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Exploring intersectionality in education: The intersection of gender, race, disability, and class

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EXPLORING INTERSECTIONALITY IN EDUCATION:
THE INTERSECTION OF GENDER, RACE, DISABILITY, AND CLASS

An Abstract of a Dissertation


Submitted


In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

Approved:

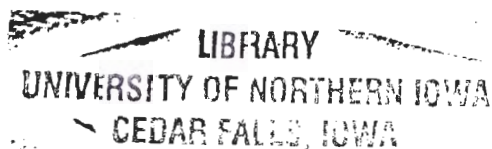

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December 2006


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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to explore the intersection of gender, race, disability, and class within education. Specifically, I examined the educational experiences of African American women labeled with a disability and from a disadvantaged socio-economic class. Employing qualitative methodology and methods, I interviewed four adult African American women from disadvantaged socio-economic groups to gain a deeper understanding of their lived educational experiences.

The story that emerged from this research was each participant's strength. Their stories revealed that each woman persistently and continually engaged in the world around them in order to negotiate, evade, and resist the dominant ideology surrounding the discourses of race, gender, disability, and class. The results indicated that the participants' lived educational experiences centered on three themes: educational and social barriers, questions of identity, and frustration at the intersections of gender, race, disability, and class.

This study reaffirmed the need to talk openly and candidly about how race, disability, class, and gender influence the lived educational experiences of individuals located within multiply stigmatized oppression. The results of this study offer a number of implications for educators, students, and future research. Of these implications, the need for educators to know students intimately and holistically was reaffirmed. Educators must acknowledge all aspects of a student's identity and create classroom communities where the discourse of difference is positioned as positive. This study also highlighted the need for educators to assist students in channeling their strengths in meaningful and

productive ways. Finally, educators must provide students with opportunities to resist and challenge pervasive stereotypes and oppressive circumstances in the classroom and wider society.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Race, gender, disability and social class play a prominent role in defining ourselves, the world, and how we know the world. Despite their historical and situational variability, each discourse¹ is widely held to be of biological origin (Adelman, 2003; Hayman, 1998; Trent, 1994). For instance, it is not uncommon to hear a teacher comment, “She is just not cut out to do this type of math. It’s just not in her genes.” Or a coach may remark off the cuff, “Of course he can play ball, he’s black.” Hence, each discourse is commonly understood as representative of a fixed and neutral trait or ability (Omi & Winnant, 1986, 2000). These seemingly “real” differences exert a powerful influence on the quality of life for individuals, often through the allocation and distribution of resources and opportunities. Beyond their more tangible effects, race, gender, disability, and class all fundamentally delineate one’s social standing among his or her fellow human beings.

Perhaps the greatest influence these seemingly “real” differences have is the way in which certain voices and bodies are privileged over others (Butler, 1990). The ongoing illusion of grounded, real, categorical differences is perpetuated when society, through its everyday actions and interactions, rewards certain individuals at the expense of others. In this way, the discourses of gender, race, disability, and class matter significantly.

Furthermore, understanding these discourses as innate or biological versus socially

¹ The word discourse is used to describe the categories of race, gender, disability, and class. Discourses define the parameters of a particular arena and the roles that people can play. For further information see James Paul Gee (1999), Michel Foucault (1978).

constructed and emerging from shifting political, historical, and economic processes results in a hierarchy of power and privilege (Omi & Winant, 1986, 2000). Paradoxically, most human beings align themselves with one or more of these discourses. We all possess socially constructed identities that influence our experiences. Some of us may even find ourselves within multiple discourses that interweave and coincide with one another. Without a doubt, these individual, lived experiences are multifaceted (Reynolds & Pope, 1991).

Background

I was interested primarily in the nature of disability. I was nagged by questions about how disability is understood and how these understandings inform and affect a student's schooling experiences. For example, what does it mean from a student's perspective to be labeled with a disability? How might that label/disability influence a student's personal identity, experiences, or life chances?

While teaching special education for five years, I considered these questions in relation to the lives of my students. In doing so, I came to realize that it was impossible to separate the meaning my students brought to their disability/label apart from their many other identities. My students were black and white, male and female, middle-class, working class, and lower classes. They were multifaceted individuals whom I could only begin to understand by conceptualizing them as whole, embodied individuals. Consequently, I learned that attempting to explain my students' actions, achievements, participation, or even grades based solely on one facet of their individual identity often proved misleading and incorrect. As Banton and Singh (2004) articulated, "No human

being is reducible to one singular identity; we are indeed all ‘gendered,’ ‘raced,’ ‘classed,’ and nobody can escape the social construction of disability” (p. 113). This proved true for my students. Simply describing them with a label or multiple labels was restrictive and limiting. They were so much more; and in some cases, much less than the labels the school and I had imposed.

One student immediately comes to mind. He had been labeled as learning disabled from a very early age and was subsequently perceived as “slow.” His family lived in a run down home without a front door. They were thought to be “trash” and a burden on the system. I worked with this student for a number of years and learned that the many labels that had defined him resulted in a grave misrepresentation. He was intelligent. He could plan out an entire city bus route so that each of his siblings would arrive at school on time. He kept mental track of the money left in his lunch account and routinely lent what money he had to others, charging a small interest rate that he calculated with ease. His family was strong and resilient. They cared for one another deeply and worked hard with what little they had. It was not uncommon that they would open their home to others needing a place to stay. They were not a burden on the system, but caught within a system that continually restricted and limited any opportunities for advancement. If I had defined this student only within the narrow meaning that we bring to learning disabled, I would not only have been wrong about this student’s abilities, but I would have disregarded much of this student’s humanity. Remembering this student and many others like him brought me to this proposed dissertation study.

Begum (1992) provided me with a starting point. She insightfully observed that race, gender, disability, and social class “interweave together to determine our experiences, and thus cannot be regarded as separate aspects of our lives” (p. 74). It was from this perspective that I began.

Purpose

This dissertation research study explored the intersections of gender, race, disability, and class as they relate to the educational experiences of African American women labeled with disabilities. The study considered how the discourses of race, gender, disability, and class intersect, interact, and influence educational experiences. The following research questions guided this study:

1. What are the educational experiences of African American women with disabilities and from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds? How can these experiences be described and analyzed?
2. How do gender, race, disability, and class shape the lived and educational experiences of these women?
3. How do these women define themselves and enact their identities?
4. How do the “realities” of gender, race, disability, and class inform and intersect with one another in educational settings?

A History of Oppression and Discrimination

In addressing these questions, a brief historical analysis of the United States provided evidence of the inequitable and unjust treatment of women, African Americans, the disabled and lower classes. Although such an analysis cannot hope to encompass

every aspect of American history relating to the discourses of gender, race, disability, and class, it should begin with a framing of the United States Constitution. The founding fathers, all of whom were wealthy, white land owners, began the Preamble with the words, “We the people.” For centuries to come, those very words would spark great controversy and debate. Who, really, does the phrase include? Was it intended to apply to women, African Americans, the lower classes, or the disabled? Contrarily, Russell (1998) suggested that the phrase was meant for, “We the normal, the **homogeneous** white propertied males.” She explained, “What was ‘normal’ in 1788 was defined by class, race, and gender. The framers omitted women, males without property (the lower classes), and people of color from access to the ‘equality’ they professed to hold sacred” (p. 13). In other words, the history of inequality within the United States structured the very foundation of the republic from its beginning. While the Constitution is most often celebrated as a document forging great freedoms for all, it should also be recognized as a document restricting the freedom for certain groups of people. Additionally, while there have been times when justice has been upheld by the Constitution, the struggle for justice still continues.

The Constitution was representative of the propertied class who were interested in protecting their own wealth and securing the means to continue to acquire additional wealth (Beard, 1913/1986). Therefore, it is not surprising that our wealthy, white, privileged founding fathers might have intended to exclude certain groups of individuals when framing the Constitution (Zinn, 2003a). This exclusion was problematic because

The document becomes not simply the work of wise men trying to establish a decent and orderly society, but the work of certain groups trying to maintain their

privileges, while giving just enough rights and liberties to enough people to ensure popular support. (Zinn, 2003a, p. 97)

Groups excluded in the Constitution included African Americans, women, Native Americans, and the impoverished. They were systematically denied the opportunity not only to participate, but also to be represented by the Constitution.

Social Class

One group of people initially, and deliberately, limited by the Constitution was the lower class. During the Revolution the laborers, seamen, and town mechanics (the lower class) had also been defined as “the people” in the Declaration of Independence. They had lent a substantial force of support to the Revolution, but received little in return. One of the greatest points of contention was property left behind by fleeing Loyalists. The lower classes and working class envisioned this property as a means through which to advance; however, the Revolutionary leaders thought very differently. They distributed the land in ways that doubly advantaged the already wealthy class and divvied out small parcels of land to the farmer. Thus, the “propertied class” enriched themselves and their friends. They appeased the working-class farmer with just enough land to create a broad sense of support for the new government. Zinn (2003a) reiterated:

This became characteristic of the new nation: finding itself possessed of enormous wealth, it could create the richest ruling class in history, and still have enough for the middle classes to act as a buffer between the rich and dispossessed. (p. 84)

In other words, the founding fathers successfully solidified support for the new Constitution by offering small incentives to the working class farmers who believed they would benefit from the new government.

Today, most Americans continue to celebrate the Constitution as a monumental document establishing freedom and equality for all. Most Americans, like Americans in the early Nineteenth century, believe that the Constitution, and the elected congress, and senate secure and represent their best interests. In fact, most Americans believe their elected officials are just like them— middle class. For instance, when Americans are asked which social class they fall into, most indicate that they, like their elected representatives, are middle class. Thus, most Americans make the assumption that the government and their elected officials have the common person's interests at heart (Parker, 1972).

That most Americans believe they are middle class is commonly referred to as the myth of the middle class. Our society maintains the illusion that social class distinctions do not exist; hence, this common consensus makes issues of class appear irrelevant, thereby rendering class as an elusive, and therefore seemingly unimportant, constituent of American life (Fussell, 1983; Mantsios, 2000; Sennett & Cobb, 1972). Just as the founding fathers attempted to obscure inequalities by appeasing the working classes with small incentives of land and offering hope of a new and better government, the myth of the middle class conceals gross inequalities from the public view.

In instances where inequities are revealed, society has been seduced by messages that blame the victim (Ryan, 1976). These messages attempt to define what it means to be an American and pursue the "American Dream." We are led to believe that Americans participate productively in society to benefit the economy. The American dream entails a

good education that leads to a good job that will support a family of two children, an owned home, two cars, a dog, and a white picket fence.

Hayman (1998) has related the pursuit of this American Dream to the myth of meritocracy. Meritocracy is the notion that able-bodied and talented individuals who work hard will be rewarded with economic and social advancement. The American Dream and meritocracy convince us that mass education will create a society wherein talent and effort are rewarded, rather than birth and privilege are rewarded (Hurn, 1985; Spring, 1989). Consequently, individuals internalize the message that failure to achieve the American Dream is a reflection of inherent qualities. One either did not work hard enough or lacked the innate ability or intelligence necessary for advancement.

The media provides an example of how social class distinctions are either hidden or situated in the myths of meritocracy. For instance, until the recent natural disasters in the Gulf Coast of the United States, the news media provided virtually no coverage of the lower classes struggling with poverty (Mantsios, 2000, Parenti, 1993). For the most part, the media has ignored the lower classes and affirmed the message that we are all middle class.

Media has also ignored the lower classes by reducing them to a statistic. Depicting the lower classes as a faceless group enables the larger society to overlook the suffering, indignities, and misery endured by millions of children and adults. As a statistic, the lower classes are easier to hide. This perpetuates the illusion that Americans are all middle-class.

When the media gives attention to the lower classes, it sends a series of contradictory, misleading, and distorted messages. The lower classes are often portrayed as “welfare cheats,” “drug addicts,” “greedy panhandlers,” or more recently “looters.” For example, consider the extensive media coverage of Hurricane Katrina in which lower class African Americans were depicted as criminals, lazy, dumb, and immoral. These images are most often portrayed through the eyes of the middle-class; hence, they focus on the middle-class opposition to the lower classes rather than on the actual plight of the lower classes (Mantsios, 2000). From this ideological framework, society is led to conceptualize the lower classes as an inconvenience and irritation. Furthermore, the status of the lower classes is believed to be largely the result of personal and/or cultural characteristics. Their economic state is viewed as a self-induced consequence of incompetence born out of natural inability rather than of larger societal factors. Again, the myth of meritocracy prevails; the lower classes become imprisoned in a cycle of poverty. This widely accepted understanding of the lower classes absolves the larger society of any responsibility.

This ideological framework that readily accepts the lower classes as immoral, lazy, and less educable reflects the climate and conditions of the United States at the turn of the 20th century. Americans experienced great economic unrest as a result of an expanding economy, immigration, and the coming industrial revolution. The burgeoning growth of cities in a relatively short period of time had led to many social problems. Urbanization increased crime and eroded traditional values. There was a widespread belief among the “respectable classes” that an epidemic of lawlessness and pauperism

threatened the foundations of morality and the maintenance of social order (Urban & Wagoner, 2000). The lower classes were thought to be at the heart of these problems and were looked upon with great disdain.

At the same time, a new movement embraced the social currents of Social Darwinism, which fueled a growing interest in genetics and heredity. The movement was Eugenics, and its central thrust aimed at correcting the problem of the lower classes who were widely perceived as shiftless, white trash (Rafter, 1988).

Through eugenics, Francis Galton, sought to translate “scientific” information about heredity into social policies that would erase human stock prone to degeneracy (Black, 2003; Kuhl, 1994; Trent, 1994). Given the existing social and political climate in the United States, Eugenics appeared to be a straightforward and common sense solution to what many people feared: “the rapid degeneration of order, traditional social arrangements, and, indeed, Western civilization” (Trent, 1994, p. 138). Indeed, as Black (2003) stated, “America was ready for eugenic breeding” (p. 22).

Eugenics rationalized and appeared to justify the ill treatment of lower classes, white individuals. It was widely believed that poverty, crime, and low intelligence were the inherited defects of the lower classes. Thus, poverty and the host of problems that accompanied it—crime, malnutrition, insanity, alcoholism, and depression—could be eliminated by controlling the breeding patterns of those believed to be “ill-suited” to reproduce. Because poverty was assumed a direct result of inferior genes, lower classes individuals were understood as being naturally inferior. This legitimized the classifications of lazy, dumb, and immoral. Rather than well-developed social programs

or public goodwill, Eugenic social policies were regarded as the cure for the problem of the lower classes (Black, 2003; Kuhl, 1994).

In this study, I refute both the myth of the middle class as well as its groundings in notions of meritocracy. Instead, I acknowledge the United States as the most highly stratified society among advanced industrial nations (Mantsios, 2000). Class distinctions operate in virtually every aspect of our lives, determining the nature of one's work, the quality of schooling one receives, and the health and safety of those we love (Mantsios, 2000). In other words, one's social class does matter. Historically, it has burdened some while rewarding others. Charlton (1998) stated:

In political-economic terms, everyday life is informed by where and how individuals, families, and communities are incorporated into a world system dominated by the few who control the means of production and force. This has been the case for a long time. The logic of the system regulates and explains who survives and prospers, who controls and is controlled, and, not simply metaphorically, who is on the inside and who is on the outside (of power). (p. 23)

Thus, one's social class plays a significant role in one's life chances.

Certain individuals, depending upon how one might identify with the discourses of race, gender, or disability, are more or less likely to find themselves in the lower socioeconomic classes. For these reasons, social class is deeply entangled with issues of disability, race, and gender.

Disability

As class relates to disability, Charlton (1998) concluded that issues of class have been crucial in constructing a theory of disability oppression because poverty is the common thread shared by individuals with disabilities. He stated, "The vast majority of

people with disabilities have always been lower classes, powerless, and degraded” (p.

21). Thus, Charlton (1998) illustrated the confluence of disability and social class.

An example of this confluence relates back to the Eugenics movement. Although the central aim of the movement was to prevent the lower classes from reproducing, individuals with disabilities were also targeted. Trent (1994) recounted:

Feeble-minded people . . . were [believed to be the] products of traits passed on in predictable regularity over generations. Given the simple nature of the flaw, they [leaders of the Eugenics movement] insisted, it would be possible to eliminate feeble-mindedness by eliminating reproduction among the feeble-minded. (p. 172)

Similarly, President Theodore Roosevelt stated [in a letter to the prominent eugenicist Charles Davenport]:

Society has no business to permit degenerates to reproduce their kind. . . . Someday, we will realize that the prime duty, the inescapable duty of the good citizen of the right type, is to leave his or her blood behind him in the world; and that we have no business to permit the perpetuation of citizens of the wrong type. (as cited in Black, 2003, p. 99)

In so many words, individuals with disabilities were considered less than human just as the lower classes had been. For that reason, the catchall phrase, feeble-minded, was readily applied to both individuals with disabilities and the lower classes. In point of fact, these were most often the same people. The lower classes were understood as disabled (or feeble-minded), and the disabled constituted a significant portion of the ranks of the lower classes.

Both individuals with disabilities and those from less privileged backgrounds have long been assigned labels that impose negative connotations on difference. These labels dehumanize and have a profound influence on one’s consciousness. For example, individuals with disabilities have historically been labeled as “freaks,” “crippled,”

“sickly,” “pitiful,” “invalid,” and “retarded” (Bogdan, 1996; Trent, 1994). All of these terms elicit undesirable and degrading connotations. While this language has evolved throughout the years—low-grade imbecile to moron to retarded to learning disabled—the meaning these terms convey has not. Charlton (1998) stated, “They, like other oppressed people, are constantly told by the dominant culture what they cannot do and what their place is in society” (p. 35). For individuals with disabilities, that place was first sensationalized through the freak shows during the period of 1840 through 1940.

Bogdan (1996) defined the freak show as “the formally organized exhibition of people with alleged physical, mental, or behavioral difference at circuses, fairs, carnivals, and other amusement ventures”(p. 23). These exhibitions “seized on any deviation from the typical, embellishing and intensifying it to produce a human spectacle whose every somatic feature was laden with significance before the gapping spectacle” (Garland-Thomson, 1996, p. 5). Individuals on exhibit were considered to possess unusual traits and were exploited in crude and primitive displays. Cassuto (1996) understood the freak show as “an attempt to cast a group of humans outside of the human category” (p. 237). It became a vehicle to convey and legitimize the message that certain individuals were less than human, thereby less deserving of basic human rights. In fact, Adams (1996) found this message condoned within constitutional law, which supposedly guarantees the equality of all citizens, but has failed to protect those citizens who look different.

Individuals with disabilities were also institutionalized during this period. The history of institutionalization and segregation of individuals with disabilities is significant and purposeful. The movement to institutionalize individuals intersects with the

Eugenics movement. Most recently, a book entitled *The Boys State Rebellion* (D'Antonio, 2004) drew attention to the horrific stories of young boys who, after being labeled feeble-minded, were drugged, sterilized, abused, experimented upon, and neglected within public institutions.

Similarly, a documentary entitled *The Lynchburg Story: Eugenic Sterilization in America* (Eadie & Tromboy, 1994) acknowledged the dark history of institutions. This haunting documentary told the decade's long history of abuse and forced sterilization at the Lynchburg Colony for the Epileptic and Feeble-minded in Virginia. The state claimed that the residents of the institution had hereditary defects that would be passed on to potential offspring, thus necessitating forced sterilization. Most individuals, however, were simply lower class, ill-educated, and considered a financial burden on the state. Both documentaries convey to the public the grave inequalities experienced by many individuals as a result of the Eugenics movement and institutionalization.

Institutionalization throughout the early and mid 20th century proved decisive for many reasons, none of which were beneficial to those who were confined. Foremost, institutionalization excluded individuals who were perceived as socially deviant, morally inept, and physically or mentally inferior (Blatt, Biklen, & Bogdan, 1977; Trent, 1994). These individuals possessed traits that were not only devalued or undesirable in society's eyes, but traits that had been delineated by the Eugenics movements as genetically substandard. For instance, a number of pedigree studies were compiled advancing and reinforcing the message that a strong linkage existed amongst those labeled with mental defects and a host of social problems. Additionally, legislation (called the ugly laws)

prevented people with physical “defects” from showing themselves in public lest they upset or trouble the gentle sensibilities of “normal” people (Bogdan, 1988). In state after state, warnings were issued that called for the immediate control of “defective” and “moronic” minds. Individuals believed to be mentally or physically inferior were forcibly taken from their families, communities, and homes. This seizing of individuals was rationalized as “necessary” and “in their best interest” (Trent, 1994).

A groundbreaking expose entitled, *Unforgotten: Twenty-Five Years After Willowbrook* (Fisher & Fisher, 2002), coupled with the works of Trent (1994), Blatt (1965), and Blatt, Biklen, and Bogdan (1977), revealed that the rhetoric of benevolence sanctioning these institutions did not match the reality. Individuals labeled as feeble-minded or as having a disability suffered not only grave indignities, but also great physical harm. They were denied the most essential and basic human needs, including health care, clothing, education, and personal hygiene. They were confined in overcrowded and deplorable conditions. Brooks and Sabatino (1996) described these hospitals and asylums as little more than “human warehousing” (p. 8). Essentially, they resembled penal institutions with wretched conditions and few choices for the individuals who found themselves confined there (Coleman, 1992).

Obviously, these institutions did not serve the interests of those confined within their walls. Instead, these institutions proved to be propitious and utilitarian solutions for the broader society. Most importantly, these institutions served important economic interests. They were a direct result of a host of economic interests that benefited from the creation and expansion of state institutions. The creation of these institutions provided

necessary jobs and work for many individuals, subsequently providing a boost to the American economy. Because the creation of these state institutions (referred to as asylums, hospitals, or special schools) was justified on educational and socioeconomic grounds, they continued to be vulnerable to social and economic pressures. Hence, economic pressure changed the overall purpose of the state institution. For instance, while the original goal was to return students to their families and communities, institutions soon became “custodial havens” wherein “the purpose of the [state institution] school began to shift from returning productive idiots to their communities to keeping them in the special school” (Trent, 1994, p. 27). In short, keeping individuals labeled with a disability or designated as feeble-minded in state institutions was fiscally sounder.

Institutions became a means of economic productivity. They absorbed individuals to fulfill economic roles and positions. Individuals who found themselves confined were expected to contribute to the prosperity of broader society by providing cheap labor. Often institutions were designated specifically for certain trades, and those confined were required to learn the trade. Foucault (1988) stated, “All able-bodied manpower was to be used to the best advantage, that is, as cheaply as possible” (p. 51). As a result, institutions failed to provide a supportive environment to educate and care for confined individuals. Instead, institutions exploited individuals in the interest of the economy.

The denial of equality for those labeled feeble-minded was the overarching tragedy of these institutions. Victims of social forces beyond their control, individuals labeled with the all-encompassing designation of feeble-minded, suffered discrimination and

denial of basic human rights in the name of a growing capitalist economy. At their personal expense, these individuals were exploited to serve the interests of the elite for whom institutions were of great economic significance. These social forces not only constructed institutions, but also constructed the meanings associated with the individuals placed within these institutions. In this respect, institutions laid much of the foundation that would shape and define society's understanding of individuals labeled with a disability. These enduring ideas remain entrenched in contemporary American thought.

Race

Race has been constructed through many of the same underlying assumptions and myths surrounding disability and social class. Hence, race also conflates with disability and social class. Just as individuals with disabilities, and those from less privileged backgrounds, have been assumed to be intellectually inferior, morally suspect, or less than human, individuals from diverse ethnic backgrounds have been regarded in many of the same ways. The unequal treatment of racial minorities, specifically, African Americans as it relates to this research, is well documented and harkens back to the early years of colonization.

In the beginning of this section, I noted that the founding fathers of the United States penned the phrase, "All men are created equal." Regrettably, the events preceding or following this most famous declaration do not support the assertion declared by Thomas Jefferson. In fact, given the constitution that would follow this declaration, it is fairly certain that Jefferson and the other founding fathers (including Madison and Hamilton) had never intended that all groups of people would be equal. For example,

Zinn (2003a) stated, “it [the Constitution] is chiefly used by those holding power in society as a democratic façade for a controlled society and a barrier against demands that threaten their interest” (p. 235). Put differently, America created a number of narratives intended to convey an ideal that would be readily embraced by all, but which would benefit only a small few (Adelman, 2003). “To make a revolution,” Lewontin (1991) pointed out, “you need slogans that appeal to the great mass of people, and you could hardly get people to shed blood under a banner that read ‘Equality for some’” (p.19). Thus, the Constitution provided a slogan, a story, an inkling of hope for many individuals to align themselves with an anticipation of a better life.

One of those stories included a theory of race. A theory of race aimed to guarantee some individuals equality, while excluding others under the pretense that certain individuals were somehow different and therefore, less than human. Just as the economy spurred on the institutionalization of individuals with disabilities, the economy played a significant role in creating a theory of race. Dependent upon slave labor, the plantation economy desperately needed a theory of race to sustain and justify slave labor and the unequal treatment of African Americans.

By 1860, slavery was a matter of practicality. Over a million tons of cotton was being produced in the South that required the labor of over 4 million slaves (Zinn, 2003a). White indentured servants had originally supplied the necessary labor, but the endless supply of African American labor through the capture, transport, and enslavement of African American individuals proved far more productive and cost efficient. It also served to create an association wherein blackness and slavery appeared

naturally to go together, thus giving white individuals the misconception that they were born superior.

In an attempt to legitimize and rationalize ideas that already had been widely accepted, Thomas Jefferson and the founding fathers called on the law to demarcate the boundaries of race (Zinn, 2003a, 2003b). They aimed to solidify through the law what they believed were the seemingly inherent differences between the white and black races. They used the Constitution as a vehicle to do so, laying a foundation that would allow for the unequal treatment of African Americans based on underlying assumptions of difference.

The Three-fifths Compromise of the Constitutional Convention illustrated a definitive example of how the law was created to sustain and perpetuate widely held assumptions about difference. This clause was a compromise between the North and the South, calling for African Americans to be counted for purposes of representation as three-fifths a person. Hence, African Americans were not considered entirely human. This allowed the South to profit from the large number of slaves, but for all other purposes, slaves were viewed as property (Urofsky & Finkelman, 2002).

The constitution also granted special privileges and protected the white “propertied class” with the Fugitive Slave Clause. This clause dictated that escaped slaves must be returned to their owners, thus reaffirming slaves as property and less than human. The Fifth Amendment also solidified the assumption that African Americans were inherently unequal. With the provision that no person shall be deprived of “life, liberty, or property,” African Americans were deprived of all three.

The underlying assumption that African Americans were inherently inferior was grounded in the Constitution and would remain deeply embedded in the minds of Americans. Moreover, these assumptions would continue to inform legislation. The controversy surrounding the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth amendments exemplify how deeply these assumptions permeated American thought. Take for example the words of Democratic Senator, James A. McDougall of California. He argued in opposition to the Thirteenth Amendment:

American slaves can never commingle with us. It may not be within the reading of some learned Senators, and yet it belongs to demonstrated science, that the African race and the Europeans are different, and I here now say it as a fact established by science that the eighth generation of the mixed race formed by the union of the African and European cannot continue their species . . . (as cited in Hayman, 1998, p. 104)

This argument demonstrates deep-seated assumptions about the nature of race prevailing during the nineteenth century. Furthermore, these assumptions did not disappear with the ratification of the amendments, but remained, however subtly, in the fabric of our belief systems.

McDougall's words demonstrated how slavery had been legitimized. If African Americans were not like us and were intellectually inferior, and if these differences were a matter of science, then the horrific treatment and oppression they endured could be rationalized. They were simply subhuman. These same ideas serve to justify many of the inequalities found in society today. For instance, if we continue to assume African Americans are genetically less intelligent (Hernstein & Murray, 1994), then we can more readily explain away the inequalities they face. In assuming as much, we are absolved of taking any responsibility for the continued discrimination African Americans endure.

Opposition to the Fourteenth Amendment was similarly rooted in ideas of biological differences and perceived inferiority. This amendment appeared to threaten the “natural order.” If the two races were allowed to marry, Congress would be compelled to provide for white and black children equally under the principle that all people would have equal protections in the rights of life, liberty, and property. This view represented a bipartisan view as illustrated by Democrat Joseph A. Wright of Indiana and Republican Orville Browning of Illinois in 1862. Wright stated:

We tell you that the black population shall not mingle with the white population in our state. . . . We intend that our children be raised where their equals are, and not in a population partly white and partly black; that they shall see those around them who are on an equality, and we know that equality never can exist between the two races. (as cited in Hayman, 1998, p. 108)

Likewise, Browning stated:

We may confer upon them all the legal and political rights we ourselves enjoy, they will still be in our midst a debased and degraded race, incapable of making progress because they want the best element and best incentive to progress—social equality—which they can never have. There are repugnancies between the two races that forbid, and will forever forbid, their admission to social equality; and without social equality they never can attain to a full development of their natural mental and moral natures, or lift themselves to any tolerable degree of respectable social *status*. (as cited in Hayman, 1998, italics original, p. 109)

Again, the belief that African Americans were naturally inferior was widely held. Yet, this belief was riddled with contradiction, as Browning’s own words demonstrate. Was it natural differences or denial of equality that kept the black race from reaching full potential and gaining equal social status with whites? Ambiguity concerning this pivotal question notwithstanding, it was unconditionally accepted that biological differences existed between the two races. Subsequently, Hayman (1998) concluded, “Racial oppression, in short, was as much a part of nature’s plan as the color of man’s skin” (p.

110). Even constitutional amendments could not equalize what was thought to be unequal by nature.

Civil War, Emancipation, and Reconstruction did not end the misery and horrific inequalities African Americans experienced; these events did little to alter their plight in life (Zinn, 2003b). The subtle, yet powerful, ideologies and assumptions about what it meant to be African American remained deeply entrenched in Americans' minds. Just as one barrier fell, another was quickly resurrected to take its place.

However, the nature and increasingly refined subtlety of the discrimination changed. Legal, intellectual, and economic changes supported and even expedited continued discrimination. The "Black Codes" in the South allowed southern plantation owners to maintain a system of virtual slavery wherein freed slaves became serfs. In Mississippi it was illegal for freed men to rent or lease farmland. Instead, they were forced to work under contracts that they could not break under penalty of prison. Courts could also assign black children under the age of eighteen into forced labor under the guise of apprenticeship (Zinn, 2003a, 2003b). Thus, de facto slavery and inequality was just as much a part of life as it had always been. The difference was that slavery now had a slightly different name.

The progress made with the ratification of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth amendments was also circumvented. The southern states had virtually nullified the right of African Americans to vote by using discriminatory literacy tests, economic intimidation, and violence to prevent African Americans from voting. The Jim Crow laws and the landmark *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) case legalized segregation, providing yet

another means to thwart black rights. The development of IQ tests used to “demonstrate” black inferiority, coupled with the growing interest in Social Darwinism and natural selection, fueled a climate already ripe with misconceptions about race (Black, 2003; Hurst, 2004). As a result, a pattern of overt inequality evolved to circumvent much of the equalitarian thrust of the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth amendments. Paraphrasing Frederick Douglas, Zinn (2003b) summarized:

A hundred years after the Civil War . . . African Americans were being beaten, murdered, abused, humiliated, and segregated from the cradle to the grave and the regular organs of democratic representative government were silent collaborators. (p. 240)

In so many words, the law, and those who make the law, continued to relegate African Americans to the margins of society.

Gender

A similar history of oppression and discrimination to that of African Americans, the lower classes, and those labeled with disabilities can be traced for women. Reading a common history text best epitomizes the denial of a woman’s equality. As Zinn (2003a) pointed out, “It is possible, reading standard histories, to forget half the population of the country. . . . The very invisibility of women, the overlooking of women, is a sign of their submerged status” (Zinn, 2003a, p. 103). Hence, the inferior status of women has been so deeply ingrained as “how things simply are” that the inequalities and oppression women have long endured have largely been ignored.

Gender has also been constructed employing many of the same underlying assumptions and myths of the above marginalized discourses. In this way, gender, too, conflates with disability, race, and class. Just as individuals with disabilities and black

individuals have been assumed inferior based on visible biological differences, the same assumption has been made for women. “The biological uniqueness of women like skin color and facial characteristics for Negroes, became a basis for treating them as inferiors” (Zinn, 2003a, p. 103).

Thus, women have been viewed as inherently inferior to the white male (Grimke, 1938/1988; Ryan, 1992). Their position and status, however, is somewhat unique in that women, throughout U.S. history, have been viewed as simply an appendage of man. Again, the Constitution elucidates this point. Women were afforded no rights within the Constitution. They could not vote, own property, obtain a divorce from their husband, or even claim custody of their own children. Moreover, married women could not lay claim to the money they earned or inherited. Instead, it was thought that the law represented women through their husbands and fathers. There was no need for women to vote because it was assumed women would cast the same vote as their husband or father. Hence, women were perceived as empty, thoughtless vessels. They were considered incapable of thinking on their own; moreover, it was assumed they had no need to think (DuBois, 1981).

Women were also considered the property of their husbands or fathers. By virtue of their male gender alone, men could do with women as they saw fit. Sarah Grimke (1838/1988) in her famous work, *Letters on the Equality of the Sexes and the Condition of Woman* described the situation of women during the Nineteenth century. She stated:

All history attests that man has subjected women to his will, used her as a means to promote his selfish gratification, to minister to his sensual pleasures, [and] to be instrumental in promoting his comfort. . . .” (p. 78)

In so many words, it was expected that women conform and graciously accept the position of man's inferior. Furthermore, it was widely held that women existed to serve men. A preacher's sermon in 1808 illustrated these expectations:

How interesting and important are the duties devolved on females as wives . . . the counselor and friend of the husband; who makes it her daily study to lighten his cares, to soothe his sorrows, and to augment his joys; who, like a guardian angel, watches over his interest, warns against dangers, comforts him under trials; and by her pious, assiduous, and attractive deportment, constantly endeavors to render him more virtuous, more useful, more honorable, and more happy (as cited in Zinn, 2003a, p. 113).

