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THE WRITING OF POOR AND WORKING-CLASS WOMEN:  
ISSUES OF PERSONAL POWER, SELF-ESTEEM, AND SOCIAL CLASS

A Dissertation Presented

by

ANN M. DALY

Submitted to the Graduate School of the  
University of Massachusetts in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

May, 1990

School of Education

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THE WRITING OF POOR AND WORKING-CLASS WOMEN:  
ISSUES OF PERSONAL POWER, SELF-ESTEEM, AND SOCIAL CLASS


A Dissertation Presented

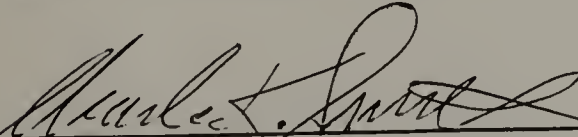
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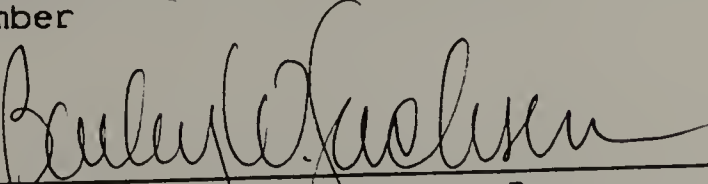
ANN M. DALY

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Marilyn Haring-Hidore, Dean  
School of Education

## DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this work to my family, especially to my mother and father who always encouraged me to do my best and who gave me the opportunity to follow my dreams.

Likewise, I dedicate it to the Sisters of Notre Dame who made it possible for me to pursue my studies and to those sisters, in particular, who inspired me when I was a student and who taught me that being female put no limits on what I might achieve.

Also, I dedicate this work to the women who graciously agreed to take part in this study. They, truly, are examples of how to live life to the full and push its limits.

And finally, I want to dedicate my dissertation to Dr. Kathleen Holland, the chair of my dissertation committee, who empowered me to value my insights and to use my own voice.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would also like to acknowledge the help of Dr. Judith Solsken and Dr. Charles Kay Smith, the members of my committee, who helped me to refine my thoughts and to broaden my knowledge. My thanks also goes to Dr. Barbara Love for all the valuable assistance she gave me. And I thank Rachael Hungerford for being there, encouraging me to keep going.

"He'd (her teacher) play around, and he'd be like, 'Oh, you can do this (write her own play), but you can't do my own work!' And I'd be like, 'Cause that stuff we're doin', I can't do--I can't get into it!' And he'd be like, 'Cause you don't try.' I say, 'I tried plenty of times, but I just can't get into it.'"

"And what did he say to that?"

"He just-he just didn't, you know. It was always unfinished, unfinished conversation."

- Tricia

October, 1988

"So I have thought of writing a book, and I've thought, "Where would you begin?" Then I look into it, and you have to...[write a manuscript]. And you have to type it. And I think, "Oh,...I'll just keep it in my head....But I think it must give someone a great sense of satisfaction. It's something that you have done in print. The same way with you when you get your Ph. D. That's such an important part of your life, I think, because it represents the struggle to get it. And I think that's what a book would be for me - a struggle to get the words out that I want to say and have them all fall in, like a puzzle, all the right way. That's important to do that. I don't think I'll ever get to do that."

- Paula

August, 1988



ABSTRACT

WORKING CLASS WOMEN AND WRITING  
ISSUES OF PERSONAL POWER, SELF-ESTEEM  
AND SOCIAL CLASS

MAY, 1990

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This study was undertaken in order to explore the writing experiences of poor and working-class, non-professional women writers and the issues of power, self-esteem, and social class. The study was focused on this population because their writing experiences had not been investigated.

The study was qualitative, having a naturalistic inquiry perspective and employing in-depth, phenomenological interviewing as a method of data collection. The population for the study were five white and five Black working-class and poor women, ages twenty to seventy-five. The data were collected in a series of three audio-taped interviews. Profiles of each woman were made from the transcripts of their interviews, and these were analyzed for emerging patterns. Issues of trustworthiness were addressed in order to avoid bias.

The women exhibited powerful personal voices when writing journals and letters where they were able to express their emotions as well as get things done for family members or other people in like circumstances. They experienced self-esteem when writing personal letters, fiction, and poetry. When they first tried to share their public voice in school it was an overwhelming experience of powerlessness. However, they did report success with writing on the job, and their self-esteem was generally good when they talked about their advocacy writing. One group, members of an advocacy group for the elderly, was able to make significant changes in health care for the elderly. However, all of the women still had conflicting feelings about their experiences with public voice.

One function of social class was that most of women did not finish school. The wishes and dreams they had for their lives were not realized. The writing of poor and working-class women centered around the events in their daily lives, such as: letters to teachers, politicians, those in the health care system; journaling about events in their daily lives and writing poetry.

Poor and working class women should write on topics connected with their life experiences. In order to overcome problems with writing, they need the

support of each other collectively, both privately and publicly.

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# C H A P T E R I

## THE NATURE OF THE PROBLEM

### Background of the Problem

Throughout history women were labeled as the "second" sex in one way or another. This classification extended to all areas in their lives. Even the area of language, women's language--that of the home, was always much less powerful than the language of the marketplace, men's domain. Women had been forced to live their lives in a cultural, linguistic silence.

With the beginning of the present era of the feminist movement, women began to claim that which was rightfully theirs--their own voice. However, the movement affected mainly middle-class, educated women who had reclaimed their voice by writing fiction, poetry, non-fiction, professional articles, and dissertations.

The focus of this study is one sector of the population which had not been heard from to any great extent--poor and working-class, non-professional women. Besides their voices being seen as unimportant, like all other women, they were denied the use of their authentic, powerful personal voice because in many instances they were not able to find public contexts to share the power of their writing voice. Added to this

was the almost insurmountable problem of lack of upward mobility no matter what skills might be acquired.

Upward intra-class mobility was about as much as they could attain.

Because of the drawbacks which were just mentioned and because there is so little research done on the writing of poor, non-professional, women writers the present research is presented. The data analyzed in this study were not the actual writings of working-class, poor, and non-professional women writers. Rather, what was examined was their sense of power, self-esteem, and social class as they were related to the use of personal voice in their writing. As in any research, the focus was limited and the population very specific.

### Acquisition of Authentic Voice

Very important to written language development, especially in women, was the acquisition of personal voice. Personal voice has been defined as the way women speak about their lives and the words they use to describe them. These words uncover the world in which women function (Gilligan, 1982). Personal voice is the resonance between the words and feelings of the author and the reality in which she lives (Elbow, 1981).

A description of public and private discourse is a prerequisite for the investigation of women's writing

voice, since the discourse of the home has always been connected with women's voice, and the language of the public domain has always been connected with that of men (Elshtain, 1982). The language of the public domain has, until now, been the accepted mode of written expression.

Pateman (1987) further explained that domestic life and domestic voice were private because the natural characteristics of the sexes were different. Women took care of the home and children while men worked in the public arena. She continued by saying that women's relation to nature and the hearth was much more tangible than men's relationship to nature because of childbearing. She further stated that this association between childbearing and nature led to almost every culture's categorizing women as coming from a lower order of existence. Thus, the stage was set for whatever repression that followed. To offset that long-held belief, Pateman suggested that men and women share equally in childrearing and other tasks in the home. She went on to state that developing a general theory of social practice where men and women would be equal was a task that feminists must accomplish. This would mean that men and women would be equally grounded in the relationship of the individual to the collective or personal life to

political life. Thus, private voice and public voice would become the domain of both sexes.

This was not an easy thing to accomplish. Feminists had to struggle to redefine all kinds of linguistic concepts. First the old definitions of public and private had to change. In the new feminist order the personal was also the political. This was so because women's personal lives were impacted by public realities. They were structured by laws about rape, allocation of welfare benefits, marriage rights, and policies on childcare. These "personal" experiences could be handled only by action from the public, political domain, and since women's personal lives were regulated by the public domain, it became evident that there was no separation between public and private in their experience. Thus, women's voices should join men's voices in the public sector (Pateman, 1987). Although the writing style and content of men's and women's writing was different, the importance of their writing voices was the same.

Black, professional, women writers talked about the integrity of Black women's voices. Toni Morrison (1984) talked about the integrity of the writer's voice and saw it as something a woman must exercise in order to stay alive. She felt that there was a difference between writing for a living and writing for life and

that Black women should never compromise the truth of their writing. Nikki Giovanni (1984) saw her writer's voice as revolutionary. For her, poetry and politics went together. She connected her writing voice to an exercise of power. Giovanni felt that Black women writers must fight for the expression of their reality using their own voices.

Russell (1983) felt that Black, non-professional women writers should bring not only their own experience but also the collective experience of every Black woman to bear on their writing. All Black women should have voice through each Black woman who wrote.

Given what has already been said, new definitions of women's voice had to be formulated. Elshtain (1982) stressed the fact that a revolution in language was central to reality and agreed with Haliday (1978) that writing voice was shaped by the culture in which a person lived. Olsen (1978) expressed similar sentiments in Silences saying that women's writing voices were silent in the past because they were connected to a cultural position and a psychological climate shaped by cultural forces which gave voice to men. Gilligan (1982) said that the way women talked about their lives revealed the way they saw the world and how they interacted in it. They became aware that their world was as important as men's and that their

voices should be as powerful as men's. As a result, a language revolution began to legitimize women's voices.

Women re-forged definitions of voice and rejected male-dominated modes of writing (Jacobus, 1979). They re-defined self, art, and society, and broke free from social and literary confinement (Furman, 1985). The essential thing in women's writing was the authority of experience (Schowalter, 1979). Gilligan (1982) reinforced this idea when she stated that women's language derived from the interaction of experience and thought and the resultant voices and dialogues which this interaction caused. Women's voice arose from the ways they listened to themselves and to others and in the stories that they told about their lives. This authority of experience was essential to a new definition of women's writing (Schowalter, 1979).

Gardiner (1980) stretched the concept further saying that women writers used their writing to help themselves with the process of self-identification. Elshtain (1982) agreed and stated that feminist writing happened when women's language burst the bonds of social control and revealed the dynamic of a life that was in the process of being re-born. Gilligan (1982) provided a new insight into the area of feminist voice saying that the words women used revealed the world they saw and in which they interacted.



Having changed the definitions of voice and of women's writing, feminist writers proposed a new definition for power, the most essential of ingredients in any kind of writing. Charlotte Bunch (1980) described this new definition of power, a natural outgrowth of the new definition of women's voice, as the ability to get things done and to see power as it connected with energy and strength. Power was seen as it related to effective interaction, and this new feminist definition negated previous male definitions and modes of wielding power which included manipulation, domination, and control. Bunch cautioned, however, that in promulgating these new definitions of voice and power, women must be honest in their confrontation of male definitions of power and voice because in the process they will have to confront the unloving and unlovely parts of their own personalities.

### Conclusion

Use of personal voice is the most important ingredient in women's writing. Up until the most recent feminist movement women have been denied its use because they used women's language--the language of the home which had been thought to belong in the private domain--in speaking about their life experience. Public discourse which was more powerful was the province of men (Elshtain, 1982). However, feminists

have changed old definitions of voice and the restrictions placed on women's writing. Pateman (1987) said that women's private domain was really public because many issues in women's lives were regulated by civil law. Since women's issues were part of public record, so their voice in talking about them is public voice.

Feminists have re-defined the meaning of power and writing voice and have forged new definitions of self, art, and society (Furman, 1985). Having moved away from literary and social restrictions, the authority of experience (Schowalter, 1979) has been validated along with the vocabulary used to express it. Women now used their writing to help in the process of self-identification and to be free of the bond of social control.

#### Statement of the Problem

Having discussed ideas on women's acquisition of authentic writing voice, a statement of the problem needs to be formulated. The focus of the study is not the writings which poor and working-class, non-professional women writers produced but rather their making connections between their experiences with writing and how these experiences connected with the issues of power, self-esteem, and social class in their

- How do they recognize the presence or absence of self-esteem in their lives?
  - In what writing context does self-esteem appear?
4. How are all of these connected to the issues of social class, especially inter-class and intra-class mobility?
- How do they perceive class mobility?
  - How are inter-class and intra-class mobility apparent?
5. What does writing mean in their lives?
- How do they connect writing with every day events?
  - How do they see it in the context of their lives up to the present?
  - How do they see that the ability of writing will improve their lives?

Reflecting the exploratory nature of qualitative research, these questions were viewed as initial framing questions. As the study progressed, some of these questions assumed more importance than others. As the meanings and actions of the participants within this study were observed, recorded, and analyzed, new questions emerged as part of a typical reactive-interactive naturalistic inquiry research cycle.

lives. It is a study of voice as it developed in the lives of five Black women and five white women.

This study is an effort to investigate the connections between the writing of poor and working-class, non-professional women and the issues of power, self-esteem, and social class. The following questions guided the collection and analysis of the data:

1. What kinds of writing in the past and present, have poor and non-professional, working-class women done?
  - How do they define writing?
  - How and where do they do this writing?
  - For whom is this writing intended?
2. What is the relationship, in the past and present, of working-class women's writing to their feelings of power?
  - How do they describe power?
  - How do they see this power being exercised?
  - In what writing contexts does the exercise of this power usually take place?
3. What is the relationship, in the past and present, of poor and working-class, non-professional women's writing to their feelings of self-esteem?
  - How do they define self-esteem?

### Definition of Terms

The following definitions are appropriate for terms used in this study.

Working-Class refers to persons whose income is not in excess of \$10,000. The designation "poor" refers to welfare families whose children are under eighteen years of age or a single woman who is pregnant. The person may have no more than one-thousand dollars in cash, bank accounts, securities, or the surrender value of a life insurance policy. The person who is eligible must have no income or very little income to support the family (Mandell, 1986).

Power is defined as an energizing and strengthening force rather than one of domination.

Self-Esteem is defined as having strong, positive feelings about oneself.

Voice is defined as the way women talk about their lives through the use of words which reveal the world they see and in which they interact.

### Approach to the Study

This is a naturalistic inquiry study of the relationship between experiences with writing and the issues of personal power, self-esteem, and social class. The focus of the study is the consideration of

these issues as they apply to poor and working-class women. Specifically, the study:

1. Identifies response patterns of poor and working-class women on the issues of power, self-esteem, and social class as they were connected with writing.
2. Compares and contrasts these patterns among the participants.
3. Examines the connections between the research findings and established theory about women's writing experiences as they were connected to the issues of personal power, self-esteem, and social class.
4. Presents the implications for poor and working-class women and writing.

Naturalistic inquiry techniques were used including formal, in-depth interviewing, written fieldnotes, and the collection of writing samples from some of the participants. In using this research method the researcher wanted to understand the experiences of working-class women with writing and the meaning they made of those experiences. This method gave the researcher the chance to get an overview of each woman's life and to set the writing information in its original context. It also gave the interviewer

some insights into the patterns of their lives. The interviews were audiotaped and transcribed.

### Limitations of the Study

The first limitation of the study is the lack of generalizability to all poor and working-class women. This limitation reflects the nature of qualitative research. While some of the conclusions provided useful information about poor and working-class women and their writing, the results on the whole could not be generalized to others since it did not take into consideration all the different groups under the headings of women of color and white women.

A second limitation concerns reliance upon ethnographic interviewing as the source of data collection. Asking people to talk about their writing was a sensitive undertaking since people's view of themselves as writers was often tied up in how they felt about themselves as people in general. Because of this some information was difficult to collect. People don't always feel comfortable talking about their shortcomings, so some of this information was missing from the data.

A third limitation in the present study involves the investigator's frame of reference and theories of the world as well of those of the participants. The researcher was not completely at home in the cultures

of the participants and that resulted in distortions in observations of and reactions to the data and interpretations of it.

### Summary

The present study was designed to research poor and working-class women and their writing in connection with the issues of personal power, self-esteem, and social class. Using naturalistic inquiry techniques, ten women's thoughts about writing and these three issues were examined through a series of in-depth interviews.

The remainder of this dissertation will report on the methodology and findings of the study. A discussion of the related research and theory will be found in Chapter II. Chapter III describes the methods and procedures used to complete the study. Chapter IV compares and contrasts the profile analyses of the ten participants around the issues of personal power, self-esteem, and social class. Chapter V summarizes the findings and then suggests implications for working with poor and working-class, non-professional women on their writing. It also suggests directions for further research needed in this area.



## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

What are the connections between the writing of poor and working class, non-professional women writers and the issues of power, self-esteem, and social class? In order to answer this question a number of areas have to be investigated. Theories about language and language acquisition must be studied. Application of these theories to production of written discourse has to be understood. And a synthesis of this information as it applies to the writing of working-class women especially in the areas of power, self-esteem, and social class needs to be made in order to help answer the research question. And finally, how do these help in the understanding of women's voice--until recently an entity usually missing or misunderstood in studies about language in general.

#### Theoretical Perspectives

There are three major focuses in this investigation of the literature. In recent research on women and writing an overwhelming amount of attention has been given to the issues of voice, audience, and experience. Women writers have brought these issues to the forefront insisting that women's personal voice

should come through in their writing, that it is important to address writing to a real audience that sometimes must begin with the self, and that women's writing, in order to be powerful, should come from personal experience. These three issues are the focus for whatever else is mentioned in this chapter.

Voice: Gilligan (1982) talking about women's voice stated that the main thrust of her research was to look at the way women talked about their lives and to see that the words women used to describe them were of great significance because these words revealed the world that women saw and in which they interacted. Elbow (1981) used the metaphor of the musical note to describe voice. "But we only manage this flowering [personal voice] if we are willing to start off singing our own tiresome pitch for a long time (p. 282)." He saw real voice as a deep resonance in the words with the feelings of the author, . . .the reality of. . .[the] person in. . .[the] words (p. 292)." Donald Murray (1980), talking about voice said that the students will be motivated to write when they hear others in the group begin to write in their own voice.

Audience: The woman writer was often her own audience. She tried to overcome a kind of cultural linguistic silence, but she was apt to begin by talking to herself and to her diary and sometimes to her pets

If there was nothing else available (Belenky, 1986). Elbow (1981) stated that the most important audience to write for was within the author rather than for the teacher. Murray (1980) believed that a good teacher weaned the students from relying on the teacher to be their editor and audience. Shaughnessy (1977) saw a sense of audience as a requirement for the writer. She gave some practical suggestions on how to make the audience real for the basic writer. "This understanding comes about when the writer is able to view. . .[his or her] own work from the researcher's perspective (p. 39)." Shor (1980) also felt that the students themselves should be the audience because what they are doing is trying to re-perceive their own reality through their writing about it.

Writing Out of Experience: Annas (1984) said that women felt powerless and uncomfortable when asked to write in a linear fashion divorced from their personal experience. Ira Shor's (1980) goal was for students to deconstruct a very common theme in their life experience so that they could understand its implications for and influence on their lives. Elbow (1973) advocated free writing as a kind of pre-writing and compared it to speaking. "But think. . .about the occasions when you spoke well. Seldom is it because you first got the beginning just right. Usually it is

a matter of halting or even garbled beginning, but you kept going and your speech finally became coherent and even powerful (p, 6)." Murray (1980) felt that students wrote best from their personal experience and suggested that the teacher ". . .listen to the student and find out how the . . .[student] really sees the world and how capable. . .[he or she] is of using language, so that the teacher might help the student find. . .[his or her] own style as well as. . .[his or her] own subject matter (p. 160)."

There are seven areas which will be discussed in this chapter. Language and Thought: Acquiring Voice will include theories of language acquisition by Vygotsky, Piaget, and Bruner. Language and Society: Addressing an Audience will discuss the adult linguistic systems of Moffett, Britton, and Halliday. Language and Experience: Writing Powerfully will focus on the writing pedagogues of Smith, Graves, Shaughnessy, Shor, Freire, and Murray. This chapter will conclude with a discussion of power, self-esteem, and social class in women's language and writing, and an explanation of how the areas of voice, audience and experience dominate these three areas as well. These three issues will be explored in the writings of Annas, Gilligan, Elshtain, Furman, Gilbert and Gubar, Bunch, Jacobus, Olsen and others.

Language and Thought: Acquiring Voice  
The Theories of Vygotsky, Piaget, and Bruner

Introduction

Language acquisition is, in a very real sense, the development of voice. It is important to understand the more traditional writing about language acquisition and development, but this needs to be pushed further in order to understand women's writing. Research specifically on women's experiences with writing looks, especially, at voice, audience, and experience from an entirely new perspective--that of the woman writer. The development of women's voice is especially important and one of the major themes of this research. When women use their authentic voice they are using their own vocabulary to talk about their own lives. The words which she uses resonate with the feelings of the woman-author.

The following theorists have been cited in this research because they explain language acquisition as that of acquiring voice. Vygotsky talked about the pre-history of written language where children told stories while they manipulated objects. They literally used their voice to construct stories, and their language from the age of two years had two thrusts, social language and cognitive thought.

Piaget talked about children's language learning in terms of using personal voice when he described his

theory of language acquisition as the child needing social stimuli in order for language to surface in the form of dialogue or voice. When he described the four stages of language development he was talking about this acquisition of voice.

Bruner described the acquisition of spoken language as a tool to share thoughts, that is, voice. He went on to say that language was used to make intentions and thoughts known to others--to give thoughts voice.

### Vygotsky

In his theory of language development, Vygotsky (1978) saw the mind as a set of capabilities distinct, to some extent, from each other. He characterized learning as being more than the acquisition of the ability to think. It was the development of many specialized abilities for thinking about a variety of things. Learning did not change the ability to focus attention, but rather developed various abilities to focus on a variety of things. Improvement in one area effected the development of another if they shared common elements.

Vygotsky's theory included a social element, his idea of the Zone of Proximal Development. Learning that was in advance of actual mastery took place in this Zone of Proximal Development. The level of this

potential development was determined by the ability to solve problems under the guidance of an adult or more capable peers. He concluded that the developmental process was at a slower rate than the learning process, and named this lag time the Zone of Proximal Development. Vygotsky also emphasized that human learning was of a social nature and stressed that children's language from age two on developed to such an extent that two thrusts became evident, one outward--social language and one inward--cognitive thought.

His theory of writing development began with a pre-history of written language. He stated that writing development began in play situations when children used objects and gestures as substitutions for characters and places as they told a story. (ex. A pencil substituted for a nursemaid.) They then went on to use objects that indicated in a more literal way the meaning that the child put on them. For instance, the dark cover of a book became forest because a forest was dark. This telling of stories through using objects and gestures, first-order symbolism, developed further as the child used drawings to tell a story. The use of drawings to tell a story, second-order symbolism, was the first use of written symbols to communicate. Children discovered that they could draw not only

things but also speech. This discovery readied the child for the natural transition to written language.

### Piaget

Piaget (Hetherington and Parke, 1979) looked at children's learning as an interaction between the children and the environment. They adapted to and interpreted objects and events in the world around them in an egocentric way; they were concerned with the world as they interacted with it. Piaget posited that children had cognitive structures called schemata which underlay patterns of behavior. They were the processes or ways of organizing and responding to experiences. Piaget believed that thought existed within the child from the beginning, and needed social stimuli throughout childhood in order to surface in the form of dialogue. He also believed that learning occurred as a function of total development rather than being an element which explains development.

Piaget maintained that the child's journey from egocentric thought through to socialized speech occurred between the years from birth to 9 - 11 years old. He posited four stages of development in children that enabled them to attain the goal: the sensorimotor, preoperational, concrete operational, and formal operational periods. Children's thought processes shifted with age and experience from mental



activities based on overt behavior to symbolically represented schemata. The preoperational stage (Ginsburg and Opper, 1969) had to do with representing things using visual images, abbreviated forms of movement, sounds, or imitation. However, the symbol was personal and only represented what it stood for in the child's experience. As a result, the child's symbol might not communicate what it referred to. Thus, the child assimilated the word into his personal schema which was already available. This internal assimilation provided the child with symbols and words which she endowed with meaning. During this period the child used words which were first related to ongoing actions and desires, and then used language to refer to absent things or events.

Symbolic play (Ginsberg and Opper, 1969) occurred when children used a concrete object to stand for something else. In it children, aware of the playful nature of their acts, had, nevertheless, achieved a primitive comprehension of the nature of symbols by using significant intellectual activity. They accepted the fact that words stood for things without any apparent justification. They did this using the process of accommodation (Hetherington and Parke, 1979), a complementary process to that of assimilation. Through accommodation the organism adjusted to environmental

demands. As part of this process children's spontaneous reactions (as mentioned above) were compressed into the social mold of their culture. The word that had been assimilated into the child's vocabulary with the meaning that the child had put on it was now given the meaning that was accepted in the general vocabulary spoken in the environment. Symbolic play helped children to adjust to this new reality. They could assimilate the external world into their own desires and needs with scarcely any accommodation on their part.

Describing intellectual growth in children from four to eleven years Piaget (Ginsberg and Opper, 1969) posited several varieties of non-communicative and communicative language. He described three types of non-communicative, egocentric speech: repetition-- where children mimic what they have heard, monologue-- where children talk out loud although they are alone, and collective monologue--where, in the presence of other children, one of them engaged in a soliloquy to which no one paid attention because of its egocentric nature. There was a decline in the use of egocentric speech as children got older, and socialized speech gradually evolved through various attempts towards dialogue: adapted information presented to other children; criticisms; commands; requests; threats;

questions; and answers. Piaget did not share Vygotsky's interactional theory of language development, nor did he agree with Bruner's interactional/negotiation theory of language acquisition.

### Bruner

However, Bruner (1978) shared with Vygotsky the socio-cultural interactional theory of language acquisition and development. He talked about language acquisition as being the tool which every human developed in order to share thoughts. It was a problem-solving mechanism which was used to make intentions known to others, what thoughts were in the conscious mind, what one wanted done, and how one wished to relate to others. Humans developed these skills, Bruner said, through interaction with the significant care-giver.

The first lessons in language acquisition came from naming games played by the mother with the child. At this point most of the labels referred to whole objects, not to their features. The mother, then, gave cues to the child based on her knowledge of the child's changing ability to acquire language.

Developmentally, the second major function of speech was requesting something from another person. Bruner broke requests down into three types: obtaining

nearby visible objects, getting support for an action that was already in progress, and persuading mother to share some activity or experience. Language acquisition, for Bruner, always involved dialogue. Bruner's position was half-way between the nativist theory of Chomsky and the reinforcement theory of the behaviorists.

### Conclusion

In looking at Vygotsky, Piaget, and Bruner it was evident that they talked about language acquisition in terms of voice--literally. Both Vygotsky and Bruner had much in common while Piaget stood alone in his theories about language acquisition. Both Vygotsky and Bruner said that language acquisition, the acquisition of personal voice took place in a direct interactional way with other people. Bruner said that language acquisition took place in a social cultural manner with negotiation between mother and child and that this negotiation provided a scaffolding which the child used as she ventured into language use more and more by herself. He believed that language was learned through use in this dyad of practice and play, imitation, routines, and sequences.

Vygotsky maintained that children acquired language through interaction in the family, with peers, and at school. He believed that language use could

develop before cognitive maturation because children were able to use more complex language interactions if they did so in the presence of a more experienced peer or adult. He called this interactive situation the Zone of Proximal Development. He also posited that at the age of two years language divided into social language and cognitive thought. He believed that children used language as a symbolic tool in social talk and speech for themselves--personal voice. He also said that language learning leads development.

Piaget, on the other hand, put forward the theory of egocentrism. He said that language acquisition--acquisition of personal voice--took place as a reaction between the children's thoughts and external stimuli activating an innate ability which enabled children to produce egocentric speech. Children's language development took place in four invariant stages through which they traveled at their own pace. The thinking processes developed through horizontal elaboration rather than acceleration. Children's language developed through assimilation, accommodation, and equilibration as they acted on the environment. Their thinking progressed from egocentric to social, concrete to abstract, general to specific. Piaget believed that language development--the acquisition of voice--explained learning rather than language leading

development (Vygotsky) or development occurring through use (Bruner).

Language and Society: Addressing an Audience  
The Theories of Moffett, Britton, and Halliday

Audience has been described as talking to the self, since the most important audience is that which is within, and talking to others. For most women the only audience has been that which was within themselves, and it is only recently that women have addressed an audience outside themselves and even more recently that women have used authentic voice in doing so. The next group of theorists Moffett, Britton, and Halliday, talked about the importance of audience and the relationship of written expression to it. Moffett, describing his universe of discourse talked about it as the relationship between the speaker and the audience. He described discourse as a series of progressions in time from the drama of what is happening, to the narration of what happened, to the exposition of what happens, to the argumentation of what will or may happen. All of these theories demand audience as part of their definition and express the relationship between the speaker and her audience in degrees of distance, from the I-thou to the I-it.

Britton described language functions in terms of the relationship of the speaker to an audience. In the

transactional mode the speaker's intent is to give and seek information or to change the listener's behavior, opinion, or attitude. In the poetic mode the writer joins the audience in being able to be part of the evaluative process. The expressive mode combines elements of the transactional and poetic modes.

Halliday described language as being a function of the social structure. Halliday's defined language as an attempt to have an effect upon the audience--an attempt to impose a point of view on another person. He described ideational language as taking in experiences, reducing them to a number of manageable classes of phenomena, and putting them in proper relationship to one another. It was after this that the interpersonal role of language could take place - that area where audience was so important. He also described situational elements of the language transaction in terms of an interactive speaker and audience, tenor--the set of role relationships among the relevant participants, and mode--the medium, spoken or written, which is used to communicate thought to another.

### Moffett

Written language made thought visible, and language, allowed us to record thought and experience from a multitude of angles getting as close to or as

far from them as we wished. James Moffett (1983) talked about language across the curriculum as the universe of discourse. He treated the issues of time and space as they impinged upon written language. He chose to use the terminology of Martin Buber describing the levels or degrees of abstraction from the "I - thou" rhetorical relation to the to the "I - it" referential relation in terms of time. His theory of language consisted of four categories measured by increasing distance between speaker and subject, first to third persons according to time.

The first category of writing was that of recording: the drama of what is happening. He included in this interior dialogue and vocal dialogue. The genre that he used for this kind of writing was that of drama as it was worked out in plays. The next category was reporting: the narrative of what happened. Included in this category were: correspondence, personal journal, autobiography, and memoir. This was the genre of narrative and included all fiction. Abstraction was pushed even further in the third category, generalizing: the exposition of what happens. The focus was now on the I-it relation. Included in this category were biography, chronicle, and history. The last of the abstractive categories was theorizing: the argumentation of what may happen.



Included in this category were science and metaphysics. Exposition and argumentation were included in the genre of the essay. These kinds of discourse were also labeled reflection, conversation, correspondence, and publication. Poetry as a genre was separate from these classifications although it could occur in all categories.

