NARRATIVES ABOUT GOD AND GENDER: WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES
IN A CONSERVATIVE CHRISTIAN ENVIRONMENT

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to examine complexities which constitute women’s narratives in a conservative Christian church context. Complexities often occur around self-perception, religious beliefs, choices, and change, in regard to gender relations. A review of the literature indicated that social constructions about gender influence the way individuals construct narratives and meaning about their lives which inform them how to live. Taking into account how reality is constructed through social dialogue an emphasis was placed on understanding how individuals conform and reform knowledge. This is often accomplished through the use of language around cultural and personal narratives.

I have drawn from three research traditions in this study: ethnography, qualitative research, and feminist research. For six months I was involved in an ethnographic study of a conservative Christian church. I utilized in-depth interviews of 11 women and two
group interviews with 7 women in order to hear the women’s narratives. Field notes from participant observation, recorded church services, and the transcripts from the interviews were used in data analysis.

Data analysis highlighted themes such as a) how the women talked about their church experience; b) the narratives they held about God and gender and how they were informed by their belief system; c) stories in which their beliefs were contradicted by their experiences around gender; d) ways in which the women lived with the tensions created by the contradictions of beliefs and experiences; e) how the women were affected by the patriarchal structure; and f) how change occurred for these women. The co-existence of two narratives, one that supported patriarchy and the other that supported feminist values, was the basis for a developing theory about change in the women’s lives.

The cultural narratives of patriarchy and the personal narratives of the women’s faith converge to create a reality for these women, yet less dominant narratives were present in their conversation. Hearing and focusing on marginal narratives in the midst of community is a way the women emphasize new narratives. This led the women to ask questions regarding change and to take action to make changes occur.
Dedicated to

Michael Pinos and Virginia Morgan-Pinos

You are present with me every day of my journey. Thank you both for giving me my Christian heritage, and my passion for education. You've instilled in me the values of justice and respect for people and you've inspired me toward social activism. You gave me a personal narrative that I would make a contribution to the world—“for such a time as this.” Esther 4:14
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This work is a product of many conversations with people whose lives have touched mine. “Scholars now understand that knowing is a profoundly communal act. Nothing could possibly be known by the solitary self, since the self is inherently communal in nature” (Palmer, 1993, p. xv). Without these people on my journey, this project would not have been possible.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Background of the Problem

Tension of Gender Awareness in a Conservative Christian Environment

In November 1995, I presented a paper at the National Conference on Family Relations, describing research I had begun during my master's studies (Ewing, 1995). In this research, I interviewed women and men in a conservative Christian church about their thinking and awareness of gender relations. The interviews offered insight about gender processes for those involved in a conservative Christian group. They seemed to live with gender contradictions and complexities which they had difficulty questioning and discussing. Their interactions with others around gender were often oversimplified, mystified, or deflected away from the topic. They described liberating aspects of their roles and aspects in which they were limited by their roles, but gave reasons why limitations were necessary.

Several questions emerged at the end of this project that inform the foundation of the present study. What would happen if the women were able to discuss gender issues? What does it mean for these women to question their beliefs and experiences about gender? How do these women live with and think about the contradictions of limitations and liberations? What would it mean if they saw themselves as limited or oppressed? How do their beliefs about gender change, and what do they do to keep these beliefs intact?

The Contribution of Feminist Social Understanding

For centuries people have asked questions about society, its structures, and how the socialization process has impacted the lives of women. It is impossible to study the lives of
women without considering the cultural social context in which they live because culture shapes social life, beliefs, values, and relationships in many subtle and not so subtle ways. Members of society are lulled in their everyday lives to not notice how culture influences them and what messages are being received about who one can be and who one should not be. Questioning the socially constructed myths and beliefs about women and men, how these myths and beliefs are reinforced through social structures, the relationship of the beliefs and structures to issues of power, and the implications for women and society have been what feminism has been noted for.

Recently an explosion of feminist scholarship has critiqued the history of religion, philosophy, and science, and the ways these disciplines have contributed to societal views on women. Historians such as Joan Kelly (1984) and Gerda Lerner (1979) claimed that traditional history has distorted women’s past in two ways. First, history has left out the lives of women, and second, the telling of history has been structured so as to make it impossible to include them. This was seen as the consequence of negative cultural ideas about women. Important pieces of history were cited offering examples of women’s subordination, a male dominated society, women being defined by their relationship to men, and the traditional role for women limiting them to the home. These pieces underscored how gender operated in society and suggested that history has been written from androcentric perspectives.

In addition, the discovery of knowledge and science historically has been considered the work of men (Andersen, 1993). Women have been excluded from educational experiences and therefore their understanding has often been disregarded (Harding, 1986). As a result, knowledge has been constructed without including women’s
views. What is “known” therefore is limited, skewed, or inaccurate.

In the social sciences, feminist professors and students have criticized existing knowledge and have begun to reconstruct studies to be inclusive for women. Feminists address this deficit in knowledge by studying the lives of women and making them the central focus of research. This kind of research is able to challenge long-held assumptions about biological differences.

Feminist theologians have challenged societal assumptions present in many religious environments by asserting that religions are patriarchal in structure and teach doctrines giving authority to men over women (Daly, 1978; Fiorenza, 1983; Loades, 1990). These doctrines are believed to be the divine design of God. Men are to rule over women, children, families, and society. But feminist theologians are reinterpreting Scripture to include the voices of women. They are challenging religious institutions like the church to reconsider their views about women’s ordination, images of women in religion, the rights of women in general, and the ways in which feminist beliefs and scholarship can inform church beliefs and practices.

Challenging the traditional assumptions about gender and family and raising concerns about the welfare of women has been a hallmark of feminism. Yet this movement has been met with opposition from those who desire to keep the traditional notions about gender and women intact. Some of those who seek to maintain such understanding can be found within conservative Christian church environments many of which are women themselves.

Conservative church environments, often patriarchal in structure, create a context in
which discourse and questioning gender ideologies is difficult (Ewing, 1995). Living out the traditional narratives of the church can be limiting for women and their development according to feminists, but not necessarily according to the women in these churches. If these narratives are taught and governed by the church and reinforce adherence to a way of thinking and behaving in regard to gender, then to question or deviate from these narratives may bring into question a person’s religious belief system (Ewing, 1995).

Some members of conservative Christian groups resist new ideas and research findings that challenge or attempt to broaden some of these long-held assumptions. Some members have an ideology that idealizes the traditional family. This idea of what is a normal and healthy household arrangement for families involves the husband as wage-earner and a wife who stays at home to raise the children. When there is deviation from that norm, it is seen as a sign of family breakdown with a three-pronged cause—the secular world, those who are liberal, and those who are considered anti-family (Thorne, 1992). These beliefs present contradictions and complexities in regard to faith and personal growth that make it difficult to question the patriarchal structure and for change to take place among individual members.

It seems important to hear and understand the views of women in these environments when considering that the postmodern era allows for multiple meanings, multiple realities, and multiple truth claims. Postmodernism opens spaces for a plurality of points of view and brings into consideration those on the margins of dominant discourse and theory (Cheal, 1991). Multiple realities accommodate contradictions, encourages the acknowledgement and celebration of diversity, and moves beyond essentialistic and dichotomous thinking (Baber, 1994). Accepting that there are multiple realities allows for
differences in behaviors, beliefs, and meaning and considers the privileging of others’ narratives. Seeking to understand the experiences and narratives of women in conservative church environments can lead to a more comprehensive understanding of women.

**Conservative Church Environments and the Support of Patriarchy**

Even though new ideas about women continue to emerge, and research has shed much light on the biases and implications of certain gender roles that may have threatening consequences for women and families, many people still hold to rigid gender role concepts (Denton & Denton 1992; Larson, 1978; Moyers, 1994). This group is comprised partially of those in conservative religious environments. They tend to support patriarchy, tend not to think of gender as problematic, and often do not see themselves as oppressed (Bernard, 1981; Brown, 1984; Kaufman, 1985; Morgan, 1987; Peek, et. al 1991; Schneiders, 1986; Whipple, 1987). Conservative religious groups worked actively to oppose the Equal Rights Amendment for women because they view gender differently. In response to the ERA campaign questionnaire, members of this group listed three reasons why they opposed the ERA: It was “against God’s plan,” it “would weaken families,” and it “encourages an un-Biblical relationship between men and women” (cited in Brown, 1984, pp. 27-28).

Conservative church environments have influence in shaping the beliefs and behaviors of members (Friedman, 1985; McNamara, 1985; Whipple, 1987). These conservative environments emphasize teachings that reinforce traditional, patriarchal ideas about gender roles (Denton & Denton, 1987). Gender is a particular area in which conservative environments seem to be prescriptive. Narratives are created around beliefs
about God's views on gender and conservative members' views on gender. Gender narratives in conservative church environments reinforce traditional, patriarchal ideas about men and women.

Conservative church environments teach a particular view of God and God's design for gender that ignores research and theory about traditional roles and patriarchal institutions. These views also ignore the effects they have on women and families. Some feminists believe these traditional and patriarchal ideas are particularly limiting for women since women are often seen as vulnerable and incapable of certain kinds of leadership in these contexts and the power to define what is truth is assumed by men. Members of conservative groups however, may not see these gender roles as limiting and may find these roles enriching (Brown, 1984).

Women in conservative environments purport to express satisfaction with women's roles and do not consider that these roles place limits on them. Brown (1984) described three crucial elements of these conservative doctrines about women: (1) Women and men are equal in worth, competence, and in the sight of God, (2) Women and men have different temperaments and different competencies, (3) Women have the better part. They tend to be satisfied with what they believe is God's plan for families, with men and women fulfilling different functions, and they believe that movement toward equal rights for women would undermine the family structure.

Statement of the Problem

Gender narratives in conservative church contexts reinforce traditional understandings about gender that limit women, especially in personal development in leadership. These conservative environments create a context in which discourse about
gender is difficult. This context and lack of dialogue about gender, problematizes gender because it prevents women from questioning myths about their lives and exploring new possibilities, and it therefore limits women’s full development of personhood. It also limits challenges about who takes responsibility for how women are impacted by the church structure and the constructed ideologies about women.

Research Questions

Four research questions guided this study:

1. How do women in conservative Christian environments narrate their experiences?

2. What are ways in which the women in this environment live with the tension of a social setting that promotes both liberation and limitation at the same time?

3. What issues arise for the researcher in the process of conducting the research?

4. What are the implications for therapeutic practice from this research?

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this project was to examine the experiences of women in a conservative Christian environment in order to better understand how they thought about and behaved in relationship to gender. The focus was on understanding how women talk about their church experience. This involved how they participated in the church, the kind of work they did in the church, how they are involved in their families, and how they think about their participation in regard to gender and their beliefs. Particular attention was given to the meanings they placed on their experience. A goal of the project was to hear the diverse voices of women in conservative Christian environments in order to be clearer
about what complexities these women struggle with.

**Key Terms**

These following terms and definitions have helped guide this study.

*Gender* is defined as “the socially learned behaviors and expectations that are associated with the two sexes” (Andersen, 1993, p. 7).

*Gender awareness* is the ability to be cognizant of one’s own or another’s behavior and life experience, and question or relate those behaviors to some preconceived belief, expectation, meanings, or social rule about gender (Ewing, 1995).

*Patriarchal* refers to structures or institutions that are organized by power relationships that give men advantages over women. It is a “hierarchical system of social relations among men that creates and maintains domination of women.” (Andersen, 1993, p. 15)

*Conservative Christian church environments* is used synonymously with fundamentalists. Conservative religious groups distinguish themselves from mainline denominations and those with more liberal beliefs. Conservatives are defined by Webster’s II (1984) as “Tending to oppose change or cautious.” In defining fundamentalists, Moyers (1994) stated that specific beliefs and practices, along with the Biblical interpretations on which they are based, often vary greatly from group to group. Several basic beliefs often characterize a conservative perspective such as the Bible is the literal word of God, and one must be born again to have a right standing with God and to experience grace for their sinful human state. In a new, born again state, one will be transformed to produce a life of holiness, adhere to a moral code, and have a zeal for evangelizing the lost.

“Fundamentalism is more an outlook on life than it is a set of doctrines. . . . This group
has tended to form tightly knit closed communities to protect their traditional family values against those of the world” (Moyers, 1994, p. 50). Sandeen (1970) sees fundamentalism as a specific social movement and protest against the modernization and secularization of Protestant denominations.

**Narrative** is a metaphor, used in the therapeutic movement as “an account of actions of human being that has a temporal dimension” (Sarbin, 1994, p. 3). I used narrative synonymously with stories. These stories enable people to make sense of themselves, others, and their world and often serve as “justificatory accounts” (Scott & Lyman, 1968) to explain the behavior of one’s self and others. Bruner (1990) posits that what one does is drastically effected by how one recounts what one is doing, will do, or has done.

**Metanarratives** or **master narratives** are those “foundational interpretive schemes that have constituted the ultimate and unquestioned sources for the justification of scientific technological and political projects in the modern world. Such narratives, focusing on God, nature, progress and emancipation, are the anchors of modern life” (White, 1991, p. 5). These metanarratives or objective truths define what is known, what can be known, and what is real.
Chapter 2: Review of Literature--A Theoretical Lens

Postmodernism, social constructionism, and feminism have brought many changes to ways of thinking and perceiving the world. These three theoretical perspectives will be used in this project because they have enlarged previously held notions about gender, raised new questions, and suggested new possibilities for women, men, and their perceived roles. The burgeoning literature presents a challenge to explore the impact of gender on the public and private lives of men and women and their relationships. This literature also presents discrepancies about how women experience gender and what kind of dilemmas are presented when women have conflicting understandings of their roles.

From Positivism to Postmodernism

Several important assumptions highlight the modern way of thinking, which is grounded in the positivist paradigm. In the positivist paradigm, an objective reality is proposed. This objective reality has implications about how human beings should relate to the world. This behavior is often viewed as innate or biological. The job of humanity is to gain clarity about the world and its realities and then to bring those realities under their control through rational actions. The desired outcome is that individuals be able to give a rational account for everything they do. This occurs through the ability to reason and the will to mastery (White, 1991). With these steps, material and moral progress will occur along with the promise of justice. Truth can be discovered and upheld through this process. Stephen White (1991) describes the positivist or modern as implying a “metanarrative.” This metanarrative or master narrative defines what the objective truths are. It defines what is known, what can be known, how it can be known, and what it real.
White (1991) described postmodernism as “standing away from, or in opposition to something modern” (p. 2). Jean-Francois Lyotard defines postmodernism as the “incredulity toward metanarratives” (cited in White, 1991, p. xxiv). The metanarratives or master narratives are those “foundational interpretive schemes that have constituted the ultimate and unquestioned sources for the justification of scientific technological and political projects in the modern world. Such narratives, focusing on God, nature, progress and emancipation are the anchors of modern life” (White, 1991, p. 5). These metanarratives or objective truths define what is known, what can be known, how it can be known, and what is real. They represent one distinct way of seeing reality.

I will refer to traditional gender ideas as metanarratives based on Stephen White’s (1991) explanation that metanarratives are the universal beliefs that seem applicable to all people. These master narratives are the anchors of modern life. These metanarratives of traditional ideas about gender are reinforced by the conservative environment, but break down in the postmodern world.

Metanarratives are limited if not inaccurate. Despite the Western cultural belief in the intrinsic progressiveness of science, today science serves primarily regressive social tendencies (Harding, 1986). The epistemologies, metaphysics, ethics, and politics of the dominant forms of science are androcentric and mutually supportive. In other words, knowledge has been designed, created, and sustained through the opinions of men in positions of power, excluding the ideas of women, other races, and other classes. The structure of science with its applications, definitions of problems, experiment designs, and ways of conferring meaning are sexist, racist, classist, and culturally coercive (Harding, 1986).
This idea of objective reality and metanarratives is significant to the way members of conservative church environments have operated in the past. These metanarratives have enabled them to make truth claims about gender. It is this dominating way of representing reality that has summoned the postmodern opposition (White, 1991).

In opposing modernity, postmodernism offers a different way of describing reality by assuming multiple meanings, multiple realities, and multiple truth claims. By challenging the status quo, postmodernism opens spaces for a plurality of points of view and brings into consideration those on the margins of dominant discourse and theory (Cheal, 1991). Multiple realities accommodate contradictions, encourage the acknowledgement and celebration of diversity, and move beyond essentialistic and dichotomous thinking (Baber, 1994). Accepting that there are multiple realities allows for differences in behaviors, beliefs, and meaning and privileges the narratives of others. There is no longer one truth. Many views are regarded. Yet difficulties arise in the effort to regard and validate many truths. What if those truths are contradictory and in opposition to each other? Can something be true and not true at the same time? Can there be variations on truth? What are the implications of having equally opposing views? How are the contradictions lived out? Can there be new directions in which to move? While postmodernist theory encourages the proliferation of questions, answers are not always found.

**Social Constructionism**

According to social constructionist theory within postmodern epistemology, multiple realities are constructed in social dialogue (McNamee & Gergen, 1994; Sarbin,
1994). It is not enough to know that different views of reality exist. The points of convergence and divergence in those constructs are essential. Social constructionist theory takes into account the interaction between two individuals and how their ways of understanding conform to and reform knowledge through conversation.

Social constructionism advances several key assumptions. Human systems are considered linguistic in nature (Anderson & Goolishian, 1988; Epston & White, 1992). Communication defines social organization. In concert with others, people constantly create and change narratives and are created and changed by these narratives. Meaning and epistemology are constructed in the social exchange (Bateson, 1972; Gergen, 1991; Maturana & Varela, 1987). Epistemology and power are inseparable (Foucault, 1980; White & Epston, 1990; White, 1991). When certain information is given status over some other information, it is given truth status. These truths become part of the culture’s dominant knowledge or story and thus become normalizing truths (White & Epston, 1990). Though there are many competing truths, some truths are more privileged and are assumed to be more true in a universal sense. I will refer to these normalizing truths as metanarratives. When knowledge is shared or discovered, objective reality has been established. Power is given to the group who has discovered this objective reality.

Foucault (1980) claimed that the establishment of objective reality leads to social control. Through the structure of the church those in positions of power often determine and reinforce what is supposedly true for women. Postmodern ideas move away from an objective, dominant reality and open up space for other realities.

Narrative

Social constructionist theorists ask how reality is created in conversations, and what
narratives one creates to make sense of their worlds. The role of the narrative is that it provides a frame for lived experience and for the organization and patterning of lived experience. A story is defined by Epston, White, and Murray (1992) as “a unit of meaning that provides a frame for lived experience. Through these stories lived experience is interpreted. We enter into stories; we are entered into stories by others; and we live our lives through these stories” (p. 97). When people experience life, they interpret those experiences based on existing dominant narratives that have meaning for them.

While these dominant narratives act as a frame to give meaning to one’s experiences, there are some experiences in life that cannot be explained by the dominant narratives. These exceptions do not fit into the dominant narratives implying that there may be other narratives existing simultaneously with the dominant narrative. However these peripheral or marginal narratives are less developed and less languaged about. These peripheral narratives are referred to as “alternative stories” (White, 1991, p. 29). These are often marginal because the dominant narrative promotes a language and behavior system that reinforces the prominent position. Important values or experiences other than the dominant ones get lost, forgotten, or unselected in giving attention to, even though those pieces might be a valued part of how the person wants to live. Alternative stories may be preferred by people instead of the dominant story. A person may be stuck in the dominant story because it has played such an important role in giving meaning to their lives and building their identity. According to Narrative therapy theory, people define who they are based on their narratives. How to give voice to those other narratives and to allow for the development of a more preferred self is the focus of narrative therapy.
Self. Sarbin contended that narrative is a "root metaphor in human experience" (cited in McNamee & Gergen, 1994, p. 70). The narrative view holds that "it is the process of developing a story about one's life that becomes the basis of all identity and thus challenges any underlying concept of a unified or stable self" (Lax, 1994, p. 71). Ideas are created by people about who they are, though they may only vaguely know it. This idea of how a person might see herself translates into how that person will interact with others depending upon the variations they have learned and the options they have experienced and will allow. Lax (1994) describes narrative or story as something we do in conjunction with others. . . . It is the process of defining who we are in interaction with other people's perceived understandings of us.

This is a recursive process. We reveal ourselves in every moment of interaction through the on-going narrative that we maintain with others. (p. 71)

Considering how reality is created by telling stories about oneself becomes a challenge.

Narratives are not individual creations, but are the result of dialogue or "mutual linguistic coupling(s)" (Maturana & Varela, 1987, p. 235). This identity is often constructed in relationship to others through communication. Gergen (1985) advocated the view that a person's self-expression through language contributed strongly to the person's being who he or she was. Talking with oneself and about oneself is a way of defining oneself. Therefore, the language one uses makes one who they are in the moment they use it. This narrative or sense of self arises not only through discourse with others, but is our discourse with others--our conversation. There is no hidden self to be interpreted. The self is being revealed through the ongoing narrative. This process is maintained with every moment of interaction with others. Women's and
men’s sense of self is rooted in a societal discourse of patriarchy. Discursive practices become important avenues of exploration. New definitions of self may arise from this process of dialogue and therefore highlight the significance of conversation.

Conversation. Anderson and Goliashian (1992) defined conversation as “any interaction between people in which there is some shared space and mutual interaction within this space” (p. 26). Within this shared space there is a sense of understanding in which meanings of one another’s thoughts, feelings, and actions are generated. It is through this conversation that reflexivity occurs. Reflexivity is the act of making oneself an object of one’s own observation (Lax, 1994). Through reflexive conversations, in which a person makes her prior conversation an object of her own observation, one shifts discourse and thus perspective. A person can step aside and view herself from another perspective. She might begin to question what it means for her story to be told in this way.

