren, & Novogrodsky (1989) all argued that women's learning is unique from men's. The most common theme found in the literature is that learning is complex, multidimensional, and linked with the previous experiences of learners (Brown, 2002), and that adult learning is unique from children's learning.

Adult Learning. Adult learning is frequently described as andragogy, self-directed learning, transformative learning, or a combination of all three. These descriptions reflect the interest of adult educators in differentiating adult learning from children's learning, and a desire to professionalize the field of adult education (Merriam, 2001). Adult learning involves more than obtaining and storing information. Instead, adult learning helps to make sense of our lives through absorbing, imagining, intuiting, critical reflection, and learning informally with others (Brown, 2002; Merriam, 2001). Anecdotal reports from adult learners attest to the transformative power of education, where people can be profoundly changed (Baumgartner, 2001; Dirxk, Merizow & Cranton, 2006; Merriam, 2001).

At the Sixth International Transformative Learning Conference held at Michigan State University in 2005, a session titled, "Whole Group Learning: Integration of Theories," took place in which Dirkx and Mezirow engaged in a dialogue facilitated by Cranton. This dialogue was continued by email and shared with readers of the *Journal of Transformative Education.* The dialogue began when Cranton asked Mezirow and Dirkx to provide brief overviews of their perspectives on transformative learning theory (Dirxk, Merizow, & Cranton, 2006).

Merizow described the process of transformative learning as:

> a rational process of learning within awareness which is a metacognitive application of critical thinking that transforms an acquired *frame of reference*—a mind-set or worldview of orienting assumptions and expectations involving values, beliefs, and concepts—by assessing its epistemic assumptions. This process makes frames of reference more inclusive, discriminating, open, reflective, and emotionally able to change. Frames with these qualities generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or justified to guide action. (p.124)

Dirkx said:

> The transformative in transformative learning means a "kind of deep learning that challenges existing, taken-for-granted assumptions, notions, and meanings of what learning is about. My interests revolve around a kind of learning that integrates our experiences of the outer world, including the experiences of texts and subject matter, with the experience of our inner worlds. (p.125)

Thus, a common theme amongst adult learning theorists is that the social context of adult learners is important. In essence, learning is not something separate from other settings, but takes place while people are involved in social, family, work, and school settings. Social interaction, observations of others, role-modeling and mentoring are all important to the learning of adults (Brown, 2002). By examining social context we can also see how variables such as race, class, gender, power, oppression, and conceptions of knowledge and truth, shape the context and the subsequent learning which occurs (Merriam, 2001). Adult student learning is enhanced by a focus on the broader community and adults' various other life roles. Thus educators and administrators could design classes to enhance learning with action research in real world settings, address real world problems or practices associated with work or family life, provide opportunities for peer teaching, and create learning which will benefit the community (Donaldson, 1999; Graham & Donaldson, 1999). Adult students and faculty have expressed a need for more interactive and collegial modes of learning and teaching (Schapiro, 2003).

A teacher-learner relationship of trust and caring is vital to creating the right conditions for a transformative learning experience. New ideas might threaten the world view of adult students and adult educators might be unprepared to help them adjust. Sensitivity around power dynamics is required (Baumgartner, 2001). For example adult students who have been in positions of authority before returning to school might be less tolerant of the position traditionally occupied by students in the university hierarchy (Anderson & Miezitis, 1999). Conversely, older students between the ages of sixty-six and seventy-six can see professors as authority figures and might be reluctant to question professors' values (Baumgartner, 2001).

It is apparent from the reviewed literature that adult learning is facilitated through means which may differ from those used for the education of children. Yet the assumption that certain factors such as motivation, self-directed learning, and having had more and deeper life experiences, as unique to adult learners, is critiqued by Merriam (2001). She pointed out that some adults are highly dependent on a teacher for structure, while some children are independent, self-directed learners. Rather than being motivated by internal reasons, adults might be learning from external pressures such as a need to keep a job. Children might be motivated by curiosity or the pleasure of learning. While adults might have more life experiences than children, this does not mean those experiences are positive for learning, since some life experiences can be barriers to learning. Finally some children might have a broad range of experiences that can be richer than some adults (Merriam, 2001). Along with differentiation between children and adults' learning,

some authors (Gaskell, McLaren, & Novogrodsky, 1989; Grace & Gouthro, 2000) argued that women's learning is unique from men's.

Women's learning. Gaskell, McLaren, and Novogrodsky (1989) argued that women's learning is different from that of men where "women are more likely to learn in ways that explore and relate their experience to the curriculum" (p. 50). Critiques by women of adult education identify the need to value women's experiences, voices, expertise, and knowledge as learners, teachers, and leaders (Morrish & Buchanan, 2001). This requires that universities recognize the value of women's knowledge production and multi-perspective ways of knowing, including knowledge associated with lived and learned experiences in the home and through mothering and care-giving (Grace & Gouthro, 2000).

Hayes (2001) and Hayes and Flannery (1995 and 1997) have written about the alleged uniqueness of women's learning. Hayes (2001) noted that the possibility of women having unique learning styles has been a topic of discussion for scholars, educators, and women for centuries. Philosophers such as Plato and Rousseau questioned whether women could learn at all, let alone be capable of the supposed rational thought required for higher education. Women's success at all levels of education has challenged these ideas (Hayes, 2001).

Hayes (2001) criticized some of the conclusions drawn about women's learning as overgeneralizations which do not take into consideration the diversity among women learners. For example, women's learning has been called collaborative and empathetic as compared to men's learning which has been called competitive and individualistic. Hayes (2001) stated that:

> Some of the generalizations stem from theories of the importance of relationships to women's lives as espoused by Gilligan (1982), and psychologist Jean Baker Miller (1986), along with the concept of connected knowing introduced by Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule, 1986, authors of "Women's Ways of Knowing," which became one of the more influential publications about women's learning in the last two decades. (p. 37)

These theories led to recommendations for education designed for women to include a focus on collaboration, support, and affiliation. Connected knowing was contrasted with "separate knowing," characterized by taking a more adversarial position towards new ideas, and looking for flaws in logic and reasoning (Hayes, 2001).

Hayes and Flannery (1995) argued that the research on adult women's distinctive learning is incomplete and inconclusive. Certainly many similarities between descriptions of adult learning in general and women's learning were found in the reviewed literature. This lack of complete analysis might relate to a general lack of analysis around gender, race, and class. Hayes

(2001) does not deny the importance of relationships to women, given women's traditional roles as caretakers in the home and their concentration in caretaking roles in the workplace, such as teaching and nursing, and how they resonate with the experience of many women. Hayes' (2001) critique is that when "relationship" is interpreted in simplistic terms, such as whether women learn best in groups or alone, or that because of the importance of relationships, women's learning is subjective and intuitive; the implication could be that women are not, or cannot be, competitive, autonomous, or self-directed.

Also, associating women's learning with intuition can reinforce the idea that women are not well-suited for logical, objective, rational thought. It can support a view that women's learning is innate and fixed without regard for women's different life situations (Hayes, 2001). Instead, Hayes (2001) suggests that we examine how gender intersects with other variables to influence the learning styles of women. For example, since women have had less power than men, as a means of survival they might have become more attuned to identifying and understanding the feelings and perspectives of others. These characteristics have been attributed to the "connected" learning of women. Hayes (2001) described an example:

> Several of my African American women colleagues feel that conflict and strong emotions are essential for a meaningful learning experience. Their beliefs seem to reflect a cultural upbringing in which such conflict reflected an authentic engagement with the topic and with other people. In contrast, many of my white female colleagues (including myself) are very uncomfortable with such strong emotions in the classroom, undoubtedly a link to a different cultural proscription against overt conflict. (p.41)

It is this kind of analysis which might provide more insight into women experiences of learning. In addition, analysis of the effects of trauma, violence, and poverty on women's learning is important as noted previously.

Summary of Women's Learning

Women's learning has been described in literature about adult learning. Frequently viewed as distinct from children's learning, adult learning is seen as connected to life experiences, critical reflection, and can be powerfully transformative to beliefs and values. Given that my study is exclusive to women's experience, the reviewed literature is significant in that it indicates that women's learning has also been described as distinct from men's. This theory is critiqued as insufficiently developed and is a theory that could be assisted by inclusion of a gendered analysis of women's experiences of learning.

Healing

Healing from violence or trauma cannot be generalized because different people heal in

different ways but generally, to fully heal, survivors require a clear understanding of what happened to them (Maltz, 1991, p. xviii; p. 8). The core experiences of psychological trauma are disempowerment and disconnection from others. Healing is therefore based upon empowerment of the survivor and the creating of new connections. Recovery cannot occur in isolation but only in the context of relationships. "The survivor recreates the psychological faculties that were damaged or deformed by the traumatic experience including basic capacities for trust, autonomy, initiative, competence, identity, and intimacy. The first principle is empowerment; she must be the author of her own healing" (Herman, 1997, p. 133). The fundamental stages of healing are "establishing safety, reconstructing the trauma history, and restoring the connection between survivors and their community" (Herman, 1997, p. 3). Some women may use therapy for this and other women may use other means (Herman, 1997).

Summary of the Literature Review

From this literature review, one can see that the return of adult women to education is described in research from a variety of perspectives, including analysis of access, experiences, attrition, retention, multiple roles, role-conflicts, and learning. Adult women have a variety of motivations for returning to university including personal goals of self-development, enhancing employment opportunity, escaping violence, realizing a long-desired goal, to challenge assumed gendered roles, and to understand experiences of violence. Only Aboriginal women were noted in the literature as using higher education today as a vehicle to benefit the socio-economic position of all their people. More research analyzing factors of race and class and women's motivations for attending university is necessary.

This review of the literature on attrition/retention and adult education showed that while gender might be a variable in research, the explanations for variances by gender were not sufficiently provided. This leaves gaps including a lack of attention to factors of race, class, culture, and the diversity of women's experiences (Morrish & Buchanan, 2001).

Another gap in the literature is that systemic factors affecting women's access to and experiences of higher education were not generally included in discussions of adult women and education, which is surprising given the claims surrounding the prevalence of women's enrollment. Policy analysis of global, federal, and provincial political decisions indicated a growing trend of market-based economies which erodes public support of Canada's social welfare system, including education. This trend affects all students and women are differentially affected because gender inequity persists in Canada, as evidenced by women's higher rates of poverty and

violence, and as women continue to be systematically disadvantaged by government budgets. Given the higher rates of poverty and violence that women experience in Canadian society, and the potential effects of poverty and violence, these factors cannot be ignored when studying women in education and in developing supports for women.

Institutional supports for women returning to education might be most effective if based in an ethic of care, where the individual needs of women can be addressed. Care-based policy is particularly important to disenfranchised women who might be attending university to escape marginalized positions and past negative life and educational experiences (Reay, 2001).

Literature reviewed about adult learning contests the idea of uniqueness to women's learning. Further research is needed to build upon the body of available knowledge about women's learning, and all aspects of adult education. According to Morrish and Buchanan (2001):

> Women must build new knowledge in order to create a more accurate and inclusive picture of adult education. This requires more than adding a token chapter to an established text, or what feminist scholars refer to as, "add women and stir" (Harding, 2006), which does not challenge systemic sexism, but requires writing the history of women adult educators, challenging sexism, and building new curricula. (p. 258)

My study assists with building new knowledge about women's motivations for and experiences with university education as advocated by Morrish and Buchanan (2001).

CHAPTER THREE
Design of the Study
Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to describe the methodological foundation of the research design, and the research procedures used to conduct my study. I followed Harding's (1987) definitions of methodology as the theoretical basis for the research design, and methods or procedures as the techniques or tools chosen to meet the purposes of my research. The methodology chosen for my study was based in a feminist theoretical understanding of the social construction of gender and the need to challenge gender-based oppression. The primary epistemological assumption that underlies my research is an understanding of knowledge as a social construction, thus it is not fixed but remains fluid and dependent upon context.

Congruent with this methodology were the use of a qualitative research design and anti-oppressive research methods. Qualitative research includes many research strategies and the interview approach was chosen for my study. Techniques of qualitative research data analysis were based upon some of the suggestions of Creswell (2005). Participants were recruited through advertising and word of mouth and women volunteered to participate in interviews. Further details of the methodology and methods of my study are outlined.

Methodology

Qualitative research means different things to different people, is founded in different and sometimes opposing theoretical and philosophical perspectives, and crosses many disciplines of study. Generally, qualitative research means studying people in their natural settings, and interpreting phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them (Denzin, 2000; Seidman, 1998). As such, qualitative research is valuable to social policy development. Studies on the social construction of problems and different understandings of social conditions are all relevant to policy development (Rist, 2000). Qualitative research allows for descriptions of human experience that can criticize oppressive systems (Olesen, 2000). Yet a focus on experiences is not enough in itself; qualitative research should explain how those experiences emerged. Thus qualitative research can, and should, attend to how women tell their stories (Naples, 2003) and how those stories critique oppressive systems, rather than just retelling experience (Olesen, 2000).

Given the benefits of qualitative research in understanding the lived experiences of humans, generating findings helpful for challenging oppression, and for policy development, it is an appropriate form of research for the purposes of my study. The primary purpose of my study

was to explore adult women's motivations for and experiences with university education. A second purpose of my study was to explore whether women survivors of violence, trauma, or gender subordination were motivated to attend university by a desire to heal from these experiences, and if so, whether they found their university education experience to be healing. A third purpose of my study was to document what institutional and personal supports were beneficial to women's healing and participation as university students.

A feminist theoretical perspective of systemic links to gender oppression and a recognition that "scholarship is a political act that can, and should, challenge the multiplicity of ways in which women are oppressed" (Davies, Lubelska, & Quinn, 1994, p. 149) underpinned the purpose and design of my study. Congruency with this theoretical perspective required the use of anti-oppressive research methods, based in a relationship-focused approach, in the recruitment of, and interviews with, participants. A relationship-focused approach meant a commitment to strive for collaboration and dialogue with participants to reduce potential power imbalances between the researcher and participants. While not all scholars agree with the relational benefits of qualitative research, this approach is consistent with seeing overcoming oppression as a joint endeavour between the oppressed and oppressor and helps us to see that research is for people, not about people (Lather, 1991; Olesen, 2000). Methodologies are increasingly sensitive to the relationship of researchers to their participants as dialogical and co-constructive, interdependent, and with negotiated meaning. A focus on relationship instead of on individuals might mean the effective reconstruction of the social sciences (Gergen & Gergen, 2000). This reconstruction could include overcoming oppression.

<div align="center">Ethical Considerations</div>

Addressing Power Relations

Even by adopting relationship-focused participatory and dialogic methods, we cannot eliminate all power imbalances in the research process. Qualitative research can give voice to marginalized people's experiences but ultimately some voices will be privileged over others when there are competing and sometimes overlapping viewpoints represented (Naples, 2003). Acknowledging that we might not eliminate power imbalances is one step towards reducing them, and we can choose methods to reveal power imbalances and attempt to minimize them (Seidman, 1998). Methods which engage research participants in creating how the research should be conducted, what methods to use, and how and to whom findings are distributed can assist with minimizing power imbalances, even though the researcher who writes the final account retains

more power (Gergen & Gergen, 2000; Naples, 2003; Olesen, 2000). Other means of addressing power relations in research include having the participants review the documentation of their experiences and provide clarification (Khanlou & Peter, 2005; Lather & Smithies, 1997; Tilley, 2003).

Some of these ideals could not be practiced for my study because the research process and methods were established prior to participant involvement in order to conform to the university's ethics approval process. The ideals of my research and the university research processes reflect the challenges of blending positivist and participatory approaches to research.

> Positivism claims that science provides us with the clearest possible ideal of knowledge. Where positivism is less successful, however, is in the study of human behaviour where the immense complexity of human nature and the elusive and intangible quality of social phenomena contrasts strikingly with the order and regularity of the natural world. (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2008, pg. 11)

Given requirements to conform to positivist-based research ethics procedures which did not allow for participant involvement in designing the study, other steps were taken to address power relations. One step included the development of a recruitment message that outlined the goal of a collaborative and dialogic research approach. The recruitment message also included sharing some of my identifiers and background, an egalitarian-based approach of reciprocity between me and participants (Oakley, 1981). Participants were also offered the opportunity to review suggested questions for discussion prior to the interview, and the opportunity to review their transcripts and my interpretation and analysis of the data. These techniques were adopted because, like Smithies and Lather (1997) in their work with women with HIV/AIDS, I felt an "intense responsibility to get it right and could be paralyzed by a fear of misrepresenting or dishonouring research participants" (p. 215).

While the ideal of this research design was to develop an egalitarian-based research process with women, not all the women were interested in this process despite being given an explanation of the purpose of their ongoing participation. All eight of the women were offered the opportunity to review the analysis and interpretations developed from the data findings. None of the women expressed interest in doing this, while four of the women were interested in having their transcripts sent to them. Only one of these four women provided feedback after receiving her transcript. After reviewing her transcript this woman requested use of a pseudonym rather than

her original request of the use of her first name in this dissertation. Five of the women expressed interest in the findings of the study rather than any review of their own contribution.

Ground rules. Primarily because of my need to ensure the utmost respect for the women who were willing to participate in my study, and my experience with vulnerable people where well-intentioned but uninformed "helpers" can replicate subtle and overt forms of violence or oppression, or trigger women's previous reactions to traumatic experiences, it was essential to be as clear as possible about my own identities and position. One technique to assist with this was to develop ground rules with participants to help manage vulnerability if traumatic disclosures were made (Tee & Lathlean, 2004). One ground rule utilized in my study was clearly delineating the limitations of the researcher. This meant that I outlined my training and experience in supporting victims of crime and tragedy and indicated to the participants that while I was prepared to support their emotional needs at the time of the interviews, and provide referrals for follow-up if necessary, I am not a therapist, and would not be available for ongoing support. Another ground rule was the inclusion of the limits of confidentiality regarding disclosure. This meant that all information shared remained confidential unless it involved threats of harm to self or others, or involved information regarding child abuse or criminal acts which might require reporting to the appropriate authorities.

Researcher identities. By reminding myself of Murphy's (2005) claim that higher education can widen the social and economic distance between women, leading to the indifference of successful women with an "out-of-sight, out-of-mind" view about the plight of less fortunate women, I was committed to continually questioning my identity and my research processes. With this in mind, I thought that it would be helpful to place my personal reflections and emotional reactions to women's stories into a personal journal, reactions which tend to be under-analyzed and under-theorized but are an important part of reflective practice (Naples, 2003; Parr, 2000).

The decision to use a journal during the research process was based partly on my experience of using journaling as a reflective learning tool during course work, experiencing emotional benefits from personal journaling, and from a reading of Cowan and Westwood (2006). They described the benefit of journal writing, one of which is the encouragement of conditions for learning and reflection. Professors frequently utilize reflective journal writing with their students as a learning tool. Cowan and Westwood (2006) undertook an experiment in which they made the same demand of themselves as they did of their students. That is, they explored the feasibility and

potential effectiveness of non-judgmental facilitation of reflective journaling by a peer. They exchanged reflective writing with a peer and received facilitative commenting upon their reflections. One of the observations from Cowan and Westwood's (2006) study included the following:

> I was struck by how much people felt they were taking a risk by involving themselves. My impression is that the risk had different aspects to it. The first was risking sharing with a relative stranger your own thoughts and ideas. This also involved accepting feedback while at the same time learning the process. The second type of risk seemed to involve the risks you took with yourself. How far should I go in challenging myself? What might I learn about myself? How will I cope with what I might discover? (p. 67)

I was influenced by their identification of risk. For my study I was asking participants to take the risk of meeting with me, a stranger, and of sharing their personal experiences and ideas. In an effort to be congruent with an egalitarian approach to research, I therefore thought I should reflect on and include some of my own risks in a journal. I did not set structures around when or how much to journal, or expectations about what aspects of the journal to use in this dissertation. Rather I used the journal as a means to reflect upon and learn from my reactions to the interviews and research process. Journaling became primarily a coping mechanism for the reactions I experienced and helpful in decision-making about writing this dissertation.

One area described in my journal was a period of angst about what data to include and exclude in the documentation of the research. This angst relates to Fine's (2000) claim that scholarly commitment to reducing power imbalances can be assisted by continually questioning what we decide to report and not to report, how we structure our data, whom we involve in our work, and who is protected and not protected as we do our work. Thus the inclusion of data was based on respect for the participants and protection of the identities of the women, as they requested, and some data was not included in the presentations of findings or analysis.

I experienced more difficulty than I had anticipated in managing my own reactions to the women's stories, and my responsibilities in connecting with them. For example, I found I was emotionally affected for a few days after meeting with some of the women, and was concerned that if I was experiencing such reactions, that they might be having some difficulty as well. The research letter of consent stated that I would be prepared to offer emotional support if required at the time of the interview, but that I would not be available for ongoing support. Yet concern for one particular woman's possible emotional needs after our interview compelled me to send her an email to ask how she was, and to at least offer referrals to other support services. Here my

identities of caregiver and victim support worker came into play. I spent several days questioning in my journal whether I should pursue the research if it could be potentially re-traumatizing to women. Possible re-traumatization of participants was something about which I was quite cognizant prior to beginning the study, but the unanticipated reaction I felt gave me pause for thought. It was a struggle to reconcile but because of the feedback from the woman that she was managing well, I felt I could continue my study with a heightened awareness of the potential effects of this research on participants and myself.

What I learned from the experience was that self-care was important to research with people, particularly when the topics discussed can be distressing. I also found that following personal ethics about treating the participants respectfully was more important to me than possible personal gain from the use of particular data that could enhance this research report.

Participant's power. Understanding power relations also means not assuming the oppressed are powerless. People can and will exercise power by choosing what they will and will not relate, reflecting their own purposes in research participation. By using a collegial approach to interviews, and offering participants the choice of answering or not answering any of the interview questions, supported participants' to be empowered to choose what they would or would not share. The relationship-focused design of the interviews supported a belief in the mutually educative experience of working with the oppressed which included a respect for the intellectual and political capacities of all people (Apple, 1991; Fine, 2000; Olesen, 2000).

Diversity and difference. Analysis of how perceived difference is handled in a study is one tool to avoid replication of oppression (Olesen, 2000). Recognition that the researcher is an intrinsic part of any qualitative research is important. This required critical awareness and reflexivity about my class, race, gender, history, and other social ascriptions which entered into the research process (Olesen, 2000), and how we can all be "involved in the dirty process of racializing and gendering others, limiting who they are and can become" (Naples, 2003, p. 41). Recruitment of diverse participants to assist with identifying dominating biases and reducing the deleterious effects of those biases (Saul, 2003), and to broaden the potential scope of findings, was sought. However, most of the women who volunteered to participate and I shared many characteristics. We were all Anglophone, white, and described ourselves as primarily middle-class at this stage of our lives, although four of the women felt impoverished as students due to financial constraints. Two women described themselves as having disabilities; one woman as

lesbian; another as woman-identified; and the remainder of the women and I identified as able and heterosexual.

An interesting discussion developed from attempts to identify diversity in participation in my study. One woman provided feedback that she did not understand what was being asked as far as identifiers of ability, sexual orientation, ethnicity etc. She described herself as "Heinz 57" and maintained that she does not think in those terms. Although her partner of many years is a woman, she does not define herself as lesbian. Her feedback gave me pause to consider the benefits of using such identifiers and to clarify that the primary purpose was to provide analysis of possible differential effects of identities on women's motivations for and experiences with returning to university as adult students.

Praxis and reflexivity. Awareness is of itself not praxis and peer review of research might be one means to assist with praxis. Peer review can provoke intellectual discomfort and disagreement and help maintain ethical integrity in scholarly research processes (Lather & Smithies, 1997). In my research, peer review happened officially through my committee, and unofficially through informal review by friends and colleagues.

Reflexivity extends to all components of research, including the transcription of interviews. Tilley (2003) called the idea of objective transcription a myth and researchers need to consider seriously who will do the work as "prints" of the transcriber can be found. For example, "some transcribers might strive for smooth reading which might not truly reflect actual words spoken, or researchers might miss some understandings as tapes are transcribed, and lose some control over decisions when they do not do the work themselves" (Tilley, 2003, p. 770). Some of these effects and prints could be just as applicable to the researcher as a hired transcriber. For my study, all transcriptions were completed by me. All transcriptions were reviewed while re-listening to the audio-taped interviews to minimize transcription prints by ensuring every word and meaning was as accurately transcribed as possible.

Researcher values. Researchers are not immune to internalized oppression or to the hegemonic constructions of research requirements (Naples, 2003). Awareness and criticism of those constructions is important to anti-oppression research processes (Fine, 2000). An example is the discussion by qualitative researchers about the value neutrality of research with a growing recognition that no individual researcher can or should free her or himself completely of values (Lather, 1991; Saul, 2003). Rather researchers must be aware of potential effects of their values on research, for even choosing one form of discourse over another can create new possibilities

while simultaneously closing down others (Denzin, 2000). My researcher values related to my study were associated with Murphy's (2005) call to keep poverty and violence on the social agenda, and since both of these issues were significant to seven of the women's motivations for and experiences with returning to university, much of the discussion of the findings was inevitably related to these values. The academic form of discourse required for the purpose of a dissertation achieves my goal to complete this component of certification, while possibly closing down accessibility to non-academic women who might want to read about the potential healing effects of education, or experiences of women students. Since encouragement of other women is one of the potential benefits of this research, additional means to reach more women such as by sharing of the findings of the study in non-academic forums could be necessary to broaden the benefits of the research findings.

Researcher expectations. Scholarly researchers must be aware of expectations of their own participation in research. Fontana and Frey (2005) described interviews as having moved from being a "neutral exchange of information to a methodology of friendship" (p. 696) for some researchers. In contrast, Berg (2001) maintains a distanced stance when it comes to the interviewee's questions. "When the respondent asks, 'Why or how was I picked,'" he recommends saying, "You were chosen by chance according to a random selection procedure" (p. 96). Both of these expectations of researcher as friend ameliorating social conditions, or the researched as randomly selected subject, can be challenged by questioning what kind of relationship the researcher and researched expect. The idea that interviewer and interviewee can become friends can be troublesome because of expectations that friends might place on each other. From a pragmatic and ethical perspective, I did not have the time or emotional resources to become a friend with each person with whom I conducted interviews. Conversely, responding to interviewees by deflecting their questions was not conducive to equity-based reciprocal relationships. Reciprocity-based interviewing can include a balance of interviewers responding to participants' questions and even sharing some of their experiences (Oakley, 1981), something with which I was comfortable throughout the interviews.

Given preparation based on the above perspective, I was surprised to find that I was the one who wished to meet with the women again after our interviews. I wanted to hear more about their stories. After transcribing their interviews, I wanted to ask further questions about the meaning the women had made of their experiences and I wanted to know about their reactions after completing the interviews. I also wondered how they were faring and what was going on in

their lives. I found that I had emotionally connected in a way with these women that I had not expected. Yet I did not want to impose on the women's time more than I already had, nor did I feel in a position to re-apply to the university's ethics board for further study given the practical restrictions of my study. I thus had to be satisfied that three of the women shared with me that they enjoyed the relaxed style and the back-and-forth conversation between me and them during the interviews.

Researcher subjectivity. The potential effect of researcher subjectivity on research cannot be ignored. The question then becomes how do researchers suspend their own understandings and beliefs, and remain open to all possibilities (Van Manen, 1998)? This is an ideal that I do not believe I could reach since I undoubtedly carry biases and prejudices wherever I go. My subjectivities are constantly changing based on new experiences and the meanings I make of them. I thus interpreted this ideal as trying to be non-judgmentally receptive to whatever stories women chose to tell. This was similar to my work of suspending my judgments, or preconceived ideas, when listening attentively to victims' experiences of crime and tragedy. This required intense practice and concentration, and a regular attentiveness to, and self-questioning of, my own thoughts and reactions to people's stories. I repeatedly found this practice effective in supporting people to access their own and my understandings of their experiences, and I drew upon these skills in the interviews. It involved reflecting back to participants my interpretations of what they said, giving them an opportunity to concur, provide more clarification, or in some cases, provide an alternative explanation because my words had inspired new thoughts.

Given that I wished for a conversational approach to interviews, and a reciprocal sharing of our experiences, it was probable that my comments could influence what participants said, and vice-versa. Thus participants and I were likely interpreting our experiences inter-subjectively and new meanings might have emerged through our interactions (Sammel, 2003). There was more than one occasion where I asked participants if I had influenced their response, or put "words into their mouths" by the way I had presented a question, provided a response, or interpreted their discussion. All of the women responded that I had not. To conclude, I could not completely suspend my own subjectivities but strove to recognize their influence on the research processes. Rather than complete objectivity, what I provided as a researcher was a receptivity free of judgments of women's responses and stories.

A comparison of my study with the research of others is important in keeping with general research traditions (Van Manen, 1998). A review of the literature about some adult

women's experiences as students helped provide an understanding of the findings of previous research, yet my study had to proceed without pre-conceived expectations of certain results. The task was to explore the meaning participating adult women made of returning to university. The results evolved from the descriptions women provided of their experiences and their meanings of those experiences. These results were then compared with the literature. New literature was sought to compare findings that were different from the literature reviewed prior to the study.

Summary of the Methodology

The methodology chosen for my study was based in a feminist theoretical understanding of gender as socially constructed, and that academic research can and should challenge oppression. An egalitarian anti-oppressive approach of situating the research and participants as research collaborators was chosen to help reduce possible power imbalances between the researcher and participants. Congruency between feminist theory and egalitarian-based research processes was attempted at all levels of the design of my study, with the recognition that this ideal might not be achievable.

Research Procedures

Recruitment of participants. Qualitative research that encourages diversity in research participants can assist with identifying dominating biases and reducing deleterious effects of those biases (Saul, 2003). Consequently, I strove for diversity in participants by explicitly advertising for diversity. My pilot interview advertisement (Appendix A) led to the recruitment of women similar to myself; that is, white, middle-class, heterosexual, and able. I then revised my advertisement for subsequent recruitment to hopefully recruit more diversity in participants (Appendix B). I recognized that my own identities might be a discouragement to participate for some women, and I did not succeed in recruiting a wide diversity of women. This might also reflect the dominant, white, middle-class nature of university education in general. Advertisements were posted at different locations throughout the university, such as university and student-run student services, and some professors and students were asked, or offered, to share the recruitment message by word of mouth. Women responded to my recruitment message by email. Upon follow-up from me with further information regarding the research, two women declined to participate, while other women agreed to participate in an interview. Some of the interviews were scheduled by email and some through telephone contact, at mutually convenient and comfortable times and locations. Eight participants is a suitable number for qualitative research "where it is typical to study a few individuals or a few cases because the ability of the

researcher to provide an in-depth analysis is diminished with the addition of each new individual or site" (Creswell, 2005, p. 207).

Interviewing. In preparation for qualitative research interviews with women, the writings of Van Manen (1998; 2005) about phenomenological research, and the description of research processes by Parr (2000), and MacGregor (2006) were helpful in designing my study. MacGregor interviewed 30 women and aimed to present interpretations in a way that resists drawing general conclusions that can be applied to all women everywhere. Van Manen (1998) described the benefit of studying unique individual experiences which counters the tendency of research to generalize. Generalizing can prevent us from developing understandings of the uniqueness of human experience (Van Manen, 1998). Interviews were thus undertaken from the perspective that dialogue emphasizes the meaning of lived experience and collecting the "data" of people's experiences allows for the generation of theory (Reinharz, 1992; Van Manen, 1998). Awareness that the individual experiences shared by participants could be perceived differently by me than what participants intended, even when the same language and words were used to describe experiences (Van Manen, 1998), led to my frequent reflection of interpretations back to participants to assist with accuracy.

The intent of the interview for my study was not to achieve a single truth of women's experiences (Sammel, 2003). Rather, the intent was to encourage the telling of people's stories that have the power to shape personal and collective history (Van Manen, 1998); the telling, listening, recording, and resultant text can support self-discovery or self-creation, for participants, the author, and readers (Cuno, 2005; Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Sammel, 2003).

The interview. This research involved audio-recorded interviews with women students who voluntarily participated. Interviews were held at a mutually agreeable time and location, and lasted from one to four and a half hours, with the average time of interviews being one and one half hours. The interviews were scheduled at a rate of approximately one interview per week and one interview was completed with each participant. The decision to space the interviews in this way was based on my experience of providing emotional support to women where the emotional energy required has taught me to be vigilant about my own self-care needs. As discussed earlier, this turned out to be important as I did experience reactions to the women's stories which necessitated time for reflection and self-care between interviews. I ensured that my routine self-care practices such as exercise, reading fiction, journaling, and relaxing with family, were

maintained in order to have the emotional energy necessary to provide women with consistent respectful listening and possible emotional support.

Interviews were approached with the goal of them being conducted in a conversational fashion with an aim of an open dialogue, rather than a detailed list of mandatory questions, to assist with explorations of the women's experiences (Parr, 2000; Reinharz, 1992; Williams, 1997). However, ethics approval for my study required the submission of a list of general questions and while the interviews proceeded with these approved questions about motivation and experiences of returning to education, women were offered the choice of answering or not answering any of them. Questions were discussed with all women in basically the same order. Questions were also modified after the completion of three pilot interviews. It was difficult to broach the topic of identity, such as class and ethnicity, during pilot interviews, so optional demographic questions were used for the remainder of the interviews. The participants were sent the questions by email ahead of time for their preview if they chose. I made myself available to women's choice of time and location for interviewing.

Women were provided with informed consent, parameters of confidentiality, and the right of each woman to withdraw at any time. With the recognition that women can become re-traumatized by discussing their past experiences of trauma, I felt prepared to support them given my professional experience in trauma and crisis intervention, and community referrals if necessary. For confidentiality and anonymity, most participants chose a pseudonym. Other women asked me to choose for them. Following MacGregor's (2006) methodology where she was concerned that automatically "treating women as anonymous subjects diminishes their role in the research" (p. 245), I asked the women if they wanted to use their own name or a pseudonym. Although some women were comfortable using their own names, some of the women wanted as much anonymity as possible. One woman who had initially chosen to use her own name changed her mind after reading her transcript, and elected to use a pseudonym. In the end, to provide the desired anonymity for those women who wanted it, a pseudonym was used for everyone. Women were offered the opportunity to review and edit their transcripted interviews, my interpretations, and final report in my dissertation, again with a recognition that even reading their own words might be traumatic so I was prepared to provide emotional support if necessary (Malone, 2003).

I transcribed the interviews and participants were offered a copy of their transcripts. The development of the transcripts involved an transcription based on listening to the interviews and recording all words, pauses, and expressions exactly as spoken. A second review of listening to

the interviews and simultaneously reading the transcriptions was found to be important as some corrections to words were necessary. Finally, transcriptions were edited for flow and to enhance understanding on the part of the reader. Four women asked for their transcripts and were sent their unedited versions. None of these women requested any revisions to their transcripts.

Data analysis. I analyzed the data using paper and pen following the guidelines provided by Creswell (2005), which is realistic for my study's small database of fewer than 500 pages of transcripts (p. 234). The steps included reading all the transcriptions carefully, then selecting one transcription to review, and coding by identifying a text segment and applying a code to it, then proceeding to the next transcription and repeating the process. Many of the code words were in vivo while others were assigned as a summary word or words for the segment being coded. Rather than coding each sentence, or applying several codes to a sentence, a method of lean coding was used, where a small number of codes were applied through the transcript. In this way, a smaller number of codes facilitated the development of the final broad themes.