### Britton

Britton's (1971) schematic account of language functions was more elaborate than Moffett's. His levels of abstraction were measured in terms of participation in the linguistic transaction, and his two general categories were those of participant and spectator. Under these headings were the subcategories of transactional, expressive, and poetic languages.

Britton's (1971) participant operated in the actual world of what was being done. There were two kinds of communication taking place in the category of participant--informative, which covered giving and seeking information and conative--where the speaker's intention was to change the listener's behavior, opinion, or attitudes. Britton's spectator was ". . . freed of a participant's need to act. A spectator is able to attend more fully and more exclusively to the evaluative process (pp. 247-248)." Here the demands of spectator achieved their fullest satisfaction.

Like any good bridge builder, Britton's (1971) second category was a little more fluid; the expressive category moved in and out of the transactional and poetic, participant and spectator. In transactional language the demands of the participant were at a maximum. The utterance was an immediate means to an end, its organization dictated by the desire to achieve that end efficiently. Attention to the forms of language was incidental to understanding. The speaker (writer) was concerned in the utterance to connect with the listener's relevant knowledge. The listener was at liberty to contextualize what he [she] found relevant.

In poetic language the utterance was an immediate end in itself. The arrangement was the construct, and the way the items were disposed was an inseparable part of the meaning of the utterance. Attention to the form of language was an essential part of a listener's response. The speaker (writer) created relations internal to the utterance and achieved a unity, a construct discrete from actuality. The convention holding between speaker and listener called for global contextualization.

Expressive speech was the principal means of exchanging opinions, attitudes, and beliefs in face-to-face situations. It was used to rehearse

growing points of formulation and analyses of experience. It presented a speaker's view of things and self. In expressive speech we got to know each other by offering our unique identity, offering and accepting what was common and what differentiated us. It was the language of the journal, diary, autobiography, letters; of the self, family, and culture--like Moffett's reporting and generalizing.

### Halliday

While Britton explained the language transaction as a series of relationships between the language user and the intent of the language use, and Moffett described language use in terms of the relationship between the language user and her subject, Halliday (1978) looked at language as it related to social structure and the functional organization of the semantic system--an attempt to have an effect upon the audience. The semantic components of his adult linguistic system were ideational, interpersonal, and textual language. These were similar to Britton's transactional, expressive, and poetic. Ideational language interpreted our experiences, and reduced the indefinitely varied phenomena of the world around us and inside us to a manageable number of classes of phenomena: types of processes, events and actions, and classes of objects. It was activated by the field,

the social action in which the text was embedded, and determined the range of meaning as content.

Interpersonal language was language that expressed our participation in the speech event and our attempt to impose on others our wishes, feelings, attitudes and judgments. It was activated by tenor, the set of role relationships among the relevant participants, and determined the range of meaning as participation, language in the intruder function--interpersonal. The textual component of language had to

. . .do all these things simultaneously, in a way which relates what is being said to the context in which it is being said, both to what has been said before and to the 'context of situation'; in other words it has to be capable of being organized as relevant discourse, not just as words and sentences in a grammar-book or dictionary (p. 22).

The textual system was activated by the mode, the channel or wavelength selected "which is essentially the function that is assigned to language in the total structure of the situation." (p. 110) It determined "the range of meaning as texture, language in its relevance to the environment." (p. 117) Halliday stated that language was a social semiotic, that writing voice was shaped by culture and, in turn, was a marker of social class.

## Conclusion

James Moffett's (1968) description of language as a universe of discourse began with a consideration of interior dialogue (egocentric speech) and vocal dialogue (socialized speech). His approach to the symbol system of language was non-analytical. For example, he did not do an exhaustive study about thought. He believed that language should be used, not analyzed, and that the starting point of teaching discourse was the recording of the drama of what is happening. He describes between writer and audience in terms of increasing distance across time, from the I - thou to the I - it relationship.

James Britton's (1971) schematic account of language functions looked at language in terms of the individual's relationship to language from the concrete experience of the participant to the abstract analysis of the spectator. He broke language into three types: transactional, expressive, and poetic.

M.A.K. Halliday (1978) describing his adult linguistic system talked about the relationship of language to social structure. He spoke of the semantic components of language; the ideational, logical, and interpersonal and matched them to language's situational elements of field--the social action in which the text was embedded, tenor--the set of role

relationships among the relevant participants, and mode--the channel or wavelength selected.

Each of these three theorists started with the very concrete and moved to more abstract language. Moffett (1983) went from recording--the drama of what is happening, to theorizing--the argumentation of what will or may happen. Britton (1971) proceeded from being participant to being spectator. And Halliday (1978) moved from the ideational (experience) to the textual.

#### Language and Experience: Writing Powerfully

Women write best when they write from their own experience using their personal voice. For years the only acceptable public voice was the voice of men (Elshtain, 1982). Women authors adopted men's names in order to be published. For example, Mary Ann Evans used the pen name of George Eliot. The personal, experiential writing voice of women was dismissed as trivial (Elshtain, 1982). Even in school the assigned topic, the stilted language, and the predictability of structure required for "successful" writing lacked the warmth, spontaneity, and creativity of women's authentic voice, a requirement for powerful discourse (Elbow, 1981).

Moffett, Britton, and Halliday talked about language as a series of relationships between user and intent of language use, between the user and her subject, between social structure and the organization of the language system, between concrete experience and abstract analysis. Writing pedagogy should be informed by this theoretical research and the following section focuses on the pedagogical approaches of Frank Smith, Donald Graves, Donald Murray, and Ira Shor. These practitioners focussed on writing as process rather than writing as product, and they all emphasized the importance of writing from personal experience with powerful voices.

Smith (1979) stated, "There is no reason why fluency in writing should not develop concurrently with fluency in other aspects of language. They have the same roots; the urge to make sense of the world and of oneself (p. 124)." Smith went on to say that the individual's sense of voice, authority, and ability to communicate were very important and that writing contributed to a person's development, no matter what that person's background or talents. He also believed that "writing contributes to intelligence. The work of psycholinguists and cognitive psychologists shows that writing is a highly complex act that demands the analysis and synthesis of many levels of thinking." (p.

30) He looked at the genesis of language and thought and traced their development starting with the brain which, he said, contained a working theory of the world. His many ideas about semantics and his theories about language and meaning, especially deep structure and surface structure will be discussed below.

Smith (1982) structured language in terms of thought and meaning. He felt that language was a symbol system itself having no meaning, just as thought had to be made manifest by language. The content of the brain was coherent, organized, and systematic and had within it a working model of the world where past present and future could not be separated. He said that thought was non-verbal, and that it proceeded in and through the theory of the world that was in the brain. Language expressed thought and its skills were rooted in the way we understood the world.

Writing drew on all these cognitive functions and enabled us to know what we think and know. We could not observe ourselves thinking, but we could observe the products of thought which were expressed through writing. We learned by exploring the potential of thought which in turn became our inner language. "Action and imagination gain access to implicit theory of the world concealed within the brain"(p. 34), and writing allowed the transfer of imagination to paper.



Language did not exist in thought, and thought was beyond language. What Smith was saying was that writing helped us to overcome these limits of time and space. It helped us to go from the abstract of thought to the concrete of written language so that ideas, the products of thought, could be communicated. Smith took us from the abstract of thought made manifest through language to the advent of the written text. Moffett, Britton, and Halliday took that written text and continued to analyze it according to degrees of abstraction from the participant.

Graves (1978) suggested that "people do not see themselves as writers because they believe that they have nothing to say that is of value or interest to others." (p. 30) He made the case for more attention being given to the teaching of writing saying that

. . . in the classroom learners too often are viewed as receivers not senders. A far greater premium is placed on students' ability to read and listen than on their ability to speak and write. In fact, writing is seldom encouraged and sometimes not permitted, from grade one through the university. Yet, when students cannot write, they are robbed not only of a valuable tool but of an important means of developing thinking and reading skills as well. (p. 30)

Writing should be taught with students and their writing process at the center of the pedagogy. If a teacher wanted students to write well, the teacher must have listened to what students said about their world

and their perceptions of themselves as writers so that they could find their own style and subject matter (Murray, 1980).

Each student must be allowed to fail and try and fail and try again as [he or she]. . . practices what [he or she]. . . has come to understand is the normal process of the writer. Each writer must face the lonely discipline of the empty page, the unsuccessful draft and the unknowing reader. (p. 103).

Besides studying the work of Smith and Graves, the work of Ira Shor will be examined. He has similar things to say about how good writing comes from choosing topics from one's personal experience.

"The ordinary experience of life--school, work, family--not only fill time, but they also shape language, behavior and imagination" (Shor, 1980, p. 93). This quotation was taken from a powerful text entitled Critical Thinking and Every Day Life by Ira Shor. Heavily influenced by Paulo Freire, Ira Shor combined his experiences teaching working-class students with Freire's pedagogy. Freire stressed production of texts which will lead to action.

Shor's (1980) experience was with working-class students in the community college setting, most of whom worked full-time while attending classes. Freire's (1973) work was with the peasants in the northeast of Brazil, helping them with literacy and, as a result, encouraging them to speak up to others and to local and

state government to claim what was rightfully theirs. Shor's method which applied Freire's methods to the teaching of marginal working-class citizens of a First World country made a unique contribution to alternative ways of teaching to an increasingly alienated student population.

One of the most difficult things to do when teaching writing is to provide topics for students to write on. The imposition of topics Freire (1973) would call the 'banking concept of education' with the teacher controlling the process. Rather, he said, the idea must come from the person's looking at one aspect of reality. "The starting point for organizing the program content of education or political action must be the present, existential, concrete situation, reflecting the aspirations of the people" (p. 85). Shor (1980) used Freire's idea of generative themes and pushed it a step further. He had the problem of dealing with students being turned off by their past educational experiences. He had to undo the damage of the "banking concept" of education where students were given a topic on which to write. Instead, his goal was to get the students to deconstruct a very common theme in their life experience so that they could understand its implications for and influence on their lives. In other words, they chose to write about their reality.

"As a basic conceptual habit of mind, the task of abstracting features of an experience around an organizing principle initiates the class into critical reflection on an ordinary subject" (p. 136). Shor used as an example the theme of "work" since it was one of the experiences that all his working-class students had in common. He asked them to list the worst jobs they had ever held. They shared the descriptions of these jobs and then picked out what they considered the two worst jobs mentioned. This was the beginning of that class's generative theme centering around the difficulties associated with work. Shor then asked the students what these two jobs had in common, and where they differed. (p.136)

"The principles underlying the lists are what provoke the development of critical thinking (Shor, 1980, p. 136). Freire (1973) described what Shor has done as follows: ". . .Revolutionary leaders. . .go to the people. . .In order to come to know through dialogue with them both their objective situation and their awareness of that situation. . ." (p. 84). Freire called the themes generative because within each theme was the capacity to contain many other themes connected with the original idea.

After the students have looked at the ideas contained in the original deconstructing of the theme of "work," they put the ideas into categories. Shor (1980) described it in this way: "We structure a mass of details into categories of meaning. The mind practices re-perceiving reality into meaningful shapes" (p. 137). Shor then asked the class to look at the aspects of a job. This led to even more concrete ideas. The students abstracted at a higher level and came up with a new list of topics associated with work: low pay, no power to make decisions, little responsibility, routine and repetitious tasks, no creativity or independence, etc" (p. 138).

Freire (1973) would describe what Shor had done as follows:

As we attempt to analyze dialogue as a human phenomenon, we discover something which is the essence of dialogue itself: the word. But the word is more than just an instrument which makes dialogue possible; accordingly we must seek its constitutive elements. Within the word we find two dimensions, reflection and action, in such radical interaction that if one is sacrificed--even in part--the other immediately suffers. There is no true word that is not at the same time a praxis. Thus, to speak (or write) a true word is to transform the world (p. 25).

In conclusion, Smith, Graves, Murray, and Shor would all agree that writing from one's own experience produces powerful writing. Smith would say that writing contributes to personal development and helps

to overcome limits of time and space. Graves, Murray, and Shor stress the importance of personal experience as the focus of writing which then produces powerful writers. And in order to do this women must write from personal experiences since these form the matrix out of which the power of their voice is manifest.

### Power and Self-Esteem in Women's Voice and Writing

As was stated in the introduction of this chapter, a sense of personal power and self-esteem are necessary to get along in any setting. However, historically speaking this had not happened for women. The domestic voice of women and the public voice of men were the result of long-standing sex-role socialization. It was only recently that women reported a change in how they saw themselves in relation to the issues of power and self-esteem as they related to their writing. Women now write using their own voices to write about their own experiences. In addition, women re-defined power stating that it was not domination but empowerment. However, in one area women still experienced conflict. This conflict existed between serious work outside the home and the traditional female role of wife, mother, and homemaker.

Studies by and about professional women writers are included in this section. These particular studies

were chosen because, by and large, they were the only studies available. They represent significant insights into women's language and writing, and they are used as background material for the research findings of this study. Studies of non-professional women writers, not as plentiful, were also included in this section. It is hoped that the present study of poor and working-class, non-professional women and their writing as it is connected to the issues of power, self-esteem, and social class will add to the growing body of literature on the subject of writing and non-professional women.

#### Language and Power: New Definitions of Women's Voice

In order to discuss power and its relationship to women's writing, two concepts needed to be articulated--a new definition of women's writing and a feminist definition of power. These definitions frame what is said in this section about power. Elbow (1981) felt that to achieve a full flowering of personal voice people had to first start by using what voice they had. It was after this that they could develop a more personalized writing voice. Jean Bethke Elshtain (1982) offered this new definition of feminist writing and maintained that it took place when women's language ". . .bursts the bonds of social control and, unexpectedly offers intimations of a life

still-in-becoming." (p. 607) Gilligan (1982) stated that the words which women writers used revealed the world that women saw and in which they interacted. The following excerpt from Marge Piercy's "The Token Woman" (1976) will serve as an example of language which ". . . bursts the bonds of social control." In talking about the token woman she stated,

Your Department stores order her from a  
taxidermist's  
catalog  
and she comes luxuriously stuffed with goosedown  
able to double as sleeping  
or punching bag (p. 2260).

Furman (1985) quoted Gilbert and Gubar (1979) who stated that women's writing was coherent because they had a common, female impulse to struggle free from social and literary confinement through strategic redefinitions of self, art, and society (p. 62). She went on to state, "Woman authors are individuals who react in a collective, sisterly manner to a common social reality. This explains the recurrence of topics, themes, images, and metaphors in the literary works of women." (p. 62) Charlotte Bunch (1980) described a feminist definition of power as ". . . the ability to act, to get something done--and to see power associated with energy, strength, and effective interaction rather than manipulation, domination, and control." (p.47) The new definition of power, said



Gilligan, (1982) was contrasted with women's more traditional reticence about using their own voice when speaking publicly given the reality of their powerlessness and the politics of the relations between the sexes.

### Historical Roots of Women's Voice

This reticence on the part of women to use their authentic voice had strong historical roots. Jean Bethke Elshtain (1982) in her work on men's and women's language asked the following questions at the beginning of her consideration of the history of men's and women's language.

What sort of language, public and private, do feminists embrace as alternatives to previous social and personal definitions of women? How do feminists redescribe social reality and experience in order to reflect on what makes this reality and experience what it currently is, whether what is must be, or whether dramatic alterations are either possible or desirable? And what models for emancipatory speech are available (p. 605)?

Since the time of Plato the phenomena of public and private discourse have been acknowledged. Public discussion belonged to the reality outside of the home, while private discourse was used in the household. Needless to say, public discourse belonged to men and affairs of importance while private discourse belonged in the home and is the province of women (Elshtain, 1982).

She went on to say that people in power have the opportunity to force their perception of social reality on people, but it did not necessarily follow that language had to serve only those who dominated (Elshtain, 1982). "If Rowbotham's (Sheila Rowbotham in Women's Consciousness, Man's World) claims were true, it would follow that once the oppressed gained power they, too, would deploy language as a tool of domination." (pp. 614-615)

Pateman (1987) re-defined these areas of public and private stating that there was no separation between men and women and their spheres of influence since women's issues were part of public debate and were regulated by and in the public domain. For example, the private areas concerning childcare, marriage, allocation of welfare funds, and laws about rape were part of the public domain because they were regulated by public law and policy. As a result, women's voices belonged in the public sector along with men's.

Women saw themselves as agents for change, not perpetrators of domination. Jacobus (1979) saw the difference of women's discourse from men's not as something which was opposite (like male versus female) but redefined it as multiplicity, joyousness and heterogeneity. "Writing. . . becomes the site both of

challenge and otherness rather than. . . simply yielding to the themes and representations of female oppression." (p. 21) Since language was politically powerful and its users gained from the politics of power, it followed that women who sought to operate in an empowering way rather than a powerful way would have to establish their own idea of feminist language (Elshtain, 1982). It would be a language that was politically strong without being politically overpowering. In order to do this the meanings of a male-dominated language must change.

When Rowbotham enjoins women to 'change the meaning of words,' or calls for revolutionary movements to 'break the hold of the dominant group over theory,' she proffers an important insight. But she fails to stress that words are not changed de novo by single persons or groups. Meanings evolve slowly as changing social practices, relations and institutions are characterized in new ways. Over time this helps to give rise to an altered reality, for language evolution is central to reality (Elshtain, 1982, p.161).

How, then, did women use language differently from men? In the past, the pattern of their writing voice had been shaped, as Halliday (1978) said, by the culture in which they lived. Since women, through the women's movement, have become more aware that a male-dominated culture has determined the way they write, they have realized that their real voice was very different from that of men's. Jacobus (1979) asked,

Can women adapt traditionally male-dominated modes of writing and analysis to the articulation of female oppression and desire? Or should we rather reject tools that may simply re-inscribe our marginality and deny the specificity of our experience, instead of forging others of our own?--reverting, perhaps to the traditionally feminine in order to re-validate its forms (formlessness?) and preoccupations--rediscovering subjectivity, the language of feelings; ourselves (p. 14).

Gilligan maintained that women's language resulted from the interaction of experience and thought and from the different voices and dialogues which resulted from this interaction. She went on to say that "the way people talk about their lives is of significance, that the language they use and connections they make reveal the world that they see and in which they act (p. 2)."

Tillie Olsen captured this in Tell Me a Riddle (1961). She talked about a couple whose only need to share language centered around family life. The woman was tired out by the self-denial she was forced to endure because of childrearing, and now that the children were gone, she felt that there was nothing that she shared with her husband. They inhabited different worlds, and there was no need to talk. Women had this sense of not being able to speak which was tied up with their cultural position as well as with the psychological climate which was shaped by cultural forces.

The domestic voice of women and the public voice of men were the results of sex-role socialization. Mulford (1983) asserted that the experience of that sex (male) could still pass for the experience of the entire human population was unbelievable. She said that as a Marxist feminist her work was to speak about the differences. Carol Gilligan (1982) stated that men and women had different social and maturational goals. Men's was separation, while women's socialization and maturity were defined in terms of attachment. Since there were these differences in men's and women's experiences and socialization, they influenced men's and women's language, and we saw a more complex picture of human life which highlighted the truth of separation and attachment in the lives of men and women and recognized how these truths were carried further by different modes of language and thought.

In the past, women communicated in a very circumscribed arena, the home. However, they now saw language as a way to change people's perceptions of women. They themselves were agents of change, and used language in an unabashedly political way to accomplish their ends.

### Women's Ways of Writing

Women were now able to use their own voices to talk about their own experiences and feeling. Gambill (1983) pointed to the fact that women "were writers who were existing within patriarchal institutions, and the primary impulse came out of. . .[their] own needs." (p. 201) Schowalter (1979) believed that the "authority of experience in the writing of women was absolutely essential, but it should not be confused with the irrational. Kaplan (1983) continued saying that if the romantic definition of the creative process were to be reworked for the present time "full subjectivity" would become a political goal for feminism.

In an article entitled "Writing as Women" Pam Annas (1984) discussed the writing of her working-class, Black and third world students. These women felt powerless and uncomfortable when they were asked to write in a linear fashion divorced from their personal experience. Annas tried to help them overcome their alienation by following a course of study which assigned two types of writing, response and research. "I wanted the writers in my class to. . .understand that what they most wanted to say is probably what they

would say most powerfully." ( p. 38) In her definition of women's writing Annas assumed that "a writer must first ground herself in her own complex reality, and then write from that center." (p. 34) She believed that women's writing was not so much defined as different from men's writing as it was in the individual woman's way of writing. She must take the risk of using her own voice to talk about her own experiences.

Russell (1983) said, "Political education for Black women in America began with the memory of our 400 years of enslavement, diaspora, forced labor, beatings, bombings, lynchings, and rape." (p. 272) She went on to speak about the role of the teacher bringing the collective Black experience to bear on the writing of each individual Black woman saying the teacher must make the writing process conscious. She must "try to help them generalize from the specifics [of their experience]. Raise issues of who and what they continually have to bump up against on the life-road they've planned for themselves." (p. 273)

Likewise, Maitland (1983) expanded the concept of writing as a means of telling a story. She described

an awakening that many feminist writers encounter. The feminist writer sees men as the enemy, but as she writes about women and writes honestly out of her own experience she confronts the conniving, unloving, and unlovely things that she does herself. And this information cannot be denied.

The following lines from Anne Sexton's "In Celebration of My Uterus" (1969) are a good example of writing anchored in a woman's personal experience.

Everyone in me is a bird.  
 I am beating all my wings.  
 They wanted to cut you out  
 but they will not.  
 They said you were unmeasurably empty  
 But you are not.  
 They said you were sick unto dying  
 But they were wrong.  
 You are singing like a school girl.  
 You are not torn.

Sweet weight,  
 In celebration of the woman I am  
 and of the soul of the woman I am  
 and of the central creature and its delight  
 I sing for you. I dare to live.  
 Hello, spirit. Hello, cup.  
 Fasten, cover. Cover that does contain.  
 Hello to the soil of the fields.  
 Welcome, roots (p. 1998).

Judith Gardiner (1980) agreed with Annas, and said that "the woman writer uses her text. . . as a part of a continuing process involving her own self-identification." (p.187)



Much has been said about women's use of language in terms of writing with their own voice, asserting their own authority, respecting and reflecting upon their own life experience, validating and taking this experience seriously, writing from their own core. Gilligan (1982) described women's use of language as "the interaction of experience and thought, in different voices and dialogues to which they give rise, in the ways we listen to ourselves and to others, in the stories we tell about our lives." (p.2) Gambill (1983) talked about the co-optation of language as it served the women's movement. The language that developed with the women's movement was a functional language. For example "support" meant that women needed

. . .to hold ourselves up by sharing our strength. Support becomes a way of challenging and helping us move forward, not simply holding hands so that we can remain at rest and feel comfortable in that. Gilligan continues, "In the different voice of women lies the truth of an ethic of care and the tie between relationship and responsibility (p.173).

Women gradually tried to overcome this cultural and linguistic silence and wrote with their own voice. They were apt to begin by talking to themselves and to

their diaries, and sometimes to pets if there was nothing else available (Belenky et al., 1986). Gambill (1983) talking about her experience in a women's writing center described what happened when women began to talk to each other about their experiences.

I'm amazed sometimes when I'm in the classroom after the students have given their first public reading, and I'm looking at a room filled with changed women. They have taken some truth from themselves, have drawn from the experiences of their lives in a very hard and difficult way, and have then chosen to speak to a group of women. . . We need to recognize that we do have power and we need not be fearful of each other's power (p. 207).

Voice was more than a literary description of point of view. It applied, literally, to many aspects of women's experience and development. In describing their lives women talked about voice and silence as they had to do with sense of mind, self-esteem, and feelings of isolation from or connection to others (Belenky et al. 1986).

Gilligan (1982) expanded on the idea of the different voice of women by concluding that men and women used the same words but that they had different meanings. She explained that men and women used the same language but had different definitions for the

words that talk about their experiences of self and social relationships. Because they shared an overlapping moral vocabulary they could be easily mistranslated and could make communication difficult, limiting the potential for care and cooperation in relationships.

By using their own voices to talk about their own experiences, women created a distinct woman's way of writing. They used their text as a way of exploring their self-identification and as means to overcome cultural and linguistic silence.

Language and Self-Esteem:  
Writing for an Audience

Self-esteem or the lack of it was a burning feminist issue. It colored how a woman saw herself, what she thought that she could accomplish, and how she related to others. Was she a creature condemned to silence, or was there a voice that she could use to address the universe? Self-esteem is the result, even in the best of all personal worlds, of evaluating done by the private audience (self) and the public audience (others). The woman writer was often her own audience, and because of this had to give herself a sense of self-esteem about her writing (Belenky, 1986). Elbow

(1981) said that the most important audience to write for was self. Shaughnessy (1977) said that a really good writer had a good sense of her audience. The following information on self-esteem and writing came from the opinions of professional women writers. Because there is so little research done on non-professional women writers these studies of professional women writers are used as background for this research.

#### Negative Aspects of Self-Esteem Reported by Professional Women Writers

Women not only talked about their lives using the metaphor of voice and silence, but they also talked about the dichotomy between their writing and autonomy. Catherine Stimpson (1977) talked about the fact that professional women were very often single. What she implied was that it was not possible to be successful in work and to integrate it into family life. Stimpson made her choice for her art and autonomy but still worried that she might be phallogentric and working out of the male model in terms of being in love with power and victory with regard to her desire to work autonomously, creatively, and energetically.

Carol Gilligan (1982) summarized the conflict between autonomy and family life, between serious work outside of the home and the traditional female role as a conflict between compassion and autonomy which the female voice tried to integrate so that she might be true to herself but, at the same time, not hurt anyone for whom she was responsible.

On the subject of her own writing, Sara Ruddick (1977) stated that she did not experience these seemingly opposite pulls. She accepted female stereotypes in her formative years, but felt that a woman's work did not present sufficiently clear-cut tasks to work purposefully. She described a gnawing fear that although her work as a woman and her work as a writer were definitely separate in her mind, success as a worker writer, which she also saw as feminine and where she felt most comfortable, would have forced her to risk failure and confront her desires. Each time she met success she stopped writing in that genre. She stopped writing short stories and poems when they were well-received or published. She recognized that success somehow made all of it dangerous. If she were successful, she would have to face her desire to excel

and would have to look at ambitions which women were not supposed to have.

Elaine Showalter (1979) said that gynocritics must remember the vagaries of the political, social, and personal histories which determined women's literary choices and careers. She went on to quote Virginia Woolf (1929) who said in her essay "Women and Fiction" that

As much elasticity as possible is desirable; it is necessary to leave oneself room to deal with other things besides their work, so much has that work been influenced by conditions that have nothing whatever to do with art (p. 27).

Tillie Olsen (1978) spoke about "women's work" and their writing. In general, most people regarded women's primary work to be within the family. Women who wanted to do other things--write in this instance--experienced a terrible pull between being smothered in these "women's duties" and feeling guilty for doing anything else. If a woman wanted to do serious writing it usually had to be deferred until her family had grown up, or she sacrificed the pleasures of family life in order to be a writer. In fact, the most prominent twentieth century women writers were, until recently, unmarried or childless. Olsen went on to say

that the two, family life and writing, have been integrated only in the last twenty years.

Mary Helen Washington (1982) critiquing Black-Eyed Susans, an anthology of ten contemporary Black women writers, commented on three themes which run through their work. The first was that of double consciousness which was found in the writings of most Black men and women. The second, the divided self, woman split in two, was found in the writing of most Black and white women. The third and one of the most illuminating themes was that of suppressed artist found only in Black women's writing.

For two centuries Black women have been hidden artists--creative geniuses in some cases--whose creative impulses have been denied and thwarted in a society in which they have been valued only as a source of cheap labor (p. 209).

And so, many women writers were forced to make painful personal decisions in order to give full scope to their art. They described the conflict they experienced between fulfilling their professional duties and their responsibilities to their husbands and children.

Positive Aspects of Self-Esteem Reported by  
Professional Women Writers

The obstacles for women writers have been great. Cultural expectations of women have been very narrow. Women were to stay in the home and use the language of the home in their writing. The professional women writers discussed in the upcoming section talked about their relationship to language, to their writing, and to their lives. They saw the writer's voice as having revolutionary power, and connected a sense of self to a strong sense of their work. This contributed to a sense of self-development, identity formation, and self-esteem. These women writers stressed the relationship between their perception of themselves as women, the expectations which the traditionalist culture put on them and their identity with that culture.

The relationship between writing and self-esteem was described by Ann Lasoff (1982) who saw her experience with writing itself as an empowering force rather than an issue which created a divided self. Lasoff, a woman who discovered her writing talent relatively late in her life, talked about having two



lives, the first--until the age of forty-two raising a family and the second--her life as a writer. "My first life ended when my oldest daughter entered high school (p.204)." After saying that, she went on to describe what her second life was like, in terms of her desire to write, by saying that her life could only be lived because, "the strong compulsion to write driven by the living creature may overcome the obstacles (p.211)."

Bartlett (1983) experienced motherhood and writing in a very different way from the preceding women.

. . .Nothing in my life has ever surprised me so much as what happens to women when they have children. At the time I found it awful, but now it seems to me as if my previous life had been a dim, flat verbal thing, a spoken monologue that ran on and on in my head detailing the elements of existence as they presented themselves to me. My son interrupted that, and in the way that interruption feels, still, is that he gave me the world (p. 10).

Contemporary Black women writers did not experience that repression and had very strong positive feelings about their writing. Nikki Giovanni (1984) talked about her poetry and her politics in the same breath. She didn't talk about herself as a woman but

as a revolutionary. Sex-linked roles didn't enter her head.

Something's got to change. Sure, people say what's the point in trying. But, of course, there's a point in trying. At some point those of us who are about what is called 'truth' have to be willing to fight for our reality as those who are fighting against us. . .Writers have to fight. Nobody's going to tell you you're going to have to change three words in your book (pp. 65-66).

Toni Morrison (1984), talking about her work, equated having a sense of her work with having a sense of herself. She contrasted the writing of Black and white women saying that Black women didn't see "women's duties" and a career as antithetical. White women, on the other hand, saw marriage and career as mutually exclusive. Morrison felt that her work as a writer and "women's work" were all of a piece. As an extension of this idea, she talked about her writing.

There's a difference between writing for a living and writing for life. If you write for a living, you make enormous compromises, and you might not ever be able to compromise yourself. If you write for life, you'll work hard; you'll do it in a disciplined fashion; you'll do what's honest, not what pays. You'll be willing to not sell it. You'll have a very strong sense of your work, your self-development (p. 131).

These Black women writers were the exception rather than the rule in terms of writing and

self-esteem. Most women writers saw themselves as divided between their compulsion to stay within the stereotype of the "good woman," and the compulsion to exert their individuality through their writing.