Meaning. Human systems are language-generating and, simultaneously, meaning-generating systems. Communication and discourse define social organization (Anderson & Goliashian, 1988). All human systems are linguistic, and they can be best described by those who participate in them rather than the outside objective observer. Meaning and understanding are socially constructed. Therefore, there is meaning in the story for the person narrating. This meaning gives understanding into the way the story is told and why the story is told in this way.
Feminism and the Benefits of Postmodernism

Feminist postmodernism, to some degree, has found an ally with social constructionism (White, 1990). Many of the tenets of social constructionism support the questions that feminists have been raising. For instance, feminist scholars assume that the efforts of science do not find reality, but create it. Feminist research puts the social construction of gender at the center of inquiry (Baber & Allen, 1992; Harding, 1986; Lather, 1991). This serves to reconstruct knowledge by focusing on the lives of women (Baber & Allen, 1992). Feminist postmodernism also allows for multiple realities.

Allowing for multiple realities has various benefits. In acknowledging multiple realities and deconstructing the normalizing truths about women, feminists have revealed that gender is complex and contradictory. “Intricate patterns of family relationships and responsibilities characterize the lives of contemporary women” (Baber & Allen, 1992, p. 1) and reveal a tension for them. For instance, while family life is an important arena for creative and generative expression for many women, it can also be constraining, stressful and unsatisfying. “A basic dilemma for women in families is their attempt to fulfill their own needs while effectively meeting the needs of those around them” (Baber & Allen, 1992, p. 2). This dilemma for women is also present in their church experience (Ruether, 1994). Studying the lives of women living with these tensions offers other ways to see complexities, contradictions, and difficulties of this postmodern problem.

In asking questions about what life was and is presently like for women, feminists have challenged the sciences, social sciences, historical studies, and theological studies. In making women’s lives, experiences, ideas, and values a central focus of inquiry, women are placed in a valued position. The devaluing of women has been a societal problem which
is highlighted by “how little we have known and what distorted information we have about at least one half of the human population” (Andersen, 1993, p. 20).

Feminism has asserted “that women’s and men’s positions in society are the result of social, not natural or biological factors” (Andersen, 1993, p. 7). Andersen (1993) defines gender as “the socially learned behaviors and expectations that are associated with the two sexes” (p. 31). In the cultural context gender patterns and expectations about what are appropriate behaviors and beliefs can be examined. For instance, Roberts (1990) notes that Christianity has a long history of sex bias” (p. 289). The organization and structure of the church supports the male dominated ways of relating known as patriarchy. Examining the social structure of the church has opened up new possibilities for the way gender can be viewed. This has occurred largely because feminists focus on the social context of gender and not simply biology.

Another significant contribution of feminism toward the examination of gender is the stance that in every culture gender is an organizing factor, though cultural expectations vary from society to society. These cultural patterns are often taken for granted because the culture socializes its members so that they do not question what they already believe or assume to be true (Andersen, 1993). Feminists begin with gender as a basic category of analysis and see it as an important structure in society. Thorne (1992) stated that “feminists have rescued gender and gender relations from the realm of the taken for granted and made them problematic” (p. 24). The patterns that once went unnoticed are now coming to awareness for those who are questioning. Making assumptions about gender roles is no longer comfortable for many.
Previously held assumptions about men and women have been challenged through this questioning and exploration of gender. What were once held as normalizing truths are being evaluated. Feminism questions how truth is known, if truth can be known, and who gets to contribute to this body of knowledge. Feminists have suggested that androcentric epistemology has been founded on knowledge that reflects male ideas and male domination, and has excluded and marginalized ideas from women, members of minorities, and various social classes (Harding, 1986; Sollie & Leslie, 1994). Mass media and educational institutions have also shaped knowledge about women. The dominant ideas of any society are the ideas of the dominant ruling class. For instance, in the church, truth has been defined by men. Men interpret the scriptures and hold positions of leadership through which they disseminate truth. "The ideas that are being disseminated through communication systems, including language, serve to authorize a reality that the ruling class would like us to believe" (Andersen, 1993, p. 68). This knowledge may be inaccurate, limited, or skewed, because it has been defined by those in positions of power.

Another factor that limits this knowledge is the exclusion of women's voices in the collection, organization and dissemination of knowledge. "At the heart of all feminist theory lies the idea that prior knowledge about women, society, and culture has been distorted by the exclusion of women from academic thought" (Andersen, 1993, p. 344). Feminist epistemologies offer a place for women to have voices about what we know and how we know it. By including less dominant voices it is possible to better understand social life and develop more accurate accounts of that life. Through the studying of different experiences, common experiences, and the inclusion of these voices in the development of concepts and theories, a more comprehensive knowledge of humans can be
attained. Palmer (1993) stated: “Scholars now understand that knowing is a profoundly communal act. Nothing could possibly be known by the solitary self, since the self is inherently communal in nature” (p. xv). Studying many voices and experiences can lead to more complete knowing.

Using many voices in the study of women has revealed a diversity in women’s experiences. There is no universal experience for all women (Andersen, 1993; Baber & Allen, 1992; Faderman, 1991). All women do not believe the same things regarding gender, nor do all women acknowledge oppression. In this study, I examined the commonalities and diversities of how various women in a conservative religious group think about and behave regarding gender and how the structure of the church informs them about their beliefs.

Stacey (1990) examined two working class women’s families who formed creative means in being involved in a conservative religious group and yet both held to feminist ideals and found ways to make their families work with more flexible roles. In her explanation of the tensions in women’s lives, she stated: “In the postmodern period, a truly democratic gender and kinship order, one that does not favor male authority, heterosexuality, a particular division of labor, or a singular household or parenting arrangement, becomes thinkable for the first time in history” (Stacey, 1992, p. 258). If it is possible to live within multiple belief systems, then how do women deal with these tensions? What does it take for changes to occur? Who might be open to these changes?

In her book, Keepers of the Culture, Janet Mancini Billson (1996) expressed that she has seen many changes for women. Her study of women from seven different cultures
reinforced that “women are freer to make their own choices yet bound by the double and
triple responsibilities of being homemaker, mother, and employee” (p. xii). The group of
women she studied from a conservative Mennonite religious background also experienced
changes regarding gender while continuing in old routines of typical homemaker and
mother. Acknowledging the pervasiveness of oppression, Bilson also demonstrates that
women have strengths and make contributions to new ways of life based on a set of
intricate, complex, societal norms, personal values and narratives.

**Challenges of Postmodernism**

While postmodern ideas have challenged the status quo, living with multiple
perspectives presents its own set of challenges. Even though new ideas about families are
emerging and research has shed much light on the biases and implications of certain gender
relations (Baber & Allen, 1992) part of the population still holds to rigid gender role
concepts (Denton & Denton, 1992; Larson, 1978; Moyers, 1994). It seems important to
understand this position on gender in order to understand the complexities in which these
women make decisions about patriarchal values and feminist values. Struggling with
opposing notions of who to be is not new for women. Fraser (as cited in Bounds, 1996,
p. 114) argues that women experience themselves as split subjects where their different
roles are contested. Yet the conflicting demands they experience cannot be resolved with
the framework of capitalist society. She says the result is two movements in this country, a
feminist one and an antifeminist one which both struggle with contradictions in women’s
identity. I am convinced that these two movements exist within each woman and not just
each represented in polarized groups of women. This dialogue seems necessary if all
voices, conservative and liberal feminist, are to contribute to a better understanding of the
lives of women.

Women in conservative groups have important meaning structures that enable them to make sense of their worlds and feel productive and in control of their lives. Lather (1991) cautions against dismissing women who are not feminist. For example, this sometimes can happen when an attempt to explain why all women do not say they are oppressed an explanation is given that they suffer from false consciousness or they just aren’t educated or developed enough. Any of these explanations leaves us with a description of women that is rooted in a deficit model. Donna Haraway (1988) emphasized the importance of not describing women in the ways they are represented in the dominant culture. We must find other ways of answering complex questions about women so that our analysis is not complicit with dominant representations of women, which usually highlight deviance or deficit. Given this caution, how can dialogue between feminists and conservatives be created? What would be helpful to know about conservative women that does not dismiss them and allows for discourse with others to occur? This project was designed to address some of those concerns.
Chapter 3: Methodology

Integrating Methods

I have drawn from three research traditions in this study: ethnography, qualitative research, and feminist research. Each method contributes significantly to the understanding of women’s lives and offers some important piece to the complexities of research. I attempt to describe and differentiate these three methods and to integrate concepts from each.

Ethnography is considered an immersion of the researcher in others worlds, in order to learn what the participants think and experience as meaningful (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995). This involves two things: First, the researcher enters a social setting and studies the people in their routine experiences, and develops ongoing relationships with those involved. Second, the researcher writes in regular, systematic ways what she observes and experiences in that setting (Emerson et al., 1995). This ethnographic approach served as the initial stages of this project.

Qualitative research requires in-depth and detailed information about people, their interactions, perceptions, meanings, and understandings about the construct in question (Rosenblatt & Fisher, 1993). Interviews of conservative Christian women were used as a data gathering method. Gaining both an understanding of the context in which people experience a certain phenomenon and their understanding and views of that behavior was a central goal.

Feminist research is concerned with the methods of how the study is done, opposing conventional research of hierarchical and exploitive relations (Du Bois, 1983;
Sollie & Leslie, 1994). These assumptions are included in feminist research. Data can be gathered from conversations with people, and it is not necessary to get information through covert measures (Gubrium & Sankar, 1994). Listening to participants’ stories about their lives leads to the possibility of multiple realities and multiple realities leads to a more complete picture of what is happening (Lather, 1991). The power in research is made explicit (Baber & Allen, 1992). No researcher is without bias. The researcher/researched relationship is important and the researcher’s reflexive response and their location in the content is a useful source of knowledge (Baber & Allen, 1992; Leslie & Sollie, 1994). How bias is addressed is an ethical concern for feminists (Allen & Baber, 1992). These assumptions are woven throughout this methodology.

**Position of Researcher**

My position in this research is located as both insider and outsider (Westkott, 1979). It is within the dual context of graduate education and the church that I began to question how my experiences in the church were gendered. Feminists refer to living simultaneously in the dominant culture and a subculture where different realities are experienced as “double vision” (Baber & Allen, 1992, p. 9). I am presently living with the tension of holding to two world views that espouse several contradictory tenets--Christianity and feminism. I examined my beliefs about the patriarchal structure of the church, and the church’s relationship to feminism. My position in this project was to be an advocate for a variety of women who experience these tensions.

**Field Location and Field Notes**

For 6 months I was involved in an ethnographic study of a conservative Christian church through enrollment in a 2 semester class. I attended the worship service of this
church where I assumed the role of a participant observer, systematically recording field
notes of my observations during the services, in the parking lot, during a women’s
ministry meeting, in the tape room, in the ladies room, at a luncheon, and other times. I
attended a Bible study independent of the church, in which many of the church women
participated. Also included as field notes were jottings taken in conversations, audio
recordings of the worship services, and written information such as newsletters and
bulletins. This assortment of data served as an initial means of data collection (Emerson et
al., 1995; Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995).

Gaining Access

Along with these field notes I kept a personal journal that described how I gained
access to the group, how I positioned myself in the group, how I responded to interactions
with group members, ethical questions I was asking, and ways that I interpreted my
experiences. I gained access to the group by taking several steps. First, I met some
women at a Sunday morning service. I introduced myself and said I wanted to do some
research on the lives of women in the church. Next, they introduced me to the women’s
leader who invited me to attend a meeting of all the women leaders at her home. They were
willing to be involved, but recommended that I ask permission of the elders to interview
them and to do the research. I sought permission from the elders through a letter (see
Appendix A).

I positioned myself in the fieldwork as an insider and outsider. I am familiar with
churches, have worked in a church, and I am married to a former pastor. I also positioned
myself as an outside researcher, as a graduate student, and a professional family therapist
interested in the lives of women. At first, I responded to the interactions with group members with caution and fear. At times, I felt threatened and unsafe about my present position as someone outside the church. I was fearful that if they knew the questions I was personally raising about the church and its beliefs about women that I would be labeled a “liberal” and communication would be cut off because they would not want to speak with me. I felt tension about having both Christian beliefs and feminist beliefs.

I was also asking ethical questions about this project through reflexive conversations with my advisor, the teacher overseeing the ethnography class, and colleagues. The ethical issue we identified was about honesty and disclosure. How much should I reveal or conceal about myself? When is an appropriate time to reveal more information?

My final type of journal entry described ways that I interpreted my experiences in the weekly church service. I constructed a hypothesis about why women dress the way they do in church and how that reinforces a narrative about who they are. I also saw men constantly being up front, leading singing, praying, and preaching, as a way of controlling what information was given about the Bible and how to live. Many of these hypotheses were shaped by my weekly meetings with my advisor, my ongoing study of feminism and narrative therapy, and talking about these ideas on a regular basis in the ethnography class in order to get feedback and suggestions. These are a few examples of the type of entries I included in my personal journal and will be included in Chapter 4.

This particular church was selected for two reasons. First, this choice was directed by my research questions which pertained to the lives of women in these contexts. When discussing my content ideas with classmates in my therapy and ethnography classes, I had
been told that this might be a church where helpful information could be attained. This location was known in the community as being a conservative church with specific ideas about gender which were important criteria pertaining to this study. Lofland and Lofland (1984) asserted that the richest data can be yielded from where the topic is physically located. I began to attend this church to see if the setting fit my focus of study. Second, I wanted to be involved in a larger congregation of people so that my presence would not be so obvious and I could perhaps be less intrusive in their worship. This church was one of the largest congregations in this area with a weekly attendance exceeding 500.

Participants

Recruiting began through the ethnographic study in this church. Being involved there for 6 months allowed for access to the women with whom I have been interacting. I originally approached 2 women and told them I was doing a research project on the lives of women in churches. The first woman asked me if I needed help as I was wandering the halls of the church one morning. She, in turn, introduced me to the women’s ministry team coordinator. I was invited to a women’s ministry meeting where a group of women told me they would be interested and willing to participate in my study. These women also suggested other women who they thought would be interested and helpful.

Participants were recruited through purposive sampling and were required to meet certain criteria (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). They were chosen because they were involved members of this conservative Christian church. These participants will have insider knowledge and will be able to give information from an expert stance.
**Interview Data Collection**

Individual and group interviews were conducted.

**TABLE 1**

NUMBER OF WOMEN IN ATTENDANCE AT INDIVIDUAL AND GROUP REFLECTING TEAM INTERVIEWS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1st Interview Participant Names</th>
<th>2nd Interview</th>
<th>Reflecting Team #1</th>
<th>Reflecting Team #2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dee</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ginger</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ellen</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alice</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nell</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beth</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kelly</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doris</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lisa</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bonnie</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lucy</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Total:** 11 | 6 | 7 | 7

**Note.** A check (✓) indicates attendance after the initial interview.
Individual Interviews. In-depth, loosely structured, individual interviews were conducted because this method is designed to explore questions about meaning and "has the ability to detect, represent, and explicate the meaning of something from the viewpoint of the actors involved" (Sankar & Gubrium, 1994, p.x). Feminist researchers are concerned with the processes of research that promote non-oppressive forms of interaction. Giving voice to the participants' definition of reality becomes important since it is respectful of their agency and might enable them to gain a greater sense of control in their lives (Rappaport, 1990). Understanding how members of this sample think about their gender experiences and what these mean to the individuals is a central concern. This method values the point of view of the participants and considers their particular social context (Osmond & Thorne, 1993).

Interviews were used in order to enter the personal worlds of the individuals and to get as close to them as possible (Gilgun, 1992; Goffman, 1989). Interviews were conducted for individuals and a group. (For a list of interview questions see Appendix B and C). I conducted interviews with 11 participants. A second interview was held with 6 of the women. Consent forms were signed by all the participants. (See Appendix D for individual consent forms). Daly (1992) suggested gradually building trust and rapport that can lead to the participants inviting the inquirer into their worlds. When participants allow the interviewer access to their lives, further understanding of the process and meaning of their lives is possible. This also places the participants in the role of experts regarding their own life experiences. Gaining trust and entrance into their worlds came from my time in the church as participant observer where they were able to get to know me to some degree.
Group Interviews

Along with individual interviews, I facilitated a group interview with the 7 participants who chose to attend. All participants were invited. Consent forms were signed by the women who attended the group interview. (See Appendix E for a copy of the group consent form). Seven chose to attend the first group. The same 7 women attended the second group interview. A goal of feminist research is to create rigorous means to increase validity, that is, to ensure the “trustworthiness of the data” (Lather, 1991, p. 52). A concern for empirical accountability in the researcher’s description and analysis becomes central. I realized I not only needed another method for listening to levels of responses of the participants but also for creating a different conversation for myself around this topic. The reflecting team design was an innovative method derived from my experience as a therapist and a researcher used to interview the group. I used the reflecting team notion to help ensure the acknowledgement of two voices, the other and self, i.e., my voice as a researcher and the voices of the participants.

Group interviews are helpful in many ways, even when a reflecting team is not present. First, the group enabled the women to hear from other women regarding their experiences, possibly constructing and re-creating new stories about themselves (Baber, 1994). Generating knowledge is dialogic and involves a mutually educative experience. Understanding phenomena is a community experience (Lather, 1991). Second, a group interview encourages change to occur not only for the researched but also for the researcher. Knowledge and change can occur through self-reflection and deeper understanding of my own situation as well as their situations. This mutual learning
approach is referred to as emancipatory or praxis research (Lather, 1991). This involved reciprocity as a data gathering technique (Lather, 1991). For the relationship to be reciprocal, the researcher must move from the role of detached researcher to the position of someone involved and interactive with the participants of the study.

Third, in this partial collaboration and group interaction (Baber, 1994), the involvement of the women will be deemed important when considering issues of validity. I submitted a preliminary analysis of the data to the scrutiny of the researched. The participants had an opportunity to interact with me regarding what they heard me saying about the issues and their responses. Lather (1991) believed this to be one of the ways to build the “trustworthiness of the data” (p. 52). Taking this information back to the participants can also generate more dialogue that could contribute to a better understanding. It could also lead to better understanding, emancipation, or change on the part of those considering the phenomena (Lather, 1991).

Fourth, interviewing is important as I consider that positivist approaches do not deal with the complexities of life, that all knowledge is biased and value-laden, and that issues of power and domination must be addressed if a critical social science can be empowering for those involved (Lather, 1991). These issues can be more openly addressed in a group as each member contributes her perspective. Addressing these issues entails being more creative in methods of research dealing with meaning and the ways people perceive their lives.

The goal of this type of interaction with participants is to generate conversations that invite reflection and new possibilities around the social constructions of gender. I examined personal and social narratives of those in conservative church environments with
special interest in their narratives about God, gender, and what affects those narratives have on the lives of women. By acquiring knowledge about these narratives, questions can be raised about the responsibility to act on or change these narratives for self and others. My hope is that this work will lead to a better understanding of women, contribute to their experiencing more freedom in their personal development, and stimulate new research.

Reflecting Team

I designed the reflecting team group interview as an innovative research tool. The reflecting team design was developed for therapy purposes by Tom Anderson (1991) in Norway and popularized by Michael White (1989). The goal of the reflecting team was to have a group of professionals observe a family in therapy and then have a conversation with each other, reflecting their thoughts about what the family was trying to resolve. This conversation took place while in the presence of a family. The reflecting team members were usually in the same room with a therapist and family or behind a one way mirror. The family was then asked to respond to the reflecting team's comments.

Anderson (1991) found that therapists developed new conversations with families when they talked in their presence versus if they talked alone behind closed doors. The conversation in front of the families was more respectful, less pathologizing, and more responses were based in the therapists’ own personal lives. This format enabled the therapist to take a more curious, reflexive stance rather than an expert who is evaluative, imposing labels and norms.

The goal of the reflecting team was not to create change, the goals were to hear and understand the women's stories and thereby increase validity, and to empower the
researcher to be more aware of her processes, biases and needs, in order to facilitate
different dialogue about the topic than had previously been experienced. I invited a
reflecting team of 5 colleagues to observe through a one way mirror a group interview with
7 of the 11 participants in the study. Two articles were assigned to the reflecting team to be
read and a training session was conducted by a moderator. The reflecting team was
designed to be different than those used in narrative therapy.

The reflecting team was to observe my process with these women and have a series
of reflexive conversations with each other, and with me, in the presence of the participants
about the narratives they heard. Several goals were accomplished by having the reflecting
team. First, the team encouraged and modeled the hearing of stories of both the participant
and researcher. I asked the team to hold me accountable for that to happen. They listened
to different levels of the participants narratives to better understand their constructions of
their experiences, offering clarity, and acknowledgement of their stories significance.

Second, the reflecting team highlights the non-hierarchical collaborative process
versus a process where the researcher is expert or evaluative. In being collaborative, the
team held the researcher accountable for hearing the participants stories and not allowing
the participants stories to be eclipsed with the researchers evaluations or leading questions.

Third, the group process encouraged personal agency of the women by opening up
space ideologically and creating a safe environment for discussion and new choices to
emerge. Fourth, the reflecting team helped me stay in conversation and connected to the
participants. One of the ways that happened was they helped me identify my fear of being
an outsider. They helped me state to the group that I was angry about the churches
treatment of women and the women were able to respond to my questions.
Data Analysis

The interviews were initiated, developed, recorded, managed, and examined through a set of systematic procedures (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). These included research questions, field notes, participants’ responses, my experience in the interviews, my life experiences, and reflexive conversations with colleagues.

Analysis of data was guided by four research questions: 1) How do women in conservative Christian environments narrate their experiences? 2) What are ways in which the women in this environment live with the tension of a social setting that promotes both liberation and limitation at the same time? 3) What issues arise for the researcher in the process of conducting the research? 4) What are the implications for therapeutic practice from this research? These questions guided the loosely structured interviews.