These roles and expectations became understood as the "cult of true womanhood" (Burns & Barnes, 1999; Ward, 1999). Woman's very existence was defined in relation to how well they met these expectations.

From an early age, young girls learned and were subtly indoctrinated into a culture of true womanhood. The notion that a women's place was in the home was instilled in women through the early teachings of the church, home, and school (Grimke, 1938/1988). Young girls learned that acquiring an education was not necessary for women; subsequently, (like African American slaves) they were discouraged from reading or writing. It was thought, these activities would poison a woman and dissuade her from accepting the more important duties of womanhood. "Such reading will unsettle them for their true station and pursuits, and they will throw the world back again into confusion," one newspaper editor in the early 1830s warned (as cited in Zinn, 2003a, p. 113). Grimke (1938/1988) also eloquently expressed the sentiment of the times. She stated:

This [the training of young girls] is demonstrated by the imperfect education which is bestowed upon them, by the little pains to cultivate their minds . . . by

the little time allowed for reading, and by the idea being constantly inculcated, that although all household concerns should be attended to with scrupulous punctuality at particular seasons, the improvement of their intellectual capacities is only a secondary consideration. (p. 57)

Hence, the message that women were and should remain intellectually inferior was bestowed upon young women from a very early age.

Women, however, were beginning to understand the subordination and contradictions of their position. While they had long internalized the message that they were inferior to men, their daily circumstances including the responsibilities of bearing and caring for numerous children, coupled with the daily hardships of maintaining a home, began to lead them to believe otherwise. In fact, much of this work was considered man's work; however, because men were often absent in the home, women shouldered these burdens. A stark veracity was beginning to resonate for women. They were beginning to understand their status not as inferior, but as equal to that of men (Kerber & DeHart, 2004). Susan B. Anthony alluded to the stirring of a movement to improve women's position in society. She stated:

The old idea that man was made for himself and woman made for him, that he is the oak, she the vine, he the head, she the heart, he the great conservator of wisdom, . . . she of love, will be reverently laid aside with other long since exploded philosophies of the ignorant past. (as cited in Ward, 1999, p. 9)

Anthony, like Sara Grimke, believed women were not men's inferiors. Grimke and Anthony were not alone. In 1848 in Seneca Falls, New York, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Lucretia Mott, and other women organized to discuss the injustices and exploitation of women throughout the United States (Burns & Barnes, 1999; DuBois, 1978; Ward, 1999).

Like African Americans, women's voices had been long silenced, and they had also grown dissatisfied with their social and legal standing. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and Sarah Grimke, to name a few, took note of these similarities. Grimke (1938/1988) articulated these parallels as they related to the law. She stated:

The very being of a woman, like that of a slave, is absorbed in her master. All contracts made with her, like those made with slaves by their owners are a mere nullity. Our kind defenders have legislated away all of our legal rights, and in the true spirit of such injustice and oppression, have kept us in ignorance of those very laws by which we are governed. (p. 72)

Thus, the abolitionist movement was a catalyst for the woman's movement and helped women to initiate their own revolution (DeBois, 1978).

At the first women's convention, held in Seneca Falls in July of 1848, Stanton outlined a number of grievances intended to illuminate the vast inequalities experienced by women. She aimed to overthrow the laws and policies that barred women from many personal freedoms and liberties. Most shockingly, for the times, Elizabeth Cady Stanton presented a *Declaration of Rights and Sentiments*, modeled after Thomas Jefferson's Declaration of Independence. In this declaration, beginning with the words, "In the course of human events . . .," Stanton proclaimed that women and men were created equal. In addition, Stanton indicated that men had systematically deprived women of their natural rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

At the Seneca Falls Convention, Stanton also proposed eleven rights to be codified within the Declaration of Rights and Sentiments. The eleventh right, the right of women to vote, shocked and dismayed most. Yet, Stanton refused to back down. She argued with Fredrick Douglas's support that denying women the right to vote rendered

The Declaration of Independence and rights therein meaningless. This was the beginning of the woman's suffrage movement, initiated 72 years after Jefferson's Declaration of Independence. It would require 72 additional years of struggle for women to acquire the right to vote (Burnes & Barnes, 1999; Ward, 1999).

In a letter to her sister, Sarah Grimke (1938/1988) parallels Stanton's frustration.

She wrote:

It will scarcely be denied, I presume, that, as a general rule, men do not desire the improvement of women. There are few instances of men who are magnanimous enough to be entirely willing that women should know more than themselves, on any subjects except dress and cookery; and, indeed, this necessarily flows from their assumption of superiority. (p. 65)

The ideas of Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Sarah Grimke, and others are of great importance.

These early expressions of equality indicate a pivotal turning point. Women were beginning to define themselves as independent of men, and perhaps more importantly, were locating the origins of their inequality within male patriarchy.

The abolitionist movement and the women's suffrage movement recognized that the path to greater equality resided in the right vote. Both movements advocated for constitutional amendments that would give the right to vote to women and African Americans. Therefore, it was natural for the women's movement to assume an alliance with the abolitionist movement. When the Civil War broke out, women strategically threw their support in favor of black rights, assuming black men would surely return the favor. Consequently, the women's movement was suspended as women asserted their support in favor of abolition (Ward, 1999).

Unfortunately, this strategy proved detrimental to the women's suffrage movement. While Stanton and Anthony had championed the rights of women through political leadership, their decision to align the women's suffrage movement with the abolition movement proved a costly mistake in terms of women's rights (Burns & Barnes, 1999; DuBois, 1978, 1981; Ward, 1999). The Thirteenth Amendment outlawing slavery passed without mention of suffrage for African Americans or women. Immediately afterwards, the Fourteenth Amendment was proposed with the intent of granting citizenship to African Americans and, by extension, suffrage. This amendment was significant as it contained the word "male" for the first time in the Constitution. Women and abolitionists debated whether to support this amendment or reject it in favor of an amendment that included women. In the end, the women's movement was unsuccessful in convincing African Americans to reject the amendment without voting rights for both black men and women. Thus, the Fourteenth Amendment passed without the inclusion of women. Shortly thereafter, the Fifteenth Amendment passed solidifying the black male vote (Zinn, 2003b).

The women's movement had been unsuccessful in convincing the abolitionists to support a Reconstruction program that included woman suffrage as well as black male suffrage. Asserting that the urgency was not the same for women as it was African Americans, Fredrick Douglas had refused to return the support that had been afforded by the women's movement to the abolitionist movement. Instead, he asked women to defer their dreams a bit longer (Barnes & Burns, 1999; DuBois, 1978, 1981; Ward, 1999).

African Americans had secured a small measure of equality; it would be up to women to secure the vote for themselves alone.

It was not until the summer of 1920 that the Nineteenth Amendment was passed prohibiting both states and the federal government from denying an individual the right to vote because of gender. Finally, women were granted the right to vote. Yet, just as the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth amendments did not solve the problems of inequality for African Americans, the right to vote for women did not guarantee equality for women. As Dubois (1978) stated, “The vote did not have the inherent capacity to emancipate women as individuals” (p. 17). Rather, the underlying assumptions about a woman’s position, intellect, and character would linger ever so subtly in the legal, economic, and educational structures of the United States. Equality would continue to be denied for women.

A History of Resistance

The numerous inequalities experienced by women, African Americans, the impoverished, and individuals with disabilities share similar histories and ideological legacies. Grounded in notions of biological differences, heredity, and worth these ideologies have resulted in the denial of personal freedom. Moreover, these beliefs have served to legitimize and perpetuate the exclusion and subordination of certain individuals within society. They have served to advance the most privileged. Still, individuals within one or more of the discourses of race, gender, social class, or disability have not succumbed; instead, they have continued to struggle through social movements aimed at

reducing inequality and improving the life chances of individuals within marginalized discourses.

These ongoing social movements and struggles illustrate the strong and enduring hold that underlying assumptions of race, gender, disability, and social class continue to have on the rights and freedoms of many Americans. As their historical origins demonstrate, these social movements share many commonalities. Most importantly, they continue to intersect with one another. Each movement often serves as a catalyst for another movement, spurring on renewed energy for a common goal (i.e., equality). Additionally, each of these social movements taught that the path to equality requires adjustment, creativity, and resilience because the economic, legal, and social structures of the United States continue to obstruct the road to equality.

For black Americans, the Civil Rights movement of the mid 1950s and 1960s is a crucial example of this continued resistance. Characterized by the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) decision, the Civil Rights movement witnessed the mobilization of black people and their allies in a concerted effort to bring equal opportunity in education, employment, and living conditions for African Americans. While the movement concluded with the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, racial prejudice continued. Legislation passed during this time provided yet another instance of how good intentions would continue to be sabotaged by notions of inferiority and biological differences.

The 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision shows how the law continues to be subverted. A sense of deep discouragement remains among many African Americans

who were both liberated by the promise of Brown and infuriated when 50 years later many of those promises remain unfulfilled (Irons, 2002; Kluger, 2004; Kozol, 2005). Most disappointing is that there is little hard evidence to demonstrate that the overall education of African Americans in desegregated settings has improved (Bell, 1980; Kluger, 2004). Not only that, as Irons (2002) and Kozol (2005) clearly document, America's schools are no more desegregated than they were in the early 1960s. Inevitably, the continued circumventing of legislation fifty years later continues to illustrate the remaining racial and social inequalities.

The landmark Brown decision, in addition to the early Civil Rights movement, served as a catalyst for women and disability rights movements. Parallels amongst the movements are easily drawn. For instance, whereas the struggle for black rights did not end with the right to vote, the struggle for women's rights also did not end with the right to vote. Ryan (1992) stated, "Winning suffrage gave women the right to vote, but not the underlying goal of political power, the means by which they meant to raise their status and create a better society" (p. 34). Hence, the women's movement continued, and three years after the suffrage was won, an attempt at the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) was introduced into Congress.

Women were also encouraged by the passing of the Equal Pay Act of 1963 and Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Although these crucial policy changes were initiated at the federal level without pressure from a strong women's movement, women benefited nonetheless. The inclusion of women, initially seen as a fluke, intended to destroy both pieces of legislation and served as a catalyst to renew a divided women's

movement. When both bills passed, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) took no action to ensure implementation of the sex provision. Spurred on by what had initially been a black rights issue, the women's movement rallied to form the National Organization for Women. Together, women once again united to work towards social change on gender issues.

Likewise, parallels can be drawn between the Disability Rights movement and the Civil Rights movement. The rationale behind efforts to deinstitutionalize individuals with disabilities can be linked with similar rationales and efforts to desegregate black students. Both movements aimed to tear down barriers of exclusion in favor of more inclusive environments. Dennis Cannon, a public transit authority employee who testified before the U.S. Commission of Civil Rights in 1980, articulated the strong connection between the integration of people of color and the integration of people with disabilities. He drew the following parallel:

In 1954 with the Supreme Court decision *Brown v. Board of Education*, many people assumed that full integration of public education was just around the corner. . . . Again in 1977, when Secretary of California signed the HEW 540 regulations, disabled people hailed the event as their emancipation and expected doors to open and curbs to fall virtually overnight. Obviously, none of these events has occurred. (as cited in Fleischer & Zames, 2001, p. 69)

These social movements share the common goal of equality and the common mechanism of discrimination: exclusion. Together and separately, each movement continues to struggle in response to the ongoing subversion of social and legal measures intended to bring about equality.

In summary, women, African Americans, individuals with disabilities, and the economically disadvantaged have experienced the undermining of much of the civil

rights legislation through subtle and overt legal, social, and economic mechanisms. Much of the Twentieth century has been characterized by a denial of personal rights and liberties for women, African Americans, the economically disadvantaged, and individuals with disabilities. Each group has long battled stigmatizing identities that have resulted in unequal access to resources and opportunities. Furthermore, each group has been perceived as less intelligent and less capable. These beliefs and their subsequent inequalities result in a story of grave travesties and empty promises.

The subtle and not so subtle messages denigrating the worth, value, and intelligence of certain groups remain today and can be witnessed in workplaces, neighborhoods, and schools. For instance, consider the recent controversy concerning Harvard's president, Lawrence Summers who surmised that there were fewer women in the scientific field because they are not biologically "wired" for these fields. This controversy demonstrates the saliency of a number of underlying messages about difference. In the following section, I discuss how these differences are constructed and continue to remain entrenched within society.

Constructing Race, Class, Gender, and Disability

In the United States, we live within a system that is largely based on categories of difference. Underlying this dissertation research is the assumption that categories ascribed to difference, including gender, race, and disability, as socially constructed (Barnes, 1998; Begum, 1992; Lorber, 2000; Oliver, 2004; Omi & Winant, 2000). The social constructionist model explains difference not as real or biological in an epistemologically realist sense, but instead as a product of human and social interaction

(Berger & Luckman, 1966; Ore, 2000). In other words, we choose how to perceive difference and assign meaning to difference through our daily interactions with others. In doing so, we also choose to create the context in which difference matters and the Other is forced to exist. In this sense, we are not born with a sense of what it means to be nonwhite/white, abled/disabled, or male/female. We learn and acquire these categories and the meanings associated with them through our interactions with friends, families, peers, and social institutions. The meanings we attribute to difference depend largely on the culture in which we live, as well as our place within that culture (Ore, 2000). As Hayman (1998) eloquently stated, “You are what you are called” (p. 119). For this reason, difference is not something that you possess, but something you are assigned.

In stating as much, the question of how we choose to assign meaning to difference arises. In an attempt to address this question, another question must also be contemplated: What subtle, underlying assumptions influence our choice making? For these answers, I turn to a brief discussion of normalcy through which the concepts of disability, race, and gender are often defined.

Constructing Normalcy

One of the most prevalent assumptions about difference is that the concept of normal has always existed and that it is stable, neutral, and natural. Ideas of what it means to be and act normal saturate society such that these ideas constitute a form of hegemony. In fact, most of us fail to realize how the concept of normal serves as a referent point dictating what we do, what we say, and even what we wear. Yet, Davis (1995) pointed out that words such as “normal,” “average,” and “normalcy” did not enter

European language until mid nineteenth century. Society did not always define its members along a scale of normal. Instead, the concept of normal has been constructed and continues to evolve as a result of social, political, and historical forces.

In the following, I discuss the origin of “normal,” how it has changed, and whose interest and what purposes it serves. I consider how our understanding of normal influences our understanding of race, gender, and disability. As part of this discussion, it is crucial for me to revisit my discussion of the eugenics movement. This is necessary because a central component of this movement involves how specific groups of individuals are labeled normal or abnormal. Thus, bringing the discussion back to the eugenics movement is crucial to demonstrate the intricacies of each discourse as they have been defined by the larger society and intersect with one another.

The concept of normal stems from three intricately linked and widely held assumptions. The first assumption holds that a particular quality or trait can absolutely or operationally be defined, and, thus, measured. This assumption is problematic because while some qualities like height can easily be measured in centimeters, feet, or inches, other qualities such as anger or attentiveness are more difficult to define and measure (Lewontin, Rose, & Kamin 1993). For instance, anger may be perceived differently by different people, and thus measured differently within differing contexts. Put differently, a quality cannot be understood as an underlying object that is reflected in varying aspects of an individual’s behavior. To do so would require the quality to exist outside the contexts in which it is understood.

Second, the concept of normal relies on the assumption that qualities are fixed and inherent to the individual. Given this assumption and the previous example, anger is not seen as a process emerging out of a particular circumstance or social situation. Rather, anger is a biologically determined quality existing within the person. This assumption is problematic in that if we believe qualities such as anger are biologically determined, there is little hope for the angry individual short of changing his or her biological makeup.

The belief that processes are reified qualities inherent within individuals gives way to the third assumption. The third assumption rationalizes that if processes are really fixed qualities of individuals, there must exist a measurement of these qualities and a scale on which to do so (Lewotin, Rose, & Kamin, 1993). Take intelligence for an example. If intelligence is believed to be a fixed characteristic of an individual, it is also assumed that a scale on which intelligence can be measured and plotted must exist. That scale, as we know it, is the normal curve.

In the late 1800s, the normal curve was conceived from the newly emerging body of knowledge known as statistics. Widely accepted as constituting real and objective science, the normal curve served and continues to serve as the mechanism to legitimize and justify the concept of normal. Still today, the normal curve is utilized throughout school districts and classrooms to assess intelligence and achievement along a scale that divides students into categories of normal, below normal, or above average. In doing so, the normal curve plays an important role in the distribution of resources, opportunities, and funding.

Yet, upon closer examination, the normal curve is not that objective after all.

When analyzed through historical and sociological lenses, the normal curve reveals itself as a distinct societal creation. This creation begins with a few individuals best known for their work in statistics, although their work as prominent eugenicists is far more revealing. As discussed in an earlier section, Sir Francis Galton, Karl Pearson, and R. A. Fisher were greatly interested in the “improvement of human stock” and elimination of inferior species (Black, 2003; Davis, 1995). They believed that inheritable traits included not only physical traits such as eye color and height, but human qualities such as talent, character, and morals. Thus, they believed that individuals of less stature must be bred out, wiped away, or erased.

As previously mentioned, the word Galton coined to undertake the task of racial cleansing was eugenics. Yet, the movement known as eugenics desperately was in need of scientific evidence to support Galton’s theory. Hence, Black (2003) pointed out, “eugenics was a protoscience in search of vindicating data” (p. 16). For this reason, MacKenzie (1981) asserted that it was not Galton’s statistics that made eugenics possible, but rather “the need of eugenics in large part determined the content of Galton’s statistical theory” (p. 52). In turn, there was a connection between the use of statistics and the intentions of those individuals driving the statistical movement. It was not simply a coincidence that those calculating statistical measure of humans were also those hoping to improve humans so that deviations from the norm would diminish.

The deliberate adjustments Galton made to statistical theory, subsequently contributing to the concept of the “norm,” demonstrated this connection. Essentially, he

created the scale of normal distribution by renaming what had been known as an error curve based on the law of frequency of error. In doing so, Galton chose to eliminate the understandings of the extremes of the curve as errors thus reconceptualizing the extremes as a continuous distribution of particular traits. Galton found this necessary because if the extreme ends of the curves were perceived as errors both those traits falling to the right and left would be viewed as deviant. Thus, tallness, high intelligence, strength, and all of the traits Galton thought of as positive would be errors. Instead, it better served Galton and his eugenics purposes to think of the curve as a distribution of traits. This allowed Galton to assign higher value to the traits falling on the right of the curve while assigning those traits falling to the left a deviant status. In other words, he changed the way in which we perceive and interpret the normal curve (Davis, 1995; MacKenzie, 1981). The well-documented intentions behind these changes provide evidence to support the concept of normal not as an “out there” objective reality, but as a purposeful societal creation.

As previously mentioned, ideas of normalcy based on his conception of the normal curve are a present and driving force in schools today. Although the “norm” created through Galton’s work was essentially a matter of interpretation, it led directly to the establishment of an intelligence quotient or IQ. Galton’s norm served as a mechanism to judge individuals along its linear scale. Consequently, those falling to the left are seen as abnormal, below average, and deviant (Gould, 1981; Lewontin, Rose, & Kamin, 1993). Given Galton’s political goals, this perspective served his interests well. It allowed him to pursue the goal of improving “human stock,” while providing the justification to do so.

Yet, Lewontin, Rose, and Kamin (1993) made clear that this concept of a normal curve is not an objective measure of science. "Let us be clear," they stated, "norms are statistical artifacts; they are not biological realities. Biology is not committed to bell shaped curves" (p. 149). In other words, what came to be believed as real, objective, normal is nothing more than another man's creation.

Constructing Differences

Galton's work is far reaching in its consequences. Besides the obvious problematic nature of the bell curve's existence, one of the most troubling implications is that some individuals must always fall below what is perceived normal or average. In fact, as the definition of normal as been construed, average can only exist with and through the identification and labeling of some individuals as abnormal or below average. Thus, Galton's work provided a framework for identifying and constructing categories of difference dependent upon and defined within the concepts of normal and abnormal. In the following, I discuss how the concept of normal resulted in the construction of categories of difference and the labeling of certain individuals as abnormal, deviant, or different.

In western society, individuals identified as able-bodied, white, young, and male are most often viewed as possessing characteristics or traits that are perceived as normal (Vernon, 1999). Thus, individuals identified as black, woman or disabled, thus, possess traits or qualities that are thought to fall outside the parameters of what is considered to be normal. These individuals are defined and categorized in terms of their alleged departures from the norm. These departures, most often, are defined in contrasting terms

that create binary dichotomies whereas normal is defined in opposition to abnormal. For instance, individuals may either be identified as black or white, disabled or abled, or woman or man.

Davis (1995) drew attention to the problematic nature of the normal curve by asserting that the practice of assigning individuals to absolute categories based on notions of normalcy is inadequate and misleading. He argued that individuals are wrongly constricted and limited by the normal curve. In fact, Davis (1995) stated, "One must view with suspicion any term of such Procrustean dimensions. A concept with such a stranglehold on meaning must contain within it a dark side of power, control, and fear" (p. 1). The dark side of power that Davis (1995) alluded to presents itself not only when one considers the construction of the normal curve, but also when one considers how the curve fueled the construction of difference and subsequent social movements such as eugenics. Hence, Davis (1995) pointed out and cautions that unconditional acceptance of the normal curve results in negative meanings assigned to perceived differences.

As outlined above, the prevailing assumptions are reflected in the discourses of gender, race, disability, and class. First, differences such as gender, race, disability, and class are widely believed to reside solely in one's biology. For example, whether a person is white, black, or biracial is decided at birth, thus the difference is intrinsic to that person. Second, and contingent on the first assumption, is the belief that assignment to a particular discourse results in differing abilities that are passed down from generation to generation. This assumption promotes the notion that particular traits or qualities are associated with specific groups of individuals. Finally, given the first two assumptions,

the conclusion that a natural hierarchy will inevitably result wherein certain groups of individuals will naturally rise to the top while others will, undoubtedly, be consigned to positions to the left of the normal curve.

Thus, stratification of individuals is believed to result from these innate differences rather than vast inequalities within social, economic, and historical processes (Hayman, 1998; Lewontin, 1991). These seemingly rational assumptions appear to legitimize the distribution of a population of people along the normal curve. In doing so, they naturally create categories of difference. In fact, the meanings that society associates with racial differences, gender differences, or differences associated with disability are neither biological givens, nor are they inherited. They only appear to represent real categories of difference. More to the point, they are purposeful societal creations existing by, through, and for culture. Most specifically, they exist for the culturally powerful.

One example is the creation of the category mental retardation (Bogdan, 1994; Edgerton, 1967). This “condition” merely reflects measures, standards, and tests that society has created to sort, label, and stratify individuals. It is the context in which we choose to measure mental retardation that will determine if a person is labeled mentally retarded, not the biology of the person (Hayman, 1998; Trent, 1994).

Gallagher (2001) also understands disabilities as social constructions. She stated, “Disabilities ‘exist’ because we as humans view ourselves and each other from within a particular context . . . ” (p. 643). That context is inundated with shared meanings and values that appear “real” and influence our daily interactions in a common-sense-like way (Gallagher, 2001). For Gallagher (2001), it is not the differences that are “real,” but the

way in which we define, group, and associate meaning with them. We essentially breathe life into difference, thereby making it matter.

This argument can be likewise applied to a full range of disabilities as well as the categories of gender and race. For instance, Shakespeare (1994), speaking of perceived gender differences stated, “One is not born a woman, one becomes one” (p. 291). Similarly, De Beauvoir (1976) argued that the position of women is not natural or biological, but instead dependent on the cultural context and the meaning that we choose to assign to certain bodies. From the moment of birth, infants are assigned a place in a system of roles, rules, and meanings (Harris & Wideman, 1988). Wendell (1997) summarizing both gender and disability stated, “Disability is not a biological given; like gender, it is socially constructed from a biological reality” (p. 260).

Regarding racial classifications, Stephen Jay Gould (1981) argued that racial differences simply do not exist. Essentially, there are no genetic markers that exist to support claims that race is innate and a result of biology (Adelman, 2003). Racial classifications have no value beyond their role as social persuaders useful for vindicating inequality. In other words, there is no scientific or genetic basis for grounding the relative superiority or inferiority of people along racial lines. In fact, just as ambiguity has surrounded the classifications of gender and disability over time, racial classifications have also varied so greatly that it is difficult to make the case that they are “real.”

Earlier in this section, I quoted Hayman (1998) as stating, “You are what you are called” (p. 115). To that I add—what you are called matters. What you are called influences your social position, status, and life chances. Emerging as a result of

underlying assumptions in biology and genetics, what you are called serves to perpetuate and maintain oppressive circumstances and structures. Together they legitimize and create a seemingly natural hierarchy wherein certain African Americans, women, the economically disadvantaged, and individuals with disabilities are understood as inferior, less intelligent, and deviant (Erevelles, 1996; Thomson, 1997). Carved out and sustained by society, these analytical categories serve to marginalize particular individuals by defining them in opposition to the norm.

As I noted earlier in the chapter and draw on now to conclude, Hayman (1998) describes this stratification as relying on the myth of merit. Differences are rationalized as natural; thereby, the process of responding to difference is unquestioned. This results in a seemingly natural hierarchy that appears to reflect natural differences. Consequently, assessments of human worth and value are thought of as neutral. Given the credo of “equal opportunity,” the burden shifts from society to the individual to mobilize his or her innate abilities toward the attainment of success. Sadly, the latter is viewed as a result of biology and characteristics inherent within the person, rather than the result of social or structural power arrangements. Hayman (1998) best summarizes the American story, “. . . it is the carefully crafted product of centuries of cultural propaganda, a myth of natural inequality perpetuated by men in power. . . ” (p. 229). History tells us so.

CHAPTER 2

INTERSECTIONALITY

Delgado (2000) defines intersectionality as the examination of race, sex, class, national origin, and sexual orientation and how their combination plays out in different settings. I have added the discourse of disability to this list of social categories that marginalize individuals. Together, race, gender, disability, and social class have been the site of concurrent social forces that intersect with one another and result in oppression and discrimination.

Intersectionality Theorized

Currently, a significant body of research literature has conceptualized the experiences of individuals defined by two marginalizing discourses. This research has explored the intersection of disability and race (Hill, 1994; Stuart, 1992, 1994), race and gender (Collins, 1993, 2000; hooks, 1984/2000), gender and disability (Begum, 1992; Blackwell-Stratton, Breslin, Mayerson, and Bailey, 1988; Fine & Asch, 1988; Garland-Thomson, 1997; Morris, 1991; Sheldon, 2004; Thomas, 1999; Wendell, 1996) and race and class (Anderson, 1990; Liebow, 2002). This research has illustrated common approaches to conceptualizing the nature of intersecting discourses. Upon close examination of this body of research, there is little coherence as to how the intersections of various discourses might be theorized.

One common approach in attempting to understand the intersection of two discourses has been to use one discourse to explain another. This two-dimensional approach has attempted to conceptualize the experiences of individuals imposed upon by

two discourses by drawing comparison or parallels. For example, Garland-Thomson (1997) suggested that parallels exist between the social meanings assigned to female bodies and those that are assigned to disabled bodies. She argued that both are excluded from participation in many aspects of daily life, are defined in opposition to the norm, and are perceived as deviant and inferior. Likewise, Wendell (1996) and Thomas (1999) described personal accounts of being labeled as disabled women, drawing connections between the disability and feminist movements.

Although these studies are well meaning and convey valuable information, their dualistic approach led them to overlook other facets of one's identity (May & Ferri (2005). Carby (1982) described how this approach would affect black women. She stated, "Black women's experience does not lend itself to an analysis based on constructing parallels, [in fact] such an approach renders the position and experience of Black women invisible" (as cited in Begum, 1992, p. 31). Thus, for May and Ferri (2005) and Carby (1982), two-dimensional approaches that draw on common parallels have been overly simplistic and inappropriate. Furthermore, May and Ferri (2005) declared that such rhetorical strategies can set up a discourse of equivalents that often falsely disaggregate intersecting identities (see also Carbado, 1999). For instance, race-gender analogies have tended to suppress anything that is not about race or gender, such as sexuality, disability, or class. In this way, these dualistic approaches have provided only an attenuated, reductionistic view of an individual's experiences and may continue to perpetuate cycles of oppression by inevitably ignoring certain aspects of one's identity.

McCarthy (1993) extended this idea by relating it to research conducted on race and education. He has explained that typical explanations of racial inequality are essentialist and reductionist. They effectively have eliminated the “noise” of multidimensional experiences by focusing only on race. Conceptualized in this way, two-dimensional approaches fall short in providing an inclusive understanding of individuals within intersecting discourses.

Others theorized these intersections employing a layering approach that uses the terminology “double” or “triple” oppression. These attempts to explain the characteristics of intersecting discourses have portrayed one discourse as added to or on top of another. Vernon (1999) argued against these approaches asserting, “One plus one does not equal two oppressions” (p. 385). Put another way, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Likewise, Begum (1992) stated, “Notions of ‘double disadvantage’ or ‘triple jeopardy’ do nothing to facilitate understanding of multiple or simultaneous oppression” (p. 17). Importantly, these notions of “double” or “triple” oppression have obstructed an understanding of the lives of individuals within multiple intersections.

Stuart (1992) also rejected the notion of “double” or “triple” oppression. Instead, he suggested that individuals within multiple discourses experience simultaneous oppression. Regarding race and disability, he asserted, “I reject the notion that black disabled people experience a kind of double oppression. The oppression black disabled people endure, is in my opinion, a special situation. . . . I suggest that racism within disability is part of a process of simultaneous oppression . . .”(p. 179). For Stuart, an

individual does not experience racism at one moment and sexism at another moment, but experiences both at the same time.

Vernon (1999), on the other hand, argued that simultaneous oppression (Begum, Hill, & Stevens, 1994; Stuart, 1992) is an inadequate starting point. She contended that the idea that individual experiences occur simultaneously is misleading and has suggested, for example, that a black woman with a disability has experiences that are unique to both her disability and race at the same time. She suggested, rather, that it is necessary to think about individual's experiences in terms of multiple oppression. Vernon (1999) substantiated this point by explaining, "Multiple oppression refers to the fact that the effects of being attributed several stigmatized identities are often multiplied (exacerbated), and they can be experienced simultaneously and singularly depending on the context" (p. 395). In other words, an African American woman with a disability may experience racism when among white disabled friends or experience both racism and disability discrimination when among white, able-bodied co-workers.

Still others have attempted to conceptualize these experiences employing hierarchical approaches. In doing so, they have tended to order the discourses, placing one discourse above or below another, according to which discourse may be viewed as more or less important or damaging. Hill (1994) provided an example of such thinking. She argued that black people with disabilities have largely been ignored by the social model of disability that privileges the voices of the disabled, while at the same time failing to acknowledge the experiences and concerns of black people with disabilities. In

this way, disability has been privileged over race, consequently resulting in the exclusion and marginalization of black individuals within the disability community.

The Importance of Intersectionality

While the above research has provided a valuable starting point, it also has presented some thorny complications or quandaries. The dualistic, hierarchical, and layered nature of these approaches have hindered a fuller or more comprehensive understanding of how each discourse may be linked and interwoven with one another. These approaches have failed to acknowledge the multifaceted nature of these discourses as they affect individual lives (May & Ferri, 2005). For instance, how class is experienced depends upon one's gender and racial assignment. Likewise, how gender operates depends upon racial and class distinctions. And how race operates depends upon class and gender identity. Thus, new approaches and methods of analysis are needed that may potentially bring about new understandings and insights into the complex relationships between race, gender, disability, and class. May and Ferri (2005) emphasized:

the urgent need for new metaphors and frames of reference to adequately theorize and realize multiplicity, to account for rather than suppress the intersection of ableism with racism and sexism, such that we shift conceptions of liberation, not merely in descriptive or additive ways, but at the levels of analysis, meaning, and subjectivity. (p. 134)

Without new frames of reference, we are left with an inadequate understanding of individuals within multiple discourses. Just as reading only two chapters of a novel would likely result in a misconstrued and hollow understanding of the novel, attempting to

separate, order, or compare the discourses of race, gender, disability, and class have resulted in a similar outcome.

Furthermore, a partial understanding is not without consequences. Those prescribed with multiple identities are relegated to fragmented lives. Audre Lorde (1984), a Black lesbian illustrated this:

I am constantly being encouraged to pluck out some aspects of myself and present this as the meaningful whole, eclipsing or denying the other parts of self. But this is a destructive and fragmenting way to live. (p. 121)

In other words, to fully appreciate an individual's experiences, one must seek to understand those experiences as interconnected and reliant on one another. A failure to do as much often not only results in a misconstrued understanding of that individual, but also limits and confines that individual.

For this reason, many have put forth an appeal for new and more refined studies of intersectionality (i.e., Anderson & Collins, 1992; Begum, 1992; Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1995; Mohanty, 1991). This perspective holds that individuals' lives cannot be understood through examining only one aspect of an identity, albeit gender, race, disability, or class. Rather, a more complete understanding of one's experiences can be gained only through a thorough inquiry into the multiple dimensions of one's identity. Wilkins (2004) stated, "Both structurally and individually, gender, race, and class necessarily inflect each other so that a person is never simply a woman or a man, but rather a black, middle class woman, or a white working class man"(p. 5). To this I added the discourse of disability. One is never simply labeled disabled, but also encompasses

labels of gender, race, and class that influence identity. Thus, we must always negotiate varying identities depending on the context and situation.