#### Studies of Non-professional Women Writers

The women cited above were professionals of one sort or another. They were women who were privileged because of education. The following research looked at one study of non-professional, middle-class writers and at the writing of non-professional working-class women.

Neilsen's (1989) work looked at the literate lives of three middle-class non-professional adult writers, two of whom were women. She found that literacy was inseparable from daily living and could not be studied in isolation. Neilsen also discovered that reading and writing experiences were transformative. The women's perceptions of themselves were typical of their gender. They saw themselves as striving for connectedness, and used their literacy to foster equality in relationships and to empower others. The one man in the study reported that his reading and writing activity was used to get things done, to control, and to serve instrumental purposes, much like

what other research has said about men's language and writing.

However, Safman's (1986) study, "Illiterate Women: New Approaches for New Lives", gave some frightening statistics. She defined illiteracy as the inability to read and compute below the standard needed by an adult within a chosen social context. Problems cited as contributory to illiteracy were social acculturation and sex role stereotyping where being wife and mother was the only role open to women in a society which expected women to be passive and men to be dominant.

She went on to say that the greatest problem leading to illiteracy was high school incompleteness due to teen pregnancy and marriage. Other factors cited were: low self-esteem, feelings of alienation and discouragement, lack of goal orientation to school, a sense of powerlessness, and a view that the "system" has control over their lives. Physical or sexual abuse damaged self-esteem and the will to succeed and made these women incapable of caring about school completion. Substance abuse also caused loss of interest in school. And finally, Safman emphasized

that illiteracy was a contributing factor to the feminization of poverty since women made up the majority of illiterates.

Burghardt (1987) looked for answers to the problems stated above in her study of Edmonton Alberta's Adult Basic Education Program. She painted a profile not unlike Safman's. Adult basic education students were single mothers with dependents who were poor and relied on welfare. Her population's profile was similar to Safman's (1986) with the addition of problems with decision-making, low level of resourcefulness in using community services, high instances of neglect of health, poorly developed interpersonal skills, and significant incidence of learning disabilities and emotional stress. She also stated that as a result of physical and psychological trauma, women had difficulty communicating both feelings and concrete events clearly and speculated that learning to write would probably be very difficult for them. She outlined problems of social class which severely impeded women in their pursuit of literacy including: their marginal social status, severe educational deficits, and limited budgets. But just as

importantly, Burghardt (1987) cited their strong desire to get better jobs, to feel better about themselves and to exercise more control over their lives through their acquisition of reading and writing skills. Her most insightful comment was the recommendation that psychological counseling accompanied any academic program for illiterate women because of their past experiences with life and learning. Safman did not mention the issues of race or culture.

Heisel and Larson (1984) looked at the variance in literacy demands of elderly Blacks in a large city environment. Eighty percent of elderly Blacks over 65 had not completed grade nine, and forty percent had completed less than five grades. Despite the enormity of the problem, the authors discovered that little research had been done in this subculture. They used naturalistic research methods, gathering data over three years using in-depth interviews. The results were not what one might expect, given the educational attainment of the group investigated. The reported literacy abilities and behaviors of the participants were much higher than was expected. Although seven percent said that they were non-readers, most of the

participants reported themselves as regular readers of newspapers and magazines. Seventy-eight percent read their Bibles regularly.

Despite physical and educational limitations, a great many of the participants were active in the political process, a major indicator of functional literacy. By Census Bureau standards half of the population would be considered illiterate. However, when asked to describe the reading level of their elderly, black subculture, the participants reported that seventy percent of the group were average or better readers, and only ten to fifteen percent could not meet the reading requirements of their social milieu.

As a result of this research the authors concluded that literacy can only be evaluated if the requirements of the specific subculture are examined and taken into account since most people have developed literacy skills that enable them to function well in their own milieu.

In summary, the study of non-professional, poor and working-class women writers correlated with the experiences reported by professional women writers

(Neilsen, 1989). However, poor and working-class women had, according to Safman (1986), a literacy rate well below the standard needed to function in a chosen social context. The most common problem blocking high school completion was teenage pregnancy and marriage. They reported feelings of alienation and a general sense of powerlessness. Burghardt (1987) stated that single mothers with dependents who were on welfare also had a low level of resourcefulness, learning disabilities, and difficulty communicating feelings, among other things. But they also wanted to have better jobs, and to have more control over their lives through acquisition of literacy skills. And finally, Heisel and Larson (1984) made the point that literacy levels among elderly Blacks was measured by the participants in the study in terms of how well a person could function in that specific sub-culture.

Language and Social Class:  
Writing from the Context of Experience

Women write best when they write out of their personal experience (Annas, 1984). Murray (1980) extended this idea and said that in order to empower students as writers teachers must first find out how the student viewed her world so that the student found her own style of writing and meaningful subject matter. Shor (1980) felt that student writers should



deconstruct a common theme in their life experience so that they could understand its implications for and influence on their lives.

In describing the social context of working-class women, Sennett and Cobb (1973) spoke of power, love, and alienation. They looked at the situation of the working class from a sociological standpoint, and what they said has a bearing on the situation of all women, the "working class" of the sexes. Power joined with love leaves a person in a very favorable position, and one knows no real love unless she possess power. Love without power makes one very vulnerable.

But what if you feel powerless? How can you join love to power? These questions persistently appear reflected in the emotional injuries of class: in the conflict between fraternity and individual ability, in the sacrificial attempts to make power out of one's love. The attempt to join the two realms seems only to increase the feeling of powerlessness (p. 192).

Social mobility is a myth that is perpetuated in American society (Gilligan, 1982; Sennett and Cobb, 1973; and Bowles and Gintis, 1976). Carol Gilligan painted a dismal picture when she spoke about inequality and the working-class family. She believed that there was no way of making the quality of family life better for the next generation of working-class adults because

. . .there are no alternatives for most of their children. . .The temporary inequality of the working-class child thus turns into the permanent inequality of the working-class adult caught in an ebb-tide of social mobility that erodes the quality of family life (p. 170).

Unfortunately, even the American schooling system exists to continue the myth of social mobility while actually continuing inequality. Bowles and Gintis (1976) stated that educational meritocracy as a way of overcoming class barriers was largely symbolic.

By providing skills legitimating inequalities in economic positions, and facilitating certain types of social intercourse among individuals, U.S. education patterns personal development around the requirements of alienated work. The tendency of social relationships of economic life to be replicated in the educational system and in family life lies at the heart of the failure of the liberal educational creed (p. 147).

Alienated work, then, is a product of the American economic and educational milieu. And people react to this reality by retreating to the family where, it is hoped, people are caring, there are definite boundaries of power, and love makes everyone worthy of esteem.

Yet, even the family is not a place of sanctuary because there is another disturbing reality that reaches even into the family--racism. This is a further indignity since it cuts across class and can leave even those who have acquired the trappings of power--powerless. Preface all of this with the problem

of gender, and the result is that working-class women and women of color are completely powerless.

All of these things come about because American society in general places most of its people in an impossible state, never satisfying their hunger for dignity nor openly denying it to them so that the task of proving dignity seems impossible and revolt against the society is the only reasonable alternative (Sennett & Cobb, 1973). And although the myth of work advancement as a result of merit is the prevailing ethos in the minds of the bulk of Americans, the fact remains that relatively few people ever "make it." Even when they "make it," they keep thinking that someone will find out that they are play acting or that their advancement is the result of luck.

That ability is the badge of individual worth, that calculation of ability can create an image of a few individuals standing out from the mass, that to be an individual by virtue of ability is to have the right to transcend one's social origins--these are the basic suppositions of a society that produces feelings of powerlessness and inadequacy in the lives of the [working class] (p.62).

If one sees oneself as lacking this ability (transcending one's social origins), then a sense of individuality is missing. People have to look somewhere other than career/employment for it. What happens is that they develop a kind of schizophrenia regarding their work and private lives in order to

protect their sense of self. Since they are powerless over the former, they feel that at least in their family life they have a sense of power. Sennett and Cobb (1973) felt that this was the only way people had a sense of dignity. They must escape the feeling of non-achievement despite their efforts, the feeling of vulnerability when contrasting themselves to others on a higher rung of the social ladder, and the buried sense of inadequacy that they resent themselves for feeling.

A sense of personal power and self-esteem, that seems to be the right of every person, is not readily available to all. In actuality, it is almost impossible for poor and working-class women to go beyond their class boundaries. The repeated experience of this powerlessness in a culture that says that anyone can rise up through the social ranks regardless of class origin effects poor and working-class women's sense of personal power and self-esteem. And these three cultural realities impinge on women's perceptions of themselves as writers.

### Conclusion

The theoretical perspectives that undergird this research were divided into the areas of acquiring voice, addressing an audience, and writing powerfully from personal experience. Vygotsky (1978), Piaget

(1979), and Bruner (1978) described language acquisition as developing personal and public voice. Vygotsky and Bruner stated that this happened through direct interaction with other people--Vygotsky talking about interaction in the family, with peers, and in school--Bruner talking about the interaction between child and mother. Piaget, on the other hand, stated that the child had innate language structures which were activated by external stimuli.

The issue of addressing an audience, the second main theme, was examined in the writings of Moffett (1968), Britton (1971), and Halliday (1978). Moffett described addressing an audience as the most important use of language. Britton looked at language and audience as the individual's relationship to the language event from concrete experience to abstract analysis. Halliday talked about the relationship of language to social structure. In each of these researchers' theories engagement with audience was the most important part of the linguistic event.

Writing powerfully from experience was the topic addressed in the theories of Smith (1979), Graves (1978), Murray (1980), and Shor (1980). All agreed that writing was most powerful when people wrote from their own experience, that it contributed to personal

development, and that personal experience formed the environment for the birthing of strong personal voice.

Voice, audience, and experience again formed the framework for a discussion of power, self-esteem, and social class in professional women writer's language and writing. The section on language and power explored new definitions of voice. These women writers described breaking out of the silenced arena of the household and using their own voice to write about their personal experiences.

The women talked about self-esteem as it connected to their writing for an audience--someone other than themselves. Professional woman writers and academics described a real struggle between feeling obligated to take care of family and feeling compelled to fulfill their professional feelings. Other professional woman writers didn't experience that conflict but connected a positive sense of the self to a strong sense of their work. They experienced their writing as giving them an experience of power rather than one of guilt.

Studies of non-professional women writers revealed that their literacy rate was well below what was needed to function successfully in school and in life. Pregnancy was the most common reason for dropping out of school. These women felt powerless,

were usually on welfare, had learning disabilities, and had difficulty communicating feelings. However, most reported that they wanted more control over their lives.

In terms of language and social class, the life experience of poor and working-class women was one of deprivation, frustration, and anger. They had no power and found that even love could not make the effects of being the underclass disappear. Social mobility was a myth, and the American schooling system ensured that their powerlessness would continue.

## C H A P T E R    I I I

### METHODOLOGY

This study employed naturalistic inquiry in-depth interviewing to describe the relationship between working-class women's experiences with writing and the issues of personal power, self-esteem, and social class. The exploratory, descriptive nature of the research questions suggested that qualitative rather than quantitative methodology in nature would be appropriate to address the question.

Decisions concerning subject selection as well as characteristics of the population will be presented first in this chapter. Next the research design including the research cycle, role of the researcher, and methods of data collection will be presented. Finally, a description of the analysis process is included to document how final conclusions were determined.

#### Rationale for Subject Selection

The study took place in the Greater Boston area. The population for the study was multi-cultural-- specifically, white and Black working-class groups. The two neighborhoods used for the study were of easy access to the researcher. Members of her religious order were involved with the women in South Boston, and



the researcher herself worshipped in a Black Catholic Church in Roxbury, a predominantly Black section of Boston. The women in both populations were from poor and working-class economic levels. The Black participants lived in a predominantly Black community in Greater Boston, and all but one of the white participants lived in a white working-class section of Boston. The remaining white participant lived in a suburb of Boston. The participants were not screened for any other variables except socio-economic status and race. The women were interviewed in their homes, in the convent where the researcher lived, or at some other location which was convenient for both.

#### Subjects for the Study

The population for the study initially included twelve women. One woman's tapes were discarded because they were inaudible, and she could not be contacted to re-do the interviews. A second woman, Elise, was found not to have any writing experiences. After the initial interview the researcher decided to continue in hopes of finding out why she didn't write. Elise could recall no writing that she did in school, and reported that in her job as a nurse's aide she did no

significant writing. Thus, she was eliminated from the research population. This final report will deal with ten women who completed all three interviews as shown in Table 3.1.

### Participants

Four of the women lived in public housing. Ellen had six children, and her husband worked as a fisherman. Mona was bed-ridden, and her husband worked nights cleaning in one of the many educational institutions in Boston. Mona's four adult children and her two grandchildren lived with her and her husband. Eva, her husband and three children lived in public housing and were supported by her disability salary. Tricia and her three month old baby lived with her grandmother and some of her grandmother's adult children.

Two of the participants lived in housing for the elderly. Fern and her adult son shared an apartment in elderly housing. Louise was retired and lived by herself in housing designed for the elderly and the disabled.

Three women lived in rented apartments. Debbie's apartment in a three family house was situated on a street which included warehouses and a fish processing plant. She lived there with her three children and her

TABLE 3.1

PARTICIPANTS: RACE, AGE, HOUSEHOLD MEMBERS, S.E.S.

Name	Age	Race	Household Members	Socioeconomic Status
Debbie	31	White	Four	\$10,000 - 14,999
Ellen+	36	White	Eight	\$ 5,000 - 9,999 (Summer)* \$100 per week (Winter)*
Fern	74	Black	Two	\$5,000 - 9,999 \$ 0 - 4,999 (Son's income)
Joan	20	White	Four	\$5,000 - 9,999
Louise	74	Black	One	\$5,000 - 9,999
Mary	71	Black	One	\$0 - 4, 999
Mona+	48	Black	Eight	\$10,000 - 14,999*
Paula+	60	White	Two	\$5,000 - 9,999 Unknown amount - husband's pension
Rhonda+	34	White	Five	\$10,000 - 14,999
Tricia	20	Black	Two	\$ 0 - 4,999

\* Husband's salary

+ Married

boyfriend. Joan lived in an apartment in a three family house with her three small children ages three years to nine months. And Mary, who was retired, lived by herself in an apartment in an apartment building. Paula lived with her retired husband in her own home.

### Gaining Entry

The data collection took place from June through October, 1988. Initial access to the population of white participants was obtained by contacting a friend who was a Roman Catholic nun who directed a literacy and consciousness raising program for working-class women. She asked women who were in her program if they were willing to take part in the research. Initially, six women responded. The researcher also contacted a member of the Catholic parish where she worshipped, and asked her if she knew any women who might be willing to be interviewed. This woman asked some of her friends in a senior citizen lobbying group if they would participate in the study. She gave the researcher the names of three Black women who were willing to be interviewed. In addition, another Black participant lived in the neighborhood where the researcher worshipped. And one white woman was the housekeeper in a Catholic parish south of Boston. The researcher obtained names, addresses, and phone numbers and made the first contact on the telephone during which she

told the women about the nature of her research, and asked if the woman would be willing to take part in it. Each agreed, and the first appointment was set up. During this same period the researcher gained approval to conduct the research from the School of Education of the University of Massachusetts Human Subjects Research Committee. (See Appendix G) In keeping with the University of Massachusetts Human Subjects Committee regulations the investigator carried with her a confidentiality statement and a summary of the study. (See Appendix B) At the first interview it was signed by the researcher and the participant. Both the researcher's and participant's home phone numbers were included. The participant was given a copy of this consent form.

The gaining entry phase lasted through the month of July. However, one participant, Tricia, was not contacted until October because a person already interviewed could not be located for some interview verification material. One other woman dropped out after the initial interview. She had been hard to contact from the beginning, but finally came for the first interview. After that she never returned any of the researcher's calls and so was dropped from the study. Ultimately, ten women participated in the study and completed all three interviews.

### Research Design Approach

The study was qualitative, employing a naturalistic inquiry perspective. The rich pool of information which is needed in this kind of research requires a methodology which will elicit thick description. In order to do this, in-depth interviewing was used.

The purpose of in-depth interviewing is not to get answers to questions, not to test hypotheses, and not to 'evaluate' as the term is used. At the root of in-depth interviewing is an interest in understanding the experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience rather than being able to predict or control the experience. The purpose of in-depth phenomenological interviewing, then, is to have participants reconstruct their experiences and reflect on the meaning they make of that experience (Seidman, 1983, p. 639).

By means of this qualitative methodology the women interviewed reconstructed their life experiences with writing. This method gave the researcher the chance to get an overview of each participant's life and to set the writing information in its original context. The interviews were audiotaped and transcribed. Tape recording is often recommended as a valid data gathering tool (Seidman, 1983; Bogdan and Taylor, 1975).

Data derived from an interview can be recorded in any of several ways. Most obviously, a tape recorder can be utilized, a mode that has many advantages, such as

providing an unimpeachable data source; assuring completeness; providing the opportunity to review as often as necessary to assure that full understanding has been achieved; providing the opportunity for later review for nonverbal cues such as significant pauses, raised voices, or emotional outbursts; and providing material for joint interviewer training and reliability checks (Lincoln and Guba, 1985, pp. 271-272).

### Interviewing

This study employed in-depth phenomenological interviewing.

In an unstructured interview, the format is non-standardized, and the interviewer does not seek normative responses. Rather, the problem of interest is expected to arise from the respondent's reaction to the broad issue raised by the inquirer (Lincoln and Guba, 1981, p. 156).

The interviewer and the participant related to each other as women committed to exploring the past and present writing experiences of the participants and to making meaning of them. Over the interview period a closeness evolved because of shared experiences and interests.

### Research Cycle

Each woman was interviewed for one hour in three separate interviews. There were time overlaps because some of the women's first interviews began in July and some began in August. The last interview series was begun in October because one of the participant's tapes were of poor quality, and she couldn't be located.

Anonymity was assured, and the participants were free to withdraw from the process or delete material from the interviews. (See Appendix B) The data was transcribed from audio tape and edited to construct a profile of each woman. These became the pool of information for the study.

### Phase One

During the first phase (June - August 1988) the researcher contacted the woman who ran the consciousness raising program in the white neighborhood in Boston and asked her if some of the clients in her program might like to be part of a research project regarding women and writing. Five women responded (one, Kathy, withdrew after the first interview), and their names and telephone numbers were given to the researcher. These women, Debbie, Joan, Ellen, Rhonda, and Kathy, were contacted by phone, and the topic of the project was explained. They were asked when they would be available for an interview, and were given three options as far as site was concerned: the convent where the researcher lived, their own home, or a third place which was of easy access to both parties.

In July the Black woman from the parish where the researcher worshipped was asked if she knew some women who would consent to be interviewed. This woman contacted three people, Louise, Mary, and Fern, who



belonged to a senior citizen lobbying group of which this Black woman was state president. They agreed to be interviewed and their names and telephone numbers were given to the researcher. They were contacted on the telephone and the research was explained. They were asked when they would be available and were given the same options as the women from the white group.

Two other Black women, Mona and Verna, were asked by another member of the Black parish to join the research. (Verna was interviewed for the three times required, but her tapes could not be used because of poor sound quality.) They were contacted by phone, and the research was explained to them. They gave times when they would be available to be interviewed and one said that she would prefer to be interviewed at home since she was bedridden. Verna wanted to be interviewed at work.

Three other women were contacted after the official gaining entry phase because there were not enough participants in the study. Paula, who was white, and Elise, who was Black, were contacted in August. Elise's interviews, in the end, were not used because she truly did not do any writing. The last

Black woman was contacted in October since one set of interviews could not be used because of poor sound quality. The same explanatory procedure was used with all of them.

### Phase Two

Between June and August, 1988 the second phase of the research took place during which the women were interviewed for the first time.

The researcher met with the participant at the pre-determined place and time. Introductions were made and the consent form was explained and signed. Each woman was assured anonymity and the right to withdraw without penalty at any point in the research. The taperecorder, a Panasonic Slim Line Taperecorder Model Number RQ - 1739, was placed on the table at which the researcher and participant were seated, a tape was labeled as to date, participant name, and interview number, was inserted into the taperecorder and it was turned on. The researcher began the interview by asking the participant to describe what writing was like for her in the past. If the interviewee was having a difficult time recalling the events, pre-written prompt questions were used (See Appendix C). The researcher took notes along with taping the interview. At the end of the interview a time and place were set for the second interview.

Many times a beverage was offered to the interviewer either before the interview or after it. The conversations which took place both before and after were mostly about family or the research. When the interviews were in the home, the children (if there were any) were usually occupied doing something else. However, they occasionally interrupted the interviews. Spouses (if the women were married) were never present. The amount of time spent in the homes was usually anywhere from one to two hours. After the researcher left the interview site and returned home, field notes were written. Besides the notes taken during the interview, the researcher noted procedures (what happened before, during, and after the interview), observations (how the subject was sitting, questions to be asked as a result of information given during the interview, topics of conversation, etc.), and reactions (the interviewer's reactions to the women, the content of their interview, the degree of rapport the interviewer felt, etc.).

### Phase Three

During phase three (July - September) the participants were interviewed for the second time. The interviews were paced differently for each subject, hence the long period of time taken to complete them. At this interview the participants were asked to

describe their experiences with writing in the present. One problem arose in that the researcher did not confirm the appointments, and several women forgot them. This caused a delay in the interview sequence since the appointments had to be rescheduled.

The second interview followed a pattern similar to the first. The women seemed glad to see the researcher. There were the usual pleasantries followed by telling the participant what the second interview was all about. Some of the women had a hard time talking, so the researcher had to be more directive than she wished. She used a combination of prepared prompt questions and her own curiosity. Many of the women were not comfortable being given center stage. They talked about a number of things not directly related to the topic--usually about one or another of their children. These stories were very poignant, and showed the courage of these women. At this point, for whatever reason, the researcher realized that she should be asking for samples of the women's writing. So she began asking the women if they would be willing to share their writing with her to be included with the rest of the research.

There were other things which happened during this phase. People shared more of their life stories--stories of violence and murder in their lives, stories

about oppression by their husbands, stories about their problems with alcohol and drugs, stories of organizing their fellow tenants to demand decent housing, and stories that bespoke incredible courage in the face of adversity.

The weather was very hot during this stage of the research. This affected both the length of the interviews and the concentration of the researcher and the participant. A beverage was offered to the researcher by most of the participants and was gladly received. At the end of the interview time the researcher made an appointment with the woman for the third interview. In similar fashion following the first interview the researcher wrote field notes at home following the interviews.

#### Phase Four

During phase four (August - October) the third interviews took place. The researcher had not phoned the participants ahead of time, so some of the interviews had to be re-scheduled. The third interviews followed the same pattern as the others had: arrival of the researcher, small talk to break the ice, the explanation of what was required for the third interview, and turning on the tape recorder. As had happened before, some of the women needed prompting to get them started. They also needed more explanation

about what kind of information the researcher was looking for in terms of making meaning from their writing experiences. She gave examples of making meaning by using questions which one might ask in order to get at such information. After the third interview was finished, the researcher wrote field notes at home. During this phase the researcher began transcribing the interviews along with others who had offered to help her with the transcribing.

Fatigue played a part in this series of interviews. The weather had been extremely hot for a long period of time which left the researcher extremely tired. Also, most of the houses had no air conditioning. As a result, the interviews were finished before the allotted time because the women were hot and tired. In one case there was much tension during the interview because the baby in the family was very cranky, and the participant's husband's temper was very short.

At the end of the interviews the subjects were asked to fill out the confidential income level form. (see Appendix D) All who were asked did so. There was one woman, Rhonda, whom the researcher decided not to ask because she sensed that it was not a question that the participant would answer. She did, however, volunteer the information much later.

On the whole, the women were very much at ease with the researcher, and welcomed her warmly. It was hard for the researcher to say goodbye to the participants because there had been a real bond which developed between them. One woman wrote a poem for her and gave her a gift. (See Appendix H ) The researcher told the women that she would be visiting them again with the transcripts of their interviews for the participants' approval.

#### Phase Five

During the fifth phase (October, 1988 - May, 1989) the post-site analysis, transcribing, profile construction, triangulization, interpretation, and reporting of findings occurred. The data coding and reduction which had begun during the data collection period was continued with more intensity. Moving from within the data to the literature and back again to the data, conclusions were formulated. The large amounts of data allowed the researcher to see the interview material in the context of the rest of the women's lives.

## Role of the Researcher

The researcher assumed two roles during data collection. They were that of objective interviewer and participant observer. Each role will be discussed below.

### Interviewer

The nature of the research question determined the use of naturalistic inquiry methods as a research methodology. In this method of data collection the researcher plays the role of interviewer. In-depth interviewing requires the use of a non-standardized format by the researcher.

The interviewer does not seek normative responses. Rather, the problem of interest is expected to arise from the respondent's reaction to the broad issue raised by the inquirer. To put it another way. . .the unstructured interview is the mode of choice when the interviewer does not know what he or she doesn't know and must therefore rely on the respondent to tell him or her. (Lincoln and Guba, 1985)

The researcher endeavored to play this non-directive role in the interviews conducted. However, at times prompt questions had to be used because the participants had trouble talking.

### Participant-Observer

The role of participant-observer was played by the researcher. This role enabled the researcher to



note what was going on at the time of the interview. She recorded how the interview was conducted, what was going on with the participant, her reactions to the participant, and the surroundings where the interview took place. The researcher tried to remain neutral and record everything impartially during these sessions.

### Building Rapport

Within the role of interviewer the researcher attempts to enter the life of the individual without being invasive. The researcher tried to be friendly and open with the participants about what she was looking for and why. She wanted to make the relationship between her and the participants as positive, non-threatening, and open as possible. She wanted to build a relationship that was trusting and honest.

Initially the researcher was completely unknown to the interviewees except for the fact that they shared a common acquaintance with the person who asked them to take part in the study. The researcher presented herself as a Roman Catholic nun and as an educator interested in all kinds of writing. She also indicated to them that they were the most important part of her research, and asked them to collaborate with her.

### Rapport at the First Interview

At the first interview the relationship between the researcher and the participants was somewhat strained because of nervousness and unfamiliarity although some of the women talked easily from the beginning. One of the older women, Fern, had trouble remembering her writing experiences in the past, and kept apologizing. Another apologized for her over decorated house. Others had a little problem remembering, and once they were asked questions felt more at ease and could talk more easily.

### Rapport at the Second Interview

At the second interview the rapport was good. Several asked if they could read the dissertation when it was finished. The researcher told them that they could. One woman was very open about her life and the violence that had been a part of it. One of the older women had given the researcher some letters that she had written to her son when he was away at college. He was very angry, and called me after the interview. The letters had already been given back to his mother. Another of the older women seemed more at ease but not completely. The reasons for this were unknown to the researcher. In general, the participants were glad to see and talk to the researcher. The researcher is

usually able to talk to people and establish rapport easily.

### Rapport at the Third Interview

By the third interview everything was going smoothly between the interviewer and the participants with two exceptions. The last visit to one of the white women was made on a very hot day. The participant's one and one half year-old son kept wandering into the room where the interview was taking place. The woman's husband was clearly annoyed with the child as well as with the intrusion of the researcher into his home. He had not been present during the other two interviews. The participant was also uptight. The interview was shorter than usual, but warranted by the situation. The interviewer had also failed to call one other woman before she arrived at her house, and she wasn't ready for the interview. As a result, she wasn't as relaxed as she usually was for the interview process.

The other participants were relaxed and expansive. However, at this last interview the researcher found it especially difficult to say good-bye to Joan, one of the participants. Joan was a gifted writer and spoke eloquently. She was also a brave woman who decided that her own sobriety was the best gift that she could give to her three daughters.

Also, the researcher discovered that she had gone to school with Joan's father. At this last interview another woman was concerned that she would not be able to give the researcher the information that she was looking for. After the interview was finished, most were eager to talk. They talked about their children and the rest of their family. They asked questions about the research, and talked about what was going on in their lives at that time.

### Data Collection

Several methods were used by the researcher to collect data. Included were formal interviews, written field notes, collection of writing done by some participants, and Income Checklists. Audio tapes were the major means of data collection, and their transcriptions were analyzed for data interpretation.

### Formal Interviews

Formal interviews were scheduled with the participants three times during the data collection. The purpose of these interviews was to collect information about working-class women's experiences with writing.

Each formal interview was designed to allow the participant to talk about anything that had to do with past and present writing experiences and the meaning

that they made of the experiences. The researcher used prompt questions only as they were needed. If the participant digressed from the assigned topic but was revealing valuable information, the researcher encouraged her to talk about the incident. The researcher tried to be quiet and not ask questions as much as was possible, although at times the researcher guided talk because of its relevance to her research.

The format of the interviews was constant. The participants were asked to recreate their experiences with writing in the past during the first interview. They told of writing experiences in the present at the second interview. The last interview was reserved for their making of meaning from those experiences. Prompt questions were used as needed. Transcripts were made of all formal interviews and placed in each participant's file.

### Informal Interviews

The participants were informally interviewed before and after the tape recorder was used for the formal interview. The participants usually commented on the weather which was usually in the 90's. They sometimes asked about the research. The women from the white section of Boston often talked about the woman who ran their Adult Learning Program. The Black elderly women often talked about their membership and

events in the Massachusetts Senior Action Council of which they were a part. Many talked about their families or what was going on in their lives. Most everyone questioned the researcher about the research and how it was going to be used. The informal interview lasted until the researcher left the house.

### Field Notes

Written field notes were used through the entire study and were made at home after each interview. Notes were also taken during each interview as references. These references helped to get the subject back to the topic or helped clarify what the participant was saying. This did not seem to interfere with rapport, verbal cues, or body language.

The interviewer used the field notes in four ways: (1) to take notes on the major points of the interview; (2) to record the personal reactions of the interviewer to what was said; (3) to record the observations about what was happening in the environment where the interview was taking place; (4) and to record the procedures of the interview. The written field notes served to refresh the researcher's memory about what had happened in the interview and to provide an additional source of information besides the interviews themselves.

### Collection of Written Material

During the study the participants were asked if they would share some examples of their writing. Not all were able to do this. However, the following were offered from four of the participants: poetry, record book of baby's first year of life, a log of neighborhood incidents, notes for speeches, and pieces written for a tenant newspaper. (See Appendix H) The samples were xeroxed and the originals were given back to the participants.

### Audiotaping and Transcription

Audiotaping was essential in obtaining an exact record of the formal interview. A total of thirty hours of interview tapes were made. The taperecorder was used with batteries at times, but mostly was plugged into an electric outlet. It was usually placed between the interviewer and the participant. The tape had to be turned over after one half hour of recording. This usually interrupted the flow of thought and proved to be an annoyance. There were no overt mechanical problems during the interviews, but because of background noise and the soft voices of some of the participants some of the tapes were hard to decipher. As a result of this one participant's interviews could not be used and another research subject had to be found.