Each interview was audiotaped and transcribed by myself and transcriptionists. The verbatim transcripts were read and coded for themes regarding the content and the processes of how gender was experienced in the church (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). "Global sorting" encouraged by Lofland and Lofland (1984) was used to establish general clusters of content. Ten different steps were utilized in developing the coding scheme and coding families. I first read through all the transcripts once. After the second read through 58 items were noted for repetition, theme, and/or relevance. Third, while asking questions about how these 58 items were related, they were condensed into 34 codes. Fourth, I read through the transcripts a third time, using the 34 codes. Step five involved examining the 34 codes to see if there were categories into which they might fit. Six categories were labeled which I will refer to as coding families. I compared these preliminary codes to my
research questions. All 34 codes fit somewhere into answering the research questions. My sixth step involved conversations with my advisor where I realized that I needed to have a more efficient coding system because there seemed to be confusion over what was a theme and what was a coding family. I returned to the data, comparing the 34 codes and 6 coding families and decided to expand the coding families to 7, redistributing the 34 codes. I rearranged the codes in the families and renumbered them in step seven. In step eight I re-read the transcripts through again, using this new coding scheme. More clarity emerged during this read through. I designed a form with a list of the codes to accompany each transcript. I also wrote on each hard copy the number of the code pertaining to the data. In step nine I began compiling a list of each of these codes by number and what each participant said in this category. In step 10, I began writing the results section from this compiled list of codes and data.

Conclusions were based on field notes, my personal journal, transcriptions of the individual and group interviews, an independent Bible study, and my reflexive conversations with my advisor and other colleagues. Reflexivity involves the reflection, examination, and exploration of the research process with the assumption that these understandings become a source of knowledge contributing to the work (Cook & Fonow, 1986). This process involved self-reflection, interaction with other professionals, and interaction with the research participants. All of these forms of data collection were used in writing the results that follow.
Chapter 4: Describing Church Experiences

*It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery.*

- *The Apostle Paul*

**Personal Journal/Field Notes**

February, 1996. It is a cold, sunny, bright, winter morning in Virginia. I awake anticipating attending this church for the first time. I remember mentioning to an elder in this church who is a business acquaintance of mine, that I would like to attend and possibly do a research project there. He encouraged me to come.

From my experience of him and heresay in the community, I have come to think about this church as “conservative.” What informs that view is that this elder often talks to me about God, quotes the Bible, checks to see if I have been “walking with the Lord,” and has challenged my professional world of therapy as though it is something of which to be suspicious. He says, “People don’t need therapy, they need Jesus.” Professionals in the community, clients in my therapy practice, and students with whom I have spoken with in the community have described this church as “fundamental,” which I have come to think of as holding to a literal view of the Bible, concerned with converting or saving people, and having all male leadership. People have also said it was a wonderful place to worship, there were lots of young people there, they offered good programs for families, and people were friendly. I have a pre-existing story about this church. I anticipate that it will feel familiar and similar to a church I had belonged to for a period of my life.

It’s been quite a while since I’ve been to church, especially a church like this one . . . A church where I might not be welcomed because I no longer can attend without asking
questions about how it works and how it affects women. A church where I could be seen as an “outsider.” I don’t want to feel “outside” any social setting, like I don’t belong. Except for gender, my comfortable, middle class, heterosexual, white experience has not been conducive to teaching me how to be a minority, or how to be in environments where I am different. My fear increases. I review ways to keep from being noticed. I say to myself, “Okay, Jan, you know how to do the church thing.” “The goal is to blend.” “Tone yourself down and monitor how others respond to you.” “Don’t be too something-too different, too outspoken, too pushy, too professional looking, too attractive, too intelligent, too curious, too confident, too non-Christian, just be a nice Christian-like woman. . . and above all, don’t say the F word.” If you mention Feminism it’s all over. They may not allow you to belong.

I wondered, “How did I ever get to this place where I question my experience in the church?” I have felt at home in these church settings in the past. Since the time I was a small child attending church with my mother, until I functioned as a “pastor’s wife”, planting a church, attending seminary, teaching women’s Bible studies, I felt somewhat comfortable. However, I am now very uncomfortable within these settings. I have questioned institutionalized religion and what I had once accepted at face value as spirituality. I have embraced new possibilities about the how’s and why’s of the way the church functions. I have added and subtracted many layers of how I define my relationship to God and spirituality. I wonder if these women ever question the church?

Overview of the Findings

Recent research on the lives of women highlight the complexities, the contradictions, and the paradoxes that often are a part of their environments. Women
make sense of their worlds and make choices about how they want to live based on their values despite these difficulties. The women who participated in this project lived with complexities regarding their faith beliefs, their involvement in the church, and how that related to gender. They each led busy, varied lives that involved sustaining a variety of relationships with family members, extended family, friends, colleagues, business associates, and co-workers in their church. Some women had a career focus. Some women worked outside the home. Some were married. Some chose to be at home as primary caregivers to their children and "helpmates" to their husbands. Some home-schooled their children. Some were involved in community programs. Some used their homes to "minister" to people. All of the women combined a variety of these activities, each making choices based on an intricate belief system and values. Whatever the different paths they chose for themselves, what these women shared in common was that being involved in their church was a priority, and this involvement was related to their beliefs about God, a personal faith commitment to Jesus Christ, and their beliefs about who they could be as woman.

The church was a context where contradictions existed for these women. How they dealt with those contradictions was complex because the church environment enabled the women to feel fulfilled as they used their strengths and "gifts," yet it also produced a slight frustration in the women when they felt limited in how they could employ their gifts. The women had a variety of ways of acknowledging and dealing with this tension caused by their contradicting experiences. They also had ways of not acknowledging and dealing with the tension. In talking initially with the women they sounded completely satisfied
with their church experience and implied that they agreed with their understanding of the church’s beliefs on gender. But during the process of the interviews the women spoke of exceptions in their experience where they were not totally satisfied. They described stories where they were content and yet perplexed—stories that contradicted some of their stated beliefs and the church’s beliefs about gender. They talked about how they were affected by the tensions created by the contradictions and complexities, and how they dealt with them. They concluded their interviews often by being hopeful about change, confident that they were making changes, and made suggestions of how change could occur.

**Church Involvement**

All of the women talked about their church experience being an important, necessary part of their lives, and something they enjoyed being involved in. Ellen, a woman who had been at the church for 26 years, said, “Our involvement in this church has been an incredible part of our lives.” Each woman used the term “involved” when talking about her experience in the church. Dee described her involvement as being “one in the same with giving.” The word “involved” was often used in contrast to the word “attend.” Involvement required some commitment of time, energy, and resources beyond “attendance” at the Sunday morning worship service.

**Serving**

The women liked “helping,” “giving,” “serving,” and “extending care” to others. These ways of being involved was a way of living out their faith and commitment to Jesus, and a way of being connected to a community of people. When I asked Alice why she was involved in the church, she noted,

Um wow, that’s a big one. Well, my faith in Christ is the foundation of my life
and that’s a part of me I want to cultivate. Um, I want it to be, and this is a struggle, I want it to be the essence of my life and so to uh, any avenue that I can take to strengthen my relationship with the Lord, then I will do it. Of course my personal time in prayer and Bible study is important to that, very important, more important than meeting with other believers. But um the Bible teaches pretty clearly that we function as a body and that each part of the body does essential things and parts of the body I need and other parts of the body need me. It’s much harder to see how they need me than it is for me to see how I need them. But I believe that it’s important for me to serve because I think that if not every part of the body is functioning, the body’s not gonna work.

Another word that all of the women used was “serve.” I asked Lucy, “So when you say you work with the women, what kinds of things do you do?” She said, “Well, maybe I guess service, I serve as an informal trainer and encourager.” The women saw the church environment as a place where they could exercise their ability and willingness to serve other individuals, families, or particular groups in their church. How each of them served varied from woman to woman. They served through writing letters, preparing Bible studies for women and children, making snacks, making phone calls, setting up chairs, and holding crying babies. The women were involved in a variety of activities such as teaching junior high, senior high, and children’s Sunday school, putting things in the bulletin, and working with the singles ministry. They organized retreats, luncheons, and practical activities like publicity, food, and prayer for the women’s group. They helped the missions committee by staying in touch with missionaries, taught young girls, and
organized the use of the kitchen. They chose curriculum, attended prayer groups, prayed, cleaned the church when their group was assigned, did "outreach" in their community, and had people in their home for dinner.

Their serving was often used in conjunction with the term "needs." How and whom the women served was often contingent upon what "needs" they perceived in others. When I asked Beth if she could describe her involvement in the church she said,

I think it changes from time to time depending on what my available time and probably my perception of particular needs of the fellowship are. When my kids got a little older it became apparent to me that during worship time they weren't learning anything except to hold off and sit still. So I became involved in Children's church program to help them.

When I asked Dee, "How do you define who and what to give your time too?" she responded,

Well, I listen for a call for help. From the front they'll say we need someone for Sunday School is there anyone who could do this, or we need people to put up a family while they're visiting in town or you know that sort of thing. So, a response to a direct request or I guess another way would be identified needs that I would see that aren't being met. I guess I identify a need and move forward to see what I can do to be part of the solution. Ah, I'm not saying that I am a really gifted, a very gifted perceptive person with peoples' needs, but I guess my closer friends or people that I am getting to know I think. I am being able to read and initiate.

The women were so intricately involved in so many aspects of church life that
several women talked about a concern that if not carefully "reigned in" the women would "take over." They were so involved because as Ellen stated "they are so good at meeting the needs of those around them." Alice said, "women have more time to be involved."

Four common components informed how, why, and in what ways they chose to serve: perception of time, the structure of the church, their beliefs, and personal reasons.

Perception of time. The ways in which the women were involved in serving depended on their perception of the time they had to offer. Many of the women stated that they wished they had more time to be involved. Women who had raised children mentioned that it was more difficult to find time when they had small children. However, several women mentioned that staying at home with their children (not working outside the home) allowed for more time to serve in the church. Lisa said, "I was able to get more involved once I stopped working." Alice stated, "I can serve the church more as a stay at home mom." Two of the women who were not presently married mentioned that they had more time to serve the church since they did not have a husband and family. Many of the women also mentioned that women had more time than men to serve the church.

Regardless of their perception of time the women made commitments to set aside personal time for church involvement.

Structure. The structure of the church was used as a guideline informing the women about how they could be involved. This particular church had no paid pastoral staff. The congregation was encouraged to meet the needs of the people, rather than having a pastor or a "paid holy man," as Ellen phrased it. There was an assumption that identifying with this church involved meeting the needs of those in the church and in the
community.

The women referred to those people who attended the church as “the body.” This metaphor is found in 1 Corinthians 12 of the New Testament and suggests that the entire congregation of this particular church represented a body and that the individuals in that congregation were the body parts, i.e., arms, legs, eyes, and organs. This metaphor implied that the body functioned most effectively when the parts worked together and used their “gifts.” This metaphor was also used to describe the structure of the Christian church worldwide and in addressing the structure of the family. For instance, an oft-quoted phrase in addressing structure was, “As Christ is the head of the Church (body), the husband is the head of the home (body)” (a paraphrase of Ephesians 5:23). Their emphasis on the word “head” referred to a structure where the head was set in authority over the others parts in some way. Each of these women referred to this metaphor, and I concluded that in their particular church metaphor “body” was often used and well known.

There were also structural issues in this church related to gender. Not only did the women talk about what they did, but they also mentioned what they did not do. Most of what they did and did not do appeared to be informed by gender and a commitment to a patriarchal structure. For instance, at Sunday morning worship time there was a set structure that determined who was up front, what they did up front, and when they were up front. Men always introduced each other, always prayed, always gave announcements, always read the scripture, and always preached. The men did almost everything on Sunday morning worship involving what happened up front on the stage, with one exception. In the six months of my field work in this church there was one woman who participated in the service. She led the congregational singing. She never prayed, preached, gave
announcements or introduced anyone. She was never introduced.

Men use prayer in several ways in this structure of the Sunday service. It was used in a spiritual way to interact with God. It also served as a form of social control determining the flow of components in the service. For instance, prayer was used as a transition between two parts of the service. If the congregation was singing and it was time for the preaching part of the service a prayer was stated. Prayer was also a way of giving information publicly. For instance, they might pray for someone who had just had a family member die. It was also a way of supporting those who were mentioned in prayer. Prayer was used to give power to those who were about to preach. Every week, when a man was about to come to preach, another man would pray that the Lord would bless his words and that the congregation would hear God’s words from his mouth. One elder prayed “that God’s word would be delivered without error” [referring to preaching]. Having God’s voice coming from the pulpit made it difficult to question or disagree with the men speaking it. Prayer was also used to strengthen beliefs. For instance, one man was describing and praying for a group called the Promise Keepers. This group was a group for men only which met in different locations in the country. He prayed that “the spirit of God would help men take control of spiritual leadership in home, in church, and in the country.” This prayer supported a patriarchal belief system emphasizing the role of men as leaders.

Elders, who were males only, functioned as the governing authority of the church. Sunday school classes that had men and women attending them were taught only by men, or by men with a woman. Women did not teach Sunday school without men unless they taught children or all-female classes. Men also were considered house group leaders,
which were small groups of adults who met mid-week for Bible study and prayer. Nine of
the women considered the wives of the male house group leaders to be participating in
leading. Two of the women did not consider themselves or other women to be leaders.

**Beliefs about serving.** The women were motivated to be involved in the church by
a belief that this involvement was a necessary component in their relationship with God.
God wanted them to serve and meet the needs of others. The church was a context in
which their helping, giving, and serving was accomplished. As Alice stated,

It is both a responsibility and a privilege to serve. Because it’s a responsibility for
each believer to um give of themselves to strengthen other people’s walks and it’s a
privilege to be working with those who are trying to do that same thing.

Involvement and service were seen as spiritual issues to the women. Helping,
serving, and giving were values held in high regard. Taking care of others was “what
Jesus modeled,” and the women attempted to model their lives after His.

Serving was also a way for the women to participate with God in doing his work.
God was believed to be involved in the care and nurture of humanity. Alice commented, “I
pray and ask God to tell me what the needs of the women are and what He wants me to
do.” When asked to describe the women in the church, Beth said,

I think that they are, for the most part, women who sincerely want to know what
God wants them to do. Um, that they want to listen to what He’s saying. That
they want to become God’s hands and God’s feet, to do His work, and walk His
ways.

The women believed God worked through them to care for people. God used their gifts to
enable them to contribute to the work of caring for “the body,” which was the
responsibility of all believers. Performing the role of serving and meeting the needs of others was encourage by the church and society.

**Personal/practical reasons.** Participants noted a wide variety of personal reasons for their involvement. Dee stated,

> It has been important for me to be involved in a church, I think for a lot of reasons. One, because it is important for me to grow spiritually and that is an important area of my life to be constantly challenged and grow in my knowledge of God and my faith. Um, also it is important to contribute to that community, ah, not just financially but, um, time and effort. It is also important to me that the church can be a family. It involves getting and feeling love. But I always have a great deal of personal reward feeling like I've taken a little bit of the burden off of someone else. I mean it's very satisfying for me and if I weren't able to do something to make things better for them I'd be a very depressed person. I would be shriveled up.

Ginger emphasized,

> that church was a way to meet and stay connected to people. It is necessary for my personal growth. Being involved in the church helps me get to know people my own age. Sometimes people need encouragement. At this point in my life I feel like I'm kind of just steady and I need to be kicked. Like being with older people they have more knowledge about the Bible and can kind of give me that kick to help me understand things better.

Nell said she saw church as,

> an opportunity to strengthen others. . . . It is fulfilling, stimulating and
challenging. . . . I can impact people.

When talking about the women who were involved in this church, Beth said,

I think the women have a particular job or mission that they want to convey to the
congregation. I know I have a mission to convey.

The women stated specific interests and particular groups in which they liked to serve, such
as missions, helping parents through cooperative baby sitting, Pioneer girls, women’s
ministry, and small groups.

Relationships Amidst Involvement

In the midst of their many involvements, the women established a network of
relationships among men and women from different backgrounds and ages. The women
often talked about their service being done with others. Eight women who were married
used the term “we” when describing their involvement. Most of the time “we” referred to a
woman and her husband. For instance, Ellen said, “We have a ministry in our home.”
When referring to another church, Doris said, “We served there a long time.” Nell said of
herself and her husband, “We taught Sunday school when we first moved here.” The
women who were not married also used terms to describe being involved in the church
with others. Ginger said, “My friends and I decided to help parents.” Bonnie stated, “My
female friends help with SOS.” The women wanted to serve alongside others, and not
alone.

Ambivalence in Their Church Experience

The women spoke of their church experience endearingly and in ways that
highlighted their contentment and satisfaction. They made statements such as, “They are
my family,” “It is a comfortable place to be,” “I feel connected there,” and “The church
saved me from experimenting.’”

However, the women also mentioned concerns about their church experience. Dee expressed feeling out of place because of her professional work and stated longingly, “I wish there were more people like me there.” When describing the ministry she was involved in, Ellen expressed, “Sometimes it’s hard to be there cuz I don’t get much support. I have felt frustrated and hurt by those men.” When talking about a painful divorce, Nell remarked,

When I was hurting I couldn’t go to anyone in the church. They can’t handle those kind of things, so I depended on my therapist.

Alice also described her frustrations with not being able to talk in the church about things that seemed important to her, “I am sad and frustrated that the people in the church don’t want to question and discuss things.”

Balancing the Positive and the Negative

They were concerned that I saw the whole picture and not just troublesome issues. They wanted to emphasize the good. For example, after telling me about some limitations she experienced in the church, Dee added,

Okay, this is not an opportunity for me to give but this is definitely a church where I can grow. So I guess that’s to say that I didn’t want to throw the baby out with the bath water saying, well gosh, if you won’t ever let me teach Sunday school, then I am leaving, but I did find a niche for myself and I was quite content there.

At the end of the individual interviews I asked the women if they would like me to
know something I had not asked about or if they would like to emphasize anything. Three
women said they wanted me to know they loved the church and the elders, and that they
hoped they did not come across as critical.

The women were careful when expressing their concerns about the church. During
both group interviews, the women voiced a concern about how questioning gender would
impact them. They wanted to question and still feel integrity about their beliefs and
represent the elders well. They did not want to “betray” the elders by questioning the
church and they were careful to not say or do things that would look like they were being
disrespectful of the elders. When I first began my field work in the church I asked a group
of women about being involved in this research. While they were very interested and
willing to be involved they were concerned that the elders approve. The following is an
excerpt from my field notes from that meeting.

I told the women that what I was observing so far in my field work was that
the men were in authority and I got the impression that I should ask them
about the research. The group of women smiled and nodded and said yes
they all wanted me to get permission from the elders for me to interview the
women. Lisa remarked, “they are over us in authority and if they thought
this wasn’t good, then we shouldn’t proceed.” I agreed to meet with the
elders and to get back to them.

This was one example of the women’s concern about respecting the elder’s position.

Ways Women Talked About Gender

Most of the women said that gender “just is.” They had not thought much about it,
had not questioned it, and did not really talk about it. They talked about patriarchy as
though it was a given—a universal—and assumed that it worked and was part of the status quo.

Some women said gender was not an issue, but feared that it might become an issue if they started talking about it. Beth shared, “There doesn’t seem be a controversy. There are other real issues in life.” Doris stated, “It’s not an issue for me, but it might be for others. There’s really nothing that rubs me the wrong way.” Kelly said, “I don’t think it’s an issue for women or they wouldn’t be here.” Dee said about gender, “It’s a hot topic.”

When I asked her what she meant by “hot topic” she explained,

Capable, able, confident women in the church challenging the leadership:

‘Why is it that women don’t do such and such? Why is it women are never invited to do such and such? Why is it that women don’t have a role in such and such?’ And I think what that would do is that, being a hot topic I think would threaten the leadership and cause a lot of controversy and unrest and lack of peace among the community and that sort of thing. And I think at that point I would see it as a hot topic. It could become a heated issue.

The women were very concerned about the potential negative impact that surfacing the issue could have for the entire congregation. Ellen commented, “It would cause unrest to talk about it. There would be discomfort. Women might become angry.” Nell proposed, “I’m afraid it would pull me off course. It could become bigger than it should.” Beth agreed, “It takes a huge amount of openness and flexibility so it doesn’t become an issue. It could divide people up.” They seemed interested that I was raising the questions, but fearful of raising those questions themselves.
Getting the “Right” Emphasis

In the second group interview, the women were concerned with “choosing the right words” when discussing gender. This meant that they did not want to make gender a bigger problem than it “really was.” They wanted me to know what place gender played in their concerns—a relatively small place.

While several women considered gender a non-existent or small issue, they told me about situations where gender was an issue, albeit a small one. These stories were not solicited by my questions and they were introduced to me as a minor exception. Dee related, “There is a teeny bit of gender when I’m asked to do something up-front.” Alice stated, “There is a little pinch of gender on the committee I serve on. There’s only been that one scrape.” Nell related, “This is a little bit of the general feelings I get.” They did not acknowledge that gender was an issue in the church, but they spoke differently about the workplace.

Eight women talked about how gender discrimination was more prominent in the workplace than the church and shared stories of their experience. The women also shared that they were not only treated differently at work, they also acted differently. Four women indicated that the way they related to others in the church differed from their work settings. Dee described herself in terms of being split or living the life of two people. She revealed,

People would be shocked if they saw me at work. I’ve been thinking about how I live two different lives. When I come to church I leave my professional self outside. I lead men at work. I feel very competent to do that.
It was easy for the women to acknowledge discrimination and inequity in the workplace, but difficult to acknowledge that it existed in the church, denying the existence of gender issues in their lives.