All code words were grouped for similarity and redundant codes were discarded. A final list of 15 codes was used to review all the data again to see if new codes emerged. Codes were then reduced to five major themes with accompanying minor themes, paying attention not only to what was most frequently discussed by participants, but also what was unique. Data that supported themes were included, while data that was not relevant to themes was discarded. For example, some of the participants offered discussion unrelated to the purposes of this research. While these aspects of their stories were frequently fascinating in themselves, the inclusion of data from these areas would not enhance the findings of my study.

Here is an example of how the data were coded. When women talked about their motivations for returning to university, several identified that they wanted to enhance their career opportunities. Words such as job, career, work, and employment were highlighted. All these descriptions were collapsed into a code of employment which was eventually then categorized under one of the five themes, that of motivations to attend university. A list of codes is included in Appendix F.

Finally, I compared my interpretation of the data with the literature. I had hoped to have my interpretation reviewed by one or more participants to determine whether it was complete, realistic, fair, and representative, but did not have this opportunity due to lack of participant interest. Thus I was unable to verify the accuracy of my interpretations through any member checking. An external review of this research report was provided by my dissertation committee,

and informally by two peers who reviewed and provided feedback about whether the findings were grounded in the data, the inferences were logical, the themes appropriate, the methodology was justified, and the research bias identified (Creswell, 2005).

Summary of the Design of the Study

The design of my study was based in qualitative research and a feminist anti-oppressive methodology. The data collection method was interviews. Upon receiving ethics approval from the university to proceed with the study, participants were recruited through advertising and word of mouth. A letter of introduction, consent, and suggested interview questions were sent to interested participants. Participants who continued to be interested scheduled audio-taped interviews with me at mutually convenient times and locations. At this time participants reviewed and signed letters of consent. Interviews lasted from one to four and a half hours, with the average time of interviews being one and one half hours. I transcribed the interviews and participants were offered a copy of their transcripts. Four women asked for their transcripts and none of these women requested any revisions to their transcripts.

Data was analyzed through a hand analysis following the guidelines of Creswell (2005). Data were coded and organized into five major themes of the most common findings, and unique findings. Finally, interpretation of the data was compared with the literature.

CHAPTER FOUR

Presentations of Findings

Introduction

In this chapter, I present the findings of the study, beginning with a brief description of the participants followed by a detailed description of the data they provided. Data is organized into common themes and unique findings. A summary of the themes is provided, followed by more specific and detailed descriptions of the themes, and data to substantiate them.

Participants

Eight women participated in interviews for my study. All the women are identified by pseudonyms, some they chose for themselves while others asked me to choose for them. Three of the women were enrolled full-time in the university at the time of their interview. Of these three women, one was in first year, one was in second year, and one woman was in her third year of university study. All of these women planned on completing at least a four-year degree, and two of these women planned to pursue graduate studies. The other five women had graduated from the university, one within the past year, and the others over a span of the past two to twelve years. All of the women had enrolled in the faculty of social sciences and humanities. Five of the women had children living at home while attending university. The ages of the children ranged from pre-school to young adults. All eight of the women described themselves as very motivated to achieve high grades in university. The following is a brief description of each participant.

Jesse. Jesse is a graduate of a Master's program in Social Work with and undergraduate degree in Education. She had initially attended university directly from high school but withdrew because she was unable to support herself financially and returned home to live with her parents. This was a painful decision for Jesse as she had escaped from a home of childhood emotional and sexual abuse and her lack of success at supporting herself after leaving home further reduced her already diminished self-esteem. Her father, the abuser, preferred to have her home to work in his office rather than supporting her to pursue her dream of education.

Jesse wanted to complete her university degree, so after resuming full-time employment, she re-enrolled in university as a part-time student to study for an undergraduate degree. The emotional challenges of combining a stressful day job under her father's command with university courses in the evening were overwhelming and led to Jesse again dropping out. Eventually Jesse persevered and completed her undergraduate degree, primarily through part-time study. She then enrolled in a Master's program full-time while working part-time. During this part

of what Jesse described as her educational "odyssey," she again could not manage the expenses of university and support herself financially. In addition, recovery from childhood trauma was interfering with her ability to study. As Jesse described it, she had begun to study women and violence issues which triggered internalized messages from her father about what she should and should not be doing. She explained, "I started looking at violence against women. It was interesting, 'cause there was part of me, my father's voice, the dialogue inside [my head] that was saying, 'You're not supposed to be looking at this stuff.' It was very strong." Jesse's reaction demonstrates one potential effect of abuse.

These emotional challenges coupled with financial difficulties again led to Jesse dropping out to pursue full-time employment. After three years of employment, she returned to full-time university studies, this time to complete a Master's degree. Despite the financial toll of graduating with significant student debt, and the emotional challenges she endured, Jesse appreciated her university experience where she gained self-esteem and what she described as healing from her traumatic experiences. She said that education provided the "re-integration of the shreds of [her] identity that had been discarded along the way." Jesse's tenacity in achieving her educational goal over an almost 20-year span, and her perseverance in overcoming many barriers, were impressive. Her articulate and poetic descriptions of her life and educational experiences, which were frequently interjected with laughter and humorous nuances, were enjoyable to hear.

Leslie. Leslie did not attend university directly from high school because she was deemed not smart enough. She commented that when she completed high school, the message she received about her future career potential was that she "was to be a secretary." Only those students who were "brilliant" were encouraged to pursue other opportunities. While this might be daunting to many, Leslie said she has always been a strong proponent of education, and she began pursuing part-time university when her four children were quite young. Because of the many demands of parenting and an unsupportive spouse, Leslie had to discontinue her educational efforts: "I had a non-supportive spouse. So that made it even more difficult. I no longer have the spouse." Sadly, Leslie thought that had her husband been more supportive, their marriage could have lasted and she could have attended university, but he was unwilling, despite the fact that she had supported him through his university career.

She returned to university some years later to complete a Bachelor of Arts with her course interests focused on history and women's studies. Her children were older and more self-sufficient, and found she was able to cope with part-time education, full-time work, and being a

sole parent to her children. Separation from her spouse made attending university easier despite her sole parent status: "I did finish the whole half of my degree without having the spouse and it was a lot easier."

Having a university education has broadened employment options for Leslie. She would like to see more acknowledgment, by the university, of the needs of adult women students, and for students who are single mothers. Leslie's recommendation partially stems from her observations of students at the university. She stated that,

> There aren't a lot of single dads still, and yet if there are, they have way more supports; they have their mother helping them, their sister helping them. For single moms, it's the expectation that you're a mother, you can handle it all. The expectation of a single dad is, well oh my God you must need help, you're gonna need help. There's no way you're going to do this by yourself.

Leslie's observations were fascinating and further research about them could provide an interesting complement to this research.

Katherine. Katherine is a woman in her mid-thirties and was in her second year of study of a Bachelor of Arts in Psychology with a minor in Women's Studies at the time of our interview. She returned to university because of a work-place injury that resulted in her inability to continue with that area of work: "I got injured. And I was off a couple of years. And they actually wanted to pension me off. And I said no, I was too young." Katherine was also motivated to pursue university education because as a survivor of child sexual abuse, she has a long-term goal of working towards ending child sexual abuse. She wants to work with offenders to help prevent their re-offending. She is passionate about her goal and feels that if she can make a difference by preventing abuse for some children in the future, then she perhaps will find a rationalization for her own experience of abuse.

Although she has enjoyed her university studies, thus far Katherine has felt most frustrated with the lack of acknowledgement in class and on campus around issues of child sexual abuse. She stated that, "We don't talk about the taboo; the person who's abused; and the taboo, the abuser. Like the human being behind the abuser. That's challenging; [on] a daily basis. Like nobody gets it." Katherine deals with her frustration by attempting to generate class discussion but also feels sometimes that it is best to remain silent. Katherine also struggles with disabilities, primarily related to learning and ability to concentrate, about which she did not elaborate further.

The care of Katherine's two children is her priority which at times made coordination with her school responsibilities a challenge. She would not miss her children's sports activities

and stated, "I never miss. I refuse to miss. Profs have told us about study groups, or we're having a review. [And] I've told profs, I can't [attend. And they don't always understand]." Katherine would most often sacrifice sleep in order to manage everything. Fortunately for her, Katherine's husband is a staunch supporter of her goal to complete university. He provides emotional support and is as equally committed to parenting as is Katherine.

Maureen. Maureen is a graduate of a Master's program in Social Work. She attended university and college intermittently after high school, eventually enrolling in full-time university studies after several years of what she described as "horrific workplace oppression: Years of oppression, on an individual basis as a woman, as an employee, as a professional, as a paraprofessional, there were so many layers of it." Finding the undergraduate program to be "like rehab," she continued into the graduate program which was an extraordinarily positive experience for her. Maureen found school to be healing as she said it provided the "chance to do something really positive to reaffirm myself as a person."

Maureen described her understanding of internalized gendered role-expectations and her challenges in extricating herself from them while being a student. Sometimes it was difficult to reconcile the prioritizing of school responsibilities over family responsibilities, which caused some angst for her. Maureen stated, "And I also think of our culture and our society and how we've been socialized as women; those early messages still play in my head, you know...Of what [I] should be doing." Despite her family being very supportive, there were moments when their expectations of her conflicted with her school commitments. Fortunately these conflicts were manageable and did not impede Maureen's completion of her degree.

Like Leslie, Maureen recommended that universities provide more supports for women, particularly for women who are sole parents and for women who are poor, to attend university and help to break the cycle of poverty:

> We need to be making some exceptions to make a more fair playing field cause if not we'll continue to see single moms not being able to pursue [university], and continue to deal with many of the social issues they deal with, like poverty, and then what chance will their children have to go on with their learning?

Christine. Christine is a graduate of an Honour's Social Work program. She entered university immediately after high school and completed one year. Christine then discontinued university because of other life situations, about which she did not elaborate, but maintained a goal of wanting to complete a degree. Christine said she spent years planning to attend university until the time when multiple responsibilities of family, work, and meeting financial obligations

were no longer a barrier. She felt she needed the certification to continue in the work she loved. She described how, "In my jobs, my colleagues had university education and I didn't. I felt that I had to hide the fact that I didn't and I felt I wasn't putting my money where my mouth was."

Despite a significant family crisis when her son was in a life-threatening accident shortly after she returned to university, through the support of her family, friends and colleagues, Christine was able to complete full-time study and receive her degree. Although she considered dropping out to care for her son during his recovery, once he was past the critical stage, he, along with the rest of her family, convinced her to continue her studies.

Christine found that her university experience met her hopes and expectations. Prior to enrolment she said that, she "was looking for validation." Christine described that she "felt very supported by the [professors'] validation of my experience. My work experience held some weight. We needed experience to get [acceptance] into the program. My professors offered a lot of respect." Christine's positive experience with most professors was echoed by all of the women in my study and is a theme to be discussed later.

Linda. Linda was in her third year of a Bachelor of Arts program at the time of our interview, with a goal of obtaining an Honour's degree in Social Work. As a sole parent of two teens, Linda left full-time employment to pursue her educational aspirations, and financial challenges were the greatest strain for her. Linda had also survived childhood sexual abuse and domestic violence, and her relationship with her partner did not survive her attending university. Despite these difficulties, Linda had no regrets about her decision to pursue a university degree. Her hope was to earn the credentials to assist other women in their recovery from experiences of violence in ways other professionals have assisted her in her recovery.

Linda found the greatest struggle as a sole parent attending university was financial. She appeared to be in a precarious situation, with financial difficulties, the strain of full-time school, parenting, and working every week-end. As she described, she was "just going seven days a week." One more strain might affect her ability to continue. Still, her dedication and commitment were impressive, and her enthusiasm for her studies was palpable. Her courage in leaving a secure, relatively well-paid job with benefits and vacation, because she wanted something more for herself and her children, could provide positive role-modeling for other women who are debating a return to education.

Marie. Marie was completing her first year of a Bachelor of Arts with a major in English. She is also a mother of two who has survived domestic abuse, and three incidences of rape. Her

supportive husband helped her to cope with the trauma from her experiences of violence and encouraged her to continue with her dream of post-secondary education. Learning about systemic links to violence and social injustices has helped her to reduce self-blame and manage the ongoing difficult relationship with her parents, whose home she had to leave at the age of 16 because of the emotional trauma she was experiencing there.

Marie's sense of humour might also help her to cope. I laughed during our interview and laughed aloud again at times when transcribing it. For example, when describing her parents' relationship she called her mother, "the anti-feminist. She won't even learn to use the remote control 'cause my Dad might not feel useful." Marie's determination to take whatever steps are necessary to achieve her goal, such as ruthlessly cutting out friends who were not helping her, is tempered by her caring and compassion for other women. She was thrilled to meet young confident women at university who had never experienced any form of violence or assault. This was novel to her and reflects the rates of violence experienced by women.

Part of Marie's motivation to attend university is to prove her abilities to her parents. Marie struggles with learning because of what she calls being "differently abled." Throughout her life she has received little in the way of positive messages about herself, or tangible support concerning education from her parents. Yet she also described her efforts to accept her parents as they are and ignore what she described as their racist, homophobic, and sexist beliefs and lack of support for her. She is looking forward to the day when she can show them her PhD certificate and prove them wrong in their assessment of her. This anecdote summarizes the long-term effect of childhood emotional abuse for Marie.

Joan. Joan is a graduate of a Master's program in Social Work. Her high school career was interrupted when she was admitted to a psychiatric hospital as a teen partly because of the trauma she was experiencing at home. After her discharge, when it was recognized that she did not have a psychiatric disorder, she supported herself in a variety of ways that did not allow her the time or resources to finish high school. Her intelligence was noted by a customer of the bar where she worked as a waitress and she was encouraged by this woman to consider her potential for academia. After exploring her aptitude for different fields of interest, and passing an initial course to determine her capacity for university study, Joan enrolled in university full-time. She initially lived in residence despite being older than the other first year students, and feeling like an outsider. After graduation, she returned to university to complete a Master's degree and has considered returning for a doctorate.

Joan, rather than talking about how trauma or violence caused particular hardship in her life, although it obviously did, focused on how she added to her own difficulties. An example was when she talked about her low self-esteem and how she had allowed that to sometimes "get in the way" of achieving goals. Joan's insight exemplifies a characteristic of all the women who participated in my study. Although at times still feeling the effects of their traumatic experiences, they were not blaming or resentful of others. Rather they accepted responsibility for their life choices despite the influence of violence and trauma on those decisions. They were determined to enjoy as much from life and their university opportunity as possible. They also focused on what and who has assisted or supported them, rather than what were deterrents. For example, Joan talked about the woman who initially encouraged her to pursue university as her "angel" and how fortunate she was to have met her.

Summary of Participants

The women who participated were inspiring with their stories of determination, courage, and persistence in the face of difficult and painful situations. I greatly appreciated the sharing of their honest assessments of themselves and what has helped, or hindered, their educational opportunities and experiences. They generously gave their time despite being so clearly pressed for time themselves and I felt honoured that they shared facets of their lives with me. All eight of the women expressed interest in the results of my study which reflects their caring and concern about other women and their experiences.

Organization of Themes

Findings of my study are organized by the major and minor themes which emerged from the data analysis. Many of the themes identified by the women were interwoven and difficult to separate. Data was organized into five major themes of: 1) Motivations; 2) Violence and trauma; 3) Supports; 4) Challenges; and 5) Transformative and healing effects. These five major themes each have accompanying minor themes.

Minor themes related to motivations were: 1) Role-modeling for children; 2) Employment and career goals; and 3) Timing. Accompanying the major theme of Violence and trauma was a minor theme of: 1) Violence or trauma after attending university.

The theme of Supports included minor themes of: 1) Learning Centre; 2) Gender Centre; 3) Financial support; 4) Professors; effects of supportive and unsupportive professors; 5) Friends and families; 6) Employers; and 7) Unique findings about supports.

The theme of Challenges included minor themes of: 1) Having to study harder; 2) Age; 3) Fears and doubts about abilities; 4) Lack of academic preparation; 5) Gendered expectations and multiple role responsibilities; 6) Finances; 7) Effects of past trauma; and 8) Dropping out. In response to these difficulties and challenges was the theme of 9) Determination.

The fifth significant theme, Transformation and healing experiences included: 1) Changes in relationship with self; 2) Changes in relationship with others; 3) Graduating; 4) Validation; and 5) Joy.

In the detailed descriptions of the themes below, women's responses are provided almost exactly as they were presented to me. Minor editing for confidentiality purposes, and to assist the reader in understanding the commentary, was necessary. For many of the themes the responses of all eight of the women are included. For other themes, where women's responses were similar to each other, a sampling of the participants' responses is provided.

Themes

Motivations

Role-modeling for children. The five women who were mothers, Linda, Marie, Leslie, Christine, and Katherine, talked about how important it was for them to attend university to provide positive role-modeling for their children. With the exception of Christine, they did not receive positive role-modeling about the value of higher education from their families of origin. Only Christine mentioned that her parents had been positive role models, but this was a general comment not specifically linked to any valuing of education.

Marie's parents were insistent that she attend university after high school, and expected her to complete a high-status program such as medicine or law, despite, or perhaps because of, their own lack of graduation from high school. Marie also experienced emotional abuse centered on her general lack of value as a person and punishment for not achieving A grades. These and other factors led to her dropping out of high school to leave home. She attempted to complete high school while supporting herself but was unable to manage the workload. Still, she wanted to model the value of higher education to her own children.

When discussing the potential effect on their children of their decisions to attend university, all five of these women explicitly and implicitly referred to their belief in the value of education. Their descriptions were all the more poignant because of the many challenges and difficulties they faced prior to, and during, their educational experiences. Perhaps their belief in

and appreciation of higher education was stronger having missed the opportunity in their younger years. Linda explained:

> I've always wanted more for myself and my kids. I was definitely in a position of the end of marriage, and having a toddler to now support, and I used the government supports that are available, but [those] were just a stopover. I [wasn't going] to count on them for my life, and give those kinds of messages to my sons.

Linda wanted her sons to realize the value of education in securing employment and economic self-sufficiency. Linda later described her job as stifling and that she wanted to be challenged by more meaningful work. My sense was that she wanted to role-model to her sons the importance of striving for one's dreams or goals, whatever they might be.

Katherine described how her decision to attend university was partially based on setting the right example for her children. After her work-place injury when she was offered a lifetime pension, she said:

> I wrote a letter into compensation pleading with them not to do that; pension me off. I mean, they offered me a very handsome sum, but I couldn't see myself [just] sitting, not so much for myself, but setting an example for my kids. I've always insisted that the kids challenge themselves. So it's monkey see, monkey do. Whatever it is I do, I know the kids are watching. So, after being hurt, they were my motivation.

Katherine wanted to demonstrate consistency between her behaviour and choices and her messaging to her children. She recognized that her actions were more influential to her children than verbal direction.

Leslie too spoke of the need for consistency between her words and actions. She explained:

> I've always been a strong proponent of education and have been with my kids, all their lives, and so it was kind of a combination of that, setting the example for my own kids, saying what I keep saying I believe in, and then totally doing it for myself.

Leslie's motivation to set an example for her children was linked with her motivation to experience the benefits of higher education for herself. She also described discussions with her children about the value of education and the employment opportunities an enhanced education can provide.

Marie expressed how she "lives for my children. I don't live with them, I live for them. Everything I do, I went back [to university because of them]." Marie too recognized the importance of her actions in influencing her children about the value of higher education, particularly for employment opportunities. She hopes her children will proceed directly to post-

secondary education from high school rather than struggling with stifling and low-paying jobs as she had.

Christine echoed the voices of the other mothers succinctly: "They [my children] have always known that education is important. I thought I should also practice what I preach."

To summarize, all five of the women who were mothers reported that their need to provide positive role-modeling for their children about the value of education was part of their motivation for returning to university as adult students. Although they themselves delayed enrolment until their 30's and 40's, these women advocated attending post-secondary education directly from high school and wished to demonstrate the value of education clearly to their children.

Employment and career goals. The women shared the hope that further education would improve their opportunities for employment. While intrinsic goals of personal development were equally important to the women and they were equally enjoying the opportunity for further personal exploration, all but one of the women also had specific careers goals in mind. Thus the potential for enhanced employment and satisfying career opportunities after success in higher education were important motivations for these women to attend university.

Marie summed up her motivation for improved employment options through education by stating that she "couldn't do call centres any more." Her previous education would not provide much else in the way of employment opportunities and she aspired to become a university professor. Jesse felt trapped in her role of secretary where she said she "did not get to use my mind. Rather I felt like I was an extension of the keyboard with my typing skills." This feeling for Jesse may have related to her place of employment which was, "under my father's thumb" rather than the role of secretary itself. Linda found that her job was not intellectually stimulating. She was also motivated by the desire to help other women in their recovery from violence in ways that she had been helped in her own recovery. She explained:

> I have worked with a number of [service providers], working through childhood issues, and domestic violence issues. And there are a couple that will forever stay in my mind, that had a huge impact on me, and my life, and which I think is really why I have chosen to go into [that field of study], because it was life-changing for me. And it might sound a little corny, but if I can reach out to one individual and help her in some way, the way that I feel that I [have been helped], and the tools that have been given to me, and the support, and the strength and the caring, and all those beautiful things. If I can give that to someone, what a gift. It is for those reasons I want to do this work.

While Katherine did not express dissatisfaction with her employment prior to her injury, she had clear career goals in mind. She offered that, "My goal is to work with criminals. I would like to implement [a means] for criminals to show their good side to their children. To help children to not see themselves as also damaged and become offenders." Her experience of child sexual abuse was her main motivation for this particular career path and she required a university degree to carry out her ambitions.

Three of the women wanted enhanced certification for the careers they wished to continue. Christine explained that she loved her work but felt under-qualified compared with her colleagues who had university degrees. She was seeking not only certification but also, "It wasn't so much about academic knowledge, my goal was to get as much clinical experience as possible. I was also looking for validation." She was also "experiencing burn-out and it was a good time to take a break from work." She hoped that the time spent at university would allow her to overcome her feelings of burn-out.

Joan too wanted to further her qualifications and said, "because some people had wanted me to do some [name of work] ...I thought if I'm going to do any [name of work] I need to become "legit." And I needed my Master's [degree] to do that." Like Christine, Joan needed a change: "And I was bored with what I was doing."

For these women, the motivation for enhanced education related to furthering their chosen careers and simultaneously enhancing their feeling of validation in their abilities to perform the roles they had chosen. University degrees legitimized their knowledge and skills, and allowed them to make some changes to revitalize their interest in their chosen career paths.

Timing. Linda, Jesse, Leslie, Christine, and Maureen explicitly articulated, and Joan, Marie, and Katherine more implicitly noted, that returning to university was intrinsically important to enhancing their feelings of self-worth. Experiencing a university education was something they all had long wanted, but had deferred because of responsibilities and obligations to others, or because repeated attempts to return had been unsuccessful for various reasons. Their enrollment in university was partly based on finally finding the time to manage studies with other responsibilities and having the financial capacity to do so. Marie described that attending university was a long-standing goal:

> University has always been something I've wanted to do. I used to live in [another province] for a couple of years. I applied for college when I lived there, and I applied here so I could come back home. I was denied because of housing; coming from out of province I would have had to live in residence. Then I got pregnant with my first child. And then it was like, ok, when he's in school I can go back to school. When my oldest

was five, I got pregnant with my second child. So I'm thinking, ok, when he goes to school...You know I'll have them both in school, I can go to school at least part-time. There were a lot of problems with my marriage, and then my husband and I separated. Then I had to work for the family, so I didn't go to university then. My husband and I have been back together four years almost, and it's only in the last two years he's been really pushing me to go back to school. 'Cause he knows its something I've always wanted to do.

Now that Marie's children were both in school full-time, her marriage was relatively stable, and she had her husband's encouragement and financial support, she has finally realized her dream of participating in university studies.

Leslie described how others did not understand her attending university as an adult when her children were grown, given that she had dropped out when her children were young. She stated that, "the questions I got more than anything were, 'Well what are you going to do with that [degree]? So why are you taking that?' And I'd say, 'Nothing, I'm doing it for me.' And [I was] totally doing it for myself." For Leslie, the right time for her to continue with her university studies did not arise until her children became more independent, and she had separated from her non-supportive spouse. She maintained her desire to achieve a university degree for years, and while others did not understand or empathize with her desire to attend university later in life, this did not deter Leslie from pursuing her dream.

Maureen described in detail how she had to wait until circumstances in her life allowed her to commit the time, energy, and financial resources to her education:

One of the significant pieces was that I knew I would be returning at some point, it was just a question of when, and there were also some life circumstances that kind of all lined up at the same time that provided the opportunity. So I was sort of in a stable place as far as relationship, as far as financial, as far as a sense of what my learning goals were, what I needed to do. So those things all lined up so that was really what led to the final decision [to return].

Maureen's description of having to defer education until the right supportive factors were in place and primary obligations were met reflects the experiences of Leslie, Linda, Marie, and Christine. For these five women, it took many years of waiting and planning before they were in a position of being able to access education. Linda stated that:

It probably took me about 15 years before I was situated in a place in my life where it was possible. I had taken a number of other classes and certificates, and smaller things; trying to get out of [my job] for several years. Another reason [is that] I'm at a place in my life where I just want to be challenged. Work, I just don't find it stimulating. I don't use my brain really. It's mostly physical work, [and] a little exhausting emotionally. I'm not really thinking critically, at any given moment. And I think, with all my life's

experiences, [and] a lot of personal work, I've come to a place where I feel that I could, [and] really want to give back what has been given to me.

Linda's experience of planning for years to attend university was reflected by Maureen, Christine, Leslie, and Marie. A university education directly from high school was not something any of them took for granted. Rather it was something they recognized later in life as a missed experience.

Marie was unique in that she was not enrolled in university for intrinsic reasons of doing something for herself. Rather, she needed a change in employment and she was determined to prove herself to her mother:

And when people say you have to do it for you, I don't have to do anything for me. That's not my motivation. I'm going to do my PhD and I'm going to end up with a Doctor on a letterhead just so I can send it to my mother, and say, "I'm leaving the country, good-bye."

Jesse returned to complete a degree because of a determination to finish what she had started. She stated simply, "I knew I needed to finish it." Her resolve to complete a degree was shared by Leslie, Maureen, and Christine, all of whom had interrupted their studies for various reasons but ultimately returned to finish a degree.

Christine succinctly stated that, "I loved education and felt I was gypping [sic] myself. The time was right." Christine's statement echoes the sentiments of the other seven women, although they used other words to describe their motivations for attending university. All the women implicitly or explicitly described a sense that they had missed out on a significant experience by not attending university when they were younger, and they were determined to make up for that loss. Now that other obligations, towards family in particular, were met or were less demanding, the women were able to prioritize their desire for education.

Violence or Trauma

Linda, Joan, Jesse, Marie, Maureen, and Katherine reported that they had experienced some form of violence or trauma, either as children or adults. These experiences included repeated abuse, as in child sexual abuse and domestic violence, emotional or psychological abuse as children and adults, and/or separate incidences of sexual assault and rape. Some of these six women elected to provide many details of their traumatic experiences and how their lives were affected, while others indicated that they had experienced violence but did not elaborate. Either way, these six women made links between their experiences of violence or trauma and their quest for education, and particularly for their field of study. Many had pursued, or were choosing to

pursue, programs in the helping professions either to give support to women who had been victimized and/or to do violence prevention work.

Linda was explicit in her statement that, "I think there is definitely a connection [between my experiences of violence and returning to school]." As already described, Linda wished to support women survivors of violence in ways that she has been helped and healed. Katherine described how her experiences of child sexual abuse "absolutely influenced her choice of study," and her pursuit of a university degree would allow her to work towards ending child sexual abuse. Katherine elaborated on how achieving this goal would also be healing in that she might understand and accept her own abuse:

> If there was something I could do to make that change [of preventing abuse], that would be probably a point in my life where I turn around and I could say: "Now I know why I was abused. Now I understand. Because I have to do this [prevention work]."

Katherine's hope of achieving understanding of her own experiences of abuse attests to a potentially healing aspect of education. Maureen also expressed hope for transformation and healing through education and she had hope that education would assist her in leaving an oppressive workplace.

Joan too associated her experiences of violence with her choice of university study: "That [field of study] drew me because of my past experiences." She described child and adult traumas that influenced her choice of field of study, including homophobic responses to her "coming out" as lesbian, which she said were, "probably more traumatic to me than the sexual abuse I had as a child." In response to these experiences, Joan aims to assist youth with struggles around their sexuality.

Jesse wanted to incorporate her experiences of trauma into her learning and research papers for university:

> That experience that I was going to write about was about trauma. I was weaving together my experience of trauma from my father and my family, with going to [location] and seeing these traumatized people, who have been oppressed. And I find that fascinating; [the various forms of oppression] are all the same thing.

Jesse found that her education revealed the systemic nature of violence, trauma, and oppression, which helped her to externalize some of her experiences.

Violence or trauma during university. Six of the women had not experienced violence or trauma after enrolling in university, partly because prior to enrolling, they had left violent intimate relationships or families. Two of the women, Joan and Linda, experienced partner abuse while

attending university but the relationships had ended by the time of our interviews. Joan described that while attending university she experienced "some violence in a relationship, not a lot, while I was in my undergraduate." When asked if and how this violence affected her studies, she said that she dealt with the violence by "maybe just missing classes, from going out drinking to forget about it, what was happening, but that's probably about it." She did not discuss how or when the relationship ended.

Linda, on the other hand, found that her enrollment in university was the catalyst to end the relationship with her partner:

> I was in a committed long-term relationship. It was a very unhealthy relationship. I can identify some areas that were certainly not healthy and would align with sections within that power and control wheel [a tool used to describe areas of partner abuse such as financial, emotional, physical, etc.] My partner at the time, when I first mentioned that I really wanted to go to university, she had a real issue with that. And I just could not, not go. So it took a couple more years. But, this relationship did come to an end which was extremely difficult for me. It was probably the most difficult thing, one of the most difficult things, in recent years.

While these two women described explicit partner abuse, the more subtle forms of gender subordination prevalent in a sexist society, were described by Maureen, Leslie, Joan, Jesse, Marie, Linda, and Katherine. Maureen described the oppression as a woman she experienced in her workplace, and the gender inequity she felt from internalized ascribed gendered expectations. Leslie felt gender subordination in her socialization in high school to be a secretary, and in her roles of wife and mother, which led to her deferring university. Joan described experiencing homophobia from not conforming to heterosexual norms for women. Jesse described her subordination in a traditional female role of secretary and lack of support from her father for her educational aspirations. Linda and Marie experienced the consequences of marital breakdown and becoming solely responsible for their children.

Katherine experienced sexism in her workplace which was the direct cause of her work-place injury. She had initially responded that she had not experienced violence or trauma after her enrollment in university. Later, she described the trauma during her first year of university of receiving death threats against her and her family from the man who was being prosecuted for sexually abusing her as a child. Katherine outlined the effect of these threats, which was clearly traumatic to her and her children:

> I remember the judge saying to him, "You know, you terrorized her." I said, "You know, the kids were outside playing and I had to have them acutely aware of every car that

drove by. And they weren't ever allowed to walk home from school, ever, and still they're [ages] and they're not comfortable walking [alone]."

Thoughts of potential revenge from her abuser remained with Katherine. She wished he was now receiving treatment "so that he's not right now got some kind of plan to come and blow away my whole [family]." Katherine primarily drew on the support of her husband through this ordeal.

To summarize, six of the women described various experiences of violence or trauma prior to their attending university, and the variety of ways these experiences influenced their decisions to return and their choice of field of study. Leslie and Christine did not describe experiences of violence, but Leslie outlined how gender inequity in childcare responsibilities caused her to interrupt her university studies. Seven of the women described more subtle experiences of gender inequity and seven of the eight of the women described how education had transformed their past understandings of violence, oppression, or gender subordination. All eight of the women described how they hoped education would transform their current living or employment situations.

Supports

Support which adult women students might need to persist in university, and in particular, the supports which could benefit adult women students who are survivors of violence and trauma, were of particular interest for one purpose of my study: to document what personal and institutional supports were beneficial to the women's successful participation as university students. The participants described various supports received from university staff and services, and emotional support from family, friends, and peers, all of which were helpful in encouraging their decisions to enroll, to persist, or both.

The Learning Centre. The university hosts a Learning Centre which provides two primary services. One is for academic support through workshops, tutoring, and personal learning assistance. A second service is to provide support and accommodation to students with disabilities. Maureen found the Learning Center very helpful with general academic preparation after having been out of school for some time. Katherine and Marie described their disabilities · and how they were greatly assisted by the Learning Centre. Both these women mentioned the name of the same staff person who was very helpful. Katherine, however, was concerned about the patriarchal nature of the service manager:

> I have a disability and I've received a lot of support. I go to the Learning Centre. Anyway they, she and this other lady there [name of staff member], have been fantastic in making sure I have a note-taker and that I have more time for my exams. Yeah, it's been good.

> [Except] I find a huge huge hierarchy system working in there. I have a real difficult time with that. That poor front-end lady, and she's such a nice lady, she does everything. Her boss just comes out, like a typical [autocrat]. It'd be different if I'd just seen it once or twice, but [it happens] every time I'm in there.

Despite Katherine's witnessing of this dynamic, she persisted in accessing the service as it was essential to her learning needs.

Marie also described the benefits she received from the same staff member at the Learning Centre:

> [She] sent me a couple of links to [name of University's] website. And they have a lot of grammar, and spelling, sentence structure programs, like hand-outs that you can download and read. So I've been trying to do that as well. Well, I have to because I'm a student with disabilities. I've never taken advantage of the fact that I'm differently-abled as people say. Until this year; that's the first time I actually took advantage of it.

Marie was initially reluctant to pursue support for her learning challenges, but because her first term marks were disappointingly low and almost made her drop out, she decided to utilize the Learning Centre. If she had not received this support, I wonder if she might have dropped out. Marie explained that in one course, "I passed, barely. I wanted to [quit]. I looked at my husband. I said, 'I'm not built for university, I'm not smart enough'." Instead of quitting, however, she accessed the Learning Centre and recognized that some of her gaps in knowledge related to a lack of academic preparation, not her intellectual abilities. One could question whether it was the services offered by the Learning Centre, or if it was the individual staff member who was supportive to these women, a question the university administration might wish to explore further.

Maureen did not identify any disabilities. Rather, she used the supports of the Learning Centre to assist with re-integration to university as it had been several years since she had last attended and she felt unprepared:

> I hadn't written an essay in a long time, so I remember the first couple of papers I had to write, I sort of ran it by the people that work there, and [they] just helped me learn APA, 'cause that was something I couldn't remember. And I went to a lot of the free seminars and presentations, like on note taking and successful test writing, and you know all those things. I attended a ton of that stuff.

Maureen also availed herself of other university-based supports. She described how she, "utilized the librarians, not just going in there and saying, I don't know what to do, but booking appointments with them to show me different things, so I could learn how to do certain areas of research."

The Gender Centre. The other valuable institutional support identified by the women was the Gender Centre which provides a library, counseling and career information, and a place to relax and meet with other students. Here women could receive peer emotional support around issues of violence and sexual assault, and they could connect with like-minded women. This Centre is funded by the student union, not the university itself. Marie described how support from the Gender Centre helped her overcome the triggering of emotional trauma after a class discussion about rape. Marie said she received "huge, huge support there. When we were doing the unit in [the course] on rape, I completely missed my class after, 'cause I ran to the Gender Centre and I just broke."