Transcribing went on from August, through November of 1988. The transcription was done by the researcher, four of her friends, but mostly by four professional transcribers. As the transcriptions were finished the researcher listened to the tapes checking them against the transcript in order to find any mistakes or to fill in places which were not audible to the transcribers. One of the problems for the transcribers was the Boston accent of the participants. Since the transcriber was used to the accent she was able to correct these mistakes in transcription.

While the researcher listened to the tapes she memoed quotes along the side of the transcripts which pertained to self-esteem, social class, or personal power. The focus of the study was on the content of the interviews, not on the correctness of speech.

### Data Analysis

The researcher conducted a systematic search for similarities and differences among the interviews of the participants. She began to notice similarities after the first round of interviews, and tried to address these issues during the second and third interviews. The researcher worked "with the data, organizing it, breaking it into manageable units, synthesizing it, searching for patterns, and discovering what is important and what is to be



learned, and deciding what you will tell others"

(Bogdan and Biklen, 1982, p. 145).

### Analysis in the Field

Bogdan and Biklen (1982) have proposed ten ways a researcher can analyze on-going data collection and still be able to conduct post-analysis on the concluded piece of research. The researcher used six of these: narrow the study; type of study; observer's comments; exploring the literature; metaphors, analysis, and concepts; and venting.

### Narrow the Study

In qualitative research collection a wide sampling is taken and reduced according to the needs of the study. In this way the researcher provides herself with an abundance of information from which to choose and has as broad a knowledge of the subjects, settings, and issues as possible.

The researcher began the study interested in the writing experiences of working-class women, especially in the areas of personal power, self-esteem, and social class. Given the interview style that was used, the function of the interviewer was to facilitate memory, not to direct the interview. Therefore, there was no re-focusing of what the subject talked about as long as it related to the topic of each interview which was the

recreation of experiences with writing in the past and present, and making meaning of these experiences.

### Type of Study

Given the nature of the study, the researcher had previously decided that qualitative in-depth interviewing would be the research method of choice. This research methodology was used throughout the study. It seemed to be the best choice in order to preserve the authentic voice of the participants. Throughout the data collection the researcher was building up the data file of each participant including in it consent forms, confidential salary form, and transcripts as they became available.

### Observer's Comments

The researcher's reactions, thoughts, and feelings were recorded in the field notes which were written when she returned home after an interview. These reflections included personal reactions to: condition of the interview environment, behavior of children, emotional reaction to the participants' stories, etc. They were also used as a private, written form of venting.

### Exploring the Literature

The pertinent literature had been studied to some extent in the years preceding the field work, and the

researcher added to the review of literature while the field work was progressing. The researcher studied qualitative studies in related fields to become familiar with how others had worked with their data.

### Metaphors, Analogies, and Concepts

The nature of the research compels one to think of analogous situations. The researcher at one time likened the research process to the Myth of Sisyphus where Sisyphus is condemned to rolling a stone up a hill only to watch it fall to the bottom each time. However, the courage of the women who participated in the study overshadowed that rather negative image and replaced it with the image of the bowsprit, the form of a woman on the bow of a ship meeting reality with courage and bravery.

### Venting

The researcher can talk about the research with colleagues, friends, and professors. The researcher talked frequently with fellow doctoral students who were engaged in similar types of research. She also talked with professors and with colleagues where she taught. The researcher also talked frequently with her dissertation advisor.

### Analysis After Data Collection

During October, 1988 the researcher began a more intensive analysis of the data. She listened to all the interview tapes and compared them to the written transcripts. As this was being done she also memoed along the margins of the transcripts wherever she found references to the issues of personal power, self-esteem, and social class as referred to the participants' views of their writing.

A code is an abbreviation or symbol applied to a segment of words--most often a sentence or paragraph of transcribers field notes--in order to classify the words. Codes are categories. They usually derive from research questions, hypotheses, key concepts, or important themes. They are retrieval and organizing devices that allow the analyst to spot quickly, pull out, then cluster all the segments relating to the particular question, hypothesis, concept, or theme. Clustering sets the stage for analysis (Miles and Huberman, 1984, p. 56).

The researcher used the memoing as the first reduction of her data. At the same time she also discovered serious mistakes in some of the transcriptions. She had to re-transcribe those manuscripts before going further in the reduction of data.

During the first reduction stage (October, 1988, - January, 1989) the researcher eliminated all interview material that did not pertain to the research questions. The transcripts allowed the researcher to

study all the data in hand. She further listened to the tapes and memoed along the margins as described above.

During the second stage (January - March), the transcripts were reduced further into profiles for each participant. Each profile covered the three interviews in narrative form. These profiles were given to participants to be checked for accuracy, and to give the participant the opportunity to delete any of the interview material. They were mailed release forms with self-addressed stamped envelopes to be returned to the researcher.

The third period of reduction (March - May) saw the researcher engage in triangulation and coding across site data. Profiles of the participants were given to outside readers to compare them with the original transcripts for accuracy of portrayal. Two people agreed to read the raw data transcripts, the profiles, and the analysis.

The fourth period of reduction took place between April and November, 1989. The interviews of each participant were analyzed within themselves to surface patterns according to the issues of power, self-esteem, and social class as they apply to their writing experiences.

The fifth period of reduction took place from May through June. It included across site analysis of the participants' profiles showing similarities and differences according to the issues of power, self-esteem, and social class. The manuscript was completed in draft form.

### Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness of findings is very important to the researcher working alone in qualitative research. It is necessary to avoid bias on the part of the researcher. In this study the researcher employed prolonged site engagement, successive interviews, triangulation, member checks, and peer debriefing.

### Prolonged Site Engagement

The researcher has to guard against bias in qualitative interviewing. Miles and Huberman (1984) mention two sources of bias, the effect of the site on the researcher and the effects of the researcher on the site. The researcher tried to avoid any mention of the three categories she was interested in while conducting the interviews. At the third interview, rapport increased as did the level of trust with each interview. Many of the women were at ease right away and continued to be so unless conditions in the interview environment made it difficult. For example,

in the last interview one of the women was very nervous because her children were home, it was a very hot day, and her husband was present and somewhat impatient. Others of the women were rather stiff and formal at the first interview, but relaxed and opened up more during the next two interviews.

The present study was conducted over thirteen months between June, 1988 and July, 1989. The researcher conducted three interviews with ten women asking them to recreate their experiences with writing in the past and the present. In the third interview she asked them to explain what writing meant to them. The interviews were approximately one hour in length. The researcher felt that this contact provided the long-term engagement needed in this type of study.

### Triangulation

Triangulation is supposed to support a finding by showing that independent measures of it agree with it or, at least, don't contradict it. (It) is a state of mind. If you self-consciously set out to collect and double-check findings, using multiple sources and modes of evidence, the verification process will largely be built onto the data-gathering process, and little more need be done than to report one's procedures. (Miles and Huberman, 1984).

This study triangulated the data in several ways; the use of multiple interviews with the same broad topic, the use of an independent person to corroborate the raw data with the participant profiles and final analysis

chapter, the sending of their profiles to the participants to check accuracy and sign the verification statement.

### Peer Debriefing

The researcher had three groups with which to debrief: her fellow doctoral students, the people she lived with, and her dissertation advisor. She met with her peers in informal situations where they would talk about their research and its perils. They also shared qualitative research process information which they thought would be helpful to each other. She talked about her work with the nuns with whom she lived, giving them a progress report and some of her findings. She met often with her dissertation advisor to report progress and to review written sections of the research.

### Summary

Qualitative in-depth interviewing was employed to describe the experiences of working-class women with writing. The participants were chosen from sites which would assure multiculturalism and diverse life experiences. The researcher contacted each participant who had been recommended to her and set up a series of interview sessions.



The research cycle consisted of four interactive phases: gaining entry and three, one hour interviews where the participant was asked to describe her experiences with writing in the past and in the present. In the third interview the participants were asked to make meaning from those experiences. Rapport between the researcher and the participants evolved with the succession of interviews.

Data was collected through formal interviews, informal interviews, written field notes, confidential income statements, and collection of participants' writings.

The data were analyzed during the interviews and after the interview sequence was over. The interviewer employed seven ways of on-going analysis: narrowing the study, selecting the type of study, using previous data, making observer comments, memoing, exploring the literature, venting, and using analogies. Analysis of the data after its collection had six stages: removing extraneous information from the transcripts, creating profiles of each participant, triangulation, within-site and across-site analysis, and the writing up of the research. The issue of trustworthiness was addressed in order to make sure that the findings were consistent with the data collected.

## C H A P T E R    I V

### WORKING-CLASS WOMEN AND WRITING: AN ANALYSIS OF POWER, SELF-ESTEEM, AND SOCIAL CLASS

#### Introduction

The foci of this chapter are the participants interviewed and what they say about their writing experiences. The chapter is divided into three parts: writing and personal voice, writing and public voice, and writing and social class. In the first two sections the issues of power and self-esteem are addressed, and all of the reported writing events are categorized according to the intended audience: self, family, or community. The third part, writing and social class, looks at the dreams unfulfilled, and those not accomplished (wishes and dreams) due to issues of economics.

#### The Women

Ten women, five white and five black, from predominantly black and white neighborhoods in Greater Boston were interviewed. A brief introduction to each woman is presented below.

Debbie was white and 32 years old. She lived in Boston with her three children: Eddie, 11; who died of heart failure after the interviews were finished; Davey, 3; and Caitlin 1. She was divorced from her husband, but lived with the father of her two youngest

children. She graduated from high school and worked briefly for a security company before she became pregnant.

Ellen was white and 36 years old at the time of the interview. She was married and had three children: two daughters, 11 and 16; and a son, two. She was white and lived in a housing project in Boston. Ellen quit school in the eighth grade and went to work just before she was 16.

Fern was 75 years old and lived in elderly housing in Boston. She was Black and came originally from New Bedford, Massachusetts. She was taken out of high school and did domestic work to support herself. She had two children, a daughter, 47 and a son, 35. Her son lived with her in elderly housing at the time of the interview.

Joan had three children, all girls, whose ages were 3, 2, and 1. She was white, twenty years old, and had not graduated from high school. Her husband had left her six months before the interviews took place. She was a recovering drug addict and alcoholic.

Louise was Black, 72 years old and lived in housing for the elderly in Boston. Her husband was dead, and she had one daughter, 56. She was born in

Virginia, and when she was old enough, she went to live in New Jersey with her grandmother because there schools were considered better. She went back to Virginia after five years and continued her schooling. At the age of 14 she had to quit school, and went back to New Jersey where she worked as a mother's helper.

Mary, a Black woman, 72 years old, lived in Boston. She was married, but her husband had died many years ago. She had four children, two boys and two girls, whose ages she declined to divulge. She was born in Georgia, came to visit relatives in Boston in 1959, and at that time decided to make Boston her home. She worked in a series of service jobs.

Mona, who was Black, was 48 years old, married and had seven children at the time of the interviews. She had three daughters ages 28, 27 (a twin), and 22. She had three boys ages 27 (a twin) and 23 (twins). Her youngest son who was 17 died the previous December. Her other children lived at home with her and her husband along with her two granddaughters ages 5 and 9. She left school in the ninth grade and went to work in a Boston women's specialty store.

Paula lived in a working-class suburb of Boston. She was white, sixty years old, married, and had three children, two boys ages 40 and 37 and one girl age 34.

She graduated from high school and wanted to be a nurse, but was prevented from doing so because her family didn't have the money. After high school she worked for the telephone company.

Rhonda was white, 36, and lived in a housing project in Boston. She was married and had six children, one of whom was autistic. Of her six children, two were boys ages 14 and 13, and four were girls ages 11 (her autistic child), 9, 6, and 2. Her husband was a fisherman. Rhonda left high school in the tenth grade.

Tricia at the time of the interviews, was twenty years old and had a child of three months. Her mother had died and she had a step-father and one step-sister. She was Black and lived in a public housing project with her grandmother. She did not finish high school, but worked off and on in various programs sponsored by a local church. She was a student in the Boston Public School System during forced bussing.

As can be seen above, the women interviewed for this study came from literacy contexts which were quite diverse. Some had finished high school; others were studying for or had completed their G.E.D.; while others had not completed grade ten. Some of the women were in their twenties, while others had reached their

seventies. They were both white and black, and all had children. The most important thing that bound them together was their involvement with writing. While interviewing for the study, the researcher was not aware what kinds of or how much writing these women did. She began collecting the data assuming that everyone does some kind of writing. The researcher was interested in the issues of personal power, self-esteem, and social class, but did not refer to these issues while collecting the data.

#### Personal Voice: Issues of Power and Powerlessness

When analyzing the interviews of the ten participants for examples of power, the sections chosen related to what the women's writing could and did achieve or what they perceived it could achieve. It had to do with how the women perceived their worlds and the words they used to describe them (Gilligan, 1982). It had to do with using authentic voice where there was a deep resonance in the words with the feelings of the author (Elbow, 1981).

The writing which emerged was writing which pertained to the self, to the family, and to the community. The women perceived themselves as powerful when using their personal voice to write about their emotions, to use writing as a means of discovery, and

to use writing as a means of survival and coping with life.

Personal voice was used intrapersonally and interpersonally. Each participant had various audiences for her writing. These were self, family, or community. They wrote powerfully for themselves when addressing the areas of writing to express anger, writing as an act of discovery, and writing as an act of coping and survival.

They experienced self-esteem when they used this personal voice to write poetry and stories, when writing for the self, and when writing letters for themselves and for others. They, again, explored their own intrapersonal world as well as the interpersonal worlds of the family and the community.

#### Venting Emotions: The Self

This first section will examine writing for the self as it was used to vent anger by looking at the recollections of three women: Debbie, Joan, and Rhonda; who used writing to control anger. Some of the other women had mentioned anger obliquely and used writing to cope with anger in one way or another. The women vented their anger in this way because they did not choose to do it in the context which caused the angry reaction. They used this personal voice freely in their writing for the self, and in so doing,

exercised power by looking at their anger and dealing with it.

Debbie had severe problems with her mother and was physically abused by her. When Debbie was in the girls' detention home because of violent outbursts, her advisor told her to write down her anger rather than venting it physically or verbally in an inappropriate way.

I had an advisor. He was good. He told me instead of venting my anger physically to write down how I was feeling and express what I couldn't do verbally. I find I still do that because I have a hard time expressing myself. Well, as I was growing up my mum never listened to me if I had a problem. So it was like everything got bottled up inside of me. The only release I had was writing it. The thing is if I told my mother what I was thinking she probably would have knocked my head off my shoulders. My mother and I were not compatible. I was what they call now physically abused. Back then it was 'I got what I deserved.' (Debbie)

Debbie said that she still had violent feelings but that writing helped to control them.

Even to this day if I am angry or pissed off at somebody, I can write it down on paper and call them everything in the book and get it out of me. . .It was like a release valve to be able to sit down and write and say things. (Debbie)

Debbie was able to build from these experiences of expressing her anger to the point of writing to her mother. She was also able to get to the point of expressing her anger in writing for the first time.



I don't know what to say to her anymore. Even when I write to her I have to sit down. . . It's not what I want to say; it's like, "The kids are great." But I think I did once. Eddie's birthday had gone by in September. Christmas went by. Little Davie's birthday is in January, and nobody heard from her. No cards to the kids or anything. So I sat down and wrote this real long, nasty letter to my mother. It was the first time in my life. She didn't talk to me for six months afterwards. Never got a reply. I called my sister and she said, "Ma is pissed, and I don't like what you did." At least she knew how I was feeling. Of course, I didn't hear from her for six months. I felt good when I sent it. (Debbie)

When she wrote expressing her angry feelings to her mother for the first time Debbie had used writing as a way to express her feelings of anger rather than venting them physically.

Joan used writing in a similar way. She also grew up in a home where anger was not expressed verbally. Instead, the anger was kept inside her.

I think part of it has to do with--I grew up in a home where you couldn't say anything. You weren't allowed to say you were angry. My mother would say if she didn't like what you had to say, she'd say that you had an attitude or she would smack you. You weren't allowed to be angry. And I learned to control what I had to say, and it's very difficult for me to let the words come out of my mouth. You know, I still have that fear, that feeling of impending doom. (Joan)

While Joan and Debbie vented anger intrapersonally, Rhonda used writing interpersonally, to get out anger with her family. As a child she would write notes to her mother or her sister saying what she

was angry at them for rather than talking to them. She would leave notes to her parents on the refrigerator and notes to her sister in her sister's bedroom.

Remember my mother and father were both alcoholics and I got used because I just would never say "No." "Stay and mind the kids." Every night! I would do it you know. So that's when I started writing notes. "You bad mother; you shouldn't make me do this" and things like that. And I would do that a lot. Every once in a while it would sink in with them, so it got me something. I started writing notes to my older sister who is totally irresponsible. . . I used to stick notes all over her bed. "Don't go to bed. You're so lazy. You stole my clothes. You left me minding the kids." (Rhonda)

As an adult she used writing to express angry feelings. She did this especially around her feelings about her autistic daughter, Leila. Rhonda wrote about the fact that her mother and husband didn't accept her daughter's condition. As a result, she bore the brunt of accepting Leila's disabilities and advocating for her special needs.

Sometimes I would write things down and then just tear them up once in a while. Sometimes I would be mad, mad at myself. It was just stuff that you wished you didn't write. Because you would feel guilty for saying it. Like you'd be a sweet little girl for everyone else, but for yourself, "What am I going to do with her?" But you have to keep up the front in front of people. You want nothing to do with it. There are times that you just want to shake her. You would write it down and read it and say, "Oh my God!" and tear it up. (Rhonda)

When Rhonda wrote things down she sometimes felt better. "Sometimes (yes) sometimes I don't. Sometimes

I write them (her own thoughts) and look at them; and I do use writing mostly for anger."

Debbie, Joan, and Rhonda could not express anger. Debbie would act out anger physically. Joan would become silent. Rhonda would write notes to different members of her family. Writing gave them all the power of their own voice and enabled them to get in touch with feelings that they were not able to express verbally. Debbie was able to write and to gain control over her physical expression of anger through writing. Joan could not express her anger or her hope verbally. She gave her anger and hope a voice through writing which allowed her to feel the power of its expression. Rhonda also came from a silent household, but unlike Joan and Debbie she used written notes, literally, to express her anger. She wrote monologues to those with whom she was angry. As an adult she wrote out her angry feelings about her autistic daughter. The power of writing those feelings validated them to these women and gave the feelings worth.

#### Writing as an Act of Discovery: The Self

There was another kind of writing for the self which was used to keep or regain mental health. Five women--Debbie, Joan, Mona, Rhonda, and Paula--talked about this kind of writing. It was used by the women

to find out what was bothering them, to express grief or frustration, to face the truth, to control emotions, and as a means to self-expression and self-discovery.

Both Debbie and Joan used writing to help them find out what was bothering them. Debbie kept a journal for the three years that she belonged to a women's consciousness raising group. Debbie said that besides using the journal to help find out what's bothering her the journal let her say what she couldn't say to her boyfriend, David.

But my journal at home is mainly. . .if I run into a problem with David or the kids, or just how I'm feeling if I'm feeling depressed and I don't know why, and things like that, that's what I do--I write in my journal. . . I don't know how to talk to David about it. You try; he gets angry. He starts threatening, "Shut up, I'm going to punch you." So it's like, it's really hard, so my journal gets most of my suspicions, my anger, whatever you want to call it. It's there. It's just to help me through it. . .but that's what my journal is to me, so I can get all that anger out of me because I can't talk to him like that. (Debbie)

For Joan, writing helps her to catch her ephemeral self, and, like Debbie, to find out what's bothering her.

Things about me are almost like wisps of smoke. You can see them, and then they're gone. And, I feel, and it's gone. It's lost to me. And on paper it's tangible, and I can go over it again and again because in my own head I lose me a lot. And I--It's important to me. (Joan)

It's the pen in my hand, you know. The way a pen feels on a pad of paper in my hand it sets it free for me. It opens up a valve and lets it all flow out. Sometimes I find myself writing things that I didn't know that I knew. (Joan)

Ellen also uses writing to help her figure out what's bothering her and to make her thoughts come together.

When I'm struggling with something, that's when I really start to write. Sometimes my thoughts just won't come together. When I put it on paper and I ask for help through that form, I'm writing--write down what it is I'm looking for or something that will come back--it just works that way. (Ellen)

Many of the women interviewed reported that writing helped them to express and deal with emotions (other than anger) once they found out what they were. Mona used writing to express her grief, and Rhonda wrote to vent her frustrations. Joan would write to stop the voices in her head and as a catharsis, while, for Paula, writing poetry was her only means of self-expression.

Mona handled her grief by writing about it. Her youngest son had died the previous December, and she missed him terribly. The following was a section of her journal that was read into the tape recorder.

January 25, 1988. Today is Keith's birthday. He's eighteen years old today. We would have had a special celebration for you today. Happy birthday, my darling. I miss you so much. Cal called this morning. She told me she remembered that today was his birthday.

She said that she'll come over tonight for a few hours. (Mona)

Joan had problems with drug and alcohol addiction, but as she became sober in A.A. she used writing to get perspective on life. She began to write again.

I really thought I was brain damaged when I first got sober because your brain goes so fast that it won't come out of your mouth. And my counselor laughed when I tried to explain to her that I was brain-damaged. I couldn't talk. Before I picked up drugs and alcohol I considered myself to have a very extensive vocabulary. I was quite an eloquent speaker, and little by little it's like learning everything all over again--the writing, speaking--starting off at square one. In the beginning I had so much hope, and I could write it better than I could speak it. (Joan)

Tricia said that writing made her more open because when she wrote, she could make her characters more open. She felt that if she could write characters like that she, herself, could be more open to discovering and actualizing her potential.

I guess writin' is important to me also because it helps me to be more open. Because when I write, when I write plays I can make my characters more open. So if to me I feel, if I can write a play and have my characters be like that, then I can be like that too because I was a very closed-in person. And so even when I did English work in the eighth grade it helped me to be more open and forward. (Tricia)

Tricia also reported that writing built up her "attitude." It meant more to her than basketball and movies. It allowed her personal voice to emerge and build up her self-confidence.

Writing is like an inspiration to me. Although I haven't been writing a lot, once I do get into it, it builds up my attitude more. It's something that I like to do a lot. It comes before a lot of my other activities like basketball or going to the movies and stuff like that. Sometimes I'd rather sit at home and write. (Tricia)

Each of these women used writing as an act of discovery and used what she discovered to gain control, get power, over emotional chaos. Debbie wrote her undefined anxieties that she could not share with David. Joan wrote insights about herself which would be lost unless they were written down. Ellen felt a growing sense of power as her writing helped her to pinpoint and understand what was bothering her. Tricia said that the personal attributes of her characters helped her to gain the same attributes in her personal life.

Several of the women interviewed used writing not only as an act of discovery about themselves but also about those close to them. Ellen said that sometimes the only way to understand a thought was to write about it. "There's something about the way people explain things to me that it's not enough for me. I have to have more. I absorb like a sponge." (Ellen) She wrote

a story about an alcoholic family to help her to understand her own alcoholic family and her life as an adult child of alcoholic parents.

I had started some writing, a story. Now the story is supposed to be a pattern--say parents that have gone through grown up with alcoholic parents, and now they're raising children. And as I started to write it was like how a child. . . how a person becomes a problem drinker or a problem with drugs. Things happen; they stub their toe and get angry, and they say they're going to go get a drink for it just to push their problems aside, or they don't want to deal with anything. And then how the children, it affects them, you know--the person sleeping late in the morning, and the parent gets angry because the kid wanted to wake them up. And the kid doesn't understand what's going on. Just all these different ways that the children will start to conform, and then the parent will think, "This kid's okay." And all of a sudden this kid's tiptoeing around. They're doing everything the parent wants, so that parent can sleep. They don't see the kid's got problems because they're a people pleaser. And that was something I wrote about. (Ellen)

For Joan, writing helps her to discover and understand her recovery from alcoholism and drug addiction.

If I don't grow, I die. Who I am in recovery, I either start dying or I start growing. There's no in-between for me. And in picking up a new journal I'm accepting that, and it's starting this new awareness, this new decision to grow. (Joan)

Joan got scared sometimes, and thought she was overestimating her ability. Writing forced her to face or discover her facility with words.



You know, sometimes when that creative flow starts, it scares me. I'm so insecure; I'm so afraid that I'm just being--I don't know how to say it--just being--overestimating my own ability, giving it too much value, too much worth to what I write. Sometimes I think--I know that part of me is sick. Part of me doesn't want to find things that I can do well and things that make me worthy and feel a great need inside because if I see them I can't say it won't be bad. (Joan)

If Joan saw herself as a good writer, she would also have to say that, at times, she was less than perfect. She couldn't stand the embarrassment of doing something that was not good. If she didn't claim her power, then she wouldn't have to face the fact that she might make a mistake and lose it.

#### Writing for Survival/Coping: The Self

The women in this paper used their powerful, personal writing voice as a means of coping with and surviving life. Many of them reported that writing helped them to express and deal with emotions (other than anger) once they found out what they were. Mona used writing to express her grief, and Rhonda wrote to give vent to her frustration. Joan would write to stop the voices in her head and as a catharsis, while, for Paula, writing poetry was her only means of self-expression.

Mona and Debbie handled the emotions surrounding a child's sickness or death by writing about them. Mona's youngest son had died the previous December, and

she missed him terribly. She wrote about his death in her journal in order to cope with it. Debbie wrote about feelings surrounding the birth of her second child. She wrote in his baby book to cope with feelings of excitement and also the disappointments that surrounded his premature birth.

Writing helped Joan to stop being sick. "And when I feel sick, and I do sick things like not being honest, . . .not keeping in touch with people that have helped me stay centered. . .Writing is a stop for that." (Joan)

Rhonda wrote to keep her sanity and to confirm her beliefs. Ever since her autistic child was a baby, Rhonda knew that something was wrong with her. However, her husband and her mother didn't believe her, even after the child was diagnosed. She was continually frustrated by this. Her method of coping is described below.

Mostly what I did, I don't think I ever let anybody read the things I wrote down. And I don't think they'd like the things I wrote down. My husband didn't believe it (the autism). No, I don't think he accepted it until she was about six years old, and she couldn't go to the regular first grade. I don't know what he was expecting. All this time, all those years I was telling him, you know, she's not normal. So I really couldn't talk to him so I used to write quite a lot. I wrote a lot about things that were a big deal to me.

The first time Lisa ever spoke she said 'mamma', but she didn't say it to me. Even

though she had gotten speech she didn't know who anybody was, and so she said it to her psychologist. But she spoke, so it was good, and it was bad, you know, and I told my mother and she said, "What's the big deal? All babies say mamma." and it was like "ack" they just couldn't get it in their heads what a big deal it was! She was three and a half, and those were her first words. And here's these people saying to me, "She's just a little slow; she'll catch up." She's three and a half, and my other kids were coloring and writing letters by that age. I never got supported at all there. I think I wrote to keep my sanity. (Rhonda)

Joan, on the other hand had to cope with words and ideas that weren't even real. She used writing to get better from her drug addiction and alcoholism and to help stop the voices in her head.

And the writing part of it, without it I wouldn't have what I have today, you know. It's always there for me, and I'm ready. It's there, and it's faithful, like my God, you know. My writing doesn't turn its back on me. I turn my back on them when I'm afraid, when I want to do my will when I'm afraid. And when I turn back, they're always there.

Sometimes what goes on in my head is like a concert, a cacophony of sounds, and I keep hearing over it--It's insane--like a million voices yelling at me at once and all different thoughts. And I can't get out of this sea of sound, and I'm drowning in it. And I can't get the air. It's just all the sounds coming at me, and when I write it's the lifeline that helps me out and tones down the other sounds, and makes it stop, so I can hear what's important. (Joan)

She explained why she had so much trouble expressing her emotions verbally and how she had to resort to writing to get even a little relief.

When my mother screamed, we were like this 'OK, who did it?' You didn't want to move. And that was everybody's release. It came to be the norm. When you were mad, when you were ready to blow, you screamed, and that was it. Except, it doesn't work. I got to get back to screaming on paper. (Joan)

Unfortunately for Paula, the next participant, writing was the only way that she could use to express how she felt. She couldn't talk to her husband and children.

It's (writing poetry) important to me only because it's the only way that I can express what I feel in my heart. And I can babble on, but I usually don't have anybody to talk to like this (during the interview), one to one. See, if I could do that, maybe it (her poetry) wouldn't be as important, and I could tell people things. So to me, the writing, the poems, they give people, I think a little bit of what I feel in my heart. And, hopefully, they understand another side of me that they don't see. So it is important to me. (Paula)

Paula's next statements were really poignant. She despaired of ever telling her children how she felt about them and what she tried to do as a parent.

Financially I have nothing to leave them. If I leave them each a letter maybe it will be as good as something material. I want something that each of them will have--something that is their own. They don't have to share with each other if they don't want to. If they want to--fine! Only what concerns them because what I intend to write is only about their part of the life I've shared with them. Hope it won't bring a lot of unpleasant memories, but so be it. Now we have many regrets, but now you've got to make them realize that I had them, too. I'm sure they experience themselves, too. Maybe I wished I loved them more, but I couldn't, and I didn't. Not until I die.

I'm just going to put them into an envelope, and have them open them up. Maybe I'm afraid for them to see the inner me. (Paula)

Ellen wrote things down about her brother who is in jail and what she hoped for him. She would "crack up" if she kept thinking about it, so she wrote it all down in order to cope with her feelings. Once her thoughts were outside of herself she was able to handle them.

I worry about my brother, and instead of worrying, I have to put that aside because that could be damaging to me. If I let everything bother me that I see around me I would crack up. So, somehow I know, I've talked about my brother. I wrote things down about how I would love to see him grow while he's in prison. (Ellen)

Mona wrote to understand her sickness. She was talking about her diary ". . . which I started several years ago when I first got sick, and, you know, I just thought it would help me to write things out--my anguish about being ill." (Mona)

Joan found that writing helped her to understand herself and how she related with people. She showed a poem that she had written about her husband to her counselor.