Collins (2000) recognized, too, that there has been little work in the area of how to theorize intersectionality. She asserted a need to examine how race, gender, and class are interconnected. Specifically, she argued that each is an identifiable system of oppression that work together to shape one another in simultaneous and interconnected ways. Collins (1993) stated, “. . . we need new visions of what oppression is, new categories of analysis that are inclusive of race, class, and gender as distinctive yet interlocking structures of oppression. . . . Moreover, we must see the connections between the categories of analysis and the personal issues in our daily lives” (p. 592).

Likewise, Cameron McCarthy (1993) highlighted the need for more intersectional approaches that will focus on issues of race and racial inequality within education. He has articulated

the need for a more relational and contextual approach to the operation of racial differences in schooling [that] would help us to explore more adequately the vital links that exist between racial inequality and other dynamics—such as class and gender—operating in the school setting. (as cited in Mangione, 1998, p.18)

The need for research that incorporates the discourse of disability is especially necessary. Davis (1997) pointed out that

studies about disability have not had historically the visibility of studies about race, class, or gender for complex as well as simple reasons. The simple reason is the general pervasiveness of discrimination and prejudice against people with disabilities leading to their marginalization as well as the marginalization of the study of disability. Progressives in and out of academia may pride themselves on being sensitive to race or gender, but they have been ‘ableist’ in dealing with issues of disability. While race, for example, has become in the past twenty years a more acceptable modality from which to theorize in the classroom and in print, a discourse, a critique, and a political struggle, disability has continued to be

relegated to hospital hallways, physical therapy tables, and remedial classrooms.
(p. 2)

Davis (1995) further made the point that many people do not understand the connection between disability and the status quo in the same way that people now understand the connection between race and/or gender and contemporary structures of power.

Research in Intersectionality

While some work to theorize intersectionality exists, as noted above, there is a dearth of empirical research that has considered the intersection of multiple (more than two) discourses. However, a few research studies do exist. For example, in her doctoral dissertation entitled, *An Ethnography of Working Class Female Students at a Comprehensive College*, Mangione (1998) explored the dynamics of gender, race, and class within a predominantly white, historically male, Jesuit, four-year comprehensive college. Through the use of individual and focus group interviews, this qualitative study uncovered the academic and social experiences of Latina, African American and White female students from working class families.

Mangione (1998) examined a number of questions. What are the similarities and differences between the ways in which these different groups of female students experienced their environment? What aspects of this environment, as defined by the women themselves, help or hinder their differing interests, needs, and desires of these female students? At what level do these different groups of female students interact within the dominant white, male student culture? Do issues related to class, race, and gender intersect differently for these female students, and does this have an impact on the way these different groups of women students perceive this environment?

Mangione (1998) framed her work within two theoretical perspectives. First, she employed the theory of nonsynchrony as discussed primarily in the sociology of education literature and feminist literature. A nonsynchrony position attempts to understand race, class, and gender within an interactive framework that recognizes each discourse as intersecting within education settings. According to Apple and Weis (as cited in Mangione, 1998) and McCarthy and Apple (1988), understanding the dynamics of race, class, and gender is essential to understanding schools and other institutions. For these reasons, Mangione chose the theory of nonsynchrony as it, “. . . provides for a complex theory that attempts to deal with issues of class, race, and gender simultaneously, while at the same time seeing the issues of class, race, and gender as unique and posing different needs for different individuals at different times” (Mangione, 1998, p. 16). For Mangione (1998), the notion of nonsynchrony allowed for a comprehensive conceptualization of the issues of race, class, and gender as they applied to the differing needs and educational experiences of the individuals within the study.

In conjunction with the nonsynchrony, Mangione (1998) incorporated notions of intersectionality derived primarily from Black feminist theorists. Drawing from the work of Patricia Hill Collins (1986), Mangione (1998) focused on ideas of self-definition, self-valuation, and Afro-American women’s culture as they related to each woman’s educational experiences. These emergent themes were especially important and unique to these women who had suffered racial inequalities in a predominately White society, as well as gender inequalities in a male dominated society.

Mangione (1998) found that the historically male and predominately White higher educational environment affected the academic and social experiences of these three groups of working class female students in different ways. While all of the women experienced varying degrees of gender inequalities, the Latina and African American women suffered inequalities that were clearly more attributed to race. They experienced oppressive circumstances that white women never encountered. Thus, while white women experienced gender inequality, their membership in the predominantly White student culture afforded them opportunities not made available to black or Latina women.

In a doctoral dissertation entitled, *Sex and Sensibility: Gender, Race, and Class in Three Youth Subcultures*, Wilkins (2004) explored the intersection of gender, race, and class through in-depth interviews and participant observations with Puerto Rican Wannabees, Goths, and evangelical Christians. This qualitative study considered how alternative identities allow youths to navigate a range of shared problems within the discourses of gender, race, and class. Wilkins (2004) described her research as:

about the ways in which identities employ, manage, reproduce, and alter intersecting race, class, and gender meanings. By representing different responses to similar constraints, the three (sub) cultural projects I studied provide substantive evidence of the ways in which race, class, and gender intersectionality is lived on the ground. (p. 5)

Wilkins (2004) concluded that the pulling together of intersectionality is difficult as it typically involves adding other dimensions of inequality to a lens that foregrounds one of the categories (i.e., everyone starts from a specific standpoint that will result in very different analysis of what intersectionality looks like). For example, she explains that the Goths' (sub) culture appears differently depending on which lens is in focus.

When viewed from a gender lens, the Goths seem much more transgressive than when viewed through a racial lens. Thus, she concludes that while the theory of intersectionality calls for the pulling together of race, class, and gender into a singular analysis, it is difficult to do in practice. Her study indicated that attempting to do so results in a process that privileges different elements, thereby altering the meaning of the analysis in significant ways. Possibly most important, her findings revealed that the ways in which race, class, and gender intersect in everyday lives are not just statuses that people carry around and manipulate, but represent ideological systems and processes that perpetuate inequality.

Richtermeyer (2001) also explored the notion of intersectionality in her doctoral dissertation, *Not One of Them: Women's Experience of the Middle Class*. In this qualitative study, she used focus groups to investigate how social class works in the professional middle class with White, Black, and Latina women. Specifically, she compared the experiences of middle class women with the experiences of women from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Focusing on motivational influences, obstacles and resources, Richtermeyer (2001) prefaced her research with two questions: How did these women become the women they are today? How do these women experience their professional lives in the workplace?

In her findings, Richtermeyer (2001) revealed differences based on class biography in who and how young women are influenced to pursue their education and career aspirations. She drew four conclusions. First, the intersection of race, class, and gender is more a process than a static identity. She drew on the work of Collins (2000) to

conceptualize the race, class, and gender as identifiable systems of oppression that work together to shape one another. She expanded on this theoretical concept by arguing that when intersectionality is understood as a process it may be best applied to empirical research. Richtermeyer illustrated her findings as follows: “What I found was that the dimensions of the intersection of race, class, and gender is a process that is experienced within specific settings by specific groups of women differently” (p. 235).

Second, Richtermeyer (2001) concluded that class biography remains salient but unrecognized by the women in her study. The women Richtermeyer (2001) described as Movers (i.e., those women attempting to climb the social class ladder) had the most difficulty acknowledging how class shaped and informed their opportunities. These women had little understanding of the intricacies of how the system worked. Having been denied experiences, opportunities, and resources throughout their lives that would teach the Movers how to function successfully in the middle class, the Movers failed to see themselves as a part of a larger social network that was based on relationships, information, and interactions. Instead, these women believed hard work and a strong work ethic would propel them up the ladder. This failure to recognize the workings of class led to self-perceived failure and loathing.

Third, acknowledgement and attribution of failure vary by class biography. While all women acknowledged that White males consistently dominated the workplace, there were differences based on class with regards to how women explained their exclusion and disconnection from the workplace. Originals (i.e., women having always been middle class) tended to cite structures or systems as failing them. They typically felt entitled to

their success and quickly moved to blame companies or leaders that failed to create and sustain systems that would allow them access. Movers, on the other hand, often placed the blame on themselves. They believed their exclusion occurred because they were not the “right” type of person. They were unable to recognize much of their personal success and because of their working class value orientation had internalized the message that they had simply not worked hard enough.

Last, Richtermeyer (2001) found that women handled exclusion, discrimination, and tokenism very different depending on the intersection of race, class, and gender. In short, White women were leaving and Black women were fighting to stay. Specifically, white women expressed a desire simply to give up, stating that males could have the success and that they had better things to do. Essentially, they accepted the sexism and endorsed the gender hierarchy that dominates the workplace. On the other hand, Black women were not ready to give up: Although they acknowledged that their fight for equality was tiresome, they felt it important to push these inequalities aside and forge ahead.

In her conclusion, Richtermeyer (2001) suggested that this research has far reaching implications as to how class continues to influence everyday life. Most importantly, she brought class issues, as they intersect with race and gender, to the surface. She reasserted a need to acknowledge that class continues to be a prominent factor in the distribution of resources and opportunities.

Stewart (2001) also offered work in the area of intersectionality. In her doctoral dissertation, *Awareness and Integration of Multiple Sociocultural Identities Among Black*

Students at a Predominately White Institution, she investigated how the socially constructed identities of race and gender influenced the educational experiences of five students attending a small liberal arts college. Five questions guided this study: How do these students perceive their own multiple faceted identities? How do these students choose which identities to embrace or abandon? What is the role of race, gender, and class on the lived experiences of these students? How do these students articulate a multiple identity? What is the impact of spirituality on the students' perception and development of their own multiple identities? Students were interviewed and data were analyzed through multiple lenses in order to illuminate the many complex issues involved in negotiating and integrating multiple sociocultural identities. Three interpretive frameworks were used including: faith and identity, optimal theory, and intersectionality.

Stewart's (2001) use of the concept of intersectionality employed the theoretical work of Reynolds and Pope (1991) to explore the identity development of individuals possessing "multiple oppressed identities." Her findings revealed that her participants were multifaceted individuals. Issues of race, gender, and class greatly influenced their experiences as college students. More importantly, her findings suggested that these students were constantly faced with decisions about how to represent themselves. Students had to continually negotiate their environments through choosing to illuminate certain aspects of their lives while ignoring or disregarding other parts of their lives.

More recently, David Connor (2005) added his contribution to the research involving intersectionality. His doctoral dissertation, *Labeled "Learning Disabled:" Life In and Out of School for Urban Black and/or Latino(a) Youth From Working Class*

Backgrounds, describes the educational experiences of eight students within various minority and oppressed groups.

Connor drew on the work of Crenshaw (1995) and Collins (2000) to develop his analysis of how race, class, and disability intersect and inform one another. In particular, he used Collins (2000) matrix of domination as an analytical framework. Within this framework, Collins (2000) identified four interrelated domains of power: structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal. Connor used these domains of power to implement a cross analysis by creating a matrix for each and further subdividing each into the major strands of disability, race, and class. He employed Crenshaw's (1995) three-prong model that focuses on the structural, political, and representational aspects of intersectionality.

The research studies cited above offer a good starting point from which to continue inquiry into the nature of intersectionality. They offer valuable information as to how theory may be linked with the actual lives and experiences of those within intersecting discourses. However, none of these studies included an analysis of how disability may inform race, gender, or class. According to Begum (1992),

There are profound implications for those of us who experience the oppression of racism, sexism, and handicapism. However, there has been very little analysis of the experiences of black disabled people or the diverse and complicated issues which affect us. (p. 71)

Thus, research that addresses the lived experiences of black disabled women from working class or impoverished backgrounds within educational settings is needed to add to the growing body of studies that consider how marginalized discourses intersect.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

Research Design

In learning about the educational experiences of three individuals assigned with the labels of woman, black, disabled, and lower classes, my aim was to understand each woman's lived experiences through dialogue, conversation, and narrative story telling. I intended to draw analysis and understanding not only from their spoken words, but also through their silences (Etter-Lewis, 1993; Goodson & Sikes, 2001). To accomplish this, my research interests directed me to qualitative inquiry focused on eliciting stories (Hollway & Jefferson, 1997) and the creation of vital text (Denzin, 1994). The voices of participants were given center stage in order to promote an authentic rendering of lived experience. Equally important, qualitative research allowed for flexibility and was multi-dimensional in nature. As Denzin and Lincoln (1998) stated:

. . . [qualitative research involves] an interpretive, naturalistic approach to its subject matter. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them. Qualitative research involves the studies' use and collection of a variety of empirical materials—case study, personal experience, introspective, life story, interview, observational, historical, interactional, and visual texts—that describe routine and problematic moments and meanings in individuals' lives. (p. 3)

Thus, my interest in exploring the intricacies of an individual's life and educational experiences was facilitated by qualitative inquiry methods. It was through qualitative inquiry that I was empowered to probe deeply and in critical ways, allowing the participants to take me where they might.

I approached this research with a number of philosophical assumptions associated with qualitative inquiry. Because my ultimate goal, as an inquirer, was to offer one of many interpretations within an ongoing process of constructing and reshaping meaning (Smith, 1993), I relied on an interpretivist approach to inquiry.

Eisner (1998) identified two features that make qualitative research interpretivist in character. First, an inquirer attempts to account for what he or she has given an account of. This may involve the use of constructs from the social sciences or the creation of new theory. In short, an inquirer attempts to explain why something is going on or an event that has taken place. Second, interpretivist inquiry is concerned with matters of meanings. Specifically, it centers on how participants make meaning, assign meaning, or experience meaning within their lived experiences. This approach to inquiry fit well with my interest in learning about the lived experiences of African American women with disabilities.

I also approached this study from a hermeneutics perspective. From this perspective, the inquirer analyzes text for meaning by considering the context or background of the subject, as well as the text or event. In this way, the inquirer moves back and forth from the whole to the part and back to the whole, acknowledging that understanding must involve both the whole and the parts. Because this type of analysis is circular, there is neither a starting point nor a final closure. Instead, the hermeneutic circle relies on continuous give and take to bring to light new metaphors that may potentially lead us to break free from our usual ways of thinking (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2000; Smith, 1989).

Kincheloe and McLaren (2000) described hermeneutics as an art form that “grapples with the text to be understood, telling its story in relation to its contextual dynamics and other texts” (p. 286). In this way; hermeneutical analysis attempts to illuminate the conditions under which interpretation and understanding take place. Its ultimate goal is a deeper understanding. Smith (1993) summarized, “The circle of interpretation can be broadened and deepened, but it is a circle from which escape is not possible” (p. 199). Thus, this interpretivist/hermeneutical framework allowed for an analysis of the lived experiences of African American women with disabilities within historical, political, and educational contexts.

Smith (1993) described three versions of hermeneutics: validation, critical, and philosophical. Each version relies on different underlying assumptions that guide inquiry and the implications for inquiry. For this dissertation research, I relied on the concept of philosophical hermeneutics. Inspired by the work of Gadamer (1975), philosophical hermeneutics begins within an interpretivist framework premised on the notion that an inquirer becomes “engaged in a critical analysis or explanation of text using the method of the hermeneutic circle” (Schwandt, 2000, p. 194). Philosophical hermeneutics differs from that of critical or validation hermeneutics in its key assumptions. Below, I discuss these assumptions and their subsequent implication for this dissertation research.

Philosophical hermeneutics is characterized by a number of key assumptions related to the nature of reality, known as ontology, and the nature, origin, and scope of knowledge, known as epistemology. These assumptions represent a basic set of intertwined beliefs that guide inquiry method (Creswell, 1998). I began with ontology or

assumptions about the nature of reality. I recognized the existence of multiple realities, such as those of the researcher, those of the participant, and those of the reading audience. As a result, my aim was not to discover an “out there” existing reality that may be accurately portrayed, but rather, to present one meaningful perspective recognizing the existence of multiple versions of reality (Gallagher, 1995). As Smith (1993) stated, “philosophical hermeneutics is not about a method for objectively valid understanding, but is rather about understanding itself” (p. 196). Smith (1989) described the ultimate goal as obtaining *Verstehen*, “an understanding of the motives and intentions of actors or the meanings individuals assign to their own actions” (p.196). To seek understanding, one must consider *what* and *why* within the context of meaning. Attempting to divorce meaning from its context does not allow for such consideration.

In seeking to acquire a deeper and mutual understanding of the various realities I explored, I have acknowledged reality as multiple and have alluded to a necessary and important assumption of my study. As the primary research instrument, I was involved in the research process and, as such, refuted the claim that knowledge may be accurately represented through a process of separating oneself from that which he or she is researching. As Jansen and Peshkin (1992) affirmed, “In hermeneutics, subject and object are not detached but, rather, in a communicative relationship” (p. 690). Understood in this way, I could not help but influence my participants and vice versa. I conceptualized this inquiry as a complex and moral task and asserted that the process of understanding could only be experienced through direct and intimate contact with my research participants in the settings in which they live, grow, and experience. So, just as my

participants were laden with their own meanings and bias, I also brought my own framework for perceiving and understanding the world. This, for me, was desirable, as it made for a richer study.

Referencing Gadamer (1975), Smith offered a helpful analogy relating to the communicative nature of the philosophical hermeneutical process. This analogy helped me to understand and embrace my role as a researcher. For Gadamer (1975) and Smith (1993), interpreting art involves a process of interaction. It is not enough to simply stand and stare at a piece of artwork; instead, one must become intimately involved in a process of asking questions of the art and allowing the art to ask questions of oneself. As Smith (1993) stated, "To 'observe' a work of art, with the intent of understanding, means that the interpreter must participate in that work because it is only the act of understanding itself that brings meaning into being" (p. 195). As a teacher, I related this to the process of learning. Both participants and inquirers were actively involved in constructing meaning through a process of continuing conversation, interaction, and reflection. In this sense, understanding could not happen alone but required interaction with what was trying to be understood. It was also not about accurately depicting an out-there objective reality awaiting discovery, nor was it concerned with achieving an objective stance. Rather, understanding was about coming together as human beings. In this way, hermeneutics is not only a "theory of understanding," but also a "theory of self-understanding" (Smith, 1993, p. 184).

Other scholars in the field of qualitative research agree that inquiry and the role of a researcher is a process that cannot be estranged from one another (Glesne, 2006). It is

widely accepted that every researcher speaks from a particular class, racial, ethnic, and cultural community. Because it is impossible to shed ourselves of these backgrounds, it is only natural that we approach research within our personal frameworks (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). In other words, as an inquirer, I brought certain assumptions and experiences that cannot be set aside. I could not separate myself from that which I researched or the context in which that research took place. I was deeply entangled with what I sought to understand.

Solidifying this relationship, Smith (1990) stated that, “Knowing is a relationship between knower and known. The knower cannot be collapsed into the known, cannot be eliminated; the knower’s presence is always presupposed” (p. 33). That said, I embraced my role as a researcher and willingly stepped inside my own research. This, I believe, is where the “art” asked questions and challenged me. As Smith (1990) eloquently stated, “The only way of knowing a socially constructed world is knowing it from within. We can never stand outside it” (p. 22). To know it from within, to answer the question back, required deep reflection of my own bias, ideas, and personal beliefs.

Ethical Considerations

I understood this form of inquiry as “an ethical and moral task” (Smith, 1993) that elicited special ethical considerations. These ethical considerations were formally addressed through filing a human participant review application and gaining approval to conduct this study from the Institutional Review Board. As part of this review process, individuals who agreed to participate in this study were made aware of their participant

rights and possible psychological risks. All participants agreed and consented to participating in this research study.

My relationship with my participants required special consideration. For example, I was careful not to “over-privilege” my own voice at the expense of my participants’ voices. As Smith (1990) cautioned, “We may not rewrite the other’s world or impose upon it a conceptual framework that extracts from it what fits ours. Their reality, their varieties of experience, must be unconditional datum” (p. 25). Thus, throughout this study I was careful to inform the reader and account for the decisions I made with regard to how I presented the data.

Likewise, I was careful not to exert subtle power over participants with what Foucault (1995) termed the normalizing gaze. For Foucault, this intrusive gaze in the form of authority figures represented an uneven distribution of power resulting in subtle control or coercion. Denzin (1994) described how this might be avoided. He suggested:

... to create a form of gazing and understanding fitting to the contemporary, mass-mediated, cinematic societies called postmodern. Such a gaze would undermine from within the cold, analytic, abstract, voyeuristic, disciplinary gaze of Foucault’s Panopticon. This will be a newer, gentler, compassionate gaze, which looks, and arises, no technical instrumental knowledge, but in-depth existential understandings. (as cited in Schwandt, 2000, p. 203)

Put differently, I strived to establish an ethic of closeness, care, proximity, and relatedness through employing the notion of Habermas’s ideal speech community (Braaten, 1991). My goal was to engage in an open conversation where my participants were minimally constrained in their comments or remarks. I desired for free-flowing conversations with mutual understanding and respect.

Confidentiality was an extremely necessary consideration given the nature of this research. Information and experiences shared by participants were kept confidential. Pseudonyms were used throughout this study. Additionally, because many of our conversations focused on sensitive areas including discrimination and bias, I approached these conversations with the utmost respect. I paid close attention to the nonverbal signal my participants exhibited and asked the more intrusive questions once I had established rapport.

Data Collection

There are no special procedures or methods that an inquirer must follow in order to engage in understanding or interpretation (Smith, 1993). Additionally, there was no right or wrong answer to be discovered; there existed no detailed procedural path to follow. For these reasons, this study employed various data gathering approaches that could not be decided and discussed a priori. Thus, they emerged throughout the course of the study. These methods included the process of interviewing and transcribing, recording extensive field notes, and gathering relevant artifacts, including school work samples.

Smith (1993) related this data gathering process to our daily interactions, as each of us try to understand those around us. He stated, “. . . there is no pre-established process for the interpretation of meaning and intentions. One does what seems reasonable given the situation at any given time and place” (p. 197). Thus, given a particular context, conversation, or situation, my participants and I negotiated our relationship, and any data collection arose from those negotiations.

Goodhall (1998) encouraged me to engage in this approach to inquiry. He suggested foregoing the traditional and stuffy style of research in exchange for a more creative approach in which my work had the freedom to be multi-voiced and narratively interesting. I found this suggestion complimented the nature of my study, as well as my earlier mentioned purpose and methodologies. Below, I describe in detail an outline of the methods that ensued.

Through the use of in-depth, multiple interviews over a period of six months, I explored each participant's schooling experiences. Specifically, I interviewed each participant at the setting of her choice. I met with Shana and Tasha, who both faced mobility restrictions, in their homes. Both Shana and Tasha lived in the same metropolitan city. I met with Courtney and Kiesha in public eating establishments near the university campus where both women attended college. Each interview lasted from one to two hours, depending on the participant's schedule and availability. I met with each woman, with the exception of Tasha, on multiple occasions ranging from three to twelve visits.

As noted earlier, my research, design, and philosophical underpinnings supported my abandoning a traditional approach to inquiry. Fontanna and Frey (1988) explained how this related to the process of interviewing. They stated:

Interviewing is currently undergoing not only a methodological change but a much deeper one, related to the self and other. The other is no longer a distant, aseptic, living human being, usually a forgotten or oppressed one . . . [thus,] in learning about the other we learn about the self. That is, as we treat the other as a human being, we can no longer remain objective, faceless interviewers, but become human beings, and must discover ourselves, learning about ourselves as we try to learn about each other. (p. 73)

In this way, the nature and purpose of my study, as well as my assumptions as an inquirer, directed the process of data collection. The interview, mirroring a conversation, united my participants and we grew and learned through each other.

I began by asking open-ended questions, hoping to elicit stories from each participant. I tape recorded and took notes during each conversation. I paid close attention to and noted the gestures, facial expressions, and tone of voice of each participant. I also observed and recorded setting details, including the expressions of others and the general surroundings.

Maintaining a conversational tone as I listened and absorbed the stories and memories of my participants, I offered a comment or advanced another question in an attempt to understand their recalled memory. My questions changed and evolved as conversations continued and new avenues were opened to explore. My first questions centered on very basic information that allowed us to become acquainted. As our conversations progressed, I focused on schooling experiences, including favorite memories, teachers, and other experiences. I was interested in learning about how each participant felt about her schooling experiences, how those feelings may have been shaped by outside forces, and how each participant came to reconcile or make sense of those experiences. Once our conversations had reached an exhaustive phase where we begin to talk in circles, I concluded our conversations.

Data Analysis

Data analysis involved the process of organizing, searching, and arranging transcript interviews and other relevant information. Bogdan and Biklen (1998) stated,

“Analysis involves working with data, organizing them, breaking them into manageable units, synthesizing them, searching for patterns, discovering what is important and what is to be learned, and deciding what you will tell others” (p. 175). Most often, this process of analysis begins with various methods intended to assist the researcher; however, as Gallagher (1995) pointed out, many of these methods not only contradict the philosophical underpinnings of qualitative research, but may potentially detract from the research itself.

For instance, Gallagher (1995) drew attention to the common method of member checking, in which researchers share their interpretations with participants. While she found member checking useful for expanding or broadening analysis, she also noted its inherent contradiction. If the purpose of member checking is to arrive closer to some “out-there,” objective truth about that which is being researched, the process of member checking opposes the very assumption that there is no once and for all truth in which to arrive at. Conceptualized in this way, member checking cannot serve to ground qualitative research or provide accurate depiction as some may hope. Thus, while the process of data analysis initially appeared self explanatory and a matter of simply choosing the right method, Gallagher (1995) cautioned me to approach analysis with an open mind.

Given my above noted assumptions regarding epistemology and ontology, Gallagher (1995) suggested that I forego the popular lockstep, systematic methods of data analysis in exchange for a less tidy approach. This was an approach that I constructed during the research. She explained:

I continue to believe that the process of data analysis is central to conducting qualitative research. The critical difference is that coding, managing, and displaying data should be a meaning making process, not a procedure that is to be executed with exacting proficiency. And in order for it to be a meaning making process, the individual has to develop his or her own procedures. Procedures offered by others (i.e., in textbook resources), can be useful if they are clearly conveyed as suggestions or examples, and the reader is cautioned to interpret them as such. (p. 26)

As a teacher, I easily related to what Gallagher (1995) was suggesting. Learning and researching is not a matter of force feeding information or methods to students or researchers with the expectation that those students or researchers will regurgitate it back in a prescribed manner that demonstrates knowledge or evidence of sufficient discovery. Rather, learning and research is a process involving the construction of knowledge in meaningful and purposeful ways (Dewey, 1916/1997). Meaningful research and learning cannot occur in artificial ways. As Gallagher (1995) affirmed of her own research experience:

Had I not been so distracted with procedural concerns, I think meaning would have unfolded more naturally, though not without a considerable amount of toil and struggle. In the effort to force my work into the patterns of familiar methodological models, I relinquished both the right and responsibility to make the analysis my own. (p. 26)

For these reasons, I approached the process of data analysis as I approached that of collecting data ,with flexibility, engagement, and enthusiasm.

I was not, however, so naïve as to approach data analysis with a blank slate. As Gallagher (1995) persuaded me to think of methods of analysis as simply tools, I looked to others to offer additional tools. Bogdan and Biklen (1998) provided many general strategies that aided in my analysis. For example, they suggested that I sketch ideas, take notes, play with metaphors, and sort information.

Likewise, Gallagher (1995) noted the importance of immersing oneself in his or her study in order to discern relationships and subtleties that may lie below the surface. I did this by reading and rereading my interview transcripts. I also listened to the recorded interviews of each participant to pick up on the influx of voice, accent, or language each woman used. Equally important, she suggested a “methodological log” or journal to jot down ideas, questions, and issues. For Gallagher (1995) a “methodological log” offered a sight of meaningful reflection and analysis. For myself, I created a methodological log in which I recorded ideas, reflections, and questions. I also sketched ideas, recorded future reference citations, and diagramed possible theories and avenues to explore. I dated each entry into my methodological log and continually returned to these notes throughout the research process.

Finally, Gallagher (1995) advised me to take an open, direct, and candid approach to my own research and issues of method that included data analysis. This meant thoughtfully and honestly accounting for my decisions. For her, believability in interpretivist inquiry was not about how close one came to a mythical truth, but with how much integrity one exercised in the process. Quoting Peshkin (1986), Gallagher expressed what she meant:

However, as I increasingly come under conviction (an expression I owe to study) about the relationship between who I am, what I see, and what I conclude I see, I feel increasingly inclined to reveal enough about myself so that readers can make their own judgments about what I saw, what I missed, and what I misconstrued. (as cited in Gallagher, 1995, p. 32).

Thus, it was not methods that offered a sense of truth or a feeling of “I got it right.” In fact, given the nature of this study and the underlying assumptions, the issue of truth as

correspondence was obsolete. Instead, “qualitative research becomes believable because of its coherence, insight, and instrumental utility” (Eisner, 1998, p. 39). In other words, I knew when I had “gotten it right” when I conveyed and made a case for the ideas that I presented. When I could offer relevant and meaningful insight into the lives of individuals within multiple discourses that caused another person to think and reflect, then I felt fairly comfortable with the stories I chose to tell. Doing this required thoughtful and careful reflection. I shared this with the reader throughout the study by drawing attention to my decision making process within the body of this work.

Selection of Participants

Participants fitting the criteria of African American, woman, disabled, and from a disadvantaged socio-economic class were located employing the snowball or networking strategy as outlined by Glesne (2006). Specifically, I contacted the local Area Education Agency, teachers, and individuals working in the area of disability services at local high schools, universities and colleges. Individuals meeting the above criterion were contacted by my colleagues and gave permission to have their contact information shared with me. I contacted a number of women, four of whom agreed to participate in this study.

CHAPTER 4

A CONVERSATION

Introduction

In Chapters 1 and 3, I outlined a number of philosophical and underlying assumptions that I approached this research study with. At that time, I overlooked an important underlying assumption. I had given the role of individual agency within my participants' lives very little consideration. In fact, with regard to students labeled within multiply oppressed discourses, I had stated, "They were not a burden on a system, but victims of a system that continually restricted and limited any opportunities for advancement" (p. 3). For the most part, I had approached this study with the belief that my participants were merely victims of a cruel and unfair system.

My failure to take into account these women's individual agency at the outset of this research was significant. It created the conditions in which I might have possibly perpetuated the very inequalities that I had hoped to dismantle. Denying or overlooking my participants' agency renounced their power and rendered them paralyzed. In effect, I became an oppressor. Freire (1970/2003) recognized that any individual "Discovering himself [herself] to be an oppressor may cause considerable anguish." Yet, he noted that "solidarity requires that one enter into the situation of those with whom one is solidarity." Furthermore, he agreed with Hegel that "true solidarity with the oppressed means fighting at their side to transform the objective reality which has made them 'beings for another'" (p.49). Thus, I came to realize that these women's liberation could not be contingent on my power or authority as the researcher. Change could only take place

working with and along side my participants. I needed to work by their sides to “transform the objective reality.”

From this perspective, I came to understand that my participants were neither passive recipients of discrimination nor passive recipients of my research. I looked for ways I could acknowledge and draw attention to their agency. These women were not in need of being “saved,” as I had inadvertently assumed at the onset of this research; but rather, their voices needed to be recognized. I realized their voices had long been squelched, silenced, and denied power.

In the following chapter, I illuminate their voices and draw attention to their individual agency. First, I briefly introduce you to Courtney, Kiesha, Shana, and Tasha. Then, I share these women’s stories and experiences through a constructed conversation between the four women.

Brief Introductions

Courtney

Courtney captivated me with her effervescent presence from the moment I sat down with her. Her words and stories resonated very deeply with me and held me spellbound. I was sure that if others around us could have been privy to our conversation, they also would have been captivated. Courtney commanded the floor like an inspirational speaker and told powerful stories of poverty, abuse, teen pregnancy, and discrimination. The sincerity of her eyes held my attention. She openly shared her triumphs, as well as many stories that most of us would bury and certainly never share with a stranger.

When I first met Courtney, I identified her the moment she walked through the door of a local coffee and bakery shop. Her tall and striking physique, with wide eyes and a kind face, set her apart from the crowd. She moved with power and elegance, cutting through the crowd to extend a hand to me in greeting as she joined me at the counter. She ordered first and directed me to where we should sit. "I like quiet corners by the window. You'll be able to hear me best," she informed me.

"Okay," I responded making a conscious decision to follow her lead, as if I had any other choice. With graceful dexterity, she negotiated her way through a maze of tables. Upon choosing and seating herself she smiled and said, "This will be good; don't you think?"

I unpacked my tape recorder, paper, and a pencil and inquired as to if she would allow me to record our conversations. "Of course, I know how important it is to record these conversations. You see, I am doing my own ethnography on the lives of teenage mothers. In fact, I like to use a digital recorder. They work much better. Pick up conversations more clearly."

It turned out Courtney had an impressive and extensive academic record, including experience in research. She was a graduate of a small, middle-income, Midwestern university and was currently pursuing a master's degree in Communication Studies. Given her accomplished educational career and experiences, I began to understand Courtney as a leader. As she launched into her life story with little prompting on my part, I realized she had always taken charge.

Courtney was born in Iowa City but grew up in Davenport, Iowa. Shortly after her birth, she and her older sister were placed in foster care by the state. Around age four, both girls were adopted by a blood relative aunt whom Courtney referred to as her mother. When speaking of her birth mother, Courtney said that she always referred to her as her “biological mother.”