While Linda did not utilize the Gender Centre for crisis intervention, the value of the Centre's work in support of women's issues, and the availability of a space where women can meet, has been helpful to her:

> The Gender Center is there as well, and they make their presence known. Or certainly I've known of them since I've been here, and I don't know if that's the same for everyone. But they do a lot of awareness and education around women's issues…I know [name of person] is a wonderful woman and a couple of the other ones that volunteer there. So I know that there's that space as well if I need that kind of woman energy. So that's where I'm kind of pulling my support from.

Linda also talked about receiving the support of a professional counselor during her first year of university, but the peer support offered through this Centre was particularly significant to providing emotional support to assist her with persisting in university.

Financial support. All of the women except Katherine cited the benefit of having financial supports available to them without which they would not have either returned or continued in university. Maureen, Marie and Christine had financial support from their husbands which was helpful and essential to their staying in university. Linda, Joan, and Leslie described financial aid provided by the university through bursaries or through the student loan system as being a significant support for them. Nonetheless, these three women still found that meeting financial needs was one of their biggest challenges as adult students. Linda stated, "Financially, there have been bursaries available to me as an adult student and lone parent that comes around mid-fall. So I have been able to access that." Still she described financial difficulties as one of her greatest stressors since she was "below the poverty line as a student."

Accessing available financial support was difficult and time-consuming for one woman, Joan. She was appreciative of the financial support she received, although she had some struggles in accessing student loans. She had been living on her own since a teen, supporting herself in a

variety of ways, primarily as a waitress, so student loans were essential to her participation in university:

> I remember the first year trying to get funding, there was a lot of difficulty with OSAP [Ontario Student Assistance Program], because I hadn't been living at home for three years but they still took into account my Dad's salary and that kind of stuff. And I had to fight them; [my parents] weren't, they absolutely weren't [supporting me]. I was working. So that was a really big challenge. And then my friend sat me down, [and] we figured out what I was earning that year. I think I earned like $3,000, and so we were able to prove to [OSAP] that I'm not getting any [parental] support. So then, I was very fortunate to get loans and grants through out my four years of undergraduate. I worked in the summer so I'd pay that off, and I still had a bill at the end of the time. Now it took me a long time to pay that off. But, that was fine. [At the] Master's level, I applied to [name of Bursary fund]. I got funded totally.

Fortunately for Joan, she had a friend as advocate assisting her in obtaining funding.

Seven of the women said that although financial support might be available through institutional resources, consistently it was described as either barely adequate or most often as inadequate.

Professors. Another major theme described by all eight of the women was the support, caring, and encouragement of certain professors which was significant to their persistence and success.

Leslie differentiated between contract lecturers and full-time faculty, while the other seven women specified professors by department, or without differentiation. Leslie said:

> If I had to say what was most supportive I would say contract lecturers. I honestly did not find the full-time faculty supportive to the extent the contract lecturers were. I found the courses that I took on campus, and even [with] a couple online, it was usually a lecturer. And, they seemed to love their topic, they were interested in it, they make it interesting. I took [name of course], and I could hardly wait to get there.

Leslie explained that, by contrast, full-time faculty members were "way too concerned about their own publications, their own CV's, and maybe they have to be."

While Leslie did not use the word care in her description of the professors who were supportive to her, Joan, Linda, Jesse, and Katherine all emphasized how caring professors were, and gave poignant examples of how this care made a difference to them and their educational persistence. Joan described how the support of one professor enabled her to continue with a course:

> I was petrified to stand up in front of [people to speak]. We had to do a classroom presentation. I hadn't done one up to that point. And I went to her and I said, "[name of professor], I have to drop this course because there is no way I can stand up in front of

my peers and talk. There's no way, I'm dropping the course, I'm getting out." And she was very good about [it, saying], "No, Joan, don't do that, we'll find you something else to do, I just don't want you to lose this course." By the time that we had to present, I made the decision to present. Now, had she let me drop out, had she not given me the option, I mean, think about it, eh?

This professor's attention to, and care about, the effect of Joan's fear, made a difference to her participation, confidence, and personal growth.

Linda also shared stories she had heard from other students about the value of caring professors:

From listening to other people, from men as well as women actually, and my [own experiences], there are a handful of really caring professors out there. They're very good at what they do and they're just that kind of person. And you just know that if you need to talk to them, or you need a little support, or, you know, you need extensions on assignments, for whatever reasons. You know there are a thousand reasons. But that that's available. They really are, some of them, approachable in that way. And they understand. I'm probably thinking more about the [name of] department. My experiences with them have been very positive. Not that I've used them as counselors or anything like that, I'm not saying that. But I just know they're approachable and willing to kind of give and take where it seems to fit. Does everybody know that? I don't know. I don't mind asking for help; not everybody is able to do that. So I think there are some pockets of this happening on campus. I think that [it's] super important.

Linda's description of a handful of caring professors as "super important" was similar to what Katherine said:

My profs are phenomenal. I have had such a wonderful, wonderful group of profs. Because they so care. If you care, they care. They go over and above the call of duty. I bombed the exam and my prof said, "Katherine, this isn't you." Like I participate in class. She said "Your [family member] just passed away." And she scrapped [the exam], and got me to do an essay. They know if you are a dedicated student. I've heard negative [things about professors] but experiencing what I've experienced, I've got to think that [students] might not be taking the proper steps.

Katherine's experiences of her professor knowing a little about her, that she was a committed student and that a family member had passed away, and wanting to provide an opportunity for her to succeed, are examples of the kind of caring she and the other seven women considered to be important.

Jesse described her thesis supervisor without whose support she probably would not have completed her program. She related that:

[My] supervisor, she was extremely [supportive]. Her manner in my project supervision, she was very present [and focused on me when we interacted]. So I felt very supported in getting that done and that was very important 'cause it did change

> my life for the better, to get it done. And she said, "You know, it matters to me that you finish this." And I couldn't have done it myself. So I'm really glad that [she] is who she is and, and helped me in that.

The acknowledgement that her professor felt a vested interest in her completion was significant for Jesse.

Joan described how fortunate she felt that the professor of a course taken to assess her capacity for university knew about her history of trauma and took extra steps to assist her in successfully completing the course. Joan talked about this as a fortuitous event, not as a part of an overall climate of care at the university:

> It just so happens that the professor of my course had been my [worker], the one that got me out of psychiatric hospital. And she hadn't seen me over those years and so it, was like, she was thrilled, I was thrilled. Anyway, in her course, she was very supportive of me. After she marks [the final paper], she takes me for coffee and she talks to me about it. She talked to me about how I should probably take an English course. 'Cause the content was interesting but the other stuff was really [poor]. So that was encouraging. Because had I had another professor? Now isn't that serendipitous? Had I had another professor, I don't know that they would have been as generous. So she passed me and I got into that [program].

Joan's perspective was that if not for the individual support of this professor, she might have failed the preliminary course and might never have pursued university education. Worse, she might have had her feelings of low self-worth and lack of intellectual ability reinforced.

Marie, Maureen, and Christine provided less detailed but equally powerful descriptions of the support of professors. Marie stated, "My two profs, definitely, especially [name of professor]. She's awesome." Marie did not elaborate on how she came to see her professor as "awesome" but she unequivocally stated that specific professors were significant in the support she has received at the university. Christine appreciated the respect for her life and work experiences and that, "My professors offered a lot of respect. They encouraged graduate work, and what they would do for me. We [older students] might challenge authority more than an 18 year-old might. They listened to us." The feeling of being validated for her knowledge was significant to Christine as one of her goals when she enrolled was to receive validation for her skills. Maureen spoke of the professors within her field of study as being "very, incredibly supportive. I really utilized the support of the professors." Maureen did not describe in detail how she utilized the support of professors other than for suggestions for assignments but she did describe a sense of collegiality similar to Christine's where she felt respected for her knowledge and work experience.

Maureen and Christine spoke of the support of professors without identification by sex, while Marie, Katherine, Joan, and Jesse spoke of specific female professors in their descriptions of the support they received. Linda stated, "It's not just the women. A friend of mine; she's been able to access one of the male professors in that department who has been able to hear her and what not." It is important to note that two of the women were specific in commenting that it was not that they expected professors to be therapists or counselors, but simply to be caring. This meant recognizing their strengths and needs, offering reasonable options for them, and providing encouragement.

Effect of unsupportive professors. The detrimental effect of unsupportive professors on the experiences of Jesse, Leslie, and Joan also points to the costs of uncaring professors and hence the benefits of caring professors. Unsupportive professors caused, among other things, Leslie to drop out for a year, Jesse to almost quit, and Joan to abandon further pursuits until the offending professor retired.

Jesse described a professor's lack of understanding and empathy towards her experiences. She was completing a paper about analyzing oppression, including her own experiences, and described how she was "writing and I was feeling invalidated. Like I would talk about [the abuse], I'd write about, you know, going through emotional abuse. And she [professor] said, 'Jesse, from your perspective'." Jesse was emphatic when she discussed this incident and explained that it seemed that the professor expected her to reframe the abuse she experienced as a child as not really abuse, but a child's misinterpretation. She described her confusion and the lack of validation she felt:

> I remember going home and being confused even about why I was so upset. But just having nobody who really [understood my experience]. I just so remember my face going red, and being so [upset]. And I think it was that idea of here I was, I thought she got it all along, and she was supporting me, and then it was [the opposite].

Still, Jesse does not blame the professor. Rather, she explained that the professor "just didn't have the same sensibility of the validity of personal experience. In fact, she didn't do anything [work wise] related to that. She was innocent in all of it." Jesse was not angry or blaming, but the experience almost made her drop out again.

Leslie described how a professor's harsh feedback caused her to drop out:

> One of the early courses I took, I dropped the course and I was very discouraged, and I didn't take any courses for the rest of the year. The assignment was to write an eight-page paper; the paper was full of red ink, full of red ink. And on all these lines she'd [written], "should've expanded, more detail, you didn't say enough."

Leslie responded to the professor about how this feedback affected her:

> I thought [she had] said a freakin' eight-page paper. I could have totally expanded on that. But I had to cut it all back because [she] said eight pages. And I ended up sending that paper back to her and saying to her, "What you did was so disheartening to my academic career, to me as a person, to get this with all this red ink all over it," and I said, "and I'm dropping your course."

While some might argue that harsh feedback is a reality of life, for a student who has been told that she did not have the intelligence to attend university, as Leslie had, and who had the courage to challenge that assumption, overly harsh feedback seriously affected her motivation to persist.

Joan outlined how a professor discouraged her from applying to graduate studies. She said:

> And the Dean at the time, I'd had him in undergraduate level. He didn't like me. He didn't accept me. I had people write on my behalf, to get me accepted into [the program], and he refused, because I didn't have 90% in my marks, and he didn't think I was a good candidate. Oh, I was devastated. But he just didn't care for me. Much. I just applied once he retired and I knew he was gone.

Joan applied to the program after this professor retired, was accepted, achieved her Master's degree, and has had a successful career in her field, achievements which belie the professor's assessment of her. Joan also described a time when she spoke to this professor about her fear of speaking in class due to her shyness:

> So I wouldn't speak out a lot in class. And he based 20% of the mark on participation. And I spoke to him, in class. I raised my hand and I said, "You know, there are those of us that [find it difficult to speak]." And he just poo-poohed that. Said, "Nope, that's it."

Joan's example here is in direct contrast to the professor who assisted her in overcoming the difficulty of speaking in class by being supportive.

Friends and family. Linda, Marie, Leslie, Maureen, Christine, and Katherine reported that the support of family was integral to their participation in university studies. Christine spoke about how her "husband and kids believed in me. My parents were really supportive. They were always helpful. My colleagues too were pretty excited." Katherine described her husband as being her "support system." Marie described how her husband was particularly supportive when she was triggered by past traumas, and said, "He just, he knows certain days, that there's certain times of the year I get really bad, and he knows. And he'll just put his arm around me." Marie has experienced recurrent sequelae from her past traumatic and violent experiences and fortunately

has the support of someone who is aware of her needs and is willing to provide the support she requires. Maureen described the support of her family in detail:

> If it wasn't for my family I couldn't have done it. 'Cause I really did just go into school mode for those years, and my family was really understanding as far as allowing me to prioritize [school], and that was, just again, lovely. And financially my husband was very supportive of whatever I needed to do. So that was really great.

In contrast, Leslie described an unsupportive husband who influenced her decision to drop out during her first attempt at university:

> You need to have a supportive spouse, which I did not have. So that made it even more difficult. There was no support. I did not have that. When the kids were young, his career took him out of town a lot, so somebody had to be there. It just didn't work out. Yup. It could have.

Leslie's words indicate her recognition that despite the responsibility of children and her husband having to work out of town, he could have been more supportive and she could have attended university when she initially wanted to. The fact that she described attending university as a sole parent as easier than when she was married indicates the lack of support she received from her husband:

> Like you're the Mom, you're studying, its not like somebody's making meals for me so I can study, but just having my husband not there, the negative, the pulling me down, that was huge. So just to have the freedom to sit in bed and study when nobody was home... So it was easier.

Leslie's words show that having a partner does not necessarily mean that one has more support than those who are sole parents.

All the women with children, Linda, Marie, Leslie, Christine, and Katherine, described the importance and value of the support of their children, who were proud of them, and accepted their role as students and their reduced availability to meet their children's needs. Linda reported that her sons had to grow up a bit faster because of her focus on studies but they continued to support her. I wonder what the women's experiences would have been like had their children resisted their mothers' roles as students.

Other significant supports came from friends and fellow students. Marie, Linda, Joan, and Maureen described the support of close friends. For example, Marie said, "I'm an only child but I have a couple of people that I call my sisters that are very, very supportive. That's it." It appears that Marie, Linda, and Joan did not need a large number of supportive people; rather, one or two very supportive people in their lives helped to make their university experience positive. The

women did not describe friends as providing practical assistance such as childcare, finances, transportation, but rather emotional support. Linda explained that most of her support came from friends:

> Mainly just friends; just the informal support that friends can give, it's immeasurable. I think probably where I seem to gain strength from is just kind of independent supports [unrelated to formal supports]. I have connected with women on campus who have similar experiences as mine. So we kind of support one another in that sense. Nothing directly connected to the university or anything in that way.

Maureen described the value of encouragement she received from others:

> And friends, colleagues were particularly supportive as well, just to me making the decision to go back. You know, for a long time, I was saying [to myself] why aren't you doing this? [I would think], oh I don't know if I'll get in, I don't know if I'll get accepted, I'm so old. If it wasn't for them constantly [encouraging me], I don't think I would have [enrolled] even yet. And, fellow students in the program that were adults, returning as well; we had a nice little cohesive group experience together.

Maureen needed this level of encouragement to escape an oppressive work environment that damaged her self-esteem and belief in her abilities.

Joan, who received some financial support from two aunts, did not have any other support from her immediate family. A lack of emotional support from family added to Joan's challenges as an adult student:

> My mother and father, not so [supportive]. It was out of their realm. They would tell everyone else how they proud they were of me, but they would never tell me. 'Cause to [my mother], if she gave me credit I would walk out of the room with my head this big.

Joan went on to describe that in lieu of her biological family, she developed a circle of women friends who became like family in providing emotional support. She said, "You know identifying with women, we get our own circle of friends and family. So we develop and enrich a second family. And that becomes your support." Fortunately, Joan was willing and able to develop this circle of support for herself, given that she had described her self as isolated, "being an island," and unused to accessing supports.

Two of the women, Leslie and Jesse, felt that they had received little support in any form, but they doggedly continued, albeit with interruptions prior to completion and graduation. Leslie described herself as "pretty independent. I just did if for myself." Jesse reported the least amount of support, "I didn't have my parents; I had nobody else. I still have nobody else. So just that bit of being... totally [alone], it sucks." It is perhaps not surprising to note that Jesse, with the least

amount of supports, was also the one who described how she had to drop out three times before meeting her educational goals.

Employers. Maureen and Christine described the support of their employers who approved a leave from work and the guarantee of a job to which they could return. This provided the emotional security to ease their decision to enroll at university. Maureen said:

> I was on a leave of absence and then after the one year I just applied for an extended leave of absence knowing that during the second leave I probably really wasn't going to return. But I just kept that option open because that made it easier to do, knowing that I had a job even though it wasn't a job I probably wanted to go back to, but knowing that I could. Financially, that security piece made it a little bit easier to do it. I don't know if I could have outright just quit a job and gone. It would have been a lot more difficult I think, just psychologically, you know?

Christine received similar employer support as Maureen, and returned to her job after completing her degree. She also described the support from her supervisor as valuable: "My work gave me time off and assured me that the job would be here when I returned. My supervisor gave me a letter, financial support, and they sought me out when I returned home at Christmas." The option of a job to return to assisted Christine in making the decision to enroll in university.

Unique findings about supports. The need for flexibility in learning opportunities was reflected in Leslie's feedback that she would not have completed her degree without the flexibility of online courses. Marie described teaching assistants as helpful, but qualified that her accessing them was dependent upon whether she could find the time, and whether they were available when she was: "'Cause quite often [when] they're available, I'm not."

The importance of the availability of information on university support services was mentioned by Joan. She could have benefited from particular services but did not because she was unaware of them and had not been socialized to access supports: "I had no idea [about support services]. Because I had been on my own: And in high school, I didn't know that there were those kinds of things. I was very much an island. So that's how I was at university too." For Joan, who lacked academic preparation, it was unfortunate that she was unaware of these supports as she might have been able to enhance her grades. Still, she managed to persist and graduate.

To summarize this section on supports, the women participants reported that institutional supports such as the Learning and Gender Centre, financial aid, and the care of professors, along with the emotional support of friends and family, were helpful in their decisions to attend university and in their persistence. One woman benefited from the flexibility offered by online learning, and two of the women benefited from employer supports. For seven of the women,

while financial supports were helpful, they still faced a financial challenge which emphasizes the need for adequate financial aid to support their decision to enroll and their ability to persist.

Challenges

While some of the supports described above helped alleviate some of the women's challenges as adult students, many challenges were still experienced.

Having to study harder. Maureen, Leslie, and Joan described how much work it took to redevelop study habits, and how much harder studying was in comparison to when they were younger. Part of this difficulty they attributed to their age and part to the length of time since they had been students. Maureen reflected that:

> It was a lot of work; I really did need to study. Particularly for some of the memorization, and getting back into doing that kind of [academic] reading, I know was hard. I remember the first couple of nights, taking my textbook into bed and going, "Oh my God, I can't read like this; this stuff is not absorbed." I'd read it over and over, and over, and go, "What?" And these were, like, first year courses, and I'd been in the field for, like, 10 years. But it didn't take too long and I started being able to absorb. And memorizing things; I hadn't memorized, other than maybe a shopping list, in a long time.

Leslie echoed Maureen's experience with her observation that:

> The other part of being an adult student is that I felt like I had to study harder, because I wasn't sure it was all going to stick. Because I think the older you get, the more things you have in your head. I don't think it's a matter of forgetting. I think you just have so many details in your head, that when you're younger, you don't have all those details. So as an adult student I really felt that I had to study hard because I wanted to make sure it stuck, so when I got into the exams the recall would be there. So I don't know if that was paranoia or whatever, but that's the way I felt. And I didn't have to study like that when I was young.

Maureen and Leslie both reflected that one of the challenges of having multiple roles and responsibilities was the need to study harder. They did not relate it to their intelligence, rather to their stage in life.

Joan, who had not completed high school, felt she did not have the required study skills when she first returned to university. She said, "I think at undergraduate, well both, [undergraduate and graduate studies], undergraduate for sure, one of the challenges was not knowing how to study. That whole needing to be structured and set up, I had none of that. I didn't know how to do that." Again, it was unfortunate that Joan did not access the institutionally provided learning assistance resources. Maureen accessed these, Joan did not; Maureen continued directly into graduate school while Joan was not initially accepted to graduate studies partially due to lower marks.

Age. Age as a challenge was mentioned by seven of the women. Leslie, Marie, Maureen, and Linda commented on how age affected their energy level and ability to study, and the pressure they felt to complete university before getting much older. Age was also described as a factor in relation to differences between them and traditional students in terms of beliefs, knowledge, values, and feeling not part of the university culture. Marie, in her 30's, described feeling too old in comparison to the mainstream culture of the university. She laughed when asked about what she found challenging as an adult student:

> Age, yeah. I'm too old for this shit. Finding I really do have to be in bed by 10:00 at night. It's intimidating. I went for orientation. I felt like everybody's Mom. It was like, "Ok, this is scary, I'm at school with a bunch of kids." And even some of the profs are younger than I am. And that takes a lot of getting used to. You have to sit there and kind of think, "Ok, you have knowledge that I need. It doesn't matter [that] you're a baby." And it's scary 'cause you're always going to be outnumbered. And, yeah, there are other adult students, but I find that we don't group together as adult students. They're all over the room. Well, most of my courses, there are two or three adult students. It's like being back in grade school and being picked last for the football team. [The younger students] look at you as the old...You don't share their views, and because you're older, you have nothing to contribute. It's like we've become brain dead at 30. I remember thinking like that [about people aged 30 and older]. Somebody in class has said, "Oh it must be nice to come to school with your daughter." Do I really look that old? And I find most of the adult students don't stand around and talk after class. They just go. Its go, go, go, go.

Marie felt that adult students do not seem to support each other in their "outsider" position. She had volunteered to assist with the development of an adult student association but ironically found that most of the students were too busy to participate.

Joan's experience was similar to Marie's in that she felt like an outsider because of her age. She commented:

> I lived in residence. It wasn't very helpful because I was with all these young people who just wanted to party and drink and, ok, I'd been there, done that. So they weren't good role models. So that was interesting, just feeling like I don't belong. And don't fit in.

Despite not fitting in, Joan persisted and then moved out of residence for the last three years of her program.

> Leslie described feeling out of place with the values and beliefs of the younger students:

> I remember [the professor] saying something about barriers to women and there was a whole group of young girls who were saying, "There's no barriers, I don't know what you're [talking about]. A woman can do anything she wants, you know." And I remember thinking, "Holy cow, I wish I was that naïve!" And I wish it was true. But there was no way they wanted to even discuss it. I maybe said a couple of things, and then I realized right away, my comments were not what the young people in that class wanted

to hear so I had to kind of [stop talking]. Again, as an adult student I probably had to curb what I really wanted to say.

Leslie's comments point to the feeling of needing to fit in, even to circumscribe one's discussion of life experiences, in order to feel less marginal to the mainstream.

Katherine too described feeling that her beliefs and values were not in step with the majority of the students in her classes: "The most difficult [challenge] was, like I said, my age, and my beliefs. Every [one of my beliefs] seems to be challenged, 'cause I was raised in a different generation." Katherine viewed these challenges to her beliefs positively, as part of her growth and learning experience.

Linda and Maureen felt pressure to complete their degrees because of their age. Maureen was worried about being "too old, I felt a lot of that agism, before I got there. I also felt the age piece, just the real pressure, and the timelines [to finish]." Maureen's experience seemed to relate to her fears of being too old prior to enrolling, rather than experiences of feeling agism once she began attending university. Linda felt age pressures in that she wanted to finish university as soon as possible despite financial challenges: "You know, I'm not getting any younger so I feel like I'm beating the clock. So I don't even see an option of going part-time, or taking a year off, to make some extra money. I'm in it, let's do it and get it done, move on to the next chapter." Linda recognized that the financial sacrifice made finishing university sooner rather than later worthwhile.

Age, however, was not a longstanding problem. The women adjusted, and never mentioned age as something that made them consider quitting. Although Katherine described age as a major challenge when she went back the first year, by the second year, she no longer felt that way. She laughed and stated, "First day second year I walked in, I was a veteran." Additionally, some of the women began to recognize the benefits of being an older student. For example, Maureen described how as an adult student she was more comfortable seeking assistance:

I was very resourceful, so I felt like I really learned what I needed to learn about the system of the university, way more so than when I had gone back as a young 18 or 19 year old student. And had I run into some problems, you know, I could have negotiated those a little more successfully I think going back as an adult student.

Leslie described how her maturity helped her to overcome the negativity of some co-workers about her student status. She explained that her co-workers "maybe haven't had the opportunity to go to university, don't see the value of it, think you're trying to get ahead of your station by going, be better than them." Leslie did not let this bother her because as she explained,

"I had way more other important things bothering me." The benefit of maturity helped her to ignore this negativity. Thus, while age was a source of some angst for seven of the women, it was tempered by the benefits of maturity and life experience.

Fears and doubts about abilities. Age related to the theme of experiencing fears and doubts about abilities to participate academically and intellectually and be successful in university. Although it might not be unusual to have these feelings as a student, at any age, the added effect of trauma and abuse and messages about lack of self-worth further affected these women's self-esteem and beliefs in their abilities. For example, Marie thought her low marks related to her lack of intelligence rather than her lack of preparation for university given that she had left home as a teen and not completed high school. Marie learned that her working-class background affected her lack of preparation for university education:

> So, my first term mark was really, really low. Like, I passed, barely. I wanted to [quit]. [I thought] I'm not smart enough, cause I was always raised to think that people who go to university have this wonderful lightening bolt of knowledge. That's how my parents always talked about university. I don't know how long you've [been here in this city] but if you were from [name of school], you went to college. They'll teach you a trade, pat you on the head and get you out into the working force. If you wanted to make something of yourself, you went to university. And university people were the elite and enlightened and wonderful human beings.

Despite Marie being pressured by her parents to obtain a higher status position of doctor or lawyer, she also received conflicting messages about her abilities to attain such positions.

Maureen's delay in committing to full-time university study was partly influenced by her lack of belief in her abilities:

> I think the reason it took a long time [to return] was because I wasn't sure if I could do it. Prior to actually arriving, the fear, you know, am I going to be able to do this? So that was tough.

It seemed that Maureen's self-doubts primarily related to her experiences of oppression in her workplace for years prior to finally enrolling after significant encouragement from other people.

Joan too described not feeling smart enough because of not being encouraged academically:

> And not feeling confident, you know, not thinking I can do this. So that attitude, you know, I don't think I can do this, I'm not smart enough, everyone is smarter than me. I never thought I was smart enough, absolutely. Does that relate to my trauma? I think it more relates to my mother. I think it more relates to family. Because there were no expectations in my family, that you can do anything, that you should be anything. The expectation was that I was probably going to get married and have children. [Education] wasn't valued much in my family. And I was just an average student so, to

me, university was something out of some other planet. And when you come from a
family background where they're not very complimentary of anything that you do, you
don't know what your skills and abilities are.

It was not until someone else recognized Joan's potential academic ability that she even
considered that she might be able to pursue higher education.

Leslie reported that she was explicitly streamed into non-academic work:

My sister is the oldest, she got a scholarship because she was really smart, the rest
of us [nothing]. I don't know what your high school was like, [but mine], if you weren't
brilliant, you were told to go into secretarial or be a nurse. I wasn't even brilliant enough
to be [a teacher or nurse]. I was to be a secretary.

At some point Leslie realized that she had the capacity to pursue more education despite these
messages from her youth.

What added to these four women's internalized messages about their presumed lack of
academic ability was a lack of academic preparation either from not having completed high
school or because of the extended time since they had been in any school setting.

Lack of academic preparation. Marie described how high school students come to
university with a different knowledge base than she had. She described her lack of current
knowledge as a challenge:

Not having the knowledge that a lot of the high schools are teaching now, I think has
hindered me a lot. Like I said, the MLA, and grammar, sentence structure, not having it
fresh, has probably hindered me a lot. And the fact that nobody's critiqued my writing for
20 years. So, I have a lot to work on. When I was in high school, there was no such thing
as MLA. First term its like, "Yes and all essays have to be done in MLA." And I'm like,
what the hell? Thank God they have a [guide] book, 'cause I'd be completely lost.

It was commendable that Marie recognized the gap in her knowledge base and was determined to
close that gap through accessing other resources. Katherine too attributed her initial low marks to
the length of time between high school and her university enrolment and said, "I'll say my marks
weren't as high as I would have liked. But there are more things behind that, I think, because of
being out of school for so long. It was my first year back." It was encouraging that Katherine and
Marie, although temporarily discouraged, also recognized the probable causes of their lower-than-
hoped for grades and were overcoming self-blame and did not drop out.

Joan too, had serious doubts about her abilities, having never thought herself "smart
enough" to attend university. Because of her lack of a high school diploma, Joan was required to
take one university course to determine her eligibility to enter university full-time:

> I didn't have my high school diploma. So then I apply to university and they say to me, "Well, we want you to take a course, so that we see how you do, to see about you getting in full-time in September." So my first year in university I took the grammar course, which was like Greek to me, a whole other language.

Even this identification of a lack of academic preparation and her achieving the necessary pre-requisite for full-time enrolment did not quell Joan's long-standing self-doubts.

Leslie outlined her techniques for overcoming her fears about her academic abilities:

> The last time I'd been in a classroom was in high school. And so you're nervous. You think can I do this? Am I smart enough? Yeah, you just don't have that kind [of confidence]. Young people don't even think of that, am I smart enough? The first class I ever took as an adult student, I was so nervous and I purchased some of the materials. I had my notebook, tape recorder, a couple of pens, in case, oh my God, I ran out of ink. And I sat there poised, and I looked around the room at these other students, who were like half asleep, nobody had a notebook, didn't even have a pencil in their hands, and I kind of smiled to myself, and thought, "You know, you're going to do OK."

As much as she could smile at herself about it now, Leslie's over-preparation seems to have assisted with her success in university.

Gendered expectations and multiple role responsibilities. Six women described their roles as partners and mothers, and their internalized gendered expectations, as more significant than outside pressures to perform successfully. Despite being aware of the additional pressures of internalized gendered role expectations and their potential effect on experiences in school and life, Maureen described how she could not extricate herself completely from those pressures. This speaks to the power of internalized oppression. Responsibilities to others affected the ability of women to participate, and the way they participated in education. For example, Katherine described how her children were her first priority and she would miss school if her children needed her for something. It seemed that for these six women, family needs had to be met first in order for them to participate in university.

Maureen talked about her recognition of internalized gender inequity in her responsibility to meet family needs in comparison to what she observed as less responsibility to family on the part of men:

> And I also think of our culture and our society and how we've been socialized as women, the image of the woman having it all together, those pressures. That whole thing with men working out of town; when do you hear of women working out of town? And I also wonder, I had male colleagues [at university] who were around my age And if we [women], any of us decided not to follow through, [to quit] halfway through, I don't know how people would have viewed that. The guy stops 'cause he decided to whatever. But it feels like [women students] we're pretty dedicated and pretty determined to do it.

But I think that's part of a societal expectation, that we'll do this little school thing we're doing, and then get back to the role of being a woman. I don't know. Again, but just from my small circle of friends and acquaintances, I don't hear as many women who have extended as long to do graduate work. The tendency is to generally get in and get it done. And I have male friends and colleagues that, yeah, have dabbled, and taken a little longer.

At times Maureen felt guilty for prioritizing her school work over family responsibilities:

And school took a lot of time from family. So sometimes it was difficult because I wasn't getting as much stuff done, around the house even, you know? So there were a couple of moments with extended [family], they had the ability in how they said things and approached things, to make it feel like I wasn't doing my role, as what I should have been doing family-wise. Even to this day, occasionally at family events, it's mentioned. But also, my family, I can't even think of another person who's gone back as an adult student. Most of them have not done it at all. So even their understanding, like, they couldn't. [They'd say], "Why do you keep doing this? Why do you keep going back?"

Maureen's example shows the subtle ways that women can feel pressured into maintaining ascribed gender roles.

Christine too, felt conflicted by family responsibilities while attending university. She felt she could see a difference between her life and that of "younger students who have only one focus." She had planned for years in order to attend university and described how "she found a place to live close to the high school. The kids could walk to school, come home for lunch. This gave us independence and freedom. We all headed to Mom's school." The difference between Christine's responsibilities and younger students was further emphasized shortly after her return to classes when there was a family crisis:

In our first month of classes, my son had a serious accident and was in hospital [out of town]. I kind of went into survivor mode. My senses were heightened and I needed to keep it together everyday. I was going to give up school. I was driving back and forth every weekend. My husband was out of town and back one week at a time.

Fortunately for Christine, the family pulled their resources together, and encouraged her to continue. In particular, her injured son did not want her to give up which helped her to make the decision to stay enrolled in full-time studies.

Marie experienced conflict between taking time to study with other students and her family responsibilities and found dealing with these conflicts difficult:

It is very, very hard work. Because [other students] say, "Well you know, can we get together on this night?" [I say] "No, I'm sorry I can't, because I've got this commitment with the [child's] school." You know, with this school or with this [child], and I have these other commitments that I have to keep.

My sense was that Marie found these conflicts difficult to manage psychologically more so than logistically. She explained with humour that some younger students have said she provides good birth control incentive because they cannot imagine "juggling" all that she does. Marie felt fortunate that she has learned good time management skills over 15 years of employment.Leslie said that her biggest challenge while attending university was "Children. But it was an issue of juggling vehicles. They also had night classes, they had to get to the library, they were working part-time, so there was a juggling." Despite these practical challenges, Leslie found it easier to attend university and manage the needs of the four children as a sole parent than when she had been married.

Linda described how she never got a break from responsibilities. She worked every week, "part-time [work], I work midnights only. It's the only shift I can fit in. Every weekend. I'm just going seven days a week. That's tough for others." Linda recognized that her schedule was difficult both for her and others with whom she has relationships. The challenges of multiple role responsibilities and the women's persistence in university reflect their commitment and determination to education.

Finances. All of the women, with the exception of Katherine, regarded finances as a major challenge, even for those women who received financial assistance from the university or through student loans. Christine talked about saving for years to attend university. "It really needed a lot of planning. What was difficult was going from a significant income to none. I had saved but was struggling in maintaining a budget. Our comfort level went down which caused some anxiety." She hoped to pursue graduate studies but again was waiting, planning and saving until her financial means allow her to return.

Linda, Joan, and Marie all reported that finances were the biggest worry for them. Leslie and Joan would not have attended without financial assistance, and finances were a major strain for Joan. Marie described her situation as, "We barely make enough to keep our butts off welfare." Because of financial pressures Jesse suspended university twice before completing her degree. Delay in financial support attributed to Maureen's delay in returning to university.

Effects of past trauma. The potential sequelae from previous trauma also proved to be a challenge for Marie, Jesse, Maureen, and Joan. For Marie, a lack of trust in the stability of her marriage still troubled her. "It took my husband two years to get me to understand that I could go back to school, because I'm still waiting for him to leave again. 'Cause he absolutely devastated me when he left." She found it difficult to make plans for more than six months in the future, yet

as described earlier, she depends on her husband for emotional support when past traumas resurface and cause emotional difficulty for her.

Jesse found that some of the messages she had received from her father returned to haunt her during her studies:

> I started looking at violence against women; there was part of me, my father's voice, the dialogue inside that was saying, "You're not supposed to be looking at this stuff." Even now, I still hear that voice of, like, "What are you doing looking at that stuff?" You know, there was a part of me which was my father shoving down my throat what my reality was [to be], which was his reality.

Jesse provided this example of how the long-term effects of abuse affected her ability to persist in university. She dropped out once because the emotional challenges were overwhelming.