"Do you know who you wrote it for? You wrote for yourself." And it got me thinking. My writing helps me grow. And this poem got me thinking about something that was really, really important that I had always done--was put feelings about myself on other people. Feeling disappointed about myself, I'm disappointed in everyone, feeling critical about myself, feeling critical about

everyone. All these things--Any piece of growing that I have done has not been without the aid of writing. (Joan)

Rhonda found that writing about her problems helped her to understand them. "Sometimes when you read back over things, you look at them in a different way, especially if you were upset at the time that you wrote. You didn't know where the landmarks were or anything." (Rhonda)

Debbie felt that she could never satisfy the school's expectations about her writing. For that matter, she said that she could never satisfy her mother. She could write anything she wanted in a journal, but her writing for school was another thing.

That was the good writing (in a journal). I could say what I want. I could write what I was feeling, what I wanted. If I made a boo boo in my life I could write it down, and nobody was going to sit there and tell me, "You should have done it this way. It's not supposed to be like this." Because I always felt no matter how hard I tried, I always felt that way. No matter how hard I tried I always felt--I was always told that I was wrong. "It could have been better." That was my mother's favorite speech. "It could have been better." It's not--I did a good job--"You tried hard." It was, "I know you can do better." (Debbie)

Ellen experienced powerlessness having thought about the world's problems, written them down and wondering if anything would happen.

My self-esteem was always getting low because I felt I had to save the world.

(What's the connection between feeling you want to save the world and writing things down--having the things happen.)

When you look around you, you can really get so overwhelmed. If I watch the news and they're talking about children being hurt, I can cry for that child. But I can also cry for the person that caused the child pain, you know, and it starts my mind going--where I just want to understand it more, you know, somehow help to change it. I start thinking about it. I mean, what do you do now? What do you do? You're not over at the State House fighting. Or you're not going to all these meetings. What do you do to make this a better world? And it comes back to me that I'm here. I'm learning. I'm always learning. I'm trying to instill that in my children. Um, I don't go out and do drugs. I'm not a heavy drinker.

(Ah, what I was going to ask you about is when you have those kinds of thoughts, do you write? In other words, when you see something and you want to change it, how do you help yourself come to that point?)

To tell the truth, I'm still waiting. I'm still waiting for those answers because I just write down--I wrote down a list of things that I would like to see, you know, how do I work towards women's equal rights? How do I help change child molestation, people getting along with these integration problems, all this stuff here. How can I be a part of. . . ? I mean, there is a list. What do I know about it? What do I want to know about it, you know. That's my writing.  
(Ellen)

Debbie wrote to communicate with people who lived far away. It was her survival technique which connected her to her friends when her mother sent her to camp every summer.

In the past I liked to write to people. It was like communication because my mother used to send me away to camp most every summer.

And from ninth grade I lived at a boarding school, so it was my only communication with people. Because of my upbringing I was not able to speak my words. I always had to put them on paper. Mainly in the past my writing was long pages to people for communication but also to let my mother know exactly how I was feeling. I had friends who didn't live in Boston. Like my girl friend, I've known her for quite a long time, and she used to write to me because she didn't live in Boston. She lived in Revere, but it was still another--She lived on the other side of the world. (Debbie)

There were other examples of writing used for survival or coping. They are separate from the examples already cited in that they are complete stories in themselves about two of Mona's children, Keith and Kim, and Debbie's son Davey. In two of the cases, Keith's and Davey's stories, the women wrote about the events when they happened and related those stories to the researcher in their interviews. Mona had written Keith's story in her journal, and Debbie had written Davey's story in his baby book. Kim's story was narrated in the course of Mona's interview after she told the researcher about Keith. Kim's story was included because of the language used and the events of the story were so meaningful.

### Keith

(Did he have his kidney problem since he was born?)

Two and one half, I thought he was going to die then. I was so scared. He had many relapses after that. Every time he had a



relapse I prayed that he wouldn't die. I knew that he was going to die one day. (Mona)

He was two and one half and he just stopped-- I thought he was putting on weight--He seemed to get big all over. And then I noticed that he was puffy under his eyes. That's when I took him to the doctor's. and the doctor said that his stomach was extended. I just bought bigger clothes for him. I just thought he was just a big boy--wasn't just in one place. And so I took him to the hospital and um it's called Nephrotic Syndrome. And he was ah--I was so scared that night. He just was very sick that night I took him. Then he pulled through. And he had several relapses after that, and he pulled through each time, and as matter of fact this time--the last-- this time that he had the relapse and I didn't--it didn't come in my mind, you know. I didn't even think about him dying. The thought never entered my mind. And that was the first time in fifteen years that, that thought didn't, you know. . I didn't say, 'O God, please, please don't take him now.' That's what I always said each time I was sitting there. I'd go across the street--He was at the City Hospital. I'd go across the street to Immaculate Conception Church. I'd go to mass there, or I'd just light a candle or something, and, you know, just pray. When he was about ten years old for some strange reason he had fluid on the brain. And he pulled through that. I was so scared. I was so--walking on the street just praying. But this time? I didn't get scared. The thought didn't come into me that he was going to die, that he might die. Never! And this time he died. (Mona)

And we were there when he died. And so we were able to sit there and hold him, and he was still warm. And I tossed his hair. He had curly hair, and my husband and I didn't cry. He just got--He was still with us. And it just helped so much. And for those next couple of days all of us around here--we had --we cried except my husband didn't. And for those first few days he'd be sitting in the chair downstairs drinking his beer and then somebody would come in, and he'd talk. And

then he'd be sitting there by himself, and you could see the tears well up in his eyes, and he'd push them away. And I wanted to tell him, 'Alright, go ahead and cry. But I know him. He's not a man who's afraid to cry. Not at all. And so I better not say anything to him. And at the wake he really broke down. And that was because he didn't cry before. So, I was able to get through that. I was able to be the strong one all through that. (Mona)

And by about February or March it just hit me so hard, and that warm close feeling that I'd had was gone. The pain was just so bad. And so it's gotten a little bit better by then. And you just, you know, and I'm saying, 'God, where are you?' He just wasn't there. He-- my kids would get sick--I would just--God always gave me comfort. (Mona)

Mona wrote about Keith's death to help herself, but in all that was going on during the event she played the typical role of women; she was the strong one who helped everyone else.

Debbie talked about writing in Davey's baby book (See Appendix H). The baby was born prematurely and sometime later was placed in a study of premature babies conducted by Children's Hospital.

### Davey

(What kind of things did you write about when you wrote about your second baby?)

David? Well the problems I had. I had wanted to breast feed him, but traveling back and forth to the hospital pumping it. . . He was in the hospital after I got home. I eventually just dried up, so I wrote about that. Never once--I was always modest. I never wanted to try anything new, and for some reason I wanted to breastfeed him. To have that fall through, I was really upset about that. And going back and forth.

David, because he was born early, is in a study through Children's Hospital. They are studying premature babies to see how they develop. They gave us this (a baby book - See Appendix H) when they started. (Debbie)

Like I said, I'm terrible at words explaining it. But this is the book, the book they gave us. We started--it was his first year of life. That's the writing about David. It's about him and my emotions going through it. I like reading down and forget so much of his first year of his life. Not that I could forget his first walk or anything like that--but the feelings I had. And to look at him now, it's hard to think he was like that. That he was that small--that his rear end could fit in the palm of my hand. To look at him now, you'd never know that he was premature. (Debbie)

This, I love reading it because of things I wrote, and also there are some where his father wrote in it. But it brings back the feelings I had when he was that small. And I look at him and say. 'God! I wish he could be like that now.' But I'm glad he's like he is now. I've got so much to write now about him, so many things I have to worry about now. They gave him a--What do you call it--an aptitude test. He's a year ahead of himself in speech and knowledge. They are really surprised at David. Some of the other kids in the group really had some problems because they were born so early and stuff. And they say he's a good help. He helps the other kids if he sees they're having a problem. He's just like a leader. Or he'll go over and if somebody's doing something wrong he goes, 'No, no, no.' (Debbie)

You know, it makes me feel good to look at this book and read some of the things I've written about him. It was just--to see the difference between him and his brother and sister. I mean, you can actually see by reading it. I wish I had the other two, I really do. But this is going to be good for him, too. (Debbie)

Debbie enjoyed looking back over the baby book. She had used it to ventilate and cope with her feelings

about having a premature baby and the difficult experiences that went with it.

Mona told Kim's story right after she finished Keith's because talking about him jogged her memories of Kim's illness. Mona did not say that she had written about the event. It was simply a story that she wanted to tell the researcher.

### Kim

Our oldest daughter almost died three years ago. And God told me she wasn't going to die. And she was in a coma, and I asked Him what to do. And He told me. And I talked to her (Kim). And I brought her out of her coma. (Mona)

There were machines, little machines, everywhere. And she had I.V.'s every where. It was like spaghetti. There were lines, all different kinds of lines. They had all these machines that were turning. I mean, those ICU nurses are like--they're remarkable. I mean they're trained, of course, and they know their job, but to watch them work is really fascinating. I mean there's so many lines! There's everything. (Mona)

And we sat there looking at the blood pressure machine, and every once and a while it would start to climb up. It would go 56, and then it would go down. And we (Mona and her husband) sat there. We would have been much better off if we didn't see. And because that was pretty much what it was, 53 over 35. And her heart rate was like--it was a little over 100. So I had gone through these little periods with fear gripping me. And my husband's sitting there and he's saying, 'She's going to be all right.' He said, 'I know she's going to be all right.' And I was--'O God, tell me she's going to be all right.' And God would tell me, and I said, 'All right, OK, I'm listening.' And then I would get scared. And then this peace would just come over me, and I'd say, 'OK,

God, alright, I know she's not going to die.  
I know she isn't going to die.' (Mona)

At one point I'm sitting there, and I asked God to tell me what to do. And so God told me I could wake her up. And I said, 'OK.' So I got--and my back was killing me--And I got under the tubing that came from the machine that was attached to her heart, and I got under it and into her ear. And I figured if I talked about her daughter that she would be able to. . . So I said, 'Kim, you have to wake up because Kisha needs her mommy.' And I kept talking. And then I would pray, and I said, 'Kim, God is telling me. He's helping me to wake you up, but you have to help, too. And you have to listen.' And I kept talking, and I would pray. And I kept mentioning Kisha's name over and over again. Nothing happened. And I'd stand up for my back, and I'd get back down again. This happened three times. So then finally I said, 'This isn't working.' So I stood up. The nurse was always--there's always a nurse at her side. I stood up, and then I said, 'God, give me the right words, and I know I'll wake her up.' So, I went back in her ear again. Nothing came. And so I just started saying the same thing. I said, 'Kisha needs her mommy.' And then I said, 'Kim, we all need you, all of us Rene, Barry, Jill, Keith, Kisha.' I don't know about Martina. Martina wasn't born yet. Me, Dad and I saw a finger twitch, and I went--so I went back in her ear, and I went through the litany of names again. And the eyeballs rolled. And I said, 'I got her! I got her!' And so I went through the list of names again--everybody she knew and everybody in the family. I went through this whole family again. One. . . this arm. . . at the same time this arm, leg, and this leg didn't go up. But this arm and leg went up. The nurse was on that side and I was on this side of the bed and, you know, we had to grab at her and hold her down. Ho, the nurse was just--She was really surprised, and so at that point she said, 'Kim?' The nurse looked in her face and said, 'Kim? Kim?' Of course, she had the tube down, and she said, 'Can you hear me?' And she (Kim) went, 'Um, ummm. And I'm standing there, and the tears are running

down my eyes! 'Oh, my God.' When her eyeballs rolled, that's when the tears started. (Mona)

And so that nurse said, 'Kim, open your eyes.' And so I'm saying, 'Kim, mommy is right here, so open your eyes and look at me!' And gradually her eyes just flooded up. It was such a miracle! And she woke up, but she doesn't remember any of it. And they just couldn't believe it! They just couldn't believe it! And I said, 'God gave me the way. I asked for the right words and He gave them to me.' The moment she woke up the blood pressure started rising; the heart rate went down; the blood pressure went up to normal. (Mona)

Each woman wrote to give herself the power to survive. Rhonda wrote to keep her sanity. Joan wrote to recover from her alcoholism and drug addiction. Ellen kept her obsessive thoughts under control by writing them down and not thinking further about them. Joan composed poetry to help her understand herself. Debbie found that her journal writing made her feel free and helped her to cope with teacher-centered writing assignments in school. Mona wrote to cope with the sickness and death of her youngest child, and Debbie wrote to cope with the emotions that followed the premature birth of her second child. Kim's story was included because of the beauty of the narrative.

### Stopping Writing as a Means of Survival

In this next section the women stressed that it was important for their survival to stop writing.

Writing was important enough to them that its absence was necessary at times.

Mary was tired of being secretary for several groups. Her experience with writing was that she was used. People were constantly pushing her to take minutes of various meetings or be president of clubs. She finally revolted.

(Is there any kind of writing you like better than any other kind of writing?)

No. I can do either one. No. Might I be pushed into it all the time. The secretary of our club she had a stroke last year, and from a year ago they haven't found a secretary to fill that spot. And I've been taking the minutes ever since. I say, 'Please get a secretary.' I say, 'No one asked me to be the secretary.' When she first asked me last year I said, 'I know you can get somebody to take this place here. I can't do it.' I said, 'I can't do it.' I said, 'I can't do it.' Last year in September, I tell you, the president went away. I'm vice-president of the club. I run the club, try and do the secretarial work. It was about five weeks, and in January she took off again and stayed for seven weeks. And I had to do the same thing all over again. Then this year, the election year, they said, 'You want to be elected?' I said, 'No, you don't elect me for no office because I'm going to pack my suitcase, and I'm leaving town maybe for two months!' (Mary)

Mona felt powerless to write because she was in constant pain. Something that she usually enjoyed became impossible for her to do.

I was going through some of the things for my food pantry, and there was a piece of paper about, you know, something that came to mind that I had written on. So I have to get all those together and, you know, put them in the

notebook. But I really haven't felt. . . It's all in my head, and I like to write. And when I get started I write volumes. I just keep going, and I just write pages and pages. But when I don't feel well, I really can't concentrate, especially when my back hurts. And the pain is just. . . When you're in pain or when I'm in pain that's all I can focus on is the pain. And my back pain is so bad that I can't read, so I just watch TV. (Mona)

Just like Mary, Mona had to stop writing because her pain wouldn't allow her to keep writing. She loved to write, but her survival had to be based on discontinuing her writing until she felt better.

Joan experienced powerlessness with writing when anger got in the way. Her creativity took a back seat while she wrote about her angry feelings.

The anger in what was going on was all I was able to write, so nothing creative, nothing positive, nothing happy would come out. And things were so confusing in my life at that time I'd have to write a one page letter six times over to be able to get one idea across. But other than letters, I stopped writing. (Joan)

Joan also could not write. It was her anger which stifled her creativity.

#### Writing for Survival/Coping: The Family

Each women wrote in her personal voice in order to cope and survive. She wrote not only for personal survival, as was just mentioned, but also to cope and survive as an individual in her family. Some of these coping strategies were maladaptive, but they solved the



problems to some extent. Through writing each woman used her powerful, personal voice in order to survive.

Three of the women, Rhonda, Joan, and Debbie wrote because they were afraid of the reactions of the people they needed to say things to. They kept people at a distance by writing notes because they feared their anger. Rhonda solved her arguments by writing notes to her boyfriend. Speaking about one of her boyfriends she said, "I would give it (a note) to his friend to give him, or he would do the same. At least three times a week that would go on--a passing of information or solving an argument. I always found that's how I liked to solve an argument." (Rhonda)

Joan grew up in a home where she couldn't say anything, so she wrote. "I had problems with my mother. I couldn't talk to my mother. When I had problems with people that I wasn't able to speak about, what I didn't have the courage to say, I wrote." (Joan)

Debbie was always afraid of the violence in her mother and in her boyfriend. As a result she wrote to them rather than talking to them about what was bothering her.

It's always been that way. I can write down exactly how I'm feeling or what I've felt over the past years, but I never talked to anybody, and can never. I don't know if it's because I'm afraid of what the reaction would be, or like my mother, every time I tried to really talk to her when I was younger, she got violent with me. But David has a violent

streak in him too. We used to get into some screaming matches. As a matter of fact I've got a few bruises, so it's like I don't push on that subject any more. Because I can write, and I don't have to worry about the physical abuse that's going to come if I open my mouth the wrong way. (Debbie)

Rhonda didn't say why she liked to solve arguments by writing notes, but said that she consistently resolved conflicts in that way coping with her environment by using that strategy. Joan, on the other hand, wrote what she didn't have the "courage" to say. In that way she also had power over the area of disagreement. She could say what she wanted to without interruption or challenge. Debbie was afraid of physical violence, so she survived in her world by writing her anger in notes to her mother and to her boyfriend both of whom were violent. Each woman validated her emotions by using her personal voice in writing about them. Thus, in situations where a more public expression was not perceived by them to be suitable, the women did not silence their personal voices.

#### Personal Voices: Issues of Self-Esteem and Lack of Self-Esteem

In this study some women's sense of self-esteem revolved around their creative writing abilities. Their creative energies were focused first on themselves and then on their families. Others wrote

letters to stay close to people, and some wrote to communicate with those who understood how they felt.

### The Self

Mona described how she decided to become a writer when she was nine or ten years old. She obviously thought herself a good writer to have these ambitions.

But I always wanted to be a writer from the time I was a child. . .when I was nine or ten years old. As I told you before, I used to read too. I loved to read. And I loved. . .I guess from the time I was able to read really well and all the stories that I read or other people read to me. . .and then I read to my sisters, so I wanted to be able to do that, too. And I used to write stories for my sisters. And I was always gonna write a novel kind of thing, but I've never gotten around to doin' it all these years though. Maybe some day I'll still do that. (Mona)

Tricia told a little different story. She thought that her writing was so important that she wouldn't go out with friends if she was in the middle of writing something.

But now if I want to write. . .if I want to do something I say like "No. I'm getting ready to do such and such." Or even when my friends call. . .They used to call down, "Well, come on, let's go down. . ." [She replied] "I'm getting ready to write. I feel the urge. I'm getting ready to write. Call me back, or I'll call you back later. Or before, I used to just run outside. (Tricia)

Writing to someone helped Paula to feel close to them because they understood how she felt.

(When you were a kid, what did writing help you to do?)

Express myself, I think. If I could write a composition myself without being able to express myself more or less, say what I thought instead of what somebody else thought, and I think that's why I like, again, writing of the poems. I feel as though I'm closer to that person because they understand how I feel, and they seem to get some humor and sense some love from it. I guess that's what it is. (Paula)

Paula talked about the poems she wrote for her daughter. But she didn't have that same sense of not being appreciated that she expressed in another part of her interview. The other members of her family had given her the feeling that they were tired of the poems that she would write for them on special occasions.

I wrote more poems for her than I did [for the others] which I did when she graduated junior high school, when she was engaged, when she got married, when she had her first child and her second child. (Paula)

Debbie wished that her speech was as good as her writing.

And part of me wished that I could talk as good as I could write. To this day I'm like that. I wish I could talk as good as I can write it down or express them the way I can when I write without having to go over them a thousand times to make you understand what I meant. (Debbie)

Debbie also felt good about her writing when she got out of high school.

I felt good when I went to work which was right after I got out of school. It (writing) kind of helped me--not with my job, but still to be able to talk to people. If I had to take down notes, I could do it in a sentence. I kind of felt proud of myself because the writing I had done [in high

school] I would have to say was a lot better than junior high because I was an honor roll student [in high school], so I had to have-- to drastically change from junior high to high school. (Debbie)

### The Family

Many of the women also wrote letters to and for members of their families. It engendered in them a feeling of self-esteem, a self-esteem that most women feel when doing for others but not so much when they are doing it for themselves.

Fern wrote letters to her son when he was away at college. She also wrote letters for this same son when he was too tired to do it himself.

I forgot about my son. When he was in college I used to write to him all the time, and when he got married, he and his wife, have a two-year-old boy, Nick. The boy is now eight? No. The boy is now eight years old. And I keep writing to the mother askin' her to let him come and spend vacation time with us. So we are now waiting to see him. (Fern)

Sometimes I write letters for my son when he doesn't feel like writing. I have written letters for his son, and I have written letters to companies for different things that he wanted information. The last one I written about was about music; how to play the piano which he got a response from. Now we have to write again and let them know about sending the books and the papers--all the information that he needs to learn how to play this piano which is supposed to be very easy. (Fern)

Louise talked about writing letters that are really worth reading. She compared herself to her

sister who, she said previously, wrote letters that said almost nothing. She was concerned with how her letters impacted on her sister.

But I write and try to tell her everything that's going on. So it was a nice long letter, so if she doesn't hear from me--But when she gets a letter she says it's really worth reading. She laughs and sometimes she feels like crying, and she laughs. I make it funny, but I tell her all the facts and all the things. She's the one I really write. .she writes a nice letter. She appreciates the letters. (Louise)

Paula wrote letters to her brother during World War II. She also thought that these letters didn't mean too much to him. Here, again, she displayed the attitude that plagued her through all of her interviews; her self-esteem was very low in most of the areas of her life. And her feelings were ambivalent.

Mostly it was writing to my brother in the service keeping him informed of what was going on at home--just wanted him to know that we loved him and prayed for him. That's mostly what I did. I always wanted them to feel that they were at home with us. So I just fill it up with home news. Things never really meant too much, I suppose, to him, but he--there again I kept some of them. (Paula)

Another woman, Ellen, talked about writing a letter to her brother which also had its effect on her which is somewhat unusual since most of the women letter writers wrote for others. Ellen poured her heart out to him, and in doing so got something from writing the letter even before it was sent.

I haven't written any letters for a while. The last I wrote a letter to my brother Dick. There was one time when he was in the hospital, and he was having a real problem with his faith. And he was in Vietnam, and I guess it started eating away at him, what happened over there. And he was in the hospital for Agent Orange; he had psoriasis all over him. So all these thoughts were coming to him, and I guess it was getting real hard for him to cope, and my sister-in-law talked to me. And I wrote him a letter. I just wrote that I really thought the world of him, and I thought he was a good brother, that he, you know, I just spilled my heart out. I guess it really lifted his spirits which really made me feel good. (Ellen)

For Ellen it was important to write her feelings to the people whom she loved.

I really don't know that well, but for some reason I felt like I needed to say something to this man (her sister's ex-father-in-law). I did, you know. I started writing. Let me think what I wrote. I forget what--He was dying. He was dying of cancer. I'm not sure but I used the words or something in the

sense that, you know, what kind of person I see him as. I mean, he did matter to me, and he meant something. But I don't think I mailed it. I think I just wrote it, but I don't think I got it there on time for him. I think he died before it. So, I've done things like that. I start to think about someone. I feel real sad about like maybe I'll say something that's going to make a difference to that person. Maybe I'll spread a little bit of love--something like that. And maybe if I say it to that person, that person's going to pass it on to the next one. (Ellen)

### Conclusion

The women's personal voices were strong and vibrant when they wrote out their anger, used writing as an act of discovery, and wrote in order to cope with and survive life. However, some women had to stop writing because of illness, because anger blocked creativity both of which were experiences of powerlessness; and because they were being taken advantage of--another experience of powerlessness.

Much of their writing in this area was writing for self. They used language intrapersonally and interpersonally. The interpersonal aspect of their expression of personal voice was seen in their personal writing and in letters written for self and others. In this area they generally exhibited self-esteem, although some felt that their skills were not good. The women wrote for the varying audiences of self, family, and community.



### Public Voice: Issues of Power and Powerlessness

The participants in the research used their public voices when they wrote in school, wrote advocacy letters, consumer letters and friendly letters, and when they wrote speeches, articles, and petitions. When writing in their public voice most women felt less powerful than when writing in their personal voice. The topics on which they wrote in school were usually not of their own choosing. In their advocacy letters they dealt with an immovable bureaucracy. When writing speeches, articles, and petitions they were often fighting uphill for people who were helpless. When writing in these genres they were dealing with issues of power as they related to self, family, and community. They dealt with issues of self-esteem when they mentioned writing on the job, articles and speeches, letters for others, and writing poetry.

### School Writing: Self

For most of the women writing in school was a frustrating experience because they were really not allowed to write about things that were important to them. That writing lacked meaning and purpose.

Paula said that she had to work very hard to pass in school. She described part of her writing process stating that she put a lot of herself into her writing, but immediately judged that wasn't any good either.

She described as negative the very thing that experts believe is one of the most important ingredients of good writing--writing from the self about things that interest the individual.

I always got passing grades, but as I said I worked. I worked hard for them. I worked hard on my reading and my compositions, and the time to remember verbs and nouns and the whole thing but never did well, never did well.

(When you worked on compositions, do you remember how you began it?)

No, I really can't. I wish I could help you there. I probably put a lot of my own feelings. I probably started off saying what I thought. I'm not sure if that's what they wanted. Now that I look back maybe that's why I didn't do so well. Maybe I put too much of my own self in it. (Paula)

However, there were some successful school experiences for the women. They occurred when the teacher was student-centered. Tricia also talked about one of her favorite teachers. She (the teacher) tried to get the students to express their feelings, and had them write on topics they liked so that practically everyone participated in the class.

But she was my second-best English teacher because she opened--She tried to get everyone to express their feelings more. But she more or less taught the class to do what the students liked to do or like to write about. And so she got practically everybody to participate in the class. I guess more or less she gave everybody a choice, "Either we could do it this way, or we could do it your way." And when everybody chose to do it their way, everybody got involved in the work. (Tricia)

Tricia's sense of power was connected with her perception of herself as a good writer.

You know, it's hard to find teachers who are--that will like your work and will tell you that they like it because some teachers try to appreciate it. And he loved my writing. And he was telling me, "Well, you should try to do this, and get into this." And I would like--I want to--And we used to talk about--He used to read my plays, my stories, and my poems. And he's the one who really got me started on still writing, to keep on writing. I wish I could find them today. (Tricia)

Her description of one teacher's writing assignment reflects what happens to people when they are allowed to write what is important to them.

And she had one project that I really enjoyed--that I got an A+ with. What was it? She had us write about something or someone very important to us. And everybody participated in that. That was like a week's project. Because it was more free choice, everybody could write about whatever. Long as, you know, it had to be two pages. And we did it right. And she correct the spelling. So I had wrote about my mother, and I had called the title, "My Pride and Joy." And I had got an A+ on it. And I still got that sitting in my suitcase at home. (Tricia)

### School Writing: Community

The women had much to say about their writing in the school community, and described both positive and negative writing experiences. They were described as positive when they centered on topics which interested the participants and negative when the assignments were centered on teacher-assigned topics.

### Writing for the Community--Positive Experiences

Under the heading of writing for the community and in the area of writing in school the next three women Tricia, Mona, and Joan reported their successes with school writing. However, only Mona described herself as doing good writing all through her school career.

Tricia described the eighth grade as her best year in school because of the English teacher who helped her. "The eighth grade was my best year because my English teacher, Mrs. O'Leary, helped me. She really helped me a lot. That was my best year in English." (Tricia)

Mona enjoyed reading and writing book reports. She had this to say when asked what kind of writing she did in school.

In school? Well, whatever was required. Book reports, I loved to do book reports because I was one of those students who liked book reports. But I would just go to the library and choose a book. And you had this outline that the teacher---the author and the this and the theme and everything. And I loved to do that. Can't remember any of it, but I really liked it when it came to book report time. I always got a good grade on it. (Mona)

Mona was good at whatever she wrote: "When you came back in the fall you had to tell what you did in the summer. I was always good at whatever I was asked to write. I always got a very good mark on--I was pretty

good at doing that." For Mona it was very important to write well.

As I say, one of my favorite subjects was English and grammar. And I know I'm not perfect, but I really try when I write and when I speak. Yeah, they're important to me. I was very good in spelling in school--in reading and writing and grammar and penmanship. And I think from the first grade on we had a much better--I had a much better education in Boston Public Schools back in from 1945 or whatever it was I went to school, '44 to mid-fifties than now. And I didn't even finish high school, and I had a much better education than kids who were finished high school. (Mona)

Mona was also a self-taught woman, and she felt good about that.

Well, I'm very proud of the fact that I'm kind of self-educated. That's been a very important part of my life. I've really been teaching myself, you know, through all the years, and it shows. (Mona)

Joan's situation was affected by her alcoholism.

She was a very good writer, but when drinking everything suffered, including her writing. She knew she was a good writer and described how she let her teachers know that she was. She described her conflict with private and public voice.

I'd go into the teacher and show them my absolute best to show them what a brilliant, bright student I was, and then I'd pull away. I was afraid I couldn't live up to my own standards, my own potential, and if I just pulled away, then I had an excuse. If I caused myself to fail, then I wouldn't be able to fail because of lack of ability. (Joan)

Joan knew that she was settling for less even though the teachers in the school system thought that her work was satisfactory. She was often confused about her capabilities, but she always felt underneath that she was a gifted writer.

One of the things a lot of my teachers told me was that I was really verbose in my writing. Essentially what happened was the one idea that I wanted to get across I'd use an ocean of babble. That's kind of how my mind was working. I was always racing. I couldn't finish one thought before I was three thoughts ahead of it. It really came out in my writing considering the fact that I was in the public school system and, for the most part, they thought my writing was great. For me it was settling for less. (Joan)

Tricia felt good about her writing in the eighth grade because her teacher helped her, and she succeeded. She relied on the teacher for a sense of her writing rather than relying on herself. Mona didn't need anyone to tell her she was a good writer; she knew it intuitively. Joan also knew she was good, but in her alcoholic personality still wondered if it were true. Afraid of her own standards, she caused herself to fail so that she wouldn't fail from lack of ability. All of these women perceived themselves to be good writers despite the circumstances surrounding their writing. They wrote for the community in that they wrote school assignments which would be corrected by the teacher.

### Writing for the Community--Negative Experiences

Not all of the women's experiences within school contexts were positive. Debbie, Ellen, Joan, Tricia, (Joan and Tricia had both positive and negative experiences.) Rhonda, and Paula relate the negative writing experiences they had in school. The women were not able to use a strong public voice because they were limited as to how and what they could write. Debbie talked about how difficult it was for her in junior high school. She had trouble with her writing--especially writing book reports. She felt bad and would often cry because she was not able to receive the writing instruction that she needed.

I knew I could do better, but I wasn't going to do it in public school. My mother couldn't afford anything else. What were we supposed to do? Seventh grade in public school wasn't that great. I loved school, but I wasn't getting the help I needed because the classes were so big. The only thing I had problems with was writing book reports because I didn't know the context. I would try. Some teachers would give me help, marks for effort, but my papers didn't come out too well. I always would feel bad. I was a weepy child. I mean, not in front of other people. To say I didn't do well on my paper--My mother would never have a kind word. (Debbie)

Debbie was apprehensive about going back to school as an adult. She was especially worried about the writing that would be required. She also felt that her boyfriend would feel insecure because she had more education.