In describing their involvement with the church I believe the women were speaking in gendered ways about being a woman in the church that did not appear to me different than in society. The women did not intentionally bring gender to their interview but I sensed it's presence through their ideas about how they were involved, their life of service, the reinforcement of the structure of the church, how they defined their missions, their ways of working in relationship to others, the ways they minimized gender, and through their beliefs.

**Beliefs**

The women seemed to share a common life narrative that gave structure and meaning to their lives. This narrative was informed by a particular belief system that included the existence of God and the presence of God in their lives. This narrative also included ideas about how God designed men and women, and therefore, how gender played into their spirituality.

**Beliefs About God**

All the women believed that God existed and that He had a plan for the universe. This plan involved the concepts of the sacred and secular. In other words, the universe is presently set up with two polarities existing--the things that are of God and the people who align themselves with God (sacred), and the things that are “of the world” and the people who align themselves with the world and against God (secular).

God’s plan also included a divine order or design for husbands and wives. I have
come to think of that order as patriarchal. Following God’s hierarchical design was labeled “obedience.” Obedience was necessary to live a life that God would approve of and to help accomplish His plans. Alice related that,

Headship . . . fundamentally is an issue of submission to Christ and what my understanding of obedience to him is above anything that I might desire personally. I think any walk with the Lord is gonna require some sacrifice whether it’s you know giving up some bad habit or whether it’s living a lifestyle that’s simpler so that you can do the Lord’s work in some capacity whatever it is. I think sometimes women are required to submit in ways that they don’t particularly like, but out of obedience, I think the Lord really blesses that and makes it easier than it might seem.

Design and order were necessary to the Divine plan, and in marriage, God’s design was for wives to submit to their husbands. Alice explained,

Especially since becoming a Christian and understanding that God’s a God of order and God puts himself above Christ, Christ puts himself above the church, you know, um Christ is the head of the man, the man is the head of the woman I, I don’t have any choice. I see how that works practically, it works great. Well, no wonder it works great. They’re following the design and that’s why marriages work.

When referring to a hierarchy of obedience according to gender, several women said that “things work best” when living within that order. For Bonnie, hierarchy was based upon God-created gender differences: “God planned those differences between men
and women. I think that’s the way God intended it. It’s going to work better this way.”

Alice agreed that hierarchy within marriage was part of God’s design:

One person must... well, you can never operate on a consensus. But there has to be an order. There has to be, I mean, it’s like society. Why do you submit to government? Well, because you like the fact that there aren’t crazy people running, you know, you like what government does. You like the fact that they have some controls and they’re, you know, you pay them your taxes to do the things that they do. Um, and we submit to our husbands because it’s a, it creates an order in the family that’s ordained by God. That’s the way it’s supposed to be. It’s the only way that’ll work really effectively.

These two women were convinced that following God’s design was the key to marriage working effectively. Submission to male authority was part of that design.

God’s patriarchal order of authority was structured as follows in descending order of authority. God was the ultimate Ruler of the universe, next in line were males, who were in authority over the church and the home. Third were women, whose primary responsibilities were to nurture children and care for their husbands. Children came last. Men and women were created with certain capacities that enabled them to function within the hierarchy. The concept of gender was most often referred to by these women with the understanding of order and hierarchy based on patriarchal assumptions. For instance, Bonnie asserted, “Men are to be leaders and providers.” Ginger explained, “God has gifted women to nurture.” Alice expressed that children need cared for in certain ways in order to “grow up seeking and obeying God. The best way to establish a child is to be a stay at home mom.” It seemed that believing God set up this hierarchy made it easier to
accept and not question. Lucy related that she believed God created male and female to both have dominion over the earth, but later said that the fall of Adam and Eve (described in Genesis) changed how things should work.

Participants also believed God was personally involved in their lives and had given each of them a specific purpose. They each had a “calling” from God along with abilities to carry out that calling. Beth referred to her call to “meet the needs of those around me.” Those participants who were mothers seemed to see their primary calling as motherhood—a calling that corresponded to God’s design for women. Their beliefs about motherhood will be discussed more fully in the section about their beliefs about women.

Beliefs About Scripture

The women believed that God spoke to humans through the Bible. The Bible was seen as “the Word of God,” infallible, and the source of authority and guidance. Nell said, “in our church there is a concern that we adhere closely to the scriptures.” Ellen said, “Well, we’re trying to base things on Scripture and not on people’s hang-ups and baggage. I hope!”

The women referred to “the Word” many times. For instance, Ellen proclaimed, “I love to hear the Word being taught.” This term, “the Word,” was used to set the Scripture apart from any other authority and implied that there was “one Word”—the truth given by God. The women made other statements describing the authority of the Bible. Alice said, “The Bible is infallible.” When explaining how she developed her views on authority, Lisa commented, “It’s in Scripture of course.” As Ellen was describing the church, she explained “We have a belief in orthodoxy. We filter everything through the Scripture.”
Bonnie commented, "The Bible is our authority, our only foundation." Referring to men being in leadership, Lisa stated,

I've been taught these things from Scripture and I haven't thought them up on my own. Men are doing what Scripture tells them, so I can't hold it against them.

In the lives of these women, the Bible was supremely authoritative.

Interpretation of the Bible did not seem to be a concern to the women when gender was discussed. Several women talked about the need to interpret the Bible literally, while others saw interpretation being rooted in context. How socialization affected interpretation was not initially a concern that the women had about those who were in positions to interpret. The term "the Word" implied that one would simply read the Bible to understand what it meant, and that people would arrive at the same conclusions since it is "the Word," or "the truth." Alice explained,

We don't have any interest in joining a denomination or aligning ourselves with any other body because we have a commitment to the Word and having our church operate with it as the only foundation has been so strong that we have no desire to be linked up with anybody else because as soon as you link up with somebody else you have some other guideline that has authority. And our church has always felt that the Bible is our authority and that's it. We don't put ourselves under any other headship other than Christ.

Christ, the Living Word, was the head of the church who gave instructions to His people through the written Word, the Bible.
Discussion about a variety of interpretations of passages in the Bible that differed or contradicted one another was often avoided because of the potential of such a discussion to create conflict. Lucy cautioned,

I think the tendency is to think it's, you know, if you question the literal translation, the literal understanding of something even I mean, there are people at this church I'm sure that Revelation is a very literal thing to them and if you question that, they say it's cause you don't have enough faith or something. You can get get labeled.

Congregation members were encouraged to seek similar interpretations regarding gender or at least not focus on differing interpretations.

I observed that the the ideas of design, hierarchy, patriarchy, and authority were set forth through interpretation of specific Bible passages. These concepts set up a belief system about men and women and how they were to perform in the family, the church, and life in general. Being a spiritual leader involved a male interpreting and teaching Scripture privately and publicly, but not for women. Women did not teach men. Women interpreted Scripture privately and only taught women or children.

Beliefs About Authority

The women believed that the Bible was authoritative, but also that the concept of authority taught in the Bible had many applications. Since God designed authority, it was beneficial to their lives. They described authority in several ways and talked about the benefits of having it. The words used most often in describing people in authority and authority relationships were "stands up there," "over," and "under." These words were
descriptive of a literal way of thinking about a patriarchal structure regarding gender. For example, Beth explained,

the person in authority is responsible that the person under them is growing.

... An authority is a person who stands up there, over everyone under him.

The “up there” in this statement was the pulpit. The pulpit was a figurative way of referring to the practice of preaching, which was performed by males only.

The women talked about authority being necessary for order in their lives. This applied to the church, the home, and marriage. For example, Bonnie said, life works best when there is a chain of command.” She believed that having someone in authority “keeps peace.” After all, “someone needs to make the final decision when there’s a disagreement.” Kelly also believed that it was “necessary for someone to say what’s right and wrong” and “to impose and reinforce standards of behavior.”

In the home, the husband was the one who answered to God. Because he was in authority over the family, he answered to God for their spiritual well-being. Therefore, as Alice said, “It is important for the husband to approve of what the wife is doing.” This person in authority was said to have a “call” from God and a “special spiritual connection” to God. This authority gave him power to say what was right and wrong, and to declare God’s desires.

There was a respect and trust in those who are in authority because it was assumed that “they are connected to God.” There was an assumption that this man in authority would look to God for “the truth” without including his own bias. Ellen said that the congregation needed to “trust that God will work through them [authorities].” She continued by explaining that “authorities get to say what God’s will is.”
Women frequently linked the idea of teaching or preaching with authority because in the context of the church, authority was linked to teaching from the Bible. When one was preaching or teaching from the Bible, they assumed a position of authority. Beth stated, “Teaching from the Word puts people in a position of authority” . . . “teaching from the Bible is a powerful tool for influencing.”

The women distinguished the concept of teaching from sharing. Women were encouraged to share, but not allowed to teach. Lucy said, “Teaching is purposefully influencing people. Sharing is not purposefully influencing. I share, but it’s not my purpose to influence.” Beth stated,

When you preach or teach you put yourself in a position to tell people what to do. They are saying what God is telling us all to do. I share by talking about what I’m learning or what God is doing in my life, but I don’t teach the Bible, like get into the history and everything.

Ellen said, “Men can’t speak to women’s needs very well, but if he’s anointed, the Holy Spirit will help you apply it.” Dee commented that she believed, “Those in authority have the pulse beat of the body.”

The women stated clearly that they did not want to be in positions of authority and gave four reasons for this preference. First, they wanted to remain connected to others in the congregation and thought being in leadership might threaten that. They saw those in authority as separate from others in the congregation. Nell described authority being separate in this way:

It’s asking, teaching specific things. Asking people to, um, reflect.
Asking people to change, asking people to examine. Do you know what I mean? In other words, putting myself up in a real authority over, rather than participating in worship, you know, as being just a part of it.

It is possible that because they desired to feel connected with others and had been socialized toward that end, the role of authority was not desirable since it was described as being distinct from the others. Kelly commented, “I’d rather participate.” Ginger noted, “I need to feel a part and not be the leader.” The women seemed to prefer participation that fostered the relational connections, but to shun positions of leadership that might create distance between them and others.

Second, the women were aware of complexities in the lives of others and did not want to feel the pressure of teaching or having the answers that they associated with authority. Beth said,

I want others to be responsible for themselves. . . . Being in authority is too much responsibility and pressure. . . . My role is to say, this is your Lord, please ask Him what He wants of you.

Likewise, Lucy noted,

I can’t say my way is the only way. . . . People’s lives are too complex so I don’t think I could give answers.

For these women, being in leadership brought a weight of responsibility they did not want to bear.

Third, several women stated that they liked being under the men’s authority. Ellen revealed, “I see my role as being subordinate and I love being under their authority.” Alice stated,
The way I deal with oppression is to place myself under the authority of the men in the congregation that I feel have an understanding of what headship means and that it’s not a position of power, but a position of servanthood. And it’s really the responsibility of the men to be serving the women in the real biblical way of looking at leadership.

Many women said they liked the idea of male authority because they believed God designed it for their benefit.

Fourth, the women believed that a balance of men and women was more desirable than men or women alone in leadership. Six women stated clearly that they did not want a woman to be in leadership on her own. They talked about this with ambivalence. They believed that it was necessary for women to contribute to male perspectives, and that women needed to lead, and therefore a balance of men and women was ideal. Yet at times they said women should not be in leadership. Lucy expressed reluctance to be in a position of leadership on her own where she might be required to call a man to accountability for his actions. She did not believe that was proper for a woman and explained,

If you call people on things, and you’re saying, this is sin, and you have authority to say that because you’re in a position to, well, that’s where I couldn’t step. I don’t think I could ever step there. I should not walk into some man’s life and you know, that’s just not right. Women should not be doing that. I think authority should always include a man and maybe should include a woman, too. But she shouldn’t have the sole power.

She acknowledged that women’s gifts and perspectives were an untapped resource. She
was open to women doing more—even preaching—but she remained uncomfortable with the idea of a female pastor and insisted on collaboration in leadership. She summarized,

I wish things were different. I would wish that there were more women teaching Sunday schools, mixed classes. I wish there were some models of women sharing the Word from up front. It doesn’t happen. You’ll see women share testimony, share at baptism, but you know the male of a couple will always be the one speaking from up front. It will not be the wife who comes in, who in my estimation may be more gifted in sharing or communicating what God’s doing or just speaking the Word and what God’s revealed to them. So, I would wish that that was happening more. My own view is not solidified. I probably would come down that I’m not sure that there should be a female pastor with no male authority either with or above her. The problem is there is nothing organizationally for women to work alongside in pastoring the church. I think women can do and have tremendous gifts in those areas that aren’t being tapped. . . . There’s not co-leading or co-eldering with females. So they have the male perspective of what’s going on in the church. . . . There is no one representing half the church. I think it would help to some extent to see things from a female’s or a mom’s perspective.

Other women also were open to having women function in leadership positions as long as their work was done collaboratively with men.

Beliefs About Men

Generally, women believed that men made good leaders, and therefore, the women
liked and respected them. Ellen commented, "Men have discernment," and Nell related, the "elders are fine men. I respect and love them."

At the same time, the women acknowledged that the men were sometimes limited. Bonnie explained, "There are things missing in male leadership, like they don't know about women's needs." Ellen agreed, "I wish they would find out about the other half of the congregation [women]." Dee proposed, "Men are busier than women," while Ellen expressed her belief that "men . . . have a loftier approach, they don't get down to the nitty gritty." As a consequence of these limitations, Ellen believed, "Men need their wives to help them lead." I do not believe the women realized the extent of their contradictions even though their perception of male limitation produced some frustration.

I was interested in how the women talked about the men's limitations as leaders and how they responded to those perceived deficiencies. Bonnie explained, "Women don't need men to teach women, because we know how to relate to each other." Ellen commented, "I know this is going to sound arrogant but I am rarely ministered to by the preaching.

In spite of the limitations thought of the men, the women still wanted specific things from them. They described what they wanted through statements like Dee's where she states, "I want someone to share in making decisions because I made decisions on my own for years." In referring to her future husband, Ginger said, "I want to have something in common with him and be able to talk with him." She also speculated, "I think some women need men to guide them." Lisa also longed for her husband "to initiate spiritual conversation in our home and bring things up more."

It seems as though the women are ambivalent about what they want from men.
They contradict themselves by saying they want men to lead and “be men” but they want them to relate in a way that is not oppressive.

I had assumed that the women wanted men to be in authority because men were able to do something the women couldn’t do. However, the women may have been concerned about the men not being in leadership positions for other reasons such as men not remaining part of the church if women led. Bonnie stated, “Men would leave if women led.” Dee explained, “With eager women saying, ‘I can, I do, I’d like to do so forth,’ it would be easy for men to say, ‘Well I don’t have time for this anyway.’” Wanting men in authority may have been a way for women to keep men relationally connected to the church and to themselves.

Beliefs About Women

The women talked about women in terms of who they were in the church and who they were in the family. When referring to women in the church Doris believed, “Women naturally let men lead.” The women had a desire for men to be in leadership in the church and in the home.

In the home, the women believed their primary focus was to help their husbands, nurture the children, and “submit to their husband’s leadership.” Their primary role was to be a mother. Making motherhood and the home a priority had at least three benefits. It was seen as a way to serve God, a means to raising healthy children who were interested in Christianity, and a way to manage the chaos of married life. Alice provided a clear description of the important role women fulfilled in the home:

Women who have families must make them the number one priority, after
God. . . . The most important thing a woman can do is stay at home and be a primary caregiver. . . . To serve as a mom is pleasing to the Lord. . . . Mothers are necessary to a child’s development. . . . Children’s security is established in the home. . . . The best way to establish a child is to be a stay at home mom.

For Alice, there was no question that a woman’s place was in the home. She went on to explain, it also benefitted the man: “My husband and I both feel that being at home allows me to keep order in the home, so that when he comes home it’s not utter chaos.” These women believed God called them to motherhood and equipped them to fulfill that call by creating them with the capacity to nurture. There was no discussion of how the role of motherhood could sometimes be difficult for women.

Yet, one participant’s description of her mother highlighted the contradictory nature of their beliefs about motherhood even though she did not see the conflict. At first, Ginger expressed,

My mother had a perfect life. She is an angel. She was always there, nurturant, and catered to others. She loves to give to people, she is the epitome of a servant. She puts others before herself and finds joy in it.

However, she also revealed that, for all her good qualities, her mother was, powerless, and dependent, she wears herself out, and can’t handle reality. She’s not in touch with the world. She doesn’t understand diversity, she’s uneducated. She has a problem with spending, she’s smothering, and very sheltered. She is petrified, afraid, inhibited, and feels insecure about my dad dying.
Ginger seemed to have an ideal about women, but failed to see the consequences to a woman’s life when conforming to that model.

In the church, all of the participants felt that women contributed through their participation in the communion service. Communion was a time when the people of the church were invited to gather in a smaller group and celebrate the Lord’s supper. This ritual was enacted by drinking a taste of wine and eating a piece of bread. These represented Jesus’ blood and body. Communion was scheduled on Sunday mornings before the worship service. Women spoke fondly of this service because they felt more freedom to speak there. They also liked that it allowed them to relate in personal ways. Ellen communicated that,

Communion is one place where women can speak. It is open and spontaneous. It’s where the real worship takes place at our church. It’s just wonderful.

Kelly referred to communion in this way, “You can share there and hear what God is doing in people’s lives... It’s much more of a sharing time, not preaching.” These women seem more content to be in a group where there was more mutual sharing. If women contributed to the structure of the Sunday morning service they may have incorporated more of this style into the worship.

I thought about the issue of women wanting to interpret Scripture on their own and in the context of relationships, without needing a male to teach them when I attended a women’s Bible study designed for women of different denominations. This Bible study was not a part of the church but many of the women from the church attended it. As part of
my field work, I decided to attend this women's Bible study in town. When I interviewed women at this Bible study who were not included in my participant interviews, as to why they attended the Bible study and what they liked about it, their answers focused on their reading the Bible and interpreting it on their own, and then discussing it with others. One woman said, "I get to study the Bible on my own." Another stated, "I want to know what I think about the Bible." Another woman remarked, "I like the small groups where we can share with each other about what we learned." Women seemed drawn to this kind of setting because it may have been more conducive to meeting the women's needs for relationships, collaboration, and a sense of agency in their own spirituality.

Beliefs Fortified by Rules

When asked about what beliefs about men and women were reinforced, rules were identified. Several women stated that they "just know" what the rules are. I asked Beth, So, these two things [not preaching when men are present and not being and elder] would represent things that women aren't allowed to do when it comes to them asking how they can minister?" She responded,

Yeah, I think they would all understand that . . . I think those are two things that are unspoken but totally understood.

Rules about gender were communicated through at least three processes: social enactment, non-verbal communication, and conversations with others in the church.

Observation and social enactment. The first way the women knew about the rules was through observation of social enactment. Lucy described,

We are accustomed to women not doing things. I guess just observation and time. Watching it happen. I know enough from talking to different
elders’ wives where their husbands probably view things, you know . . . It’s not just my imagination. But a lot of it initially was just picked up from observation. Who’s doing what and who’s not.

Beth explained that she knew about the rules,

through observing the service I see what women can’t do, and through perpetuation we come to expect to see certain people up there.

For a time, only the husbands’ names were listed in the bulletin as house group leaders, when it was believed by some of the women that husbands and wives led these groups. This omission was yet another subtle way of the women “knowing” what the rules were.

The following is an excerpt from my field notes illustrating how the church enacts gender even in their dress.

February 25, 1996. I was preparing to go to church this morning. I found myself having a difficult time knowing what to wear today. Wearing my ‘church clothes’ just did not seem to fit. My church clothes are interesting. They are pastel, sometimes floral, I wear hose and nice shoes—nothing I’d just hang out in or wear to work or shopping or anywhere else for that matter. There is an image I associate with church dress and this church is no different. I found myself arguing back and forth this morning with myself actually developing an attitude. I knew that I needed to meet with an elder to tell him that I would like to receive permission from the elders to do my research with the women. I was frustrated that I had to get his and the other elder’s permission to do my work. However, part of me wants to honor their procedures and beliefs. My dressing dilemma was about talking with this
man. If I look too professional he may reject my request since professionalism for
women in the church is an oxymoron. Women and professionalism do not fit
together, especially in the context of the church. Women do not look professional
when they go to church. What I mean to say is that if women are professional
during the week, they leave that at the door when entering the church.

So, my research takes on an interesting meaning in this context. It needs to
be minimized in some ways. So if I look like a non-threatening, non-professional
church women, then the elders will say, the project is no big deal. Of course that’s
what I want him to say. So, I guess I better do the church clothes. I want them to
see this as no big deal---then I can go on and do my research because they really
don’t care. As long as women aren’t becoming problematic, then I see them as
pretty much ignored or at least unnoticed. So, just get their permission and then do
your thing. I wonder if any of these women acquiesce in this way?

On the other hand, I take my research and professional life seriously. The
men can take their work seriously. So, I decide I’ll take my chances and wear the
most professional “male like” outfit I can put together. It is interesting that I have a
hard time separating male and professionalism. I wore a bleached white collared
button down shirt. A Navy wool blazer that is roughly textured, a pair of brown
chestnut pants and flat shoes. This is something I wear to work when I work in
the Deans office and I wear to see clients. I have never worn it to church and I
never thought of doing that. I had to convince myself it would be okay today to
wear it. I wore no jewelry except my watch. I spiked the front of my hair, did not
curl it at all. I hardly wore any makeup. I strutted out of my apartment daring any
of the men to question what I was doing with my research. This sounds very silly but it consumed my preparation for going to church this morning.

I parked in my usual parking space. The first thing I saw were six women. Five had high heels, five had floral flowing dresses and one had a red and white polka dot dress. A man was dropping off his family at the door. It was a gorgeous, warm morning and I wondered if they were going to get “messed up” if they had to walk from the parking lot. There were several children and the wife was helping them out of the back door of a van. Two little girls ran across the lawn. They both had on fitted spring coats, white leotards, black patent leather shoes, little purses and bows in their hair.