Maureen described how the oppression she was experiencing in her workplace affected both her delay in returning to university for fear of experiencing more oppression, and her experiences in class:

> I guess that was part of the fear of going back, was whether or not it was going to be supportive or if it was going to be more of the same [oppression]; not that that was probably possible but at the time I didn't know.

Fortunately Maureen's experience of university was not oppressive like her workplace and instead she experienced growth and validation. Classroom experiences led to her recognition of how traumatic her workplace had been a recognition which was traumatic in itself. She recalled:

> It was also tough to be in such an incredibly supportive environment after having come from a really horrifically unsupportive environment. Like it was black and white, and I actually had one moment in one of my classes where one of the fellow students was giving me this really lovely, positive, just really super, special, wonderful feedback, and it was just amazing. And I actually started crying and I didn't really understand why I was crying. It just dawned on me the differences in the environment and how unhealthy the first environment had been.

Maureen was so unused to hearing anything good about herself that when she did, she became overwhelmed with emotion and was forced to realize the effects of internalized oppression.

Aside from the above, two unique challenges were described by Jesse and Katherine. Jesse found that, as an adult, it was difficult to sit through lectures:

> Being lectured at was like I was [supposed to be] just ready to eat up whatever got thrown at me and regurg [regurgitate]. The classroom seemed like a place where I was supposed to just receive information and not, you know, use my wits. Like [the professors] sit and expound upon their knowledge of the world. That I'm supposed to just eat up.

Jesse was the only woman who mentioned this experience and although she found it annoying, it was not a deterrent to her continuing with her education.

The lack of attention to, or silencing around child sexual abuse, was a daily struggle for Katherine. She appreciated how her knowledge and beliefs had been challenged since she had returned to university, yet this made it even more difficult to discover that there had been little advancement in the way child sexual abuse was treated: "I found it ironic that every other one of my beliefs, or the ways I was brought up, is different today, except for [child sexual abuse]. [It] scares people. We talk about everything, but we don't talk about this." Katherine recognized that as a survivor of child sexual abuse she was sensitized to the subject, but was disappointed that a university, which is generally seen to be progressive, had not advanced the cause of making child sexual abuse more of a public issue.

Dropping out. Joan, Jesse, Leslie, Christine, and Maureen had completed their degrees in stages with interruptions caused by lack of financial, spousal, emotional, and/or personal supports in dealing with trauma reactions. Jesse described her situation:

> I went to university right after high school. I was on my own and didn't have any support. I dropped out. I tried to go back. I was working full-time and then I tried to take   a course, after working all day under pressure. And I couldn't calm my mind down enough to do it. Yes, the dichotomy between working in that job and then going to university, and using my mind in a different way [was too difficult]. And I wasn't very grounded [in ways to manage emotions and feelings] and I didn't have strategies at that time for grounding myself; it was too much. And I dropped out and I was devastated. [Jesse sighed.] And I thought, "Oh, I'm never gonna complete university 'cause I can't do it…" And I have to work. I went through a couple of near misses. That's why it was like an odyssey. 'Cause there I quit it, there I went back.

Jesse's entire university career took almost 20 years from her first attempt immediately after high school until she graduated with a Master's degree. This speaks to her determination despite the several interruptions.

Maureen also described her many attempts to complete university and how she eventually returned:

> I returned several times. But life got in the way and different things were happening family- wise. My Dad was really sick, and so I sort of felt that I couldn't sort of not be working. I needed to be working just in case they needed my support financially and stuff. And being an only child, there's a whole lot of factors there.

Maureen's experience related to having to prioritize other responsibilities before her education.

Linda had attempted to attend university earlier in life when she needed to become economically self-sufficient after her marriage broke down. Career counseling recommended a quickly completed certificate course, although she had been interested in a university degree.

Christine had attended university at different times with her decisions dependent on family responsibilities and finances: "I went [back] after having my kids. I had planned on going for years. But I had to go back to work because my husband's business went under." These women's experiences reflect the importance of the availability of financial support. Other factors relating to dropping out include Leslie's description of an unsupportive husband which caused her to drop out the first time, and an unsupportive professor who caused here to drop out a second time. Had she had sufficient funds to arrange childcare during her first attempt at university, she might not have had to drop out regardless of the lack of support from her spouse.

Those women who were currently enrolled, Katherine, Marie, and Linda, planned to study year round, with some spring and summer courses, and to possibly proceed immediately from undergraduate to graduate school.

Determination. Maureen, Linda, Christine, Leslie, Marie, and Katherine talked about experiences through which they gained drive and determination, which they recognized as helpful to their persistence and success as students. Once they made the commitment to finish university, they were driven to not just complete, but to excel, with expectations of achieving A grades. They maintained this goal despite barriers of lack of formal preparation, not having completed high school, or having prolonged gaps between leaving high school and enrolling in university, and with multiple role responsibilities. Most of the pressure came from internal expectations and one woman, Maureen, talked about the self-induced pressure not to fail after having made the decision to return to school. She said, "I just felt at the time, one of the pressures was [that I] must be successful, there's no halfway." This pressure drove Maureen to persist and do well academically so that she could pursue graduate studies.

Linda said that her most recent and previous partners were not supportive of her returning to university, and although she regretted the loss of those relationships, it ultimately increased her motivation:

> So if I were to say that I had hindrances, I would have to say probably relationships
> that I have been involved in over the years have really not been supportive for me to
> get my education, in one way or another. But it just made me want to try harder.

She also described herself as always being "very independent, very motivated, very focused." Further, she felt that she has "deep self-determination, huge self-determination so I think that has

added to my success." Linda believed she learned this self-determination from her grandmother who had survived a great deal of domestic violence yet had "amazing inner strength. And I'm quite sure that's where I got it from." Linda attributed the role-modeling from her grandmother as integral to her ability to persist in the face of multiple life challenges, in that she has also developed a great deal of inner psychological strength and resiliency.

Christine explicitly described an example of her determination. She said:

I had planned on going for four years. But I had to go back to work because my husband's business went under. I did correspondence instead. I did my BA by correspondence and then I applied to [name of university] for the Honour's year. This attested to my desire for accomplishment and success.

Leslie explained why it was important to her to achieve an A average. "The A was an indication that I had really exceeded and I had done well. It was my proof to myself that I was capable of doing that, that my brain was still capable." She said she put pressure on herself to achieve high marks, pressure that she would not have felt as a younger student where she said, "I probably would have thought, I [just] need to pass."

Marie and Katherine reported that part of their drive and motivation to excel came from past expectations others had had of them. Marie, whose mother expected her to become a medical doctor or lawyer, decided that she would become a doctor on her own terms. She said, "Well, I am going to become a doctor. I'm going to become a doctor of [field of study]. I'm going for my PhD." Katherine had been told by a high school teacher that she should expect to be working at McDonald's for the rest of her life and she was determined to prove him wrong by achieving A grades.

Transformative and Healing Experiences

All the women provided rich and moving descriptions of unanticipated benefits of returning to education. It was encouraging to hear their stories of transformation, of themselves, their understanding of their experiences and the world in which they lived, and ultimately their healing and resistance to being labeled as victims.

Changes in relationship with self. Interestingly, three women, Maureen, Christine, and Marie used the same term in describing an unanticipated benefit of higher education, that of a change in relationship with self. The other women described this change more obliquely.

Christine stated:

I think there was somewhat of a relationship change with myself. I felt a sense of relief, satisfaction. I was calmer knowing I have the credentials even though I'm doing the work I was doing. [I have a] calmness and confidence in interacting with colleagues. I

present more easygoing about being a professional. I'm very validated in the work I do, the way I present to clients.

Christine had achieved what she had hoped. Maureen had similar comments, "Yeah, I think the relationship with myself, understanding myself more. Good and bad, you know critique it a little more effectively, and make decisions that are a little more appropriate 'cause of it." Maureen went on to describe how she no longer stays in unhealthy relationships, or allows herself to be treated in ways that are less than respectful or validating. Her comments provided an interesting perspective that education was not only healing for her, but also a preventative factor in resisting further oppression. And she described other changes:

> I changed all my friends. When I look back, there wasn't a whole lot of healthiness going on around me that I was choosing to be part of. Yeah [I'm] very different [now], and what my limits and boundaries are as far as what I would expect of [as] reasonable [from others].

Marie recognized through her education that the violence she experienced at the hands of her partner was not her fault, that it was his problem; this knowledge helped her to see herself in a more positive light:

> It's changed the relationship with myself. Like, my own relationship with me has changed. I'm getting to the point where I can almost look in the mirror and say "It wasn't your fault." Almost. It's opened my eyes. He would have beat the shit out of anybody. Not just me.

This knowledge is crucial to women overcoming the effects of abusive partners who blame their violence on their victims, who then internalize the blame.

Joan, Katherine, Linda, and Jesse also described how education had changed, or continued to change them, personally. For example, after analyzing class differences between herself and other women, Joan felt that she learned not to judge others based on surface appearances:

> You know what, I don't know that my relationship with [others] changed, but it changed me. So I left home at a young age, right, trying to make it on my own, never felt smart enough, never felt good enough, and never really fit into mainstream society, always kind of felt an outsider. And being a street person, right, I would kind of describe myself as a street person, a lower class [person], right. Never middle, upper [class]. And I remember, I meet these [professionals] and they are asking me questions, "Oh, so you're in university," and they are really treating me with respect. They're looking up to me, talking to me in a   respectful way, right? And this impostor [me], that's what I [felt], what if they find out who I really am? 'Cause I had done some things to survive, right, we haven't gotten to those things yet. And I'm petrified to say anything about my background. And these [women] are from big homes, very much a class difference. So, it

wasn't until I get to know this woman [that] I start revealing a little bit of myself. [Then] they all thought it was wonderful; look where I had come from, look what I'm doing. And that really struck me as, what they're proud about is that I was on the street, and now I'm here [at university], but they don't know anything about me as a person. And I'm thinking, you don't know me as a person, you don't know anything about me, my personality, my life, my feelings, my thoughts, and so that's what struck me. You don't know Joan the person, what I'm like, and my interests. It made me more aware of not to do that kind of thing, to judge people. And just to be more aware of class, and what you value and what you don't, and to try and keep in touch with just ordinary people. Because you can get caught up in that class, middle-class stuff, so I think those instances really made me more aware of that. How I am with people. So I think it hasn't changed my relationship, it's changed me. How I am.

Later Joan described how eventually she realized the relativity of knowledge:

What the Master's level taught me is that…you can decide, think about this critically, and you be the judge of that. 'Cause you know what, it's just an opinion. It's not right or wrong, good or bad, it's not the truth, and it's just a damned opinion.

This recognition that the judgment of others is simply opinion helped to liberate Joan from feelings of inadequacy based on her lower-class background.

Jesse also talked about the empowerment she experienced through becoming more educated:

Well just, the part about getting the letters gave me more power. To think that I went from being a secretary where I felt very much as though I was regarded as not valuable, or as important, and I was doing this job that sort of reflected that. 'Cause I wasn't using my mind. So completing university, I think I've gotten jobs where I've had increased responsibility and what I contribute, increasingly, the commodity is me. That's what's changed. 'Cause when I was secretary, it was, you know, my skills of perfectionism, and not making mistakes and being fast. And now with an advanced degree it's more self-actualizing. [I have] more of a faith in me. Something about having that degree. It gives a person power. And then it, all of a sudden I'm given validation, for just being myself. It made me feel more valued, for me. Unfortunately, 'cause I don't want it to depend on letters behind my name. I'm proud, I'm really proud of what I did. I feel good about what I did. It's become part of who I am.

Jesse and Joan both spoke of a struggle between their now elevated class and status positions and their origins. While they enjoy the benefits of their new positions, they also critiqued the system that put them there.

Linda talked about how she has changed through taking on a new role of student, and what she has learned:

I would say it has changed [me], because I've done a lot of personal growing while I've been here. I feel like a bit of a shape shifter sometimes. I've taken on a student

role first of all, but [also] the things that I've learned, connections that I've made, how I kind of look at others now.

Linda later talked about how learning about violence from a systemic perspective helped her to deconstruct some of her own experiences of violence.

Jesse said that, "My relationships with others have changed in that I'm more fully myself. You know, like I bring my whole body, my whole self into discussions more." Thus Jesse recognized a transformation in herself which also affected her relationship with others.

Changes in relationship with others. Changes in relationships with others seemed naturally intertwined with changes in relationship with self. Katherine, Linda, Maureen, and Marie talked about changes in their perceptions of racism, classism, and sexism, and their feelings around social justice issues. They were honest in their recognition of their own history of racist or other oppressive ways of thinking and behaving, and how they now have less tolerance of these behaviours in others. This change in themselves has not been without challenges to their relationships with others, yet these women were clear and decisive about no longer colluding with others' oppressive behaviours.

Linda described how her previously stereotypical thinking about others has been challenged and the benefits this has brought to family relationships:

> I really have broken down a lot of really icky stereotypes in thinking that is so deeply ingrained in...in so many of us. And [I've] really tried to look at people in my life, especially family members, with a little more empathy and understanding. Just [to] understand what's behind some of these things that create problems for people that I care about, is really valuable actually. It's pretty incredible actually.

Later, Linda talked about how this growth assisted her in making some changes in her relationship with her mother.

Maureen and Katherine described their changes in tolerance of social injustices. Maureen described herself as less tolerant while Marie described herself as more tolerant, yet they both refer to being more tolerant of difference, and less tolerant of social injustice. Maureen said:

> I find with people who come to see me for support I'm tolerant, but I'm less tolerant with social injustices and a lot more rigid around some of those things, to a point where it sometimes causes risks [to] potential social relationships. Because...it's really hard for me to be around someone who doesn't have respect for other people or [people] who don't have respect for the environment, [or] many of the social injustices, I just find it really hard. I sometimes wonder if I'm developing some personality trait, is this a psychological thing, or is this cause I've learned so much, [and] have more of an appreciation for social injustice? Sometimes I feel a little bit alienated. Yeah, [but] the

> wonderful part of that is that it's opened me up to a whole new social group, new folks, because of different interests and different ideas.

So although Maureen lost some relationships, she gained new ones. Still she described this struggle as difficult as she does not want to be elitist. Marie said, "I'm learning tolerance, where as before I wasn't tolerant. Which is really, really stupid, 'cause you'd think in university you wouldn't be as tolerant. But with me it's the other way around. 'Cause I'm learning why I have to practice tolerance." She has made some significant changes in relationships in her first year of university because of her shift in tolerance:

> A lot of my friends I had to cut out of my life, because they were hindering my life, not helping my life. And I had to sit back and make those decisions. My relationship with my parents has probably changed. Only, I don't thing they'd realize the change. My eyes are opening to classism, racism, the status quo, the dominant features, and how to recognize them, if not challenge them. They're going to be the prejudiced, little racists till the day they die. I can't change that. I can tolerate it to a point.

Marie had seen a change in her thinking and she recognized that while she cannot change others, such as her parents, she no longer has to tolerate their oppressive views of others.

Katherine described how she has changed her previously stereotypical beliefs about other groups of people and how this change has affected her relationships with others. She described an incident that occurred the night before our interview which brought this change to her awareness:

> We had people over and I've always enjoyed their company, nice people, great people, always there when you need them. An issue came up, and it had to do with First Nations [people]. Suddenly they started talking about things, like what they don't deserve, like very [racist] and I'm sitting there and I'm trying and trying and trying to bite my tongue. When they left, I said to [my husband], "I don't know if we can associate with them, cause if that is their beliefs, that is going to go down to their kids, [and] I don't want my kids near people like that." So it crept inside of me and made me really angry to hear her speak about what she didn't know about. So my education experience has altered different relationships.

Katherine, like Maureen, was choosing to exercise new boundaries about her associates and is resisting oppressive, racist behaviours.

Joan described how with her new learning she was able to initiate healing the rift with her mother:

> When I moved here to go to university I remember calling her one time, and we had this conversation over the phone. And I said to her, "Why did you do those things that you did?" And by asking that one simple question, she was able to tell me. And then I got to see her as a person, not as a mother. And that was really helpful to me. That was the beginning of it being helpful.

She and her mother were able to resolve their past issues prior to her mother's death which was immensely healing for Joan.

Linda, too, has seen an improvement in her relationship with her mother. "We had a really good talk and she just kind of acknowledged that she has seen some growth in me. So it was very positive, she kind of acknowledged a few things. It was really meaningful for both of us." Although Marie described a change in relationship with her parents, she was still hoping for a change in their view of her: "Maybe someday they'll find something about me that they can like and they can respect. And that's all I ask." As described earlier, part of Marie's motivation for education was to obtain a PhD certification to demonstrate her value to her parents.

Christine described how she has different expectations in her work since graduating from university:

> I'm probably more challenging to the supervisor. We had been isolated to new ideas and I brought back all kinds of new passions, ideas. It has created significant frustration in coming back into the same workplace. It's not always the way I want to be; there's not a lot of different goals here.

Christine acknowledged that she has changed and has different expectations of herself and others. While these changes provided some challenges to working with colleagues, she continued to pursue her goals.

Finally, all the women experienced significant changes in their views of their futures. Their sense of empowerment allowed them to feel that they can do anything, or as Maureen succinctly said, "The world is my oyster." She elaborated that "the wonderful thing [about] having gone back [to university], particularly doing graduate work [is that] you can do whatever you want. It's just a matter of focusing and figuring what it is you want to do." Maureen's sense of empowerment was tangible. She went on to describe the many opportunities now open to her, so many that she was having a difficult time deciding where she wants to focus. This contrasts with her pre-university oppressive work environment where she felt that she had few options or abilities.

Joan's experience echoed Maureen's sentiments almost exactly. She noted, "Well I think what I learned [is] that you can do anything you want. You know, you can really do anything you want to do." Joan's comment speaks to the healing power of education for her. She moved from a life of focusing on subsistence to feeling a sense of liberation that she was capable of making whatever decisions and choices she wants.

Christine, too, has developed confidence in achieving her goals and has specific plans in mind: "Hopefully by next September, I'll be in the Master's program. I know that I can come in when I'm ready for the Master's. I know I would be able to handle the workload. So I can absolutely do the Master's. Hopefully someday I'll teach in a university." Christine's self-confidence exemplified what the seven other women expressed in various ways. Marie also planned to achieve a PhD and "to teach at a university. That is what I want to do. I want to teach people who want to be taught."

Only Linda was a little more tentative: "Well, I have one year left of my undergrad. I am considering working at a graduate level following that. I think that would just be amazing. That would exceed my expectations, to be able to accomplish that." Linda's description of her educational opportunity as "amazing" speaks to the power of it for her.

Graduating. The women who had completed their degrees reflected upon what their graduation meant to them and their families. Joan expressed her sense of accomplishment which was shared by her family:

> When I graduated, all my family [who had never supported her throughout university] came for the graduation. That was one of the happiest days of my life. I could not believe that I had actually graduated from university; the first one in my family to graduate from university. It was so, "Oh my God, I did it."

Joan's experience of graduating and having the family share with her what they had never supported her to do also speaks to the potential healing benefit of education for her. She was able to bring the family together for the first time in many years.

Leslie described a similar celebration:

> When I graduated, it was so wonderful. My family is mostly in [location] and I do a lot of things without my family, Christmas, Easter, they just don't come [here] all the time. So when I graduated, they were all here. My mother came from [location] and when I walked across the stage, they made a ruckus.

Leslie had just recently graduated and she described how her family shared in her accomplishment which "said a lot about all of us persons." She was happy that they were proud rather than envious of her, as the first person in their family to achieve a university degree.

Maureen did not mention the graduation ceremony per se, yet summarized her completion as, "Returning as an adult student is an amazing experience and I hope we can find more ways to get women back into school." Maureen saw the benefit of higher education for herself and other women.

Validation. Katherine, Marie, Maureen, Jesse, Joan, and Linda described the emotionally healing benefits gained from the validation about their previous experiences of violence, trauma, and/or gender oppression. Katherine found it helpful to focus on her long-term goal of completing university to receive the certification to work at preventing child sexual abuse:

> It's not going to help me to stay angry [at the abuser]. It's just not. It'll help me for the moment to feel good to put him down. But in the long run, I won't be able to get myself through school, because it's going to eat me alive.

Katherine's comment seems to imply that her focus on education and her ultimate goal to work to reduce child sexual abuse was healing because she was taking control over her situation, doing something to change herself, and to help prevent others from being victimized by child sexual abuse.

Marie described her experiences with life threatening domestic violence and how she no longer blamed herself and her ignorance for the abuse. She had previously thought that the abuse was her fault:

> If I was smart enough, then it wouldn't have happened. 'Cause everyone kept on saying, "Well, you were just naïve. You know, you didn't know, you were naïve, you weren't educated" as an excuse. And I thought, "Well if I'm more educated then it won't happen. Yeah, if I could become smarter and less naïve, this won't happen to me again."

When asked what she thought now, Marie replied, "Yeah, it could still happen." She now knows that the abuse was the problem of her ex-partner, not her fault, and she was healing from this knowledge. She also described the healing benefits of meeting mentally healthy, non-traumatized women:

> Before, I didn't know anybody who wasn't sexually assaulted. I've actually met girls at university that haven't been and I'm so happy. It's like, yes! You know, 'cause I always thought like attracted like, right? I'm this damaged shell of a person so I'm going to attract damaged shells of people. But to actually meet these girls and nothing has happened to them in this way. They haven't had an abusive relationship in any way shape or form, and they've never been assaulted. And they're wonderful, confident, independent, great girls. Wow. I am so happy. You know, if me taking the brunt of what I did helped to keep [them] safe, then I will never change it. Because, I think its wonderful if you've never had to experience any of that. I know a lot of women my age and I don't know three of us who haven't been assaulted in one way or another.

Marie's response speaks to the prevalence of violence against women, not all of which is reported to any authority. At a grassroots level, Marie knows the prevalence of violence against women as she knows many women who have experienced violence. Being exposed to healthy non-abused

women as transformative and a healing factor gave Marie hope that women can be free from victimization.

Jesse, too, experienced healing from externalizing the cause of her traumas. She explained:

> I did a lot of research on trauma, and mental health, trying to understand my own problems. And got a lot of validation by understanding and seeing written, about the social determinants of mental health. About the effects of power and oppression, and the systemic influences. That helped me to externalize some of the reasons for some of my own struggles. And then, also in going back [to university], it's always [been] about picking up the shreds of my identity that have been trampled on and been disregarded and sort of left for dead along the way.

Learning about systemic influences related to power and control helped to reduce Jesse's self-blame, or externalize the reasons for her experiences and struggles in dealing with them.

Linda described a similar learning experience to Jesse's:

> Well, I mean there's been huge growth for me. Just in probably what I've been studying and just being able to deconstruct and look at things through a different lens. I think that's been supportive because I've been able to kind of make sense of things that have happened [to me].

Similarly, Leslie understood her life and gendered experiences through new eyes which she found validating. She described her reaction to one of her first social studies courses and commented:

> There were times in that course I was almost on the verge of tears. Because I would sit there and think, [the professor is] saying this out loud. She's saying what I've known, in my marriage, in my life, and she's saying it out loud. And she's saying it like a fact, and there's like research behind what she says. And I knew in my heart everything she was saying. But women my age don't necessarily talk like that, or don't discuss it. They might complain about their husband, but you don't discuss it in those terms. [The same with] Where is your career, and why didn't you get that promotion, and why are you still wherever you are? Unless women have been made aware of those gender differences, even friends, they don't get it.

Leslie's experience speaks to the healing effect of validation of one's experiences and of understanding systemic influences.

Joan described the healing benefit of learning to feel in control of her life:

> But at the Master's level, what I loved about it that it was just, be a critical thinker. And it really forces you to use your brain, to use who you are, and that's a good thing. Whereas I think when you have some of the experiences that we've had, its, you're not in control, right? Its things being done to you, right? So you don't know that you can have control that you can be in control. So I think that's what the Master's level taught me. You can be in control.

The importance of learning that she can exert control over her own thinking and reactions has been healing for Joan. Maureen, as did Joan, also saw the importance of having some control over her environment:

> Oh, it absolutely did [help with healing]. It absolutely did, on a whole lot of levels. I mean it was positive people, a positive environment; you had some control over the environment. It really helped me to sort out and process what had just happened for the seven years prior to that. What's interesting is now that that schooling piece is done and I've had some distance from that, it probably seems less traumatic in my mind; having had the chance to do something really positive to reaffirm myself as a person. 'Cause it was a sort of a cycle of violence I think I was caught in, in those years.

The feedback from Marie, Maureen, Joan, and Linda indicated that their learning about the systemic nature of violence and subordination has helped them to take control over aspects of their lives and establish expectations of what they will and will not accept from others. Thus the content of what they learned validated their experiences and assisted their healing and their descriptions demonstrate how transformative learning, empowerment, validation, and healing are interconnected.

Joy. The joy that all of the women described as part of their experiences with university also seemed significant to their healing. Linda commented that:

> You know, I have two teenagers who are at home, and they are as patient as they could be. So it's totally being selfish. It just feels so good. I'm enjoying every minute I'm here. That was a huge risk [leaving work to attend school full time] and I don't regret a minute of it actually.

Linda's positive experience could have been enhanced because she was prioritizing her needs and desires in returning to university.

Leslie also described how much fun she had as an adult student and her sense of joy that she was able to provide this positive role-modeling to her daughter:

> I would say as an adult student I loved going to school way more than if I had gone when I was 18 or 19. I enjoyed it way more. I'll miss it. I would say that one of the very most positive experiences that really got both of us going is my daughter came back to school, and we ended up taking courses together. So, the first two years we took [courses] together, and then she surpassed me because she was a full-time student. But for me that was probably the most positive thing, and we had so much fun, studying for exams, discussing whatever, and I think that I was probably an inspiration to her to keep going.

Leslie had tears in her eyes when she expressed how her daughter thanked her for the experience and how she would not be where she was in life without the encouragement of her mother.

Maureen also described the joy of her experience in detail:

Ahhh, oh it was so wonderful, it was just amazing. I went back initially and did the [Honour's] and then went right into my Master's. And both experiences were amazing, for different reasons. The first year back was just that connection, being back in school and learning and really having the time and just being focused on that. And so to be back and doing something that I loved, that I was focused on, and had the time to do it, and having worked for all that time in the field and knowing what pieces that I needed to gain more knowledge in, I was just so motivated. Oh, it was wonderful, wonderful. I miss it. And then the Master's was even better because you're doing a different, deeper level of learning with more critical analysis, where you're really learning what you want to learn, so of course, you know, the undergrad is more didactic learning and you know, meeting the requirements, but the Master's is where you can really, yeah just grow and fly, and oh, I loved it, I loved it. I still remember walking to the parking lot after being back, even in the undergrad program, and leaving at night and not really wanting to leave the school. Not that I didn't want to go home to my family, but going [with] students, talking all the way to our vehicles, and then being at our vehicles, having the door open and talking, and sometimes getting in the other's vehicle while the other one was warming up and talking about what we were learning. And so, it was a fantastic experience.

The learning itself, and collegiality with other students brought joy to Maureen.

Christine also described the benefits of being an adult student. She stated:

I got so much more out of it than coming out of high school. All of my experience was positive, including my outlook. I could be the poster girl. Overall, I wanted to do it for lots of reasons. I had always wanted to [return to school]. I loved school; I could be a lifelong student.

Perhaps for those who love school it can be healing. Even Joan, who did not have the most positive experiences of high school because of the trauma she was experiencing at home, found that university was a wonderful experience. She described it this way: "I was having a good time. I had a blast. We had such a good time with [name of professor]." It is encouraging that university experiences were so positive for these students, and that those who had prior negative experiences with education found the university experience so different.

Summary

The women involved in my study were primarily motivated to attend university to role-model for their children, for intrinsic motivations for self-development now that the time was right to attend university, and for employment and career opportunities. These women faced multiple role challenges as mothers, partners, paid workers, students, friends, relatives, and more.

Six of the women had a "supportive other" or "others," whether family, friends, and or colleagues who encouraged them to enroll and persist in their goals. Two of the women, Jesse and Leslie, described that having few supports contributed to their dropping out at different times during their university experience.

Six women felt angst about their age, and seven of the women expressed self-doubts about their abilities to compete academically. Seven women felt they had to work harder at learning in order to compensate for their perceived deficits and lack of academic preparation. The university's Learning and Gender Centres provided valuable assistance to those women who accessed the services. These Centres might need more promotion to make struggling students aware of the availability of services. All eight women experienced an overall enhanced sense of capability, despite some temporary discouragements with low marks for Katherine and Marie. Still they overcame discouragement by recognizing the external factors involved, and all eight of the women, including Christine who did not express self-doubts prior to enrolling, found their confidence enhanced. Certainly the respect and caring from their professors that all of these women described assisted in their feelings of validation, and helped to counter some of the internalized inadequacies which they had brought with them to university.

Six women described how experiences of violence, trauma, and gender oppression affected both the timing of their attendance at university and their experiences of attending. Because of diminished self-esteem and doubts in their abilities, six of the women deferred enrolling. In addition, the triggering of emotional suffering from their traumas caused emotional upheaval and the need for additional supports from the student union's Gender Center, and one woman utilized the support of a professional not connected to the university.

Painful past experiences for seven women seemed to be countered by the learning and healing which they experienced at university. The knowledge they gained about gender oppression and the systemic effects of violence against women helped to reduce their self-blame, explain some of their experiences, and subsequently brought changes in their self-perception and relationships with self and others. Of further benefit was the sense of control these women were able to exert over their environment as students, and over their lives, such as by changing relationships with people who had not been supportive or respectful of them or their values. This was important as they had been robbed of control during experiences of abuse. These data are significant in that they add to available knowledge about factors that are helpful and possibly necessary to support survivors of violence in their quest for success in higher learning institutions.

Finances were one of the most significant challenges to all but one of the women. Despite receiving financial support from the university or student loans system, finances remained a constant burden for three of the women. Three women relied on financial support from partners which could put them in a tenuous situation in the event of relationship breakdown. One woman dropped out twice because of insufficient financial support. Employer support through study leave, with the guarantee of a job to return to, provided some psychological reassurance and assisted two women to attend university. These findings indicate the importance of examining the socio-political context of financial support vis-a-vis post-secondary education for women.

CHAPTER FIVE

Interpretation of Findings

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the findings of my study in comparison with the reviewed literature about women's motivations for and experiences with university studies. The discussion includes the participants' motivations for returning to university, the participants' experiences as university students, and experiences which were supportive of the participants' healing from experiences of violence, trauma, or gender subordination, and supportive of their persistence as students.

Discussion of Findings

Motivations for Returning to University

The women in my study described various linked motivations for returning to university. Motivations for self-development, to role-model the value of higher education to children, and for occupational or career goals, were interlinked. Motivations were also based on the women being at a time in their lives where sufficient emotional and/or financial supports facilitated their decision to enroll in university. Women did not describe being motivated to enroll in university by a desire to heal from experiences of violence, trauma, or gender subordination, but these experiences did influence their enrolment and choice of field of study.

Motivations for self, children, career. Prior research to my study indicated the importance of intrinsic motivators of personal growth and enrichment from education as more significant than extrinsic motivators of employment and career for the non-traditional female student's choice to enroll in post-secondary education (Carney-Crompton & Tan 2002; Faith & Sturrock, 1990; Robson, Ryan, & Veltman, 1997; Tinto, 1987). By contrast, in my study, all of the women with the exception of one were equally motivated by both intrinsic factors and extrinsic factors, and these were inextricably linked. All eight of the women indicated the importance of intrinsic rewards of self-development, and all but one, Leslie, had specific career goals which were related to their life experiences.

Many of the women's descriptions of motivations for returning to university were overlaid by a sense that a university education was something that they had long wanted to achieve, but was not something that they had been able to accomplish, because of a variety of barriers. Possibly because of their delayed opportunity to attend university, five of the women who were mothers, Linda, Marie, Leslie, Christine, and Katherine, stated that one of their

motivations for returning to university was to role-model the value of higher education for their children. Encouraging their children to pursue higher education themselves was a motivation mentioned by some of the 38 women in Mohoney and Anderson's (1988) study.

Breese and O'Toole (1995) found that catalysts influencing the decisions of women to enter university often involved external events such as death, divorce, job loss, or internal factors of personal development. In my study, catalysts that influenced the women's decisions to attend university included personal development and conditions of life which facilitated their opportunity to commit to university education, except in the case of Katherine who had experienced job loss. The women described how events, relationships, and responsibilities interfered with their opportunity to attend university until such time as they felt compelled to defer no longer. For seven of the women, their compulsion was related to the underlying motivation which was to "do this for themselves." Their motivations were similar to those of the 38 women studied by Mohoney and Anderson (1988) who all indicated that the "time is now," and a sense that they were now able to take on the role of student and they "needed to do this for themselves" (p. 272). The motivations of the women in my study were also similar to the findings of Parr (2000) where women wanted to pursue university study "for themselves" as a means of exerting control, independence, and making a deliberate decision to engage in education, possibly to prove to themselves and others that they deserved something better in their lives. Reay (2001) and Parr (2000) both noted that non-traditional women students, more commonly than traditional-aged students, were motivated to attend university by a desire to discover more about themselves, what they could achieve, and of what they were capable, findings which were also similar to the personal development motivations of the women in my study.

Linda said that she wanted to challenge herself intellectually, and had always wanted "something better" for herself and her sons. "Something better" was interpreted to be a meaningful career which would provide a better quality of life for her sons. Katherine talked about proving wrong a high school teacher's assessment of her lack of academic abilities. Marie talked about her hopes that by obtaining a university degree she would prove her parents' negative assessment of her to be wrong and they would develop respect for her. Marie also talked about fears of not being capable of achievement at university and part of her decision to pursue university study was to challenge that fear. Maureen was motivated to pursue university to overcome the loss of self-esteem that she had experienced from workplace oppression, and to prove her capabilities to herself. Jesse wanted to overcome limitations that she felt her father had

placed on her, and to prove to him and to herself that she could succeed at university. Joan had thought she would never be capable of university study, but was motivated to test this perception by a friend who convinced her of her potential academic abilities. Leslie was deemed to be not intelligent enough to attend university when she completed high school and she wanted to contest that assessment. Christine felt inadequate compared to her co-workers who had university degrees, so wanted to prove her skills and abilities to herself.

The question which arose for me was what made these women recognize that they needed to pursue their aspirations of higher education? What factors or catalysts finally inspired seven of the women to do something they had "always wanted to do?" For Maureen, Linda, Marie, and Joan, stifling jobs were the final catalyst to motivate them to enroll in university.

Marie said she "couldn't do call centres anymore." Marie had received ambiguous messages from her parents that she should become a doctor or lawyer, while simultaneously having her lack of intellectual ability and lack of worth as a person reinforced. The end result was her leaving home as a teen and working at jobs that did not require a high school diploma. Joan had been encouraged by another woman to realize that she was capable of more than waitressing. Joan described herself as a mediocre high school student who did not receive encouragement from her parents since their aspirations for her were limited to marriage and a role as housewife. The experiences of Joan and Marie were similar to Murphy's (2005) finding that "adolescent girls are still frequently discouraged from pursuing post-secondary education and end up in dead-end minimum wage jobs, primarily due to the influence of parental expectations" (p. 27) and "the mind-numbing damage of a typical unskilled job held by women sometimes takes a while to make itself known to the young women working as a cashier, waitress, clerk, or other job holder in the service sector" (p.21). The point is not to devalue service sector work or women's work in the home, or those who choose to pursue it, but to recognize that this work is undervalued by society at large, an undervaluing which then tends to be internalized by women.