I'm not sure if I'm going to like it. You know, part of me says, 'Yeah', 'cause I can get better training, get a better job when I go back to work when the kids are bigger. But something tells me that I'm in for a tough time. I mean, I like to write, but I don't know how drastically school's changed since I left the work--what school will be like. (Debbie)

Joan talked about the chances she was given to go to good schools and how her addictions kept her from them. She also lacked self-esteem and felt inferior because of her problems with alcohol and drugs. She said, however, that she also felt unique because of her drug problems.

First, I kept saying, 'Those people are snobby. I don't want anything to do with them. They wouldn't like me.' What it boiled down to, part of it was, I was afraid they wouldn't drink and drug the way I did. And part of the loneliness of the addict is feeling unique. Being able to be in a whole room of people, hundreds of people, and you could know 25 people and still feel completely alone. I was cocky and arrogant, but inside I was dying. (Joan)

When asked to recall what writing was like in the past, many of the participants talked about writing in school. All of the women quoted said the same thing in a slightly different way. They found it difficult or impossible to write on teacher-assigned topics which held no interest for them.

Tricia couldn't get into what the teacher wanted her to write. She wanted to write on topics which were of interest to her. She couldn't tell this particular



teacher that she didn't want to write on his topics, so she just didn't complete the assignment.

If it was something I just couldn't get into, I wouldn't do it. I just wouldn't do it. He never questioned me. He might have said--if I wasn't in his class or he seen me down the office working or something, and he'd be like, "Cause you don't try." I say, "I tried plenty of times, but I just can't get into it. He just, he just didn't, you know. It was always unfinished, unfinished conversation. (Tricia)

It was obvious that Tricia liked to write freely. She wanted to write what she wanted to write.

Sometimes I'd like doing some of the writing projects. And then sometime I didn't because of what they wanted. And I like to write freely. I like to write what I want to write. One year in school we had about the topic--What was it? It was something that was out of my--something I didn't even like. It wasn't interesting, but we had to do it because it was the class assignment. So it took me a while to do that. But I like to write freely. (Tricia)

Debbie described what happened to her in school. She couldn't write what "they" wanted her to write, and because of that never experienced success in writing.

I think my advisor sat down and tried, but I just could never--I love to read, too--but I could never get down what I felt about the book onto paper. It was like not what they were looking for, and to write it in the context that they wanted--It just seemed hard to me. I couldn't do it. It was like--See, if I can write in my own words how I feel about something, I can do it. But for somebody to say, "We need this, this, and this," it's very hard for me. (Debbie)

Rhonda echoed what Debbie said. When asked what she wanted included in a writing course she said, "Not to be restricted. Naturally to be writing on the subject you were supposed to be writing on--not to be restricted. I don't mean how many words you can write, I mean what you can put in it." (Rhonda)

Paula had a slightly different outlook on her experiences with writing in school. Unlike Tricia, Debbie, and Rhonda who blamed the controlling writing context of the school, Paula tended to blame herself for her school writing problems.

I always got passing grades, but, as I said, I worked, I worked hard for them. I worked hard on my reading and my compositions and tried to remember verbs and nouns and the whole thing. But, I never did well, never did. (Paula)

Paula blamed herself, but maybe that was the way she viewed all of life.

#### Advocacy Letters: Self

Many of the women interviewed wrote in their public voice when they wrote advocacy letters for themselves, their family members, and the community. They did not, however, do well when advocating for themselves. As a single example of this personal advocacy letter writing, Paula spoke about her writing to a prominent church official who did not answer her.

His office sent her to visit a lesser church official in whom she was very disappointed.

Cardinal Law--I had a problem with him. He never answered my letter, or he never got. .  
 .His office said I could go visit Bishop Hart which I did go to see, but I was disappointed. (Paula)

### Advocacy Letters: Family

The public voice was stronger when the participants advocated for others. Here they spoke about writing letters advocating for members of their families.

Rhonda wrote many letters to politicians. Due to her special family situation, she also wrote to various bureaucracies for the "special needs" of her autistic daughter, Leila.

I might write a letter to a politician. I've written a lot of letters. I wrote to Joe Moakley a couple of times about the school special needs busing situation. (Did you get results?) Yes, well, results, no, an answer, yes. I have to say, Joe Moakley always replies. He was doing what he could, looking into it. He wasn't really in charge.  
 (Rhonda)

I wrote to Joe Casper. Actually, I did get results from him. My daughter was going to be bussed to East Boston, and it was much too long a ride for her. She couldn't handle it. Actually, there was no way I could stop it. They said, "Sorry." And I wrote a letter to them, and told them she couldn't handle a bus ride. It was just too far. And there had to be a class closer. And he sent me a letter saying that she wouldn't be sent there, and I would be hearing from them. And I did and I got a new assignment. (Rhonda)

Rhonda detailed how she made sure that Leila got proper treatment. She wrote letters to medical people and to the school department. She updated Leila's medical records so that an accurate medical history was sent to agencies from which she was requesting services.

When she was finally diagnosed, I did a lot of reading about that because I used to have to fill out Camp Joy forms and school things, and we just never--we would have lines. 'What is her problem? What kind of medication does she have to take and the color of her eyes?' Is this all they want to know? So I would write a paper. I mean, what she was afraid of, things she may do. So I did a lot of writing when it came to her, and I still do every year. Like this week, that's what I'm doing cause she got a new counselor. (Rhonda)

Rhonda wrote to governmental agencies requesting funding to pay for Leila's medical bills.

I remember writing to the government funding places and Medicaid. We didn't have any kind of medical insurance, and we went through all these medical evaluations and CAT scans. And it costs all kinds of money, and I didn't have coverage, and he didn't have coverage in his work. One time I wrote this big, long, tear-jerking letter to the government and got granted the Hill-Burton Act which paid a hospital bill at Kennedy Memorial. And I wrote quite a few times to Medicaid, to Medicaid personnel. I wrote the Mayor when he came around because I knew him. (Rhonda)

On the other hand, Paula enjoyed writing letters to famous people advocating for family and needs. She wrote to President Truman, President Reagan, and Senator Kennedy.

(About writing to President Truman) I think that I told him that my brother was shot down; he was in a hospital in England and think I put, I was young, gosh, when I think of it, I'm surprised the FBI didn't come. And about the Purple Heart, I remember. I remember crying because he got shot down. I wrote and told him we should end this war and bring my brother back home. I never heard from him, but I didn't care; I liked him.  
(Paula)

Senators--I've written to Kennedy. My sister had a problem that couldn't be solved, and I felt, here I go, I said, get out the pen. . . And that didn't turn out too well either.  
(Paula)

Rhonda wrote letters so that her family could get an apartment in a housing project.

When we were searching for a place to live, I applied for housing, and we were on emergency status because we were evicted. And so they said there was nothing, and I wrote a few times to Ray Flynn (the present Mayor of Boston) who lived probably three doors away from me, and he didn't know that. So I went through channels. I was even going to knock on his door. So he wrote a letter to the head of housing and to the housing project. And I explained that we couldn't go too far out if we did get housing because Leila had just been assigned to that school, and it would just have been "kaput". And he wrote a letter to Leila's doctor asking Leila's doctor to send letters also. And between all the letters he talked a man into moving out of a six room apartment into a four room apartment so we could have it. In the end, I had to go talk to the man myself. (Rhonda)

Rhonda reported that she wrote letters for her husband who "runs and hides when there's tragedy. My mother was that way when we were kids, and I just started to take over. I'm always used to doing that." (Rhonda)

He had been accused of selling a boat motor in bad condition.

But my husband is aware of the letter writing, getting a response, because he asked me to write a letter once. Some man was suing him that he had sold a boat motor to. He said the motor was in bad condition, but it wasn't. He (her husband) wanted me to write a letter to this man's lawyer telling him the true situation before it got that far, and I did. And it was settled out of court. (Rhonda)

Rhonda wrote a letter to the electric company when she was unjustly accused of not paying an electric bill, but ultimately, she lost her case.

I was once taken to court and sued by the Boston Edison Company for a bill that was not mine. And I lost. And it was three months after we had moved. And the landlord's son lived in the apartment. And the landlord asked me to leave the electricity on until they finished fixing it up. And he would change the name over. And I trusted him. Anyways he did not change it over. And of course when you move into housing you don't have Edison or anything, so there was no way for me to re-open it. So it was three months before he changed it. And I got bills for this. So I said, "I'm not paying these bills. I didn't live there." I could prove I didn't live there, but I could not prove somebody else did. It was in my name. And I fought it right to the court, and I wrote letters I wrote, "You know I didn't live there. I mean, you know this. Yet, you're still going to charge me because you don't know where else to charge it." (Rhonda)

Rhonda experienced the power of her writing because it got housing for her family. She was able to write to the Mayor of Boston. She experienced no diffidence when she did this because her family needed

housing. She wrote to the head of the housing project, and ultimately went to the man whose apartment they needed persuading him to move. This was an experience of power in two ways. She was able to write to very powerful people, and she got what she asked for as the result of her letter writing. She did, however, fail to win her case with the electric company.

### Advocacy Letters: Community

The women wrote not only for themselves and their families but also for others in their community. The older black women wrote many advocacy letters for the needs of senior citizens in Massachusetts. Their public voice was more powerful than the other women's voices because they worked as a group rather than as individuals. The results of using their combined public voice were felt in the community.

Mary, a member of the Massachusetts Senior Action Council, wrote to President Carter, Representative Moakley, Senator Kerry, Senator Kennedy, and Senator Patricia McGovern to get bills passed that concerned the elderly, especially health care issues.

I had wrote a letter to President Carter, to Representative Moakley, one to Senator Kerry, Senator Kennedy, and Patricia McGovern. She's not a representative of this district. She's a person who works on the Ways and means Committee. And that's why we writes her. And then, then when things go right, whatever it is, some of them will write her back a thank you note. (Mary)

Well we was just asking--give 'em the name of the bill--what we were working on, and ask them would they give their support to help get it passed. When it was talking about cutting the poor off--the raise of (the) social security check. And we wrote Senator Kennedy about that; and wrote Kerry; and wrote Moakley. Wrote to all three about that. And with all the rest of them, and then their help--we did get; it did pay off I know they must got a ton of postcards from all over the state. And then give it to the senators. They wrote them, too. (Mary)

They said they would do all in their power to get it passed. They didn't want it to be cut off (the health care) the only means we had for medical expenses was that check again. And everything else was going up. Living expenses was going up. If we didn't get no more money, how were we going to make it? (Mary)

Mary explained her involvement with the senior citizen advocacy group in this way.

It's so much out there. Once you get to be a senior, then you learn what the seniors are denied. After you get into these organizations (the Massachusetts Senior Action council),--I've been there since it started, in '82 I believe, . . .I joined to see what it was all about. I liked what they were doing. (Mary)

Mary described how the members of the organization lobbied for passage of bills that they were interested in.

We set up a date when we gonna do it. Then we go to the State House, and go to the different senators' and representatives' offices, and talk to them, and tell them what we want. It does need a whole group to get the point, so many, about five or six unlessin you have a real lobby there. (Mary)



Mary didn't do much direct writing for the Massachusetts Senior Action Council, but she helped with the composition of letters and bills that they proposed.

I don't write it. We all decide what to say, and then one person writes it. We have items on the agenda that we want to work on, and we write to the representatives. We write them a little card and ask them if they would stay behind House Bill Number so and so. Sometimes we get a reply back. (Mary)

Mary felt powerful when the letter campaign was successful. Here, she was talking about a letter campaign to President Reagan against cutting social security benefits.

#### Letters: Community

The participants also used their public voices to write letters involving the wider community. Some letters never got sent, like Mona's. Others were written, sent, and bore results. One woman felt powerful writing letters because doing this allowed others to know her better.

Mona spoke about letters she had to write as president of the parish council. She talked about what her writing looked like and what the writing process was like for her. Even though she considered herself a good writer, she was able to acknowledge her mistakes

with equanimity, but realized that when writing for others the letter should be composed correctly.

This was the rough draft of a letter which never got typed up. So my mistakes, I realize I always did very well in school in grammar and spelling, but when you're writing fast, when I look back over things and realize that I leave out "ands". And if I'm reading something that someone has polished supposedly, I get really ticked grammatically. You know, they left out the "and"; they left out the comma or "didn't". I'm always correcting my kids all the time to the best of my ability to speak the language and use it properly. But then I look back at rough--at things that I have just written like this (indicates a letter) and I look and see where I leave--but that would never happen if I always did it (proof read it).  
(Mona)

Paula's consumer writing was an assertion of her individuality and her power in at least one area of her life. Paula said that she was sent different products to test and evaluate them. She thought this came about because she sent away for coupons.

If I buy a product and it's not as good as I think it should be then I write and tell them. I tell them what's wrong with the product, tell them about their good products, tell them about their bad products. And my children call me the "Poison Pen there she goes again." But I also feel I work hard for my money, and I feel that if there is something wrong with their product I'm going to tell them. And most of the time I get very nice letters back from them. And I felt my money is scarce, and they're going to tell me what this product does it should do it. And if it doesn't, I want them to know. They sent in the mail (certain products), and I'm willing to write back and tell them about different products. They send me questionnaires, so I've been doing that, and that's fun because there, again, I can

express myself. I've been doing that for quite a while. But I like doing that because I like letting them know how I feel. Sometimes it gets to be a pain in the neck because they want it back in three days, but I do it anyway. I feel as though I told them I would do so. So there, again, the pen, the pen, I'm always with the pen. (Paula)

Not everything went well when the women wrote letters. When Paula's writing involved asking someone she knows for Jimmy Carter's address, she shied away from asking for it. She talked about writing to Jimmy Carter.

They were just such nice people. So for me, right away I've got to write to them. (Did you?) No, but I'm going to. I know they live in Plains, Georgia, but I don't know if it was White Plains or Great Plains. And I don't dare ask anybody. (Paula)

(What is there inside of you that pushes you to do that?)

I don't know. Maybe it's wanting to be liked - wanting to show people that maybe I'm as good as they are. I think that's probably what it is. What I lack I feel in intelligence maybe I feel I can do some good, because I think that's what pushes me. I think fairness. If I buy a product, and I pay a dollar for it, I want a dollar's worth because I work hard for the dollar. So I write them a letter. I never write them hate letters. (Paula)

Louise saw her writing as a way for people to get to know her better.

Well, it means to me that other people by reading anything that I write, even down to a letter--I think that people get to know--get to know me better, or get to know my thoughts or ambitions or my future or my best or whatever it is that I write about. (Louise)

The elderly Black women did other formal writing besides writing advocacy letters. They wrote minutes of meetings, petitions, speeches, articles, and poetry. They experienced the power of their own writing and the power of their public voice as it was directed toward community needs.

Mary described how she organized writing the minutes of meetings at her church and at the senior club in her neighborhood.

My most thing I write--like if I have to take the minutes, well I sketch it. And then you get home, and you re-write it. And if it's not for you to read--if somebody else--If you know somebody else is secretary you write where they could read it and understand what you's been (saying). (Mary)

### Conclusion

When writing in the school community setting, not all of the women's writing experiences were positive. The women were limited by teachers as to what and how they could write. Many wanted to write on things that interested them, but were assigned topics for their writing assignment. One didn't get the individual instruction that she needed, and felt that the system overpowered her. Alcohol and drug addiction kept another woman from doing her best. Another felt that she just didn't have the ability. The women did not experience themselves as powerful in school settings because they were not allowed to use their personal

voice in a meaningful or purposeful way, nor were they given the help that they needed.

However, when advocating for others, especially family members, the women felt better about their writing. They wrote advocacy letters to politicians, church officials, various bureaucrats, and to public utility companies. They were not afraid to engage these people in dialogue when it came to asking for things for their families, and they were successful in getting many of things they wanted by being persistent with their requests.

They also felt powerful when writing letters on behalf of people in the community. The elderly Black women wrote letters and proposed bills for the legislature which would make the lives of senior citizens better. Another Black woman wrote letters as part of her duties as president of the parish council, and felt good about that. One of the white women wrote consumer letters, and it was an experience of power for her. And finally, one of the elderly Black women found that in her letter writing she was able to reveal herself to other people so that they might know her, her thoughts, and her ambitions better.

Although they were powerless over their writing in school, the women experienced the power of their public writing in real-life situations--especially those which threatened their family or people with similar needs.

Public Voices: Issues of Self-Esteem  
and Lack of Self-Esteem

Writing on the Job: Community

Many of the women experienced feelings of self-esteem about their writing on the job. This writing was done for the community in the form of an assignment for a Christian leadership course, letters to the parents of Boston Public School children, records kept about a senior center in a housing project, secretarial work for a security company, and notes written about patients in a nursing home. For all of these women there was a sense of self-esteem as they used their public voice writing in the contexts of their respective jobs.

Mona, speaking about her writing, felt good enough about it to offer to read an epitaph she had composed for herself as part of a course in church leadership.

Mona enjoyed living a simple life dedicated to God and sharing her faith in God. All her life she knew God was with her. He always answered her prayers although at that time she may not have realized it until later.

She had a great love with her husband, children, grandchild, parents, sisters, brothers, and friends. Because she was not artistically talented in music, art, or working with her hands, she believed that she had no talent although she knew that she would be a good friend. As an adult she came to learn that this was one of the best talents she could have, and was surprised and pleased when people saw leadership in her. She loved worshipping God in private and in public in church. They're a small and dedicated [group] pray to God together, strengthen themselves through worship and faith and service in God to one another. Mona knew that the church building is not a church alone, and [she] is not afraid of death. I love my family and friends--happy to be with God. I had leadership qualities growing and strengthening over the years, and I wish to learn more about the scriptures, the Catholic Church, to enforce in the areas where I see change, to keep myself open to being educated and to serving the world with compassion and others. (Mona)

Mona wrote articles to parents of children in the Boston Public Schools.

And on that job we put out a newsletter which we sent to the Boston parents, all the parents of Boston Public School children. We each wrote an article. We put our newsletter out five times a year, and we each wrote an article. In one of those boxes I have saved one of the newsletters in my closet. I had saved one of the newsletters, and there's an article in there. Each newsletter we did I wrote an article for. And we--all of us in the office would like--everybody had their own article. My boss did the editorial, and we would collaborate on another article. (Mona)

Fern kept records when she worked in the senior center in a Boston housing project. She used her public voice when writing on the job and had a healthy self-esteem about herself and her writing.

(Let's see. I know. You talked about working with the senior citizens in the project, and you said that you had to keep records when you worked there. Is that right?)

Yes, concerning what we did that day. Every day I had to write in my notebook how I spent the day with the senior citizens, and sometimes it would be a regular routine that we did every day. But sometimes we would have a luncheon, or we would go on a trip or whatever the day concerned, you know. I would always have to write and this letter, this report to my boss. (Fern)

(What would be your usual routine that you would write down on these reports?)

The time they came, like--I used to work from twelve to four, and so I would just take notes and what I did the whole day and then the calls I would make a lot of times I would call and find out about the senior citizens. Sometimes they would be sick. Sometimes they would be in the hospital. (Fern)

Debbie filled two jobs at the same time. She worked at a security company, and was a guard and the company's secretary. She described this job as the one which had the most writing.

The one job I had that I had to do a lot of writing was for a security company. I worked as their security guard, and I was also their secretary. I did their payroll and their communications and their typing and all their billing. It was like I was constantly writing--writing to people and communicating through the mail about when they'd come in to the Hynes Auditorium for their shows--set up the security on the shows. (Debbie)

(Now how are these things that you wrote at work?)

They were my words. I would write it. They would tell me, "Well, we need to have this date in there." They would tell me what was



needed in the letter--what kind of information. It was in my words it was written down. (Debbie)

Rhonda also had positive self-esteem about her writing at the nursing home where she worked as a nurse's aid because she wrote detailed notes on the charts of her patients. No one else did that. For Rhonda, who already felt she was a good writer, the act of writing nurse's notes made her feel important.

I worked for a long time as a nurse's aid at Marian manor. there was a lot of writing involved in that. At the end of the day you would have to do a write-up on each patient. Usually you would have six patients. Before you would went off your shift you would have to take an extra twenty minutes and write in the book on each person. What time they got up, how you thought they were feeling when they got up, what kind of mood they were in, are they eating well, how many times they went to the bathroom, if they had their medication. You'd have to do that for each one. Some people would do it short and sweet, and some people would do it a page long I suppose it all depended on how much writing you liked to do. but if you didn't like to write, you probably wouldn't get the right information anyway because there were some things that people never could write like, "She was in a good mood today," or "She was happy today," or "She was crying today." People didn't bother with that stuff. (Rhonda)

(Did you put it in?)

Yes, I did because to me in a job like that that was important. The way those people feel, it's the most important thing. So, I used to do some pretty long write-ups on that. I remember the girl that worked on the shift, and I used to give her a ride home. She'd say, "Come on. Come on. You got off five minutes ago." But I would always just that one person who needed that extra

write-up. And I like doing that. You were a nurse's aid, but when you came to that part of the job, it was like you were important. You were an authority. (Rhonda)

Mona had to keep records as coordinator of her parish food program, and had to send letters with requests for donations of food.

I really have a busy life with my church work. I have to do a lot of writing. The food program first of all--I have to keep records, and I have to keep files on people. I have cards and files on people in the program, their name and family composition, and like I said, I have to keep reports. There are letters that I send, requests for donations. Every year I have a fundraiser at Christmas time, and I send letters to people at other churches to request donations for items to sell. I make up fliers and things for people to come to the sale. (Mona)

#### Speeches, Articles, and Petitions: Community

The Black participants in this research experienced self-esteem around their writing of speeches, articles, and petitions about community concerns. The women expressed sentiments of self-esteem around these writing events. The speeches, articles, and petitions previously mentioned in this paper were examples of how the women experienced power in their writing.

Joan was placed in a program for the gifted and talented when she was in high school, and wrote for the school newspaper.

I was going to high school, and their standards were pretty low. So it was easy for me to whiz by. I didn't have to do too much. I was in a program that--I was in several different programs for gifted children when I was in elementary school, when I was in kindergarten, when I was in high school. One of the things I was on was the school newspaper. I did a lot of work on that. I dabbled writing plays, bits of plays, though not too much. (Joan)

Louise wrote and delivered speeches. She did this in connection with her membership in several senior citizen programs.

They had a civil rights activist, James Farmer, and Mamie Till Mobley that has given so much to equality and justice for all, and have given their lives to that. I wrote my own speech that I gave when they were here when they came. We had a reception for them that afternoon down on Tremont Street, and we had a little reception for them. And I wrote this speech, and I spoke just to tell them what we were all about and all. I write some speeches every now and then. They're always asking me to speak at different places. And they will come and help me, but sometimes I write my own speeches. And then er talk over the phone about how it sounded and then the things we can change, you know, But I don't mind speaking. (Louise)

Fern delivered many kinds of speeches which she wrote herself. One speech was about her Portuguese ancestry, and the speech was given to children at a local grammar school. During the course of the interview she showed the researcher different things that she had written for the senior citizen activist group. These included a log she was keeping about the goings-on in the park in front of her building. It was

a known place where drugs were sold. She also showed the researcher copies of speeches she had given as part of her work in the activist group and copies of letters she had written to her son when he was in college.

And this (indicating the papers she held in her hand) is the writing I did for the school where they were having their program, and they invited me to represent the Portuguese this year. (Fern)

Fern also wrote a speech to tell about the senior ladies making pillows for a Christmas bazaar.

One time when we were making pillows, stuffed pillows for the Christmas bazaar, we met at one of the church member's house, and it was . . .tearing the mattresses apart to get that stuff from the pillow to make, to make the pillows--fancy pillows. We covered them with beautiful material, and we had a lot of fun. Even though the cotton was all over the place and all over us and everything, and so I wrote a speech about that. (Fern)

Fern also talked to the students at a local Catholic high school about the elderly and the Silver Hair Legislature, an advocacy group for senior citizen concerns.

And I wrote my own speech. I was there twice then I also brought this lady over there that takes pictures, and she showed them films and talked about Negro history. And then I had the Silver Haired Legislature director to come over there and bring films and show it to the pupils telling them about the silver hair and showing different people. And I was on the film. (Fern)

All I know is that I was talking about the elderly and about the youths, and how some of the senior citizens, you know, was being mugged and everything by the youths of today--some of them, you know. And I spoke

about the senior citizens having like three legs, I think it was. They have their pair of feet, and then they have a cane. I wished I had that letter. (Fern)

Tricia talked about having difficulty finishing most of her writing projects. She spoke especially of writing a play for Eddie Murphy that she had difficulty finishing. However, Tricia was different from both Paula and Joan. Even though she didn't finish the play, failure to reach her writing goal, she only admitted being slightly puzzled about it. Her natural optimism seemed to carry her through any self-doubt. "I still have to do the story I started of him, and I'm trying. . ." (Tricia)

And I had--I was gonna make it about him goin' to college and to major in law. And I never finished that 'cause I didn't know to get into it, and I'm tryin' to think, 'Oh, this is Eddie Murphy, and I know how he is, so I gotta make it such and such. Then I was thinkin' about who, you know, who his--the characters were going to be. I was thinking of other celebrities. And I had a whole list one time. What makes it so funny is I don't have it no more. I still do have the story I started of him, and I'm trying. . .(Tricia)

### Poems: Family

Some of the women exercised their public voice by writing poetry for or about their families. An attitude of self-esteem is caught in the way Joan described her poetry. She also sent her short stories to a T.V. station. However, Paula had no sense of self-esteem when describing her family's reaction to

her poetry. Joan talked about her poetry and short stories.

I can remember writing a poem about the rain. It was so good, so good, so expressive to be able to express myself in a way that my mother approved of. My mother was very hard to please. I don't know. . . I can remember writing stories and I . . . sending them to T.V. shows, kid's T.V. shows. (Joan)

From the very beginning Joan's mother also told her that she was talented and described her as being "special" and "mystical." She also received confirmation from another person.

But in the next example, Paula told of how she stopped writing poems for her family. She also said that she felt inferior to people, especially in education.

And no one's ever said. 'How come we don't get any poems anymore?' So that was to me a kind clue that they're not as important to them as I thought they were. Or they just don't think, so I can't judge them. I don't know. So I figure, well. . . My daughter had the two boys, and I wrote them each a poem when they were born. With Kathleen, she's a girl. She's never said, 'Gee, you wrote one for the boys, how come you never wrote one for Kathleen?' So, we'll let that go for a while, and we'll see what happens. I think I resigned myself to the fact that they're sick of them, or they don't mean as much to them. (Paula)

No one in Paula's family told her that they didn't like her poems; she put the interpretation on it herself. Paula was never sure how she or others felt about her writing.

Poems: Community

Paula experienced self-esteem around her poetry when it was written for the wider community. This kept her writing for others even though she stopped writing for her family because she thought that they didn't like her poetry.

For Paula it was very important to write well. And she tried to make sure that what she wrote was correct by consulting the dictionary or a grammar book. She was proud of her writing about her family, but was still unsure how others would find it.

(Does it matter to you that you can write well or not?)

Yeh, it does. I wish I could do it better. I wish I could spell better, or I wish I could put the words together better. See, with my family when I write my poems I write them just how I feel. But when I give them to anybody outside I'm always thinking, 'Oh God, does a comma belong there?' I'm not sure a word I write for the family, but I correct it later. But to someone I get the dictionary. (Paula)

Paula thought she put too much of herself in it. but, in the end, she was never quite sure how she felt about her writing.

(You said you like to hear people praise your work.)

Yes, that's why I continue doing it. I think it gives me the feeling, 'Gee, they really did think it was good.' Because I tell you, when I write them I think, 'Oh gosh, this is great!' Sometimes the words come hard because I want them to fall into place. And

as I told you, that's when I pray, 'Gee, help me with the words.' So I think maybe I want to be liked; I don't know. But I think when they say, 'That's great; that's great that you can do that' I think, 'Well, I can do something!' I like that part. And yet, when I read them over I think they're really not that good. It's nothing that could ever be published. (Paula)

### Conclusion

When the women used their public voice, the power of their expression was curtailed significantly. When they wrote in school, they wrote on topics which were not to their liking. Having topics imposed upon them made them feel helpless and incompetent. There were, however, one or two teachers who let them write on self-chosen topics enabling them to write out of the power of their personal experience. The writing of consumer letters was an experience of power for Paula although her advocacy letter for herself didn't bear much fruit. However, the advocacy letters for family members were generally successful. When writing speeches, articles, and petitions for the community, the elderly black women experienced the power of their public voice. Many of the women wrote letters which involved the larger community.

Many women addressed the issue of writing and self-esteem when they wrote on the job, when they wrote articles and speeches, when they wrote letters for others, and when they wrote poetry. Mona felt good



enough about her writing to read a segment to the researcher, and she also reported that she wrote for a newsletter regularly sent to the parents of Boston Public School children. Rhonda took pride in the writing she did as a nurse's aid. Mary, Fern, and Louise spoke positively about the speeches, articles, and petitions they helped to write. They also had to exert much pressure on the legislature by other forms of lobbying in order to gain their objectives. It was always an uphill experience. Joan wrote for her school newspaper. Louise and Fern spoke to various audiences outside of their work with the senior citizen lobbying group. And Tricia wrote stories for a general public audience. Joan and Paula wrote poetry. Joan always felt good about her writing, but Paula was never quite sure how she felt.

#### Social Class: Leaving School and Wishes and Dreams

Sifting through the interview material around the issue of social class, the one constant which emerged was the fact that most of these women left grammar school or high school before they graduated, or were not able to fulfill their dreams after graduation from high school. In this section each of the women has been allowed to tell the story of her educational experiences without being put into categories.

The issue of leaving school is an important one when considering social class. Traditionally, the school bridges the individual from self and family into community. In school the child learns quickly what the larger community allows and prohibits. Working-class and poor families usually do not have a power base in the larger economic/political community. It is no surprise, then, that most of the women cited in this research failed to complete their education in an environment that imposed middle-class criteria for success.

#### Dreams Unfulfilled: Leaving School

##### Fern

Fern was taken out of school at the age of fourteen because her parents divorced, and she was sent to live in Boston. She lived with a family and did domestic work to support herself.

Down the country there really wasn't much really to do, you know, because we were poor, and we didn't have that much, and we didn't know that much really at that time.

(What about after you got out of school?)

Oh, after I got out of school, I went to work, and I kept on workin' one job to the other. First I was doin' domestic work 'cuz I was taken out of school, and had to go to work to support myself. And I went--and then as I grew older, I kept gettin' different jobs. And, ah den I--one job to the other.  
(Fern)

Mona

Two traumatic events in Mona's life influenced her dropping out of school after completing the ninth grade, her sister's death and the closing of her Junior high school.