At 15 years of age, Courtney became pregnant and gave birth to a son who is now eight. A few months after giving birth to her son, she left home due to negative experiences with her alcoholic, adoptive mother who had always been very physically and emotionally abusive. Courtney did not want to repeat the same mistakes with her son.

The decision to leave her family home sparked a number of subsequent events that led Courtney to where she is today. After living on the streets and with friends for three months, Courtney painfully, but voluntarily, placed her son in long-term foster care. She aimed to get herself and life together. She was then accepted into a program called Sisters of Humility, a Catholic faith-based charity, which provided shelter, basic necessities, and education for homeless women. At the same time, she struggled to regain access into the general education high school after being tracked into a high school intended for young, pregnant women. Courtney was intent on receiving a college-bound education in comparison to what she described as a “going nowhere” education at the high school for young mothers. Most importantly, at this time, she refused both a doctor’s and a school counselor’s advice to delay or forego her education upon learning and being diagnosed with pseudo tumor cerebra and intracranial hypertension. She stated with regard to her disability,

I really felt like it was the end of the world. But I knew if I wanted a future I had to get an education. And there was no way I could do that if I didn't graduate from high school. Education was absolutely first. It wasn't an option. Even when I was going blind, it never crossed my mind [to delay education].

Just as I was to learn that Courtney was determined to make the most of her life, I realized she would make the most of our time together as well. Courtney willingly shared her life stories. She spoke up until the very last moment when she would thank me and rush off to school, her full-time job, or to pick her son up. This led me to believe that Courtney made the most out of every single day. She demonstrated a deep and diligent vision that served as an internal compass guiding her daily existence. While she claimed, "My goodness! I'm going to take a break. I'm still running like I'm a teenage mother. I'm so into that mentality that I have to do this and then that," I could not imagine Courtney ever pausing to take a breath.

Kiesha

I met Kiesha near the end of her last semester in college. She was nearing the completion of a Bachelor of Arts degree in sociology and was frantically preparing to graduate from a four-year, public Midwestern state university. She described herself as the "poster child" for her family because she had been the first to attend and graduate from college. While at college, she had been labeled with Attention Deficit Disorder, anxiety, and depression.

As I got to know Kiesha, I learned that she grew up in an inner suburb of a large metropolitan area located in a neighboring state. Upon graduating from college with a degree in sociology, she planned to return home and begin working full-time. She also held aspirations of returning to graduate school in the near future. Her goal was to

become a pediatrician. She told me she was deeply motivated by a lack of quality health care for African Americans. She explained,

There is not a lot of diversity in the medical field, and when I look around, I notice there are few black doctors and especially few black women doctors. Unfortunately, there are still some doctors who do not know how to treat, talk to, or interact with patients that are not of their same ethnic background. I want to fix that.

I began to realize how few African Americans were on campus the day I might Kiesha. I met her in the university union where students congregate to study, visit, and eat. As I waited, I wondered how I would recognize her. We had not discussed what we would be wearing. As I looked around taking note of the students sitting at tables and sleeping in nearby chairs, I realized it would not be difficult to identify Kiesha. I did not see an African American student in sight.²

Kiesha, having recognized me by my tape recorder in hand, approached me first. As we made our way to a table near a window, she pointedly stated, "Let me be upfront. I didn't really know if I wanted to talk to you." She was "hesitant" she said because "it is so much scarier here." When I inquired as to what "here" meant, she explained that although she grew up in the Midwest, her childhood was somewhat "isolated." She clarified,

I basically went to school with kids that were all minority, but where we went to school minority was the majority. There were few whites. When we [her family] did travel, we mainly visited relatives down South. In the South, we always knew who to stay away from. You know, who we knew were racist. But here [Midwest, public, state university] you never know what or who you might run into. People hide racism much better and are much more subtle about it. You never know if you are looking at or talking to someone who is racist.

² According to the 2005-2006 university fact book, the African American undergraduate student population was less than 3%.

Thus, Kiesha was reluctant to speak with me. She was afraid I would be yet another white-middle class individual who would misunderstand her. Worse yet, she feared I had ulterior motives.

Her white, woman sociology professor convinced her to speak to me. “All right,” Kiesha recalled,

but I’m not holding back. I will tell my perspective because I think it is about time. . . . Enough is enough, and if you can’t tolerate it, you need to deal with the program because you need to understand that this is what I am. And if it’s too much for you, and if you can’t handle it, I can’t help you because I am at the point where I am going to say what I say.

And she did.

Shana

I visited Shana, a twenty-four-year old African American woman, in her home on many occasions. She lived with her Grandmother Rose in a massive, old two-story house located on the Southeast side of a large metropolitan city. Like many other homes in her neighborhood, Shana’s home was in desperate need of repair. Many of the homes on the block, including Shana’s, had porches that were decrepit and broken or rotted windows that were boarded up. In some cases, there were so many windows that had been boarded up it was nearly impossible for residents to see out. Additionally, the abundant trash and garbage littering the neighborhood made it appear as though it had been overlooked, forgotten, or, perhaps ignored by city garbage services.

I began interviewing Shana in the winter, so the neighborhood felt desolate and barren. There was little, if any, human activity. However, I was familiar with the neighborhood. Years ago, fresh out of college, I had worked as a substitute teacher in the

elementary school. Later as a self-contained special education teacher, I taught many students who were bused from this neighborhood to my segregated special education classroom. From these experiences, I knew the neighborhood as an area where one locked his or her car, dared not to enter after dark, if at all, and did not want to send his or her children to school. Many city residents avoided the neighborhood altogether.

Shana's family members were long-time residents of this neighborhood. The family home was owned by Grandma Rose but lived in by Shana and many relatives, including her mother, her uncle, and many cousins. The house sat next to an empty lot. Beside this empty lot was a street corner where a busy thorough street met Shana's one-way street. From the living room window where Shana occupied much of her day, she had a view of this corner and, ironically, the city bus that stopped to pick up passengers every fifteen minutes or so. This was ironic because Shana desperately desired the freedom to travel throughout the city. She would have loved to have had the opportunity to hop on and ride the bus across town to get her hair cut, to shop at Wal-Mart for some toiletries, or peruse Radio Shack for a new watch. Unfortunately, Shana was unable to take the city bus because she required transportation that was wheelchair accessible.

From this very same window, Shana also had a very good view of the alternative high school³ that sat directly across from this busy corner. Shana watched and recognized many students from the neighborhood who came and went from this high school each day. It was no coincidence that this alternative high school was located in her neighborhood. Most of its students also lived in the neighborhood.

³ An alternative high school is a public school for students who have been expelled from or no longer attend their neighborhood high school because of behavior, attendance, or academic reasons.

Shana, however, did not attend this alternative high school nor any of the public neighborhood schools just a few blocks away. Instead, Shana had attended a segregated school for students with visual impairments. Located approximately 45 miles from Shana's home, the school was a residential facility serving students under 21 years of age diagnosed with visual impairments. Shana and her Grandma Rose had difficulty recalling exactly when Shana began to attend and live at this school. Grandma Rose claimed, "My memory is just not as good as it use to be. I think a lady at the hospital when Shana was first born told us about the school. I believe she arranged everything for us." Shana, on the other hand, had no recollection of *not* attending the Braille School. Thus, both women agreed that she went there from a very early age up until she graduated just a few years ago.

From an outsider's perspective, I was surprised to learn that she attended the Braille school. I understood the Braille school to be for individuals with more significant visual impairments, and Shana did not appear to meet this criteria. She wore thick glasses, but moved about without the help of any assistive devices for her visual impairment. She did not use Braille, and from what I could tell, the only accommodation she required for her visual impairment was a wrist watch with a very large face and numbers. Because I did not understand Shana as an individual who was blind, I probed deeper as to why Shana attended the Braille school.

Grandma Rose explained that it was because of Shana's multiple impairments, including limited mobility, visual impairments, and being "slow," all of which had been a result of having been born with cerebral palsy. She further recollected that social services

had been helpful in getting Shana into the Braille school. The family had “no idea what to do with her,” and they were told the Braille school was a place that would best fit Shana’s many needs.

Still, I could not understand Shana’s placement. She appeared very capable of learning and working alongside her “nondisabled” peers. In my personal teaching experiences, I had taught many individuals within neighborhood schools labeled with similar disabilities. These individuals flourished and enjoyed living and learning alongside friends and peers. As I continued to contemplate this question and came to know Grandma Rose and Shana, I arrived at a few possibilities.

First, the Braille school was suggested to the family by individuals in positions of authority when Shana was very young. The Braille school was presented as the best option because of Shana’s multiple, severe disabilities. Thus, Shana’s family believed that placing her in the Braille School was the best decision. Grandma Rose repeatedly shared, “The Braille School is the best place for people like Shana. That school knows what to do. I wouldn’t have known what to do with her, still don’t sometimes.” Thus, Grandma Rose had internalized the myth that individuals labeled with disabilities require special kinds of care, education and teachers (Sapon-Shevin, 1996).

Second, given Shana’s family’s meager income and resources, the extra care and responsibilities surrounding Shana’s disability must have seemed staggering. How could a family who was struggling to “make ends meet” afford to provide for an individual with a disability? How would they meet the challenges of daily living arrangements? In this

way, the Braille school provided the best fiscal answer for a family who was presented with no other feasible options.

A recent graduate of the Braille school, Shana resided with Grandma Rose and worked at a local Pizza Hut. She proudly told me, “I’ve been working at Pizza Hut eight years this January—since I was in [high] school. I started working at the one near school and then when I graduated I transferred to this one.”

Shana is a dedicated and loyal employee. Grandma Rose affirmed this for me on many occasions stating: “Oh, my! Does she love to work there. Hates to miss a day of work, that child!” Shana, glowing with pride, replied, “I’ve never been sick. Just missed a day when the bus couldn’t get me in the snow.”

Accordingly, my visits were scheduled around Shana’s work schedule. On these days, we sat together on a well-worn sofa and visited for hours, always under the watchful eye of Grandma Rose. At first, I believed Grandma Rose was simply being protective of Shana—after all, I was a stranger in their home. Thus, when I noticed in some of our first conversations that Shana had difficulty articulating her experiences, I thought nothing of it when Grandma Rose jumped in to compensate. I speculated that her multiple disabilities caused her difficulty in articulating and required extra time for processing, reflecting, and answering questions. Hence, I waited patiently for Shana to respond. However, Grandma Rose grew impatient and chastised her for not responding quickly or for giving, what she felt, an inadequate answer. Consequently, Grandma Rose would regularly answer for her, and on many occasions, she apologized in front of Shana for what she believed to be Shana’s lack of ability to answer questions.

As I came to know Shana more intimately, I began to be somewhat troubled with her relationship with Grandma Rose. It was much more complex than I had initially perceived. I then realized it would significantly influence my understanding of Shana, as Grandma Rose would be an intricate part of my relationship with Shana.

From the first time that I telephoned Shana to arrange for an interview, Grandma Rose made it clear that I would only be granted access and permission to speak to Shana through her. For instance, Grandma Rose politely refused me the opportunity to speak to Shana directly by explaining, "I am Shana's Grandma Rose. I can make the arrangements for you to visit Shana." She also supervised our conversations. She, often coyly, refused me the opportunity to visit with Shana alone. She lingered in the doorway, made herself busy nearby, and sometimes deliberately joined us and readily contributed to our conversations.

For these reasons, Grandma Rose became a domineering presence in our conversations. She would unapologetically interject her ideas, thoughts, and opinions in a manner that overshadowed or contradicted what I felt Shana was attempting to tell me. Consequently, during our conversations, I was often left with the distinct impression that Shana had more to say. For example, she would begin a sentence only to be interrupted or initiate a comment only to be verbally scolded with, "Shana, please, that's not what the lady is asking you." Shana would frequently respond to this by rolling her eyes, always with her back turned to Grandma Rose. Thus, I came to conclude that Shana was not merely unable to respond because of a lack of ability as Grandma implied, but desired to say more. In fact, it appeared that she desperately wished for Grandma Rose to say less.

For example, on a number of occasions, our conversations grew somewhat sensitive in nature. These conversations centered on disability, personal autonomy, and dissatisfactions that Shana may have experienced in school or work. In these conversations Grandma Rose swiftly interrupted and swayed Shana's thoughts. On one such occasion, I had asked Shana about what it might have been like for her if she had attended her neighborhood school. Grandma Rose immediately interrupted and stated, "Going to school with normal kids, you know, not handicapped kids, would have been a conflict. Don't you think Shana?"

The room then grew silent. Shana did not answer, and I understood her refusal to answer as confirming what I suspected. She was both embarrassed by Grandma's interjection and angry with her for an answer she did not wholeheartedly agree with. Shana had already given this question some prior thought. How could she not? She spent a great deal of time looking out her window each day at a school she had only seen from the outside. I perceived her irritated expression as evidence that she had not entirely dismissed the question of what attending her neighborhood school may have been like. In fact, during one conversation in which Shana had shared her love of swimming with me, she told me that the school she spent a great deal of time looking at through her window had a swimming pool that was sometimes open to the public. She had seen kids go in and out with swimsuits and towels; yet, she had never had the opportunity to swim there. Recognizing the twinkle in her eye, I realized Shana desired an opportunity to participate in and use the neighborhood school.

In this incident, Shana's refusal to answer confirmed my suspicions that Grandma Rose also recognized Shana's interest in the neighborhood school. Shana's silence indicated that she had thought about and possibly wished she could have attended her neighborhood school. Clearly uncomfortable with the silence, Grandma Rose forged on and attempted to elicit a response that would support her own opinion. She ordered Shana, "Answer the woman, Shana." Quietly, with her eyes looking at her feet, Shana replied, "I guess so." Satisfied, Grandma Rose said, "See, I thought so."

I sat frozen, not quite knowing what to do or say. Essentially, Shana had answered Grandma Rose's question, not mine. Should I rephrase the question and try to ask it again? Should I move on to a different question? I sensed tension in the room because Shana was still looking at her feet; thus, I chose to change the subject. I did not want to risk Shana's trust or our growing friendship.

As I began to reflect on this conversation and others like it, I became frustrated. While I had wished for free flowing dialogue, our conversations felt restricted by Shana's grandma's presence. Shana was no longer attempting to answer my questions. She had gradually learned to say nothing. Essentially, Grandma Rose's presence was silencing Shana's voice. I wondered how I could gain Shana's perspective with Grandma Rose always in the room.

Around my third visit to Shana's home, I had an epiphany. As I sat next to Shana on the couch, I realized Grandma Rose's watchful eye, always looking on from the doorway and just a few steps away, exemplified the compilation of Shana's experiences. I had started to feel limited and restricted by Grandma Rose, like Shana must also feel.

Thus, I came to understand Shana's inarticulateness as not simply a result of limited language skills, but "generally overlaid by other factors including a lack of self-esteem, learned habits of compliance, social isolation or loneliness, and the experience of oppression" (Booth & Booth, 1996, p. 56). Moreover, in the same way that I had changed many of my questions with anticipation of Grandma Rose's disapproving response, I came to believe that Shana was possibly doing the same with her responses. I would phrase a question or ask a question that I knew was "safe" to ask. Shana appeared to answer the "safe" response. It seemed we were getting nowhere.

Yet, after reading and rereading my interview transcripts, I started to pick up on the silences, the gestures, and the casual comments. I noticed Shana was telling me things. In fact, Shana was conveying quite a bit. As Hedges and Fishkin (1994) noted, there are the unnatural silences,

those that result from 'circumstances' of being born into the wrong class, race, or sex, being denied education, becoming numbed by economic struggle, *muffled by censorship*[italics added], or distracted or impeded by the demands of nurturing, that must be brought to the forefront and given attention. (p. 3)

Thus, while I realized that I could not "get rid of" Grandma Rose, I also realized I would not want to. I was experiencing Shana's life just as she experienced it. In the same ways that she was silenced or limited by Grandma Rose, I was as well. Thus, I wanted to bring these silences to the forefront.

Just as Shana had learned to employ the silences to convey meaning, by shifting her eyes downward or pausing at length in refusal to answer, I learned to pay attention to those silences. Inevitably, I came to wonder if I was a little crazy. It was as if Shana and I were talking in code. I questioned if I really understood what she attempted to convey to

me. How did I know if she was dissatisfied or unhappy? How was I to interpret this meaning when she said one thing, but her body language indicated another?

I reconciled these contradictions and obvious dilemmas in a number of ways. First, I asked many of the same questions repeatedly. I rephrased previous questions or briefly paraphrased key points to check for understanding. I carefully watched Shana looking for familiar gestures or long pauses. I listened to Grandma Rose and noted questions that brought forth adamant responses. I paid close attention to interactions that occurred between Grandma Rose and Shana. I watched for Shana's eyes to meet mine, and I searched for meaning in her expression. Finally, I contrasted our conversations by comparing Shana's demeanor when Grandma Rose was in the room with the few instances that Grandma Rose was not in the room. Through these means I deciphered what Shana's messages conveyed.

I also came to another epiphany about Grandma Rose. I initially perceived grandma as simply the domineering "matriarch"; however, I realized this would have been grossly inaccurate and stereotypical (Davis, 1971). Although African American women have been stereotyped as matriarchs, hooks contended, the term matriarch "implies the existence of a social order in which women exercise social and political power, a state which in no way resembles the condition of Black women or all women in American society" (1981, p. 72). Thus, using matriarch to describe Shana's grandmother would have recreated a hierarchy of discourses. Moreover, I would have erroneously generated the context in which to implicate African American woman in their own oppression.

Tasha

On an icy, cold December morning, I met Tasha. She was a petite woman, approximately five-foot four and plainly dressed in a red turtleneck shirt and jeans. At the time, she was living with her new husband in a small, one-room apartment. The apartment was located just off an interstate outside of a large, metropolitan city where she had attended and graduated from the public school system. Throughout her educational career, Tasha had been labeled with learning disabilities.

As I greeted her for the first and only time, I immediately noticed a scar running the length of her face. I was reminded of a previous telephone conversation in which she had shared that she was recuperating from a tragic automobile accident that had occurred just months before. Tasha had explained,

We, my mom, fiancé, and I, were returning from Chicago late one night this past August when I lost control of the Jeep I was driving. It rolled three times and we were all thrown from the car. My mom and I landed on the side of the road and my fiancé in the median. I remember waking up in the hospital and thinking “oh, my god.”

Her injuries were extensive. She had a broken pelvis and leg that required screws and rods throughout her body. In addition, she had facial fractures that resulted in numerous subsequent surgeries. As a consequence of these facial injuries, she also had bleeding in the brain that resulted in brain injury, short-term memory loss, and visual impairments. Describing her injuries, she stated, “Everything that could be broken was.”

Yet, it was her mother’s and fiancé’s injuries that evoked deep emotion in her voice. As she recounted to me on the telephone, “It wasn’t until I saw my mom that I realized I was really the lucky one. At least I had one leg left to walk on. My mom had no

legs left to walk on because she had broken both legs.” Of her fiancé’s injuries she stated, “He had a broken collar bone, a fractured knee, and internal bruising.” Tasha, her mother, and her fiancé had spent months in the hospital and still had a “ways to go,” she had stated. Thus, because her days were consumed by doctor appointments, therapy sessions, and endless amounts of paperwork, she was unsure of how much time she could give me. Yet, she had gone ahead and invited me over.

Tasha was warm and welcoming when she greeted me at the door. She quickly invited me in and offered me the one chair available—located just inches from the door. The apartment was small. The entry way was, literally, the living room, and the compact kitchen butted up against the living room. Four cabinets were all that made up the kitchen, and the counter doubled as both an entertainment center and food preparation area. From my seat in the chair, I noticed a short hallway that led to a bedroom and bath.

Tasha apologized for not being able to meet me at a local restaurant, and I immediately felt stupid for having suggested doing so. Clearly, given the icy and cold weather conditions, it would have been very difficult for Tasha to get out. She also explained and offered a second apology. She was expecting Rent-A-Center to interrupt our interview around noon. They were coming to haul away their mattress. I didn’t ask, and she didn’t offer. The meager surroundings led me to guess that Rent-A-Center was repossessing their mattress. Rent-A-Center’s business flourishes by preying on and exploiting the poor. I spent the remainder of the meeting wondering where she would sleep that evening. I mentally referenced Barbara Ehrenheart’s (2001) book, *Nickel and*

Dimed, thinking to myself that I was witnessing first hand what it is like to struggle financially in America.

Shortly after our first interview, Tasha left me a telephone message stating that she and her new husband (they wed shortly after the accident) were relocating out of state. I was not surprised. I had recognized that she was just barely “getting by” and that her existence was a daily struggle. Mounting bills coupled with on-going doctor appointments, physical therapy, and lack of support were a catalyst for her and her husband to join family in the South. She felt this was their only option at a fresh start and new life. She promised to be in touch, but I have not heard from her since.

Because I only had the one opportunity to meet Tasha, I debated as to whether I should include her story at all. Certainly, I had not gotten to know Tasha as well as my other participants; however, I felt that her story was important. The very fact that I was unable to interview her a second time is quite telling. Tasha’s unexpected move illustrates one of the many ways that disability, class, gender, and race intersect. The accident could, of course, have happened and been a source of hardship for anyone. Yet, events and circumstances that occurred before, after, and surrounding the accident were certainly a combination of many conflating factors, all of which were relevant to this research.

Constructing A Conversation

Collecting and analyzing my data was a continuous process in which I immersed myself in my participants’ stories. I wrote daily and extensively in a “methodological log” (Gallagher, 1995). In this journal, I reflected on my participants’ stories by sketching

out ideas, drawing diagrams, noting subtle body language from interviews, and recording additional thoughts and questions. I started to sort the women's stories by grouping direct quotations, field note entries, and anecdotal notes into common themes or experiences. I began to move fluidly between the overall notion of strength that had emerged and the detailed incidents that supported my understanding.

Below I created a conversation to illuminate my participants' experiences. I did this by drawing heavily on interview transcripts, field notes, tape recordings, and my "methodological log" (Gallagher, 1995). Throughout the dialogue, I employed as many of my participants' words as possible. I returned to interview transcripts and recorded conversations to capture the context and essence of their words. I also relied on my personal notes to infuse the dialogue with subtle details and gestures. I had actually met one of my participants in the coffee shop in which I locate this conversation.

My voice is present and interwoven within this dialogue as well. I understood the process of inquiry much like a routine conversation in that my participants and I were engaged in an open "dialogical encounter in which the interpreter questions the text and the text questions the interpreter" (Smith, 1993, p. 196). From this perspective, this research and the constructed conversation below represents a fusion of horizons (Gadamer, 1975). I did not attempt to step outside myself, assuming one could, to understand my participants' experiences; rather, I acknowledged my own standpoint or horizon as it related to or fused with my participants' experiences.

My voice as the interpreter is intertwined within the conversation in many forms. Foremost, I have chosen which stories to share and the means in which to share them. I

have also infused into the dialogue transitional phrases, setting details, questions, and editorial comments. Based on my interview notes and personal journal, these creative elements serve the literary purpose of creating a seamless conversation.

I chose to share my data in the form of a constructed conversation for a variety of reasons. As I reflected on my conversations with each of these women, a common theme of strength resonated throughout each of their stories. In spite of the less than ideal circumstances these women encountered on a daily basis, each of them demonstrated resilience and fortitude. I also realized that together their stories embodied a powerful collective strength. That is to say, singularly, their stories were compelling; collectively, their stories were empowering.

After spending time with each of these women, their stories led me to imagine and create a conversation amongst them. I believed such a conversation would provide these women the opportunity to share, be comforted, and perhaps be empowered by each other. As Freire (1970/2000) stated:

Who are better than the oppressed to understand the terrible significance of an oppressive society? Who suffer the effects more than the oppressed? Who can better understand the necessity of liberation? They will not gain this liberation through chance but through the praxis of their quest for it, through their recognition of the necessity to fight for it. (p. 45)

In so many words, I wanted to offer my participants a forum in which to talk frankly of their experiences. I believed such a forum would open up possibilities for my participants to understand the collective nature of their strength in the same way as I had.

Unfortunately, schedules, geographic locations, and transportation issues, prevented the arrangement of such a meeting. Yet, I decided I could still convey their

stories collectively as I had initially envisioned through a constructed conversation. I realized doing so would compliment the aims and methodology of this research.

As discussed in Chapter 2, one of the quandaries associated with intersectional research comes with describing, defining, and sorting through the experiences of individuals labeled with multiple discourses. Constructing a conversation allowed me to avoid fragmenting, compartmentalizing, or ranking these women or their labeled discourses. A conversation permitted me to present their lived educational experiences in a holistic manner while at the same time teasing out the subtle nuances of each woman's experiences. I also circumvented making invidious comparisons or understanding each woman from only one aspect of their identity.

Constructing a conversation also complimented my methodology. Given the multi-dimensional nature of my research question, the philosophical underpinnings of qualitative research supported my creativity in constructing the conversation below. Because I was uninterested in arriving at an out-there objective truth, I was able to forego more traditional approaches to research in favor of a more imaginative and open approach. This approach encouraged me to think differently about what I already knew. It allowed me to stretch my understanding, factor in different ways of knowing, and arrive at alternative meanings and understandings (Ferguson & Ferguson, 2000).

Gumbo Ya Ya

Gumbo ya ya is the essence of Black musical tradition where the various voices in a piece of music may go their own ways but still be held together by their relationship to each other (Brown, 1989, p. 925)

Around a large, square table bordering the window, four women begin to gather. Courtney is the first to arrive and orders a pot of coffee for the table. Shana arrives next. She is obviously pleased. (She *actually* managed to arrange transportation to come today, and that transportation was *actually* on time.) She shyly thanks Courtney for pushing aside a chair, allowing her to navigate her wheelchair easily through the maze of tables and chairs. As she positions herself to the side of Courtney, Tasha follows, making her way awkwardly through the maze of tables and chairs on crutches. She chooses the closest and most accessible chair on the other side of Courtney. She carefully lowers herself to avoid knocking her casted leg on any of the numerous obstacles that the café presents. Last to arrive, Kiesha enters and quickly recognizes the group—they are the only African American women in the café. She makes a beeline to the table and sits opposite of Courtney.

It is early in the morning and the coffee shop is a flurry of activity. The regulars sit scattered and are evenly placed throughout the small establishment. Square tables line the outskirts of the coffee shop and border large windows. Smaller circular tables fill the center of the coffee shop. Uniform in size and shape, each table is framed by four chairs. The morning commuters rush in and out. They zigzag through the crowd, arming themselves with a cup of java and exiting through the same door they entered. A rhythmic beat is barely audible through the overhead speakers because of the endless chatter. The walls of the coffee shop are painted in bright, contrasting hues and are framed with a hodge-podge of local art work. In spite of all the excitement of people moving about and filtering in and out, the coffee shop appears to run seamlessly.

As the women tentatively take in one another, Courtney begins introductions and gives a brief history of herself. “I’m Courtney. I’m twenty-six. I have a son who is eight, and I will graduate from the university this spring.” Wasting no time, Courtney proceeds to take the lead. She directs the others to introduce themselves in a round-robin-like fashion.

Sitting to Courtney’s right, Kiesha begins, “I’m Kiesha. I’m also twenty-six, and I’ll graduate this spring from the same university.” Then looking to her right, she indicates to Shana that it is her turn.

“I’m Shana. I’m twenty-four. I work at Pizza Hut,” she says timidly looking down at her hands.

And in just as quiet of a voice, Tasha continues, “I’m Tasha. I’m twenty-four, too.”

Without pause, Courtney starts, “So, Amy brought us together to talk about school, huh?” Everyone nods in unison, not sure what exactly they should say to one another. Unaffected by the silence, Courtney continues, “What about school? What was school like for you all?”

“School wasn’t really all that bad. It wasn’t really that hard,” Tasha states in a noncommittal manner. She is consciously being careful not to reveal too much. These are strangers, after all. “I mean freshman year [of high school] no one does well, but the last three years were okay. When I was focused and all.”

“Yeah, it wasn’t really school that was hard,” Kiesha agrees, “it was all the other stuff that went along with school. You know, the politics, the institution, and the life. That’s the hard part.”

“I know exactly what you mean,” Courtney proclaims. She is not dillydallying around. She is intent on getting down to business. “It wasn’t the academics that were hard, but the crap that everyone else seemed to put on you,” she declares, looking around the table before she continues, “Like when I got pregnant with my son. I was just 16 and a lot of people made me feel like I was having Satan’s child, to put it lightly. I really felt like the end of the world was going to come. I remember hearing you’ll never graduate, you’ll never get a job, and you’ll probably have five more. My teachers, my counselor, even my mother told me these things,” Courtney states in disgust.

“Your mother said those things to you?” Kiesha questions. She only just met her, but she can already tell that she has a lot to say.

““You’re life is over I remember her saying. She was so angry, and I didn’t understand because she was always trying to get me to do more girly things. What could be more girly? I thought this was exactly what she expected from me.”

“You don’t think she wanted something more for you?” Kiesha probes, thinking of her own mother. “I remember my mom always telling me that I could do better than she had had the chance to. She wanted me to go to college, to make something of myself.”

“Not my mom.” Courtney replies and then in hesitation adds, “Well, if she did that was not the impression I got.”

“Wow, my mother was the complete opposite,” Kiesha exclaims. “From as long as I can remember, she was my biggest supporter when it came to college. She was always telling me that I didn’t need a man. That I needed to learn how to take care of myself. She’s the one who knew I would go to college. She even got me into a specialized math and science high school to prepare me for college,” explains Kiesha, drawing a line of distinction between her own situation and Courtney’s.

Tasha and Shana listen and contemplate the exchange between the two women. Shana is not quite sure what to say or think. She never really thought about college or having babies. In fact, she doesn’t even remember anyone speaking to her about either.⁴ She thinks about saying as much, but decides against it, afraid of what the other women might think.

In response to Kiesha’s comments, Courtney continues, “Oh, no, I don’t think my mom would have let me go to college. In fact, having my son was really a blessing because it forced me to leave home. If I wouldn’t have left, I can’t see how I would have got to college,” Courtney plainly states.

Feeling more at ease, Tasha adds, “My mom was like Kiesha’s. She was all about me going to college. I didn’t really want to go, but she told me, ‘Tasha if you want to be independent and have money then you have to go to college.’ So that’s when I enrolled in a community college; but since the accident, I don’t know if I can bring myself to go back.”

⁴ Whenever I brought up these topics of conversation with Shana in front of her grandma, Shana simply looked at her feet. Grandma Rose, on the other hand, acted as if I had asked a silly question. She seemed to imply that because of Shana’s disability there was no expectation that Shana would ever go to college or date for that matter. Furthermore, when I inquired as to grandma’s dreams for Shana, she could not answer, stating, “I guess I don’t know if I had any. I didn’t think she’d get this far.”

“What accident? Is that why you are on crutches?” Shana curiously asks, hesitantly entering the conversation for the first time. She, too, sometimes uses crutches.⁵ She is nervous also, hoping to avoid anyone directing a question about college or babies at her.

“Yeah, I was just released to use crutches. I’ve been in a wheelchair for the past four months. I was in a car accident last August with my mom and fiancé. We were coming home from Chicago around one a.m. in the morning, and I was driving. I lost control of my SUV and rolled it three times. Everyone was thrown from the car. My mom and I landed in the ditch and my fiancé was actually in the median. My mom broke her pelvis and both legs. My fiancé broke his neck, wrist, and fractured his knee. I think I just about broke everything in my body. I have pins and rods throughout my body.”

“You look so good!” Courtney offers in genuine amazement and support. Tasha softly smiles, appreciating Courtney’s compliment. The others also take note of Courtney’s dynamic and upbeat personality. There is something about her that seems to help everyone feel at ease.

“Thanks, but I don’t always feel so good. I sometimes get a little down, but I try to stay strong. We’ve all had to go through a lot of physical therapy. I’ve also had to go through quite a bit of speech therapy. I had some minimal brain damage and no longer

⁵ Shana’s cerebral palsy has resulted in limited mobility. During her schooling, Shana recalled being “forced” to participate in physical therapy sessions that were grueling and punitive. To this day, Shana prefers to crawl, explaining it is her fastest and most reliable method of getting around. Crutches, she feels, are difficult to use and a wheelchair is too big and inconvenient. Shana’s grandmother, however, is visibly upset by Shana’s decision to discontinue any physical therapy. On one occasion she commented, “I try to get her to not crawl because, you know, how it looks and all. But she won’t listen, crawls everywhere when she can.”

have much of a short term memory. It really gets me down sometimes because I just don't seem to be the same person."

"So that's why you don't know if you will go back?" Kiesha questions, referring back to their previous conversation about college.

"Yeah," Tasha continues reluctantly, "I just don't know if I can go back. I'm still in the process of rehabilitating and going to doctor appointments. I had originally thought I would go back in the summer or fall of 2006, but now I just don't know. College was really hard for me. I had just gotten comfortable with the work and all when the accident happened. Now that I haven't been in the swing of things, I'm afraid I've forgotten how to do it, and it was so hard to begin with. I think I'm scared to go back, and I just can't seem to get motivated all over again. Work on top of work on top of work, and I just don't know how I would do it."

"I sometimes didn't know how I would go to college, either," Courtney offered encouragingly. "I had so many things and people against me, too."

Wondering out loud, Tasha asks, "Who else besides your mom was against you?" She finds it hard to believe that Courtney ever experienced hardship or defeat. She appears so put together.

"I had a high school counselor who, oh, my god, was so upset that I wanted to go to college. He thought because I had a baby that I shouldn't even consider going. He wouldn't even let me go on one of those college tours."