Women in the study of a transitional program for marginalized students to experience university education by Groen and Hyland-Russell (2006) and the findings of Murphy (2005) described similar experiences to those of Joan and Marie in my study. An example from Groen and Hyland-Russell's (2006) study was when a woman said, "I wanted to go to school, but my entire life I had heard I would not amount to anything. This program was a good step in between and I could prove people wrong" (p. 104).

Linda described some discouragement from partners about her abilities to achieve higher education. Primarily, though, she stated that 15 years of experiencing a lack of intellectual challenge in her service sector job influenced her decision to attend university. Maureen talked about the effects of workplace oppression and her need to escape that situation. Her place of employment had become so oppressive that she seriously doubted her intellectual abilities. Through repeated encouragement of friends and colleagues Maureen finally decided to assume the risk of enrolling in university.

For Christine, a catalyst to returning to university was experiencing burn-out in her job. The catalyst for Katherine's decision to attend university was a workplace injury requiring a change in employment. Only Jesse did not appear to have any one particular catalyst that inspired her to enroll in university. Rather she sustained a motivation to complete university after dropping out during her first attempt. She had returned to her parents' home which left her with a profound sense of failure that she needed to overcome. She continued to pursue university education with periods of drop out until she eventually achieved her goal of completion.

Motivations based on conditions of life. A significant catalyst for six of the women's decisions to enroll in university was because the time was right for them as far as life responsibilities, and that sufficient emotional and financial supports were in place. Without these supports in place, these six women's motivations to attend university might still be something they longed to do rather than something they had achieved. The deferral of education based on responsibilities and available supports reflects the gender inequity these women experienced, where women tend to be in an unequal position in society, with less economic, social, and political power than men, while carrying the majority of care-giving responsibilities for children and extended family, which can limit their choices (Baker, 1998; Bakker, 2006; Yalnizyan 2005). Waerness (1996) concurred and stated:

> Gendered socialization means that responsibility for caring is still ascribed for women as part of the formation of "femininity." This translates to women caring for children, the ill, the disabled, and the elderly in the private sphere, while trying to achieve more economic independence in the public sphere. (p. 232)

The five mothers in my study were the primary caregivers of their children and deferred their decision to attend university until their children were older and less dependent. This was particularly true for the three mothers who, at times in their lives, were sole parents. Leslie waited to attend university until her four children were almost adults. Her attempts to pursue university when her children were young were thwarted by a lack of childcare support, from her spouse and

other sources. Linda and Marie had attempted to pursue university when their children were young, but as single mothers lacking sufficient childcare supports, they had to defer their goals until the children were older.

Because of the financial and emotional support offered by husbands and other family members, Maureen, Marie, and Christine were motivated to attend university. For Leslie and Joan, the availability of institutional financial supports helped to solidify their decision to pursue university, and for Joan, the emotional support of a friend was significant to her decision to enroll. Maureen summarized the importance of being at the right time in life most succinctly by describing how she had always wanted to complete a university degree, but did not until all the necessary supports were available to her.

Maureen, Marie, Leslie, Laurie, and Christine's experiences are reflected in previous studies by Mohoney and Anderson (1988) who found:

> ...that for 38 women between ages 25-46 their decision to return to college was influenced by the state of their relationships and life events, not solely by their motivation. Enrollment was often postponed until children were deemed old enough, family responsibilities were lessened, or even when co-workers or employers would not be inconvenienced. (p. 271)

Choosing university at a time when others would not be inconvenienced was also a theme noted in the study of Robson, Ryan, and Veltman (1997) who analyzed the experience of university for women with co-dependent characteristics developed primarily in response to childhood trauma.

Motivation for higher education as linked to experiences of trauma. For the women in Parr's (2000) study, a pursuit of higher education was linked with a desire to overcome family of origin traumas. Similarly, the women who participated in the study of Robson, Ryan, and Veltman (1997) had come from traumatic family backgrounds and were motivated by wanting to get away from difficult family situations and internalized dysfunctional family values. By contrast, none of the women expressed that a motivation for their attendance at university was because of a desire to heal from experiences of violence or trauma. Yet six of the women, Jesse, Linda, Joan, Marie, Maureen, and Katherine, did describe experiencing some sort of violence and/or trauma prior to attending university, and these experiences unequivocally informed their choices of field of study. This finding is similar to that of Breese and O'Toole (1995) who found that women frequently chose academic majors based on their life experiences.

In my study, Linda wanted to work helping women survivors of violence in a way that she had been helped, which necessitated a professional degree. Katherine wanted to work in the

criminal justice sector in a role that required a university degree. Marie described that her experiences of domestic violence might have been related to her lack of education; she hoped that more education would provide a means to prevent further victimization. Jesse was interested in studying violence against women and was very interested in trying to "understand trauma, and mental health, trying to understand [her] own problems." Joan stated that what drew her to her particular field of study were her past experiences of violence and abuse. Leslie did not describe experiences of violence but was drawn to Women's Studies and "all courses about women" because of her experiences of gender subordination. Thus, although none of the women described a desire to heal as one of their explicit motivations to attend university, one motivation for choice of academic field was related to their past histories of trauma, violence, and/or gender subordination.

Summary of Motivations

Motivations for attending university were identified by the women who participated in my study as desires for self-development, to set a positive example for their children, for occupational goals, and because of access to adequate emotional and financial supports that finally allowed for their participation in university. None of the women named healing from experiences of violence, trauma, or gender subordination as part of their motivation, but these experiences nonetheless informed their choice of field of study.

The Women's Experiences as University Students

The women's experiences after enrollment in university are discussed next with a focus on what they found challenging and what was helpful. The women described what helped them to overcome difficulties, to persist as students, and to heal from experiences of violence, trauma, or gender subordination.

Experiences of Financial Challenges

Tinto (1987) claimed that when students cite financial problems as reasons for leaving university, this often reflects a more acceptable reason for dropping out than what might be real undisclosed reasons. Yet Home (1992) found that Canadian women did indeed experience high levels of financial difficulties which included the high cost of tuition, books, childcare, transportation, and housing. Grace and Gouthro (2000) found that particularly for women over 30 with dependents, accessing sufficient financial resources to attend university was especially challenging. My study showed similar findings to those of Home (1992) and Grace and Gouthro (2000) where, rather than financial problems being a pretext for other causes of dropping out,

finances were a real and critical factor in decision-making regarding enrollment and retention in education for all but one of the women. Linda, Joan, Leslie, and Maureen indicated that without financial support, they would not have enrolled in university, and even with financial support, financial difficulty presented one of the greatest challenges for Linda and Joan.

Linda, Leslie, Joan, Marie, Jesse, and Christine noted that financial concerns have been central to their experiences as students. Linda described herself as moving from a middle-class salary level to being below the poverty line as a student, which was difficult as a sole parent, and was difficult for her two teens. She applied for bursaries and worked night shifts every weekend to help supplement her income. One could question how long she can sustain such a schedule. Leslie said that she would not have completed university without institutional financial support. Jesse left university twice, partly due to financial constraints, and she described the withdrawals as devastating. Marie said her family income level was barely sufficient for her to avoid welfare. She worked hard to provide practical support to her employed spouse, such as cooking for and entertaining his boss, even though this took away from her study time. She did not describe any financial support received from other sources, nor attempts to receive it. Christine named financial constraints as a significant challenge for her and her family. Christine and Maureen talked about employer support, either by direct financing, or through the promise of a job to return to, which at least made financial concerns psychologically easier to cope with. Only one woman of the eight, Katherine, who had a supportive employed spouse, did not mention financial concerns. This possible dependency on a partner might put Katherine in a tenuous position should the relationship breakdown.

Given that research findings cite financial support as being one of the most frequently reported challenges faced by women (Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002; Gouthro, 2005; Home, 1998; Thomas, Adams, & Birchenough, 1996; Wooller & Warner, 2001), it was not surprising that all but one of the women in my study discussed financial concerns. The women's experiences of financial hardship are a significant concern because of a populist perspective of gender equity, particularly when recent statistics state that women are dominating post-secondary education enrollment; in 2007, 57% of full-time students in Canada were women (Yalnizyan, 2008, p. 20). Attention being given to the overall numbers of women enrolled in university could lead to a lack of concern as a society about inequities and financial constraints many women continue to face. Analysis of financial access is critical to understanding women's participation and experience in university.

For seven women, financial constraints came with dependent-care responsibilities, separation or divorce, and either insufficient income to meet university and living expenses, or lack of access to financial aid. Women's experiences of financial constraints are more complex than the making of poor individual life choices, which can be a populist explanation for women's poverty. As described in the literature review, the real causes of women's poverty were shown in a recent analysis of the 2008 Canadian federal budget by senior economist of the Canadian Center for Policy Alternatives, Armine Yalnizyan, who concluded that women are systematically poorer than men. Almost two-thirds of minimum wage workers in Canada are women and 40% of jobs are unstable, temporary contract work, or on-call, casual, and seasonal work. These jobs provide no job security, and most have no benefits. Twice as many elderly women live in poverty than do men. Single mothers have the highest poverty rate of any demographic group in the country, partly because only 19% of women with children received financial support from their ex-partners (Murphy, 2005).

Many women are in precarious financial situations, partly as a result of low-paid work, and partly as a result of conflicting pressures for paid and unpaid work in the home. When women experience domestic violence, they might find it difficult to leave relationships because most communities do not have available affordable housing options. The 2008 federal budget provided no additional funds for women to enhance their opportunities to escape violence (Yalnizyan, 2008).

Similar to the budgets from years of 2000 and 2005, the 2008 budget still does not address Canada's commitments made to women's equity such as in The United Nations Platform for Action, signed in Beijing by Canada and 188 other nations (Bar, 2006). In the 2008 budget, the federal government cut social programming that could have improved equity for Canadian women and their children. Rather, an emphasis on tax cuts primarily benefits high-income men (Yalnizyan, 2008).

Despite an increase in overall funds to the student loan system, the 2008 federal budget did not provide finances to meet the need for affordable, quality post-secondary education. Federal education and tuition tax credits designed to replace direct funding to the provinces for affordable post-secondary tuitions mean that students must have the money to pay fees when they enroll and receive a tax credit the next year (Yalnizyan, 2005). This tax policy does not assist those people who have no discretionary income and the effects of this policy were experienced by

seven of the women whose decisions about enrolling or continuing in university were affected by access to adequate financial means.

Although education is viewed as being one of the protections against poverty, social attitudes about who is responsible for higher education have changed from that of a collective to that of individual responsibility (Baker, 1998; Canadian Federation of Students, 2008; Murphy, 2005). Ideas of individual choice and individualistic "anyone can make it" attitudes deny the social structural factors which affect the attempts of prospective students, particularly women, to achieve higher education (Sparks, 1998; Weiner, 2005; Yalnizyan, 2005, 2008). Increasing tuition fees have caused post-secondary education to become unaffordable for many low-and middle-income Canadians. Students from low-income families are less than half as likely to participate in university as those from high-income families. This trend is likely to continue as the government of Ontario replaced a tuition freeze in 2007 with plans for tuition increases of up to 20% by 2010 (CFS, 2008). Given that women make up the higher percentage of those who are poor, their choices about higher education could become more limited by these social attitudes and tuition policy decisions.

Financial challenges affected the decisions of six of the women to defer enrolling, or to drop out, when higher education is seen as a means to help break the cycle of poverty and economic dependency for women. Education is one of the public investments that brings dividends to the individual and to society. Tax money spent on building and operating post-secondary educational institutions is more than returned by the higher incomes people earn and resultant taxes they pay with each completed level of education (Klein, 2006). Even if governments borrow money, run deficits, and pay 5% borrowing costs, the social rate of return exceeds the cost of public spending on education, and the social rate of return is higher for women (Klein, 2006, p. 2). Maureen described this analysis. Her perspective was that universities need to help break the cycle of poverty for women by providing sufficient financial supports in particular to sole parent mothers so that they can graduate from university, increase their economic independence, and in turn, support their children to pursue higher education.

This financial situation for single mothers, and the financial challenges experienced by all but one of the women who participated, indicates that two of the women, Linda and Marie, were in potentially precarious positions. Linda struggled as a lone parent with finances being a major challenge. Should these financial challenges increase she might be unable to continue with her education. Marie was economically dependent upon her husband, with the prospect of a

relationship breakdown never too far from her mind. If he should leave, one could question whether Marie will be able to continue with her education.

Experiences of Multiple Role Challenges

Commonly, research on conflict from multiple roles show that these conflicts are a significant reason for withdrawal from university (Donaldson, 1999; Graham & Donaldson, 1999; Grayson & Grayson, 2003; Home, 1992, 1996, 1998; Perin & Greenberg, 1984; Thomas, Adams, & Birchenough, 1996). Having multiple role constraints, non-traditional students are less likely to become involved in student activities and social groups and are less likely to spend significant time on campus interacting with other students and faculty (Grayson & Grayson, 2003; Tinto, 1987). University efforts to increase retention of adults based on the research results on traditional students by for example, encouraging adult students to participate more in student activities to become better integrated, might increase role-conflict for adults (Graham & Donaldson, 1999).

The findings of my study are consistent with findings reported in literature about multiple role students (Donaldson, 1999; Graham & Donaldson, 1999; Grayson & Grayson, 2003; Perin & Greenberg, 1984; Thomas, Adams, & Birchenough, 1996) and in particular for female multiple role students (Grace & Gouthro, 2000; Home, 1992, 1996, 1998) where women with family responsibilities described the challenges of managing their many roles. Six of the women with families discussed making significant adjustments to their personal lives as necessary to cope with their multiple roles. Family and education are called 'greedy institutions,' a term originally coined by Coser and Coser (1974), as they demand exceedingly high degrees of energy, time, and commitment to each of the roles (Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002; Home, 1998).

Linda said that she was "just going seven days a week" between being a student with classes and study, working every weekend at paid employment, parenting two teens, and volunteering on campus. Maureen described feeling that she was shirking family responsibilities because she had to focus on her studies and could not devote as much time to keeping the home tidy or to participating in family functions. Katherine described that she did not allow her schooling to interfere with her responsibilities as a mother. She remained involved in her children's extracurricular activities, attended all their sports events and volunteered on the board of directors for one of their team activities. Most often she managed the demands by occasionally missing tutorials or more commonly, by sacrificing sleep. Marie cut herself off from friends which could have simultaneously meant cutting out important emotional supports.

Having multiple roles required finding affordable quality childcare which was described as highly challenging for the five mothers. Leslie's experience of dropping out when her children were young reflects the findings of Sheridan (2001) where "married male adult students received far more support and encouragement from their partners than married female students, and female students experienced considerable stress when there was a clash between domestic and education commitments" (p.12). Christine moved her entire family in order for her to attend university, and Leslie felt that she had to constantly "juggle" her schedule against that of her children during her second period of enrollment in university. These women's experiences were similar to those described by Grace and Gouthro (2000) who found that women of various races and classes often made great sacrifices to study and conduct research, and faced diverse challenges when trying to integrate their responsibilities in school with those at home.

In my study, support from the university in the form of flexibility in due dates of assignments was important to Linda to cope with the many demands on her time. Marie described the teaching assistants as helpful, but qualified their helpfulness as dependent upon whether she could find the time to meet with them, and whether they were available when she was. This time and scheduling dilemma was consistent with the findings of Home (1992) where students reported that the services designed to help them develop study skills, handle stress, and manage time were often not accessible to students who are too overloaded or they were held at times unavailable to women. In my study, Maureen had the most family support and the least additional responsibilities as she was not participating in paid employment and had no children. Of the women, she was most able to access university-based resources to enhance her academic participation and achievement.

The only other university-based support that was mentioned as supportive to managing multiple role challenges was online education described by Leslie as essential to the completion of her degree. Online or distance education is frequently cited as particularly beneficial for adult women because of the higher degree of flexibility and control they can exert (Home, 1998; Ross & Powell, 1990), allowing women to better manage the multiple role-conflicts they tend to experience (Home, 1996; O'Rourke, 1997). Given the prevalence of online courses today, I found it interesting that it was not mentioned by more of the women.

While Linda, Marie, and Katherine described their multiple roles as significantly taxing, none of them mentioned, or even alluded to, thoughts of dropping out because of overwhelming role-conflicts. Although Maureen felt guilt for not being able to maintain the level of contribution

to family and home responsibilities while a student, this was not something that caused her to consider dropping out.

However, multiple role-conflicts were a factor in drop out decisions for Leslie and Christine during their first attempts at university. Leslie stated that role-conflict between her student and parenting responsibilities caused her to drop out when her children were young because she did not have the necessary childcare supports to enable her to attend. Sufficient financial support for paid childcare might have helped to prevent Leslie's decision to drop out. However, Leslie's dropping out might have also been related to the lack of emotional support from her husband along with the multiple role challenge she experienced since she returned to university as a sole parent after the marriage ended and found it was easier without her spouse "dragging [her] down."

Christine dropped out once because of family responsibilities and deferred enrollment because of multiple role responsibilities, and finances. More financial and dependent care support might have led to Christine's ability to continue. As with Home's (1992) findings, the students in my study described their lives as "constant juggling acts." All the mothers in my study described how their children were their first priority and they managed their studies based on first meeting their parenting and other family responsibilities. It is interesting that six of the women described similar experiences to those reported by Grace and Gouthro (2000) and Home (1992, 1996, 1998) and this indicates that although women are attending university in higher numbers, some of their struggles and challenges have not changed much since Home's (1992) research. The women's persistence in the face of multiple role challenges likely reflects their level of commitment to completing their education.

Experiences for Survivors of Violence and Trauma

Horsman (1999) wrote that educational policy and educators should be informed by knowledge of the effects of trauma, and the rates of violent traumas experienced by women, and how these influence women's learning, access to learning opportunities, and experiences in educational settings. For example, women students who seek to escape violent relationships can find that the violence escalates when they begin to attend school (Grace & Gouthro, 2000; Horsman, 1999; Leonard, 1994). At the least, as a woman's self-image and behaviour become increasingly confident, capable, and independent as a student, this can cause conflict with her family's expectations of her (Williams, 1997). In my study Joan experienced violence from her partner but did not elaborate on whether it began or escalated upon her attendance at university.

Linda described how her attending university threatened, and possibly brought to an end, her intimate relationship. Despite the emotional pain of this experience for Linda, it provides an example of a woman's resistance to violence and oppression by choosing what was, in the long term, best for her.

Educational institutions might not have supports in place which are effective for survivors of violence, and policy development for these women needs to be based in awareness that survivors can experience triggers of past trauma which can bring symptoms of anxiety, terror, rage, or grief (Horsman, 1999). Effects from past trauma, or experiencing violence while attending school, might lead to a variety of effects for women as described by Horsman (1999):

> Women may need to explore control by starting, stopping and restarting. ...be absent because she has been injured by a spouse or is suffering from health problems resulting from violence. She might need immediate accessible counseling to help her to continue in class when issues arise during her studies. Irregular attendance might lead to a woman being unfairly judged as unmotivated. (p. 294)

Policy developed with awareness of potential effects and resultant behaviours could mean allowing flexibility in attendance and access to counseling. In my study, all six of the women survivors of violence primarily relied on personal resources of husbands and friends rather than institutional supports, other than the university's Gender Centre. Three women described post-trauma reactions that arose during their educational experiences. Marie talked about times of the year when she experienced emotional effects from her trauma where she "gets really bad." She relied on her husband to pick up the cues and provide emotional support. As a survivor of three incidences of rape, Marie also described feeling traumatized after a class discussion about rape. She turned to the student-funded Gender Center where she found "a huge huge support" that helped her to manage her reaction.

Linda described the Gender Centre as providing an important form of emotional support in that she could meet with other like-minded women. Maureen did not access the Gender Centre for personal reasons, but described it as important for its advocacy of women's issues. She did find, however, that she had to access the support of a professor after a class experience where she became overwhelmed and could not stop crying after receiving positive feedback from a fellow student. She had come from such an oppressive environment that the positive feedback was overwhelming and she required support in what she described as "processing her reaction." Maureen's reaction was similar to a woman's story reported in Horsman's (1999) book. This

woman described that she had "worked so hard to exclude all the judgment that she was stupid, she could not now let in a judgment that she was smart" (p.105).

Katherine reported that she and her family had received death threats from her childhood abuser who was prosecuted for the abuse. Katherine felt that this experience affected her grades temporarily, but not her determination to pursue her goals. Although she was familiar with the Gender Centre, Katherine primarily drew on the support of her husband through this ordeal.

Other post-trauma effects for women can include reactions to overly harsh feedback from teachers which can affect their ability and motivation to persist (Horsman, 1999). Some might argue that potentially harsh feedback is just a reality of education for everyone, but "every time a teacher gives out overly harsh feedback, a survivor might have to try and survive that experience and re-triggered feelings of being less than OK" (Horsman, 1999, p.104). In my study, Joan and Leslie received feedback which they found to be traumatic and which affected their motivation. Leslie dropped out for the rest of the year and Joan did not re-apply until the offending professor retired. Jesse experienced a lack of understanding and validation of her experiences of abuse which almost made her drop out. All three of these women described these experiences as devastating. None of the women described seeking redress which could reflect the triggering of disempowerment survivors can experience. Although Leslie responded with a written note to the professor about the effect of the feedback she had received, she did not pursue the situation any further. These women's experiences relate to Horsman's (1999) appeal for informed educators about the potential effect of their feedback on survivors of violence or trauma.

Katherine was surprised to find that of all the issues with which she has been confronted and about which her beliefs have been challenged during her time at university, child sexual abuse was the issue about which little has changed. She also discussed at length her frustration and anger about the silencing around child sexual abuse that she observes on a daily basis. Katherine acknowledged that it is a difficult topic and one to which she was sensitized, but she felt silenced. She felt that when she brought up the topic in classes, some professors and other students looked offended, or made what Katherine felt were insensitive comments about childhood sexual abuse. Thus she sometimes avoided giving voice to her perspective but would seethe internally instead. Katherine's experience relates to the writing of Horsman (1999) who included the feedback from a literacy worker that, "The word abuse makes many people uncomfortable, and so it should. But as literacy workers, we need to get past that discomfort; we need to talk about abuse" (p. 26). This recommendation could apply to anyone working in the education field.

Katherine's experience also relates to the claims of Horsman (1999) and Morris and Buchanan (2001) that the systemic nature, frequency, and effects of violence, poverty, and other inequities experienced by women tend to go unrecognized. Horsman (1999) also noted that "women's experiences with educational programs depends not only on teachers, but also on the policies and administrative structures that either create 'spaces' or close them down, and set the context for education" (p. 293). Katherine explained that part of the reason she disclosed her experiences of child sexual abuse was to help create discussion around the issue but she was frequently met with resistance. When she further disclosed that her childhood abuser was convicted, Katherine found that people tended to then believe her story. This experience also reflects Horsman's (1999) point that those who attempt to speak up about the injustices that they have witnessed or experienced risk their own credibility. Katherine relied on the support of her husband to help manage her ongoing frustration with responses to discussion of child sexual abuse.

Given that, apart from the Gender Centre, the women primarily relied upon personal supports for coping with emotional reactions from trauma, one could question the outcome if women have few personal supports. Further exploration about what services the university offers to support survivors of trauma, and how students are made aware of services, could be a useful complement to my study. Awareness of and access to peer or professional counseling, as recommended by Robson, Ryan, and Veltman (1997), might make the difference for students struggling with trauma reactions. One of the participants in my study who might have benefited from such a support was Jesse. She described herself as completely alone in facing the difficulty of not being able to emotionally "ground herself" when effects of trauma surfaced. This experience was a cause for one of the instances of her dropping out from university. She did not explain whether she attempted to access supports to help her manage her symptoms, but the lack of support seems to have influenced her decision to drop out. Similarly, Joan described not being aware of supports or services available to assist her in university as she had been socialized to not seek supports, but to rely solely on herself.

Robson, Ryan, and Veltman (1997) also found that, "Most participants, even though they were upper-level students or had graduated, were unaware of existing personal development courses and felt that many support services were not responsive to the older student" (p. 97). These researchers recommended that provision of separate publications for adult students about available supports might assist student awareness of and access to supports. Further exploration

with the women in my study about their knowledge of and/or attempts to access institutionally based supports would further add to this analysis.

Experiences of Fears and Doubts About Abilities

Breese and O'Toole (1995) found that women who return to education because of external events where their choices were affected by pragmatic concerns might have more significant self-doubts about their abilities and options. By contrast, women who returned to university because of internal factors of personal development experienced virtually no doubts, felt a greater sense of control over their situation, and had time to plan prior to returning to school. While many adult students have doubts about their abilities, partly related to age (Home, 1992, 1998; Kasworm, 2005; Tinto, 1987), adult women might experience internalized inadequacies resulting from their experiences of gender subordination. Those women who have experienced violence might have further self-doubt, particularly if their trauma included emotional abuse about their self-worth and abilities. Robson, Ryan, and Veltman (1997) found that for most of the women in their study who were survivors of trauma, self-esteem and self-confidence were low as they entered the university. Self-doubt can relate to survivors' habit of judging themselves harshly and feeling that they have to prove themselves to everyone around them. These doubts, fears, and harsh self-judgment are a frequent part of the sequelae of surviving both childhood abuse and domestic violence, and "these felt experiences of subordination and powerlessness [can] stand in the way of women's empowerment" (Heng, p. 80, 1995).

All of the women with the exception of Katherine described in detail their experiences of feeling doubt about their abilities to succeed in university. Factors which added to their doubts were their age, perceived class status, inadequate academic preparation, and damaged self-esteem from experiences of violence, abuse, and their gendered socialization. Joan discussed a sense of powerlessness resulting from childhood sexual abuse which added to her self-doubts. She described that with experiences of child sexual abuse there was a sense of not being in control because someone with more power was inflicting the abuse. Thus victims of child sexual abuse could learn that they have no control over any aspects of their lives.

Jesse described the effects of trauma on her self-esteem and how she felt invalidated as a worthy being, thus she found it difficult to feel confidence or to make choices in life that reflected self-worth. These self-doubts were powerful messages to abrogate. Jesse described how through her studies she continued to be affected by remembered messages from her father about how she should deny abuse, particularly her own experiences of it from him. These messages caused

significant angst for Jesse and added to her doubts about whether she should even pursue university study.

Doubts about their intellectual competence for two of the women also related to their perceptions of class status. Joan and Marie talked at length about the challenge of feeling class differences between themselves and other university students, although they both identified as middle-class at the time of our interviews. These two women expressed feelings of self-doubt about their abilities and their identities as students at university because of their lack of socialization to middle-class values. Joan described herself as feeling like an "impostor" and felt she needed to hide details of her past and perceived lower-class background from people she met at university. Marie felt acutely aware of her class background when some of her first term marks were low and she felt that she was not "built for university." She recalled that while she was growing up she received conflicting messages from her parents that university education was something she should achieve, while simultaneously being socialized to believe that university was something for a different class of people than to what she belonged. She had come from an area of town and a high school where typically students were streamed to trade schools rather than university. Her parents had not completed high school yet it seemed that they expected their daughter to rise to middle-class status.

Joan's and Marie's experiences were similar to the finding of Reay's (2001) study of working class students returning to higher education where "education was, in the main, a world into which these adult students fitted uneasily"(p. 337). Students in Reay's (2001) study explained their experiences of feeling that they did not fit in with the university cultures and their struggles to reconcile their working class status with that of the middle-class university. Joan used the same terms in describing that she never felt that she "fit in." Through education, Joan came to realize that perceptions of class stratification are subjective, and as she gained further knowledge, she felt less an impostor. When she realized that much knowledge is relative and opinion-based, she no longer felt as much an outsider from what she perceived as the middle-class status of the people she met at university. Joan's experience of doubt might have also related to her gender socialization since she described her parents as expecting her to marry and be a housewife.

Marie described that she was learning to identify classism through university study which helped to reduce her sense of being an outsider. Further diversity of participants could allow for more in-depth class analysis. As well, a further focus on solely this aspect of university student's experiences of moving between social classes could be a valuable area of further

research. A support group to assist women in analyzing and coping with their reactions might be beneficial to women, or any student, struggling with class identities. At the least, Reay (2001) asserts that the importance of a sense of being welcomed must not be underestimated when a majority of working-class students have experienced "being made to feel I wasn't up to it, that I wasn't welcome in education" (p. 343).

One could question as well whether the women's experiences of self-doubt might have been fueled by unrealistic expectations the women might have placed on themselves "to perfectly perform the roles of student, mother and wife," as was found for women in Robson, Ryan, and Veltman's (1997) study. Maureen described this internalized pressure as "when women are expected to have it all together."

Experiences of Dropping Out

Descriptions of women's experiences of returning to higher education were found in research literature about attrition and retention of post-secondary students. Tinto's 1975 foundational interaction/integration model and his follow-up research (1987, 1993) examined the compatibility of traditional students with a university environment. Included in Tinto's (1975, 1987, 1993) research were examinations of students' interactions with the university culture, perceived social support, social involvement, and academic engagement. Tinto's primary finding (1987, 1993) was that successful student retention lies with the institution. Generally, positive or integrative experiences, or those where a student is supported by the university culture to become well-integrated into the educational and campus environment, reinforced the likelihood of student retention. Conversely, negative or mal-integrative experiences weakened students' intentions and commitments, especially commitment to the institution, and thereby increased the likelihood of leaving (Tinto, 1975, 1987, 1993). Tinto's model is valuable for university policy development because it focuses on the role of the institution, not on the personality or individuality of the student, as causes for dropping out. Tinto (1987) explained that most research about student retention has explained student departure from psychological models about individual abilities and dispositions. They downplay or overlook the role of the institutions. By contrast, Tinto concluded that there was insufficient evidence of a personality profile that explains why some students drop out (1987).

Although Tinto's research is helpful, some researchers (Darkenwald & Novak, 1997; Graham & Donaldson 1999; Grayson & Grayson 2003; Kasworm, 2005) are concerned that results from research about traditional students are used to assess the needs of non-traditional

students. Despite their reduced levels of social and academic interaction, adults performed as well or better academically than traditional students, results that are not well explained by the dominant interactional model (Darkenwald & Novak, 1997; Graham & Donaldson 1999; Grayson & Grayson 2003; Kasworm, 2005). The findings of my study support the need for a different analysis of the attrition and retention of adult students from traditional-aged students. The findings of my study are similar to those of Grayson and Grayson (2003) who identified that students would not describe their reasons for leaving as having experienced inadequate social or academic integration.

The four women who experienced dropping out did so because of a lack of financial, academic, and emotional supports. None of the women mentioned anything related to a compatibility of their values with university life or the academic climate. If anything, they felt marginal and Leslie described the university as "brutally" hierarchical which was incongruent with her values but was not a factor that led her to consider withdrawal. Similarly, Katherine stated that she did not like the patriarchal way she saw a staff member be treated by the manager of the service, and she felt repeatedly frustrated with the lack of acknowledgement about child sexual abuse on campus. Yet this lack of congruency with her values did not cause Katherine to consider dropping out. None of the women talked about the culture or ethos of the university, even when asked about supports they had received from the university. The four who had dropped out and returned based their decisions primarily upon pragmatic and economic reasons. Leslie found childcare too difficult when her children were young and had to drop out until they were older. Christine dropped out when family and financial demands were incompatible with her pursuit of education. Maureen lacked confidence in her abilities and struggled with financial concerns, and Jesse was affected by reactions from trauma and lack of financial support.

One could interpret that the support of one or a few professors elicited a feeling of connection or compatibility with the university which could encourage the student to persist, but this was not what the women described. It seems highly unlikely that any of the women would withdraw because of lack of compatibility with the institution, considering their efforts to enroll, their level of motivation, and from a pragmatic perspective, their lack of opportunity to move to another community to attend another university.

Other than discussion about multiple role challenges, the impression gleaned from the women was that their reasons for dropping out were distant from or unrelated to what was espoused in the attrition and retention literature. This contrast might relate to the fact that most

attrition/retention literature is about traditional American students and has been inappropriately generalized to adults and Canadians (Grayson & Grayson, 2003). Another explanation could be the lack of student voice in the attrition/retention literature (Hermanowicz, 2004) and perhaps researchers have misinterpreted some students' experiences of persistence and drop out.

Still, Tinto's thesis about the role of the institution in student retention is important. It could be the role of the institution to provide the necessary supports which were lacking for women in their efforts to complete university. Supports such as affordable flexible childcare, adequate financial assistance, and recognition of the emotional needs of survivors of violence might have led to the retention of the four women who had experienced dropping out. With support by university policy and practices to enhance students' integrative experiences, this might reduce women's need to drop out and reduce self-blame when they struggle against systemic obstacles (Ennis, Mueller, Ettrick, Chepyator-Thomson, Zhang, Rudd, et al., 1989; Erwin & Maurutto, 1998; Hayes & Flannery, 1997; Home, 1998; Grayson & Grayson, 2003; Tinto, 1993; Waggoner & Goldman, 2005; Williams, 1997). In my study, Jesse and Leslie described feelings of devastation as central to their experience of dropping out from university. Maureen and Jesse talked about self-doubts, self-blame, and feelings of inadequacy. None of the women linked their decisions to drop out to systemic obstacles. This finding partly relates to the claim of Reay (2001) that the societal prevalence of a focus on individualism can lead to individual pathology. She wrote that, "As one of the adult students puts it 'life makes some people drop out of school and for some reason they tend to blame themselves.' Against the backdrop of powerful blaming individuals can all too easily be marked as failure" (Reay, 2001, p.338). Yet, with appropriate systemic supports students might not need to drop out.

Experiences Related to Age

Kasworm's (2005) study showed that approximately one third of non-traditional-aged students surveyed entered an intergenerational class with anxieties about their age and an internalized societal view that university is a place for young adults. All women in my study described similar anxieties about their age. They felt they had differences in beliefs, knowledge, and values from the majority of the student body and that they had much less energy and more difficulty studying than when they had been younger. Some of the women felt marginal because of their age, a common finding in the literature (Home, 1992, 1998; Kasworm, 2005; Tinto, 1987). Even though women predominate at the university of my study, the majority of women students are of traditional-age. Feelings of being marginal can also relate to being too busy to get

involved in campus activities, irrespective of age (Home, 1992), which was what Marie experienced. She found that adult students were too busy to even talk after class. She tried to develop a coalition for adult students but most of the interested students were too busy to become much involved.

Jesse reported feeling resentment as an adult student about the method of teaching she experienced. She felt diminished when forced to sit and listen to a lecturer rather than participating in a mutually educative process between professor and student. Jesse's criticism reflects findings in the literature, where adult students who have been in positions of authority before returning to school, might be less tolerant of the typical student subordination to professors in the typical university hierarchy (Anderson & Miezitis, 1999).

Although feeling marginal because of age discouraged the retention of older students in the findings of Home (1992), none of the women in my study indicated that age was a consideration for leaving. Instead, they adjusted. For example, Leslie said she curbed what she wanted to say when she felt that younger students were not interested in hearing her perspective. Katherine described that the age difference and concerns about her age "left me by second year. First day second year I walked in, I was veteran."