When I entered the church I stopped at the info. desk. A young woman was standing there talking with a tall man who was inquiring about something. I glanced on the table for a church directory. The older woman who is usually there came up and said hi. I asked for a directory and she gave me one. She introduced herself to me as ________. I told her my name and thanked her. I said I had remembered her from a few weeks ago. I said I remembered her lavender dress. She said “oh thank you.” I wondered if she has had other compliments on that outfit.

I went toward the church meeting room. A woman was standing at the door maybe 30ish. She had long curly hair with the front pulled back in a bow. Her dress was floral with a lace inset across the neckline. I noticed there was another women who looked like she was seating people. She had a collarless navy and
white checked blazer, with a very lacy blouse underneath. I was surprised to see someone else with a blazer, but I thought it was much more church appropriate than mine. I sat in the next to last row. I looked down my aisle and then around at the other women who were standing talking and seated. None of these women had pants on. I finally spotted a young woman in her late teens probably who had on a cream colored pair of pants with matching sweater, hose and shoes. I saw no women with jeans or blazers.

A tall man with dark wavey hair went up on the platform. He had a dark grey suit on, a white shirt and a greyish tie with a design in it. He introduced a hymn and asked everyone to stand. He read Psalm 47. Still standing the congregation sang “A Mighty Fortress.” I had the song memorized so I did not open my hymnal. My early life in the Lutheran church flashed before my eyes. I thought of my mother who’s life work was in the church. I remembered this to be one of her favorite hymns and I remembered we sang it at her funeral. I thought that she would be proud of the research I was doing this morning. Sang another song from the hymnal. I did not know it. I turned to it but used the hymnal to support my note pad while I took notes. After this song a man that I recognized from the first week, stepped up to the platform and said “Let’s pray.” I cringed at how that felt more like a command than an invitation. He has on a navy suit coat, a dark blue shirt and a deep red tie. He prays that we would keep in mind our salvation, that we would be encouraged and built up by the Word that brother ____ brings us. Another man steps up. “Good morning.” He has a serious look. Not smiling. He has on a dark navy suit, a white shirt and a dark read tie with a design
on it. He speaks intensely without opening his mouth much. His jaw seems clenched. Both men seem very professional and serious. Their clothes speak for them.

This field note entry illustrated a way that men and women present themselves—a presentation that played out the drama of men and women. It also demonstrates my own drama of obedience and rebellion to things that I experience as constraining. This was one example of how messages are communicated through social enactment.

Non-verbal communication. The second way rules were communicated was through non-verbal communication. I asked Ellen, How do women deal with the confusion about whether or not they should be doing something or if they don’t know what the boundaries are? She answered,

Well I pretty much know what the boundaries are. But I imagine other women don’t always know. Because they’re not married to an elder, the one who makes the . . . so I have a pretty good idea of what will fly and what won’t but a lot of them don’t have anybody to ask. And if you’re doing something they don’t like, you get the big-chill.

The “big chill” was a non-verbal expression of disapproval that did not need to be stated explicitly in order to be understood.

Dee told a story about the power of non-explicit communication that occurred when she took responsibility to lead a small group for a week. She said,

When I asked everyone to gather because the group was ready to begin, some people looked around at each other kind of surprised, and one person said are
you leading?”

Referring to a woman who was sometimes seen up front, Ellen expressed,

I’m not sure that they say anything to her, but she must pick up the vibes, she must feel it. Most people think she’s wonderful and she is. But there are people, men who have said, she must not pray, or read Scripture from the pulpit. There aren’t many, but there is that element in a group you know—[who say] we don’t want her modeling spiritual leadership. It’s a shame. But she doesn’t know that as far as I know. But she knows it in her spirit cause she is reluctant to get up there, you know to hog the limelight.

Some non-verbal communication seemed to be clear to some and denied by others.

I asked Nell if she felt supported during times she had been up front. She answered,

Well I think there are a few men who have trouble with it. They have never said anything to me, but I have just heard that being told to me in a real soft, gentle ways by some of the elders that there may be a few men . . . I think it’s mostly elderly men that have trouble with it. But I also think me doing that has a tendency to cause a little bit of a problem in my relationships with other women. I can tell they feel a little intimidated or something.

There is something that they aren’t comfortable with. I asked, “Have they ever said anything to you?” Nell responded, “No. It’s just, I can just pick up on things. Like you can feel when you’ve said something that they are just not quite comfortable about.

When I asked the women if and when they had received much direct teaching on the issue
of gender they stated they had not had much teaching. The women stated, “We hear about it occasionally.” “There may have been some teaching on it.” “We don’t hear about it very much. “The older women teach the younger women how to love their husbands, like when we go on a retreat.” So even though they had not received much explicit teaching on gender roles, they had received much implicit communication.

**Verbal communication.** The final way rules about gender were communicated was through brief interactions with other men and women in the church. These forms of verbal communication occurred as short verbal exchanges, not in-depth conversation. In one interaction Dee described being in a group where people were teasing her about becoming an elder because she was so active and involved in the church. She said one man stated very seriously to her, “If you became an elder, that would be the day I will leave the church.” She did not respond. While statements like this one were often made, little discussion occurred around the topic of gender. Eight women said they never talked about gender. Ellen said, “No we don’t talk about it.” Kelly stated, “It is never addressed.” Lisa expressed, “You get the sense that this is okay, this is fine, cuz no one says anything.” Bonnie reported, “People don’t ask about it because they know.” Beth explained, “If it [gender] was brought up, it wouldn’t be a strong discussion.” Two women revealed that they discussed it with their husbands, and one women shared that she discussed gender with a friend who was not in the church.

Beliefs about God, Scripture, authority, men, and women were woven through narratives by which the women made sense of their lives and were given guidelines about who they were to be as women. At times, these beliefs seemed clear and the women’s
commitment to them strong. At other times, however, those beliefs directly contradicted what the women had experienced. These contradictions created a tension that the women felt. Focusing on the tensions was difficult for the women and for me, and became a portion of the focus in the interviews. Examples of those tensions, how they were affected by them, and how the women dealt with them are in the next section.

Tensions

All of the women started their interviews with clear, seemingly definitive statements about what they believed about gender, and their understandings about women and men. However, at some time during the interview each woman told me an experience they had involving gender that contradicted their beliefs. For instance, Dee described a time when she was single where an elder announced from up front that they needed Sunday school teachers. She was excited about volunteering for that position since she had taught in a public school and had been looking for a way to contribute her time and energy to the church. When she told that elder that she would like to teach, she was told by him that the best model for the children were couples. Since she was not married at that time, she would not be permitted to teach without a man. She stated,

I didn’t think that I was in a position, especially as a newcomer, to argue the point, but I was angry and very, very hurt. In fact, I can say when you and I talked about it, it occurs to me that some of the things that have hurt me are not resolved emotionally for me. I just felt like, good grief, here I am moving out and stepping forward and I felt like I was being told that I was not valuable because I wasn’t married.

Ellen told a story of her sharing at communion and some of the men leaving because she
had spoken out. She said, “I was devastated.” Another participant told about how she
served on a committee for a few years and the chairperson was resigning. She had been
interested in possibly filling that position in the future. One of the members of the
committee said she felt strongly that the new chairperson needed to be a man because it
would look better. The participant reported to me feeling sad and angry that she or another
woman wouldn’t be considered for that position. The women reported many stories of
experiencing tensions between beliefs about women and the consequences of those beliefs
in their lives.

Affects of the Contradictions Regarding Gender

Women said that they were somewhat confused about their roles as women, and
what was expected of them in the church context. This confusion contributed to the
women acting in a variety of ways. The women expressed self-doubt through questioning
themselves and minimizing their thoughts, and they watched others closely to see how
people responded to them. They experienced discomfort, and awkwardness when having
to speak when men were present. They felt pressure to communicate well when men were
present, and because of their sense that some in the congregation might be opposed to
female leaders, they often felt limited, fearful, or caught in a bind between their desires and
the expectations of others. At times they felt the need to explain, defend, or justify their
behavior in response to criticism.

Ambiguity and confusion about gender. No written statements exist that describe
what the church’s or elders’ beliefs are about proper roles for men or women. All 11
participants stated that they were not aware of anything written in the church by-laws or
statement of faith about rules for men and women, and yet certain rules were understood. They weren’t sure what the individual church leaders believed either. As Beth said,

All the elders believe different things about gender and every situation seems to be so different, so it doesn’t seem to be clear.

Ellen, when trying to describe existing beliefs about gender explained, “It’s an elusive sort of thing.” Lucy stated, “Nobody has ever said, this is what we believe,” and “I’m still unsure about where I come down on this gender stuff.”

**Knowing the rules.** Even though the women said they were somewhat confused, three women stated that the men did not seem to be confused. In addition, even though the women reported that the rules about gender were not written and different people believed different things, they all stated clearly what the rules were. These rules included, women did not preach, women did not teach with men present, and women were not to be elders or hold any position of authority. These understood rules contributed to maintaining what I perceived as ambiguity contained in a patriarchal belief system.

Ellen told a story that contained many of these ambiguities. A woman outside the church had visited and later called to speak with her. The story described a woman powerfully affected by the gender ambiguity present in the church:

There was another phone call that came last week to me, from a lady who I don’t know well. She was in a Bible study years ago and just recently has come to the church. I just see her at a distance you know. She’s on the periphery somewhere and uh, she works as a ____, and she called me last week from work and she said for a whole year she had wanted to talked to me and all of a sudden she got up the nerve and she had to do it. She said she felt
like I was somebody safe that she could talk to. And, um, she cried and cried and cried and she said she in her whole life, she's trying to figure out who she is. She's in her forties and she doesn't feel like she fits in the church and that it would be nicer if she would just, how did she put it? Keep her mouth shut. She said, 'Every time I express myself I get in trouble.' And so she said even in the church she feels like when she speaks to somebody they run screaming the other direction. Men. If she tried to talk to any of the leaders and uh she wondered if she was being hormonal or what? (She takes a deep breath and a sigh). Um, anyway I ended up having her over for coffee for five hours. But she is very uncomfortable at the church. She said, "Am I imagining that? Is there something wrong with me? Why don't these men like me?" And I said, "No, I think it's about . . ." She's very perceptive. She picks up vibes from a mile away. Cause I know things about that that she doesn't and I know that she's caused waves because she's real open and perceptive and expressive--verbal. (Long sigh) I want to support the church but it appalls me that someone coming in from the outside feels that chill. And you know, that's sad.

**Questioning.** The participants often responded to confusion about gender by questioning themselves and then giving alternative explanations like emotional defects or sinfulness. After she had been up front doing something and received messages from people that they didn't like her in that role, Ellen said,

I end up questioning myself. Why do I have to be different, or be in the spotlight? This must be my own personal hangup.
Lucy talked about how she questioned herself when she has felt uncomfortable, she explained, “You know, I think to myself, I probably imagined 95% of it.” Lisa commented, “It’s my insecurity and these things aren’t really happening.”

**Minimizing.** Another form of questioning was to minimize their thoughts. Lucy said, “These are just my thoughts, it’s not like they’re from the Lord.” Lucy shared a story in which she was listening to a male teacher whose viewpoint she did not share. Wanting to “stay out of trouble,” she did not express her disagreement because she thought it would have been “out of line” to do so. She summarized, “Far be it for me to disagree with this man.”

**Pressure to be profound.** When the women were in groups with men, four reported feeling pressure to communicate well, like they needed to say something profound. Nell explained that the reason she felt she needed to say something profound was because,

women’s voices are weaker in projection. Sometimes men talk right over me. So I must come across with wisdom and weight and significance in order to be heard. I need to get all my ducks in a row before I speak.

Others felt they needed to prepare for possible questions. Lucy commented, I definitely feel like I’m being grilled a bit more. Others gave up trying to speak up. Lisa explained, I can’t always argue verse per verse, so I don’t even try. When men speak it’s kind of a monologue anyway.

Dee stated,

Some men say something strongly and I can’t think of a counter so I don’t say
anything.

**Discomfort when speaking with men present.** Addressing a group with men present was difficult and uncomfortable for many the women. When describing an experience where she spoke when men were present Dee revealed,

I felt awkward and found myself choosing my words very carefully. I experienced discomfort, like I was foreign.

The women interpreted their uncomfortableness as an indicator that being in a position of leadership was improper for women. Nell said, "Discomfort tells me it's not right, it's all wrong." In other words, because they were doing something that felt uncomfortable, it must have been wrong. The uncomfortableness they sensed seemed to be related with social rules in that context and the non-verbal messages they received rather than an internal state of reality. I was able to relate to their feelings of awkwardness when speaking to a group with men present. I have often received non-verbal messages from the audiences in this kind of environment.

**Monitoring others/constant surveillance.** The women watched others closely to monitor how people responded to them. They were concerned with behaving in socially appropriate ways and getting feedback about their behavior from others. Nell said,

I need to make sure I don't offend someone. I don't know what the best word is, not to be too something so they're receptive. If I'm too preachy, others would be uncomfortable. There is a concern at our church that in no way would want to be a stumbling block toward anyone not coming to Christ. I don't know if it would keep them, hopefully it wouldn't, but it may cause enough of little bit of an inner turmoil enough of a deterrent so that they,
that becomes the issue rather than just seeing Christ, you know what I mean. It’s like those people let’s say that have been totally abstinent from all drink all their lives and you’ve been the one bringing them to church and you’ve been the one talking to them about the Lord and they happened to see you drinking lots of wine or at a dinner. That would just give their brain a whole new thing to have to think about. A whole new issue to deal with and in doing so it may be so disturbing to them that it would be a deterrent toward what should be the real issue, and that’s Christ.

She later said that she looked to the congregation to help her know if she was offending anyone: “I depend on them as my meter to tell me how I’m doing.”

**Unclear about who opposed them.** The women also spoke of sensing that some in the congregation might be opposed to women being in overt leadership positions. However, the persons who were in opposition to women being in leadership positions were not always identified. The women referred to those in opposition in vague terms stating that they weren’t very clear who opposed them. Nell shared,

*When I’m up front I just feel things. Later I hear that there were a few who were opposed to me being up there. I think it might be some older people but I don’t know.*

Ellen mentioned,

*during communion there were some men who use to come who don’t anymore, [because women shared], but they might show up again, they may still be out there lurking in the shadows.*
Because the women were unclear about who was uncomfortable with them and why, they described these people (mainly men) using mysterious language. They seemed to be haunted by voices they have been told about or encountered themselves but could not define precisely and therefore could not resolve. Since those in opposition to women participating in such an overt way were not always identified, it was difficult to have discussions with the women as a means of understanding or resolving their confusion.

Keeping the discontent people and their concerns so ambiguous served to make it difficult for the women to clearly and specifically address why, when, and how they could be in leadership. Because the women were not in positions of authority, they were hopeful that some of the male leaders would give their approval for women to lead.

**Inhibited.** Nine women reported another affect saying they felt inhibited or limited in the church in regard to what they were able to do. Ellen described dealing with this limitation saying,

I pull back, I keep a low profile. It hinders me terribly... I get into trouble when I express myself so I try to keep my mouth shut.

Two women did not feel limited. They stated that there were opportunities to lead and that they did lead, even though their leadership wasn’t exercised or recognized through an official position. They led through “influencing the husbands,” and “meeting any needs we see.” Even though these women said they felt like they were not limited in what they wanted to do, it was not clear to me how they concluded what they wanted to do. They may have been encouraged and socialized to think in certain ways about what would be appropriate for them to want to do—especially what a “spiritual” woman would want to do. When they functioned in their given roles, they talked about this as obedience, not
oppression. These few women stated however, that they could see how others might feel limited. Only one woman, Bonnie, thought that oppression did not exist at all, but she later described several cases within her family and the church where she experienced extreme difficulty with sexism. One of her stories even involved a rape. Bonnie was not wanting to use the term oppression when discussing and describing life experiences that were troublesome to her.

**Fear.** The women were also affected by feelings of fear. They reported that they wanted to bring things up about gender, but they felt afraid and were unwilling to risk it, especially if it meant losing relationships or being labeled unspiritual. Ellen explained,

I don’t want to look like I’m at odds with the philosophy, and risk losing relationships. . . . I’m afraid people will be turned off by me.

Lucy provided a lengthy, detailed description of her fear, concluding with a revealing biblical allusion:

I’m afraid people will label me. Well, you know if did something that someone thought I was out of line they might say no, we don’t think that should happen and no female would ask anyway because they’d know the answer is no! You’re not gonna teach. But there’s freedom in other areas. It’s what would the men think. I don’t think it’s a question that women couldn’t speak out or couldn’t pray or couldn’t share, its just that it doesn’t happen. I mean there are certain settings that are more open. But if you have a conservative elder, you’re not gonna if someone’s leading us that you definitely get the impression that this is really important to the person then
you know I’m sure that you may stand off a bit more than with someone who
is warmly inviting males and females to participate. Um, yes, if you felt that
your were gonna be out of line, when you said something then it would
certainly be a question in your mind do you want to break that role and cause
people to . . . to be awkward. It’s not the real issue behind this stuff though.
People might say I’m coming to close. It reminds me of Eve who the serpent
said, ‘Don’t touch the tree.’ I’m scared to get too close to the tree. Maybe if
you don’t even talk I certainly won’t get into trouble you know? Maybe we
tend to stay back more and part of our thoughts is that we just you know
we’re afraid . . . of getting too close to the tree.

“Getting too close to the tree” was a reference to Eve picking the forbidden fruit from the
tree in the Garden of Eden. Eve was tempted to do evil. She was told she could eat from
any tree except for one. The consequence of her wanting more than she was permitted and
acting on her desire was the fall of humankind.

When I first started interviewing the women I noted the similarities in how they
talked about what they did in the church and the story of Eve. Several woman said they
could do anything in the church “except” for teach when men were present, or be an elder.

When women wanted to lead this often raised concerns that they would want to lead for
“the wrong reasons,” The suspicion was that they wanted to be in the “spotlight” or they
“wanted power.” So their desire to do more was seen as springing from wrong motives.
I was interested in what the women could not do and the consequences for them if they
desired to exceed those limits. It raised a question about the constraints placed on them and
how the story of Eve’s sin and it’s interpretations has affected women’s freedom for
centuries.

Being in a bind. The women sometimes felt caught in a bind between doing what seemed to be in line with the church’s belief system and doing what they needed or wanted. If they spoke out they went against the beliefs of their faith community and could be labeled or ostracized. If they did not speak out they went against their own belief that they had a voice, “gifts,” and something to offer. Lucy summarized her tensions,

You don’t want to be seen as somebody who you know ruffles the feathers.
You just want to be seen as somebody who does what’s right. So I think it can be stifling or it can just be awkward I guess. If you do share you take a risk of gee, I wonder if people are going to look at me this way and criticize. But we are hindered a bit. It makes it hard. I just think the silence to me over time causes women to take less risks, cause you’re not sure where you stand, but then another thing is you’re not able to express the gifts God has given you so you are not using your potential that God’s given you to minister, to lead, to lead others, to share and you know, we hear sermons about what your gift is or gifts and using them. And if the elders have strong feelings along certain lines that we should at least know that we can go up to that point. If you will. Um, so there is a risk and awkwardness to develop your gifts and use your gifts and be what God wants you to be that’s not met. That’s a definite fall out, its that you can’t if you’re not sharing your situation and your experience and your perspective and others can’t be encouraged by you.

I asked, “So how do you think the women deal with this?” She said, “You just stuff it
most of the time.” As a result, she felt frustrated and angry.

The women mentioned these affects as an aside. The tensions the women experienced were not always seen by them as difficult. They have developed considerable means by which they deal with the tension.

Managing the Tensions

When I heard from the women what the beliefs and rules were about women and men, some of their experiences and tensions created by these beliefs, and how they were affected by them, I was interested in the fact that they kept doing the things they valued, like serving and giving, in spite of the tensions they experienced. They did several things to help themselves live with these tensions and contradictions. Some accepted the tension by saying it wasn’t that big of a deal and that authority was part of God’s plan (see Beliefs). Others tried to ignore the things they experienced and felt by reframing how they thought about the situation, some tried to talk about it, some tried to “wiggle around the system,” and some tried to change the system. Some even found ways of protesting against the system. All of the women told themselves something and did a combination of these behaviors, sometimes simultaneously, in order to live with the incongruencies they encountered.

Accepting. The first way the women dealt with the tensions was to accept the views of the church and the Bible. Lucy talked about her acceptance in this way:

Okay, I’ve given you [the person in authority] the power to make those decisions in my life. And, it’s almost like authority has to be, um, accepted before it’s real. You know I mean like we have, God is an authority but he’s not the authority in my life until I say you are the Lord of my life. And I’m
inviting you to do that and there’s a sense of, I’ve accepted authority. I accept that he’s the one in control, and when I get married I accept, you know, the husband’s headship. I’m saying, ‘You’ve listened to me I’ve listened to you and if we still can’t agree on something then I will just trust God that you think about it and you can decide.’ That’s okay. I accepted your leadership. I might not agree with it but I’ve accepted that you had authority over me.

I asked, “So what does that look like? How do you ask them to be authority?” She replied,

Well, it’s loose at our church. You don’t sign a membership form so, I mean, by attending regularly. I think there’s a sense of, I’m accountable to this, to these leaders of this church. I have some sense of accountability to them ‘cause I represent the body of Christ, but I also represent this body of Christ of which they are the leaders and so if there are things in my life that are not pleasing to Christ they have authority to say um, we don’t, we don’t see this in your life. Yes, they could come in and if I was doing something wrong because I represent this body and that’s um, they have a right to say something to me because I fellowship there and I represent their church.

In this way, Lucy described her ability to accept authority if she wanted to.