"So, what did you do?" Kiesha asks, leaning in attentively. Her curiosity is peaked because she also remembers being told "no" repeatedly by teachers.

“Well, I just knew I had to go to college, so I started organizing my own college tours. I got a bunch of young women who also were teenage moms like me together and called the college office admissions pretending to be an advisor and arranged for a tour. Turns out, we didn’t need his help at all.”

“Wow! I don’t think I would have ever thought to do that,” confesses Shana.

“Yeah, I guess it was pretty amazing. I look back now and think about how he could have crushed me if I had listened to him. I’m so glad I didn’t, but I was so young, and I really thought he knew everything. I would think seriously and really worry that maybe he knew something that I didn’t know. Like, maybe he was right after all.”

“But he wasn’t,” Kiesha affirms.

“Yeah, I know that now, but at that time I didn’t,” Courtney responds.

“But, how’d you know you would go?” Shana probes deeper, still wondering how Courtney could just *know* she would go to college.

“Well, I don’t think I would have gone to college if I wouldn’t have gotten pregnant. Where I grew up people just don’t go to college. But when I got pregnant, my mom said, ‘You’ll end up just like your birth mom. You’ll never do anything. You’re no good,’” Courtney recalls with emotion and heat in her voice. “And you know, all my life I believed her, but when I had my son, it was, like, different. I wanted to be something. I didn’t want anybody in this world resenting or hating me like I hated my birth mother.”

Recognizing the implications of Courtney’s choices, Kiesha interjects, “That’s a very good reason. You wanted to break the cycle.”

“Yeah, that’s exactly it. I knew I didn’t want to repeat my birth mother’s mistakes. I knew I wanted more for my child,” Courtney reaffirms.

“That’s kind of like why I want to be a doctor. I want to break the cycle, too. Just in a little different way. I want to break into the medical field—to make something of myself for people like me. You know what I’m talking about. We’ve all been to the doctor and, you know, we never get a doctor that understands us.”

With nods and loud hmmm-hmmmm’s all around the table, it seems everyone agrees. Shana is looking anxious, as if she wants to say something, and Courtney begins to say something, but Kiesha speaks first returning the direction of the conversation back to college.

“So, we’re all in college, then?” Kiesha states, doing a mental tally.

Quite a bit more comfortable than just twenty minutes before, Shana decides to add her personal story, “No, I work at Pizza Hut. I don’t think I ever thought about college. No one in my family ever went to college. I guess I never thought about it.” Obviously still thinking about it, Shana continues, “I don’t think anyone at school ever talked about college. I guess I just knew I would work at Pizza Hut.

“How’d you just know?” Courtney inquires, wondering to herself if Shana was also motivated by some internal desire that led her to just know, as well.

“That’s just where I knew I wanted to work. After the teachers at school helped me get the job, I fell in love with working there. I have been there eight years in January,” Shana shares proudly.

Slightly confused, but genuinely interested, Courtney questions, “What do you mean? Who helped you get a job?”

“At the Braille school, that’s where I went to school; the teachers help you get a job. It’s part of our school day. You learn how to fill out applications and practice your signature, like a million times. That part was boring, but you also learn to do other stuff, too.”

Wondering about her question, but asking it anyway, Courtney inquires, “What’s the Braille school? I’ve never heard of it?”

“The Braille school is where I went to school. Instead of going to the school in the neighborhood where I lived, I went to and lived at the Braille school. There were lots of kids from all over the state who went there.”

“You mean for people who are blind?” Tasha questions.

“Yeah,” Shana replies and then makes sure to add, “but I’m not totally blind.”

“You don’t look blind,” Kiesha interweaves, and Tasha nods in agreement.

“You don’t have to look blind, to be blind.” Courtney, with a wave of her hands, forcibly interjects. “I don’t look like a blind person. And, you know, I don’t act like a blind person, however that *is!*”

“You’re blind, too?” Shana repeats loudly with surprise. Finding an ally with Courtney, she is surprised by how comfortable she is with the entire group. However, her reaction draws attention from a table a few feet away. A trio of older, white men noticeably stare and then quickly avert their eyes downward when caught by Courtney.

In a hushed tone, she laughs, “You would think they had never seen a bunch of black women talking.”

Laughing, too, Tasha suggests, “Maybe it’s the wheelchair and crutches. We must look like quite the group!”

“Anyhow, getting back to what we were talking about,” Courtney redirects. “Just after I had my son, I started to lose my vision. They call it pseudo tumor cerebra or intracranial hypertension. It means that my body thinks that I have a tumor, but I don’t. It causes symptoms just like a tumor. That’s why I’ve got excessive fluids throughout my body. It causes me to gain weight, and it’s how I lost my vision, the fluid putting pressure on and blocking my eye nerves. And so, I only have 25% vision in my right eye and 75% vision in my left. I have no peripheral vision and can’t see any depth,” Courtney explains.

“I wouldn’t have guessed,” Kiesha admits. “Neither of you look blind.”

“I was born with cerebral palsy and am legally blind, but with my glasses, I can see pretty well,” Shana says.

“I know I don’t look blind, either. People are always shocked to learn I have a disability. I guess I don’t look disabled enough. But then again, I don’t think of myself as disabled,” Courtney responds.

Pondering Courtney’s statement for a moment, there is an awkward silence surrounding the issue of disability. “Yeah, I know what you mean; I don’t think of myself as having a disability, either. In fact, when Amy wanted to get us together for this conversation I thought to myself, I don’t have a disability, but I’ll come and talk,” Kiesha says.

Shana agreeing, adds, “I don’t call it that either. I just think of it as my personal problem.”

“Yeah, I sometimes think of it as that, but I also think that it’s not really a problem until someone makes it a problem for me,” Kiesha interweaves, adding, “You know, I was making it in college, but just barely. There were some days I couldn’t get out of bed to face the world. I was so overwhelmed with college life. I would go to class and be completely freaked out. I was just debilitated. My papers and work I just couldn’t finish, and I was to the point where I was asking for extensions. But they refused to help me. They told me I needed to go the disability services office. Then when I went there, I had to go through hell and high water to be recognized.”

“What do you mean?” Courtney questions. “You had to go get a label to get help?”

“Yeah, pretty much. I was suffering from severe anxiety, depression, and ADD. It wasn’t understood at all. Even after I spent seven days in the hospital, people still didn’t get it,” Kiesha expresses with frustration.

“So your disability is anxiety and depression?” Shana inquires.

“Yeah, but I don’t think of it like that. Life, I think, is just filled with advantages and disadvantages. Like, you would never know by looking at me that some days I can’t even get out of bed. I get filled with so much anxiety and panic that I can’t move. But it was never a problem until I came to college. When I came to college, no one understood about my anxiety. Then it was definitely a disadvantage. Professors just thought I was being lazy.”

“What do you mean?” Tasha wonders aloud.

“You see, like I said earlier, college was really hard for me, but it wasn’t the academics. I was an honor roll student before college, but when I got to college, everything changed. I was like a fish out of water. Culturally, I just didn’t feel like this college was for me. You know, some people said, ‘Oh, you’ll get use to it.’ I believed them for a while, but then I realized that just wasn’t possible. Maybe if you were coming from an environment that was more favorably or more culturally geared towards me, but I still haven’t got use to it, and I’m about ready to graduate.”

“What was the hardest thing to get use to?” Courtney asks. She also felt out of place with college life.

“I think it was how competitive everyone is. I came from an environment that was so nurturing, you know, we all did whatever we could to help each other out. It was more comfortable and warm. Maybe that had something to do with the history of minorities. I don’t know, but we all stuck together. It wasn’t like everyone was out to get or do better than their neighbor. But when I got here, it was all about grades and what your GPA was. You weren’t valued as a person; no one related to you like a human being. You were just a number. I couldn’t avoid playing the game, you know, trying to be the best, but I just couldn’t seem to be the best, no matter how hard I tried. That just added to my anxiety.”

Cutting Kiesha off, Courtney responds with fervor, “I know what you mean. I remember trying to survive and everything was so different.”

“Yeah,” Kiesha continued angrily. “Like for example, I remember one incident especially. I had been assigned to work with others on a group project, but I was the only

one doing any of the work. One day I got so fed up that I told the rest of the group that I wasn't going to cover for them anymore. I refused to hand in what I had done until they completed their parts. Well, finally, everyone had done their part so I handed over my part, only to find out that the group had "lost" my part and never turned it in. The professor turned around and blamed me for holding up the group and gave me an F. He told me I needed to learn to get along better with people."

Thinking about similar experiences, Courtney dives into a story of her own. "I've had bad experiences like that, too. Professors think I am just being lazy or just want to create more work for them. When I've requested copies of notes or overheads because I can't see the board, they refuse to give them to me and then imply that I'm lazy or ill-suited for college life. Some have even asked why I have bothered with college. They want to know why I don't just get disability aid or something. And I'm always, like, because I'm alive that's why. You know—because I can talk and move and work. I just need some accommodations, that's all."

"People always wonder why I work, too." Shana adds with a fervor the group has not witnessed. She has been thinking how Kiesha and Courtney's experiences relate to her own. She, too, has had great difficulty in being valued as an employee. She explains, "They want to know why I just don't get SSI or something. They never let me switch jobs; even though I know I could make pizzas, they make me continue to fold boxes."

"So you fold the pizza boxes?" Tasha clarifies.

"Yeah, but what I really want to do is move up and help make the actual pizzas, but my bosses don't think I can."

“Have you ever made the pizza before?” Courtney asks.

“One time when another girl was sick they let me, but since then I haven’t. I get so frustrated because I want to do more, but no one lets me. Even my Grandma Rose acts like my work isn’t important. She always says in front of me, ‘That Shana, thinks they can’t survive without her,’ implying that they really could. But the truth is I do a good job. And I love to work.”

Courtney, smartly drawing out the irony, remarks, “Don’t most people complain that people with disabilities don’t like to work or that they are sponging off the government?”

“Yeah, you’re right,” Kiesha chimes in, “most people get angry that people with disabilities abuse the system, but it seems to me that in your case, they don’t even want to let you work.”

“That’s exactly it. I love to work, and I love even more to make my own money. In fact, I keep my own checkbook and everything. That really makes Grandma mad. My only problem is people not letting me work and do the work I want to. Oh, and getting to work on time is a problem.”

“What do you mean? You can’t get there on time?” Courtney asks.

“I have to take the city bus because Grandma Rose doesn’t drive. There are only a few buses that can pick up people in wheelchairs, and they only pick up certain people first, most of the time I am late for work.”

“What do you mean they only pick up certain people first?” Tasha, jumping into the conversation, asks.

At the same moment, Kiesha asks, "Speaking of time, what time is it?"

Courtney, glancing at her watch, replies, "it's ten."

"Wow," Kiesha says. "We've been sitting here for an hour already? It seems like a lot longer." Everyone agrees, and Kiesha, apologizing for interrupting, states, "I'm sorry, go on."

"See, because there are only a few buses that transport wheelchairs, they pick up people for doctor appointments or people with emergencies first. So if someone has an emergency, then I have to wait till the bus can get to me. Sometimes, I have to wait an hour or longer."

Clearly annoyed, Courtney declares, "That's terrible. You shouldn't be forced to be late. Do your bosses get angry?"

"Well, they are not supposed to take it out on me because it's not really my fault. Grandma Rose will call and tell them that, but sometimes they are still mean about it. I get so angry, but Grandma Rose just says, 'When you have to depend on other people to get around, what do you expect?' But I don't agree. I don't think it is right."

"You bet it's not right," Courtney, easily siding with Shana, replies and asks, "Have you tried to call and talk to the bus people?"

"Grandma Rose has tried a few times, but they just tell her there is nothing they can do. Then they can be really nasty to me when I get on because they think I am getting them in trouble. The driver will sometimes swear at me and tell me to 'hurry up' or 'get moving.' Then one time the bus tried to pick me up early, but my shift wasn't over, and I wasn't ready to leave."

“What happened?” Tasha inquires, encouraging Shana to continue.

“Well, I was just finishing up, and the bus wasn’t supposed to pick me up for about a half an hour, but he was early. I told him that I wasn’t done yet, and he started to swear at me in front of my bosses.”

“Did your bosses do anything?” Kiesha demands to know, setting her cup down on the table with force.

“No, they just kind of watched, and I didn’t know what to do. I didn’t know if I should just get on the bus because I didn’t have any other way home.”

“So what did you do?”

“All I could do was get on. I was so surprised that my manager didn’t say anything, and then when I got on, the bus driver kept swearing and saying I should be happy because *wasn’t I the one* that is always complaining about him being late. I was so scared, and I thought that one of the other drivers would hear and say something because, you know, all the buses have two-way radios. But no one did. Grandma Rose says that from now on I just shouldn’t say anything. ‘If you want to work, you have to just ignore it,’” Grandma Rose tells me.

Obviously, horrified, Courtney asks with a raised eyebrow, “Don’t you have a work coordinator that is supposed to help out with this kind of stuff?”

“I use to, but I haven’t heard from him in a long time. He just sort of disappeared. Grandma Rose tries to call him, but I guess we don’t know his number anymore,” Shana says, her voice growing quiet and defeated.

“Let me just go out on a limb here,” Courtney begins, waving her arms in the air in protest, “It seems like no matter how much you want to work, people are always getting in your way—the buses, the driver, your bosses, even Grandma Rose.”

“I guess I never thought about it like that. But you’re right. Why would it be like that? I mean all my life, throughout high school and everything it was always about working to be independent, but now no matter what I do, it seems I can’t.”

All the women shake their heads in disgust, not sure how to help. It seems to be a no win situation.

Finally, Courtney, making sense of the conversation, states, “The point is—to get any help or support, you have to jump through hoops and that means pretty much saying, ‘I’m disabled; therefore, I’m stupid, incapable, lazy, whatever it is, and then, after doing all that, you still can’t get what you need or want.’”

Immediately jumping in to pick up where Shana and Courtney left off, Kiesha also makes the connection. Adding her own personal layer, she contributes, “They want you to say you’re disabled and then sometimes they don’t even give you what you’re asking for when you do say it. For me, they just wanted to fix me with a pill. But I didn’t want a pill. What I needed were people, especially my professors, to understand.”

“Just like I needed the bus drivers to understand that getting to work is important and my bosses to understand that it wasn’t my fault when I didn’t get there on time,” Shana says, picking up on the common thread between their stories.

Courtney affirms Shana's statement by replying, "Right!" Shana smiles and is obviously happy that others understand her frustration. Then Courtney looks at Kiesha and says, "Don't worry they wanted me to take a pill, too! I told them no way!"

Curious, Tasha asks both Kiesha and Courtney, "Who wanted you to take a pill?"

Answering first, Kiesha responds, "The doctors did and then the people in the disability office on campus were like, 'Well, why don't you just take the pill if that's what the doctors want and it would help you; why don't you just do it?' But I didn't want a pill; I just wanted people to understand what I was going through."

"So did you take the pill?" Tasha continues to probe.

"At first I did. I felt like I had to. Like, if I didn't they [disabilities services] wouldn't help me, but I don't take it anymore. I've been off of it for about six months."

"So did disability services help you, then?" Courtney follows.

"After I started taking the medication, I remember saying to God (I'm a very spiritual person) 'if you knew what I deal with everyday then you would help me.' And so, finally, I remember the lady at the disability office saying, 'I don't know how much we can help you, but I'll fill out these papers for you.' That's when they let me have special arrangements."

"My doctors wanted me to take a pill, too. Thought it would make everything better, but it only made it worse. I was sicker with the side effects than I was with no pill at all," Courtney declares. Then addressing Kiesha's complaint about trying to get necessary accommodations, she states, "Even with all my paperwork, I couldn't get the accommodations I needed, either."

“Really?” Kiesha wonders aloud, leaning in attentively.

“Really.” Courtney, finger pointing at the group for emphasis, begins. “Let me tell you a story. I had a really bad incident in personal wellness where I had to take a lecture class and a workout class. In the workout activity, my only choices were tennis, golf, or racquetball. All of those have to deal with me seeing a ball with all the certain levels of my vision where things just disappear. Those classes did not work for me. And the professor was like, ‘What is wrong with you? Pay attention, wake up!’ And he really had this attitude that I was lazy or something. I had told him that I had a vision problem, but he had just said, ‘Well everybody has something, you know.’ He was real sarcastic and all. So I decided to switch to golf and get out of his class, not knowing who the golf instructor was. Come to find out it was him again. Can you believe that?”

Without waiting for a response, she begins to imitate the professor loudly, “And he would berate me in front of the class. He’d yell at me, ‘what’s wrong with you? Can’t you see that? How can you not hit that?’ I remember thinking, I can stand here all day and I’m not going to be able to hit it because I don’t see it. Then it would take me forever to just find my ball. And so one day, I was crying in front of the entire class, and I ended up just walking out because it was so humiliating. The next day, I came back with my visual field drawn for him and gave him a copy of it with my medical records and tried to make him see what I was dealing with. I said, ‘you know if you don’t want me in your class because of this, please tell me. Otherwise, stop berating me in front of the entire class. I’m doing the best I can.’ After that, he left me alone. He felt bad, I think, because he said, ‘hey, you’re making too big a deal out of it. I yell at everybody.’ You know,

blah, blah, blah. Then he told me, ‘Come on you’re just being too sensitive about this whole thing.’ I told him, ‘well everybody doesn’t have a disability, you know, at least to my knowledge.’ He kind of left me alone after that, but I knew he just didn’t get it.”

“My teachers didn’t get it either,” Shana adds with growing confidence.

“Listening to each of you, I think my physical therapy teacher was trying to fix me, too. At least, I think she was trying to get me to walk like a ‘normal’ person. She wasn’t giving me a pill, but she would make me do these exercises over and over all the while telling me, ‘Shana, if you just work hard enough, you can walk with just your crutches. Don’t you want to walk like that?’ I think she was implying that I shouldn’t be crawling because she knew that’s how I liked to get around. I remember I used to get so angry. Now, I don’t do any physical therapy, and I crawl when I want to.”

“My teachers didn’t get it either,” Tasha says, agreeing with Shana and Courtney.

“They just thought I was a bad kid, and the other kids just thought I was some dumb special education kid.”

“I use to have that feeling too,” Kiesha jumps in. “People always are trying to make you feel less than. I remember one incident late one night. I was in my dorm room with my best friend who just happened to be white. Our window was open, and all of a sudden, we heard all this racket coming from outside. It was a really loud car, and as it drove by, a bunch of girls, hanging out its window, shouted, ‘Fucking nigger, go home!’ I was kind of scared, you know, but my white friend was, like, really scared. She’d never heard anything like that, and it really bothered her. She couldn’t understand that I ran into people all the time that made me feel like I wasn’t as good as they were. It wasn’t always

as blatant, but it happened all the time. If it wasn't my race, it was other things, like being a woman, or my disability. Passed up, looked over, and sometimes ignored altogether. That's why I've told myself that I just had to take matters into my own hands and not let anything get to me," Kiesha says forcefully.

"How can that stuff not get to you?" Tasha genuinely inquires, remembering how frustrated and angry she felt in high school when students and teachers looked down upon her for being in the resource room.

"Whatever it took, that's what I knew I had to do," Kiesha proclaims to the group. "I learned it wasn't a choice, like it is for some. Like my white friend, for example. After that incident happened, she was afraid to do anything with me, always conscious that wherever we went I was the only black person in the room. Well finally, one day, she just told me straight up, 'I can't be your friend anymore. I just don't know how to deal with it.' I was shocked, and then I realized something. You know, she was right. She didn't have to deal with it—you know all the issues surrounding race—and she could just choose not to be my friend. She had a choice. I didn't. That's when I knew I had to deal with things head on, that I couldn't let anybody stand in my way."

"I didn't let anybody get in my way, either," adds Tasha, afraid she may have given the wrong impression of herself. "For instance, I remember I had to make it my business to get Mrs. J. I knew Mrs. J was the only teacher that could get me through [school and course work]. She was the best teacher there. She taught me the fundamentals, you know, how to do school, like studying and stuff. The other special education teacher and I didn't get along. I didn't like her, and she didn't like me. Her

room was like a daycare. She would choose our books for us, read to us, and then give us detention when we were talking and not listening to her boring books. I was so fed up and had like a 100 minutes of detention, and she finally just told me that I needed to leave. So that's just what I did. I left kicking the door on my way out, and I never went back to her classroom. I hated her, and when I was a junior, they tried to give her to me again, but I wouldn't have any of that. I talked Mrs. J into taking me instead."

"Yeah, that's it," Kiesha affirms, "figuring out what you need and not letting others get in your way."

Remembering her many detentions, Shana adds, "I used to get detention all the time, too."

"For what?" Courtney asks, thinking to herself that given Shana's quiet and timid demeanor there was no way she ever received detention.

"We used to get detention if we were late to class," Shana begins slowly and quietly. "I remember I was always late for class because I'd have to go from one end of campus to another, and the teachers only gave you, like, five minutes. Well, I could never make it in five minutes and especially not in my wheelchair. So I was always late."

Asking the obvious, Tasha says, "Didn't they give you extra time because you were in a wheelchair?"

"Yeah, the teachers knew I was in a wheelchair, but part of my physical therapy was to strengthen my legs and use braces to try and walk normal as I said before. But I hated my braces; I always felt like I was going to fall with my braces, so I would use my chair because I wasn't allowed to crawl. Well, I think they thought I was being late on

purpose, or maybe they were just mad because I wasn't trying to use my braces, so they'd give me detention." Shana recalls, attempting to rationalize her teacher's line of thought.

"Did you say crawl?" Tasha asks, having thought she heard Shana say that she preferred to crawl earlier in the conversation. At the same time, Courtney questions, "So were you late on purpose?"

"Yeah, to both," Shana replies with a coy smile. "I know it sounds weird, but I like to crawl best. It's fastest for me, and I can get around the easiest. When I am at home that's how I get around, but when I was at school, the physical therapist was always trying to get me to do these stupid exercises over and over. She would even time me with this stop watch and make me repeat them if I wasn't doing enough in a minute or so. So, sometimes I'd be late or take forever on purpose, just to make her mad. She used to give me a lot of detention, too. Like I said before, she thought that I never tried hard enough. Anyhow, I hated those stupid exercises so much that when I graduated I just decided I would get around how I wanted to. So, now I mostly crawl when I can," Shana explains.

Relating to Shana in that she also remembers having a few not-so-great teachers, Kiesha contributes another layer to the conversation. "I had bad teachers like that, too. Once, we were supposed to choose someone to do a research report on, and I chose a black cowboy. Well, this white teacher told me, 'you can't do that because there aren't any black cowboys.' So, I went home and told my mom that I had nothing to do my report on because the teacher said that there weren't any black cowboys. Well, of course, my mom was furious, and she told me that we were going to do that report on black cowboys. So, I did, and my mom helped me. Then, on the day that I had to hand it in, she

marched into school with me and told the teacher, ‘if you want to educate, make sure you educate.’”

Remembering her adoptive mother with an all too often forgotten fondness, Courtney ties memories of her into the conversation, “My mom could be strong like that, too.” She pauses for a moment, lost in thought and then continues, “Despite all the abuse she put me through and her own bad choices that she made, I still think of her as a strong person. I have so much respect for her, what she’s done, what she’s been through. I mean she took me and my sister in having barely anything and raised us.”

“My mom went through a lot, too,” Kiesha shares. “I think that is why she was so intent on teaching me not to take any crap from anyone. She was part of the Minneapolis integration of schools. She was on one of the first bus loads of black kids that were being bussed to all white schools. So my mom went through quite a bit. Biting, kids throwing rocks at her, people calling her names, you name it, she went through it.”

“I look up to my Grandma Rose, too,” Shana shares. “My Grandma Rose does the best with what she can. She doesn’t drive, but she’s always helping out by letting people live with us or babysitting for my brother’s kids. She helps whoever needs it; it doesn’t even have to be her family. Anything she can do to help anybody is her motto.”

“Yeah, our house was like that, too,” Courtney recalls. “Our house was always full of people and food. I think partly because my mom was an alcoholic. We always had lots of people stopping by and sometimes staying with us. She always had parties, and there were always a ton of people around. I can so remember the music and the really good food. That was always just the hugest thing. The food. My mom was always

feeding everyone. She was a big part of helping families who didn't have money or food. If she had friends who didn't have something, she would just go into our cupboards and pack them up a box of food. Now that I'm older, I can see that selfless side of her, despite everything. That's what I miss about her."

"What do you mean miss?" Shana asks.

"We don't see each other anymore. Not since just after my son was born."

"How can you not see her? I thought you just said how much you respect her," Kiesha challenges.

"I do, but remember I said earlier that she could be, like, real mean sometimes? Well, I always remember wanting to please my mom, no matter what. I worked so hard thinking that if I worked hard enough I could make her happy. I got really good grades, and I tried to be involved in everything. I'd always been on the honor roll, but when I'd come home with my report card and she'd say, 'What's that B doing there?' Or she'd be like, 'Well, you're not in choir or you're not in church. You shouldn't be playing basketball.' There was always something. Well, when I hit 14, I was, like, I just don't care anymore. I'd had enough of her raggin' on me all the time. I decided that I wanted to do anything I could to get in trouble and embarrass my mom. I was thinking, if I couldn't make her happy then how could I hurt her. Let's see how you like that, I thought. And so when I got to be 14, whew! I checked out. I started dressing, you know, scantily and hanging out with all the wrong people, which eventually led to my son. I just wanted to do absolutely everything I could to drive her nuts," Courtney recalled.

"On purpose?" Shana inquires in astonishment.

“Oh, yeah. It was a conscious thing. I wanted to hurt her because I wanted to see if she cared about me or not. It was like a test to see if she cared because I had worked so hard to make her proud, but she never noticed. So I was like, you don’t care so why should I bother trying to be this good kid. Then my son came along and that didn’t hurt her, either. Then I finally figured it out. She wasn’t the one who was pregnant at 16 and in high school. I was. I was only hurting myself.”

“But something major must have happened if you don’t see her anymore,” Kiesha probes.

“Yeah, I’m getting to that. It’s a long story, but it’s all so important that I’ve got to start from the beginning. So let me back up quick before that. You see, when my son was born I had a really hard time delivering him. I had toxemia and was really sick throughout the entire pregnancy. When I went into the hospital to give birth, all of the nurses and doctors were real mean to me. I am sure they thought I was just another stereotypical teen, black mother. You know, we’ve all heard the clichés. Where is the father? Oh, you know, he’s in jail. And, oh my god, how old are you? Just 16, huh? Well, the doctor made himself unavailable to me so I couldn’t get any drugs. And the nurses were real rough. I could tell they didn’t like me, and they gave me a lot of looks. I went through a whole shift of nurses, and when the doctor finally did come in, I had gone way too long and I had to have a cesarean. I ended up having mild seizures because of all this stuff and my mother, finally speaking up for me said, ‘Why didn’t you give her some meds?’ And the doctor said, ‘I just wanted to make sure she wouldn’t do this again.’ And he looked at me and said, ‘See how that was, you see how bad that was? You know,

that's not something that you want to happen again, and you're not married, and you know, you seem like you are smart enough, you know, so don't make this decision again.' Then later on when my IV broke, I kept telling the nurse that something was wrong and she was like, 'What do you know?' making some comment about young kids as she walked out the door. There was just one nurse that was kind, and she had told me that in her 15 years she had never seen a delivery so rough. It was really bad."

There are no words around the table. Words cannot be found at this moment because the story resonates so deeply with each woman. It is shocking and horrifying. For Kiesha it only affirms her desire to break into the medical field—to break the cycle of inadequate healthcare for African American women.

She adamantly declares, "See, that's exactly why I am going into the medical field." Courtney and Kiesha meet eyes in an expression of mutual understanding. This story is any woman's worse nightmare, and as each woman sits, paralyzed, no one knows quite what to say. The question—What would have I done?—hangs in the air as each sits, silently wondering, what if this had happened to me?

Continuing, as if compelled to address the unspoken response, Courtney declares, "If I were who I am now, I would have been like it's none of your business, and I don't appreciate you saying that. But, I was still at a point where I was really scared. It was really just a sad day. It shouldn't have been like that. To this day, I wish I could have done it over, not the getting pregnant part because I love my son, but the delivery part because it should have been a special day."

Shana touches Courtney's hand and squeezes it tightly. Kiesha pulls a Kleenex from her bag. Her face appears both disheartened and angry as a tear escapes. Tasha leans in closer to Courtney and the group, fuming she curses, "that son of a bitch." Amongst the chaos of the coffee shop, as it prepares for its late morning rush, the women sit clustered tightly together, the hustle of the coffee shop ensuing around them.

Courtney, for the first time, appears sullen and less sure of herself. She begins to second guess her emotions, "I guess they thought they were being really helpful. You know, like they thought I needed to hear that or something. And I guess my mom maybe thought she should act like that, too—harsh and all. Because when we got home, even though I was supposed to be on bed rest, she started hollering at me, 'You need to get up and out of this bed. You need to be moving. Get cleaning something, do something!' And so that's what I did, but I must have overdone it because I passed out and ended up with a severe infection."

In an effort to reassure Courtney, as Courtney had done for her earlier in the conversation, Shana says, "They were not being helpful. They couldn't have even thought their comments were helpful!" Appreciative of her support in return, Courtney smiles. It is clear the bond amongst the women is deepening as their stories become interwoven and stitched together.

Appalled at the thought of returning to that same doctor, Kiesha, raising her voice, asks, "You went back to that doctor?"

"No! I would have never gone back there," Courtney, throwing both hands up in the air, declares with passion. "It happened that I had to go to the ER, which turned out to

be a good thing because the doctor there knew right away that I was in bad shape. He told my mother, 'She's needs to be lying down. You need to let her lay down. You need to get off her back.' Well, that was the first time that I had ever heard another person holler at my mother about her treatment of me. She didn't like hearing that at all. She thought I was being lazy and just complaining. She didn't think there was really anything wrong. So, when we got back into the car, she took it out on me and slapped me, real hard across the face. Well, she had hit me while I was pregnant, so I guess I wasn't all that surprised, but I was angry. I told her, 'I have a child now, and I have to take care of him. I'm not going to let you hit me anymore.' I just couldn't bear to have him grow up seeing that.

The women nod and exchange heated words of agreement around the table. A few young women passing by the table briefly look over to see what all the excitement is about. Upon seeing the group, they quickly look down and speed up the gate of their walk to get by the boisterous women.

Keeping with the rhythm of the conversation, Courtney continues, "Well, when I said this to her she was shocked. I had never stood up for myself before. I had never talked back to her. And so when we got back home, we were still arguing, and she was hitting me and everything, and I actually pushed her back. That was the first time I had ever done anything like that. So for a moment, we just kind of stood there and looked at each other. I think she kind of understood it as, 'okay, you have this baby now and you think you are hot shit, and you think you can do what you want. I'll show you.' So me pushing her back heightened the suspense, and she pulled out a knife. She put it to my throat and said, 'You ever push me again, I will kill you.' Then she smacked me real

hard. That's when I knew I had to go, and so, I grabbed the car seat with my baby, got my backpack, and walked out the door. I knew the bus was coming, and I just left. That's all I left with that day, and I never went back."

"Where did you go?" the group asks in unison.

Courtney answers, "I stayed with friends and moved around a bit. Finally, I was accepted into a shelter, and I lived with older, single women who had been abused by their husbands or boyfriends."

"So, what happened to your mother?" Kiesha asks.

Responding to her question, Courtney explains, "Because the bruise and knife marks that she had left on me were so noticeable, a teacher at school finally reported her. She denied the whole thing, but there were pictures because the bruising lasted so long. Anyhow, they didn't allow me to go back, and I didn't want to go back. I just had this mental image of my son being four or five standing there and watching that. I knew that would have been his life, and I didn't want that. So that was the end of me and her. We've seen each a few times. I like to call it my worship from afar relationship. She's not very good for my mental health. Like when I called to tell her I was going blind, she told me that it was what I deserved because I was a bad kid. Don't get me wrong, I love her and I miss her terribly, but she's really not good for my state of mind. We maybe talk once a year, and then she, like, flips out on me, and I just leave her alone. I love her; I just don't need the live version. Sometimes, it's the best way. I just can't wake up with her in my head everyday. But I dearly miss things, too."

“What could you possibly miss?” Kiesha asks and then declares, “There’s nothing to miss!”

“Well, like I said just a bit ago, she could be really wonderful. She’s was always taking in people, after all she adopted my sister and me. And there was always sort of this oral history and culture that was present in our lives. Her siblings and our family would always be talking and laughing about the past. You know, who broke this, and do you remember when this happened? That’s what I miss the most, and I know I can’t give that to my son without exposing him to the bad parts of her, too.”

It’s quiet around the table. Everyone is digesting and weighing Courtney’s words, but she needs no time to do the same. It is apparent that she has reconciled her feelings about her mother. She offers the following to help the others understand, “As strange as it must seem, my son was the best thing that ever happened to me. He made me want to be a better person. I could have never left if it wouldn’t have been for him, and if I wouldn’t have left, I wouldn’t be where I am today. I would never have gone to college or anything.”

“After everything that had happened? How could have you even imagine going to college?” Tasha asks with astonishment.

“That’s funny that you ask that,” Courtney replies. “As I am working on completing my maser’s thesis. I am interviewing young teenage mothers like myself, and they, unfortunately, have never thought about college. In fact, they assume just the opposite of what I had. For me and my son, I knew I had to go to college, but these women can’t even begin to imagine college as an option. Yet, it was all I could imagine.

I knew there was no other option, but to make something of myself for him.” Courtney replied.