I went to Roxbury Memorial. In the summer that I was in the eighth grade my sister was killed, and she was accidentally shot. She was sixteen, and I was thirteen. That was a very bad summer. And I was in the eighth grade in the Theodore Roosevelt School which was a good school then. I don't know about now. It's terrible over there. That was one of the best junior high schools in the state at that time. Anyways, that was in 1953, and my sister died. She was killed in May, and I was in the eighth grade at the Theodore Roosevelt and looking forward to the ninth grade and graduating from there. And some of my best friends had graduated that year 1953. And so I saw all the things that they were going through--graduation and everything. And me and all my friends, we were looking forward to it. The teachers were saying, "Next year, next year you guys--And in the summer, that summer I received a letter saying they were closing the school because it was too small. And they sent me to this school over here, the Lewis School which had one of the worst reputations in the city. And I just made up my mind that I hated school from then on. I didn't want to have anything to do with the ninth grade. And so I just made up excuses. My poor mother, I just made up excuses not to go to school. I didn't feel well. And so I failed the ninth grade mainly because of my attendance. And then I went to Roxbury Memorial High School, and I still had the same problem. And I failed, and I had to repeat the ninth grade over again. And when I was sixteen I left school. (Mona)

Tricia

Tricia had a lot to say relative to her education or the lack thereof. She explained that she was thirty credits short for her high school diploma. She then described what her educational experiences had been.

I don't want to go back to Charlestown-- that's I refuse to go, not because I . . . It's not a bad school at all. It's just that to me I would feel funny goin' there, seeing the same faces or doin' the same thing, especially bein' there now I can't play basketball. And if I'm there now, I' goin' to want to play sports, and I'm not eligible to play sports 'cause I'm too old. And that's another reason I don't want to go there is because of my age. Students that are new to there, or I know from out of middle school are goin' to be there. And I'm just like, "Wait a minute. I don't even belong in high school; I belong, I was supposed to graduate when I was eighteen years old." So I would feel--I wouldn't be comfortable back there, so I would rather go someplace--meet, see new faces, meet new teachers and work at my own self-paced level. So that's another reason--that's why I didn't --even my guidance counselor wrote, "Just come back, and you can have. . ." he said, "I'll give you work study." Because I only need the four classes, four more subjects. He was like, "You don't even need to stay the whole day. But I was like I just don't want to come back there. I would feel funny or uncomfortable there. (Tricia)

(So you had to--Is it like your junior or senior year?)

If I went to jobs for youth, it really wouldn't because you don't have a lot of activities as I would in high school, you know, so it would be more like just work, doin' school work. I mean it's, you know, I'll meet new people; it'll be kind of fun from what , from what my friend told me. But it's not like finishing my senior year. There won't be no prom or anything like that.

They do, I think, they do have some kind of activities there, but it's not the same. They don't have sports or nothin' like that. They do somethin', but I forget what it is.  
(Tricia)

(What happened that you decided not to finish high school?)

I think if I would've went to Charlestown instead of goin' to Madison from the start I would've finished high school, but Jim didn't want me to go there 'cause he thought they was having a prejudice out there which they did have a few fights and stuff out there. But after that it was nothin' serious. So, that's why I didn't go out there from the start. But if, I believe if would've went there from the start I could've finished.

See, Madison messed me up. That school messed me up totally 'cause they give you, they give the students too much freedom at Madison. The security guards, at the beginning of the school year they try to come down hard on you. Tell you you can't leave the building and such and such. But it goes in everybody's ear and out the other. And to me, if I, they hadn't given me that much freedom, I would've never took it. 'Cause it ain't like I was--I consider myself not having friends 'cause I kept more to myself. The friends I did, the friends who did go there and who I went to middle school with, like one girl, me and her was this close in middle school. And when I finally seen her in Madison, she was a whole totally different person! (Tricia)

They was like sharing tables, and which I didn't like neither, so I didn't really get into my class work. And I took advantage of the freedom. I used to go home for lunch; I used to come here (her grandmother's). If I, if I knew Jim wasn't home, I used to go home and stay home. (Tricia)

Tricia felt that she might have finished high school if she didn't go to Madison, but also admitted that she didn't go to school as often as she should. In

addition, she had a low tolerance for frustration. She stated,

If there was a teacher I couldn't get, you know, get into his work or her work then I wouldn't do it. You know, I would try just like in math, I would start off all right in math, but when it started to get into stuff I couldn't get into and I didn't like it and I tried, you know, to pressure myself into doin' it I wouldn't do it. I just wouldn't do it no more. I would give up. (Tricia)

When Tricia transferred from junior high to high school the usual disorientation of a move like that affected her powerfully. The school was too big. She didn't know too many people. And when she changed to Charlestown High (due to forced bussing in Boston) the work was harder.

First I went to Madison, and I didn't do too well there. Then I had plans for going to Charlestown High. I enjoyed that high school. My English teacher there, he was all right, pretty much. But things change when you get to high school. Everything's a lot different. Well the work was harder. The work is harder, and at the other school it's like. . .When I was in the. . .It was everybody was one big family. [In high school] you meet new teachers, and there are a lot more people. So you don't get as much attention. And some teachers could care less. Of course it's like that all around. When I really went to Madison, that's where I had all my problems, 'cause Madison was like a big school. And it has a lot of students. But you have all those students there, and most of the teachers act like they just there to do their job, and just to get paid. "I'm here to teach, and I'm just going to do this and do that as long as I get my check. I used to work. I'm used to being around teachers who act like they care. They want you to do something, and they don't want to see you slacking off. (Tricia)

Rhonda

Rhonda left school in the second year of high school and went to work. She didn't say why she left school, however.

Well, I didn't finish high school. It's different now. My first year of high school I was not much into writing and stuff. I still don't recall doing much writing. My first year of high school I didn't do much of anything. And I quit my second year. I did some writing then, filling out applications. I worked on (the name of the job was unclear) years later. And I got so good at the job that they wanted me to become an agent, and I hadn't even finished tenth grade. When the boss was out I used to write perfect orders for him. And then I had good handwriting, and they just assumed everything on that, that I was well-educated. Of course, I didn't take the job. (Rhonda)

Ellen

Ellen didn't like school. She had problems at home and these affected her performance in school. She repeated the seventh grade, and left the eighth grade when she was sixteen years old.

When I was a kid, I just didn't want to go to school. There were problems at home, so I took it out on my school work and myself and the adults. I wanted the attention, and taking it out in destructive-type ways and trying to drive my mother crazy. Was that in the seventh grade? Yes, it started in the seventh grade. I turned into a teen age rebel-cutting out of school, hooking school, never listening. [I] didn't have any respect for my teachers. That went through--I was kept back in seventh. I was another year in the seventh. They put all the kids. . .I was considered one of the bad. . .They didn't know enough about kids to. . .I was put in with the other kids that were all punks. I was scared to death. I was supposed to be so

tough. I knew the other kids were real bad. And then they had to promote me to the eighth grade because they couldn't keep me back for three years in a row. I thought I was going back to school to the seventh grade again. At least I was going. . . And they promoted me into the eighth. I quit school in the eighth just before I was sixteen, and I went to work. (Ellen)

### Joan

Joan left school at the end of her junior year when she got pregnant.

See, I was a junior; they had me in sophomore point-wise. I was trying to get my points from Colorado. They lost my records. . . Just stupid problems. I got knocked up at the end of the year. There was the escape again, the white picket fence, getting married, kids, dog, fish and birds and all of that good stuff that was going to make Joanie happy. I was miserable. That summer I started counseling, and my creative writing stopped completely. I stopped writing. My husband (my boyfriend at the time)--a really sick relationship, he's an addict and really destructive, he kept leaving me from the time I was sixteen. I was with him from about sixteen till about six months ago. (Joan)

### Paula

Paula completed high school, but failed to realize her dream of becoming a nurse because her family didn't have the money to send her to nursing school. She did not leave school, but she did have to leave her dream, and this handicapped her in her own eyes, and it left her feeling as powerless as those women who didn't finish high school or grammar school.

Other times I think I'd like to write about what I would have done forty-six years ago, however long I'm out of school. What I would



have done. Maybe what I could have done if I put my mind to it. Maybe I could have become a nurse even though I was poor. Maybe I could have got better grades if I studied. Maybe I could help somebody else by telling them what I did. Where do you begin? Where do I start? What would I have changed? Gee, I don't know. I just always liked nursing. I always wanted to be a nurse.

When I was gonna get out of high school, the year before, I thought of joining the service, and I thought in that respect I could get the nursing career in there, and it wouldn't cost me any money. My brother was in the service, and I wrote and told him that the next year when I graduated I thought I'd join the service. At the time service women were looked on, I think, differently than today. He wrote back and said, "You're not going into the service. It's not a place for a young lady to go." You see, it was war time too, you must remember, and I think maybe their morals were different then. He never said. He just said he didn't want me going in, and I listened to him, which today maybe the kids today would try it, wouldn't listen to him.

So I always, when I start to think about what I could have done, when I look back, it's God's will. This must be what he wanted because nothing has changed. I did want to go back to school a period in my life, but was told no. I was too old again. And I didn't fight for it. So whether I'm not the fighting type, or whether I just felt that if God wanted me to go back, he would have provided a way. And maybe he did, and I didn't push for it. It's not his fault either. So you have to accept what you have today. 'Cause if I don't, then I could be very unhappy. So this way, if I back off and say, "Well, you gave me the opportunity, and I didn't take it, God. Or else, this is really what he wants." And so I let it go at that. (Paula)

Debbie

When Debbie finished high school at the home for troubled girls, she wanted to enlist in the service. It was a very important goal for her. Instead, she became pregnant and wasn't able to do so.

All I've done is like security work since I got out of high school, or file clerk. When I was working at John Hancock, I worked in the mail room. I never really took anything in school business course wise because when I got out of school I was planning on going into the service, but unfortunately I got pregnant. So I couldn't.

Ah, so I figured if I went back to school and get training, because in the training I have, yet I probably could get a good job. But I just don't want a good job that's gonna make me stuck there, you know, for the rest of my life. I want something that I can, how do you say, go places with. (Debbie)

Louise

Louise also had to quit school in order to go to work. Her father was disabled in a quarry accident and could no longer support the family.

I was taken out of school at 14. I was taken out of school, and I went to work. There were five children younger than I was, and they definitely needed help although we lived on a farm. But my father wasn't a farmer; he worked at a stone quarry most of his life.

But I've always been. . . I went to school. I went with my grandmother. We had a long ways to go to school in the country, so my grandmother was visiting for the summer, and she lived in New Jersey.

(Louise went to live with her grandmother and to go to school in New Jersey.)

So I stayed with my grandmother in New Jersey, and I went to school for five years. I think it was quite an advantage of going to school.

But I went back home, and I really didn't want to go back there with my grandmother. My mother said, "You don't have to go back." So, I stayed, and I started to school there (in Virginia) until, you know, this happened with my father. He was caught in a slide, caught his leg, and he had have his leg amputated.

When my mother told me I would have to leave school and go to work, I was very, very heartbroken. I said, "To leave school? How am I ever going to be a nurse?" So, I did. I went back to New Jersey with my grandmother again, and got a job as a mother's helper. I was with a little boy, and I stayed with those people until my father died. And I went back, of course, for the funeral and all, and then I stayed because my mother didn't want another sister and I to go back if we could find some work near where we could be near and the smaller children. So, this is what we did. (Louise)

### Mary

Mary didn't have much to say at all about her education. The only time it was mentioned was in connection with a job she had with an insurance company. She did not indicate whether she went to high school.

I went to night classes on my job 'cause we. . .it was something I wanted to do. And so I took it. It didn't cost nothin', so I get up and go. (Mary)

## Conclusion

How did the women view their leaving school? Why were their dreams unfulfilled? Whatever the reasons for leaving school, it was a kind of watershed in their lives. For some it was the beginning of their work life or family life. For others it was a shattering of their dreams. For still others it was a vain hope that children and family life would somehow change their lives. And others left school because of emotional trauma which had nothing to do with school itself.

Fern and Louise seemed to accept the fact that they had to leave school in order to support the family. Fern didn't articulate that she had plans for the future. In fact, she said that she went from one job to another throughout her life. Louise accepted her mother's decision, but it was not without protest. She wanted to be a nurse, and knew that by leaving school her dream would be shortcircuited. Mary, the third elderly woman, never referred to her schooling during the interviews. Paula, who was sixty and had finished high school, was never allowed to pursue her career goal of nursing. Her family didn't have the money to send her to nursing school as the other families couldn't support Fern and Louise. She was further discouraged when she wrote to her brother

asking his opinion of her joining the service and being able to be trained as a nurse in the service. He discouraged her, and her hope of becoming a nurse was denied again. The stories were not exactly alike, but the results were.

Mona, Tricia, and Ellen left school because of psychological trauma. Mona was unable to achieve in school after the shooting death of her sister and the change in her school assignment, both of which happened at about the same time. Tricia, who was twenty, blamed the premature termination of her academic career on the school itself. It was too big; teachers didn't really care about the students. Topics taught didn't speak to her life experience. But even though she had only thirty points to complete for her diploma, Tricia felt she was too old to return to the traditional high school setting. Her academic life was on hold. Ellen came from an alcoholic family, and took her anger out on her mother and herself. She skipped school and never studied. Ellen was considered a "tough" kid, and left school after her social promotion to the eighth grade.

Pregnancy was the cause of the school terminations of Joan and Debbie. Joan had substituted relationships for her alcohol addiction, and had three children in as many years. She was miserable and

stopped writing. Debbie graduated from high school but was prevented from going into the service, her dream, because she became pregnant.

Rhonda said she left school during her sophomore year, but didn't say why. And Mary never talked in great depth about her educational experiences. Each of these ten women had her own story. She didn't complete school or attain her goals, and this contributed to her being mired in the mud of marginal living and continual frustration.

#### Wishes and Dreams

Many of the women interviewed for this project had wishes and dreams for their writing. These were not limited by the circumstances of their daily life. They wanted to write books about family or friends or a book for the parents of autistic children. These aspirations could be said to have been born "out of time" and not to be terribly realistic.

Paula echoed many women of her generation who wanted more than they had, but thought they couldn't have it. They felt that they weren't as good as or as smart as everyone else.

(You said that you want to show people you're as smart as anybody else, and writing poems does that for you. Could you elaborate on that a bit?)

Well, I think I've always wished I could have gone on for a better education. I used to want to go back to college a couple of times. But I was married in a different time, and women just didn't do that. They just didn't further their education. Once they got married, they settled down, had a family, stayed home, and took care of them. And I think that was my generation.

As I got older, I wanted to do more things. But--I always wanted to play the piano, and I wanted to take piano lessons. When I was working I went to see if I could take lessons. She said, "Do you have a piano at home?" I said, "No." She said, "It's foolish. How are you going to practice?"

I wanted to take skiing when I was married and my children were older. My husband said that I was too old. My generation of women weren't given the opportunities or were pushed to further their education. So I think now mostly everyone has a better opportunity to do these things. And mostly everyone has a degree, and I am nervous when I am with a lot of people who have their degrees. I don't talk because I'm afraid they're over my head, or they'll think that. Or I think I can't keep up with them. (Paula)

Paula had wishes and dreams that never came true. She seemed unable to get out from under the feeling that she was stuck, even though she said positive things about herself and her writing.

Tricia wanted to write something about her closest friends just because she wanted to do so.

As a matter of fact, I got a diary about some of my closest friends. It's not really a diary. It's just something I said, "Oh, let me write about all the close friends I have."  
(Tricia)

When asked about what writing meant to her Mona said that for her it was a matter of preserving her thoughts and feelings. She also wanted to write for an audience by preserving the events in her family, both past and present, through writing a family history.

Well, for one thing, in keeping a journal or trying to keep one, writing means preserving my thoughts and my feelings and what is happening. I hope to put a lot of what I write down in book form some day, so it will be kind of a family history. And I've always liked to write. It's just been since I haven't been feeling well I'm just so distracted. So, I just keep putting things off, all the writing that I want to do.  
(Mona)

Rhonda would like to write a book for a specialized audience, the parents of autistic children. Her experience with her own daughter convinced her of the need for such a book. Parents are also traumatized when their child is diagnosed as autistic.

I always think if you write something it should be of some value to somebody else. I probably would, could write a lot about autism. I've read every book written on it. And a lot of things are not in it. I could write a lot about that. I wouldn't use my imagination. I really don't put my imagination on paper. Well, I would probably mainly write it for the parents, you know, not for the kids. Somebody should tell the parents, "You're not nuts. You're not totally 100% obligated to this disease because this is what happens. It happened to me. I know." And you get so completely involved that the rest of your life just stops. And I've seen it. I mean, I've seen it happen to women who, young girls who wanted kids, who were totally involved with



them. It was their only child. And their marriages were falling apart. They quit their job. And you can't do it. I would probably write it for the parents and the doctors and everybody else who usually gets involved in it because if they get that totally involved it's almost as bad as not being involved at all. (Rhonda)

If she could write better, Paula would like to write a book where she would address a general audience. She had three themes which ran through all of her interviews, and she put them together in the following paragraphs. She wanted to write about her family or the rectory where she worked. But most of all, she wanted to write about what could have happened in her life if circumstances were different.

I think I'd like to write a book. I've thought of it so many times. Well, how do they begin? Where do they begin? When I read a book, I always read the ending first because I can't wait to see what happens. So if I read the ending and then I start at the beginning I say, "Oh, yes! everything falls into place. That must say something about my personality. I want everything to be in its place, maybe. So I have thought of writing a book. And I think that's what a book would be for me, a struggle to get the words out that I want to say and have them all fall in like a puzzle all the right way. I think that's important to do that. I don't think I'll ever get to do that.

Sometimes I think I'd write about my family. Other times I think I'd write about my experiences here at the rectory. Other times I think I'd like to write about what I would have done 46 years ago--however long I'm out of school--what I would have done. Maybe what I could have done if I put my mind to it. Maybe I could have been a nurse even though I was poor. Maybe I could have got

better grades if I studied. Maybe I could help somebody else by telling them what I did. Where do you begin? (Paula)

Tricia, probably the most whimsical of the participants, wanted to write about her friends just because she wanted to. She never mentioned her intended audience, and perhaps she had none in mind. She perceived herself as a good writer, and didn't see her project as something unattainable. As usual, her breezy self-confidence as a writer carried her along.

Mona wanted to write for her family. Her wish was to compose a family history. She thought it was important enough to be written down and preserved for future generations, her audience. She had enough confidence in her writing to contemplate the project. She wanted to write from what she knew--her personal experience.

Rhonda's audience was wider. She wanted to write to the parents of autistic children. She had enough confidence in her writing ability to decide that it was possible, and enough insight from her experiences to know that they would be a valuable contribution. She wanted to give to others her experiences as a parent of an autistic child.

Paula probably had the most poignant desire to share her experiences through writing. She wanted to write from the depths of her being about what she might

have become if things were different in her life. She described her writing experience as a personal struggle. She wanted to write about topics that were close to her--her family, her job, but most of all about what her life might have become if circumstances were different. She echoed the voices of millions of women when she said, "Maybe I could help somebody else by telling them what I did, [but] where do you begin?" (Paula)

Each of these women had wishes and dreams. However, their experiences around written language, issues of gender, and social class put them in great conflict. The economic condition of poor and working-class women and the expectations of a middle-class society put them in a social condition where they had no chance to actualize their potential. Added to this was their own conflict about letting their voices be heard. They found that in the public domain it was much more difficult for their voices to be heard, and, in many cases, they found themselves completely silenced. It was only when they wrote in the personal domain out of their own life experience that they used their strong, vibrant voices. And most of the time they used these voices to help them survive in very hostile worlds within themselves, their families, and their communities.

### Conclusion

The women interviewed for this research described how they used vibrant personal voices when writing to vent angry feelings, discover how they thought and felt, cope with and survive their living situations. Their audience was primarily themselves. However, they wrote letters for themselves and others and generally experienced feelings of self-esteem connected with this writing.

When the women used their public voice they perceived that their writing voice was not so powerful. School writing was an exercise in being dominated by another person's ideas and demands. The writing of advocacy letters was a positive and powerful expression of their writing although not all of this writing succeeded in its intent. The three elderly black women experienced a high degree of success from their speeches, articles, and petitions.

When addressing the issue of self-esteem, the women generally felt good about their writing on the job. This attitude tied into the issue of social class since the work ethic dominates American society, and since having a job means being productive, writing done on the job was perceived in a more positive manner. Their speeches, articles, and petitions were generally successful even though the process of lobbying was

always difficult. When writing poetry and stories the women usually felt good although not all the time.

And finally, the women's experience of helplessness when confronted by the inequities of social class was manifest in their leaving either grammar school or high school before graduation. They did not fit in a school system that existed in order to bridge the individual from the family to a community where middle-class, male experiences and values were the only accepted ones.

Their wishes and dreams were born of persistent determination to succeed despite all the obstacles. Some wanted to write books; others wanted to write a family history. One woman wanted to write a book for parents of autistic children. All wanted to be successful, but none accomplished her wishes and dreams, especially concerning writing.

CHAPTER V  
SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS

The Problem of the Study

The purpose of this study was to investigate the writing experiences, past and present, of poor and working-class, non-professional, women writers. A second purpose was to explore the relationship, past and present, of their writing to their feelings of power, self-esteem and social class.

Procedures

The exploratory, descriptive nature of the research suggested a qualitative rather than quantitative methodology. Therefore, the researcher conducted the study from a naturalistic inquiry perspective. The researcher's primary role was that of interviewer of working-class and poor, non-professional women. Data was collected from June through October, 1988 using: (1) formal, audio-taped, in-depth phenomenological interviews; (2) written field notes; (3) participants' writing samples; and (4) using confidential income statements.

The data were analyzed throughout data collection and after the interview sequence was over. The interviewer employed seven ways of on-going analysis: narrowing the study, selecting the type of study, using

previous data, making observer comments, memoing, exploring the literature, venting, and using analogies. Analysis of the data after its collection had six stages: removing extraneous information from the transcripts, creating profiles of each participant, triangulization, within-site and across-site analysis, and the writing up of the research. The issue of trustworthiness was addressed in order to make sure that the findings were consistent with the data collected.

### Findings

The findings of this research were presented in chapter four. They fell into three categories. The first was the relationship of women's personal voice to their sense of power and self-esteem in connection with their writing. The second was the relationship of women's public voice to their sense of power and self-esteem regarding their writing. The last category looked at the issue of social class as it connected to the relevancy of education, and wishes and dreams. The application of these very tangible categories to the data of the study yielded the findings discussed below.

## Personal Voice

The women exhibited a strong personal voice when writing out their emotions. Anger was the primary emotion in the expression of their personal voice, and was usually written about in journals and personal letters. Other emotions expressed in the personal voice were: guilt, fear, and frustration. These emotions were validated by writing them down for the audience of self--personal voice. Anger propelled the women to exercise their personal voice in journals and letters. Doing this helped them to control themselves and to distance them from people who might respond to them with negatively. This writing centered on themselves and their need to vent their emotions. As a rule most of these women were not permitted to express negative emotions verbally in their childhood and had trouble doing so as adults.

Some women used writing in their personal voice as a means of discovery to sort out their feelings. They did this chiefly by keeping journals and writing creatively in poetry or fiction. The journals were an easy mode of self-revelation with only themselves for audience. Writing poetry helped them express themselves to a personal audience when no other form of communication was possible. And writing fiction gave the women a chance to create possible worlds through



imagination and to become anyone they wanted to be and do anything they wanted to do. Some of these personal narratives had characters who imaged what was going on in the author's real personal world. In other instances some women wrote plays with specific audiences in mind, either siblings or peers.

They used the writing for survival and coping to help them deal with grief, frustration, and obsessive thoughts, among other things. The women found that they could deal with emotions by writing them out once they were able to name the experience for what it was. They wrote on a multiplicity of topics: grief over a child's death or disability, attempting to understand personal sickness, or attempting to cope with personal emotional illness.

Some poor and working-class women found and aspired to share their personal voice through published writing during adolescence. Joan, Tricia and Mona discovered their personal writing voice in adolescence while Fern, Louise, Mary, Debbie, Ellen, Paula, and Rhonda found it when they became adults.

Writing in their personal voice, poor and working-class women experienced a real sense of self-esteem. The participants made strong use of personal voice when writing letters. When speaking about their kind of writing they expressed themselves

with confidence and a sense of self-worth. Their letter writing was often centered on others, especially family members. For example, Fern wrote letters to her son when he was in college. She wrote letters for him when he was too tired to write. Louise described herself as a good letter writer whose letters were really worth reading. Paula told of writing to her brother in the service during World War II. She wanted to keep him informed about what went on at home. Ellen wrote a letter to her brother that actually helped her. It was important for Ellen to write her feelings to people she loved. This aspect of acquiring personal voice--letter writing--was part of the traditional female socialization process.

The women also described feelings of self-esteem about kinds of writing that were not those society expected from poor and working-class women--fiction. They described this kind of writing as easy to do. Mona knew she was a good writer, and decided to be a writer at age 9. Even though she never finished school she held on to this desire to write. Nothing could dissuade her from pursuing this goal. She wrote stories for her younger siblings, and was successful with writing in school. Tricia explained that her writing as a child took precedence over going out with her friends. She found satisfaction in writing about

people who had feelings and experiences like her own. Writing, for her, was a way to work out her own feelings. She stated that if she put emotions that she wished to cultivate personally into her characters, it was easier for her to put these same feelings into her own emotional repertoire. Although Paula only continued to write poems for her daughter instead of the entire family, she had a sense that her daughter still enjoyed them. However, she knew that those outside her family liked them, too. Debbie felt good enough about her writing to say that she wished her public speeches were as good as her personal writing. Joan wrote poetry and described herself consistently as a good writer.

In fictional writing the women's personal voices went beyond the boundaries of self-as-audience and created stories which could speak to others. They created possible worlds for themselves as Bruner (1978) stated, and they acquired voice through practice and play as they wrote fiction. They dared to speak of the ambitions they had. They talked about things they were able to do which went counter to what their social circle expected them to do. Besides writing letters, a female-oriented task, they dared to dream about being a professional writer; they dared to write plays while living in a housing project in the inner city; they

dared to write poetry and give it to their families, or when that didn't work, they gave it to friends. And some, like Mona and Joan, never doubted that they were good writers.

### Public Voice

It was in school that many poor and working-class women tried to share their public voice for the first time. With few exceptions they found it a frustrating experience when required to write on teacher-assigned topics. The topics didn't speak to their experiences, and as a result, few achieved success in school writing. Some of the younger women felt let down by the system because they didn't receive the instruction they felt they needed. They were never given the tools nor the encouragement to speak in their own voices.

Debbie described her frustration at not being taught to write properly. Joan's addictions got in the way of her writing, and nobody seemed able to intervene and get her help. Tricia was blamed by her teacher for not completing her writing assignment when, in fact, she was asked to write on subjects in which she had no interest. She tried to tell one teacher, but described the encounter as an "unfinished conversation." Debbie couldn't write what "they" (her teachers) wanted, and never experienced success with writing in school. Rhonda didn't want to be restricted in her college

writing course in terms of topic. She expressed dissatisfaction with the teacher. The schools failed these women because they prevented them from writing on their own chosen topics in their own voices--personal and public.

However, some women reported positive experiences with school writing when they encountered teachers who encouraged them to write out of their own experience. Tricia described her eighth grade teacher and one other unnamed teacher as her best teachers. They helped Tricia to find her own voice; they let her write about things that were important to her. She had a sense of personal power connected with her perception of herself as a good writer. Joan knew she was a good writer and would let her teachers see that. However, because of her addiction to drugs and alcohol she was afraid that she couldn't live up to her own standards. She felt that teachers would accept her writing as good work even though it was writing that she didn't think was her best. After showing her teachers her best writing, she would pull away. She then had an excuse; she caused herself to fall.

And there were those women who were naturally good writers and never experienced problems with writing in school. Mona was among those writers. She enjoyed reading and writing book reports, and was a

consistently good writer. She was self-taught, but no teacher picked up on this--to her and their loss.

When women wrote letters using their public voice they were usually to advocate for people about whom they were concerned. They wrote to welfare agencies, public utilities, public schools, public officials, product manufacturers, and clergy. There was much more energy and persistence required by this type of writing. Their public voice was weaker than the private voice because it had to fit into pre-existing formats which precluded their speaking spontaneously in letters addressed to public officials, to a mostly hostile audience because they were taking public systems to task, and because they were signing a woman's name which meant that they had to face the issue of gender. Finally, they were alone in doing all of this. Before and besides writing these letters the participants had to call or go to the offices of public officials to back up their written requests. They used their physical presence as well as the public voice found in their letters. But, in most instances they acted as women alone protesting publicly in their writing.

However, women were found to have a strong public voice when they group together to advocate for common causes. The elderly Black women cited in this research

lobbied to create public policy favorable toward senior citizens. This was seen graphically in the writing by the three elderly, Black women who belonged to the senior citizen advocacy group. They wrote speeches to be given at special hearings on elderly affairs at the Massachusetts state House. They wrote letters to their senators and representatives in Washington as well as writing petitions and bills to be presented to the state legislature, usually about senior citizen health-related legislation. This lobbying on the state level was also accompanied by demonstrations and sit-ins. One woman described their picketing; she also described their presentation of a casket to a politician symbolizing the fate of seniors if adequate after-care was not provided after their discharge from the hospital. The power of these collaborative writing efforts was significant in giving them a powerful public voice. The advocacy group was so powerful, in fact, that they got what they were asking for from the state and from major hospitals in Boston.

Women who worked also reported that their writing on the job was an exercise of their public voice, and most felt good about it. They usually worked in service jobs as secretaries, nurse's aides, co-ordinators of religious affiliated programs which supplied basic needs to marginalized people (like

themselves), keeping office records, typing, and recording patients' data on charts. These writing tasks were specifically mentioned when reporting favorable writing experiences.

Other voluntary work efforts also demonstrated use of public voices. Women kept records of suspicious people in their neighborhoods, and visited schools to give talks about their ancestry as well as the contributions of senior citizens. Some of the women wrote poetry, short stories, and plays which they sometimes shared with family, friends, school children, and political groups.

Besides feeling good about their writing in the public realm, working-class and poor women had conflicting feelings around their public experiences with writing, and as a result, their sense of self-esteem about their writing skill still left much to be desired. For example, one woman's writing was effected by her alcohol and drug abuse. She knew she was a good writer, but she was afraid that she couldn't live up to her own and her teachers expectations. She was in conflict with herself about her own writing talent and how she thought others perceived her.