Acceptance was also a personal trait that was valued by their God and their church. Similar self-defining words were compliant and accommodating. These words were paradoxical for the women. If they possessed certain traits, they were applauded and
viewed as being deeply godly or spiritual. But if they did not possess them, they gave up a sense of their individuality and spirituality by not being accepting, compliant, or obedient to some established way of being. They made statements like, “I just need to accept things the way they are.” Accepting things was an important virtue tied to their ideas of obedience.

I asked Dee if she had any ideas about how women dealt with the tensions they experienced. She responded,

Well, I don’t know. I could talk about how I think I deal with it or don’t deal with it. Um, one word that has really come to my mind recently is compliance. If I respect the environment that I’m in, the family the church structure, the work structure perhaps it’s easy for me to comply with the rules, the expectations, the standards. I comply. I respect the institution or the organization or whatever, and I’m comfortable with that then I resign myself to certain things. You know, I find I’m accommodating. Bad new or things that otherwise upset other people don’t. . . . So I think this is probably a good way to describe myself. I also sometimes think, ‘I can’t change things. Will what I say make a difference?’ I have a more peaceful life this way.

Complying, accepting, accommodating , and obeying helped Dee deal with the tensions by giving her a more peaceful life which contained less conflict.

Ignoring and suppressing. The second way the women tried to deal with the tension was by ignoring it, suppressing it, or denying its affects. In attempt to ignore it, Dee remarked, “I just put it on the back burner.” Beth suppressed desire to change her situation and explained, “I focus on just getting the job done rather than trying to change
it.” Lucy denied its affects, saying, “I stuff it. I talk myself right out of it. I say it doesn’t affect me.”

Justifying the church. Women also tried to cope with their situations using justification and rationalization. In justifying the church, Dee argued,

This church is better than most, either I go here or nowhere. I can still grow here, even if I can’t give in ways that I desire, I still gain things.

Beth indicated,

“In the scheme of things it doesn’t matter. . . . The perfect church doesn’t exist, so be content where you are.”

Sometimes the women used spiritual concepts to put the responsibility on God, as they explained the incongruency between what they like and what was. Ellen said,

The men don’t think they need me, but I do. But I’m not the head of the church. Jesus is and I give it to him. I have to believe I will eventually be heard in the place he [God] put me. God hasn’t forgotten us.

Alice emphasized, “The struggle is an opportunity for growth. Anyway, men and women are equal in God’s eyes.”

This kind of justification seemed to allow the women to remain a part of the church. When I asked Nell how she thought women dealt with the tensions in order to stay in the church, she replied,

I guess I can give a real quick answer but I guess it would depend on what they are being kept from doing or what they are being told not to do. I think anything that is disturbing to you as a person in Christ, well it’s an . . . an
opportunity for growth. That sounds very spiritual, but I really think that’s really the bottom line. I mean possibly they’d be telling themselves, ‘I’m uncomfortable with this. I feel weak here. I feel somewhat abused, ignored or whatever. They may use all those words and that means they are thinking about themselves. That’s a very me reflection. So then what you would hope they would do as a woman in Christ they would take all of that and they would study or spend time with the Lord and say, ‘What do you want me to do with all this God? I don’t like these feelings.’ I think what would be wonderful is if they could discover that it’s okay to feel uncomfortable. It’s okay to feel oppressed or, you know, out of sorts, disjointed. If it helps you to love me more [referring to God]. If it helps you to pursue me more, meaning Christ. If all of that anger and hurt or whatever gets you to pursue me, then it’s okay.

When I began my second interview with Nell I asked her if she had had any thoughts or interactions since our last interview. She continued to justify what she experienced through spiritualizing,

    I was thinking, not to sound odd or sound strange, but I do think there is . . . there are a gazillion ways that daily things are thrust at us to take our eyes off Christ. Satan is trying to distract us from focusing on Christ and, you know, women just get distracted. If we turn our eyes upon Jesus the things of earth will grow dim.

Weighing the costs. The women placed the gender-related tensions they experienced in relationship to other things they valued and weighed whether or not it was
worth it to pay attention to them. They also talked about strategies that helped to distract them from focusing on their concerns about gender. Beth said,

It’s not worth it. There are plenty of other things to do. It doesn’t matter right now because there isn’t a woman who wants to lead.

Dee summarized,

If it’s working, why try to stir up confusion? There are so many good things, I don’t want to make an issue of it.

Defending and justifying themselves. Several women sometimes felt like they needed to defend, to explain, or justify their behavior or the behavior of other women to those who questioned them based on gender. While referring to her friend, Ellen said, “Others were questioning her [because she had been up front on Sunday morning] and I said I thought it was okay. I defended her.” When men questioned why she should teach the Bible, Beth said, “I’ve had to stand up for myself and say this is my calling.” She gave suggestions of how a women could be heard implying that she might need to defend her position, “If a woman wanted to preach, she would have to tell the elders why and be able to defend it.”

Criticizing other women. Some of the participants were critical of other women when they wanted to lead or when they questioned traditional roles for women. This was the only time during the interview that they were critical of other women. Nell said, “I’m tired of whining women, women who say they want to be heard. They are just thinking of themselves a lot.” Another criticism by Kelly was, “Women who are unhappy with their [traditional] roles just probably are feeling their own guilt about working.” When referring to sexual harassment, Bonnie said, “I think women read into things too much.”
Looking for female models. Since the women did not often see women in “up front” leadership positions, they looked for female models. This may have indicated that they had an interest in being in leadership positions but were not sure what that would look like or how to do that in ways that were congruent with their values of being respectful to the men and not exercising power over people. Lucy said, “I look for people to look up to. . . . I wish there were more models.” Unfortunately, few models were available. Ellen explained,

*My hero is Ms._____.* She is deceased now, but I memorized every word that came out of her mouth. She didn’t let anyone stand in her way.

Working within the system. While trying to make sense of the tensions they felt from the contradictions they experienced, some women tried to work within the system, making adjustments and concessions. I asked Doris if she had a sense of what it would be like for her to be restricted from doing something she wanted to. She said, “I would just probably wiggle around some way and do it.” They considered how they could create new possibilities so they wouldn’t seem so deviant or disobedient when attempting to be involved in ways that felt more comfortable to them. Ellen commented, “I found some other ways to be involved in my small group besides bringing dessert. I asked if I could share and co-lead the group from time to time.” Each of these women worked with the existing system, negotiating small differences.

Creating change. While some women tried to work within the system, others tried to change the system. They proposed new ministries, started new ministries, and suggested changes in existing ministries. Dee described,
I just decided that I saw some needs that weren’t being met, so I stepped forward, designed a proposal and gave it to the elders.

Beth remarked, “The system needs to change if someone is being hurt.”

In addition to the changes listed above, some women attempted to change the status quo that encouraged them to not speak up and lead. They found ways to speak up for themselves and talk about their needs using spiritual language that still honored their faith.

Dee said,

I told this guy, wait a minute, I’ve prayed since I was a kid, if God didn’t want me to pray in a group of men it would say that in Scripture.

Ellen argued,

The men don’t think they need me but I think they do. . . . I will rise up in wrath, I won’t be a vegetable, I will speak my peace. They can’t tell me that God didn’t call me.

Even when the women did not use spiritual language, they found ways to state clearly how they felt about things. Ellen said, “Sometimes I just don’t care if people question me. I know darn well what I think.” Nell revealed, “I certainly encourage my daughter/s to speak up.” Lucy emphasized,

You know, I do speak out. No! I’m not a radical, I just happen to believe a little differently. I’m trying to be a model to young women and help them do things differently.

Protesting limitations. These statements were made in an effort to resist something that was happening to them that they did not agree with. At times they were able to protest the limitations placed on them by gender beliefs.
When I asked Nell to define what she meant by oppression and to describe what it took to get her to get to the point where she felt oppressed and would speak up about her concerns, she replied,

I think how I'm using that term [oppression] to mean that a person who is either not allowed or who does not feel comfortable in expressing themselves, acting out who they think they are or challenging themselves... achieving something different. Really keep them from doing something that they want. I think that if I am doing something that I honestly feel is good or for the good of others, or what I am trying to say or express is good and right and for the good of others, then oppression occurs when it causes that to stop. When what I meant to do was pure and my motives were good, then I think I would scream. When I think I am trying to do something or say something genuine and I am stopped for whatever reason, or suppressed, or oppressed, or put away, then I would scream and bristle.

Nell seems to be communicating that there is a point in which she would scream about being limited on behalf of herself and others.

The women had many ways in which they dealt with tensions created by a belief system that had harmful affects on them. Their use of language was another way they dealt with tensions.

Using Ambiguous Language

The women used forms of language that helped them talk about gender in ways that felt familiar and comfortable to them. The forms that they used contributed to their being
able to live with the tensions created by the complexities and contradictions they experienced. Although this language was often ambiguous, the participants seemed to use this ambiguity to differentiate their beliefs from the church's beliefs. They also used this ambiguous language as a means of protest against the acceptable ways of gaining power. The ambiguity of their language was manifested through their use of spiritual language, allusions to Scripture, and metaphors. Each of these three forms seemed to help the women live with the tensions they experienced.

**Spiritual Language—God's Call**

The women's use of spiritual language helped them define themselves apart from the church's position on gender. Ellen described her conviction to use the Bible and her own relationship with God as her guide in determining how to let her voice be heard. She stated,

Everything I think about usually I filter through the scriptures and I'm thinking of one right now that probably has helped me to be content with who and what I am. Because, no doubt in every culture there is a dominant voice and it won't always be the white, middle class male, although it will certainly always be male. Let's face it! But, um, that's neither here nor there. You arrive in this thing full blown and you can't turn the ship around, so you do with what you've got. I feel very strongly, in Acts 17:27 (leafing through her Bible) he [God] determined the time set for them and the exact places where they should live. God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, etcetera. I really like that. I feel perfectly suited to live in the 20th century in this country. And surprisingly
enough, in this culture. This is where God has put me to be a missionary. I believe that with all my heart. And I could not be as effective somewhere else. I feel that way about each person. So whether my voice is heard or not really is not part of the thing that bothers me. I will be heard in the place where He put me. And I don’t care what men are saying. I will minister to those people that I can reach. Men may not be able to reach them. Although she knew she would experience limitations in how her voice was heard, she faced those obstacles with a determination rooted in her spiritual convictions.

The women also used spiritual phrases like, “God gifted me,” “God led me,” and “God called me,” as a way of defining themselves. These three phrases helped describe and justify what they perceived to be God’s purpose for their lives—a life of service—and to differentiate. Ellen explained,

There was a time when I had lots of men say to me, ‘Who do you think you are teaching women these things?’ I beg your pardon. God called me to do this and I’m going to do it. That’s my thing, I do it and that’s my gift. This just happens to be my specialty is training leadership [women]. But the men don’t want it. They definitely don’t want it. So I teach the women. . . . My husband has told me this is my gift. I’ve been given this ability.

While the women could identify gifts they possessed, they expressed regret when they felt those gifts were not utilized. Dee expressed, “It’s a shame when you aren’t able to express the gift that God’s given you,” and Lucy concluded, “Women have gifts that aren’t being tapped.”
Women frequently referred to God’s leading as a motivation and spiritual justification for their actions. Using these terms was a way for the women to define themselves. God’s leading was often manifested through a “call,” and all 11 participants talked about God’s involvement in what they were doing. Dee said, “The Lord led me to be a pioneering kind of woman.” In referring to the task of preaching, one woman declared, “If I were called, I would do it.” Beth agreed and stated,

As far as I’m concerned, if the person feels as though that’s where God wants her to be that’s where she should be. We should be flexible if that’s what God has led her to do. Some women may be called to be pastors. I’m not, as you can tell, the most restrictive.

The word “call” had something to do with a life of service and selflessness versus a life of selfishness. Nell emphasized that service was more important than other issues, especially focusing on oneself:

It can become a little too dangerous when gender becomes too major. Once again, too much energy being put forth, in that people thinking too much about themselves rather than focusing on Christ. This women’s voices not being heard, because what it will give you is a woman who is thinking about herself a lot. Um, and we all do that. . . . But daily we are called on to deny ourselves. You can’t get caught up in a cause, you know what I mean. You have to sacrifice. It is a real giving of yourself.

Caring for the needs of others while at times sacrificing having their needs met were spiritual ways the women could feel confident about their ministries.
Allusions to Scripture

During the course of our interviews when I asked the women questions about their beliefs, none of the women quoted a Bible passage or gave a complete description of where their ideas about gender were found. The women only alluded to Scripture and the meaning of certain passages, saying things like, “the Bible says...,” “there is a verse in Timothy...,” or “I was reading in Acts 17 and I can’t remember exactly what it said, but....” Even when discussing specific gender beliefs, they did not provide specific biblical references. For example, Kelly stated,

In Peter and Timothy, and other places it says the qualification of an elder is that he be the husband of one wife. [a passage that implied that elders must be men].

The women consistently referred to passages with some amount of ambiguity. In addition, they continually made reference to passages as though I might know what they said and meant. They seemed to assume that I knew specific passages. Ellen remarked, “You know that passage from Timothy where women shouldn’t have authority over men.” Although they did not quote passages or even state clearly what specific passages said, they spoke with certainty about what the passages taught.

Metaphors

Along with using spiritual language and allusions to Scripture, another way the women talked about their beliefs and experiences was through their frequent use of metaphor. They used over 125 metaphors during the interviews. Ninety-four referred to gender, such as, “I have to get over this hurdle of not wanting a woman to preach” or “The
women are the power behind the throne.” The most commonly used metaphors described their thoughts about the relationship between gender and the church. Ellen summed up how she thought about gender by calling it an “uneasy truce.” This uneasy truce was made between the men and the women in the context of the church:

The bargain was that we’re [women] not to teach and that we were not to make waves.... We’ve agreed to just keep our place.

She saw the men’s part of the agreement being to “just acknowledge us once in a while.”

Other women mostly used metaphors that implied an idea, that something was temporarily settled and there was a risk of disturbing that pseudo-settled state of gender dynamics. For instance, when referring to men, Ellen said, “We try not to ruffle their feathers.” Dee stated, “I don’t want to stir things up.” Doris asked, “Why muddy the waters?” Bonnie remarked, “I don’t want to cause waves.” Ginger commented, “You may touch a nerve if you say something.” Lisa expressed, “I don’t want to rattle their cages.” Beth noted, “He’d turn over in his grave if he knew I thought that.” These metaphors reflected tenuousness, reluctance, a holding back, and timidity, if not fear. Gender was framed in certain ways that seemed acceptable in the present, but one needed to be careful not to say or do anything that might cause a disturbance of some kind in the future. It seems ironic that in containing social control regarding gender that they still experience adverse affects of those beliefs.

The women seemed to use each of these forms of language--spiritual terminology, scriptural allusions, and metaphors--as a form of protest against the accepted ways of gaining power in the church. Since Scripture was viewed as the ultimate source of authority and the men who taught the Bible from the pulpit had power, it would have been
easy for the women to quote Scripture as a means of being authoritative and hence, gaining power. But they did not. To have said that “God said” something in the Bible was a way to be authoritative, but that kind of dogmatic statement did not invite dialogue. It usually introduced a truth claim that could not be debated. However, I do not think the women wanted to quote the Scripture as a means of gaining power. So they did not quote it, they alluded to it and explained its teaching through the use of metaphor and ambiguous, spiritual language.

Conversation With Each Other and Me

Some women attempted to talk with others about the tensions they felt between their beliefs and their experiences. However, they found conversation with each other difficult. Alice said, “I have approached other women, but we don’t really talk about it.” Sometimes they joked about it and said, “We really know who runs the church anyway.” As in my earlier research (Ewing, 1995), the participants described the church as a difficult context in which to raise questions or have dialogue about gender.

During the group interviews all the women commented that they were excited about being a part of the research because although they had thought about gender from time to time they had never talked about it. They noted that the conversation through the interviews played a significant role by helping them clarify their own beliefs and helped them in relationship to what others believed. Five specific advantages were mentioned. First, they wanted to know more about what they thought and what their beliefs were based on. The process of conversation which occurred during the interviews helped them define what they believed. Ellen commented, “I don’t know what I’m thinking until I say it.”
Second, they saw conversation as a way to challenge their faith and assumptions, implying that they were open to change and growth. Lucy commented,

I think talking about some controversial issues or things not always agreed on is a way to strengthen your faith. If it doesn’t then your faith needs some work. God can handle us questioning.”

Third, hearing themselves and others in the group context allowed them to feel good about themselves. Alice remarked,

I enjoy talking about things that I don’t have all the answers for. To me, it made me feel important which is nice. We were listened to, and the fact that we were being asked to state our opinion was really encouraging.

Ellen exclaimed, “Gosh it’s nice to be taken so seriously.” Fourth, they were interested in what others thought. Lucy said, “This has caused me to be more interested in what other women and men think about this.” Fifth, having conversations strengthened the women to ask questions about it. Lucy continued to explain that “talking about this encouraged me to be brave in asking people what they thought and then even challenging them.” These women clearly expressed the desire and the need for conversation but had not had opportunity for these discussions. They also noted that conversation led to change.

My Reflections

This was both an energizing and exhausting process for me as I tried to make sense of the data in order to write something condensed and coherent about the women. I was energized because the women were delightful, respectful, and interested in this work. I enjoyed my interactions with them. Many theoretical thoughts along with personal feelings pulsed through my mind and body during most of the interviews and the coding process. I
anticipated writing creatively about the treasures I found. At times I thought I was on the verge of seeing and being able to say something profound about the women that sent my mind and heart soaring to the heights of research nirvana, only to fall quickly back to reality when finding contradictions and opposing data. I wanted a perfect representation of the women. I struggled between paradigms of trying to describe truth versus exploring multiple truths. Eventually, this process wore me down. My exhaustion came in trying to make clear categories for the women's words to fit--trying to explain their worlds. I now see that that was impossible. In order to be respectful of the women's lives, I must represent the complexities and ambiguities. I was left with a sense of weightiness about the extent of the participants' and my own belief systems and social interactions that produce reality about women. The women's narratives were a diverse, complicated, tangled and elaborate network of beliefs, meanings, and choices. I feel both respectful of life's collage of personhood and overwhelmed.
Chapter 5: Shouting and Whispering--the Co-Existence of Patriarchy and Feminism

*I saw the angel in the marble and I just chiseled 'til I set her free.*

- Michelangelo

**Introduction**

The women communicated two belief systems in their interviews that were seemingly contradictory. The first system contained beliefs about patriarchy. The second was comprised of their beliefs and their support of values that I considered feminist. The women probably would not have used the word 'feminist' in describing their values but I believe those values were latent in their discourse and I will offer an explanation for the covert nature of their language. The process of talking about their beliefs involved placing one belief system in a prominent position and the other belief system in a peripheral position. The women dogmatically described their beliefs about church, church structure, and roles of men and women in that structure. Yet, at some point in the interviews they said something like, “All that being said, let me tell you a small story.” The women felt uncomfortable about how their beliefs were often in conflict with how they and other women experienced gender relations in the church. While the women told me about a well developed, dominant belief system, they also included exceptions to that belief system.

Michael White (1991) described how dominant stories are often *totalizing* (p. 29) narratives that provide the primary frame for interpretation and meaning making in people's lives. This implies a certain determinacy to life, yet, the narratives do not always handle the “other” pieces or contingencies that arise in life. In this theory, even though a person’s life narrative is pervasive, it is also full of gaps, inconsistencies and other narratives that
run contrary to the dominant one. Anderson and Jack (1991) talk about listening to people *in stereo* (p. 11). Hearing the many levels of what is clear and muted, what is being said, what is not being said, and what is being said in ways that are more difficult to hear are all important pieces in understanding the women’s perspectives.

I experienced the women as shouting one set of beliefs while whispering another set of beliefs. The women’s words supported both systems of thought, patriarchy and feminism, however, emphasis was placed on one belief system that was much more developed in their reasoning and more easily communicated. The dominant belief system, shouted loudly and clearly, supported the patriarchal structure of the church and family. The less dominant belief system which seemed to be whispered and was far less accentuated supported values which I considered to be feminist, albeit latent, feminist values.

Struggling with opposing notions of who to be is not new for women. Fraser (as cited in Bounds, 1996, p. 114) argues that women experience themselves as split subjects where their different roles are contested. Yet the conflicting demands they experience cannot be resolved with the framework of capitalist society. She says the result is two movements in this country, a feminist one and an antifeminist one of which both struggle with contradictions in women’s identity. I am convinced that these two movements exist within each woman and are not simply represented in polarized groups of women, i.e., feminist and conservative groups.

In this section I will offer a theory about how women began to privilege a feminist perspective and why they presently might not refer to their views as feminist. I will address how the dominant narrative remained dominant, what led me to think that the
women were not completely satisfied with the shouted narrative of patriarchy, how the whispered narrative was amplified, and how change occurred regarding shifts in privileging narratives.

According to the dominant story they offered about their lives, the women shouted a belief system which supported patriarchy. The women were committed to a structure and a set of beliefs where men had privileges over women and men were in positions of power. Constraints were placed on women regarding how they were able to contribute to the church in expressing their views and in ways they were to behave. Male knowledge was held in high regard and espoused as a standard of truth. Women contributed knowledge to the men’s perspective, but a woman’s voice was rarely heard alone. The male’s position became a form of social control as men regulated beliefs and behaviors of others, bolstered the patriarchal narrative, and thereby affected those who were not in positions of power. Accountability for the dominant beliefs and decisions made by those in power, and the affects on those who were not in power were not monitored since the only way to challenge the power structures was through being in a position of power.