“I think I was more like some of the ladies you are talking about,” Tasha says, contrasting her own experience. “I just wanted to graduate and get my diploma. I never thought of college as an option. I just wanted to get a job. It was my fiancé and my mother who wanted me to go college. I remember them saying that it was the only way I would have any money.”

In a whisper, Shana admits again “I never thought about college, either.”

Returning to Courtney, Kiesha pries further, “But how did you go from having a baby to college?”

“It was hard. In fact, saying it was hard is probably an understatement. When I got pregnant, they forced me to go to a teen parenting school. They, meaning the teachers and all, force you to do it in terms of they make it seem like you’re going to be absolutely miserable if you stay at the normal high school. Well, the school was academically nothing. There were no college prep courses that you could take. Nothing. As far as instruction went, you might be in a classroom with students two or three grades older so everyone just worked on their work by themselves. We were supposed to just keep following the order of the text, and because all the girls came from different schools in the area, we all had different texts. There wasn’t any real instruction, just a bunch of girls sitting in the same room working independently. Then everyday in the afternoon, we would learn mommy things. People just assumed your life was basically over as far as making anything of yourself.”

“Mommy things?” Kiesha interrupts again, clearly angered at what the description suggests.

“Yeah, you know, like infant nurturing, how to feed, change and take care of a baby. Plus, we were assigned a social worker who would meet with us to do what they called group counseling. Basically, they’d tell us, ‘hey, everybody can get pregnant once, but twice . . .’ well, you know, they would be less forgiving.”

“That sounds a lot like a threat,” Tasha states and questions in the same moment.

“Yeah, I think it probably was and maybe it was even effective. I knew that school was a punishment for getting pregnant. I was really upset that I had to go there because I was missing a whole year of college prep courses before they would let me back into the regular high school.”

“So, they did let you back into a regular high school?” Kiesha interjects.

“Yeah, but still no one thought I would go to college. In fact, No one ever even approached me about going. I just knew I was going to go. In fact, when it was time to start thinking about going to college I found out about everything on my own. No one even sat down with me,” Courtney recollects with a facial expression that indicates—can you believe that? The looks around the table imply that none of the women can and Courtney continues, “You know, like when a counselor sits down with you your sophomore or junior year and tells you that if you want to go to college you need to do this or that. No one ever did that me. I already told you about my experience with the counselor so, you know, no one thought I would go. It was like, if she does finish so what, she’s probably not going to college. Finally, when I told them I was going they

even tried to talk me out of it saying, ‘well, you know, with your circumstance and all maybe you should go to a community college.’”

“I knew I was going to go to college, but I had the exact opposite experience,” Kiesha interrupts. “My mom, like I said before, always knew I was going to go to college. She had worked to get me into a specialized math and science high school to even prepare me for college. At that time, I was, like, the only girl and definitely in the minority group being black, but she didn’t care. To her, everything centered on going and getting ready for college. I knew I had to do something with my life.”

“I knew I wanted to do something with my life, too. No matter what,” states Courtney aware they share a common thread of determination. “That’s why it never crossed my mind not to go to college. When I was pregnant, even going blind, I never thought of quitting. It just wasn’t an option. I wanted to show everyone that they were wrong about me. I wanted to show them that I could raise a child and love a child and that I could be successful too. . . . And so I kept on trying. I had to deal with a lot of stuff. I don’t know if I should call it discrimination exactly, but in high school with a lot of the teachers and social workers and, you know, even people here [at college] look at me, and I can tell what they are thinking. ‘Oh my god, look at this young black woman with a child.’ I know they look down on me, and that they’re not going to cut me any breaks. But that gives me 100% more. With no help, I am going to do this, and I’m going to show you that, you know, you’re wrong.”

“I’ve had to show people that they were wrong about me, too,” Shana chimes in adding another dimension to their stories of determination.

“Who have you had to prove yourself to?” Tasha wonders aloud, anxious for Shana to share.

“Well,” Shana begins, hoping her new friends will believe her, “My Grandma Rose doesn’t believe I can read or write. She’s always telling other people, ‘That, Shana, she thinks she can read,’ and then in a whisper, as if she thinks I can’t hear, too, she tells them, ‘We just let her think she can, what harm can it do?’ But, I really can read. I love to read. I have a huge collection of romance novels, and even if she thinks I can’t, I keep reading everyday.”

“Does it make you mad that she says those things in front of you?” Courtney asks, knowing full-well that she would have been fuming angry.

Thinking for a moment, Shana responds shyly, “Mostly, I get embarrassed, and I feel ashamed. She tells people that I can’t write, too. But, I can. I write out my daily schedule for work and things, but she doesn’t think that is really writing. She’ll tell me, ‘It don’t count if nobody can read it, Shana.’ But I don’t care, I keep writing my schedules out and sometimes I type them, too.”

“Sounds to me like that *is* writing.” Kiesha affirms looking Shana in the eye and encouraging her to continue.

“Yeah, but Grandma Rose doesn’t think so. She just thinks it is something that keeps me busy. When it comes to what she thinks is real writing she won’t let me.

“What do you mean? She won’t let you write?” Tasha, slightly confused, questions.

“No, I don’t mean she keeps me from writing my schedules and things, but when I need to write something official like to sign a form or something, she won’t let me do it. She’ll sign it for me.”⁶

“But I thought you said earlier that you used to practice your signature at the Braille school?” Courtney recalls aloud.

“I did, and we did,” Shana answers, thinking about Courtney’s comment for a moment. Then with a hint of sarcasm, “Imagine that, after all those years at school practicing our signature over and over, she won’t even let me do it.”

The table is quiet. The quietest it has been for sometime. The other women consciously give Shana an opportunity to digest her own words, recognizing that she is just thinking about these things for the first time. Then, changing the conversation just slightly, Kiesha probes further, “Did you like the Braille school?”

“Yes, I loved the Braille school,” Shana quickly responds. Yet, after realizing that Grandma Rose is nowhere in sight and cannot jump into the conversation to correct her, Shana decides to share what she has thought quite a bit about, but has been unable to talk about with someone. She confesses, “Sometimes, I think a little bit about what it might have been like if I had gone to a school by my house.” Feeling instantly guilty for some unknown reason, she adds, “but I really loved the Braille school. We got to do a lot of things.”

“What kinds of things?” Kiesha asks, encouraging Shana to continue.

⁶ For example, when I gained consent to interview Shana, Grandma Rose insisted that Shana was unable to sign her name and, thus, signed for her.

“Well, mostly our days were pretty much the same. We followed the same schedule every day. Get up at 7:00, eat breakfast, do chores, go to school at 8:30, classes, and then chores again, dinner, homework, and then bed. Oh, and they’d make us take our showers at night. I used to hate that the most, but usually once a week, they would take us shopping or out in the community. I loved that.”

Jumping in, Kiesha asks, “What do you mean they would make you take your showers at night?”

“Yeah, that’s the part that I really hated. I liked to take my shower in the morning, but they would not let us. They’d make us do it at night and wash our hair, too, every night!”

The entire group groans loudly in disgust. Everyone knows that you can’t wash black hair everyday; it ruins the texture.

“Every night,” Shana repeats for emphasis with a frown, “but sometimes the teachers would take us shopping, and we got to go out in the community.”

“That’s the only time you got to leave the school?” Kiesha asks.

“Yeah, pretty much. They would bus us home on the weekend, and oh, yeah, we did go swimming all the time. Sometimes we got to go places with the swim team. I remember my favorite teacher was Coach Smith who was the swim team coach. He let me be the swim manager and go to all the swim events. I had to write down and keep track of all the times. We got to go to Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Indianapolis,” Shana tells the group.

Responding at the same time, first Courtney declares, “See, another example of writing!,” and then Tasha questions, “Don’t you get to do those things now? I mean shopping and stuff.”

“No, not very often. That’s what I miss about the Braille school. Because Grandma Rose doesn’t drive, I pretty much have to stay home unless I am going to work,” Shana explains.

“What about the bus? The one that takes you to work. Won’t the bus take you other places?”

Shana, kindly retelling the problem with the buses, says, “The bus mainly will take people to their jobs and to doctor appointments. They’re supposed to be able to take us other places, but there is always a shortage of buses and people to drive the buses. Plus, Grandma Rose couldn’t go with me because the bus will just take people with wheelchairs.”

Dismayed by the thought of such limited mobility, Tasha interjects, “But how do you get the things you need?”

“Sometimes, my brother will go to Wal-Mart and get me things. I do take the bus to the hairdressers, but sometimes I get bumped and have to reschedule my hair appointment if something comes up. Grandma Rose says I should just go to the lady down the street, so I could wheel myself, but I like the lady I go to now.”

Clearly infuriated by mobility restrictions placed on Shana because of the lack of sufficient busing, Courtney offers a few words of encouragement. “I’d stick with the lady you have now, too. Your braids look great. Make that bus come pick you up, I say.”

Shana sheepishly smiles, clearly appreciative of the support. The others nod in both affirmation and protest.

“So you said that you sometimes have imagined what it might have been like if you had attended the school in your neighborhood. Do you think it would have been different?” Kiesha probes.

“I don’t know,” Shana begins with hesitation, “Grandma would always say, ‘Shana, you were just fine at the Braille school. Look at how far it brought you. It was a good thing.’ But sometimes, I would have liked to go to the school across the street. I think it maybe could have worked out. I know it would have been harder for me, and the teachers would have had to give us more attention, but I think I could have done it. I don’t think it would have been a conflict like Grandma thinks.”

“Why does your Grandma think it would have been a conflict?” Tasha questions attempting to draw out Shana’s understanding of her situation.

“She says that it would have been difficult for me to fit in, you know, because of my personal problem. That other kids may not have been nice to me and that I couldn’t have coped.”

“Is that what you think?” Courtney asks, guessing it is not.

“No,” Shana states with renewed vigor. “I think I could get along. I have lots of friends at Pizza Hut.”

“We think so, too!” Courtney announces, speaking for the group. Everyone nods in unison. Then changing the subject just slightly, Courtney contributes her own memories of favorite teachers to the conversation, “I had a favorite teacher, too. She was

my third grade teacher, Mrs. Fleshman. I can even remember writing a story for her. I wrote a story about this little girl who wanted this really popular teacher and ended up getting a mean teacher and discovered this mean teacher was really good. The mean teacher was really Mrs. Fleshman. Anyhow, she turned out to be the greatest teacher ever. I just loved her.

“What did you love about her?” Shana wonders aloud.

“Well, I know she had to have known what was going on in my life because I was such a needy child. But I think she took that real needy side of me and helped me channel it into my education and my love of learning. Then in junior high, I had Mr. Keller. He was another one of my favorite teachers. He was a lot like Mrs. Fleshman. He allowed me to open up and use my voice and thoughts in a creative manner. He used to tell me I was a lot like Oprah because I was so opinionated. In fact, he used to call me Oprah sometimes,” recalls Courtney laughing heartily.

“That’s just like Mrs. J,” Tasha excitedly breaks in. “Everyone else treated me like I was nothing, but Mrs. J understood me, even when I had an attitude, she would tell me to put that attitude in my school work where it belonged.”

“Yeah, I think the best teachers were those who could recognize my strengths and saw past what everyone else saw as negative. They were the ones who truly made a difference in my life,” adds Courtney.

“Like Coach Smith who let me keep track of the times,” Shana reasserts, making a similar connection to Courtney’s recollections. “Others didn’t believe I was capable of

doing things, especially things like writing. Coach Smith really believed in me. Giving me the job of keeping track of times was a big deal, and he knew I could do it.”

“Yeah, like Mrs. J, too. She saw the good in me and believed that I could be successful. She was even still helping me with my college math. Up until my accident, I would take my math to her. I hated math, but she always told me, ‘Tasha, you can do it; you may just need a little help.’”

“You hate math, too?” Courtney asks, smiling because she hates math as well.

“With a vengeance!” Tasha recalls. “Math was always so hard and confusing. I was never any good at it. Even when I managed to learn a formula, there would always be another one to learn. Mrs. J helped me to memorize all those formulas. She taught me a system, so I could pass the test, but I guess they never stuck with me because even after high school I was still taking my math to her.”

“I never did well in math and science, either,” Courtney begins to explain.

“Elementary school math has always been an uphill battle. To be honest, looking back my mom wasn’t good at math, and her mom wasn’t good either. You know, I think I just bought into the idea that girls aren’t good at math. I guess I just accepted that because I was a girl I couldn’t do math. So why bother trying, I remember thinking.”

In contrast, Kiesha recollects, “I know, for me, I loved math, but it was like my mom taught me to love math. I don’t think I would have felt that way if my mom hadn’t pushed it so hard. She even enrolled me in a math and science high school.”

“I think,” begins Courtney, thinking out loud, “I was under a lot of pressure to be a girl. I’m sure that’s why I never really liked math. I think I knew that girls weren’t supposed to do math.”

Having, obviously given this issue quite a bit of thought, Kiesha asks, “Why do you think you assumed that?”

Attempting to answer Kiesha’s question, Courtney remembers, “When I grew up, I was always a tomboy. You know, running, getting dirty. I would always come in with grass stains, and I can remember my mother hollering and cussing me out. She’d tell me, ‘you’re supposed to be a girl; don’t you know?’ When I got to junior high, she made me stop playing basketball, and I loved basketball. She wanted me to act more like a girl. Anyhow, I just don’t think grades were important to my mom. I don’t have any memories of her helping with my homework or anything. What I do remember, oh, my gosh, this is so embarrassing, but she’d actually do bra checks on me each morning before I left for school. You know, where she’d run her hand across my back each morning to make sure I had a bra on. But no matter how much I acted more girly, it was, like, never enough for her. She’d tell me, ‘You should straighten hair or that skirt just doesn’t do anything for you.’ I think that’s actually how I ended up pregnant. Since whatever I did for my mother was, like, never enough, I went looking for love in other places. That’s how I got hooked up with my son’s father.”

“I completely understand how that happens. I think I am feeling that pressure now. I just turned 26, and all my friends are getting married and having babies. I know that’s what most people think I should be doing too,” Kiesha confesses.

Intrigued because she recently married, Tasha asks, “You don’t want to get married?”

“Not right now!” Kiesha adamantly proclaims. “I’ve got so many things that I want to do. But now I’m starting to get the questions: ‘Why are you single? How come you don’t have a boyfriend? Why aren’t you married? Don’t you want kids?’” Kiesha rolls her eyes, noticeably annoyed. “Not to say I don’t want to get married, just not now.”

“I know what you mean. I have been with my boyfriend for the last six years, and he is a great father to my son, but I don’t know if I want to get married. I have so much I want to do, yet. I don’t know if I want to be tied down like that. Ironically, though, I never wanted children,” Courtney laughs and noting the irony states, “but like I said earlier, my son ended up being my ticket to college.”

“Because you left the house, right?” Tasha reiterates.

“Yeah, but I think it was more than that, too. I still haven’t figured my mom out. At times, she was so against college. I thought she just wanted us to be moms and have babies. But then she was so angry when I got pregnant. It was like she wanted me to make something of myself, but at the same time she didn’t. I still don’t know what to think. That’s why I stay away.” Summarizing her experience, Courtney concludes, “If I wouldn’t have left when I did, I don’t know what would of happened.”

“It’s a good thing you did leave,” Kiesha acknowledges. “You probably wouldn’t have been able to come so far. I hope that my husband, whoever he may be, realizes and understands that I’m my own person, too. I’ve got things I want to do. I want to become a doctor. I want to give myself that opportunity,” Kiesha declares.

Quietly and, somewhat, reserved, Tasha decides to share her experience. “I didn’t want to get married right away. I wanted to have time for myself, too. The accident changed everything, though. I wanted to be independent, but after the accident everything happened so fast. That’s when I married my fiancé.”

“You just got married?” Courtney asks and then, sensing some reluctance on Tasha’s part to tell her story in fear of being judged harshly, immediately offers congratulations.

Shana also congratulates Tasha declaring, “That’s great.” She then turns the topic to herself shyly stating, “I’m just the opposite of all of you. I think I just accepted that I wouldn’t get married. No one thinks of me in that way.”

“What do you mean?” Tasha inquires further.

“Like getting married or, even, dating. At the Braille, school we didn’t do those things. Our dorms were segregated, and some of our classes were, too.”

“You mean you never got to date?” asks Courtney in astonishment.

“Not really. We could go to prom, and I did. I took my brother.” Shana replies, slightly embarrassed, “I think everyone assumes that I will just live with Grandma. No one in my family talks about that kind of stuff.”

Courtney, kindly sensing Shana’s embarrassment offers, “I think we each must do what is right for ourselves. That may be different for each of us. I am not saying that any of us shouldn’t get married or that we have to date, but that it really is a personal choice as long as that choice is ours and not anyone else’s. For me, I don’t want to get married. I think it would keep me from doing some things. At least right now that is.”

The table falls quiet. Courtney's suggestion is a good one. As the women look around the table at one another, they sneak a peek at their watches, as well. They are hesitant to end the conversation realizing how comforting it has been to speak to one another. The words of the group have seemingly wrapped each in a blanket of warmth. There has been no need to judge one another, but simply to listen.

Still in thought, Tasha, redirects the conversation, asking Kiesha, "A doctor, I thought you said accountant earlier?"

"That's kind of a long story," Kiesha begins. "I have a two-year medical degree from a community college. I initially wanted to become a baby doctor. After I got my two-year degree, I came to the university and, at the same time, worked full-time as a LPN to pay for college. When I transferred to the university, I changed my mind and thought I would do accounting because, again, I loved math. But, after about a semester, I learned it just wasn't for me. It seemed like such an uphill battle, so I dropped that major and just accepted that it wasn't to be. So, I then switched to criminology, but I didn't like that either, and finally, I switched to sociology. Now I want to be a pediatrician and think sociology will really help me to work with all kinds of people. I think it will be helpful because I want to go into the medical field. I want to look into graduate school, now. I just need five prerequisites to get into medical school."

"But how come you didn't take any biology or something at the university?" wonders Courtney, a fellow student at the same university.

"Science scared me, I guess," Kiesha answers.

"What do you mean—scares you?" Courtney pushes.

“When I got here it was like you just hear everything that everybody is saying and you forget your own strengths,” Kiesha cautiously, remaining noncommittal, admits.

Probing just a bit more, Courtney continues, “But don’t you think it will be scary at the next level?”

“I think once I’m out of this environment, away from this university, I will be okay. It’s like I said in the beginning. It’s not the school part that’s hard; it’s everything else,” Kiesha reiterates.

Agreeing and unwilling to let the topic drop, Courtney says with a hint of skepticism, “Yeah, I know the environment can suck, but I just don’t know how things are going to be any different by just leaving one environment or school for another.”

“I struggle with this, too,” Kiesha confesses, silently pleased that Courtney brought this up. It is something that she continues to worry about. “Where I came from, school was so different, and I don’t mean academically. I mean people’s attitudes. I think it has to do with the culture I came from. Everyone was so much more friendly and caring. The biggest difference, like I said, is how competitive everyone is here [at the university]. When I was in high school things weren’t like that. We all worked together and helped one another out. It was like a different set of rules from the rules of the university; I guess I’m hoping I can go back to my hometown and my old set of rules. Because these rules, I just don’t get.”

In response, Courtney affirms, “You’re right. It is different, and it takes some time to get use to. I don’t know if you ever get use to it. Maybe you learn to just get along. I think of it like this. My mom used to always say that there were cold prickles and

warm fuzzies in this world. Well, I try to seek out the warm fuzzies. You know, the people that are positive and praise you for who you are while challenging and supporting you at the same. Those are the people I try to surround myself with, and I try to avoid the cold prickles.”

“What’s a cold prickly?” Shana asks.

“They are the kind of people that give you a bad feeling about yourself. They nit pick at you. You know, they act like they hold the key to some big secret, and then they never share that key with you. Like, that personal wellness professor, I had. He was definitely a cold prickly,” Courtney explains.

“I know what you mean by a cold prickly person,” Kiesha states. “Like that friend that I was telling you all about earlier. She was a really good friend at first, a warm fuzzy, I thought, but it turned out she was really a cold prickly. The whole thing just made me feel terrible. Sometimes, I see her around, and she doesn’t even acknowledge me. She’s definitely what I would call a cold prickly.”

“I don’t think you can avoid those kinds of people. That’s just life,” Tasha asserts, playing devil’s advocate.

“Maybe you can’t avoid them, but,” switching from skepticism to optimism, Courtney points out, “you can work against them by becoming a warm fuzzy yourself.”

“How do you do that?” Shana inquires.

“Well, for example, right now I volunteer at a shelter downtown and work with girls who are in the same situation that I was in eight years ago. I talk to them about their options, even telling them about college and helping them to apply and figure out how to

get aid and assistance. I want to do for them what no one did for me. I want them to see that there are more things out there for them than just dead end jobs. I want to be their warm fuzzy!" Courtney expresses in excitement and then embarrassingly adds, "Okay, maybe that sounds a little corny."

"I don't think so," Kiesha says, immediately buying into Courtney's idea. "I think I know exactly what you are talking about. Getting out there and empowering others to have a voice. I do that now, too, but I never thought of it like that. Right now, I work in the multicultural center on campus helping students from all different backgrounds and cultures to become familiar with the college life. I work as a mentor."

"What does a mentor do?"

"Mainly, we meet with people and talk about what is going on in our lives. We often share some of the same kinds of experiences on campus, and having one another makes it easier to talk and work through those things. We're not alone."

"What kinds of things do you talk about?"

"Everything, it's kind of like our conversation today. We do a lot of crying on each others shoulders and offering support. I remember sharing with my mentee the story I just told you because she had experienced something like that. I told her, 'Don't deny your emotions. No matter how bad it hurts because you are always going to remember that time and be better for it. . . . Don't let anybody take away who you are because they will try. We're tested all the time. But I tell them it's not always a bad thing. Just like we were talking about teachers who help you to channel your energies, I tell my mentee to

do the same, just not in those words. I tell her, 'It's not a bad thing always to have these experiences. It helps you to know who you are and what you want to be and do.'"

"That's exactly what I mean by being a warm fuzzy to others," Courtney affirms smiling. "I remember I had a teacher who was a warm fuzzy in high school. Remember the teacher who called me Oprah because I was always talking? Well it got me involved in doing a local high school radio show. That is really how I came to be interested in what I am doing today."

Anxious to add her own personal thread to the others stories, Tasha, begins, "I've done something just like that, too. When I was in high school, some upper classmen started a group called 'Let's Make it Happen.' Anyhow, it paired students with other students for support and I was chosen to be paired with another girl who was having a hard time fitting in and things. We would meet and talk about our lives. It turned out that we had so much in common that we became good friends, and I don't think I would have been friends with her if it hadn't been for this group. We kind of helped each other too—

What did you say earlier Courtney about the key to unlocking the secrets of school?

That's kind of what we did for each other. I would explain things to her that would steer her in the right direction, and she would do the same for me. "

"Wow," Shana says and everyone nods all around the table.

"What was the biggest thing you helped her to understand?" Courtney asks.

After contemplating the question for a moment, Tasha grows somber and admits, "Well, I used to think school was supposed to be fun, you know. Well, I came to learn

that school is really not supposed to be fun; it's about learning to get along. Once you understand how to just get along, then you can get through."

Again, no one speaks. This time it seems Tasha has caught the group and herself off guard. Aloud she wonders, "Was I being a warm fuzzy? Just getting by doesn't seem like enough after all this talk."

"I am not sure," Shana wonders aloud. "You just reminded me of my Grandma Rose. She tries to help me by telling me the same kinds of things. When I get discouraged about how the people at work treat me, or about the buses, Grandma Rose will say, 'That's just the way things are when you're a handicap, Shana. There's nothing you can do about it; you just have to be lucky they let you work.' I know she's trying to make me feel better, but while it used to make me feel a little better, I am beginning to get angrier because I love to work. I am beginning to feel like no one cares that I love to work or cares if I worked at all. They just want me to get by. Mostly, I wonder about Grandma Rose. I know deep down she is trying to help, but it's not all that helpful."

"We all have Grandma Roses and people in our lives like that," Kiesha chimes in. "They want the best for us, just like you did Tasha, when you were trying to help your mentee, but sometimes our good intentions get twisted up somehow."

"I think we all do the best that we can with what life puts in front of us. Just as I said before, I believe that is different for each of us. I think that is a good thing. We don't all have to do the same thing or be the same person, but we must support one another in whatever we may do. That's what being a warm fuzzy is about. In that sense, I think you

were a warm fuzzy, and I would guess, a very important part of her life. Sometimes, just getting by has to be enough,” Courtney reasons.

“I agree with Courtney,” Kiesha declares. “Even today I sometimes feel as though I am just getting by. Even in graduating, I’ll be the first in my family, you know, but I still feel as if I am just getting by, especially on days when my panic attacks set in. I tell myself, ‘One foot in front of the next. That’s all you can do.’”

“Me, too,” Shana adds. “When things get bad, like with the buses, I can get really down. Grandma Rose complains that I’m always throwing tantrums, but really, I’m just trying to deal with everything as best I can.”

Out of curiosity, Courtney asks, “What do you mean tantrum?”

Shana looks at her feet and lets a quiet laugh escape. She is slightly embarrassed, but believing the group will understand explains, “Sometimes, I get so angry and frustrated—with the buses, and work, and Grandma—that I can’t take it anymore. I just let it all out, and sometimes that means I’m hollering at Grandma or just at myself. I just get so worked up that I can’t go where I want when I please or do what I want on my schedule. Sometimes, I even throw things. I’m not happy about that, but I feel like I just can’t help it. Anyhow, Grandma calls the incidents my tantrums. Even that makes me mad, especially when she tells other people that in front of me. I just refuse to look at her because I’m not a baby!”

“No, you’re right! I’d be pissed off, too. I think it’s understandable to react in that way. I am sure that the teacher’s room that I walked out of, you remember me telling you

that I kicked the door as I left, would probably call what I did a tantrum. But a person can only take so much,” affirms Tasha.

“Yeah, I gotta agree with Tasha,” Kiesha says. “We all have our moments. Given what you’ve shared today, I know I would probably throw a tantrum, too.”

“Me, too,” Courtney agrees, checking her watch for the time.

She is not alone, each woman has done so in the past thirty minutes, but unwilling to let the conversation end, they have ignored the time. However, now it seems quite fitting to end the conversation. The waiter has long since picked up the empty coffee cups, and the frayed napkins that Shana nervously tore at when the conversation began have been wadded up and removed. Still, each woman sits, unsure of how to end the conversation or appropriately excuse themselves. It is somewhat awkward. No longer strangers, having bonded in their honesty and shared experiences, they resemble old friends. Fittingly, it is Courtney that breaks the silence. Standing, she moves to each woman embracing them firmly and wishing them well. Slowly, the women, too, embrace one another, as Courtney kindly orders, “Let’s do this again. Soon.”

Everyone nods in agreement.

CHAPTER 5

INTERPRETATION

Introduction

In order for the oppressed to be able to wage the struggle for their liberation, they must perceive the reality of oppression not as a closed world from which there is no exit, but as a limiting situation which they can transform (Freire, 1970/2003, p. 49).

In the following chapter, I employ Giroux's (1983a, 1983b) theory of resistance to make sense of these women's stories and the conversation in Chapter 4. I intend to illuminate each woman's unique story within the overarching theme of strength that they shared in common. I draw on these women's individual experiences and offer alternative understandings to the assumption (one I initially made) that these women were simply passive victims of a dominant ideology.

A Theory of Resistance

Traditional education theory ignores the notion that schools are cultural sites representing arenas of contestation and struggle among differently empowered economic and cultural groups (Giroux, 1983a, 1983b). A traditional or functional understanding of school and culture does not view culture as a process that involves lived antagonistic relationships among different socio-economic groups (Hurn, 1985). Hence, this functional perspective fails to offer an adequate explanation for the unequal access and distribution of power that characterizes schools (Apple, 1979/1990; Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Giroux, 1983a, 1983b).

In contrast, theories of reproduction offer insight into the ways in which schools operate in the interest of the dominant elite. By exploring how schools promote inequality

in the name of fairness and objectivity (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977), theories of reproduction have led to new understandings regarding the purpose and intent of schools (see Anyon, 1981; Rist, 1970; Willis, 1977). They significantly revealed the ideological assumptions and processes behind the rhetoric of neutrality and social mobility within schools (see Althusser, 1971; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Bowles & Gintis, 1976).

While these theories have been consequential in unveiling the nature and process of schooling, Giroux (1983a, 1983b) argued that reproduction theories were also problematic. He asserted that reproduction theories inadvertently continued to support the dominant ideology by ignoring how individuals within oppressed groups resist and counter dominant ideology. Simply stated, reproduction theories ignored the role and influence of human agency. For this reason, Giroux (1983a, 1983b) identified a need to develop new theories that accounted for the connection between structure and human agency. Building upon the work of Althusser (1971), Bourdieu and Passeron (1977), and Bowles and Gintis (1976), Giroux (1983a, 1983b) framed a theory of resistance.

Defining A Theory of Resistance

By exploring how students and teachers live out their daily lives within the overarching structures of school and the larger society, Giroux (1983a, 1983b) defined a theory of resistance as an analysis of how individuals respond or react to the dominant ideology. A theory of resistance seeks to identify lived experiences that possess a critique of or challenge to the dominant ideology. The aim of a theory of resistance is two fold. First, a theory of resistance examines how individuals express a combination of behaviors that confront, resist, or evade the dominant ideology surrounding schools.

These identified behaviors are classified as acts of resistance. Second, a theory of resistance explores how acts of resistance lead to transformational experiences for individuals within marginalized and oppressed discourses.

Inherent within a theory of resistance is the assumption that human agency and social structures are dialectical (Giroux, 1983a, 1983b). An individual's life chances and lived experiences are not solely determined by one or the other. Through an ongoing process of mediation wherein power is understood as multi-dimensional, individuals meaningfully engage in their world. Hence, power may be exercised *on and by* individuals within different social contexts and settings and with varying results (Giroux, 1983a, 1983b, italics added).

Given this understanding, a theory of resistance acknowledges and emphasizes the role of human agency. Human agency is brought to the forefront in order that the social sites and spaces where the dominant culture is challenged by subordinate groups may be illuminated (Giroux, 1983a, 1983b). Individuals are not merely recipients, conforming to the dominant ideology; rather, they exert human agency that, in turn, shapes their daily activities and lives. In short, individuals may be influenced by the dominant ideology, but are not solely determined by it. Giroux (1983a) summarized, "Resistance theory assigns an active role to human agency and experience as key mediating links between structural determinants and lived effects" (p. 285).

As I applied a theory of resistance, I acknowledged the primacy of social structures and described how my participants responded or reacted to these structures. I defined social structures as institutionalized norms and systems of organization that shape

and influence the actions of individuals. These social structures included schools and work places, as well as the myths and stereotypes surrounding the discourses of gender, race, disability, and class.

Giroux (1983a, 1983b) identified sites of conflict, particularly incidents involving rebellious behavior, as a starting point to articulate a theory of resistance. Thus, I started my analysis with an examination of experiences or behavior that appeared merely disruptive and/or a result of deviancy. I classified these experiences as overt acts of resistance. A few of these examples included Tasha storming from the classroom, Courtney confronting her mother, or Kiesha refusing to go along with her peer group during a group project.

Giroux (1983a, 1983b) also encouraged me to examine behavior that may potentially represent subtle acts of resistance. I labeled these acts of resistance covert. Giroux (1983b) described these behaviors as “slightly oppositional” in that the behavior is “quietly subversive in the immediate sense, but *potentially* progressive in the long run” (p. 246, italics added). These acts of resistance did not always arise from immediate situations of conflict or tension, but were nonetheless a response or reaction to the dominant ideology. This type of behavior may include students purposefully ignoring directions, refusing to participate, or intentionally distracting others within the classroom. A good example of a covert act of resistance was Shana’s intentional tardiness to class after she received physical therapy. Her tardiness was an act of resistance in response to the oppressive nature of her physical therapy.

Within these covert acts, Giroux (1983a, 1983b) argued that spaces exist for individuals to resist in a manner that is less obtrusive, thereby allowing for additional acts of resistance. I described these subtle, but underlying critiques as “, working the cracks” (Collins, 2000, p. 281). Collins (2000) described the ability to “work the cracks” as “resistance from the *inside*.” A person located within an oppressive structure capitalizes on small opportunities by virtue of his or her membership within the structure, to initiate change through pecking away at “cracks and fissures that represent organizational weakness” (p. 282, italics original). Although Collins (2000) employed the concept to describe individuals within positions of authority in bureaucratic organizations, I borrowed the concept to describe my participants’ membership and subsequent participation within their family, school and work communities. Within these settings, I identified and drew attention to the various means my participants employed to quietly challenge prevailing ideology without threatening their membership.

The nonverbal body language that Shana conveyed during our interviews was an example of “working the cracks” (Collins, 2000, p. 281). I realized that if Shana had chosen to express her displeasure verbally in front of her grandma, she may have been reprimanded, chastised, or embarrassed by her grandma (as she was when she threw a rebellious tantrum). Furthermore, Grandma Rose may have prevented her from visiting with me again. Yet, in conveying her displeasure nonverbally, she was able to maintain her dignity and communicate resistance. While not outwardly obvious, these subtle gestures were acts of resistance.