I'd go to the teacher and show them my absolute best to show them what a brilliant student I was, and then I'd pull away. I was afraid I couldn't live up to my own standards, my own potential, and if I just pulled away. Then I had an excuse. If I



caused myself to fall, then I wouldn't be able to fall because of lack of ability.  
(Joan)

Most women experienced conflict resulting from not having the attention they needed from teachers. The need for self-esteem and confidence to write in their public voices should have been found in school--in the first place--but was not. When the school failed, they lost the chance to develop their public voices.

Women also related other experiences of conflict around writing on the job, writing letters, and writing poetry. When one woman described the writing she did as secretary for a club while at the same time being its vice-president. Her writing was a source of conflict for her because she was asked to do the writing for someone else. She was tired of doing other people's work.

We haven't had a secretary for the senior club in over a year, and I been keeping the minutes at that one. It's kind of hectic. Sometimes you don't feel like going, but if you the only person who take the minutes, you go sometime when you don't want to. The president went away. She went away for seven weeks. I'm the vice-president. I had to do the president's work and do the minutes while she was gone! (Mary)

Another woman wrote to companies evaluating their products. Her writing came out of the conflict between poor writing done in school and successful writing in the consumer evaluation that she did. She wrote out of the conflict with the power she exercised in passing

judgment on the products she tested and knowing that her writing skills were not that good in the past.

So for me, anything good that I think I do it's out of my hand with the pen. So that's what I do with my pen. Today [I] was eating something. There was something that was supposed to be in there telling us how to do it in the microwave. Didn't give explicit directions. I said, "I'm writing them a letter of what I think of it." There goes the letter. Ours was very good, but they got to be more explicit. So, I'm going to write them a letter. (Paula)

(What is there inside of you that pushes you to do that?)

I don't know. Maybe it's wanting to be liked --wanting to show people that maybe I'm as good as they are. (Paula)

Another woman's writing came out of the conflict between knowing that she was a good writer and being afraid that she wasn't as good as she thought she was.

You know, sometimes when that creative flow starts, it scares me. I'm so insecure; I'm so afraid that I'm just being--I don't know how to say it--overestimating my own ability, giving it too much value, too much worth to what I write. I know that part of me is sick. Part of me doesn't want to find things that I can do well because if I see them, I can't say it won't be bad. (Joan)

### Dreams Deferred

The most significant finding about social class as it effected the women in this research was that all of them either left grammar or high school before graduating, or were not able to realize their career plans after they finished high school. All of the

women worked in low economic level jobs after leaving school.

Leaving school when one is poor or from a working-class background is not unusual. Traditionally, school bridges the gap between the home and the community. In school the child learns what the community allows and what it prohibits. Poor and working-class families have no connection with this power base in the community, so it is not unusual for their children to feel alienated in school and, ultimately, to drop out altogether.

There were economic, psychological, and reproductive reasons which caused the participants to leave school or to never reach their career goals. For Fern and Louise the reasons were economic. Fern came to Boston after her parents were divorced. She left school at the age of fourteen and went to work to support herself working for a family in Boston. Louise left school to help support her family after her father was injured in an accident and was not able to work.

Mona, Tricia, and Ellen left school because of various psychological reasons. Mona's sister had been shot and died the summer before Mona was to enter junior high school. In addition, her school assignment was changed, and she felt alienated in her new school. Tricia left school because there was too much freedom

in the high school she first attended. She would go to school late and come home early. Tricia also had a low tolerance for frustration. She changed schools, but felt isolated in her new school and left before graduation. Ellen left school in the eighth grade just before her sixteenth birthday, and went to work. There were problems at home, and she vented her frustration in school. She described herself as having no respect for her teachers, herself, or the adults in her life.

Joan and Debbie became pregnant. Joan left school at the end of her junior year, and Debbie had to give up her plans to enter the service after her graduation from high school. Joan married the father of her child, and had two more children in rapid succession. She was living with her husband until six months before the interviews. Debbie married the father of her child, but was divorced from him and living with the father of her second and third children at the time of the interviews.

Paula was unable to go to nursing school after her graduation from high school because her family did not have the money to send her. She wanted to join the service and be trained as a nurse there, but her brother told her not to because the service was no place for a woman. Unfortunately, she did what he told her to do.

There were two women who gave sketchy profiles of their educational experiences. Rhonda did not say why she left school. She stated that she did not go to school much in grade 9 and left school altogether in grade 10. Mary didn't divulge anything about her education.

For most of these women school was an alien environment. It was structured on middle class values, and didn't meet their needs. It was impossible for them to succeed when the school made no provision to intervene and help them cope with the psychological, family, economic, and reproductive problems which prevented them from finishing their education.

In terms of their formal instruction in writing, most of them found that their writing experiences in school were alienating. Teachers required them to write on topics in which they had no interest, and as a result they either did not complete the assignment, wrote under protest, or experienced extreme frustration. There were some who had good writing teachers at some point in their educations, and they felt good about their writing at those times. There were two women who knew they were good writers no matter who taught them.

Some of the women had wishes and dreams centering on their desire to write. Tricia wanted to write

something about her friends. Mona wanted to write a family history. Rhonda spoke about writing a book for the parents of autistic children. The most poignant wish was that expressed by Paula. She wanted to write a book about her family, her job, or what her life would have been like if her educational and family circumstances had been different.

### Among Women Writers

There are similarities and differences between the writing of professional and non-professional women writers. The similarities fit some of the categories and definitions mentioned by professional women writers, but these definitions only scratch the surface. The participants in the research for this paper have a far richer voice when they talk about the issues of power, self-esteem, and social class in relation to their writing.

When Elshtain (1982) talked about a new definition of women's writing, she spoke about it in terms of "bursting the bonds of social control and unexpectedly offering intimations of a life-still-in-becoming." The writing of the participants in their personal voice backed up this observation. They used writing as a way of expressing many emotions, but especially anger, an emotion which women, traditionally, did not express; they used

writing as a means of survival and coping, and they used writing as a means of discovering things about themselves. The participants fleshed out and pushed further the rather academic, generalized definition of professional women's writing found in the literature review (See Chapter Two).

Bunch (1980) articulated a feminist definition of power which called for the ability to act and get something done and called for effective interaction rather than manipulation, domination, and control. The participants in this research achieved their ends when they wrote advocacy letters as well as speeches, articles, and petitions. One woman advocated for her autistic daughter to obtain medical, transportation, and educational assistance. Her ability to act and get something done, however, was accomplished through the expenditure of a great deal of energy fighting a male-dominated bureaucracy. She also acted as advocate for her husband in a business controversy, and for her family in a dispute with the electric company. She had the power to write with energy, strength, and effective interaction, but not without expenditure of energy. Another woman wrote letters to Presidents Truman and Kennedy advocating for her brother to be sent home from World War II and for her sister's health needs. She was not successful in either case. She was using her

public voice by herself, with a sense of powerlessness and lowered self-confidence than in her personal voice. Conversely, the three elderly Black women wrote, as part of a senior citizen lobbying group, to the president, their two senators, and to their representatives in Washington requesting passage of bills relevant to elderly health care needs. They were able to get things done because they banded together. As individuals they may not have been as successful with their public voices.

Furman (1985) talked about women authors as ". . . individuals who react in a collective sisterly manner to a common social reality," saying that, "this explains the recurrence of topics, themes, images, and metaphors in the literary works of women." The writing of the Black women went beyond this literary definition of women's writing. Their writing as a way to deal with anger, as an act of discovery, and as a means of survival was firmly rooted in reality, not fictionalized in literary works. The Black women reacted in a collective, sisterly fashion.

Furman (1985) also said the women's writing is coherent because they have a common, female impulse to struggle free from social and literary confinement through strategic re-definitions of self, art, and society. The women in this study had to get free from



social confinement but also free from emotional confinement, housing confinement, and the confinement of societal expectations. Through writing they had to move not to redefine art or society but to redefine themselves. They used writing to cope with anger within themselves. They wrote notes expressing their anger publicly. They wrote to keep or regain mental health. They were much more resourceful in their use of writing than their professional counterparts.

Women see themselves as agents of change not perpetrators of domination (Jacobus, 1979). The women in the study tried valiantly to be agents for change in their advocacy letters both as individuals and in groups (the Black senior citizens). They wrote petitions, circulated them for signatures, and brought them to the State House. However, it was only women working in a group who were able to effect systemic change. As individuals, women's (whether Black or white) scope was much more limited. They usually had to write to several bureaucrats before getting medical, educational, or housing services for their families. At other times they experienced failure. The bureaucracy did not come through for them by sending a brother home from the war or by getting free medical treatment for a sister.

Gilligan (1982) said that women's language resulted from the interaction of experience and thought and from the different voices and dialogues which resulted from this interaction. The participants in this research reported that there was much interaction of experience and thought. They wrote about their life experiences in order to cope with, understand, and survive them. This writing was intensely personal and sustained over long periods of time. In writing advocacy letters they were combining their experience with people and the thought it took to advocate for them. The women were involved with real people who had real problems, and composed letters in order to help these people whether they were members of their family or members of the same generation. Usually, this was intensely personal. When they wrote speeches the topics were their life experiences or were telling what they and other people had accomplished. Their language was uniquely personal and could be called women's language. They, however, would call it ordinary language. They didn't see their language and writing as different from others.

Schowalter (1979) said that women's writing had the authority of experience. This idea is backed up continually as the participants in the research described their writing experiences. Everything they

wrote about was from their life experience except the writing they did in school. Most of the women were not successful in school writing because they had to write on topics that held no interest for them.

Judith Gardiner (1980) said, ". . .The woman writer uses her text. . .as a part of a continuing process involving her own self-identification." The participants in this research would agree with this professional critique of women's writing. They wrote out their anger, discovered themselves as they wrote, and wrote in order to cope with the daily experiences in their lives as well as to insure long-term survival.

Stimpson (1977) said that professional women writers were often single, that it was not possible to integrate a professional life and the women's duties of family life. Gilligan (1982) echoes this by saying that there is a basic conflict between serious work outside the home and the traditional female role, between compassion and autonomy. The participants in the research sometimes talked about writing and life as the same thing. They did not think of it as a career. For them it was a means of survival. Their writing could not be separated from the rest of their lives. The women used writing as a way of dealing with anger, as a way of discovering things about themselves, as a method of survival. Their writing was "work" in a very

literal sense. They used it as they "worked" at trying to change themselves and their lives.

Sara Ruddick (1977) feared her success as a woman writer because she would be forced to confront her desires to be a professional success and to confront the possibility of failure as she tried to write. Each time her writing was successful she would stop writing in that genre. Joan, one of the women who was interviewed for this research, felt the same way. When she met a new writing teacher she would show the teacher her best writing and then slack off and do poor work usually because of her drug and alcohol problems. Joan knew she was a good writer and wanted her teachers to know that. But she also possibly feared success and/or failure.

Another participant, Mona, felt good about her writing and wanted to write a family history. She wasn't afraid of success; on the contrary, she hoped that her writing could someday be published. Rhonda felt the same way. She hoped to write a book for parents of autistic children. These women were not as sophisticated, nor as educated, as the professional women writers. Success, for them, was something that would be welcomed, and sharing their writing was something that they wanted to do for others.

Tillie Olsen (1978) discussed the conflict between being smothered in "women's duties" and feeling guilty for doing anything else. Professional women writers usually deferred their writing careers until their families grew up. Ann Lassoﬀ (1982) felt that her second career (writing) developed when her oldest daughter went to high school.

As was stated before, the writing of poor and working-class non-professional women writers was not looked upon as a career. All their writing centered around the events in their daily lives. For instance, the women wrote letters, mostly to advocate for other members of their families. They wrote consumer letters passing judgment on products which could be found in the grocery store. Their speeches, articles and petitions were written to force passage of legislation for senior citizens, to pay tribute to black civil rights workers, to tell about their ancestry and stress the fact that senior citizens were still contributing members of society. They described writing that was associated with the jobs that they performed. They wrote poetry for family members and friends, and it was only meant for that purpose. The women did express the desire to have books published that they would write about their own life experiences, and also talked about writing fiction.

Bartlett (1983) said that having children was a blessing to her career as a writer. It made her see that her previous life was lifeless and flat--a spoken monologue. She said that the birth of her son gave her the world. Nikki Giovanni (1984) and Toni Morrison (1984) said that Black women didn't see "women's duties" and a career as antithetical. The women studied in this research had similar experiences. For them, writing was a part of their lives and not put in a little box which would be opened when it was time to create.

In general women wrote more powerfully using their personal voice. They used their writing as a help to self-discovery and self-growth writing themselves into life in their journals. They used their writing as a kind of self-reflective therapy encouraging personal growth. The women began with written anger and moved toward personal expression of it. They wrote to cope with situations where they couldn't speak for themselves or couldn't speak to a particular person. The very act of writing the feelings validated them and gave them worth.

The participants in the study evidenced a power in what their writing could get done which was impressive. Their use of advocacy writing, speeches, articles, and petitions was powerful and got results.

They wrote to presidents, state and local politicians for members of their families although it was hard for them to speak for themselves in many instances.

In addition, the elderly Black women "reacted in a collective and sisterly manner to a common social reality (Furman, 1985)." They used writing to fight for the rights of the elderly (Black and White) especially in the health care field. Writing alone achieves results but through extraordinary personal effort. The Black women were able to achieve results much more easily working in a group.

These ten women wrote to free themselves from social confinement. Through their writing they defined or redefined who they were. They tried to deal with their emotional health, their place within the family and later within their own marriage and family. Through writing they changed how they viewed their own parents, themselves, their relationships with spouses, and with their children. These women struggled to free themselves from social confinement through writing, and as a result became agents for change. They wrote best when writing from their own experience. And they struggled with their role as nurturer versus their desire to actualize their own gifts.

Their situation was reminiscent of a story about the sculptor Michelangelo. He was said to have stood

before a block of marble looking for the image imprisoned in the rock and using his artistic genius to set the image free. In the same way, these women used writing as a means to set themselves free from the rock of personal, familial, and societal prisons in which they were held. However, unlike Michelangelo's statues, they did not yet stand entirely free of the stone in which their beautiful images were imprisoned.

### Implications for Working with Women Writers

(1) If poor and working-class women are to write well, they should write meaningfully and purposefully.

Women write best when writing from their own experiences. This study has also shown that women write powerfully in the private domain when they write journals and notes to vent and deal with emotions in order to survive in their families, first as children and then as adults. This research has also shown that women's writing is powerful when it addresses their own real life issues and problems in the public domain in the genres of speeches, articles, letters, and books.

(2) If poor and working-class women are to write with power and self-esteem they need to begin writing about themselves. To write powerfully, women have to use authentic voice by writing about their own experiences. This power in finding one's own voice in the writing of journals, diaries, letters, and poetry



validates the experiences both in the present and in the past. This validation directly effects self-esteem.

(3) If poor and working-class women are to raise their consciousness and those of others concerning social class and the power that they have to change these situations, they should write about the events in their lives. A sense of social class, whether positive or negative, is brought to the forefront of women's consciousness when they write about events in their lives especially in a journal or diary. In exploring and writing about the events within their social class, poor and working-class women will realize that they are not alone in their experiences.

(4) If poor and working-class women are to develop a stronger sense of power and self-esteem, they need to write about their families, especially about their children. For any woman, but especially for poor and working-class women, having children is a powerful and creative act. They need to write about their families, especially their children, since they are the traditional source for women's feelings of power and self-esteem. Women's outlet of emotions both positive and negative, revolve around family events, experiences and members. Moreover, women experience the creative process in the birth and parenting of

their children. Writing about their families, especially their children, validates poor and working-class women's sense of self-esteem, power, and social class.

(5) If poor and working-class women writers are to write with power and self-esteem from their poor and working-class contexts, they need to actively collaborate together to be heard. These women wrote strongly when they perceived that the well-being of themselves or family members was threatened. The elderly Black women who actively advocated for change got results because they belonged to a group of people who lobbied together about issues important to older people. These women wrote in various genres: letters, petitions, and speeches, addressed to people who had the power to change existing laws. They wrote together about issues of gender and class from their own experiences of family violence, questions about reproductive rights, and lack of adequate health care.

(6) If poor and working-class women authors are to publish their writing, they need to work together in writing groups and publish their writing. In this way, women share their stories, validate their experiences, and use the power of the group to get things done. Their need for a public audience was lost in their experiences with writing in the public

schools. Because of this, they were deprived of the experience of the writing process and the experience of audience provided in a writing group. This might allow them to further develop public voice within a community of women writers. Their needs for recognition and publication in newsletters, literary magazines, or books would be supplied by membership in a writing group.

#### Directions for Further Research

The results of the study suggested that poor and working-class, non-professional, women writers had generally unsuccessful experiences with writing in school. It established the fact that they continued writing, in spite of these experiences, to satisfy their personal needs and to advocate for the needs of others, mostly family members. Other directions for further research are discussed below:

(1) Replication with a wider sample of poor and working-class, non-professional, women writers.

This study was limited to two areas in Boston. It also was ethnically limited to Black and white women, both young and old. More extensive research with a wider diversity of ethnicity, age, and geographical areas would give a better sampling. Would they validate the conclusions reached in this study, or would other

variables appear which would alter these conclusions? Would different ethnic, age, and geographical (i.e. rural or nonurban) samples uncover different attitudes about the importance of writing in the lives of poor and working-class, non-professional women writers? Would the issues of power and self-esteem be as evident, and would lack of formal education be as frequent in a larger sample?

(2) Longitudinal studies of poor and working-class, non-professional women writers and their experiences with formal writing instruction over a longer period of time. The women studied in this research talked only about their personal experiences with writing. How would formal process writing instruction affect them? Would they write best using topics which were interesting and meaningful to them? Would their experiences working in support groups carry over to working in writing groups? Would they produce writing that would be shared with others? How wide would their audience become? Would their writing effect or change a significant number of people and situations?

(3) A wider study using women in a formal writing groups. Of the women studied in the research four women took part in an informal writing group, three of the women belonged to a group which wrote as a

part of their activities, and the remaining women wrote only according to their daily needs. Would the feed-back and sharing of women belonging to a formal writing group change the form or content of the women's writing since it would be more explicit?

(4) Poor and working-class, non-professional women writers should define personal voice and power. Professional, published women writers re-defined the meaning of writing voice and power saying that women's personal, private voices were as valid as men's public voices and that power was not the male ideal of domination but rather an experience of energy, strength, and significant interaction. Would poor, and working-class, non-professional women writers define themselves in the same way? Would their life experience make a significant difference when defining the above-mentioned concepts for themselves?

(5) A corresponding study of poor and working-class, non-professional male writers should be undertaken. Would there be a close correspondence with the findings of research done with poor and working-class, non-professional women writers? Would a woman be able to conduct this same research with men, or would gender issues be an obstacle? Would poor and working-class, non-professional male writers have the same writing experiences as professional, middle-class

male writers have? Which would be stronger, the issue of gender or the issue of social class?

APPENDIX A

ELIGIBILITY STANDARD FOR WELFARE PAYMENT

Appendix A  
 Eligibility Standard for Welfare Payment  
 Department of Social Services  
 Commonwealth of Massachusetts  
 AFDC/RRP

Assistance Unit Size Standard	Eligibility
1	\$ 616.05
2	780.70
3	943.50
4	1100.75
5	1261.70
6	1426.35
7	1587.30
8	1748.25
9	1907.35
10	2068.30
Incremental	166.50

A. F. D. C. = Aid to Families with Dependent Children

R.R.P. = Refugee Resettlement Program



APPENDIX B  
WRITTEN CONSENT FORM

## Appendix B

## Written Consent Form

To participants in this study:

I am Sister Ann Daly, a graduate student at the University of Massachusetts, in Amherst. The topic of my doctoral research is women and writing. I am interviewing women in Boston about their experiences with writing throughout their lives. You are one of approximately twelve participants.

As a part of this study, you are being asked to participate in three in-depth interviews. The first interview will be focused on your experiences with writing in the past, the second on what your experiences with writing are like now, and in the third interview I will ask what writing means to you. As the interviews proceed, I may ask an occasional question for clarification or for further understanding. Mainly my part will be to listen as you recreate your experience within the structure and focus of the three interviews: your experiences with writing in the past and present and the meaning writing has for you.

Each interview will be audiotaped and later transcribed by me or by a typist who will be committed, as I am, to confidentiality. In all written materials and oral presentations in which I might use materials from your interviews, I will use neither your name nor the names of people close to you. Transcripts will be typed with initials for names, and in the final form the interview material will not use your real name.

My goal is to analyze the materials from your interviews, in order to understand better your experience and that of other women's experiences with writing in the course of their lives. I am interested in the concrete details of your life story, in what writing was like for you in the past, in what it is like for you now, and in what writing means to you. As a part of the dissertation, I may compose the materials

from your interviews as a profile in your own words. I may also wish to use some of the interview material for Journal articles or presentations to interested groups, or for instructional purposes in my teaching. I may wish to write a book based on the dissertation.

You may, at any time, withdraw from the interview process without penalty. If I were to want to use any materials in any way not consistent with what is stated above, I would ask for your additional written consent. I will answer any questions that you have concerning the research procedures.

In signing this form, you are also assuring me that you will make no financial claims for the use of the material in your interviews; you are also stating that no medical treatment will be required by you from the University of Massachusetts should any physical injury result from participating in these interviews.

I, \_\_\_\_\_, have read the above statement and agree to participate as an interviewee under the conditions stated above.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of interviewer

---

Participant's address

---

---

Participant's phone number

---

---

Interviewer's address

---

---

Interviewer's phone number

---

APPENDIX C  
PROMPT QUESTIONS

## Appendix C

### Prompt Questions

#### Interview One

##### Experiences with Writing in the Past

1. Could you tell me about your family?
2. What kinds of experiences with writing did you have in school?
3. What did writing help you to do?
4. Did you like to write?

#### Interview Two

##### Experiences with Writing in the Present

1. What role does writing play in your life right now?
2. What kinds of writing do you do now?
3. Does your writing help you to express your feelings?

#### Interview Three

##### The meaning of Writing in the Participant's Life

1. How important is writing to you?
2. Does it matter to you whether you can write well or not?
3. What is the most important thing in your life right now?

APPENDIX D  
CONFIDENTIAL INCOME SCHEDULE

## Appendix D

## CONFIDENTIAL INCOME SCHEDULE

PARTICIPANT # \_\_\_\_\_

INCOME EARNED IN ONE YEAR (PLEASE CHECK ONE.)

- \_\_\_\_\_ 0 - \$4,999
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5,000 - 9,999
- \_\_\_\_\_ 10,000 - 14,999
- \_\_\_\_\_ 15,000 - 19,999
- \_\_\_\_\_ 20,000 - 24,999
- \_\_\_\_\_ 25,000 - 29,999
- \_\_\_\_\_ 30,000 - 39,999
- \_\_\_\_\_ 40,000 - 49,999
- \_\_\_\_\_ 50,000 AND UP



APPENDIX E  
CERTIFICATION OF TRANSCRIBED INTERVIEWS  
AND RESULTING SUMMARIES

## Appendix E

I certify that I have read the transcribed interviews and that the profile which the researcher has assembled is true to the original interview .

Signed \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Interviewer \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

APPENDIX F

CONSENT FORM--USE OF INTERVIEW SUMMARY

## Appendix F

## Consent Form - Summary of Interview

I give permission for my interviews to be used in the doctoral research of Sister Ann Daly. I approve of the summary which appears in this paper, and I give permission for the knowledge gained to be disseminated in written form or for presentations to professional audiences. I am under no stress to sign this document, and I am aware that confidentiality will be maintained.

Signed

---

Date

---

Interviewer

---

Date

---

APPENDIX G  
GUIDELINES FOR USE WITH HUMAN SUBJECTS



APPENDIX H  
SUBJECTS' PERSONAL WRITINGS

## Fern

Thanks for the clippings I'm sure glad I saved them, for they came in handy. I have the writing up about me from the suncay globe. It certainly was wonderful. I shall always treasure it I worked hard but it certainly paid off in the end.

I went to the royal Ballet Sunday and they reconized me, they told me how great it was. Every-day some-one is stopping me to talk to me about it. They are also praising you for the wonderful job you did. I hope Jack Wigon is glad and I didn't let him down.



Fern

Thanks for the clippings I'm sure glad I saved them, for they came in handy. I have the writing up about me from the Sunday globe. It certainly was wonderful, I shall always treasure it. I worked hard but it certainly paid off in the end.

I went to the Royal Ballet Sunday and they scolded me, they told me how great it was. Every day some-one is stopping me to talk to me about it. They are also praising you for the wonderful job you did. I hope Jack Wigon is glad and I didn't let him down.

Hope I make the election and if I get in, hope I'll do  
a better

Job, also hope our bills comes  
through. Now I must close

Thanks a million for the  
beautiful writing up

Peace and Love

Fern

Hope I make the election and  
if I get in, hope I'll do a better  
job, also hope our bills comes  
through. Now I must close  
Thanks a million for the  
beautiful writing up  
Peace and Love

Paula

Dear Sister Ann,

I hope I've helped  
In a very small way  
For you to get your  
Phd

Listening to what I had to  
say

I liked the idea  
of one to one  
Found out lots I had  
forgotten

And it was also fun  
Our sessions have come to an  
end

But lucky me  
I now have you for a friend  
So amny thanks for the  
interviews

God luck God bless

I shatt always remember

In my prayers                      Love ya!

A special person "you"

Paula

Dear Sister Ann.

I hope I've helped  
In a very small way  
For you to get your  
Phd

listening to what I had to  
say

I liked the idea

of one to one  
Found out lots I had  
forgotten

And it was also fun

Our sessions have come to an  
end

But lucky me

I now have you for a friend

So many thanks for the  
interviews

God luck God bless

I shall always remember

In my prayers

A special person "you"

Love ya!

Louise

Keeping On

Mass. Senior Action Council members without a doubt,

We have a lot to shout about -

With staff and friends by our side all the way,

Brought us to that never to be forgotten day

When our hospital discharge bill was signed

So let us keep this in mind

We may be old and gray,

But our stamina is here to stay.

To fight for our rights,

Until our dying day.

2/1/88

Louise  
The 10 cent fare for Seniors had just been passed so now Seniors can go and come when they want to. Before it was free but was restricted to times you could ride. They were also negotiating with one of the well known Hospitals in the City, for a patient's Bill of rights, Balanced Billing, Discharge Planning, After Care, Bilingual Services and more.

Two of these bills have been passed through legislation. I was well on board with the second hospital negotiating team that tried to get the most prestigious hospital in the city to talk with us -- they refused, but after a press conference in front of the hospital, radio messages and a bus load of Seniors downtown at 8:30 am passing out pamphlets to people on to work, then marching to each Board of Directors Offices, the publicity was getting too much, so they decided to sit down and talk with us.

This took a lot of time and energy, but with results.

Louise

"Fighting the Gloom"

Gloom is everywhere. It crept into my windows today.  
I'm hoping it's not here to stay.

I could hop back in bed - but guess what I'm going to do  
instead.

Pretending I'm the sun, as I go from room to room,

Look into the mirror and give a great big smile. Then  
hum a happy tune for a while.

Think of the sand dunes by the ocean blue. With the  
waves washing on the shore. Before you know it, the  
gloom is not there any more.

Thinking of the sun, it's such a welcoming sight. Do you  
think the gloom helps to make it so?

I am one that would like to know.

1988



Louise

"Asking"

1-12-88

Darling come into my arms.  
No longer can I resist your charm.

Each evening when you say  
good night  
you leave my heart - ready  
to take flight

A year has passed. And things  
are still the same.  
I am beginning to wonder if I'm  
the one to blame.

Instead of the same old Good  
Night. I am ready to put up a  
real good fight.

Have dinner with me. If you are  
free -- and see what the outcome will be.

You will never know until you  
try. So please don't let  
another day go by

Louise

Debbie

Debbie

*Was this a good time in your life to be having a baby?*

Yes, yes, yes! We were *so* ready! We couldn't believe that I was really pregnant! When we were sure that I was pregnant, we couldn't believe that there would be a baby at the end of it.

*George's mother*

We were planning on starting a family but the timing turned out to be less than the best. Pauline had come to visit and exclaimed that we weren't getting any younger, that the process might take years. Since many of our friends had had trouble getting pregnant, her words prompted me to be pretty loose about birth control. Less than one month later, I threw up: pregnant. Robert lost his job with the government when the new administration came in and remained unemployed throughout the whole pregnancy. The unknowns in our future sometimes added to the general anxiety of being a parent.

*Caitlin C.'s mother*

It really was a good time for us. We wanted to have a spring baby, and I had a winter pregnancy. This is what I had done with my first, and it kept me warmer in the winter. And we wanted them close together. I was a little concerned about how Nicholas would react, but his language increased so much that we could talk about it, or at least try to communicate. Financially, we could definitely be more stable. But we knew if we waited for that, we'd never have children.

*Ila's mother*

yes it was a good time in my life to have another baby. I no longer worried about losing my first son from his heart problem and he wanted a baby brother himself to play with and help take care of. David and I wanted to wait a while before having children but, when I found out I was pregnant we were happy.

Debbie

*Was pregnancy an anxious time?*

I had a dream. I was at the hospital and felt the baby's head poke out my abdomen. When I touched the spot the head began to emerge, and I hurried to the operating room down a darkened hall. I pulled at the head and felt that it was unusually pointed and that the baby had a slick fur coat and residual tail. When I arrived at the operating room the doctor and I realized that I had not had a human child but an otter or weazel and we planned to conceal the facts from the community.

*Caitlin C.'s mother*

Yes, it was a *very* anxious time. I kept feeling that if only we could take the baby out and look at him, I'd feel okay. That's what made the two times we had sonic pictures of George so terrific. The first time, he was seven weeks after conception and looked like a fish with a pulsing star-beat of a heart. The second time was six days before he was born. He looked like a beautiful baby!

*George's mother*

I wasn't at all worried or concerned or apprehensive. I felt very optimistic. I had a blind faith and a physical comfort that this machine was working and was going to run its course and that I should just relax. It was Michael who felt apprehensions. Not bizarre, unusual ones—just run-of-the-mill worries.

*Dylan's mother*

I was anxious that he be okay and not have the same heart problems his brother had. I use to wake up at night from dreams that he had to go through surgery like his older brother or I was worried he would come to early and be real sick. It was also an anxious time for me because I worried it wouldn't be the boy we all wanted so much.

Debbie

*Mother's response:* When they induced my labor my pains were coming one on top of the other before the other was done. I was scared because while they were giving me the medicine to induce my labor my baby's heart rate kept dropping and I was very scared something was going wrong. They took some blood from the baby's head to see if he was getting enough blood from me or if the cord was around his neck. As soon as they were done with taking the blood, I asked Nancy if I had the time to have some pain killer, she went to check and she said that the baby was right there. I didn't even have time to go to the delivery room, our son was born right in the labor room.

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