The women’s whispered, marginal belief system suggested feminist values. By feminist values I mean the commitment to the idea that women have equal value with men and that women’s experiences and ways of knowing are as valid as men’s. Feminism rests on ideas of faith in justice, fairness, and equality for all people (Baber & Allen, 1992; Harding, 1986; Oakley, 1981). Caring for the less privileged and liberating those who are oppressed is a central focus in the “cause” of the feminist movement. These are also hallmarks of the Christian faith (Bounds, 1996; Fiorenza, 1983). According to feminist
values, a patriarchal structure is not necessary and is even harmful to women and others who are not in positions of privilege. Other feminist values include a) the desire to question the status quo of societies values, and structures that privilege men and may be harmful to women, b) the ability to acknowledge power and its affects, and c) the willingness to work to create change on behalf of women.

**Maintaining the Separation of Two Narratives**

What maintained the dominant narrative and the marginal narrative? What occurred to keep these narratives in their respective places? From a social constructionist perspective, persons lives are shaped by their experience in their social structures, the meaning individuals ascribe to their experience, and the language practices and cultural practices of themselves and relationships (White, 1991). Using narrative theory as a backdrop, I will address how the dominant narrative was rooted in culture, how it was reinforced by the participants’ belief system, and how language contributed to it’s maintenance.

**Rooted in Culture**

In the course of daily life people experience many messages, overt and covert, about who women and men are in this society. For example, people learn things daily from friends, parents, advertisements, television shows, music, business partners, and medical experts about what is *right* for men and women to do. This tacit information received from culture is learned to the point where is no longer questioned. These messages are so patterned and woven into our experiences they are sometimes difficult to note. All these messages produce dominant cultural narratives about men and women which are held in place and reinforced by institutional structures in society that give advantages to men.
Reinforced by the Church

I identified five prominent processes that contributed to the dominance of one narrative and the marginalization of the other: the church structure and the ways it perpetuated the patriarchal system, beliefs systems about God that helped the women make sense of their worlds, a community of relational networks that allowed for one to identify with the group as it supported the dominant narrative, highly developed skills to deal with the tensions between what they believed and what they experienced, and the use of language that kept the beliefs ambiguous enough for the women to cope with the tensions but defined enough for them to not question the conflict.

Church structure. Like other institutions in society, the church socialized its members through enforcing group norms that dictated a variety of aspects of everyday life, like how life events were defined and ritualized and how men and women were defined in terms of home, work, and childcare. (Daly, 1978, Fiorenza, 1983; Loades, 1990). Church institutions also include power structures that are characterized by a system of stratification based on race, class, and gender. For the purpose of this discussion, I am concerned mostly about the gender component of social status within the church that promoted a patriarchal narrative. This raised the question, to what extent the church with its patriarchal structure contributed to the subjugation of women. Men were in positions of leadership and authority in the church. They were elders, they make the major decisions about the church, they preach, and teach. Power was given to those in authority based on the assumption that they were close to God, that God blessed the leaders, and the leaders did what was right without considering that they had a cultural bias that affected their
interpretations. This special, divine privilege given to men allowed them to define spiritual beliefs, proper behaviors, and what was "normal" or "right". Power was often manifested through the teaching of the Bible. The men's privileged voices eclipsed the voices of the marginalized by proclaiming truth from Scripture, that supported their views. They did not encourage dialogue about other possible views. Thus preaching enhanced the patriarchal narrative.

I believe the church could possibly be structured differently if women were leading, especially the role of preaching. One study on North American women and men (Maltz & Borker, 1982) showed that girls used speech to create and maintain relationships of closeness and equality, to criticize others in acceptable ways, and to interpret accurately the speech of other girls. Boys used speech to assert one's position of dominance, to attract and maintain an audience and to assert oneself when other speakers had the floor. For the girls, communication was the opportunity for establishing equality and intimacy in relatively small and private group; boys' communication was the site for contesting dominance in hierarchically structured groups that were public and relatively large. If women were leaders in the church, at the very least, other behaviors would emerge or be fostered.

Beliefs. The women's belief system about God, Scripture, authority, men, and women reinforced the dominant and marginal narratives. They put a "divine spin" on their beliefs in order to support patriarchy and dismiss feminism. Since they valued their relationship to God, they did not want to jeopardize that relationship by doing something that would be displeasing to God. The women had a narrative about God that included his design of gender that was a part of a divine order--patriarchy. If God designed men and
women to function in certain ways then why would they question it? Examining gender
dynamics by questioning patriarchy and affirming feminist ideals was to question God and
their entire belief system. This complex cognitive belief system was difficult to question
because it was so intricately tied to faith issues (Ewing, 1995).

The women believed that the Bible was divinely inspired. Men actually wrote the
books of the Bible, but God spoke to these men regarding what to write. Therefore, the
women believed the the Bible was without error. This view of Scripture held the dominant
narratives in place by emphasizing the authority and truth of the Bible when taken literally.
It also discouraged questions about how and by whom the Bible was interpreted. The
women believed the Bible could be read and interpreted for this present time and place even
though the text was an ancient document written for people living in a different culture and
time period. How present day values and ideas impacted those who interpreted the
Scripture was not often a consideration. The women did not pay attention to the fact that
men primarily interpreted Scripture, and the men’s interpretation was influenced by their
positions in life—positions of power, and their commitment (consciously or unconsciously)
to patriarchy. Men and women interpreted the Bible through the dominant lens of
patriarchy. The Bible was not interpreted by those in less influential places in life, those
marginalized by a lack of education, status, race, or gender. This tendency was consistent
with the fact that those who wrote the books of the Bible and those who have interpreted
the Scripture to the church were almost exclusively men. In this particular church, men
were the only people who interpreted Scripture for the congregation, and since only men
were allowed to preach their interpretation reinforced patriarchal views.
Beliefs about patriarchy were anchored in the idea that God designed men to be in authority. The women said that authority was necessary for life to work well and that it was helpful in defining “their place.” When the concept of authority became problematic, it was difficult to challenge this notion because God had designed it. For example, the women mentioned abuses of power by those in authority. Though the women desired to address these abuses, they usually deferred to the men, only to be sorry later that they had not spoken up. During these times “their place” felt constraining to them. The women did not question the interpretation of passages that taught about authority, possibly because they learned not to question authority, they feared the consequences of questioning, or they lacked the education necessary to question the dominant interpretations.

The women did not consider that this patriarchal arrangement could have been designed for any other reasons or purpose other than for their good. After all, it was designed by a loving and all-wise God. However, when there were things about patriarchy that injured the women, this raised an inconsistency with God creating it for their good. The women’s first inclination was to protect the men. The women said that patriarchy did exist and that it was harmful at times, but that it was an oversight by the elders. They did not want to question the elders’ motives, as though they would have to blame the men for wanting to purposefully harm the women. During our discussions, this explanation that men were not aware, was usually the end of their query to other possibilities about why patriarchy existed. It also discouraged the women from asking anyone to take responsibility about the injustices that occurred in the church through patriarchy.

The women had difficulty putting the men’s motives aside and considering that the patriarchal ideals could be reproduced in the church because of cultural narratives about
men and women and that these needed to be examined. This may have originated in a belief that the church is a model for “the world” and therefore the church’s responsibility is to shape the culture. In this scenario, the church is a “light” to the world, modeling godly lifestyles, relationships, and values. The church did not reproduce cultural narratives about men and women, but rather modeled biblical values. Therefore, the women believed that when they spoke of authority being “over” and others being “under,” they were not reflecting the patriarchy of the culture, but the biblical design handed down by God. They held to this view in spite of sociological critiques of the church concerning social control and power.

Because the women’s beliefs about men and women were based on social narratives that supported patriarchy and dismissed feminism, the women described the men and women in traditional ways. Men were to be providers. Men had responsibilities in the home and the church to lead. Men were seen as having a “special place” to articulate God’s thoughts to the congregation. Women were to be nurturers and the primary caregivers to children. They stated that they were comfortable with those roles and did not feel limited. Yet, I believe that people decide what they want to do based on society’s messages about what is proper behavior. (Bruner, 1990; Foucault, 1980). If we are entrenched in societal narratives about what is important for women and men to be, freedom to go beyond those constructions must be a conscious choice. Society’s influence shapes people’s lives. Patriarchal structures present clear ideas regarding how people are socialized to think about themselves and these ideas are often in conflict with a feminist framework. For instance, the women used the term “obedience” and not “oppression.” Only in a patriarchal set of
beliefs would the term obedience make sense. Their freedom was relative to the structure in which they functioned. The patriarchal narrative, that men lead and women follow, informed them of what would be appropriate for a “spiritual” woman to desire or do, and their beliefs about men and women bolstered the patriarchal narrative which defined their limits.

Community. The women used their belief system to make sense of their lives, but also to identify with a community. Relationally, the church community was a highly networked group of individuals who were at times referred to as “family.” The women found meaningful relationships in this context. This community context was a place where the women were able to work out their values and their roles of giving, serving, and caring for others. This community also provided normative behaviors from which the members learned to operate. Challenging the dominant patriarchal narrative posed threats for the women because it was in the group context these norms were reinforced. Often, norms were enforced through labeling. If the women contested the group values, they could be labeled a trouble maker, a liberal, or even a non-Christian. They also risked being ostracized by the members of the church, or discovering that they did not believe what others believed. This could cause relational conflict or the loss of having shared values that allowed one to identify with the group. The position relationships played in the lives of women deterred them from questioning norms, challenging the dominant narrative, and introducing other narratives.

Ways Women Dealt With the Tensions

Another way that the dominant narrative was kept amplified and the marginal narrative kept at a whisper was through the highly developed ways that women dealt with
the tensions created when their experience contradicted their belief system. The women were committed intellectually to this belief system, and they found ways to adhere to it in spite of difficulties. For example, some of the women said they accepted the idea of patriarchy and authority. In so doing, they ignored the affects on their lives, justified it, and were hesitant to question it. At times, patriarchy seemed to offer certain advantages. Since the men had the responsibility to make decisions, especially major decisions, the women were free not to “worry about” those details. Women were also free at times not to have to commit to a particular stance on a given issue. Because they were not the final authority they left those decisions up to their husbands or the men of the church. This took away the pressure of decision making as well as the responsibility for the consequences of those decisions. Granting to others the authority to make decisions also lessened the risk of conflicted relationships created by making decisions that some might disagree with. This gave the women more time and energy to focus on what they felt “called” to do, but it did not allow the women to differentiate from the men’s decisions. Thus, it kept them from clearly defining how they supported or differed on those decisions.

The women often ignored or suppressed the affects of accepting a patriarchal belief system experienced by themselves and others. They often did this through justifying the church and rationalizing their experiences. For example, they stated that no church was perfect and that difficulties presented opportunities for growth. The idea of suffering through difficulties was seen as spiritual and was connected to how they were suppose to live as Christians. If difficulties were seen as an opportunity for personal growth there was no reason to challenge situations that hurt or hindered them. However, when they became
clearer about being limited, they did challenge the system. Research with a group of women from a similar church revealed that painful life experiences surfaced questions among women that sometimes led to a change in their beliefs (Ewing, 1995).

The women rarely talked to others about their questions or concerns regarding how they experience the church’s patriarchal structure. This isolation, according to Betty Friedan (1963), is a function of patriarchy. A lack of discussion about gender supported the idea that the gender “just is” and it need not be questioned. Patriarchy was a given. They said they were afraid to talk about it and make it an issue because it would make trouble, and even when they did discuss gender, they used language that minimized their concerns about the affects of patriarchy. However, it was difficult for them to state that discrimination and inequity existed in the church. To admit that inequity and discrimination existed might mean that the God they or others had constructed was unjust. This might cause them to question whether the God they wanted to worship had indeed created patriarchy. Changing their ideas about God might be a necessary step in order to have a faith that was consistent with their experiences. This possibly could lead the women to call into question the church structure. They would begin to question their values of justice, fairness, power, and would need to reexamine where those value fit into patriarchy.

**Language of Ambiguity**

The way language was used also supported the dominant narrative. Language simultaneously reinforced narratives and gave meaning to them. The stories the women told determined the meaning they attributed to their experiences. The stories were determined in part by what aspects of the experience were selected and expressed. Narratives and meanings were often woven into the social communication, but were not
always overt. This obscure form of communication happened most obviously when the women used spiritual language that served to keep concepts ambiguous. They said that the men were the “spiritual leaders” of the church and home, but they did not define what that meant. In part it meant that men were to preach and teach Sunday school, and that final decisions were left to men, it’s meaning was somewhat unclear.

Men being spiritual leaders was meaningful to this group because they valued patriarchy. Words like submission, authority, headship, and leadership had meaning and significance within the social structure of the church and patriarchy, but were not well defined. The women had difficulty explaining these terms. Being curious about the meaning behind words unmasks narratives and meaning that are present. These terms were packed with ill-defined meaning, used as common language in this social setting, and helped people identify with the group, even though the meanings of the terms and phrases were unclear. If the women had talked about what these terms meant for them they may have been surprised to find out what they and others thought about them.

The following is an excerpt from my field notes illustrating how I experienced ambiguity during a church service.

Field notes, March, 1996. A man steps to the platform. He is tall, 50ish dressed in a light brown suit and tie. He refers to a book related to work where a man who was a missionary ends up a janitor. He says, “We are called to obedience, the job doesn’t matter.” I am reminded that there are not many janitors in this congregation. This is a highly educated, affluent group of people. I wonder how people are feeling about their work right now. I wonder if they are feeling guilty
that they aren’t janitors of if this sermon today is going to focus on obeying God in your work. He gives a summary of a text of scripture. People around me start looking for the text in their Bibles flipping through pages. He says he is going to read Nehemiah 3:1-12. He reads and lots of people are following along in their Bibles. I had a different version so I set my Bible aside. I felt like I had to defer to his translation and reading of it. He then prays “Open my lips to speak your truth.” He says that he is going to speak about work. His first point is that work was God’s idea before the fall. He says that “God put man in the garden to work it.” I was thinking about Genesis 1:27 that God created male and female He blessed them and said the them to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and rule over the fish of the sea... Seems to me men and women were both responsible for a type of work. Point #2 was that work is purposeful activity. He includes women by saying child care is considered work. He then says, “Ask any women, she probably works just as hard as her husband.” Several thoughts raced through my head. Who says she’s married? Why is that assumed? What about all the literature especially ideas about women working a “second shift” that notes women working twice as hard as men, not “as hard.” I’m waiting to hear what his point is about women and work. He says, “today’s culture says get into the work force to women. This is not necessarily a biblical view. In fact there may be situations where working is necessary for women.” By now, I have lots of questions. So, the culture, “the world” calls women into the work force? They couldn’t want to do that themselves? Does that make working evil? So what is the biblical view? He seems to use the idea of biblical view to increase power or authority behind his
point. Is the only time women should work is when they have economic difficulty? He then reads a quote about raising children as the most important role a person can have. I wondered if it’s so important then why aren’t the men involved in it. I am thinking that this man is communicating lots to men and women but not stating it in ways that could be argued or questioned. I want to jump up and say, can we ask questions? I think about what that would do to my research project. I decide to sit. His statements are very confusing and unclear. What I think I hear is that work outside the home for women is not okay, unless it an economic necessity and that the Bible says so, and that women raising children is the most important work they can do. This ambiguous language communicates something, but not information that can easily be discussed or debated.

As I re-read this field note I am aware that the tensions I was feeling about the ambiguity was what was informing me about it’s presence. I had an emotional reactivity to the use of ambiguity since I felt the leader was speaking in a way that was hiding something and saying something at the same time.

Ambiguity was displayed in the fact that there were no written statements of what the gender rules were. Not having something written led to some confusion about what the church’s beliefs about women actually were. Even though the rules were cryptic, the women possessed strongly held beliefs that seemed meaningful and could not be disputed. All the women knew what the basic rules were even though there were variations on those rules. The rules were communicated through social enactment, non-verbals, and language contained in conversations, and through direct teaching. These forms of communication made it more difficult to challenge the issues thereby supporting the status quo about
gender. Ambiguity helped the women deal with the tensions of the conflict between differing belief systems and kept one narrative dominant and the other peripheral. Privileging both narratives enough to discuss and evaluate them seemed to be too difficult.

Another reason I think ambiguous language was used was to avoid eliciting a response on the part of those listening. If the men made clear statements about beliefs regarding men and women, either through the medium of preaching or conversation, they might have elicited a response from the women. A response might have led to more clarification through a process of reflexive dialogue. This reflexive process would have entailed making statements, asking questions, defining terms, deconstructing terms, talking about the who, when, where, and how of their experiences. Reflexivity could have occurred if there had been an opportunity for the women to respond to the comments from an equal position. However, reflexivity was prevented in this patriarchal system because it did not invite an equitable participation of ideas. Preaching was a monologue, not a discussion. The men and women avoided clarification in order to avoid the response if might have elicited. Patriarchy could have been undermined if the women had responded, by entering into dialogue.

The Significance of Conversation With Me and Each Other

The women began the reflexive process with other women where equity in dialogue already existed. This may have been one reason why the women said they were impacted by the interviews and conversations that took place during the research process, because it was a reflexive process from which they benefited. During the individual and group interview, the women stated clearly that they wanted and valued this process of reflexivity-
the exchange of conversation around the issue of gender. All the women commented that they were excited about being a part of the research because although they had thought about gender from time to time, they had never talked about it openly. They noted our conversation played a significant role in helping them clarify their own beliefs and the beliefs of others. Five specific advantages of conversing were mentioned. First, they wanted to know more about what they thought and what their beliefs were based on. The process of conversation helped them define what they believed. Second, they saw conversation as a way to challenge their faith and assumptions, implying that they were open to change and growth. Third, hearing themselves and others allowed them to feel good about themselves. Fourth, they were interested in what others thought. Finally, having conversations strengthened the women to ask questions about it in other conversations. These women clearly expressed the desire and the need for conversation but had not had opportunity for these discussions. Conversations with one another reinforced a transition for the women toward other narratives. Emphasis on these conversations began my hypothesizing that the women were not completely satisfied with their dominant narratives and were interested in exploring other possibilities.

Evidence of Dissatisfaction

Affects of Patriarchy

The women were affected in a variety of ways by the dominant narrative of patriarchy. The women indicated that they were somewhat confused about their roles and what was expected of them in the church context. The women expressed self-doubt through questioning themselves and minimizing their thoughts, and they watched others closely to see how people responded to them. They kept a look out for models to pattern
themselves after. They felt pressure to communicate well when men were present, and because of their sense that some in the congregation might be opposed to female leaders, they often felt limited, fearful, or caught in a bind between their desires and the expectations of others. At times they felt the need to explain, defend, or justify their behavior in response to criticism. Addressing a group with men present made the women uncomfortable and they interpreted their discomfort as an indication that they were doing something wrong.

Hope for Change

Change was an important element in the women's interviews, especially the group interviews. Even though the women indicated that they were mostly satisfied and comfortable with the dominant narrative of patriarchy, they spoke about a desire for change and expressed hope that change might occur. This emphasis on change implied discontent with the status quo of gender in the church.

The women talked about change in terms of the past, present and future. Referring to the past, they stated that things were no longer as bad as they used to be. They believed that things were changing for women. Because women had more opportunities and chose to work outside the home, the church would need to reflect those changes. They talked about present changes in terms of what they thought they were doing presently that did not fit with how things used to be. For instance, one woman said she was becoming more comfortable sharing in a group of men and women whereas before she would have remained silent.

Future changes were noted in both optimistic and pessimistic terms. One woman
stated that she thought there would never be a day when women could be elders. But she added parenthetically, "Well, maybe in my lifetime that might occur." Several women even offered specific suggestions of how change might occur for the church. This opened up space for another narrative to be considered. The ability to imagine and discuss change also brought into focus a dissatisfaction with the patriarchal narrative. Noting the dissatisfaction about patriarchy created new questions about the women’s acceptance of this model. Maybe the women were not just unaware of oppression or suffering from false consciousness. Maybe they were involved in resisting patriarchy.

Resistance

In referring to narratives that suppress women, Michael White (1991) noted that these narratives are never totally effective in eclipsing the lives of women—the women resist and protest them. When considering a dominant narrative such as patriarchy, I believe that individuals have the ability to resist those oppressive narratives—to protest against injustices. These protests are discovered in other stories in one’s life that do not fit or allow the dominant narrative to totally determine the direction of one’s life. For instance, Ferree (1987) reports that women develop their own views in the work place where they are confronted with sexism on a daily basis. They create a women’s work culture that counters devaluation and discrimination on the job. They found ways to resist sexist belief structures. I believe the women create a similar process for themselves in the church where they use their experiences to inform them of other possible ways of being. Their protests are found in the alternative narratives or the whispers that were based on values that I label as feminist.

The women protested the patriarchal narrative in several ways. They worked
within the church system, making adjustments and concessions, and they attempted to
change the system. They proposed new ministries, started new ministries, and suggested
changes in existing ministries. Through their use of spiritual language they resisted the
dominant narrative and began to privilege the marginal narrative. At times when they used
spiritual language it was a way of defining self. They described how God called them and
other women to certain kinds of ministries. This was the one condition under which they
agreed with women being in leadership or even being pastors--if God called them. At
times the women also resisted the status quo by speaking up for themselves or others not
using spiritual language. Sometimes they declared that they did not care what others
thought, that they encouraged their daughters to speak up for themselves, and that they
wanted to speak out themselves. bell hooks (1989), describes this process of “talking
back” as a resistance strategy to oppression, something she learned growing up in a black
family dealing with the complexities of gender and race.

Not Using Socially Acceptable Ways to Gain Power

When I asked the women questions about their beliefs, none of the women quoted a
Bible passage or gave a complete description of where their ideas about gender were found.
The women only alluded to Scripture and the meaning of certain passages. Even when
discussing specific gender beliefs, they did not provide specific biblical references. I
believe this way of handling Scripture was a protest against the accepted ways of gaining
power in the church. Since Scripture was viewed as the ultimate source of authority and
the men who taught the Bible from the pulpit had power, it would have been easy for the
women to quote Scripture as a means of being authoritative and hence, gaining power. But
they did not. They were not going to abuse power. For instance, to have said that “God said” something in the Bible was a way to be authoritative. Quoting Scripture introduced a truth claim that was difficult to debate. However, I do not think the women wanted to quote the Scripture as a means of gaining power. So they did not quote it. They alluded to it, and explained it’s teaching through the use of metaphor and ambiguous, spiritual language.