To be classified as acts of resistance, overt and covert behaviors must also emerge from a conscious or semi-conscious critique of the dominant ideology (Giroux, 1983a, 1983b). Giroux (1983a, 1983b) defined conscious acts of resistance as experiences in which an individual could clearly offer an explanation and articulate his or her intent at the time the behavior occurred. The individual also needed to link his or her explanation to a specific outcome or goal. In addition, an inherent desire for transformation or emancipation must have existed within an individual's explanation and identified outcome. For example, Courtney shared that she wanted to go to college to become educated. She consciously chose a career working with young teenage mothers in an effort to challenge prevailing ideology surrounding young teenage mothers.

To determine whether an experience or behavior was a conscious act of resistance, I analyzed each woman's explanation for her intent, motivation, and desired outcome at the time the experience occurred. In order for an act to be classified as a conscious act of resistance, the woman had to have identified her experience as a response or reaction to oppressive circumstances. She had to have recalled a specific motivation or intent. Furthermore, she had to have recognized her action as rooted in an overall goal of transforming her circumstances. Incidents where a woman had, in hindsight, reflected and articulated intent and motivation were not classified as conscious. I will later discuss these incidents as semi-conscious.

Tasha exemplified a conscious act of resistance when she succinctly explained that she had stormed from the special education classroom because she was angry at receiving a special education curriculum that she perceived as "for babies." She stated,

“It was like a daycare. We didn’t read. The teacher read to us or made us read some boring, old books.” Subsequently, Tasha reacted by seeking out a new teacher and classroom. This example illustrated that Tasha felt limited and confined by the reading instruction she was receiving. Her explanation and subsequent actions revealed purposeful intent, as well as a desire to secure a specific outcome.

In contrast, semi-conscious acts of resistance may have lacked a clear and articulated intent by the individuals at the time he or she initiated the behavior (Giroux, 1983a, 1983b). He or she did not succinctly express the reasoning behind his or her actions, but may have possessed a vague understanding or feeling that something was amiss surrounding his or her experiences. Put simply, an individual may have been unable to “put his or her finger on” the source of his or her feelings or actions. Giroux (1983b) explained, “. . . students may not be aware of the political grounds of their position towards school, except for a general awareness of its dominating nature and the need to somehow escape from it . . .” (p. 247). In short, individuals who exhibited semi-conscious acts of resistance did not clearly articulate the logic or intent surrounding their actions while resisting, thus they may not have presumed transformation as an overarching goal of their actions. Individuals exhibiting semi-conscious acts of resistance possessed a developing understanding of the oppressive nature of their circumstances, but were unable to fully explain their intent or articulate a specific desired outcome at the time the experience occurred.

An example of a semi-conscious act of resistance was Tasha’s decision to attend college. She did not clearly state her decision was rooted in a desire to transform her

oppressive circumstances or challenge prevailing ideology. Rather, her most immediate goal was to earn a certificate and obtain a paying job. She had stated that she wanted to “just get through school, maybe college, and get a job.” However, she had demonstrated in our previous conversations that she was aware of the oppressive nature of her circumstances. Thus, I concluded that Tasha perhaps did not understand college or education as a means to channel her feelings of discontent.

In exploring semi-conscious/conscious and covert/overt acts of resistance Giroux (1983a, 1983b) suggested conceptualizing the experience or behavior either to the historical or social context from which the act emerged or within the accepted social practices and norms. Doing this, Giroux asserted (1983a, 1983b) provided a deeper understanding of the individual’s actions as acts of resistance. For instance, consider again Tasha’s discontent with the special education reading curriculum. Within the historical context, her displeasure may have reflected what many (see Ferri & Connor, 2006; Kozol, 2005) argued is the resegregation of African-Americans through placement in special education. By exploring the overrepresentation of African-Americans in special education, Tasha’s criticism and subsequent conscious and overt behavior is powerfully linked and understood within the legacy of segregation for African-Americans.

Giroux (1983a, 1983b) also explained that experiences or behaviors could be conceptualized against the backdrop of accepted social practices and norms. Again, doing so offered additional understanding of an individual’s conscious or semi-conscious act of resistance. For instance, in attempting to determine whether Shana’s desire to crawl was a semi-conscious/conscious or overt/covert act of resistance, I thought about her crawling

within the context of accepted social practices and norms. I concluded that Shana knew that crawling was socially unacceptable, but that she didn't care. She demonstrated this by continuing to crawl, in spite of other individuals' insistence that she walk. In fact, she appeared to gain pleasure from crawling to greet me in front of Grandma Rose. (She smiled mischievously in Grandma's direction after swinging herself onto the couch.) From this perspective, I came to understand this act of resistance as covert and overt. Shana's crawling did not arise from conflict, but it did create conflict between Shana and Grandma Rose. Additionally, Shana's crawling was both quietly oppositional and rebellious.

I was also unable to determine if Shana's crawling was solely a semi-conscious or conscious act of resistance. Because of the communication challenges that I noted in Chapter 4, I relied on Shana's actions and body language to provide me with clues as to the intent behind her actions. I believed that her continued insistence that she be allowed to crawl symbolically represented a challenge to prevailing ideology. Her actions conveyed that she was consciously working towards broadening the concept of "normal." Yet, I was unable to decide if she understood the transformational potential of her actions. Thus, by conceptualizing Shana's crawling within the context of accepted social practices, I concluded her crawling may not have been entirely semi-conscious. This act possessed an element of consciousness, as well.

In determining the conscious/semi-conscious and overt/covert nature of acts of resistance, I found the categories were often fluid. As I just noted, it was often difficult to place an action or experience solely within one category. Instead, acts of resistance were

in the continual process of emerging and developing. I also found the categories to be interchangeable. Acts of resistance could be semi-conscious and overt. For example, consider the example of Shana's tantrums. This example was interpreted by many as outward and bad behavior, thus overt. It was also semi-conscious in that Shana was reacting out of anger, but was unable to link this anger with the dominant ideology in a way that would potentially lead to transformation.

Acts of resistance could also be semi-conscious and covert. These acts of resistance typically fell into the category of "working the cracks" (Collins, 2000, p. 281). Again, recall Shana's participation on the swim team. Her status as a team manager was not understood as an act of rebellion by most. Thus, I classified it as covert because it arose from Shana's disappointment at being denied the opportunity to be a swimming member on the team. Shana did not identify it as discrimination, so I classified the experience as semi-conscious.

Conscious and covert acts of resistance also fell into the category of "working the cracks" (Collins, 2000, p. 281). For instance, Kiesha clearly articulated a desire to be a mentor to students similar to her because she recognized the oppressive nature of the university environment. She wanted to assist other students in negotiating and challenging this environment in ways that could possibly bring about change, as well as success for the students she mentored. In this example, she possessed motivation, intent, and a desire for a specific outcome while working within the system. Thus, this experience was conscious and covert.

Finally, acts of resistance fell into the classification of conscious and overt. In these cases, participants were aware of the motives behind their actions and often acted rebelliously or in insubordination of a particular set of rules or social practices. These incidents often resulted in conflict and tension. For instance, recall when Kiesha stormed from the special education classroom. This act was conscious and overt because it emerged from conflict and was disruptive.

Last, in defining a theory of resistance, Giroux (1983a, 1983b) deems it necessary to explore the degree to which any act of resistance is transformational. This is especially relevant as a theory of resistance must “be situated in a perspective that takes the notion of emancipation as its guiding interest” (Giroux, 1983a, p. 290). Thus, as I analyzed and described my participants’ stories, I determined the degree to which acts of resistance were transformational.

Poems of Resistance

My interpretation begins with a series of poems that I composed based on my interview transcripts. In creating these, I reviewed my interview transcripts, noting repeated phrases, themes, or events that each woman emphasized. I then rearranged and edited my participants’ words into stanzas. Hence, these poems highlight the compilation of their stories and acts of resistance. I chose to share the experiences of my participants through poetry because the poetic verse has been the major voice of poor, working class, and African American women. It has throughout history provided an economical and efficient way to communicate one’s words, emotions, and experiences (Lorde, 1984).

Conveying my participants' stories through poetry also helped me in the process of meaning making and interpretation. Essentially, writing served as a means of data analysis. Richardson & St. Pierre (2005) stated, "I used . . . writing to think; that is, I wrote my way into particular spaces I could not have occupied by sorting data through a computer program or by analytic induction" (p. 970). Likewise, I used writing to crystallize my participants' experiences in ways that allowed for multiple meanings and alternative perspectives. The poetry shed light on the women's experiences much like a crystal reflects, refracts, changes, and grows (Richardson, 1997).

Courtney

Wards of the state, my sister and I,
 our mother, simply, could not care for us.
 She was too young, too poor, too unfit, they had said.
 Later I would learn, the trap had been set,
 the conditions just so,
 for the stereotypical, young, poor, black mother in the making.

At 15, I too, was pregnant.
 "Satan's child," they said, "Lucifer, is what it would be."
 But I dreamed differently,
 "Thank God for my son," I said then and say now.
 For him, things would be different,
 they had to be.
 That much I knew.

But there was much that I was up against.
 "Pseudo tumor cerebra, intercranial hypertension,"
 The doctors explained, as I watched my vision slip away,
 just before my son arrived.

I was beaten, cursed, and worse, yet, ignored.
 'Til one day, I could take no more.
 I left for school that day,
 fresh with bruises and knife marks.

For my son,
 I carried
 what would be our life in one tiny back pack.
 Into the bus, I climbed,
 no need to look back,
 no home to return to.

Homeless,
 Even the shelters didn't want to take me in,
 a young black girl with a child.
 What hope could there possibly be?

My teachers said,
 "Nothing will come of you, now.
 Why bother with college?"
 I cried,
 "It is I who am blind,
 why didn't you notice?"

They sent me to a special high school,
 "No need for Algebra, Spanish, or Biology,
 you will learn to do mommy things, now,"

To this I reacted, "I will have none of that,
 I am destined for college,
 you will see!"

Kiesha

My mom always told me,
 "don't just settle for your first no."
 That's what I've learned it's all about.
 Everybody wants to tell you no,
 But if you really believe in it
 you go for it.

Like, once in high school,
 Some white teacher told me,
 I couldn't do a report on black cowboys.
 Said there were no black cowboys.

Well, my mom would have none of that.
 She said, "You're doing that report."
 Later she marched me up to school,
 report in hand
 she told that lady,
 "if you're gonna educate,
 then make sure you educate."

So that was that.
 All my life I heard no,
 While my mom sat quietly
 on my shoulder,
 whispering yes.

"Cept when I got to college,
 things changed.
 My mom, in all her experiences,
 bussed integration,
 rocks thrown at her,
 you, name it,
 she experienced it.
 Couldn't help me no more."

While she'd prepared me for my life,
 With lessons that gave me courage and strength,
 She couldn't teach me about this;
 she knew nothing of college life.

 "This,"
 she plainly stated,
 "I can't figure out,
 this is up to you."

 "Don't get me wrong,
 school, itself, is very easy.
 It's all the other things that are involved—
 the people,
 the politics,
 the institutions,
 the whole college life.
 Now that's the hard part."

“You know, some people say,
 ‘oh,
 after your first year,
 you’ll get use to it.’
 That might be
 if I was coming from an environment,
 you know,
 like yours,
 But I grew up in the city;
 this college
 stuff just ain’t geared towards me.”

“Although I grew up loving math,
 College changed that.
 I guess I was just lazy,
 a little scared,
 or maybe,
 it just wasn’t me.
 Anyhow, I didn’t last long in accounting.
 Went on to
 criminology,
 then sociology,
 but what I really want to be is a pediatric surgeon.”

 Other students
 even professors,
 they talk down to me,
 sabotage me,
 undermine me,
 call me nigger.
 This is what I’ve learned at college;
 oh,
 and,
 You know,
 I never thought of myself
 as having a disability,
 but, I guess, I learned that, too.

I kept having these anxiety attacks,
 thought I was gonna die.
 Couldn't go to class,
 some days, couldn't get out of bed.
 I would freak out,
 and one day,
 I knew what I had to do.
 I committed myself.

Now, the doctors said I had a disability.
 But, you know,
 when I think of disability,
 I think of people
 who can't see or hear,
 so,
 I don't really think of myself
 as having a disability.

They wanted to fix me with a pill,
 But,
 "I ain't in to taking no pill.
 I am not somebody you fix with a pill."

The real cure,
 I feel,
 is just getting out of this environment.
 Then I will be okay.

In the meantime,
 I think,
 "Don't let anybody take a piece of yourself away.
 They will try.
 You're tested all the time.
 Constantly passed over,
 looked over—
 But I keep telling myself,
 It's not a bad thing;
 These are lessons.
 And you cry,
 I do,
 But you keep going,
 No matter how bad it hurts,
 you pull through."

Life is a lesson,
 The more you deal with those that are racist,
 those that hate,
 those that ignore,
 those that tell you that you are no good,
 The better prepared you are
 for the lesson,
 God helps me with this,
 My spirituality carries me through.

Shana

“She’s quite the girl.
 I’m proud of her, ya know.
 She’s a smart girl, that Shana.”

I can read.
 Romance novels, mostly—
 The stack in the corner, tattered and frayed,
 held together with a thick rubber band,
 They’re mine.

“She can’t really read.
 Now, ya know, she says she can.
 And I just let it go at that.
 What harm can that do?”

I can write.
 They taught us forms.
 You know, SSI, . . .
 Our signature
 But I don’t much care for forms.
 Now days, I just write my schedules, my diary, my thoughts
 Nothin’ important.

“She can’t really write.
 Nothin’ we can read anyhow.
 We just let her be, ya know, thinking she can.
 What harm can that do?”

I remember they were real sticklers, and all.

Always crackin' down.
 Man, did I get detention.
 Mainly I was late all the time.
 Late for the same day,
 Over and over, 'magine that.

Wake at 7:00
 Dress,
 eat now,
 chores next,
 school from now to then,
 homework,
 eat again,
 more chores,
 lay out clothes,
 bathe,
 lights out at 10:00.

PT was the worst.
 Boy, was she mean,
 But, no use for it now,
 Crawlين' I prefer.

"What did ya say?
 Is that what ya said?
 Hodge-podge,
 It wasn't like that at all, now Shana."

"That girl is somethin' else.
 My, you can hardly live with the child.
 I'll tell you that,
 Is she ever stubborn."

"Well, I don't know what she's talkin' about—
 I think they did a good job with her, and all.
 It was the best thing that could happen to a handicap,
 You just have to learn to go along."

It could be better?

“Yeah, right.
 I spose, but ya know,
 Not that they misuse ya,
 Or somethin’,
 But if you’re a handicap,
 I’ll just leave it at that.
 It’s not really that bad,
 is it
 Shana?”

“Shana, answer the lady.
 It’s not that bad, is it?”

“no—“

“See, I tell ya.
 I can hardly ‘magine it,
 Bad eyesight and all
 What else was there to do?
 Maybe, maybe it would be different,
 But I can’t see it, ya know,
 It was really just wonderful.”

I just cried.

Tasha

Freshman year nobody does well,
 everyone knows that.
 The other years they weren’t so bad
 Bs and Cs mostly . . .
 Well, math, of course, was lower.

Ms. J, I have her to thank
 for that you see,
 it could have been much worse.
 She helped me a lot in and out of school—
 Made it easier to come to class
 ‘n all.
 She found a system that would work for me,
 Made sure I got the basics.

Still don't get math—
 But I know
 I can count on Mrs. J.
 She gave the fundamentals,
 the stuff I needed to survive.
 Shit, I still take my math to her.

I enjoyed school—
 Well, as much as one can,
 Depended on what was going on.
 Sometimes I just didn't feel
 like doing shit.
 It really could be rather a drag.

So, I made it my business to get Ms. J
 Knew I had to, cuz,
 That other lady's class was like a daycare.
 Choosing the books for us,
 reading to us,
 like circle time,
 but we were in high school.
 We weren't no pretzels
 sitting quietly on the carpet.

She gave me lots of detentions—
 Said I talked too much—
 5 minutes here,
 10 minutes there,
 'til finally,
 I'd had enough.
 And she had too, cuz, she told me to leave.
 Said she couldn't help me no more
 if I couldn't help myself,
 And I did just that,
 being careful
 to kick the door shut—
 on my way out.

So, I guess, yeah,
 I was a bad student,
 but I didn't like being bored.
 And, I guess,
 I didn't like school that much after all.
 But, I learned
 to get along—
 That's the trick, I guess,
 learning to get by.

I remember,
 they use to say I was many things:
 Black,
 learning disabled,
 you know,
 basically a bad kid.

Then one day,
 they told me I was a leader.

Couldn't hardly believe that.
 Wanted me to speak to other bad kids,
 to reteach them,
 you know,
 to be less unruly,
 to have a different attitude.
 They called it, "Let's make it happen."

It was all such a load of crap!
 And just think,
 I use to believe school was suppose to be fun—
 When I was little and all,
 But now I know.
 School is about getting that diploma,
 Cuz, a diploma is what will get you the money.

Didn't plan to go to college,
 But everybody said,
 "If you want to take care of yourself,
 have money,
 be independent,
 you gotta go."

So, I started working on my two year,
but since the accident I haven't re-enrolled.

Just can't bring myself to do it.

Lost the rhythm,
the groove maybe,
I just can't seem
to get motivated.

Work on top of work,
that's what college is.

Can't seem to find
the purpose in that.

Plus, my life has changed
since the accident.

I married my fiancé.

Didn't really plan to,
at least not right away.

It was suppose to be
about me.

But, then again,
I guess things change.

Employing A Theory of Resistance: Stories of Resistance

Following Giroux's lead, I began with the theoretical framework of resistance to analyze my participants' stories. To reiterate and emphasize, I did this for a number of reasons. I came to understand these women as strong, and employing a theory of resistance enriched this understanding. I was also able to privilege my participants' voices through acknowledging their human agency. Additionally, a theory of resistance allowed me to conceptualize and analyze my participants' stories in a holistic manner without needing to compartmentalize by gender, race, disability, and class. In this way, as I described in Chapter 2, I avoided restricting my analysis to privileging one discourse over another or creating a hierarchy of discourses.

I began my analysis by exploring how each woman resisted, negotiated, reacted, or made choices in response to the dominant ideology and structures of school. I also included in this analysis my participants' home and workplace experiences when they were relevant and when an examination of these settings enriched the overall study. As I have stated, I examined stories of conflict and discontent, as well as more subtle avenues of resistance. I also considered the degree to which acts of resistance were conscious or semi-conscious.

Last, I analyzed and described how these acts of resistance shaped my participants' lived educational experiences by exploring the transformational nature of classified acts of resistance. Specifically, I considered the degree to which an act of resistance improved a woman's immediate circumstances, as well as increased the likelihood of the woman engaging in future acts of resistance. I also contemplated the ways in which the dominant ideology reached into an individual's personality and "reproduces itself in the psyche of human beings" (Giroux, 1983a, p. 288). To do this, I considered how daily restrictions, limitations, and subtle, but underlying messages about individual worth influenced my participants' understandings of self. In a like manner, I also considered how my participants' understanding of self impacted their lived experiences and life chances. These questions were especially relevant as they related to the third purpose of this research—explaining how these women defined themselves and enacted their identities.

Courtney

Courtney demonstrated numerous of acts of resistance. These experiences fell along a continuum over time from covert and semi-conscious to conscious and overt acts of resistance. Her developing ability to critically reflect, assess and act on her lived experiences assisted Courtney in outwardly challenging the prevailing ideology. Ultimately, the culmination of her early experiences served as a catalyst for her career choice and future life work. These experiences provided the foundation that motivated her to continue to challenge and work against the oppressive discourses of woman, African American, disabled, and economically disadvantaged in meaningful, productive, and visibly radical ways.

The defining moment in Courtney's life was the birth of her son when she was 16. To determine if this experience was an act of resistance, I paired Courtney's explanation with the social context in which the experience took place. I surmised that this life changing event was a semi-conscious and overt act of resistance. This experience qualified as an overt act of resistance because Courtney identified that becoming pregnant was, although unintentional, a result of rebelling against her mother and her life circumstances. Thus, while becoming pregnant appears to merely conform and adhere to stereotypes surrounding young African American women, I did not classify it as such. Instead, Courtney's actions represented cries for help, love, and affirmation. This act of resistance was semi-conscious. While Courtney sensed there was something amiss surrounding her circumstances, she admitted that she did not fully understand the roots of her rebellion until much later.

Reflecting on her experiences, Courtney felt that she had inadvertently become pregnant for a number of related reasons. These reasons point to and highlight how Courtney sensed the oppressive nature of her circumstances. Yet, because she did not fully understand the experience at the time, she was unable to fully articulate and more consciously respond to it.

Courtney recalled having a deep desire to win the affection of her adoptive mother. She desperately wanted to please her and had attempted to do so by adhering to her adoptive mother's direct and indirect messages about womanhood. For instance, although Courtney loved playing basketball, she remembered that once she began middle school, her mother was displeased with her interest in sports. She recalled that her mother wanted her to do more "girly" activities. She encouraged her to have an interest in and pay more attention to how she looked and presented herself. After what Courtney considered to be humiliating bra checks, she admitted to finally conceding to her adoptive mother's wishes. She quit the basketball team, started spending more time straightening her hair, painting her nails, and began wearing bras.

Unfortunately, for Courtney, conforming to her adoptive mother's ideas about how women should act and dress did not bring about the affection for which she was searching. Instead, Courtney felt as though she could never please her mother. She began to rebel by dressing provocatively and hanging out with older boys. This led Courtney to become pregnant. She explained, "I began looking for love in all the wrong places."

On the surface, this act appeared to lend credence to the many stereotypes surrounding young, African American mothers. Specifically, I thought of the widely held

assumptions that mothers of African American women are supportive of their daughter's pregnancies and that this approval is linked to the existence for an extended kin network amongst African American families (Kaplan, 1997). Given this common, underlying assumption, it appeared Courtney had become complacent in her own oppression.

After Courtney shared with me how she had rationalized, reflected, and reconciled her adoptive mother's actions, I classified these experiences as overt, semi-conscious acts of resistance. While the rebellious behaviors appeared to merely conform, Courtney's ability to honestly ruminate over the events resulted in subsequent conscious and overt acts of resistance. Moreover, becoming pregnant illuminated the many contradictions and disjunctures that typified her relationship with her mother and led to additional acts of resistance. Together these subsequent conscious and overt acts of resistance led Courtney to transform her life.

Let us first examine Courtney's relationship with her mother. She articulated that this relationship had been characterized by violence, emotional abuse, mental anguish, jealousy, and, in stark contrast, laughter, family, and rich culture. In sum, Courtney stated, "I love and hate her all at the same time."

The physical and emotional violence Courtney experienced may be associated with a number of factors. One common explanation is that single mothers from disadvantaged economic backgrounds typically exert more power and authority over their children. They tend to be strong disciplinarians (Hill, 1999). While plausible, this explanation only provides a surface level understanding. When the violence between a mother and a child is conceptualized within the context of historical and current

oppressive environments, the love is often manifested as an act of violence (hooks, 1984/2000). Rodney Cate, a professor of family studies, articulated,

When you examine the context in which parents suffer [sic] their children, it is easier to understand how the victim—and the abuser—equate violence with love. It's not hard to see how over time we begin to pair some sort of physical punishment with love and to believe that someone is hurting us because they love us. (as cited in hooks, 1984/2000, p. 124)

In this way, love and violence are intertwined and misunderstood as one and the same. For Courtney, who longed for the approval and love of her mother, the above rationale provided a reasonable explanation as to her conflicting feelings. She had, to an extent, internalized her adoptive mother's violence as a symbol of her adoptive mother's love. As I spoke to Courtney, I realized she was still coming to terms with her relationship with her mother and had not yet resolved it entirely, commenting that she preferred to "love her from a far."

Another conceivable explanation that conflates with the explanation from above is that Courtney's adoptive mother had sought to both protect and prepare Courtney for oppressive and dangerous environments that she would inevitably encounter as an African American woman. Wade-Gayles (1984) suggested that African American mothers

. . . do not socialize their daughters to be 'passive' or 'irrational.' Quite the contrary, they socialize their daughters to be independent, strong and self-confident. Black mothers are suffocatingly protective and domineering precisely because they are determined to mold their daughters into whole and self-actualizing persons in a society that devalues Black women. (p. 12)

In other words, Courtney's adoptive mother, motivated by a love for her daughter, may have attempted to shield Courtney from the hardships and cruelty of the rest of the world by inflicting the cruelty first.

When I spoke to Courtney, she had begun the process of reconciling many of these contradicting and confusing messages. For instance, Courtney believed that her adoptive mother's suggestions to be more "womanly" were grounded in a desire to instill within Courtney the necessary physical attributes to be valued by society. These physical attributes entailed imitating or conforming to white beauty standards. As Collins (2000) stated,

African American women experience the pain of never being able to live up to prevailing standards of beauty—standards used by White men, White women, Black men, and, most painfully, one another. Regardless of any individual woman's subjective reality, this is the system of ideas that she encounters. Because controlling images are hegemonic and taken for granted, they become virtually impossible to escape. (p. 90)

Thus, Courtney had, in hindsight, understood her adoptive mother's well-intended, but misguided lessons about womanhood and beauty as her mother's attempt to help her assimilate in a society that clearly perceived beauty as white.

In arriving at this understanding, Courtney now balked at the implied message. She also second guessed her original belief that her mother wanted her to become pregnant. She stated, "I thought that's what she wanted—for me to get pregnant and have babies—but now I am not sure. I remember how angry she was when I told her that I was pregnant. She told me I'd never amount to anything." Thinking out loud, Courtney expressed, "It's ironic how all the hate my adoptive mother inflicted on me actually

helped me become who I am today.” Clearly, in the continual process of reconciling this relationship, Courtney continued to think deeply about it and grow as a result.

Kaplan (1997) provided another dimension of understanding. In her study of African American teenage pregnancy, she found that the conflicts between teen mothers and their mothers grew more intense and often resulted in the teen mothers leaving their mothers’ homes. She attributed this phenomenon with the disappointment many mothers felt with regards to their teenage daughters’ pregnancies. Specifically, as this study related to Courtney’s situation, Kaplan (1997) found that lower-income mothers felt their daughters had failed them. In fact, they had hoped that their daughters would have done better for themselves than they had. This possibly explained Courtney’s mother’s initial anger when Courtney told her she was pregnant and her subsequent words stating that Courtney would never make anything of herself.

Ironically, if Courtney’s adoptive mother’s intentions and abuse had been that Courtney make a better life for herself relative to her own, then Courtney’s mother succeeded. Courtney realized she did not need or desire to adhere to traditional and, for that matter, white and/or female notions of what women should look and act like. As proof, Courtney told me that she consciously had chosen not to marry her boyfriend of eight years. This decision represented a conscious act of resistance. Courtney wanted to gain independence from any man. She was no longer “looking for love in all the wrong places,” but rather prided herself on being assertive and self-reliant. Moreover, the decision not to marry was rooted in a desire to attend and graduate from college.

The strength that Courtney's mother passed on to her arose from contrasting and conflicting messages. From the perspective of an African American woman and scholar, Brown (1989) linked her experiences with her mother to African American women's history. She stated,

. . . my mother demonstrated her understanding of the need to teach me to live my life one way and, at the same time, to provide me with the tools to live it quite differently. . . . What my mother teaches me are the essential lessons of the quilt: that people and action do move in multiple directions at once. (p. 929)

Thus, while the messages Courtney received from her mother were often contradicting and confusing, perhaps, that was the most important lesson. Collins (1987) stated, "A key part of Black girl's socialization involves incorporating the critical posture that allows Black women to cope with contradictions" (p. 7). Understanding the contradictory nature of the world through the experiences and words of her own mother, Courtney found strength to engage, resist, and interact within it.

While becoming pregnant was a semi-conscious act of resistance, the events that immediately followed led Courtney to new ways of thinking and acting. Although she was a young and scared teenage mother, Courtney had a strong inkling that the physical and emotional abuse she had endured from her mother, as well as the medical treatment she had received while in the hospital was "not the way things should have been." Thus, one of Courtney's first conscious acts of resistance was in direct protest of her mother's abusive treatment of her.

Perhaps rooted in the same desire her adoptive mother had for her, Courtney desired to provide a better life for her son. Consequently, Courtney confronted her abusive adoptive mother. In the physical altercation that ensued, Courtney remembered

making the decision that she would leave and never look back. Thus, she severed all ties with her adoptive mother to begin a new and uncertain life for herself and son. That life began with the heart-wrenching decision to place her infant son in foster care while she secured permanent living arrangements. After living with friends and on the streets, she applied and was accepted into the Sisters of Humility program that provided basic shelter and food. She found herself a part-time job, participated in parenting classes through the Department of Human Services, and continued to attend high school.

The experience of confronting her adoptive mother and the events that followed represent intentional and outward acts of resistance. Courtney possessed a purposeful intent to change her life and oppressive circumstances. Thus, these acts of resistance are conscious, overt, and transformational.

Collins (2000) explained why motherhood is such an empowering and transformational experience for many African American women. She stated, “Despite the obstacles and cost, motherhood remains a symbol of hope for many of the poorest Black women” (p. 198). Similarly, Golden (1983) described how the relationship between mother and child may serve as a catalyst to defining one’s self and voice. She stated:

Now I belonged to me. No parents or husband claiming me. . . . There was only my child who consumed and replenished me . . . my son’s love was unconditional and, as such, gave me more freedom than any love I had known. . . . I at last accepted mama as my name. Realized that it did not melt down any other designations. Discovered that it expanded them—and me. (p. 240-241)

Thus, the birth of Courtney’s son fueled Courtney with the desire, ambition, and confidence to graduate from high school and pursue college.

The birth of her son also gave birth to continued conscious acts of resistance. After being segregated to a high school for young teen mothers, Courtney demanded that she be allowed to return to her general education high school. Although the segregating of teen mothers was rationalized as an effort to provide a curriculum to prepare young mothers in parenting skills, Courtney clearly understood its implications. She recalled being angry with receiving instruction that was “sub-par” and for being denied access to college preparation courses. Consequently, she “raised holy cane” until her counselor allowed her to transfer back to the general education high school.

Upon returning to the general education high school, Courtney continued to encounter obstacles in her quest for college. She was denied assistance in exploring and applying for college. Unfortunately, Courtney’s experience was not unusual. While African Americans and women have high academic aspirations, significant structural factors remain. These structural factors include one’s economic status, lack of culturally sensitive career development initiatives, and lack of access and opportunities that limit an individual’s options (Hanson & Smith, 2001). Yet, Courtney refused to give up. She independently organized a college tour and invited friends who were in similar situations to go along with her. She also independently sought out financial aid and chose a college with on-site daycare services. As a result, Courtney consciously and overtly challenged the stereotypes others held of her and overcame the many structural limitations.

Noting the obvious and seemingly insurmountable barriers that Courtney had to overcome, I inquired as to how she knew she would go to college. She gave three explanations. First, she explained that for some unclear reason she had always sensed that

she would go to college. Second, making the connection to her yearning to provide a better life for her son, she felt that an education was the only way to support her and her son. Finally, she declared, “Part of me just wanted to prove everybody wrong.”

Courtney’s desire to attend college may also be rooted in a historical legacy dating back to slavery. She understood education as a means to counter her oppressive circumstances (Davis, 1981; hooks, 1984/2000). Furthermore, her decision to remain single may be linked to a study of working class African American women and college that noted a large portion of working class women chose to remain single, stressing educational goals above personal goals (Dill, 1983). Dill (1983) stated, “These women never viewed marriage as a means of mobility and focused primarily upon education, postponing interests in, and decisions about, marriage” (p. 140). Courtney had similarly chosen to pursue college, foregoing any plans to marry at the moment. Hence, her behavior was conscious. Her acts of resistance challenged prevailing ideology that typically deters many young African American women from attending college, as evident in their under representation in higher education (Hanson & Smith, 2001).

Further complicating Courtney’s high school and college experience was the onset and diagnosis of the medical condition pseudo tumor cerebra and intracranial hypertension. A few months after the birth of her son, Courtney began to experience headaches, numbness throughout her body, and loss of vision. (I ventured that this medical condition was possibly a result of her pregnancy and complications giving birth, but Courtney believed the condition was hereditary.) Courtney endured numerous eye surgeries, medications, and stints to relieve pressure in the optical nerves surrounding her

eyes; however, these procedures were minimally effective. By her early 20s, she was left with no depth perception, little peripheral vision, and significant loss of vision in both eyes.

Officially labeled with a disability, Courtney refused to understand herself as helpless or incapable. She shrugged off the suggestion by both doctors and counselors that she should drop out of high school and forego college all together. In doing as much, Courtney consciously challenged the underlying assumption of disability as a personal tragedy (see Oliver, 1990, 1993; Shakespeare, 1994) that causes “suffering and blighting lives” (French & Swain, 2004, p. 34). Additionally, she consciously challenged the underlying assumption that women with disabilities do not attend college (Hanson and Smith, 2001).

While pursuing a college education, Courtney continued to exhibit acts of resistance. The incident Courtney described between herself and her personal wellness instructor is one example. When Courtney explained this incident, she remembered feeling as if she were trapped in a no-win situation. She did not wish to share her disability with the instructor for fear that the instructor might make stereotypical assumptions about Courtney’s abilities. She also did not want the instructor to assume that because she was a girl she was lazy, not trying, or just plain terrible at sports.

In this incident, Courtney had to choose between claiming a disability and the assumptions surrounding the discourse of disability, or receive an F because the instructor perceived her as “another girl trying to coast through personal wellness.”

Although she readily acknowledged her visual differences, she also feared the professor

would negatively interpret these differences. Courtney worried that, like her doctors and high school counselor, this instructor would buy into the notion that because of her disability label she did not belong in college. Yet, she was just as uncomfortable with the instructor perceiving her as lazy.