If anything, age reinforced retention for participants Marie, Maureen, Linda, Christine, Katherine, and Leslie. Linda described how she was too old to take a break now, despite the need to earn more money, because she was "beating the clock." She was determined to complete university as soon as possible. Maureen, too, described feeling too old to delay completion of university any longer and felt pressured to "get in and get it finished." Primarily the women were concerned about age affecting their learning, studying, and energy levels. Respect from professors for their adult status and life experiences countered negative feelings about being older than most other students. In addition, the women recognized the benefits of their age, life experiences, and maturity to their university experience. Compared to younger students, six of the women saw themselves as more serious, committed, resourceful, and they had developed better time management skills which assisted their ability to do well.

Experiences of Having to Study Harder Because of Age/ Fears/ Doubts

Five of the women described feeling a need to work harder at their studies to keep up with younger students because of their age, and fears and doubts about their abilities. These findings are consistent with Kasworm's (2005) research which showed that the majority of the adult students in her study believed that they could be academically competitive, primarily

because of the additional effort they put into their studies compared to younger students. Donaldson (1999) also reported that adult students tend to develop strategies to compensate for real or perceived age deficits such as working harder, a finding which is replicated in my study.

Five of the women talked about having to learn, or relearn, how to study and the effort involved. They felt that they had to study much harder than when they were younger. Marie felt that it had been so long since she had been in any school setting that she had forgotten all that she might have learned prior to university. Maureen described that it was "harder to memorize" since she had not memorized anything except a grocery list for years. Leslie thought that her mind was so full of details about all her many life responsibilities that she had to study harder to ensure that what she was learning would be retained. Maureen, Marie, and Leslie's experiences are similar to those reported by Kasworm (2005), who found that adult students thought their age affected their learning. One participant in Kasworm's (2005) study said, "However, at my age, sometimes it's hard to memorize. My mind, it's full! Overloaded! You know, adults find it harder to learn" (p. 9).

One could question if the participants' feelings about studying harder were also related to their high expectations. All of them expected to excel, obtain high grades of A's, and/or were concerned about acceptance into graduate school. These expectations might relate to the findings of Hayes and Flannery (1997) who found that women's self-doubts might also contribute to their drive to prove themselves and excel.

Experiences of having to study harder for the women might also relate to their lack of academic preparation as discussed by five of the women who talked about their lack of preparedness for academic study and the steps they took to help prepare themselves. My sense was that this preparation was not just about practicalities but also about emotional preparedness. For example, Marie and Joan were socialized to expect university to be something beyond their social class which caused significant doubt about their abilities as university students. None of the women described receiving encouragement or socialization about achieving higher education from their families of origin.

Three women described the benefits of supports provided by the Learning Centre at the University. For two of the women with learning disabilities, supports provided by the Learning Centre were deemed essential. Maureen utilized the Learning Centre to aid her transition to full-time student by improving her study skills and knowledge about navigating through the university

system. These students' feedback and the similar findings of Robson, Ryan, and Veltman (1997) indicate the benefits of such services for these students.

Experiences of Support

One consistently noted factor for retention of adult students is a supportive "other," either a partner, friend, tutor, or faculty member (Bruyere, 2003; Castles, 2004; Home, 1992, Sheridan, 2004; Tinto, 1987; Williams, 1997). Family support, nuclear and extended, is valuable, even essential to retention, but Home (1992) found that women students receive less support from their spouses than do men in the reverse situation, and that woman are expected to maintain the traditional roles of wife and mother, findings also reported in the studies of Castles (2004), Pascall & Cox (1993), Sheridan (2004), Tinto (1987, 1993), and Williams (1997). In my study, only Leslie experienced lack of support from her husband, despite her support of him through his education. While this is too small a sample to generalize, it is encouraging that four women described their husbands as significantly supportive of them, and this might be indicative of some progress with societal gender roles.

Family and friends filled the gaps for the two women without partners. Linda described her friends as invaluable, and Joan described forming a surrogate family of friends. Christine's extended family was supportive of her. Primarily, the support provided by others for the women was emotional. The women did not mention practical supports such as childcare, transportation, or help with household chores.

The three women who had older children (early teens and up) considered their children to be critical supports. These mothers did not provide detailed descriptions as to how these children were supportive, other than that they felt proud of their mother, accepted her attendance at university and the extra responsibilities they had to absorb, and, as stated by Leslie, "provided words of encouragement." These women described their children as their first priority, my interpretation being that because of their children's acceptance of their mother's adult student status, despite the financial hardship it caused, this helped the women to feel reassured about attending university. Linda talked about some of the struggles her children experienced with reduced availability to them, but they responded by "growing up" a little quicker and she felt their empathetic behaviour was one of her most important supports. A question for further research could be the effect of children's resistance to their mother's attending university on both women's enrollment and persistence.

Three women talked about having little or no support from others and their sense of self-reliance. Leslie explained that, "I never even thought of how much support can I get. It was how much can I handle at this point in my life." Although Joan had made a supportive circle of friends, she talked about her independence and growing up to rely on herself, so it did not occur to her to seek additional formal supports. Jesse described having no one to provide emotional support, and this, along with a lack of financial support, on two occasions, influenced her decision to leave university. She did manage to graduate, although she felt alone the whole time. Despite the paucity of emotional support, these three women described the significance of support from one or more professors. One could surmise that the support of some professors helped to compensate for the lack of personal supports these women had in their lives.

Experiences of Determination

All but one of the women described experiences that stimulated their drive and determination to attend university at some point in their adult lives, and that helped them to manage the challenges of being adult students with multiple roles. Part of this drive included expectations to excel despite barriers of lack of formal preparation from not completing high school, or having a significant gap between high school and their university experience, and having multiple role responsibilities. The women felt pressured from internalized expectations which caused some stress but also added to their determination to do well at school. Maureen talked about the pressure not to fail after making such a key decision to return to school. Katherine and Marie described feeling driven to prove the perception of others about them to be wrong, Marie to her parents, and Katherine to a teacher from whom she received poor feedback during high school when she was struggling with grades. It was fortunate that Katherine was determined to counter her teacher's assessment of her. This kind of overly harsh criticism can be a deterrent to student persistence (Horsman, 1999).

Linda described her development of determination and how it assisted her perseverance in university. She explained that no matter how challenging life had become at times, she had retained and reinforced an attitude that she could surpass difficulties and make life better for herself. Although Linda described her self-reliance, one of her other self-identified strengths was her ability to recognize her need for support from others and to access supports to meet those needs. She recognized, however, that not everyone is comfortable asking for help. For example, Joan and Jesse described themselves as habituated to not asking for help so neither of them considered seeking it during their years at university. Joan talked about how when she was

struggling with academic issues, it never occurred to her to seek institutional assistance. Jesse struggled with persistence several times but did not mention seeking any assistance for her issues. Still, both women eventually achieved their academic goal demonstrating their personal drive and commitment. Tinto (1987) reported that older students tend to be more committed to educational goals than are younger students and even the decision to re-enter education indicates a commitment to education under potential hardships which younger persons might be unwilling to endure. This commitment was demonstrated by the three women who were enrolled in university at the time of our interviews. Katherine and Linda were attending year-round, taking spring and summer courses, and possibly moving directly from undergraduate to graduate school, a path Maureen had also followed. Leslie and Linda described their commitment as linked to their independence and "need to do this for themselves." Maureen talked about her drive to complete once she made the decision to enroll.

The descriptions the women provided of their drive and determination is a testament to the ability of women to persist with university despite the many struggles they experienced. This finding contrasts with Tinto's (1975) interaction model of retention where personal characteristics are less significant to retention than student integration with the university culture. It seems that, for the women, their personal characteristics of drive and determination were a significant factor in their persistence. This finding could have problematic implications, however, because it could lead to a lack of support for women since it might fuel a perception that they will overcome all odds, or as Leslie and Maureen described, reinforce a stereotype of women as being able to handle everything. Thus, I was both impressed and concerned by the drive and determination of these women to persist as university students, sometimes with little support in the face of tremendous demands.

Experiences of Healing

Although the women did not explicitly state that their motivation for pursuing university education was to heal, they experienced a variety of healing experiences at university through knowledge gained and positive experiences. Healing experiences were facilitated by the transformative value of education which involved learning about the systemic nature of violence, abuse, and gender subordination, thereby reducing the women's self-blame for such experiences. In addition, five of the women described challenges to, and subsequent transformations in, their beliefs about society and social issues. The opportunity to engage in something about which they initially doubted their abilities and then succeeding was powerfully liberating for seven of the

women. The care and support given by some professors was deemed valuable by all the women, and finally, the sheer joy of the opportunity to experience university seemed, in itself, to be healing.

Healing experiences linked to overcoming internalized oppressions. According to Heng (1995), most efforts to relieve women's oppression by improving their economic and material conditions of life are insufficient in themselves. We need also to recognize that women's experiences of gender subordination and exploitation can so damage women's self-esteem, and sense of power, that their internalized oppression prevents them from even imagining recovery or empowerment. These women need to have opportunities to address their felt or subjective experiences of such subordination. "A feminist perspective on empowerment critiques how individual women, and women collectively, have been affected by ideologies and institutionalized systems of domination/ subordination, and how these practices have resulted in specific and profound injuries to women" (Heng, 1995, p. 80). One of those injuries can be internalized oppression which includes believing the derogatory messages and stereotypes spoken by others about a group of people. People learn to loathe themselves rather than understand the socioeconomic and political systems which support self-blame (Rosenwasser, 2002). Both the subjective experiences of women and the structural factors need to be analyzed to reduce self-blame (Hayes & Flannery, 1997; Heng, 1995; Morrish & Buchanan, 2001).

The opportunity to challenge limiting self-perceptions and link gender subordination to the collective experiences of women might contribute to a woman's healing. Women's decision to pursue further education might be about their search for understanding of abuse and violence (Hayes & Flannery, 1995; Horsman, 1999).

All women talked about how their educational experiences and learning at university fundamentally changed them, their self-image, and their relationships with themselves and others. Jesse described her unanticipated sense of empowerment at length. Each accomplishment along her educational journey further changed her self-image and identity. She had not expected the difference a university education would make to her. The completion of a degree brought further experiences of empowerment and one could interpret Jesse's description of her experiences as healing.

Several factors led to Marie's feelings of empowerment, and improved feelings of self-worth. She talked about feeling empowered by meeting healthy, confident young women who had never experienced sexual assaults or abusive relationships. Marie described learning that the

violence she experienced at the hands of her intimate partner was not her fault and that the problem of domestic violence lay with him. Marie's story of transformation from education was the most heartrending. She said, "I can almost look in the mirror and say, 'It wasn't your fault'...almost." She had almost rid herself of blame for her experiences of violence and this learning had been significant to her improved feelings of self-worth. Marie's experience supports the claim of Rosenwasser (2002) who wrote that, "Transforming self-hatred can be liberatory, so that we no longer need accept limits on ourselves, on what we can do, on how the world can be" (p. 54).

Leslie described her sense of validation in hearing a professor discuss the systemic nature of gender subordination which helped her to understand some of her experiences. This sense of validation for Leslie was so powerful that she said it brought tears to her eyes during class. Joan, a survivor of child sexual abuse and domestic violence, described the empowerment experienced from critical thinking in decision-making, and the control she learned that she could exert over her life. This was significant given that her experience of violence taught her that others had control over her. Maureen too described the importance of her ability to have some control over her educational environment which was empowering after years of feeling that she had little control in an oppressive work environment. Linda, also a survivor of child sexual abuse and domestic violence, described how her learning through university has helped her to "make sense of things that have happened [to her]." She had a better understanding of how and why she had experienced violence. Maureen described the transformation and healing she experienced, in addition to how she learned about her need and ability to limit her exposure to other people's mistreatment of her. She described how she changed all her friends and has new expectations of herself and others' in her relationships. Maureen, Joan, and Linda's experiences of extricating themselves from situations of violence or oppression after their learning and experiences from university might indicate a potential for education to assist women in resisting further experiences of violence or gender oppression. This finding is worth further exploration in other research.

These women's experiences relate to the findings of Hayes and Flannery (1997) who found that, more than just learning a new body of knowledge, women tend to be struggling with learning about themselves, and defining themselves in new ways. Parr (2000) also found that regardless of women's social or economic status, or program of study, the experience of deciding to attend university was associated with resistance to the power and control that others have, or have had, over their identities. Whether this was directly or indirectly verbalized, Parr found that

education was linked to the desire by many women to take control of at least this part of their lives. It seems that this was also the case for the women in my study. Taking control was part of their healing.

Experiences of empowerment for social action. Along with personal empowerment, all eight of the women described how they wished to assist with social change. Naples (2003) studied women's experiences in university and described how their growth in self-esteem and personal power enhanced their resistance and ability to critique public patriarchal policies. Lather (1991) acknowledged that empowerment can mean individual self-assertion, upward mobility and the psychological experience of feeling powerful, which describes much of what the women experienced. However, Lather (1991) also wrote that she prefers to understand the word empowerment to mean analyzing the causes of powerlessness, recognizing systemic oppressive forces, and acting both individually and collectively to change the conditions of our lives. Education should lead to re-conceptualizing violence in ways that support broad social change (Horsman, 1999). Healing internalized oppression can also profoundly empower a practice of social action (Rossenwasser, 2002). Heng (1995) wrote about levels of women's empowerment.

Heng's (1995) description of the various levels of empowerment relates to the motivations and experiences of seven of the women who participated in my study. They were highly motivated by the prospect of eventual economic and occupational outcomes which included goals of social change and working towards social justice. In my study, all of the women described personal empowerment through the recognition of systemic oppressive forces as described above, and they were acting, or plan to act, to change the conditions of their own and others' lives, through social action. They described themselves as less tolerant of social injustices, and provided details of the ways in which they hope to bring about change.

Marie talked about socializing her son about how to treat women. Marie's perception that socializing boys to be respectful of women is seen by some authors as helping to overcome oppression by addressing root causes (Jaffe, Baker, & Cunningham, 2004), and is a powerful form of social justice work. Jesse stated that she wanted to further explore the "idea of perpetration. You know, how we are all perpetrators. I'll speak for [myself]; I [have] perpetrated that emotional violence on somebody else, right? Especially if we've been victimized." As with Marie, Jesse was seeking to address root causes of violence, by looking at intergenerational links to perpetration of violence. Linda aimed to assist women in their recovery from violence and trauma

and to assist with their empowerment to avoid further potentially abusive relationships which is a form of preventative work.

In addition to individual healing and empowerment, and a drive for social action, all the women experienced changes in relationships with others, how they see the world, and the decisions they were now making. Five women talked about learning to be less judgmental, shedding previously held racist beliefs, and being less tolerant of social injustices. Three women described how they had absorbed these judgmental beliefs through their socialization and they were now aware of the origins and limitations of that thinking.

Marie described the racism she learned from her family and how she has not only unlearned it, but is also learning to challenge it. At the same time, she is learning to understand from where her parents learned their racism and to accept her parents as themselves. Marie had challenged her own views and was setting limits on how much oppressive behaviour she would accept from others, including her parents. Katherine no longer wants to associate with people who express racist views, despite her acknowledgement that she used to have some racist beliefs. She described an interaction with a friend who was expressing racist views, and how she realized that her own perspective had changed. Marie, Katherine and Maureen described setting limits on their associations and were cognizant that people's racist attitudes are learned and can be unlearned. Similarly, Joan described how she learned through her university education not to generalize about groups of people and judge others without knowing them. These women's examples of refusing to tolerate injustices can be a step to participating in social change.

What was described by the women was transformative learning and it assisted their healing. Mezirow (Dirkx, Mezirow, & Cranton, 2006), one of the initiators of theorizing around transformative learning, described it this way:

> Transformative learning is a rational process of learning within awareness. It is a meta-cognitive application of critical thinking that transforms an acquired *frame of reference,* a mind-set or worldview of orienting assumptions and expectations involving values, beliefs, and concepts, by assessing its epistemic assumptions. (p. 124)

Transformative learning is compared with other learning, most of which occurs outside of our awareness. "We derive our beliefs largely from unconscious inferences that we make from our experiences. Our frame of reference is acquired primarily through unconscious family and social experiences that reinforced habits and behaviours that were consistent with this cultural frame" (Dirkx, Mezirow, & Cranton, 2006, p. 135). Marie described how she had learned racism as part of her family values and beliefs. She gave an example of losing marks on a high school paper for

using a racist term that, to her, was a part of her family's everyday lexicon and she was unaware of the slur behind it. Linda too described how she had, "deconstructed... really broken down a lot of really icky stereotypes in thinking, that are so deeply ingrained in so many of us."

What these two women described were their new frames of reference and new insights they had acquired together with a critical awareness of how context influences beliefs. These are important components of transformative learning. This learning, however, is not without anxiety which could become overwhelming. New ideas might threaten adult students' worldviews and adult educators might be unprepared to help them to adjust (Baumgartner, 2001; Dirkx, Mezirow, & Cranton, 2006). None of the women discussed feeling anxiety about their learning. Instead, they seemed astonished and excited about what they had learned and how it had changed their thinking.

Leslie, Maureen, and Joan talked about other aspects of transformative learning such as "deep learning that challenges existing, taken-for-granted assumptions, notions, and meanings of what learning are about" (Dirkx, Mezirow, & Cranton, 2006, p.126). Leslie described herself as a "deep learner." Maureen and Joan described how the additional critical thinking they developed at the Master's level enhanced their understanding of learning. Maureen described the undergraduate program as more didactic learning compared with the Master's program where she felt that her critical thinking abilities were enhanced.

Part of the power of transformative learning is the overcoming of internalized oppression (Rosenwasser, 2002). All these effects were involved in the healing aspects of returning to university for the six survivors of violence, and for Leslie who came to understand gender subordination through university education. As did the women in the study by Groen and Hyland-Russell (2006), the women "experienced a personal transformation that is moving toward wholeness as they rediscover their self-worth and their ability to access, not only traditional post-secondary educational programs, but also the possibility for success in whatever path they choose"(p. 102).

Experiencing caring professors. Some researchers (Castles, 2004; Kasworm, 2003; Tinto, 1987) report that contact with and support from a faculty member is seen as important to program completion for adult students. Acknowledgement of and respect for their adult status, or merely the faculty member knowing the student's name, and/or work or family situation can be supportive. One student in Aviles' (2005) article claimed that "faculty and administrators should understand that students today cannot be dedicated just to learning as they have other

responsibilities" (p. 28). Faculty helpfulness, understanding the needs of multiple role students, respecting the experiences of adults, offering pragmatic content, and ensuring student participation were important for women's satisfaction in Home's (1992) study. Faculty concern for students and faculty accessibility were also found to be significant to adult students (Donaldson, 1999).

Acker and Feuerverger (1996) elucidate the need for Nodding's concept of caring in the educational setting to be re-thought and re-worked and applied to students and teachers in universities. A lack of care and value towards care is evident in universities because of their organization around an ethic of rights rather than an ethic of care (Gaskell, McLaren, & Novogrodsky, 1989), and around a discourse of economic and global competition (Gouthro, Taber, & Brazil, 2006; Harris, 2003; Wallace, 2002). The patriarchal academy and mainstream definitions of academic success mean that caring can be subordinate to research, and female faculty frequently assume the primary responsibility for nurturing the students while receiving little credit for doing so (Acker & Feuerverger, 1996; Gray, 1994). Women academics provide caring based on their individual ethics and socialization, not from an institution's policy, or climate, of an ethic of care. While a tradition of service before personal gain is a foundation of human services, these services draw upon feminized characteristics of empathy, support, kindness, and caring (Wallace, 2002). Demonstrating values related to care and relationships and challenging academic processes seldom contributes to a faculty member's success when priorities are research and teaching. Many women working in higher education struggle with conflicts between care, relationships, and achievement, and care must frequently be subordinated to research productivity (Gray, 1994; Home, 1992). Leslie described this challenge for professors in her comment that, "The regular faculty are way too concerned about their own publications, their own CV's, and maybe they have to be."

Despite these challenges for professors, caring is evident in adult education (Acker & Feuerverger, 1996). Caring is centered on an understanding of the uniqueness of individuals and their situations. Care policies are based in an underlying moral sensitivity where context, personal relationships, and individuals are important (Burton & Dunn, 2005).

The feedback from all the women in my study supports the research findings of Acker and Feuerverger, 1996, Castles, 2004, Davies, Lubelska, and Quinn, 1994, Donaldson, 1999, Gaskell, McLaren, and Novogrodsky, 1989, Home, 1992, Kasworm, 2003, and Tinto, 1987 about the importance of caring and helpfulness from faculty. Given the indication in the literature about

how difficult it is for professors to provide individual caring, and the lack of validation for doing so, it was surprising that the care given by professors was such an important theme in the data of my study. The caring and individualized attention provided by some professors was seen as significantly valuable for all eight of the women. Not all the women described details of the care they experienced but were emphatic in their statements that professors cared.

Christine felt that the acknowledgement of her adult status and respect for her life experiences was extremely valuable, as was the encouragement for her to pursue graduate studies. Maureen described the support of professors in generating ideas for papers and helping her to understand a classroom experience. Katherine described how a professor allowed her to write an essay to compensate for failure on a test written a few days after a death in her family.

Katherine and Linda specifically described that the caring they experienced from professors was not about therapy, or counseling, or personal disclosures. Katherine explained that trusting professors had not meant disclosing personal information to them. None of the women expected professors to be therapists or counselors but caring meant recognizing their needs as adults and individuals. The women were explicit in describing that their professors had caring attitudes and behaviours, and cared about their experiences with university. The caring was not complicated or time-intensive. Joan described two incidences of how she might not have persisted without the care from two professors. One incident related to her initial entrance to university. The professor knew about her past history of trauma and lack of a high school diploma and chose to give her a passing grade despite her poor grammar and advised Joan to take a grammar course to aid her future success. The second incident was when a fear of public speaking led Joan to want to quit but the professor intervened and offered her another means of demonstrating her ability. Joan described both of these events as serendipitous and that she might not have received the same care from other professors. Joan also experienced empowerment from the option provided by the professor. By the time the presentations were due, she had decided that she would challenge her fear of public speaking and presented to the class. This relates to Parr's (2000) finding that overcoming fears and succeeding at something that they felt they were incapable of was empowering to women.

Katherine described how her perception prior to enrolling was that professors would not care, that it was just a job for them, and how she was pleasantly surprised to find that this perception was erroneous. Her experience was now that if one is a committed student, one will

experience caring and support from professors. One might ask how widespread Katherine's original perception of uncaring professors is and what could be done to counteract this perception.

Jesse described how her supervisor cared enough to encourage her to complete her Master's degree. "I felt very supported in getting that done. I think she said, 'you know, it matters to me that you finish this.'" The vested interest of her professor spurred Jesse to continue at a time when she was considering dropping out.

Linda shared her own experiences, and those described to her by peers, about the support and care of professors. Although Leslie differentiated between contract lecturers and permanent faculty, none of the other women did, a finding which could be an area of further research. What was interesting was that the women described the personal nature of a "handful" of professors whom the women found so caring and supportive, and most of these caring professors came from one or two departments. None of the women described an overall academic climate of care. Given that this research involved women participants, it is understandable that female professors could be more frequently identified as caring. Perhaps, as survivors of violence perpetrated primarily by men, the women participants might have felt more comfortable, or safer, with women. However, this does not mean that caring was exclusive to female professors. Linda was careful to acknowledge that a female friend had received valuable caring support from a male professor.

Experiences of lack of care. Care is particularly important to disenfranchised women who might be attending university to escape marginalized positions and past negative life and educational experiences (Reay, 2001). Three of the women survivors of violence, trauma, or gender subordination described the detrimental effect of uncaring or insensitive behaviour of professors. These negative experiences led to Jesse almost quitting, Leslie dropping out for a year, and Joan failing to pursue a dream of graduate studies. It is logical that if professors have the power to encourage women to continue in education, then they could also have the power to lead women to doubt their abilities and withdraw. The women's decisions could also relate to self-doubts about abilities which can be triggered by insensitive educators.

Leslie described the effect of what she perceived to be overly negative feedback about an essay she submitted. Leslie was a woman who at high school was not deemed smart enough to do anything other than secretarial work, and was overcoming a limiting perception of her abilities. The feedback and the way it was presented to Leslie were discouraging enough that she dropped out for a year. Joan talked about the devastation she experienced when a professor, who was also

the chair of a department, did not like or accept her, and rejected her application to graduate studies. While facing rejection is a part of life, a rejection perceived to be based on one's person is particularly devastating for someone who has internalized beliefs about her lack of ability or worth. Joan and Leslie's experiences relates to the findings of Groen and Hyland-Russell (2006) who studied marginalized students making the transition to university. They commented that:

> Since students' perception of their past lack of academic success is so closely tied to familial and socio-cultural frames of reference, addressing academic gaps sometimes triggered painful or debilitating memories or fears. Key to helping students manage their vulnerability and distress in their increasing self-awareness is the provision of a safe and trustworthy environment. (p. 107)

One must credit Leslie for being assertive in addressing her concerns with her professor rather than withdrawing without explaining why since Perin and Greenberg (1994) found that adult students typically give personal reasons for withdrawal partly because of an unwillingness to criticize professors or programs, or because they lack assertiveness or sophistication about what they should expect from a program. Still, the professor's feedback did lead to Leslie's decision to drop out for a year.

The professor who encouraged Jesse to write about her experiences of abuse and trauma seemed to lack the knowledge or concern about the effects of trauma, and how invalidation of trauma can be re-traumatizing. Jesse considered dropping out because of this insensitivity on the part of her professor. Her experience speaks to the need for professors to be informed about effects of violence and trauma, particularly if they are going to work with a student studying those issues.

Katherine described how people, in general and at the university, did not believe her experiences of abuse until she told them the abuser had been criminally convicted, which was part of the reason she would disclose that part of her story. As described earlier, she also expressed her frustration with a lack of breadth of awareness or discussion around child sexual abuse among faculty and in the educational climate in general. Katherine and Jesse's experiences speak to Heng's (1995) finding that "many women [in adult education] feel invisible rather than present, silenced rather than heard, and isolated from their experiences and thoughts" (p. 80). Halfway through her program, Katherine found her university experience routinely unsupportive towards survivors of child sexual abuse. One could question what might be the potential effect on her persistence. Nevertheless, she did seem quite determined.

Breese and O'Toole (1995) also recommended that since women frequently choose academic majors based on their life experiences, that these students be supported to appreciate and incorporate past accomplishments and abilities into their present identity. This was something Jesse had aimed to do but was thwarted by the professor's lack of understanding of her experiences.

Along with a recommendation for awareness development on the part of professors of the needs of survivors of violence and trauma, it seems that these women, and women with multiple roles, might benefit from preparatory information about some of the potential challenges and realities of attending university. Frequently, prior to enrollment, these students did not realize how difficult it would be to manage the demands of school with their other responsibilities (Home, 1992). As Maureen suggested, orientation sessions led by veteran multiple role students might help women to develop realistic expectations and negotiation strategies to help keep demands manageable (Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002; Home, 1998; Robson, Ryan, & Veltman, 1997) Maureen also recommended institutionalized recognition of non-traditional students such as a forum for adults to meet and support each other. Maureen's insights and recommendations were similar to some of the strategies utilized by the Women Into Science and Technology (WIST) program in Australia (Wooler & Warner, 2001). WIST identified barriers for women and strategies to overcome them. This included having women participate in consciousness-raising to overcome socialization that they cannot do science, math and computing, and women exerting control by having flexibility at all levels of progress.

Maureen's recommendations were also similar to what the women reported in the study of Robson, Ryan, and Veltman (1997). These women recommended that peer or professional counseling be available during the day and evening to help manage sequelae from trauma. Other recommendations included tailored supports for survivors such as academic advising about options and how decisions might affect other factors in their lives, ongoing seminars to address concerns of returning adult students, including those dealing with problems associated with trauma, social support to deal with isolation, classes designed to teach adaptive/transitional and stress management skills, opportunities to explore the self within the context of education/career/life options, and pragmatic information about library use, reading, and study/time management skills. They suggested providing separate publications for adult students as a way of promoting available resources.

One woman from Ryan, Robson, and Veltman's (1997) study questioned whether it was the role of a university to provide such support; while this could be a question for further study, overall the group strongly suggested educating faculty and staff about the needs and concerns of this high-risk population. They said that taking this important step could make university personnel more familiar with co-dependency, which in turn would increase appropriate referrals for information and counseling. While participants agreed that social and support groups would have been advantageous, some said they would not have attended because of other commitments (Ryan, Robson, & Veltman, 1997). In my study Marie found that attempts to initiate an adult student association were thwarted because these students were too busy to participate, also a finding in Home's (1992) study.

To summarize experiences of care, the findings of my study are consistent with the literature (Acker & Feuerverger, 1996; Castles, 2004; Davies, Lubelska, & Quinn, 1994; Donaldson, 1999; Gaskell, McLaren, & Novogrodsky, 1989; Home, 1992; Kasworm, 2003; Tinto, 1987) where care from professors is helpful, and possibly necessary, in supporting women's return to education. From the experiences of the women, an "ethic of care encourages close and respectful attention to students' lived realities, family and social class, as well as their interpretations of their present, past and likely future circumstances" (Bates, 2005, p. 36).

Experiences of joy. All the women exhibited joy when describing their university experiences. Their body language was unmistakable. Their faces lit up, they smiled, their tone of voice was enthusiastic, and they leaned forward at times, and seemed thrilled to describe their positive experiences with university. One could ask whether the sheer joy of their opportunity to participate as university students could be healing. Could doing something positive and powerful for oneself that is not directly linked to "therapy" be on the continuum of healing options for women? This is my perception after my study. The women frequently described how they "loved" many of their experiences. Leslie celebrated her graduation with her children and extended family and looked forward to reviewing texts that she did not have time to read while enrolled as a student, to extend her joy of learning. Maureen enthusiastically described in detail the daily experiences that fueled her joy. She said, "And so to be back and doing something that I loved, that I was focused on, and had the time to do it. I loved it, I loved it." Given that Maureen had felt great misgivings about university potentially being as oppressive as the workplace from which she was trying to escape, her positive joyful experience seemed all the more rewarding.

Linda described that her enrolling in university "was a huge risk, and I don't regret a minute of it actually. It's been positive for me, and no regrets that's for sure." Christine said that she loved school and Jesse described how she "got so excited, I loved theory, I mean I love what I wrote. I loved the conclusions I came to. I love what I was able to say [in the thesis]." These experiences of joy were empowering for all the women of my study and led to their feelings of confidence and that they could now conquer the world. Murphy (2005) found similar findings in her study and wrote:

> Looking back on the choices and decisions she made, knowing she was able to make them because of the confidence she gained through her education…[One woman said] I don't know why it is but education somehow makes you feel you can do anything, even if it's entirely new. (p.75)

As well, Murphy (2005) found that, "Many women with university degrees claim the whole university experience gave them new personal strengths they never knew they had, in addition to the academic skills they originally signed up for" (p.77). Often adult women's experiences with education were about self-esteem and confidence building, and developing a sense of control over their lives (Parr, 2000). The women's experiences in my study are similar to these findings of Murphy (2005) and Parr (2000).

<div align="center">Summary</div>

Seven women were motivated to pursue education by both intrinsic and extrinsic factors and the two categories were inextricably linked. This finding contrasts with the findings of some earlier researchers who found that the women they studied were seen as being motivated primarily by intrinsic more so than extrinsic factors (Carney-Crompton and Tan 2002; Faith & Sturrock, 1990; Tinto, 1987). The most significant motivations for the women were self-development, to achieve a longed-for goal of university education, and for career goals. It is significant to note that one of the motivations for seven of the women to enroll in university was because they were at stages of their lives where sufficient emotional and/or financial supports were available to them, and for the women who were mothers, their children were old enough to be less dependent. Without these supports in place, these women might still be longing to achieve a university education. These findings indicate the need for adequate financial support for adult women students, particularly those who are sole parents, to obtain the resources needed to attend university.

Although the women who participated in my research did not explicitly state that healing was a motivator for attending university, their motivations were linked to their chosen fields of

study, all of which were linked to their experiences of violence, trauma, or gender subordination.

All the women had enrolled in the Faculty of Social Science and Humanities, and five of these in the helping professions, partly because of their desire to help others who had experienced violence and trauma. Of significance to the enrollment and persistence of four of the women was the emotional and financial support provided by their husbands. This contrasts with the literature where women students receive less support from their spouses than men do in the reverse situation (Castles, 2004; Sheridan, 2004; Tinto, 1987, 1993). This is encouraging as it might indicate progress towards gender roles becoming less prescribed. This cannot be regarded as a generalization because of the small number of participants, however. Only Leslie's experience of lack of spousal support corresponded to what is documented in the literature (Castles, 2004; Sheridan, 2004; Tinto, 1987, 1993). While she supported her husband through university, he did not support her even in part-time study. Similar to the findings of Bruyere (2003), Castles (2004), Home (1992), Sheridan (2004), Tinto (1987), and Williams (1997), seven of the women also drew emotional support from other family members, friends, and peers.

The availability of care provided by professors to the women seems to contrast with the findings of Acker and Feuerverger (1996) who described the difficulty professors have in providing care due to relentless professorial demands and the lack of valuing of care in the academy. One could question whether the women's experiences of care in my study related to their enrollment in the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, including programs in the helping professions where it would be congruent to receive care from professors who are teaching students about care.

In my study, the women perceived that care from professors was demonstrated by allowing for flexibility in due dates of assignments, respect for their knowledge as adult students, recognition of their individual needs, offers of options to demonstrate academic ability, encouragement, and recommendations to aid in academic success. The care provided by professors was significant to the women's persistence and aided in the healing of the women who were survivors. The benefit of caring professors is further exemplified by the effect of a lack of care where three of the women felt devastated by experiences of overly critical feedback on an assignment, the perception of a student as less academically able, and lack of understanding and validation of trauma and its effects. The six women's descriptions of their experienced effects of violence indicate the value of informed educators about effects of violence and trauma.

All the women struggled with conflicts between multiple roles including parent, partner, employee, and student. Insufficient childcare and financial supports were factors leading to dropping out which is consistent with other studies (Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002; Home, 1992, 1996, 1998; Thomas Adams & Birchenough, 1996; Wooller & Warner, 2001).

Two women discussed struggles with the sequelae of violence and the value of the Gender Centre in providing emotional support to help them to cope. Three women also described the benefits of the Learning Centre. Other than these supports available at the university, and the support of some professors, the women relied on personal rather than institutional supports. Although institutional financial support assisted three of the women, it was deemed insufficient.

The women all described a high degree of commitment to their university education but the essential nature of supports cannot be understated. Four of the women have not yet achieved all their educational goals. The four women who have achieved their education goals dropped out intermittently because of inadequate supports. This is concerning for the women currently working towards their goals and who struggle with financial and parenting challenges, insecurity about marriage stability, and the triggering of past trauma during class. While these women have helpful personal characteristics of drive and commitment, the importance of institutionally based supports for sufficient financial aid, and attention to the emotional needs of survivors of violence and trauma must continue to be advocated. As well, research exploring the benefits of orientation and ongoing support sessions for adults returning to university might be helpful to longer-term analysis of the needs of adult women students.

The experiences of the women in my study suggest that transformative learning and the caring from professors experienced by these women has been important to their self-esteem and self-image, and has provided some healing for them. Finally, the women's healing was enhanced by their experiences of joy from giving themselves the opportunity of returning to university and the exhilaration and sense of control they gained from the experience.

CHAPTER SIX

Conclusions

Introduction

In this chapter, conclusions drawn from the findings of my study, the limitations of my study, and suggested areas for further research are discussed. The conclusions focus on the women's motivations to attend university and their experiences with returning to university.