Willingness to be Involved in the Research

The women were very interested and willing to be involved in the research. They were interested in thinking about women and that stated they were wanting to have their beliefs challenged. The women’s comments on the affects of their church beliefs, their desire to see change, their protests against what conflicted with their values, and their interest in wanting to be involved in the research led me to believe there was dissatisfaction on their part. These behaviors were forms of protest for their dissatisfaction. These behaviors could not be accommodated by the dominant story. I concluded that the women had a preferred narrative that played a less dominant role in their lives. Possibly, they do not use the term feminist because they have not developed a language that selects and attends to those issues. I see this preferred narrative as informed by feminist values even though they did not use that language. The data indicated what could happen if attention was given to the marginalized narrative. But, how the less dominant narrative was amplified must be examined first.

Amplifying the Whispered Narrative

Women’s Conversations

The marginal narrative which has previously been described as being less
dominant, peripheral, and whispered, was amplified through conversation. If language provides the basis for all human understanding, then conversation plays an important role in the development and changing of narratives. In the narrative therapy literature, psychotherapy is construed as “linguistic activity in which conversation about a problem generates the development of new meaning” (Goolishian, 1988).

I propose that any conversation where collaboration and equal participation is required, regardless of the naming of a problem, can serve to identify narratives and generate new possibilities of narratives. This is done through a recursive process of two or more persons’ words and experiences shaping the conversation. The second person’s (either the researcher or other women) questions and comments based on their life experience may open up a discursive space for multiple meanings or interpretations. For instance, several women told me about their anxiety and discomfort when speaking in a group where men were present. Their interpretation of that experience was that they were doing something that women were not supposed to be doing. I had told them I had had similar experiences in which I received non-verbal feedback from the men in the room that I shouldn’t be up front. That opened up a discussion about how they had experienced some men giving them messages, verbally, and non-verbally about not wanting women up front. This discussion presented another possible explanation for their discomfort. As a result, the women were no longer locked into believing they were doing something wrong or that something was wrong with them.

Many women are not comfortable speaking in public where men are present (Minister, 1991). Women are not used to public speaking and rarely have opportunities to
practice. But these women tended to believe myths about women, such as women talk more than men (one woman in this study kept referring to the women as “flapping their gums” while her husband only had to say one word on an issue to be heard), women do not talk about significant things (one woman said “men are much deeper and women chit chat”), women can not tell jokes, they cannot speak logically, and they gossip. In addition, a lack of female role models inhibited the development of a self-identity and a social identity. Considering that there may be many reasons why women are uncomfortable speaking in front of men can amplify a feminist narrative rather the patriarchal narrative that women must not speak from a position of authority when men are present.

**Community**

A feminist narrative becomes more dominant when the women speak their stories in the midst of community. According to research done by Paget (1983), women help each other develop ideas and are typically better prepared than men to use the interview as a search procedure, cooperating in the project of constructing meaning together. Adrienne Rich (1976) wrote that it is only the willingness of women to share their “private and often painful experience that will enable them to achieve a true description of the world, and to free and encourage one another” (p. 15). If meaning and understanding are socially constructed, then to engage in conversation within a context which the meaning had relevance, may bring about change. Change is a goal of feminism.

During discussions in the individual interviews and group interviews occurred, several things occurred. Questions and conversations led to clarification. Clarification lead to attending to certain aspects of the less dominant narrative, conversations in community led to change in the emphasis on narratives.
It is necessary to speak words describing one’s life in order to know how one thinks about one’s life. According to DeVault (1990), members of society learn to interpret their experiences in terms of dominant language and meanings, therefore women often struggle to have their own language, not male language to describe their experiences.

Therefore, it seemed important for me when listening to the women, to hear what other ways of talking about their experience existed rather than the prominent words. It was important to hear and take notice of other words that supported another narrative, but were not as developed. Paying attention to less obvious words and introducing words that were a bit unfamiliar with their context seemed to lead to change because it allowed for the possibility of other explanations and meanings.

**Identifying Factors not Accommodated by the Dominant Narrative**

The women amplified their marginal narrative by speaking their stories, acknowledging that they had experiences that were not congruent with their beliefs, and by feeling the tensions these created. Another way change occurred for these women was by acknowledging how they or others were affected by the contrasting beliefs and experiences. They recalled facts or events that contradicted their commitment to patriarchal structures. When they recalled and examined these events a shift in the narratives occurred. Most of the women said that they had thought about these things before but had never spoken to anyone about them. During the second reflecting team with the participants, the women focused on details of their statements, but found it more difficult to talk about the tensions created and felt around those statements. Giving voice to their concerns, questions, and experiences served to emphasize the less dominant discourse.
According to Anderson and Goolishian (1994), the transformational power of narrative rests in its capacity to re-relate the events of our lives in the context of new and different meaning. Acknowledging the effects of the patriarchal narrative was difficult. They were likely at first to dismiss any negative affects by using their skills of rationalizing, justifying, and ignoring. The whispered narrative first had to be noticed, and given attention, to be worthy of discussion.

Change Related to Research

The research process of the interviews may have elicited change because of four factors. First, my being present in the church and stating I wanted to study women accentuated difference and generated interest. The second was their preparation in thinking about the interviews. Third was the interviews themselves, and fourth was the impact of the group interview.

My Presence

This study initiated the process of change even though that was not my initial goal. My presence in that environment and my stating that I was studying the lives of women began a change process for some. They seemed curious about why I wanted to study women. They were curious about who I was and what I wanted to study about them. Making women a valid project to study seemed to intrigue some. This may have been a type of introject into their world of patriarchy. I was introducing something different enough to pique their curiosity and elicit their involvement, but not too bizarre that they dismissed me and my research proposal. I believe my presence as a participant observer allowed another possibility—that a person could be involved in the church but still be questioning what was happening in terms of process as well as content.
Participant Preparation

The women’s thoughts in anticipation of the interview also acted as a change agent. Several women said they wondered what I would be asking them during the interview and they were thinking about it beforehand. Several women also said that asked themselves what they really did believe about gender because they had not thought about it much. Gergen (1989) remarked that talking with oneself or others is a way of self-defining. When the women asked themselves questions about what they believed they began a process of defining themselves more clearly. Fourth, this process continued as they entered into conversations with others and highlighted the significance of the impact of the group interview.

Conversations and Community

Through the women having conversations with me and each other in the group, they began to feel more comfortable talking about this issue and also realized they were not the only one thinking about gender issues. During their first group interview they stated that they liked being together. They liked hearing from other women about what they thought about gender. They decided they needed to continue to meet to talk about these things so they organized a group that met without me. From that group they decided to write a letter to the elders seeking information and clarification about what the rules about gender were. Building a sense of community through conversations with other women amplified the narrative of feminist values. The group interview revealed an interactive process where the women raise issues with patriarchy by stating feminist values.

In summary I will reflect on two areas of concern—implications for therapy and
implications for further research.

**Implications for Therapy**

It is important for therapists to understand how therapy for women is influenced by the larger sociocultural context in which they live (McGoldrick, 1996). Feminist scholars have noted how mental health practices are oppressive and debilitating to women. This research emphasized that women's lives are affected by the patriarchal structures that surround them. One goal for therapists would be to take note of how the patriarchal structures can also be oppressive or debilitating, drastically affecting the women. Helping women identify those affects can enable them to be more empowered toward change. Understanding their narratives can help in that process. It is important in therapy to consider how the women may already be using their strengths to resist those structures through alternative narratives. It is necessary to avoid formulating hypotheses about the women based on deficit models. This includes therapists not pathologizing the women’s behavior as being too passive, lacking courage, or not being aware.

Many women in these kind of conservative church environments do not want to leave their church. They often have a community of relationships and support that are valuable to their lives. They also have a well developed belief system that helps them make sense and create meaning of their worlds. Caution for therapists must be taken in challenging their belief system or encouraging them to leave their church environment by seeing their complexities. Working with preferred stories about what they find helpful for themselves and their families may aid in creating new narrative possibilities.

This could be accomplished by acknowledging their belief system and the role it plays in making sense of their worlds and emphasizing that their values are important.
Asking women to clarify and deconstruct their language may allow for the women to have a greater sense of self-identity (Gergen, 1994). Articulating their values and beliefs can help them towards self-development.

Having women talk with other women about their church experiences becomes especially important to change because they are often not accustomed to doing this (Bemstein, 1996). Suggestions for group therapy or focus on relationships with other women could aid female clients in finding support, discovering new narratives, and generating ideas for empowerment towards change. Identification with other women may help in their own process of differentiating their beliefs from others beliefs.

It is necessary for therapists to become bilingual to hear the different stories offered by women. Laird (1996) emphasized that the clinician needs to become ethnographers, or students of the culture. Assuming the posture of a learner and not an expert gives a therapist more perspective regarding the client’s world and narratives (Anderson & Goolishian, 1994). Reading feminist literature and therapy theory is critical in acknowledging issues of power and maneuvering those difficulties. Insisting on and assuming the dominant narrative could be harmful to the client if the client needs and wants a new story. As therapists we need an analysis of our own vocabularies in therapy, our own narratives, and our assumptions about women can aid in more responsible therapy practice.

**Implications for Further Research**

Understanding how women think about their church experiences is important when determining to take all women seriously and respecting the fact that they make choices about how they wish to live based on their values. Highlighting the need to learn more
about women and how their values shape their choices and the course of their lives would be one way to begin this process of respecting them.

I would like to continue this study by revisiting the participants to see how they might have been affected after the interviews. Conducting a longitudinal study focusing on how the women changed or did not change over time would offer insight into processes that induce change. How their church environment responded to their changes would also be of interest to me. A study of the church culture and how language contributes to reinforcing beliefs would help further elaborate the social construction of meaning for the women.

I would also propose getting to know more about women who have left conservative church environments. Knowing what kind of processes they attributed to their leaving could give a better understanding of women’s narratives and how meaning and values change.
APPENDIX A

TO: BCF Elder Team

FROM: Janice Ewing

RE: Research Project

DATE: 2/26/96

My name is Janice Ewing. I am a Ph.D. student in the department of Family Child Development at Virginia Tech. Along with my husband, I have been active in church ministry for 14 years. My church experience has sparked my interest in a unique dissertation topic. I am interested in studying the lives of women who are involved in the local church. Generally, my focus will be on understanding how women are involved in the church, the kind of work they do in the church, how they are involved in their families, and how they think about their role. This would involve interviewing a group of interested and willing women (probably 10-20).

I would also spend time as a participant-observer in the Sunday morning worship and women's meetings. In order to find out if there were women who were interested in being involved with this project, I asked some of the women's ministry group to give me feedback. Many of those women were willing to be involved and we thought the next step would be to speak to the elders.

I would like the elder team to be aware of the study. I am asking for your consent to carry out my research. If you have any questions please feel free to contact me at 951-8442. Thanks for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Janice A. Ewing
APPENDIX B

In-Depth Interview Guide Questions

The following questions were asked of each respondent during the in-depth interviews. Variation in the order of the questions was permitted to promote rapport and facilitate the flow of conversation between respondent and interviewer. Probes were used to encourage elaboration.

**Initial rapport building questions:**

To begin, could you tell me about yourself?
(Probes: age, work experience, ethnicity, education, marital and familial background)

What is a typical day like for you?

How did you get involved in this church?

In what ways are you involved in this church?

How did you make the decisions of how to be involved?

**Personal beliefs about gender**

What are some of your personal beliefs about women and their roles in the church?

What is your understanding of how these beliefs/roles affect your involvement?

**Church beliefs**

What does this church believe about your involvement in terms of gender?

In what ways are those beliefs communicated? How did you learn the church beliefs?

Do you ever find that you differ from the church’s beliefs?

In what ways do you deal with that? What is your sense of what would happen if you did?

If so, what is your understanding of that?
APPENDIX C
Group Interview Questions

The group interview format and questions are for the purpose of initiating and facilitating the flow of conversation. They provide a loose structure for the discussion; they are not intended to be exhaustive. Some of the questions are open ended to allow participants to share their own experiences in their own way. Variation in the order of asking questions is expected in order to promote rapport and allow participants to elaborate areas of concern.

I. Welcome

II. Overview and introduction of topic

III. Ground Rules

IV. Distribution of Informed Consent for participants

V. Questions:

To begin we will go around the circle and have each person introduce themselves by stating their name, age, and how long they have been a part of this church.

Tell me about the nature of your work in the church?

How did you make the decisions of how to be involved in the church? How did you learn what was appropriate for women to do in the church?

Could you describe what your church believes about gender roles?

Could you describe what you believe about gender roles?

How do these rules benefit or limit you?

Is there anything else you would like to add to help us understand how you perceive the relationship between gender and your church experience?

VI. Wrap up - What has this interview been like for you?

VII. Thank you for participation - Remind participants of contact numbers on form that was distributed and encourage them to contact the investigator if they have further questions.
APPENDIX D
VIRGINIA POLYTECHNIC INSTITUTE AND STATE UNIVERSITY
Informed Consent for Participants
of Investigative Projects

Title of Project: Women’s Perspectives on Gender and Their Church Experiences
Investigator: Jan Ewing

I. The Purpose of the Research/Project
You are invited to participate in a study of women and their ideas and experiences in church
environments. The purpose of this project is to study the lives of women in conservative Christian
church environments to better understand their ideas about gender roles. Information gained from
this project will be utilized to inform future research on women and their experiences with
organized religion. Two hour interviews with 10-12 women will be conducted.

II. Procedures
The study will involve the researcher’s participation in and observation of worship
services, and/or a mid-week gathering. Also, interviews with you will take place at a mutually
convenient location and time and will require approximately two hours of your time. The focus of
these interviews will be on understanding how you are involved and think about your experiences
in the conservative Christian church.

III. Risks
The risk involved are considered minimal. The questions are not intended to make you
uncomfortable.

IV. Benefits of the Project
Your participation will provide the following information that may be helpful to other
women, ministers, counselors, and educators. First, this study will provide information about the
unique characteristics of women who are involved in the context of the church. Second, the study
will provide the opportunity for you to talk about your beliefs and experiences in the church.
Third, the collection of this information about women will contribute to future research questions
and serve as a basis for the investigators dissertation. Fourth, you may come to a better
understanding of yourself, the church structure, and societal values through talking about your
beliefs and what these beliefs mean to you.

V. Extent of Anonymity and Confidentiality
The location of the particular church, the people involved there, and your part in the
interviews, to the best of my ability will remain anonymous. Fictitious names will be given to the
church and its members. Confidentiality will be strictly kept by not divulging information about
particular participants. The exceptions to the breach of confidentiality are three fold: If a
participant discloses child abuse; harm to self; or harm to another. In each of these cases the
researcher would notify appropriate authorities.

Taping will occur in individual and the group interviews. These tapes will be secured,
coded by numbers, and stored in a locked personal file. Transcriptions will occur by the
researcher under the supervision of her committee chairperson. The committee chair will also supervise the analysis of the transcriptions.

VI. Compensation

There will be no compensation for this project.

VII. Freedom to Withdraw

You are free to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. Participants are free not to answer any questions that they choose without penalty.

VIII. Approval of Research

This research project has been approved, as required, by the Institutional Review Board for Research Involving Human Subjects at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, by the Department of Family and Child Development

IX. Your Participant Responsibilities

I voluntarily agree to participate in this study. I have the following responsibilities: To engage in the interview in the ways I feel most comfortable. To state if I do not wish to answer a question or if I desire to withdraw and cease the interview.

X. Participants Permission

I have read and understand the Informed Consent and conditions of this project. I have had all my questions answered. I hereby acknowledge the above and give my voluntary consent for participation in this project.

If I participate, I may withdraw at any time without penalty. I agree to abide by the rules of this project.

_________________________  __________________________
Signature                      Date

Should I have any questions about this research or its conduct, I may contact:

Janice A. Ewing, Investigator  Phone 951-8442

Katherine Allen, Faculty Advisor  Phone 231-6526

E. R. Stout, Chair
IRB, Research Division  Phone 231-9359
APPENDIX E

VIRGINIA POLYTECHNIC INSTITUTE AND STATE UNIVERSITY
Informed Consent for Participants
of Investigative Projects

Title of Project: Women’s Perspectives on Gender and Their Church Experiences
Investigator: Jan Ewing

I. The Purpose of the Research/Project
You are invited to participate in a group interview with a reflecting team component. This is a study of women and their ideas and experiences in church environments. The purpose of this project is to study the lives of women in conservative Christian church environments to better understand their ideas about gender roles. Information gained from this project will be utilized to inform future research on women and their experiences with organized religion. A group interview with 6-10 women will be conducted. A group of 5 colleagues will participate as the reflecting team.

II. Procedures
The focus of this group interview will be to collect information on how you and other women are involved and think about your experiences in a conservative Christian church. The group interview will take place at a mutually convenient location and time and will require two to three hours of your time. A reflecting team format will be used. Each woman has already been informed at the individual interviews what the group interview, reflecting team will be like.

III. Risks
The risk involved are considered minimal. The questions are not intended to make you uncomfortable.

IV. Benefits of the Project
Your participation will provide the following information that may be helpful to other women, ministers, counselors, and educators. First, this study will provide information about the unique characteristics of women who are involved in the context of the church. Second, the study will provide the opportunity for you to talk about your beliefs and experiences in the church. Third, the collection of this information about women will contribute to future research questions and serve as a basis for the investigators dissertation. Fourth, you may come to a better understanding of yourself, the church structure, and societal values through talking about your beliefs and what these beliefs mean to you. Fifth, you will be able to hear from other women regarding their views.

V. Extent of Anonymity and Confidentiality
The location of the particular church, the people involved there, and your part in the interviews, to the best of my ability will remain anonymous. Fictitious names will be given to the church and it’s members. Confidentiality will be strictly kept by not divulging information about particular participants.
Taping will occur in individual and the group interviews. These tapes will be secured, coded by numbers, and stored in a locked personal file. Transcriptions will occur by the researcher under the supervision of her committee chairperson. The committee chair will also supervise the analysis of the transcriptions.

VI. Compensation
There will be no compensation for this project.

VII. Freedom to Withdraw
You are free to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. Participants are free not to answer any questions that they choose without penalty.

VIII. Approval of Research
This research project has been approved, as required, by the Institutional Review Board for Research Involving Human Subjects at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, by the Department of Family and Child Development

IX. Your Participant Responsibilities
I voluntarily agree to participate in this study. I have the following responsibilities: To engage in the interview in the ways I feel most comfortable. To state if I do not wish to answer a question or if I desire to withdraw and cease the interview. To keep confidentiality as agreed upon by the group.

X. Participants Permission
I have read and understand the Informed Consent and conditions of this project. I have had all my questions answered. I hereby acknowledge the above and give my voluntary consent for participation in this project.

If I participate, I may withdraw at any time without penalty. I agree to abide by the rules of this project.

_________________________________________  ________________
Signature                                      Date

Should I have any questions about this research or its conduct, I may contact:

Janice A. Ewing, Investigator  Phone 951-8442

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E. R. Stout, Chair
IRB, Research Division  Phone 231-9359
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References


JANICE A. EWING

EDUCATION

Ph.D. Marriage and Family Therapy 1997
Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University (Blacksburg, VA).

M.S. Marriage and Family Therapy 1991
Loma Linda University (Loma Linda, CA).

B.S. Psychology 1989
La Sierra University (Riverside, CA).

WORK EXPERIENCE: THERAPIST, ADMINISTRATOR

Family Therapy Clinic Associate Director, Seattle, WA 7/96 - present
- Seattle Pacific University, Seattle, WA.
- Supervised 8 student intern therapists
- Taught two practicum groups
- Taught weekly reflecting team supervision
- Conducted therapy session for individuals and families
- Organized monthly Psychiatric consults
- Conducted staff meeting for supervisors and therapists
- Organized supervisor training session

The Everett Clinic, Everett, WA 11/96 - present
- Conducted medical family therapy in a medical practice with four physicians
- Collaborated with physicians regarding treatment plans for patients

Center for Family Services, Blacksburg, VA 9/94 - 5/96
- University Clinic. Treated students from Virginia Tech,
  Radford University, and Roanoke College
- Treated individuals and families

Family Consultation Service, San Diego, CA 6/91 - 3/93
- Private practice. Treated individuals and families, specialized with
  adolescents
- Facilitated groups

New Life Treatment Center, Psychiatric Hospital, San Diego, CA 12/91 - 9/92
- Case Manager. Collaborated in client treatment with social worker,
  psychologist, psychiatrist, and physician
- Focused on college age clients with drug and alcohol abuse, depression,
  and eating disorders
- Facilitated group therapy
- Developed family-focused treatment plan
- Developed family-focused four-week workshop
Loma Linda University Family Clinic, Loma Linda, CA
- Therapist intern. Worked extensively with university students
- Treated individuals and families
- Conducted groups for incest victims and co-dependency

Pediatric Department Loma Linda Medical Center
- Therapist trainee
- Conducted groups for sexually abused children and adolescents
- Conducted groups for parents of sexual abuse victims

Loma Linda University Clinic
- Student Director of University Clinic
- Received, assessed, and assigned all intakes
- Responsible for the organization of 10 interns
- Hosted an open house to inform the community of our services
- Liaison between interns and Faculty Clinic Director

PROFESSIONAL AFFILIATIONS

Member of American Association of Marriage Family Therapists
Member of California Association of Marriage Family Therapists
Member of National Council on Family Relations

[Signature]