Summary of the Study

The problem my study is focused on is the prevalence of violence against women (Statistics Canada, 2006), and the higher number of women (57%) attending full-time post-secondary education in Canada (Yalnizyan, 2008, p. 20). The significance of my study was that it helps to address a gap in the literature about adult women's motivations for and experiences with returning to university and whether one of those motivations might be to heal from violence, trauma, or gender subordination.

The questions which guided my research were:

1. What were the motivations for adult women's return to a mid-sized university in Ontario?

2. What were the experiences of adult women's return to a mid-sized university in Ontario?

3. Was the university experience healing for women survivors of violence, trauma, or gender subordination and if so why or why not?

4. What supports were beneficial to the women's healing and participation as university students?

My study was exploratory and describes the motivations and experiences of eight adult women students who returned to university. A qualitative interview approach was used to collect data related to the four questions of my study. The women were recruited to participate voluntarily, from a mid-sized university campus in Ontario, through advertising and word of mouth. I met with the women at a mutually convenient time and location to engage in audio-taped interviews. The interviews were transcribed by me and data was analyzed through identification of themes following some of the guidelines suggested by Creswell (2005).

Conclusions Drawn from the Findings of my Study

Conclusions About Women's Motivations

For the women who participated in my study, motivations to attend university were linked to internal motivations, life experiences, and circumstances which facilitated their return. Rather than one specific motivation, women's decisions to enroll in university were influenced by a

complex array of factors. Although motivations can be discussed through three major themes, the themes were inextricably connected.

A major motivation to attend university for seven of the women was the desire to follow through with a long-held dream of obtaining a university degree. For the five women who were mothers, a major motivation was to also provide positive role-modeling about the value of higher education to their children. A third major motivation for seven of the women was for employment and career goals, to improve current employment situations by enhanced certification, or to pursue new careers.

Underlying all eight of the women's discussions of their motivations was a theme of wanting to challenge themselves intellectually and to determine their academic abilities. The women's motivations to enroll in university were influenced by various experiences which led to the women wanting to prove their abilities to themselves and to others. These findings are similar to those of Murphy (2005) where "education is linked with a desire to remedy a negative self-image influenced by the attitude and behaviour of significant others and a way of shedding stigma from the past" (p. 128), and of Robson, Ryan, and Veltman (1997) where some women attended higher education to escape past negative family experiences.

The women did not say that they were motivated to attend university by a hope or expectation that education is healing. Yet, through their stories, a theme of hope for making changes to their lives which had been affected by experiences of violence, trauma, or gender subordination, emerged. For six of the women who had experienced violence, their choice of academic major was influenced by those past experiences. Five of these women chose to pursue work in the helping professions, and one chose to teach others at the university level where she hoped to inspire student learning. A desire to take action in response to their experiences of trauma, such as working in the helping professions, or working to prevent violence or abuse, were part of the these women's motivation for university study. Thus, although women's motivations for enrolling in university were not identified as healing from violence, trauma or gender subordination, their decisions to enroll were influenced by those experiences. These findings most closely relate to those of Parr (2000) who found, to her surprise, that approximately half of the participants in her study about identity and education for adult women students, presented with past traumatic experiences. She concluded that:

> One could raise the question of whether education is the major vehicle, or one of many, which women who have experienced trauma in their lives use to take control over some

aspects of their identity. There might be other vehicles such as a craft, music, or starting a business which women choose for their purpose as well as education. (p.130)

Rather than an explicit motivation, healing seemed to be an unanticipated benefit of university education for the survivors of violence or trauma, both in my study and that of Parr (2000).

A significant finding about the women's motivations to attend university was that motivations were influenced by the availability of sufficient supports for them to confirm their decision to enroll. Although the women had long wanted to attend university, and some had made several attempts, it was not until sufficient financial, childcare, and/or emotional supports were available that these women were able to attend. This finding is most similar to Mohoney and Anderson (1988) who found that, for 38 women between ages 25-46, their decision to return to college was influenced by the state of their relationships, life events, and life responsibilities. These authors contrasted middle-class women's and men's sequence of life events, where men tend to complete their education and move into careers, even if they do marry and have children during that time frame. By contrast, women tend to interrupt education and career for marriage and children, and then possibly return to education and career after responsibilities for others have lessened. Thus for seven of the women, their motivations for university followed the typical sequence described by Mohoney and Anderson (1988). Only Joan's educational trajectory differed where she had left home prior to completion of high school and returned partly as a means to enhance her employment opportunities.

The finding of women's motivations to attend university being linked to the availability of resources and degree of responsibilities to others is indicative of the gender inequity they experienced. However, in light of the enhanced enrollment of traditional-aged women in university, this typical sequence of life events as described by Mohoney and Anderson (1988) might change and gender inequity for women might be reduced. Murphy (2005) noted that, "Women across the world are increasingly marrying later, getting closer to the marrying age of men, a trend that reflects that young women are now more likely to prepare for life, rather than simply for marriage and motherhood" (p. 4). Given claims that education can promote gender equity (Klein, 2006; Murphy, 2005), and should the trend reported by Murphy (2005) that enrolment of traditional-aged women in university continue to increase, we might see some improvement in gender equity. In the meantime, advocacy for gender equity for women's opportunities for and experiences with university education is important.

Conclusions Drawn From the Experiences of Women

Conclusions about Experiences of Challenges

The women described experiences of financial difficulty, gendered responsibilities, and emotional sequelae from violence and trauma which affected their experiences as university students. These experiences relate to systemic gender inequity in Canadian society as evidenced by the increased rates of poverty and violence and the higher rates of responsibility for dependent-care that women experience.

Financial difficulty. The findings of my study both support and are supported by the findings of Baker (1998), Bakker (2006), Bennetts (2007), Groen and Hyland-Russell (2006), Gouthro, Tabor, and Brazil (2006), Home (1992), Murphy (2005), Sparks (1998), Weiner (2005), and Yalnizyan (2008), where the socio-economic position of women remains inequitable in their choices about education, and financial supports or constraints are a significant factor in women's decisions about and experiences with participation in university. Financial difficulties were significant for all but one of the women. For the women who were able to obtain sufficient financial support, it was primarily through their husbands. The potential problem for women in these situations was that their financial supports were not systemic which could place them in a precarious position if those relationships breakdown.

Financial difficulties have been documented as a critical barrier to Canadian women's participation in and completion of higher education, at least since Home's (1992) study. While high tuition costs and under funding of financial aid affect all students, women are differentially affected as they remain primarily responsible for dependent-care and experience higher rates of spousal violence that more frequently leads to sole-parent status and economic hardship (Statistics Canada, 2006). Financial difficulties are enhanced partly because low-income students experience increased role-conflict since they must expend more energy scraping money together (Home, 1998).

The findings of my study support the need for university and social policy to address the high tuition costs and inadequate financial support of all students, and in particular, returning adult women students and women who are caregivers, as advocated by Home (1992), Yalnizyan, (2005, 2008), and Klein (2006). Part of the reason why systemic financial support for women's pursuit of education is important is because university education is a major vehicle for developing gender equity. "Post-secondary education, especially university, can open the way for women to a

lifetime of economic independence regardless of marriage break-up" (Murphy, 2005, p.80). Similarly, Carney-Crompton and Tan (2002) concluded that:

> Educational attainment has long been viewed as a way out of poverty and an improved lifestyle. Post secondary educational institutions might re-examine their commitment to providing such opportunities to all types of students, including adult women, and ensure that financial as well as social support are available and accessible for all. (p. 151)

Another reason to advocate for sufficient financial supports for women's participation in university is to counter the effects of the current global focus on an individualistic market-based economy. This trend has affected policy decisions at all levels of Canadian government which has led to a lack of attention to inequalities in funding of, and thus access to, participation in, and experiences of post-secondary education (MacGregor, 2006; Mackenzie & Rosenfeld, 2002; Rosenfeld & Kaufman, 2004; Spooner & Shaw, 2004). Affordable university and college tuition is very important to Canadian women and has not been sufficiently addressed in Canadian federal budgets over at least the last decade and in the most recent budget of 2008 (Yalnizyan, 2008). The finding of women's experience of financial challenges also supports Murphy's (2005) insistence on the need to keep poverty on the public agenda.

Gendered responsibilities. In my study, Linda, Marie, Leslie, and Christine described the disadvantages of being primarily responsible for dependent care, which has been significant to their experiences with university. After separation from their partners, Linda and Marie became sole parents and deferred their education to support their children. Leslie had to interrupt her studies to be primarily responsible for children, despite having supported her husband through his post-secondary education. Family responsibilities were a priority for Christine who spent years planning for her eventual enrollment. Internalized gendered expectations of family responsibilities added to Maureen's challenges as a student. These gendered experiences relate to Stalker's (1996) position that subjugation is the process of control through protection or suppression of activities. How society perpetuates these views and how women internalize these views and live up to them are the basis for understanding barriers which women might experience when pursuing adult education (Stalker, 1996). Bennetts (2007) noted that, "We don't write stories about men having to give up their aspirations in order to have a family; we don't ask men to choose, or even to agonize it" (p. 35), yet my research provides such stories for five women, which is indicative of the continued gendered responsibilities and inequity faced by women.

Experiences of violence and trauma. Six of the women in my study described life experiences of violence and/or trauma that affected their experiences of accessing and persisting

with university education. Given that women continue to experience higher reported rates of violence and more severe forms of violence (Statistics Canada, 2006), and that it might not even be abnormal for women to have experienced violence (Horsman, 1999), analysis of violence against women is important to understanding women's opportunities for and experiences with university education. The findings of my study support Horsman's (1999) recommendation for university policy development to be informed by the needs of survivors of violence and trauma. Women's experiences of violence and trauma relate to their experiences of gender inequity.

Final Conclusions About Experiences of Challenges

Findings of gender inequity for the participants in my study relate to their experiences of financial challenges, gendered responsibilities, and violence, trauma, or gender subordination. Part of the challenge in addressing the effects of gender inequity on women's opportunities for and experiences with university is that universities are often perceived as being gender-neutral, and much of the literature on universities does not address the way gender, or other variables such as race, class, ability, and sexual orientation, affect how individuals are able to participate within the university (Gouthro, Tabor, & Brazil, 2006). The reality of the academy for many women, and all eight of the women in my study, is that they are disadvantaged because of gendered differences in responsibilities and life experiences. In my study, internalized gendered role expectations and financial ability related to gender inequity influenced seven of the women's delayed enrollment, and four of the women's interrupted university education.

The finding of gender inequity for the participants in my study supports the need for continued gendered analyses of women's opportunities for and experiences with university. Access to adequate financial and emotional supports, and access to quality, affordable, and flexible childcare, are major recommendations to support women's access to and experiences with education and has been well-documented in the literature (Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002; Gouthro, 2005; Grace & Gouthro, 2000; Home, 1998; Thomas, Adams & Birchenough, 1996; Wooller & Warner, 2001). It is interesting that six of the women expressed similar experiences as those reported by Home (1992) and this indicates that although women are attending university in higher numbers, some of their struggles and challenges have not changed much since her research. The findings of my study support Home's (1996) suggestions that if adult women students who are sole parents or caregivers had adequate income, they could obtain the resources needed to cope with the pressures and attend university. The findings of my study support the analysis of Bar (2006) and Yalnizan (2005, 2008) of the socio-economic situation of many

women in Canada, and thus support the need to address the poverty and violence in the lives of women to be addressed in order to facilitate empowerment for women through adult education (Morris & Buchanan, 2001).

Conclusions About Experiences of Dropping out and Persisting

The findings of my study do not relate to the dominant findings of attrition and retention literature where a lack of fit between student and the university is the dominant explanation for attrition (Tinto, 1975, 1987, 1993). None of the women mentioned anything related to a compatibility of their values with university life or the academic climate. If anything, although they felt marginal because of their age, their age reinforced persistence for participants Marie, Maureen, Linda, Christine, Katherine, and Leslie.

The four women who experienced dropping out did so because of lack of financial, academic, and emotional supports. Support of some form has been integral to current or eventual persistence of all eight of the women. University-based supports included flexibility in assignments and due dates, online learning courses because of the flexibility they offer, the Gender and Learning Centres, financial support, and the respect, care, and at times, individualized responses provided by professors. Given the negative experiences of Jesse, Joan, Katherine, and Leslie, further awareness development for faculty about the effects of trauma and violence might be of benefit.

Research on the educational experiences of adults lacks discussion of factors that lead to success (Castles, 2004). It is important to address this gap and determine which supports help meet the many challenges faced by women.

Experiences of care and healing. The findings of my study support the findings of Parr (2000) and Reay (2001) that care is of particular importance for disenfranchised women who might choose to attend university to escape marginalized positions and past negative life and educational experiences. The healing aspect of education for the women who participated in this research was facilitated by caring professors, although they were not used as therapists. The care, support, and respect the women received from professors assisted with their persistence, success, and healing. All eight of the women were explicit in describing the value of care provided by some professors as being enormously supportive to them. These professors had caring attitudes and behaviours, and cared about the women's experiences with university. The caring was not complicated or time-intensive and was contextualized in detail by four of the women.

All of the women perceived the caring they received as characteristic of the individual professors, rather than an institutional climate of care. These women's responses support the value of care from professors, which also indicates that university policy that supports professors to be caring could be important to student's experiences and persistence.

This finding could support recommendations for systemic policies based in an ethic of care, where caring is centered on an understanding of the uniqueness of individuals and their situations. This finding is also important partly because women who have past experiences of trauma can be triggered by insensitive educators and policies (Horsman, 1999). Unfortunately, today universities are concerned with their positions in the global economic market which might lead to less focus on students needs, and less concern about developing a caring environment (Gouthro, 2005; Gouthro, Taber & Brazil, 2006). Similarly, while my study took place at a mid-sized university, one could question how much of the care women received from professors is possible at a larger university. This could be all the more reason to institute policies based in an ethic of care as advocated by Benner and Gordon (1996) who wrote:

> In a highly individualistic society, such as a university community, the importance of caring is denied while paradoxically this kind of society actually needs highly developed caring practices. For example, as we see ourselves as separate and unique individuals we require caring practices to show us how to engage in meaningful, genuine human responses. (p. 47)

Support for an ethic of care for these students was also found in the women's experiences of lack of care which influenced their decisions to drop out. Just as there was not one specific motivation for these women students to enroll, there was not one specific factor that led to women's decisions to drop out. This finding speaks to the possible benefit of a constellation of supports for women based in an ethic of care. In order to develop a systemic commitment to care, it is important for policies to be developed reflexively with ongoing student feedback to ensure a holistic view of students needs (Noddings, 1999). Thus it is important for policy developers to hear from these women in particular to both develop policy and assess the effectiveness of such policies (Campbell, 2002).

Grayson and Grayson (2003) concluded that, "The most effective strategy involves a total institutional commitment to implement policies that help keep students in school, rather than through isolated policies implemented by various departments of a university" (p.8). Universities can define their policies and rhetoric to reflect a caring and student friendly campus environment (Waggoner, 2005). Tinto (1972) concluded that:

> If there is a secret to successful retention it lies in the willingness of institutions to involve themselves in the social and intellectual development of their students. That involvement, and the commitment to students it reflects, is the primary source of student commitment to the institution and their involvement in their own learning. Institutions must capture the quality of those experiences as they are understood by the student. Assessment must in this sense be grounded in the experiences of students as they pass through the institution. (p. 7)

After reviewing a program that assisted marginalized people to pursue post-secondary studies, Groen and Hyland-Russell (2006) found that "while support in the area of material necessities is essential, a holistic approach that identifies and then addresses the entire spectrum of material, educational, medical, emotional and spiritual needs would truly support these students" (p. 107). These authors, and Grace and Gouthro (2000) who studied the experiences of women graduate students, also noted the importance of educational policy attention to physical, sexual, and emotional safety and security for women. In my study, the emotional safety and security needs of the women were the most significant. Examples include the experiences of struggles with class identity, trauma from class discussion of rape, being overwhelmed to the point of crying because of class discussions, difficulty with class discussion or lack of it about child sexual abuse, post-trauma sequelae, and dealing with multiple role challenges for six of the women. These women's experiences relate to the findings of Groen and Hyland Russell (2006) who commented that:

> Since students' perception of their past lack of academic success is so closely tied to familial and socio-cultural frames of reference, addressing academic gaps sometimes triggered painful or debilitating memories or fears. Key to helping students manage their vulnerability and distress in their increasing self-awareness is the provision of a safe and trustworthy environment. (p. 107)

The importance of emotional safety and security was exemplified by the effect of a lack of care where three of the women felt devastated by experiences of overly critical feedback on assignments, the perception of a student as less academically able, and lack of understanding and validation of trauma and its effects. Given the complexity of needs of the women discussed in my study, which are not comprehensively addressed, the recommendations from Groen and Hyland-Russell (2006) for development of awareness of and support for the whole constellation of students' needs could be supported.

Conclusions About Other Factors and Women's Healing

The findings of my study indicate that for the women who participated, women's healing was assisted by life experiences being validated, learning about the systemic factors implicated in violence against women which helped to reduce self-blame, learning that they could exert some

control over decisions and their environments, opportunities to challenge their capabilities, experiences of care provided by some professors, and the sheer joy of choosing the opportunity to participate in university. In addition, five of the women described challenges to their beliefs and ways of thinking about society and social issues, and subsequent transformation in those beliefs and ways of thinking, which were empowering to them. The opportunity to engage in something in which they doubted their abilities and then succeeding was powerfully liberating for seven of the women. The growth in self-esteem and personal power that occurred as a result of their experiences in university enhanced their resistance to and critique of their experiences of gender oppression, violence, and trauma which was also empowering.

The opportunity to challenge limiting self-perceptions, and linking gender subordination to the collective experiences of women might contribute to a woman's healing. Women's decisions to pursue further education might be about their search for understanding of abuse and violence (Hayes & Flannery, 1995; Horsman, 1999). Dirkx (2006) wrote that not everyone believes that a private perspective, such as personal meaning, should be part of educational contexts. He countered these beliefs with the perspective that unless we think that learning is a process that is somehow removed from anything that means anything to us; people will make sense of things by involving their life experiences. He is not advocating psychotherapy in the classroom, nor a religious view of learning. Rather he advocates that transformative learning involves, at the core, learning experiences which are deeply and personally meaningful (Dirkx, Mezirow, & Cranton, 2006). Ultimately, "transformative learning involves discoveries that deepen the meaning of our experiences, our relationships with others, and, fundamentally, our relationships with ourselves" (Dirkx, Mezirow, & Cranton, 2006, p. 129). In part, this happens because in transformative learning there is a focus on the meaning we make of learning in our own lives, not just what an author or lecturer means (Dirkx, Mezirow, & Cranton, 2006).

These descriptions of transformative learning explain how the women in this research have experienced profound changes in their cognitive and emotional way of being and support the benefit of this type of learning. The experiences of the women suggest that the transformative learning experienced by these women has been important to their self-esteem and self-image, and has provided some healing for them.

Conclusions about other supports for women. Carney-Crompton and Tan (2002), Home (1998), and Robson, Ryan, and Veltman (1997) suggest that orientation sessions led by veteran multiple role students to help women develop realistic expectations and negotiation strategies to

help keep demands manageable might continue to be relevant given the results of my study. Support sessions to assist women in managing their reactions after receiving discouraging feedback from professors, to daily frustrations of angst about age, abilities, and social class, and/or to triggered reactions to past trauma, might also be of benefit. If such supports were established, they would need to be flexible in scheduling to enable women to attend. Support sessions would need to receive sufficient promotion for women to develop awareness. Such a formalized mechanism might make it easier for women who are struggling to access supports to aid in their persistence.

A program designed to meet women's needs could address the concern raised by Marie that adult students do not seem to support each other in their "outsider" positions on campus. In particular, for adult women survivors of violence or trauma who are struggling with self-esteem, an institutionalized recognition of the needs of adults might make asking for help easier. Jesse almost dropped out one time due to emotional reactions from a professor's feedback. As Jesse described, she, "couldn't even articulate what the problem was." Access to assistance in managing this reaction might have been beneficial for Jesse. A concurrent means to identify students in need and encourage them to access such a support might also be of benefit to students. As Linda indicated, she was open to seeking help, but not all students are. Joan indicated that she was so used to living independently that it did not occur to her to seek assistance. A benefit from universities providing appropriate services to these students was that they could be empowering to students to be responsible for themselves and their own self-care and to take action in a variety of ways that will help them adapt to change (Robson, Ryan, and Veltman, 1997).

Other tangible examples of supports to benefit adult students and in particular survivors of trauma are available in the research findings of Robson, Ryan, and Veltman (1997). These authors suggested "developmental instructional classes designed to target a particular group or need, such as a returning adult seminar, career exploration class, women's studies courses, and/or workshops on values, ethics, critical thinking, interpersonal communication, social skills, or gender and diversity issues" (p. 91). A gender analysis in the administration of these programs is important because, for example, with a gender-neutral analysis, the identification of barriers such as low self-esteem and multiple responsibilities at home can result in women being blamed for non-participation (Morrish & Buchanan, 2001). Given that Breese and O'Toole (1995) recommended that adult women students be supported to appreciate and incorporate past

accomplishments and abilities into their present identity, which could have been beneficial to at least Jesse, their recommendation might be worth the university's consideration.

An example of a program that encompasses some of the above recommended supports for women are first year seminars called University Life 101 at the University of Saskatchewan (Mueller, 2008). The program is voluntary and non-credit and students register online for the program over the summer months when they are registering for their credit courses. The program is set up similarly to an academic class. Classes meet once a week for an hour at a time and the program runs through the first academic term (September to November).

The program is designed and delivered by a student services unit, and partners with academic advisors, faculty, and other staff from across campus. The purpose of the University Life 101 program is to facilitate both a social and academic transition to university in a student's first year. Some of the program objectives are:

> To make students more comfortable approaching faculty; to help students learn to manage time and stress effectively; to prepare students for the demands of writing a university paper and studying for a university exam; to provide students with the strategies necessary to be successful; writing exams; to encourage students to explore career options, and link career goals with academic work; to encourage students to get involved on campus and in the local community; to provide an arena for students to meet and get to know a small group of others. (R. Mueller, personal communication, November, 11, 2008).

The University Life 101 program is delivered by a team of student staff, called "coaches." Coaches are generally third or fourth year students who are strong academically and who are involved on campus in a variety of capacities. Coaches go through four days of intensive training, and meet as a coaches group once a week throughout the academic term in addition to facilitating their University Life 101 classes (R. Mueller, personal communication, November, 11, 2008).

The one caveat is that the program is geared primarily towards students who are coming directly from high school, but adult students are also accommodated. Robson, Ryan, and Veltman (1997) recommended separate programs to address the needs of adult survivors because feedback from women in their study indicated that programs designed for traditional-aged students did not meet their needs and thus could exacerbate these students' sense of being marginal.

The program design of The Women Into Science and Technology (WIST) program in Australia could provide additional supports for women who cannot attend campus support classes. WIST offers phone lists of supportive mentors and counseling to women to overcome emotional challenges (Wooler & Warner, 2001). This could allow women to access supports as they deem

necessary. Some might argue that it could be difficult for a university to allocate specific resources for women survivors of violence or trauma. The counter-argument is that ultimately the effect of violence against women is felt by everyone, either directly or indirectly (Statistics Canada, 2006). As reported in *Measuring Violence Against Women. Statistical Trends* (2006),

> The economic or financial costs of violence to victims and society are difficult to gauge. There are no studies that have examined the total economic cost of all types of violence against women. Four Canadian studies have estimated partial economic costs and indicate that the economic impact of violence on victims and Canadian society in a single year, including costs related to health, criminal justice, social services and lost productivity, can range in the billions of dollars. (p. 13)

As well, Darkenwald and Novak (1997) noted that adult students' presence provided overall effects of improved conditions for learning, tendencies of students to acquire broader perspectives, and a greater desire to do well, thus universities could find their investments in supports for adult women to be, in the long run, worthwhile.

Conclusions About Women's Experiences of Determination

Part of the inspiration for this research was actually planted several years ago during a gathering of Women' Studies students, when I was struck by the question of a professor who mused out loud, "What is it about you women, who have so much to do [multiple role identities of parenting, work, etc.] and yet you seem to do the best [academic] work?" Similarly, Castles (2004) noted in her research of adult women students that anecdotal reports from participants included lecturers' feedback about adult students:

> Lecturers showed unequivocal surprise at the misfortunes suffered by their students, who continue doggedly to study, complete assignments, and sit examinations, in the face of sometimes appalling family and personal crisis. At the same time there are students who dropping out [apparently] because of an extra busy work week or minor illness. (p.167)

I, too, am repeatedly impressed with women's courage, perseverance, and abilities against what, at times, seem like incredible odds. Yet this admiration is laced with caution since these stories can lead to an assumption that women will persevere at all costs and the need for institutional supports will not be recognized. It was encouraging that most of the women in this research experienced a validation of their experiences and knowledge which was powerful for them and hopefully their experiences can be used to guide university policy development in ways to support survivors of violence and trauma.

Of significance to recognizing women's determination is the awareness that it is important in research to "not collude in the social scientific gaze, fixation, moral spectacularizing of the poor and working class" (Fine, 2000, 120). One question to aid this awareness is, "Does it [the research] depict the researched as abnormal, powerless, or without agency" (Olesen, 2000, 239)? I have attempted to describe how all eight of the women were extraordinarily optimistic, particularly given their life experiences of abuse, violence, and gender subordination. They were not resentful or blaming. Rather they had a great deal of insight that has been enhanced by their education and understanding of systemic aspects of violence against women. All of the women described struggles with finances, multiple demands on their time, and angst about their age and abilities during their university experience. Yet, personal characteristics of drive, commitment, personal strength, independence, and self-reliance were described by five of the women as supportive of their persistence in education, characteristics which seemed to be reinforced through their experiences of success at university. It is important to emphasize these findings because, all too often, women who are suffering the consequences of violence and trauma can be regarded as being beyond help. These women illustrate that women can heal and they were resisting labels of permanent victim, or "damaged goods." Although one woman, Marie, described herself in those terms prior to attending university, her self-image was changing with her new learning and the experience of meeting non-traumatized young women students. The women survivors in this research were healing and were using, or plan to use, education to assist other women to heal, or to help prevent perpetration in the first place.

Despite the real and potential struggles women face when returning to post-secondary education, many persist in working towards their goals. In my study, the women's persistence in the face of many challenges likely reflects their level of determination to complete their education. This finding supports that of Grace and Gouthro (2000) who advocated that those who develop policy and design programs in universities should understand that commitment is intricate and has diverse meanings for different women engaged in education. As with the women in Grace and Gouthro's (2000) study, the women in my study demonstrated commitment and determination through the renegotiation of family responsibilities, struggles to attain financial support and organize childcare, along with the confrontation of dispositional barriers of low self-esteem, low self-confidence. Universities can therefore support women students by valuing women's experiences, acknowledging that women have other obligations, by offering

understanding and flexibility to enable the learning process, and by supporting means to overcome dispositional barriers (Grace & Gouthro, 2000).

<center>Limitations of the Research</center>

A limitation of my research was the small number of participants, all from a single mid-sized university, so the findings cannot be generally applied. Another limitation was the lack of diversity in race and class of participants which did not allow for much analysis of how these factors might affect women's motivations for and experiences with university. Women of different cultures and race than those identified by the participants of my study might have different roles and expectations than those commonly understood in the North American Anglo-middle-class, and these differences might affect their motivations, persistence, and required supports when enrolling in university. Two of the women defined themselves as having disabilities, two as lesbian or woman-identified, and six as heterosexual. These last factors of ability and sexuality did not demonstrate significant differentials in experience in my study. A final limitation was the lack of diversity in the participants' choice of field of study. Further study about women's experiences of other faculties would broaden the knowledge base of women's experiences with university.

My study provides a snapshot in time for women at one university. The results of my study might also relate to the emotional or psychological stage of the participating women during their interviews. Perhaps if the women were interviewed during times of dropping out from university, a different picture might have emerged. This point relates to Sammel's (2003) view that while there might be some commonalities among participants' experiences, neither my study, nor its comparisons with other research, provides a generic experience of adult women's participation in university. I also recognize that individual women's experiences can contain contradictions within themselves (Sammel, 2003). However, the findings from my study add to the literature about women's motivations, experiences and support needs when returning to university, and specifically add to the literature about the motivations for and experiences of women survivors of violence and trauma.

<center>Areas of Further Research</center>

The women experienced and witnessed valuable caring and support from some professors at university. Further research with adult student and professors' experiences and perspectives of each other might be valuable. Further research on professors' understanding of the needs of survivors of violence and trauma, and awareness of the effect of their feedback on students might

be useful. Although all eight of the women primarily experienced supportive and caring professors, analysis of the institution's policies about the value of care in the teaching component of professors' responsibilities would be beneficial. Research about current university policies and whether they facilitate caring professors and staff would be a valuable complement to my study. Research about the need for staff development about the needs of adult women students and women survivors of violence might also be beneficial. Further exploration about what services the university offers to support survivors of trauma, and how students are made aware of services, could be a useful complement to my study. A pilot project to test the viability and value of a program such as the University 101 with components specifically designed for adult women survivors might be of benefit.

The positive experiences these women have had might be interpreted as gender equity yet it is important to keep in mind that many authors are critical of the patriarchal structure of adult education in general which does not value women's experiences, voices, expertise, and knowledge (Gouthro, Tabor, & Brazil 2006; Grace & Gouthro, 2000; Gray, 1994; Horsman, 1999, Morrish & Buchanan, 2001, Naples, 2003; Wallace, 2002). Katherine and Leslie described observing patriarchy and hierarchy in the institution, which they found disturbing, but overall they individually felt valued and that their knowledge was appreciated. Further research about the university's climate of equity, patriarchy, or hierarchy could be helpful.

Research about how the university staff and professors manage discussions of child sexual abuse, based on Katherine's feedback about the lack of attention to child sexual abuse, and given the statistics about the numbers of girls victimized by child sexual abuse, could be beneficial. Also of benefit could be research about Horsman's (1999) point that the recognition of violence and trauma at the university level also requires an awareness that staff who have not dealt with their own history of violence or trauma might contribute to the silence about the issue.

Further research about the motivation of providing role-modeling for children could be interesting. One could question whether it was despite, or because of, a lack of encouragement to pursue higher education from their parents that motivated these women to offer a different message to their children.

Maureen described how the empowerment she experienced from attending university enabled her to move out of a number of oppressive relationships and an oppressive workplace, and Linda described the end of an oppressive relationship. Joan too was no longer involved in an abusive intimate relationship after her enrollment in university. These findings indicate the

possibility of education being a preventative factor to women becoming involved in oppressive relationships. From a preventative perspective, it would be interesting to determine if education encourages other women to be better prepared to resist oppressive behaviours from others. Given that violence crosses all socio-economic classes and education levels, further exploration about whether it is specific programs of study, or the empowerment from the decision-making and taking control over this aspect of their lives, that influenced the three women in my study to resist oppression and violence.

Groen and Hyland-Russell (2006) report on the stories of students who have graduated from at least one pre-university course in the humanities and have chosen to pursue studies within the mainstream educational community. Their study attempted to determine if the transformation these students experienced within the program was sustained after they left, despite the consuming challenges within their lives. From the experiences described by the women who had graduated, their experience of transformation, empowerment, and healing have been sustained. Further research about the sustainability of the healing effects of education could be beneficial.

Research about traditional-aged survivors of violence or trauma attending university would be an important addition to the literature about the needs of women in higher education. Given the statistics of violence against girls, younger traditional-aged students are likely struggling with sequelae similar to the women represented in my study. Rates of violence continue to be highest among the youngest women. Young women under 25 show the highest rates of sexual assault and criminal harassment, and the risk factors identify young women as particularly vulnerable to spousal homicide (Statistics Canada, 2006).

Further research, on the experiences of sole-support fathers, as Leslie observed, would provide an interesting complement to this research. Along with Leslie's feedback, it would be interesting to compare Maureen's experiences of guilt regarding her inabilities to fulfill all her family responsibilities while a student with men's experiences. Do men feel the same sense of guilt or family pressures about their responsibilities? Further research about mother's experiences as students if their children are not supportive of them could be interesting as well. Research focused on the specific experience of moving between social classes as university students, as described by Joan and Marie, could be a fascinating and valuable area of further research.

Large scale studies have not been especially concerned with gender as a key feature of women's experience of higher education, and have not been especially grounded in theories about women's education or about women's lives (Pascall & Cox, 1993, p. 19). While I have tried to

address the lack of student voices in the literature as identified by Hermanowicz (2004) by including as much of the women's explanations in their own words as the parameters of this document will allow, further research about women's experiences of education that includes their voice would be valuable.

Finally, all the women were from programs in a faculty of social sciences and humanities. Further research about women's motivations for and experiences of education in other faculties would further add to the body of literature about women's needs in education.

Implications for Practice

The findings of my study, in conjunction with findings from other researchers (Horsman, 1999; Parr, 2001; Reay, 2001), indicate that educational policy developers should recognize the continued gendered inequities women face (at the least, these inequities include poverty and violence, where statistically women are over-represented Horsman, 1999; Morrish & Buchanan, 2001; Statistics Canada, 2006), and the sometimes long-lasting repercussions women experience from traumas. The report in the Globe and Mail (2003) that provided an impetus for this research, along with other publications indicating the high numbers of women enrolling in post-secondary education, and an economic system geared to individualistic market-based competition, can all fuel a populist perspective of gender equity for women in such institutions. This can lead to indifference about women's gender inequity which needs to be countered by continued research focused on this problem. With the increased enrollment of women in university, some authors have put forth the idea that the continued success of postsecondary institutions might depend on the universities' ability to understand and accommodate women's situational and institutional needs (Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002; Tinto, 1987). If this is so, universities would benefit from policy development that supports the needs of women.

My study provides useful feedback for university policy development to support the return to and persistence of adult women in post-secondary education. My study adds to systematic knowledge generated by research which is an important and necessary component in the decision-making process for policy development (Rist, 2000). The findings of my study support the findings of Carney-Crompton and Tan (2002), Gouthro (2005), Home (1998), Thomas, Adams and Birchenough (1996), and Wooller and Warner (2001) that policy development should at least include adequate financial support and dependent-care as essential to adult women's enrollment and persistence in university. Another policy recommendation worth

consideration is the development of means to address the whole constellation of adult women's needs.

My study adds to the descriptive literature about women's experiences of pursuing education. These descriptions are valuable to enhancing an understanding of women's experiences and learning (Hayes & Flannery, 1997). In the report of my study, I have also tried to respond to a criticism of Williams (1997) who found that much research does not elucidate women's struggles to make sense of their situations, or provide insight into the daily life of women's experiences of conflict between study and family.

In addition, my study might help reduce some women's sense of isolation by reading about others with similar experiences to their own, by providing encouragement from other women's efforts to challenge oppression, and by providing policy analysis and tools for women to take up in their own efforts to pursue post-secondary education.

Results of my study might assist with the development of a conceptual framework for future research in the area of the effects of violence and trauma on educational experiences. The findings of my study indicate the benefit of further research about higher education as potentially healing for survivors of violence, trauma, or gender subordination.

Summary

This qualitative study explored eight adult women's motivations for and experiences with returning to university. A second purpose of my study was to explore whether women survivors of violence, trauma, or gender subordination were motivated to attend university by a desire to heal from these experiences, and if so, whether they found their university education experience to be healing. A third purpose of my study was to document what institutional and personal supports were beneficial to women's healing and participation as university students.

The women who participated in this research were motivated to attend university for personal development, to provide a positive role model for their children, and/or for employment or career goals. The most significant finding is that the women's motivations to attend university were linked to the availability of financial, childcare, and emotional supports and that they were at a time in their lives where their attendance at university was manageable given their other life responsibilities. This finding is reflective of gender inequity.

None of the women stated that healing from experiences of violence, trauma or gender subordination was a motivator for their pursuit of university studies. Rather those experiences were linked to their field of study. However, six of the women found that education helped to

alleviate the psychological trauma of physical or sexual violence, and/or emotional abuse and all of the women found that education helped to alleviate various conditions of gender subordination. The content of what they learned was important; learning about racism, classism, and sexism and the systemic factors related to gender inequity and violence against women were significant. Despite the many and varied challenges faced by these women as adult students, all the women described the benefits of university education to their self-esteem, self-image, confidence, and for the six survivors of violence, their healing.

Data show that the transformative learning experienced by these women was invaluable to their self-esteem and self-image, and has provided some healing for them. Of significance to the women's experiences were the care, encouragement, and support provided by some professors, which assisted the women in persisting in their educational endeavours and overcoming some of the challenges they experienced as adult students. The women's healing was enhanced by their experiences of exerting control over their lives through deciding to attend university, and joy in allowing themselves the opportunity to achieve a long-sought goal of university education.

References

Acker, S. & Feuerverger, G. (1996). Doing good and feeling bad: The work of women university teachers. *Cambridge Journal of Education,* 26(3), 401-423.

Anaquod-Williams, D. (1997). Bill. In J. Perreault & S. Vance (Eds.), *Writing the circle: Native women of western Canada: An anthology* (pp. 1-3). Edmonton: NeWest Publishers.

Anderson, B. & Miezitis, S. (1999). Stress and life satisfaction in adult female graduate students. *Initiatives,* 59(1), 33-43.

Apple, M. W. (1991). Series editor introduction. In P. Lather, *Getting smart: Feminist research and pedagogy with/in the postmodern* (pp.vii-xi). New York: Routledge.

Badali, S. (2004). Exploring tensions in the lives of professors of teacher educations: A Canadian context. *Journal of Teaching and Learning,* 3, 1-16.

Bagihole, B. (1994). Being different is a very difficult row to hoe: Survival strategies of women academics. In S. Davies, C. Lubelska, & J. Quinn (Eds.), *Changing the subject: Women in higher education* (pp. 15-28). Washington, DC: Taylor & Francis.

Baker, B. M. (1998). Women's inequality and the retreat from the welfare state: Downloading and discrimination against women. *Dialogue,* 27(4), 719-738.

Bakker, I. (2006). *Gender budget initiatives: Why they matter in Canada* (Technical Paper 1). Ottawa: Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives.

Bar, R. (2006). March 2006: *Empty promises, dashed hopes: 10 years after Beijing conference, women are still waiting.* Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives. Retrieved March 25, 2007, from http://policyalternatives.ca/MonitorIssues/2006/03/MonitorIssue1316/index.cfm?pa=DDC3F905

Bates, A. (2005). *Voices from the margins: Teenagers at a school informed by the ethic of care.* Unpublished Master's Thesis, Faculty of Education, Simon Fraser University, British Columbia, Canada.

Baumgartner, L. M. (2001). An update on transformative learning. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education,* 89, 15-25.

Bennetts, L (2007). *The feminine mistake: Are we giving up too much?* New York: Hyperion.

Berg, B. L. (2001). *Qualitative research methods for the social sciences* (4th ed.). Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

Blizek, W. (1999). Caring, justice, and self-knowledge. In M. Katz, N. Noddings, & K. Strike (Eds.), *Justice and caring: The search for common ground in education* (pp. 93-109). New York: Teacher's College Press.

Breese, J. R. & O'Toole, R. (1995). Role exit theory: Applications to adult women college students. *The Career Development Quarterly,* 44(1), 12-22.

Brown, J. O. (2002). Know thyself: The impact of portfolio development on adult learning. *Adult Education Quarterly,* 52(3), 228-245.

Bruyere, M. (2003). *An interpretative study of native women in post-secondary education.* Unpublished Master's thesis, Faculty of Education, Lakehead University, Thunder Bay, Ontario, Canada.

Burton, B. K. & Dunn, C. P. (2005). Caring approach and social issues in management education: Caring as universal to humans. *Journal of Management Education,* 29(3), 453-474.

Campbell, A. (2002). *Can policy be care-empowering? Voices of administrators.* Retrieved March 25, 2007, from http://www.oise.utoronto.ca/CASAE/cnf2002/2002_Papers/campbell2002w.pdf

Canadian Federation of Students. (2008). Student handbook. Lakehead University, Ontario.

Caplan, P. J. (1992). *Lifting a ton of feathers: A woman's guide for surviving in the academic world.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Carney-Crompton S. & Tan, J. (2002). Support systems, psychological functioning, and academic performance of non-traditional female students. *Adult Education Quarterly,* 52(2), 140-154.

Castles, J. (2004). Retention and the adult learner: Factors affecting retention in open university students. *Active Learning in Higher Education,* 5(2), 166-179.

Cohen, L., Manion, L. & Morrison, K. (2008). *Research Methods in Education* (6th ed.). Washington, DC: Taylor & Francis.

Conrad, D. L. (2001). The issue of access in adult education: Privilege and possibility. In D. H. Poonwassie & A. Poonwassie (Eds.), *Fundamentals of adult education: Issues and practices for lifelong learning* (pp. 204-213). Toronto: Thompson Educational Publishing.

Coser, R.L. & Coser, L. (1974). The housewife and her greedy family. In L. Coser (Ed.). *Greedy institutions: Patterns of undivided commitment* (pp. 209-230). New York: Free Press.

Cowan, J. & Westwood, J. (2006). Collaborative and reflective professional development. *Active Learning in Higher Education,* 7(1), 63-71.

Cuno, J. (2005). Telling stories: Rhetoric and leadership: A case study. *The Art Institute of Chicago,* 1(2), 205-213.

Creswell, J. W. (2005). *Educational research: Planning, conducting, and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research* (2nd ed.). New Jersey, USA: Pearson Prentice Hall.

Darkenwald, G. & Novak, R. J. (1997). Classroom age composition and academic achievement in university. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 47(2), 108-116.

Davies, S., Lubelska, C. & Quinn, J. (Eds.). (1994). *Changing the subject: Women in higher education*. Washington, DC: Taylor & Francis.

Dekeseredy, W. S. & Schwartz, M. D. (1998). *Woman abuse on campus: Results from the Canadian national survey*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Denzin, N. K. & Lincoln, Y. S. (2000). Methods of collecting and analyzing empirical data. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (2nd ed.). (pp. 632-644). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Digby, W. (2002). Curriculum design in a context of widening participation in higher education. *Arts & Humanities in Higher Education*, 1(1), 85-99.

Dirkx, J., Mezirow, J., & Cranton, P. (2006). Musings and reflections on the meaning, context, and process of transformative learning: A dialogue between John M Dirkx and Jack Mezirow, facilitated by Patricia Cranton. *Journal of Transformative Education*, 4(2), 123-139.

Doherty-Delorme, D. & Shaker, E. (Eds.). (2004). *Missing pieces V: An alternative guide to Canadian post-secondary education*. Ottawa: Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives.

Donaldson, J. F. (1999). A model of university outcomes for adults. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 50(1), 24-40.

Ellis, C. & Bochner, A.P. (2000). Auto-ethnography, personal narrative, reflexivity: Researcher as subject. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (2nd ed.). (pp. 733-768). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Ennis C., Mueller, L. K., Hettrick, D., Chepyator-Thomson, J., Zhang, X., Rudd, W., Zhu, W., Ruhm, C., & Bebetsos, G. (1989). Educational climate in elective adult education: Shared decision-making and communication patterns. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 39(2), 76-88.

Erwin, L. & Mauretto, P. (1998). Beyond access: Considering gender deficits in science education. *Gender & Education*, 10(1), 51-69.

Fine, M. (2000). For whom? Qualitative research, representations and social responsibilities. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (2nd ed.). (pp. 107-132). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Fontana, A. & Frey, J. (2005). The interview: From neutral stance to political involvement. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (2nd ed.). (pp. 231-264). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Francis, K. C. & Kelly, R. J. (1990). Environmental fit and the success or failure of high-risk university students. *Educational Policy*, 4(3), 233-243.

Franklin, U. (2000). What is at stake? Universities in context. In J. L. Turk (Ed.). *The corporate campus: Commercialization and the dangers to Canada's colleges and universities* (pp. 17-22). Toronto: James Lorimer & Co.

Gaskell, J., McLaren, A. & Novogrodsky, M. (1989). *Claiming an education: Feminism and Canadian schools*. Toronto: Our Schools/Our Selves Education Foundation.

Gergen, M. M. & Gergen, K. G. (2000). Qualitative inquiry tensions and transformations. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (2nd ed.). (pp.1025-1046). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Gilligan, C. (1982). *In a different voice: Psychological theory and women's development.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Gordon, S. (1996). Feminism and caring. In S. Gordon, P. Benner, & N. Noddings (Eds.), *Caregiving: Readings in knowledge, practice, ethics, and politics* (pp. 256-277). Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Gouthro, P. A. (2002). What counts? Examining academic values and women's life experiences from a critical feminist perspective. *The Canadian Journal for the Study of Adult Education,* 16(1). Retrieved July 7, 2006, from http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb?did=505675341&Fmt=3&clientId=29636&RQT=309& VName=PQD

Gouthro, P. A. (2005). *Democratic considerations for fostering lifelong education for women.* National Conference Online Proceedings, University of Western Ontario, London, Ontario, May 28 to May 31. Retrieved July 7, 2006, from www.oise.utoronto.ca/CASAE/cnf2005/2005onlineProceedings/CAS2005Pro-Gouthro.pdf

Gouthro, P.A., Taber, N., Brazil, A. (2006). *Universities as inclusive learning organizations for women.* National Conference Online Proceedings, York University. Toronto, Ontario. May 28 to May 30. Retrieved July 7, 2006, from http://www.oise.utoronto.ca/CASAE/cnf2006/2006onlineProceedings/CAS2006Patricia% 20A%20Gouthro.pdf

Grace, A. P. & Gouthro, P.A. (2000). Using models of feminist pedagogies to think about issues and directions in graduate education for women students. *Studies in Continuing Education, 22*(1), 5-28.

Graham, S. & Donaldson, J. F. (1999). Adult students' academic and intellectual development in university. *Adult Education Quarterly, 49*(3), 147-161.

Gray, B. (1994). Women in higher education: What are we doing to ourselves? In S. Davies, C. Lubelska, & J. Quinn (Eds.), *Changing the subject: Women in higher education* (pp. 75-88). Washington, DC: Taylor & Francis.

Grayson, J. P. & Grayson, K. (2003). *Research on retention and attrition.* Montreal: Millennium Scholarship Foundation.

Groen, J. & Hyland-Russell, T. (2006). *Transitions to transformation? The bumpy road to accessing post-secondary learning for students of the storefront 101 program.* National Conference Online Proceedings York University, Toronto, May 28 to May 30. Retrieved July 7, 2006, from www.oise.utoronto.ca/CASAE/cnf2006/2006onlineProceedings/CAS2006Janet%20Groe n.pdf

Harding, S. (1987). *Feminist methodology.* Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press.

Harklau, L. (1998). Newcomers in U.S. higher education: Questions of access and equity. *Educational Policy,* 12(6), 634-658.

Harris, E. (2003). *Canadian universities as institutes for civic pedagogies.* Canadian Association for the Study of Adult Education, Online Proceedings 2003. Retrieved July 7, 2006, from http://www.oise.utoronto.ca/CASAE/cnf2003/2003_papers/emharrisCAS03.pdf

Hayes, E. R. (2001). A new look at women's learning. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education,* 89, 35-43.

Hayes, E. R. & Flannery, D. D. (1995). Adult women's learning in higher education: A critical review of scholarship. *Initiatives,* 57(1), 29-39.

Hayes, E. R.& Flannery, D. D. (1997). Narratives of adult women's learning in higher education: Insights from graduate research. *Initiatives,* 58(2), 61-80.

Heng, C. L. (1995). Women's empowerment: Addressing emotional subordination. *Convergence,* 28(3), 78-84.

Herman, J. (1997). *Trauma and recovery: The aftermath of violence, from domestic abuse to political terror.* New York: Basic Books.

Hermanowicz, J. C. (2004). The university departure process among the academic elite. *Education and Urban Society,* 37(1), 74-93.

Home, A. (1992). *Women facing the multiple role challenge. Adult women studying social work and adult education in Canada: A study of their multiple role experiences and of supports available to them.* (Final Report). Ottawa, Canada: Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council.

Home, A. (1996). Coordinating work, family and studies: Social workers in action. *The Social Worker,* 4(3), 29-34.

Home, A. (1998). Predicting role-conflict, overload, and contagion in adult women university students with families and jobs. *Adult Education Quarterly,* 48(2), 85-97.

Horsman, J. (1999). *Too scared to learn: Women, violence and education*. Toronto: McGilligan Books.

Jaffe, P.G., Baker, L.L., & Cunningham, A. J. (Eds.) (2004) *Protecting children from domestic violence: Strategies for community intervention*. New York: The Guilford Press.

Kasworm, C. (2003). Adult meaning making in the undergraduate classroom. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 53(2), 81-98.

Kasworm, C. (2005). Adult student identity in an intergenerational community university classroom. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 56(1), 1-20.

Kember, D., Lai, T., Murphy, D., Siaw, I., & Yuen, K. S. (1994). Student progress in distance education courses: A replication study. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 45(1), 286-301.

Khanlou, N. & Peter, E. (2005). Participatory action research: Considerations for ethical review. *Social Science and Medicine*, 60, 2333-2340.

Klein, S. (2006). *The importance of public post-secondary education: Speech to the Federation of post-secondary educators*. Retrieved January 2, 2007, from http://policyalternatives.ca/Reports/2006/02/ReportsStudies1347/index.cfm?pa=A2286B2A

Lather P. (1991). *Getting smart: Feminist research and pedagogy with/in the postmodern*. New York: Routledge.

Lather, P.A. & Smithies, C. (1997). *Troubling the angels: Women living with HIV/AIDS*. Boulder, CA: Westview Press.

Le, H., Casillas, A., Robbins, S. B. & Langley, D. (2005). Motivational and skills, social, and self-management predictors of university outcomes: Constructing the student readiness inventory. *Educational and Psychological Measurement*, 65(3), 482-508.

Leonard, M. (1994). Transforming the household: Adult women students and access to higher education. In S. Davies, C. Lubelska, & J. Quinn (Eds.), *Changing the subject: Women in higher education* (pp. 163-177). Washington, DC: Taylor & Francis.

MacGregor, S. (2006). *Beyond mothering earth. Ecological citizenship and the politics of care*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press.

Mackenzie, H. & Rosenfeld, M. (2002). *University funding cuts: Shortchanging Ontario students*. Ottawa: Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives.

Matsakis, A. (1998). *Trust after trauma: A guide to relationships for survivors and those who love them*. Oakland, California: New Harbinger.

Malone, S. (2003). Ethics at home: Informed consent in your own backyard. *Qualitative Studies in Education,* 16(6), 797-815.

Maltz, W. (1991). *The sexual healing journey: A guide for survivors of sexual abuse.* New York: Harper-Collins.

McLaughlin, J. (2003). *Feminist social and political theory: Contemporary debates and dialogues.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Merriam, S.B. (2001). Something old, something new: Adult learning theory for twenty-first century. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education,* 89, 93-96.

Mohoney, C. & Anderson, W. (1988). The effect of life events and relationships on adult women's decisions to enroll in college. *Journal of Counseling and Development,* 66, *271-274.*

Morrish, M. & Buchanan, N. (2001). Women's empowerment and adult education. In D. H. Poonwassie & A. Poonwassie (Eds.), *Fundamentals of adult education: Issues and practices for lifelong learning* (pp. 256-270). Toronto: Thompson Educational Publishing.

Murphy, B. (2005). *Eating the wedding gifts: Lean years after marriage break-up.* Winnipeg: J. Gordon Shillingford Publishing.

Naples, N. A. (2003). *Feminism and method: Ethnography, discourse analysis, and activist research.* New York: Routledge.

Noddings, N. (1999). Care, justice, and equity. In M. Katz, N. Noddings, & K. Strike (Eds.), *Justice and caring: The search for common ground in education* (pp.7-20). New York: Teacher's University Press.

Oakley, A. (1981). Interviewing women: A contradiction in terms. In H. Roberts (Ed.). *Doing feminist research* (pp. 30-61). London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Olesen, V. L. (2000). Feminisms and qualitative research at and into the millennium. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (2nd ed.). (pp. 215-256). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Parr, J. (2000). *Identity and education: The links for adult women students.* England: Ashgate Publishing.

Pascall, G., & Cox, R. (1993). *Women returning to higher education.* Buckingham, England: Open University Press.

Pereira, D. (2003, September 16). Gender gap widening in post-secondary education. *The Globe and Mail.* Retrieved August 12, 2004, from http://www.theglobeandmail.com/servlet/story/RTGAN.20030916.woecd0916/BNPrint/N ati

Perin, D., & Greenberg, D. (1994). Understanding dropout in an urban worker education program, retention patterns demographics, student perceptions and reasons given for early departure. *Urban Education, 29*(2), 169-187.

Perrault, J. & Vance, S. (1997). *Writing the circle: Native women of western Canada: An anthology* (2ⁿᵈ ed.). Edmonton, Alberta, Canada: NeWest.

Reay, D. (2001). Finding or losing yourself? Working class relationships to education. *Education Policy, 16*(4), 333-346.

Reinharz, S. (1992). *Feminist methods in social research.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Robertson, R., McGrane, D., & Shaker, E. (2003). *Cash and future considerations: Ontario universities and public-private partnerships.* Ottawa: Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives.

Robson, S.A.,Ryan, M.J., & Veltman, G.C. (1997). Enhancing the development of adult women students: Co-dependency issues, effects and implications for campus programming. *Initiatives,* (58), 81-101.

Rosenfeld, K., & Kaufman, A. (2004). Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives. Missing pieces V: An alternative guide to Canadian post-secondary education. In D. Doherty-Delorme & E. Shaker (Eds.), *Missing pieces V: An alternative guide to Canadian post-secondary education* (pp. 47-52). Ottawa: Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives.

Rosenwasser, P. (2002) Exploring internalized oppression and healing strategies. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education,* 94, Summer.

Ross, L. R. & Powell, R. (1990). Relationships between gender and success in distance education courses: A preliminary investigation. *Research in Distance Education, 2*(2), 10-11.

Salinas, A., & Llanas, J. (2003). Student attrition, retention, and retention: The case of the University of Texas Pan American. *Journal of Hispanic Higher Education, 2*(1), 73-97.

Sammel, A. (2003). An invitation to dialogue: Gadamer, hermeneutic phenomenology, and critical environmental education. *Canadian Journal of Environmental Education,* 8, 155-168.

Saul, J. M. (2003). *Feminism: Issues and arguments.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Schapiro, S.A. (2003). From andragogy to collaborative critical pedagogy. Learning for academic, personal, and social empowerment in a distance-learning Ph.D. program. *Journal of Transformative Education,* 1(2), 150-166.

Seidman, I. (1998). *Interviewing as qualitative research: A guide for researchers in education and the social sciences* (2ⁿᵈ ed.). New York: Teacher's College Press.

Sheridan, E. (2004). *Why do adult learners leave higher education? A descriptive analysis*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, Toronto.

Sparks, B. (1998). The politics of culture and the struggle to get an education. *Adult Education Quarterly, 48*(4), 245-259.

Spooner, M., & Shaw, T. (2004). Trouble with the commercialization of university research: How our campus pub became a Coke bar. In D. Doherty-Delorme & E. Shaker (Eds.), *Missing pieces V: An alternative guide to Canadian post-secondary education* (pp. 106-113). Ottawa: Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives.

Stanley, L. (1990). Feminist praxis and the academic mode of production: an editorial introduction. In L. Stanley (Ed.), *Feminist praxis research, theory and epistemology in feministsSociology* (pp. 3-19). New York: Routledge.

Stalker, J. (1996). Women and adult education: Rethinking androcentric research. *Adult Education Quarterly, 46*(2) 98-113.

Statistics Canada (2006).*Measuring violence against women: Statistical trends*. Catalogue no. 85-570-XIE. Retrieved September 01, 2008, from http://www.statcan.gc.ca.

Strike, K. (1999). Three pictures of justice and caring. In M. Katz, N. Noddings, & K. Strike (Eds.), *Justice and caring: The search for common ground in education* (pp.167-178). New York: Teacher's College Press.

Tee, S. R., & Lathlean, J. A. (2004). The ethics of conducting a co-operative inquiry with vulnerable people. *Journal of Advanced Nursing, 47*(5), 536-543.

Thomas, M., Adams, S., & Birchenough, A. (1996). Student withdrawal from higher education. *Educational Management and Administration, 25*(2), 207-221.

Tilley, S. A. (2003). Challenging research practices: Turning a critical lens on the work of transcription. *Qualitative Inquiry, 9*(5), 750-773.

Tinto, V. (1975). Dropping out from higher education: A theoretical synthesis of recent research. *Review of Educational Research, 45*(1), 89-125.

Tinto, V. (1987). *Leaving college: Rethinking the causes and cures of student attrition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Tinto, V. (1993). *Leaving college: Rethinking the causes and cures of student attrition (2nd ed.)*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Tronto, J. C. (1994). *Moral boundaries: A political argument for an ethic of care*. New York: Routledge.

Tudvier, N. (1999). *Universities for sale: Resisting corporate control over Canadian higher education.* Toronto: Lorimer.

Van Manen, M. (1998). *Researching lived experience: Human science for an action sensitive pedagogy* (2nd ed.). London, ON: Althouse Press.

Van Manen, M. (2005). *Writing in the dark: Phenomenological studies in interpretive inquiry.* London, ON: Althouse Press.

Waerness, K. (1996). The rationality of caring. In S. Gordon, P. Benner, and N. Noddings (Eds.), *Caregiving: Readings in Knowledge, Practice, Ethics, and Politics (pp.* 231-255). Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Waggoner, D. & Goldman, P. (2005). Universities as communities of fate: Institutional rhetoric and student retention policy. *Journal of Educational Administration,* 43(1), 86-101.

Wallace, M. (2002). *Ontario downsized and privatized: A gendered approach to the common sense revolution.* Retrieved March 25, 2007, from http://www.oise.utoronto.ca/CASAE/cnf2002/2002_Papers/wallace2002w.pdf

Weiner, G. (2005). Bilateral vision: Gender and education in the United Kingdom and Sweden. *European Education,* 36(4), 22-39.

Williams, D. (1998). Is the postsecondary classroom a chilly one for women? A review of the literature. *Centre for Higher Education Research and Development/ Canadian Study of Higher Education, Reader Series,* 3, 7-20.

Wooller, J. & Warner, L. (2001). *An innovative flexible program for rural women: Providing quality education and training for rural Australians.* 17th SPERA National Conference Proceedings, Wagga, Wagga, New South Wales, Australia. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED, 470624).

Yalnizyan, A. (2005). *Canada's commitment to equality: A gender analysis of the last ten federal budgets (1995-2004).* Report prepared for the Canadian Feminist Alliance for International Action (FAFIA) Ottawa, Ontario, Canada. Retrieved January 2, 2007, from www.fafia-afai.org/images/pdf/CanadaCommitmentsEquality.pdf

Yalnizyan, A. (2008). *Budget 2008: What's in it for women?* Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives. Retrieved September 30, 2008, from http://www.policyalternatives.ca/documents/National_Office_Pubs/2008/Budget_2008_Whats_in_it_for_women.pdf

APPENDIXES

Appendix A

Recruitment Message Pilot

"I am a PhD student in Education at Lakehead University, supervised by Dr. Hope-Arlene Fennell, conducting a research study about adult women's motivations for, and experiences of, returning to university education. Currently I am seeking three interested women to participate in individual pilot interviews lasting approximately one hour. Interviews will be audio recorded and all information provided will be kept secure and confidential. If you are interested in participating, or for more information, I can be contacted at <u>jcox@lakeheadu.ca</u>, or 939-2386. Thanks very much for consideration of my request."

Appendix B

Recruitment Message Final

"I am a PhD student in Education at Lakehead University, supervised by Dr. Hope-Arlene Fennell, conducting a research study about adult women's motivations for, and experiences of, returning to university education here at Lakehead University. I am particularly interested in meeting with women survivors of violence and trauma who may be returning to education as a means to recover from or transform their past experiences. I am a white, now middle-class, heterosexual, able bodied woman and am interested in meeting both with women who share similar identities to mine, and women who share identities that are different than mine. I have professional experience in working with women survivors, am a survivor myself. Currently I am seeking six to twelve interested women to participate in individual interviews lasting approximately one hour to two hours, depending upon your interest. Interviews will be audio recorded and all information provided will be kept secure and confidential. If you are interested in participating, or would like more information, I can be contacted at jcox@lakeheadu.ca, or 939-2386. Thanks very much for consideration of my request."

Appendix C

Interview Questions

Demographic Information

Name (chosen pseudonym or own)
Ethnocultural Background
Socioeconomic Status
Education Level
Sexuality
Ability/Disability
Other responsibilities while attending university?
      e.g. Child/dependent care
          Employment
           Volunteer
           Other

The questions are shaped by the literature with enough flexibility to allow respondents to talk more about areas where they wanted to provide more information. (Castles, 2004, p. 173)

Participants will be asked to reflect upon the following questions:

What were your motivations for joining university, including any changes in life plans and reasons for these changes?

Have you experienced violence or trauma prior to returning to university?

Have you experienced violence or trauma since returning to university?

What kind of support have you received from the university?

What kinds of support have you received from others?

Have you had to take a break from university and if so what were your reasons for dropping out or stopping?

What have you found most difficult about returning to university?

What have you found most supportive in returning to university?

What experiences have helped you to be successful as an adult student and what experiences have hindered your success?

Has your relationship with others change since attending university? If so with whom and how?

What are your hopes, goals, expectations for the future?

Is there anything else you would like to share?

Reference:

Castles, J. (2004). Persistence and the adult learner, factors affecting persistence in open university students. *Active Learning in Higher Education, 5*(2), 166-179.

Appendix D

Participant Letter

Dear Potential Participant:

I invite you to participate in a study I am conducting to help understand adult women student's motivations for returning to university, and their subsequent experiences in the university setting.

The purpose of the research is to also examine the potential link between women's experiences of trauma and the possibility of education as healing. A second aim of the research is to add to the descriptive literature about adult women's experiences of pursuing education, descriptions which are valuable to enhancing an understanding of women's experiences and learning (Hayes & Flannery, 1997). Benefits of the research included the collection of information that may benefit policy development for universities to support adult women's return to post-secondary education. In addition, this research may; help reduce some women's sense of isolation by reading about others with similar experiences as their own; may provide encouragement from other women's efforts to challenge oppression; and may provide policy analysis and tools for women to take up in their own efforts to pursue post-secondary education.

To accomplish these goals, I ask that you participate in an open-ended interview where you will have an opportunity to discuss your motivations for and experiences of returning to university as a adult women. The interview may last approximately one to two hours depending upon your interest in discussion and your time limitations.

I recognize that there is a risk that participants may experience a retriggering of traumatic reactions when participating in such research. Should your participation in this study cause feelings of distress that are overwhelming, I will provide support based on my training, skill, and experiences in supporting women experiencing crisis or trauma reactions, and I am well informed in community referrals for any required follow-up. You may at any time choose not to answer one or more of the questions asked, or discontinue any area of discussion.

All information you provide will be kept confidential and will be securely stored in a locked filing cabinet for the required seven years. You will have an opportunity to review and edit transcripted interviews and my data analysis and interpretation. The findings of this project will be offered to you at the completion of the project. Your name, or any other identifying information, will not be revealed in any published or non-published materials.

If you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me at (807) 939-2386, or at jcox@lakeheadu.ca, my supervisor, Dr. Hope-Arlene Fennell @ 343-8354 or hfennell@lakeheadu.ca. You may also contact Lakehead University's Research Ethics Board at 343-8283.

References:

Hayes, E., & Flannery, D. (1997). Narratives of adult women's learning in higher education; insights from graduate research. *Initiatives*, 58, 61-80.

Thank you for your interest.

Sincerely,

Janis Cox
PhD Candidate
Faculty of Education
Lakehead University

Appendix E

Letter of Consent

Consent to Participate in Research
(Student)

Title of Study: Can Education be Healing? Adult Women's Motivation for and Experiences of Returning to Post-Secondary Education at Lakehead University.

You are asked to participate in a research study conducted by Janis Cox, PhD candidate, faculty of education, Lakehead University. If you have any questions or concerns about this research, please feel free to contact Janis Cox at 939-2386, or jcox@lakeheadu.ca, or my supervisor, Dr. Hope-Arlene Fennell @ 343-8354 or hfennell@lakeheadu.ca .

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the research is to examine the potential link between women's experiences of trauma and the possibility of education as healing. A second aim of the research is to add to the descriptive literature about adult women's experiences of pursuing education, descriptions which are valuable to enhancing an understanding of women's experiences and learning (Hayes & Flannery, 1997).

Potential Benefits to Participants and/or Society

Results of this research may lead to the development of policy recommendations for Lakehead University to support adult women's return to post-secondary education. In addition, this research may; help reduce some women's sense of isolation by reading about others with similar experiences as their own; may provide encouragement from other women's efforts to challenge oppression; and may provide policy analysis and tools for women to take up in their own efforts to pursue post-secondary education.

Procedures

If you volunteer to participate in this study, I ask that you participate in an open-ended interview with myself, Janis Cox, which with your consent, will be audio recorded, and then transcripted by myself. Possible questions to discuss will be forwarded to you prior to an interview.

Potential Risks and Discomforts

I recognize that there is a risk that participants may experience a retriggering of traumatic reactions when participating in such research. Should your participation in this study cause feelings of distress that are overwhelming, I will provide emotional support based on my training, skill, and experiences in supporting women experiencing crisis or trauma reactions. While I am not a counselor, I am well informed in community referrals for any required follow-up and would be happy to assist with a referral. You may at any time choose not to answer one or more of the questions asked, or discontinue a particular area of discussion.

Confidentiality and Anonymity

All information you provide will be kept confidential within the following parameters: Any disclosures of threats of harm to self or others, child abuse or criminal acts, may need to be reported to the appropriate authorities. Audiotapes and transcriptions will be securely stored in a locked filing cabinet for the required seven years, when they will be destroyed in accordance with Lakehead University's research policies. You may choose a pseudonym and Lakehead University will be referred to as a 'mid-sized' university in my dissertation and any subsequent publications.

Participation and Withdrawal

You can choose whether or nor to participate in this study. If you volunteer to be in this study, you may withdraw at anytime without consequence. You may also decline to answer any questions you do not want to and remain in the study. I may request that you withdraw from this research if circumstances warrant doing so.

Feedback Study Results to Participants

You will have an opportunity to review and edit transcripted interviews and my data analysis and interpretation. The final findings of this project will be offered to you upon the completion of the project. Your name, or any other identifying information, will not be revealed in any published or non-published materials.

Subsequent Use of Data

Findings will be used to complete a doctoral dissertation and possible subsequent publication.

References:

Hayes, E., & Flannery, D. (1997). Narratives of adult women's learning in higher
    education; insights from graduate research. *Initiatives*, 58, 61-80.

Signature of Research Participant

I understand that the information provided for the study of, Can Education be Healing? Adult Women's Motivations for and Experiences of Returning to Post-Secondary Education at Lakehead University as described herein. My questions have been answered satisfactorily and I agree to participate in this study. I have been given a copy of this form.

_____

Name of Participant

_____

Date

_____
Signature of Participant

Janis Cox_____
Name of Researcher

_____
Signature of Researcher

These are the terms under which I will conduct this research

_____   _____
Signature of Researcher   Date:

Appendix F

Data Codes

Codes for data analysis

1 Belief in education
      1 b love of
      1 c deep learning
2 For self
      2b drive and commitment (to do well)
      2c loving it
      2d desire for deep learning
      2e prove to self
3 Employment requirement
      3b becoming a requirement
      3c opens doors (opportunities)
      3 d financial
4 Supports
      4b need supportive spouse
      4c financial
         4ci spouses
         4cii employer
         4ciii university
      4d personal
      4e university
         4ei sessional faculty supportive
      4f gaps
         4fi extended family not supportive
         4fii financial insufficient
      4g from children
      4h from friend, peers; other adult students
5 Responsibilities to others
      5b gendered expectations
         5bi supports for women and men
         5bii self expectations
      5c children old enough
      5d flexibility important
      5e online courses
      5f expectations of mothers (to do it all)
6 Benefits of lived experience
7 Transformative
      7b validation of life experiences
      7c like rehab
      7d overall positive experience
      7e loved it so persisted
8 Fears, doubts, age
      8b who cares at your age?
      8c expectations of professors

8d not smart enough

8e outsider

9 Family background

9b working class

9c poverty

9d violence

9d not encouraged from high school

10 Dropping out before final commitment

10b full-time faculty not supportive

10c hierarchy of university

10d insecurity of academics

10e effects of violence, trauma

11 Working/studying hard

11b determined to do well

12 Individualized supports for women

12b poverty, sole parenting

13 Formal recognition of adult students

13 b institutional support

14 Congruent example setting with children

15 Relationship with self changed

15b with others

Final Five Major Themes and Accompanying Minor Themes

1. Motivations

1.1 Role-modeling for children

1.2 Employment and career goals

1.3 Timing (with other life responsibilities and experiences).

2. Violence and trauma

2.1 Violence or trauma after attending university.

3. Supports

3.1 Learning Centre

3.2 Gender Centre

3.3 Financial support

3.4 Professors and effects of unsupportive professors

3.5 Friends and families

3.6 Employers

3.7 Unique findings about supports.

4. Challenges

4.1 Having to study harder

4.2 Age

4.3 Fears and doubts about abilities

4.4 Lack of academic preparation

4.5 Gendered expectations and multiple role responsibilities

4.6 Finance

4.7 Effects of past trauma

4.8 Dropping out.

In response to these difficulties and challenges was the theme of

4.9 Determination

5. Transformative and healing effects.

5.1 Changes in relationship with self

5.2 Changes in relationship with others

5.3 Graduating

5.4 Validation

5.5 Joy

Appendix G

Conceptual Framework

```
┌─────────────────────────────────────┐
│  Adult women's motivations for and   │
│  experiences with returning to       │
│  university                          │
│                                      │
└──────────────────┬───────────────────┘
                   │
       ┌───────────┴───────────┐
┌──────────────────┐   ┌──────────────────┐
│   Motivations    │   │   Experiences    │
│                  │   │                  │
└──────────────────┘   └──────────────────┘
```

Adult women's motivations for and experiences with returning to university

Motivations

Experiences

Is a desire to heal from trauma, violence, and gender subordination a motivation? (some findings indicate yes)

If healing is a motivation, do women experience healing? (some findings and this study indicates yes)

What experiences lead to healing and women's persistence as students and can be added to the body of literature about this topic and/or provide policy recommendations to support women's healing and persistence.