This situation illuminates how discourses interlock resulting in no-win experiences for individuals within these multiple intersections. Although Courtney attempted to resist the assumptions surrounding either label, her efforts were futile in this instance. She was forced to claim her disability, and in doing this was also brushed aside by the instructor who accused her of being “overly sensitive” or, as I interpreted Courtney’s recollections, overly feminine.

Courtney’s decision to attend graduate school also provides an example of a conscious act of resistance. After completing her Bachelor of Arts degree, Courtney wanted to do more than “just get a job and go to work.” She recollected wanting to make a difference for other African American women in situations similar to hers. Thus, she deliberately chose to continue her education and her interests in exploring what deters young, teenage mothers from attending college.

The passion for helping young mothers explore their career and education options led Courtney to consciously challenge the dominant ideology by “working the cracks” (Collins, 2000, p. 281). She regularly volunteers at a local shelter for teenage mothers. In this role, she encourages and supports young women to “dream big.” As part of her major, she also broadcasts a regular radio show where she shares information about college admissions, applications, and financial aid. Finally, she works as a graduate

assistant, engaging in research surrounding these issues. With calculated intent, Courtney continues to consciously confront a system that she recognizes as vastly unjust.

Kiesha

Kiesha's educational experiences were characterized by conscious and overt, as well as covert acts of resistance. Kiesha's acts of resistance were always purposeful and deliberate, yet moved fluidly between overt and covert when she entered a Midwestern, public university.

Kiesha felt out-of-place and unfamiliar with the prevalent white, middle-class culture of the university. In negotiating this new environment, she attempted to challenge the dominant ideology through more subtle and covert acts of resistance. Many of Kiesha's experiences led her to be less sure of herself. At the time I interviewed Kiesha, she was graduating from this university. She was beginning to regain some of the confidence she had entered the university with and had been, admittedly and visibly, stripped of during the four years that she attended. Her future aspirations to attend graduate school and pursue a career in the medical field indicated she would continue to consciously challenge prevailing ideology surrounding her race, gender, disability, and class.

Kiesha was also greatly influenced by her relationship with her mother; although this influence differed from that of Courtney's mother. Kiesha's mother made it a point to explicitly make her expectations known. For instance, she told Kiesha at a young age that Kiesha would attend college. Thus, Kiesha recalled having internalized the expectation that she would graduate and go to college. Kiesha's mother also modeled, through her

daily interactions and conversations with Kiesha, how Kiesha might challenge prevailing ideology. In doing so, she purposefully instilled in Kiesha many valuable traits, including self-reliance, perseverance, and assertiveness. These traits proved imperative to Kiesha as she coped with the unfamiliar culture, unwritten rules, and hidden expectations surrounding her college experiences.

The first purposeful act of resistance that Kiesha's mother modeled for her surrounded a research assignment when Kiesha was in middle school. Although Kiesha was told that she could not complete a research report on black cowboys, her mother encouraged Kiesha to go ahead and do so. She provided her with necessary support, including accompanying Kiesha to turn in the report. This experience is a conscious act of resistance because Kiesha and her mother had spent time discussing the purpose and intent behind choosing to complete the report. Their overall goal was for Kiesha to complete the report and present the report to the teacher in hopes of changing the teacher's attitudes. This incident represents a covert and overt act of resistance. It emerged as a covert act of resistance when Kiesha quietly chose to ignore the teacher's instruction. However, the experience became overt when Kiesha and her mother turned in the report and confronted the teacher. Last, it proved transformational because it potentially influenced the teacher's understandings of African Americans, and it modeled for Kiesha how to critically question what she is told, as well as how to assert herself.

A second conscious and covert act of resistance was modeled by Kiesha's mother when she enrolled Kiesha in a high school specializing in the math and sciences. As Kiesha shared in our interview, this was purposeful on the part of Kiesha's mother. She

stated, “My mother knew I loved math, and she wanted to see me do something with it. She told me I was smart enough and got me into that [the specialized math and science] high school.” It was a covert act in that enrollment in this high school served a subtle, but underlying purpose of challenging the dominant ideology. Kiesha’s mother sought to directly challenge the stigma associated with females interested in the math and sciences so Kiesha could accomplish her goals (see Wahl, 2001).

Both of the above acts of resistance also consciously prioritized education. Kiesha’s mother conveyed to Kiesha from a very early age that she expected her to graduate from high school and attend college. Like Courtney had, Kiesha’s mother internalized a common and longstanding belief that has served to motivate African American women—education was a means to independence and equality (Davis, 1981; hooks, 1984/2000). Given Kiesha’s mother’s personal experiences with discrimination, I also ventured that she consciously sought to prepare her daughter for the world by emphasizing an education rich with the necessary skills or traits to counter discrimination. Collins (2000) confirmed this explanation stating that African American mothers protect their daughters by teaching them autonomy and instilling within them a strong sense of self-worth and value. One of the ways African American mothers do this is by encouraging their daughters to develop their talents. As this related to Kiesha, she was encouraged to nurture her intellect through pursuing her interests in math and science. Moreover, her mother helped her develop a strong sense of self through continued encouragement and modeling how to challenge the dominant ideology.

As I noted, this encouragement led Kiesha to graduate from high school and attend college. College proved a turning point in Kiesha's life for a number of reasons. First, college was monumental because Kiesha was the first in her family to attend college. Kiesha explained this pressure as enormous. Second, Kiesha found college life unfamiliar. She expressed that she had difficulty fitting in with her peers, making her needs known, and being taken seriously by professors and counselors. She recounted having little understanding as to how to adapt to a new and strange culture.

Although Kiesha's mother had previously provided the necessary emotional support and advice to assist her, Kiesha explained that her mother was unable to do so now. She recalled her mother telling her, "This [college life] I don't know anything about. This I can't help you with." Thus, Kiesha struggled in isolation attempting to belong and get along in an environment very different than what she had previously known. As she attempted to find her way, Kiesha exhibited both overt and covert acts of resistance. However, these acts of resistance continued to demonstrate a critique of the prevailing ideology.

For example, Kiesha often recognized that she was being taken advantage of by fellow students during group projects. In an effort to protest her exploitation, Kiesha quietly refused to submit her parts of the group project until all group members had submitted their parts. She procrastinated giving her parts to group members and refused to do more than her share. She resisted the urge to offer more help, organize the group, or facilitate communication between group members. Angry that Kiesha was no longer offering or willingly accepting a lead role in the work, the group sabotaged Kiesha by

purposefully forgetting to include her parts in the final project. Compounding the situation, Kiesha explained that when she brought her experiences to the attention of the professor, the professor criticized her for not being able to get along with others and gave her an F.

Kiesha also noted her struggles in adjusting to college life, the climate of college life, specifically its emphasis on competition and grades. Kiesha expressed frustration with the university's emphasis on grades and grade point averages. Contrasting her college experiences with her earlier schooling, Kiesha proudly recalled that her family and families in her neighborhood supported one another.

It was not about who got the best grade or ran the fastest in the track meet the night before, but about how so and so was making the neighborhood proud or how we all could come together to celebrate. There just wasn't the competitive edge like I found in college. And I didn't know how to be competitive, not like that.

As a result, Kiesha found competition undesirable and nearly impossible to negotiate successfully. In hindsight, she believed "competition was one of many unwritten rules that made life at college difficult."

The "unwritten rules" that Kiesha was alluding to are described as the hidden curriculum found in schools by Philip Jackson (1968) and more recently, Delpit (1995), Payne (1996), and Apple (1979/1990). The hidden curriculum represents what students are expected to learn and demonstrate in school but is not formally taught or outlined in any curriculum. It often consists of implicit messages given to students about socially legitimized behavior, differential power, social evaluation, knowledge, what is valued,

and how students are valued in their own right. Synder (1971) articulated this concept well:

There is another set of less obvious tasks which bears a most interesting and important relationship to the formal curriculum. The question for the student is not what he will learn but how he [or she] will learn. These cover inferred tasks, and the means to their mastery, are linked together in a hidden curriculum. They are rooted in the professors' assumption and values, the students' expectations, and the social context in which both teacher and taught find themselves. (p. 4)

As this related to Kiesha, she unknowingly identified the inner workings of a hidden curriculum in which neither she nor her mother understood how to negotiate. When I prodded her further, she stated, "Culturally, this [college] was just not for me," or "This [college] is just not where I come from. It's not how we do things from where I came from." Additionally, she commented, "I've been really confused. It's just a mix of everything. I can't pinpoint any one thing, but I just feel like I don't belong."

Apple (1979/1990) offered an additional explanation for Kiesha's feelings. He employed the concept of hidden curriculum to describe how schools are organized to systematically structure inequality in order to distribute specific kinds of knowledge. In other words, schools play a role in making inequality appear natural by teaching a curriculum that is uniquely situated to maintain the most powerful in society. In this way, the hidden curriculum serves to (1) maintain a cultural hegemony, (2) to sort and select individuals for specific roles in society, and (3) to maintain seemingly natural inequalities.

In fact, Kiesha attributed her recently diagnosed disability with her failure to understand and successfully negotiate the hidden curriculum. She explained, "I've never thought of myself as having a disability. It wasn't 'til I got here [college campus] that

people told me I had a disability.” Hence, Kiesha accredited the onset of her depression and anxiety with the overall climate of the university campus. She recalled,

Where I came from it was good just to do your best. It was more comfortable and warm. Maybe that has something to do with the history of the minority period, you know? We all stuck together. It wasn't as competitive. Then when I got here [college] it was all about grades and GPA. You weren't valued as a person, just a number. I couldn't relate to what was going on, but I could not avoid getting caught up in it, either. It was everywhere and it added to my anxiety.

What Kiesha was inadvertently alluding to was the hidden curriculum of college campus life. In contrast to her high school experience, college presented Kiesha with a new set of social rules and socially acceptable behavior. Previously Kiesha had done well in school depending on fellow students for encouragement, support, and friendship, yet now Kiesha encountered competition, sabotage, and harassment by fellow students and professors. Kiesha had difficulty negotiating these situations and conforming to the implicit, unwritten rules.

She was also deserted by individuals she believed were her friends. In her most poignant example, Kiesha painfully recalled the explanation one white female friend gave for discontinuing their friendship. She stated, “I remember she told me that she just couldn't be my friend anymore. That she just couldn't put up with all the racial issues that I had to encounter each day.” At this point, Kiesha came to a crossroads of sorts. In an epiphany, she realized that she could not simply choose to disassociate with her race as her white friend had chosen to disassociate with her. Kiesha recognized that all she could do was stand strong. And while her mother had claimed that she was unable to help Kiesha in these college matters, Kiesha drew strength and power from the many

examples and emotional foundation her mother had consciously laid in years prior.

Kiesha embraced a will and determination to graduate from college.

Kiesha continued to study and persevere in her classes; however, she recognized that her difficulties were taking a toll on her coursework and her emotional well-being. She vividly recollected the anxiety and depression she felt at the thought of having to pull herself out of bed to attend class. She attempted to relieve this stress by advocating for herself. She asked professors for extensions, accommodations, or alternatives to assignments that required group work. I classified these requests as conscious and covert acts of resistance. Kiesha was desperately trying to negotiate, adhere, and conform to college life by “working the cracks” (Collins, 2000, p. 281). These attempts were rooted in a desire to “make a better life” for herself.

Unfortunately, many of the professors were unwilling to accommodate Kiesha without the appropriate paperwork that would legally entitle Kiesha to the accommodations she was requesting. Kiesha feared that many professors thought she was simply being “lazy” or was not “smart enough to be in college.” Thus, when one professor referred her to the disability services office on campus, Kiesha felt compelled to follow through. She felt that if she could “legally” secure the accommodations then her professors would understand that she was not “lazy” or “stupid.”

Although Kiesha had never thought of herself as disabled, she now realized that she must identify as disabled in order to have her needs met. With determination, Kiesha embraced the attitude “whatever it takes” and entered the disability services offices armed with her data to support her requests. She had medical charts, doctor notes, and a

recent assessment of her well-being, taken during a three-day period in which Kiesha had voluntarily committed herself to the hospital psychiatric ward. To Kiesha's dismay, the professionals in the disability service office were at first unwilling to help her. She recalled that they were uncertain if her medical diagnosis of anxiety, depression, and ADD really qualified her for services.

Like Courtney, Kiesha resented having to claim her so-called disability in such a public fashion. She was embarrassed stating, "I had to share some very personal details about myself." To make matters worse, it was not until after she had agreed to take medication that the disability services offices finally approved her request for accommodations. Yet, even after she received accommodations, she did not feel as though her situation dramatically improved. She stated, "Now, my professors looked down upon me for being labeled with a disability, and still they didn't think I belonged in their classes. I could tell many didn't want to accommodate me."

The culmination of these numerous experiences can be understood in relation to Kiesha's choice of majors while at college. Like many young college students, Kiesha changed majors frequently. It was her choice of majors that interested me as they provided insight into how the discourses of race, gender, class, and disability intersected.

Originally, Kiesha wanted to major in accounting, but left the field after deciding that accounting was really not for her. When I probed deeper as to why she made this decision, Kiesha avoided the question. She was unable or, perhaps, too embarrassed to tell me. She vaguely referred to the competitive nature of accounting and how hard it was to keep up. I ventured that she may have felt as though she had failed. Although I could

not be entirely sure, I imagined that it was difficult for Kiesha to give up on accounting. She professed to loving math and believed that she was capable at math, but had been unsuccessful in completing a major in math. She also was an individual who did not like to give up.

Similarly, Kiesha shied away from a science major. Although she adamantly wanted to be a doctor and had attended a high school geared towards individuals with math and science interests, she had chosen not to pursue a science major. When I questioned her about this decision, she admitted that she had likely internalized the message that science would be too difficult.

I suspected that her decision to forego a degree in either of these areas was a result of experiences surrounding her race, disability, class, and gender that coalesced while she was at college. The collection of these experiences resulted in a bifurcated identity. She was in a continual negotiation of attempting to figure out who she was and how she fit into the university community. While many college students encounter difficulties in transitioning to college life and deciding on a major, Kiesha's adjustment was compounded by assumptions made about her race, gender, disability, and class. Thus, she found herself in a negotiation that resulted in self doubt and led Kiesha to switch majors on numerous occasions.

Hanson and Smith (2001) affirmed that this was not unusual experience for women interested in math and science. They noted and drew attention to the fact that female math and science scores are just as high if not higher throughout elementary, middle and high school. However, once females enter college, the reverse becomes true.

Moreover, they noted that it is not because of women's own internalized beliefs about their aptitude or interests, but rather because of their reaction to the attitudes of peers and professors. I found this reflected Kiesha's experience. She had explained to me that math and science had been an uphill battle and had cited peers who had "convinced [her] it would be too difficult" and professors who she felt alienated from already.

For these reasons, it appeared that Kiesha succumbed and conformed to underlying ideology surrounding women's capabilities in science and math. Yet, I classified these experiences as conscious and covert acts of resistance. It would have been easy for Kiesha to simply give up and drop out of college, but she didn't. Instead, Kiesha chose to major in sociology and at the time that I interviewed her was preparing for graduation.

In choosing sociology, Kiesha stated that she had hoped that sociology would provide her with a deeper understanding of herself and how to work with people. She specifically stated,

I noticed that there was not a lot of diversity in the medical field. Unfortunately, some doctors still do not know how to interact or talk to some patients. So I decided I would take my undergrad in sociology thinking it would be helpful later when I went on to med school.

Thus, Kiesha chose a field that could be directly linked to the medical field and would serve an overarching purpose of providing her with a stronger foundation in understanding human nature, which she felt would be beneficial in two ways. She explained that sociology had helped her to understand some of the negative experiences she had encountered while at college. For example, she had rationalized the behavior of the friend that deserted her as fear on the part of her friend and not of any fault of her

own. She learned to forgive this friend and had even attempted to initiate on-going conversations with this individual. In this way, her choice of majors had been somewhat therapeutic. She also felt she could take these new understandings and apply them to working with individuals—both patients and care professionals—within the medical field. Thus, she desired to do a greater good with her degree.

This experience is an excellent example of “working the cracks” (Collins, 2000, p. 281). As a member of the university community, Kiesha used her insider knowledge concerning a lack of understanding with regard to the individual needs of people from varying cultures, to choose a major that would compliment her long-term goals. She had not given up on the medical field, but had found an alternative, creative route in which to gain access. She turned the experience of being deterred from pursuing math and science into an experience that potentially could be transformational.

Kiesha also demonstrated additional covert and conscious acts of resistance during her college years. Take for instance, her experiences as a mentor to other minority students. Having suffered hardship, discrimination, and alienation during the first year of her college career, Kiesha found solace in the on-campus minority and cultural center. She eagerly volunteered to be a mentor to younger students who were encountering similar experiences. This experience provided Kiesha with the opportunity to support and be supported by others. She stated, “It helped me to channel what was quite a bit of anger and bitterness into something more productive.” Obviously radical, this volunteer work served as a space for Kiesha to critique the prevailing ideology and offer insight to other students in ways that might potentially lead to campus-wide transformation.

Her conscious choice not to marry out of high school and her continued consideration as to whether she wanted to have children is another example of an act of conscious resistance. Again, Dill (1983), Davis (1981), and hooks (1984/2000) noted that working class African American women have long understood education as a means of mobility. With the encouragement of her mother, Kiesha had internalized this message, as well. Belonging to a neighborhood and community in which few students graduate and go on to college, Kiesha chose to attend college instead of marrying or having children. Kiesha acknowledged the pressure to get married and have children and shared how difficult it had been to explain her decision to others, especially to former high school classmates. She recalled being asked repeatedly the infamous question, “Are you married, yet?”

The answer always “no,” Kiesha still felt her choice important because it was grounded in a desire to carve a path that might encourage other African American women to go to college. Pointing to the fact that she was the only African American woman in the coffee shop at the time that I interviewed her, she recognized the under representation of African American women at colleges across the country. Moreover, she articulated that when she did decide to marry, it would be on her terms.

I don't know even if I would want to have children. I have so much I want to do. Any man I marry is going to have to be willing to support me and, likely, compromise on a few things.

Hence, her interest in the medical field coupled with her conscious decision not to marry points to a desire to dismantle many stereotypes surrounding women.

Additionally, Kiesha fought being labeled. Although she initially was bullied to concede to being medicated, her recent refusal to continue medication as a means to “cure” her anxiety and depression elucidates Kiesha’s understanding of the oppressive nature of her college experiences. She recognized that there was nothing inherently wrong with her. Rather, a cruel and unjust system had created the circumstances in which Kiesha was labeled as disabled. Since she never had anxiety or depression prior to college, the recent disability label attests to the understanding of disability as a social construct. Moreover, her assertion that she is not disabled and would not take a pill presents a direct challenge to the system.

Interestingly, this act of resistance arose from personal reflection and a culmination of other acts of resistance acts. In struggling to find her place and attempting to belong, she was met with social and educational barriers that continually impeded her path. These barriers led her to question her self value, worth and intellect in ways that left her feeling drained and defeated. Audre Lorde, drawing from her own personal experience as an African American lesbian woman, eloquently explained,

. . . I find I am constantly being encouraged to pluck out some one aspect of myself and present this as the meaningful whole, eclipsing or denying other parts of self. But this is a destructive and fragmenting way to live. My fullest concentration of energy is available to me only when I integrate all parts of who I am, openly, allowing power from particular sources of my living to flow back and forth freely through all my different selves, without the restrictions of externally imposed definitions. (1984, p. 120).

Kiesha, too, felt this fragmentation. She noted, “Some days it took so much effort just to be me. It was a constant battle.”

Perhaps the largest lesson Kiesha learned was best articulated when she explained that college wasn't necessarily about learning subject matter (she knew she was smart and easily mastered her coursework), but was really about learning how to get along, how to move back and forth between the discourses of African American, economically disadvantaged, woman, and disabled. This she never felt comfortable doing, stating how anxious she was to return to her hometown after graduation. "I can't wait to get out of this environment. Maybe then I'll be me again."

Shana

Shana exhibited many acts of resistance. These acts of resistance fell into the categories of semi-conscious and conscious as well covert and overt. I was initially guilty of failing to recognize many of Shana's experiences and behaviors as acts of resistance because of their subtle nature. Yet, as Giroux (1983a, 1983b) noted, it are these acts of resistance that are of great importance as they may potentially offer alternative understandings of behaviors that may otherwise be misunderstood or ignored. In speaking with Shana, I learned to listen for and pay close attention to the spaces in our conversations that signified less obvious acts of resistance.

It appeared that Shana's experiences, while informed by the discourses of race, gender, and class, were more heavily influenced by the discourse of disability, particularly the label of severely disabled. For Shana, this grossly minimalist, one-dimensional label was at the forefront and rendered many other facets of her identity invisible. When I spoke with Shana and her grandma, we rarely spoke of Shana's race, class, or gender. I surmised that issues pertaining to these faucets of her identity

somehow did not seem as important or relevant to Grandma Rose, and thereby were not readily discussed.

For example, when I asked Shana about marriage or dating, Grandma Rose seemed visibly displeased and shocked. Her nonverbal body language implied that I should not even ask such a question. I received the impression that because of the significance of Shana's disability it was assumed that Shana would not date or marry. Similarly, when Shana recalled experiences at the Braille School, she told me that she had never dated. In fact, she remembered that students were often segregated by gender for activities. There were few opportunities to socially interact with the opposite sex. Although the Braille School did sponsor a senior prom, students were encouraged to bring family members. Shana had taken her brother. For these reasons, I concluded that the only identity most people acknowledged was Shana's label of severely disabled and the accompanying stereotypes and expectations surrounding it.

Jolly (2001) offered insight into this phenomenon. He stated, "Unfortunately, in the presence of one clear or outstanding characteristic that contributes to a person's diversity, many other distinguishing characteristics will often go unnoticed" (p. 51). Thus, because Shana's impairment was noticeably visible, the label and accompanying stereotypes dominated how others understood Shana. As Shana shared her stories with me, I realized the emphasis on her disability label by others resulted in low expectations for her.

Gerschick (2000) argued that disability, particularly "the type of disability, its visibility, its severity, and whether it is physical or mental in origin," affects the

gendering process in numerous ways. She stated, “The bodies of people with disabilities make them vulnerable to being denied recognition as women and men” (p. 1264). As this related to Shana, I concluded that because she was labeled with severe multiple disabilities, she encountered fewer gender expectations and fewer opportunities to explore her identity as a woman. In accordance, Asch, Rousso, and Jefferies (2001) noted that disabled women are less likely to marry or have children. This explained why Grandma Rose had appeared unsettled when I brought up the topic of dating. She did not think of Shana as a woman. She never imagined that Shana would date, let alone marry or have children.

Shana’s educational placement in a segregated school for individuals with visual impairments resulted in fewer opportunities to explore her identity. It also resulted in limited instances to exert overt acts of resistance. In fact, I had difficulty imagining what avenues of resistance had existed for Shana.

Shana’s segregated educational setting focused largely on functional skills and transitional services. This curriculum aimed to provide Shana with experiences to assist her in becoming independent and to gain employment within the community. Yet, ironically, these experiences constrained Shana by affording her the opportunity to only make decisions within the framework of the pre-determined curriculum and program. For example, remember Shana was not allowed to make decisions with regard to when she washed her hair, did her homework, or went to bed. Hence, Shana was left with little space to express and act upon her needs or wants. For these reasons, I wondered if any

possibility for resistance existed within this context. Had Shana merely conformed? Was she a victim of the prevailing ideology?

As I noted previously, I relied heavily on the conversations between Shana, Grandma Rose, and myself to gain a deeper understanding of Shana's educational experiences. Most importantly, I paid attention to the subtle but intentional challenges Shana conveyed to her grandmother through her nonverbal body language. I read these gestures to indicate that she blatantly disagreed with her grandmother's words and opinions. For example, she would nonchalantly glance in my direction and roll her eyes. She would noticeably turn her back on her grandma, as if to shut her out of the conversation, and on a number of occasions, when her grandma posed a question, Shana would refuse to answer.

I first understood these silences and subtle messages as semi-conscious and subtle acts of resistance. Because of the lack of verbal communication, I was not entirely sure of Shana's intentions, and I was uncertain as to her overall goal. I believed Shana was simply reacting in response to Grandma Rose and the dominant ideology. Yet as our relationship grew, I believed that Shana began to act with more diligence and purpose. Shana would shoot Grandma Rose a glance of disgust and then smile at me, or she would turn to me and roll her eyes. I believed that Shana recognized that I understood and valued what she was saying. Because of this, I believed Shana's nonverbal body language increased and that she was actively seeking out my attention. For these reasons, I began to understand Shana's nonverbal body language as an articulation of her frustration. These silences and nonverbal body language affirmed for me that Shana had an

awareness of the oppressive nature of her circumstances. By seeking out me for affirmation, she was consciously engaging in an act of resistance.

Through exchanges between her grandma and herself, I also learned that Shana had overtly and semi-consciously challenged dominant ideology. I became aware of these challenges when grandma “told on” Shana during a conversation that had centered on negative memories of school. Although the conversation was quite tense and I felt awkward in that Grandma Rose had interjected many times, I continued to pry into experiences that might provide insight into how Shana handled difficult experiences. Without warning, Grandma Rose began speaking in a tirade, “That, Shana, when she gets mad, there ain’t no stopping her. She’ll throw a tantrum, like no other.” On and on Grandma Rose spoke with her hands waving. Shana, clearly embarrassed by her grandmother’s portrayal of her, bowed her head and refused to acknowledge either of us. From what I could see of her expression, her eyes were closed tight and she was visibly angry. I understood Shana’s anger. I, too, would have been angry if I had been depicted as an out-of-control two-year-old. Thus, I abandoned the topic.

Nevertheless, I was curious. Up until that day, I had believed Shana had only quietly and subtly reacted in opposition of her oppression. Now, I began to think differently. Shana did overtly resist. It was no longer just a hunch that she was deeply discontented. Rather, she had demonstrated by throwing tantrums on numerous occasions that she was unhappy and angered by her circumstances. As Grandma Rose had revealed, Shana threw tantrums when the bus was late, when she couldn’t get to her hair

appointment, when she couldn't go shopping, or most recently, when her siblings planned a car trip without her.

A few weeks later, the topic of Shana's tantrum arose again. This time it was Shana who initiated the discussion after I had asked her to tell me how she dealt with being angry when people assumed she couldn't do things. She began, "Well, Grandma thinks I can't read, but I can and that makes me mad." She pointed to a stack of books in the corner as evidence. In the doorway, having heard what Shana said, Grandma Rose ignored Shana's words, threw her hands in the air, and exited the room, in direct contention of Shana's words.

"So that must anger you," I surmised. "That people always assume you can't do things."

She then confessed, "Well, you know, like Grandma says, I sometimes do throw tantrums. I just get so mad. Mostly when I can't do something or someone tells me I can't do something. I holler; sometimes I throw things." I immediately expressed to her that I felt this was perfectly understandable, given that she had had so many experiences in which people continually underestimated her. She continued, "It's just that when people never listen to me, I don't know what else to do. I can't seem to control myself then."

I wondered out loud, "Did you feel this way at school, too?"

She sheepishly replied, "Yeah, but in school I could hide my tantrums because I had a room all to myself."

Thus, this conversation solidified for me that Shana was not merely conforming. She was actively engaged in reacting to and challenging the dominant ideology around

her. When people failed to understand her subtle assertions she would engage in not-so-subtle tantrums. Unfortunately, these tantrums were rarely understood as a response to her circumstances or treatment. All too often these tantrums went unnoticed or were attributed to Shana acting badly or childlike.

I also came to understand Shana's acts of resistance through the contradictions woven throughout our conversations. As Giroux (1983a, 1983b) asserted, it was necessary to unearth these contradictions in order to analyze Shana's subtle acts of resistance. In doing as much, I realized that contradictions inevitably arose when Shana attempted to negotiate the oppressive circumstances that enveloped her.

One of the most obvious contradictions that arose in our conversations surrounded the topic of Shana's living arrangements. Shana both complained and expressed a fondness for living with her grandma. With her grandma, Shana lived in a neighborhood segregated by race. For the most part, she was confined to her house because of restricted mobility. Within the house, she was largely restricted to three rooms—the kitchen, living room, and backroom. The stairs kept the remainder of the house inaccessible. She had no privacy because relatives and family friends were constantly coming and going using the back door as an entrance. This meant walking through Shana's makeshift bedroom. Additionally, Grandma Rose did not drive; therefore, she never left the house.

Under these circumstances, it was understandable that Shana complained. The majority of Shana's complaints stemmed from being restricted to the house all day. She wanted to go shopping, to church, and to get her hair done. She was angry with the transportation system because it was unreliable and expensive. She was constantly late to

work, had to rely on others to do her shopping, and was continually rescheduling hair appointments all because of a lack of adequate transportation.

On the positive side, Shana loved and cared for her grandma deeply. It was evident that the two women were as much adversaries as they were companions. Recall from the conversation in Chapter 4 that Grandma Rose was Shana's role model. I came to reason that both women were similarly oppressed. Together they were negotiating their situations with one another and in spite of one another.

Shana also expressed to me that she had both loved and hated living at the Braille school. In fact, she sometimes wished she still could live there. While I am an advocate of inclusion, I began to empathize with Shana. Sadly, however exclusionary and segregated the Braille school was, it provided Shana with more opportunities to access the community, have personal privacy, and a wealth of resources. She had her own bedroom and access to buildings, toilets, and recreational settings that were all handicap accessible.

The Braille School also emphasized independent living that Shana took great pride in. This entailed obtaining and keeping employment, doing her own laundry, keeping track of her own money, and occasionally cooking. In addition, she had regular opportunities to go out into the community, to participate in extra curricular activities, and go shopping. She also had a network of friends and teachers to interact with. She did not have to worry about a lack of transportation, bills, or healthcare because these things were all taken care of through the Braille school.

At other times, however, Shana expressed to me that she did not always enjoy attending the Braille school. She found many of the regulations and rules “too strict.” For example, she complained of the regimented schedule that students were required to follow daily. She didn’t like to go to bed at 10:00, and some mornings she didn’t feel like eating breakfast. She also hated to be told that she had to do things. For example, she would have liked to have had the opportunity to skip her homework, but because time for homework was scheduled each evening and monitored by staff members, there was no opportunity to exert such power. She didn’t like taking a shower or washing her hair at night, either. She complained, “I don’t think those white folks really knew about a black woman’s hair because everyone knows you can’t wash it every day, but they would make me.” For the most part, she had to go along with these rules.

Within both settings, Shana found opportunities to offer challenges. In contrast to the Braille school setting, Grandma Rose’s home offered Shana the opportunity to protest the regimented schedule of the Braille School. She had complete control of her days with regard to when she might wake, dress, or eat. While she was a stickler about getting to her job on time, she was quite a bit more relaxed when it came to other aspects of her daily life. For example, Shana was often not dressed or out of bed when I arrived to meet with her. At first, I worried that I was intruding or arriving too early, but I realized that after living for so many years adhering to a strict schedule, Shana no longer felt the desire to do so. I understood this as a conscious and covert act of resistance in response to the years of regimented schedules at the Braille School. At times, this also appeared to be an overt act of resistance because it was in contention with Grandma Rose, who often

chastised Shana for not readying herself properly or for making me wait. Shana would simply roll her eyes.

Shana also prided herself in keeping her own checkbook. This was a source of resentment for Grandma Rose who angrily accused Shana of “being cheap.” She stated on numerous occasions, “That girl is so stingy, won’t even let me look in her checkbook.” To which, Shana would sheepishly grin at me. Thus, I understood the desire and insistence that Shana put forth to keep her own checkbook as a conscious and covert act of resistance. Given what little meaningful control Shana had over her day to day experiences, maintaining her checkbook was quietly oppositional and provided her with freedom and autonomy. Shana had control over her money, and she knew it. Moreover, I found this act of resistance noteworthy because women with physical and mental disabilities are especially economically vulnerable. They have the fewest opportunities for employment and are paid the least; thus they are typically poorest and fare the worst (Gerschick, 2000). Certainly, Shana fell within these statistics. However, she purposely saved and “pinched pennies” in an attempt to overcome this economic disadvantage.

Another excellent example of an act of resistance surrounded the repetitive and painful physical therapy sessions that she was forced to endure each day. She despised the regimented exercises in which her legs were fastened to mechanical equipment that propelled them into motion. If it had been up to her, she would have simply crawled. However, teachers and staff refused her the right to do so. In response to teachers and physical therapists ignoring her requests to crawl, Shana arrived late to class explaining to teachers that there was no way for her to get across campus any faster. Well aware

that she would receive detention for her tardiness, Shana recalled with laughter, “I didn’t really care. I think I had the most detentions of everybody there.” Thus, Shana’s tardiness was a conscious act of resistance. It was quietly oppositional, but intentional.

Oliver (1993) stated, “Any hope for resistance—and it is a slim hope—lies in a ‘disabled’ person’s ability to reject and resist the medical and associated categories imposed upon them, to break free from the discursive bonds in which they are held . . .” (p. 51). Shana resisted the medical model interpretation of her physical differences in a number of ways. She was repeatedly tardy to class, just after her physical therapy sessions, and blamed this tardiness on being denied the freedom to choose her preferred means of mobility. Furthermore, she recalled complaining extensively about her physical therapy sessions to her teachers, physical therapist, Grandma Rose, and me. She continued to insist that she did not want to participate in physical therapy and that she preferred to crawl.

This conscious act of resistance also carried over into her home setting where it became overt. Grandma Rose continued to adamantly suggest that Shana continue physical therapy. Yet, much to Grandma Rose’s dismay, Shana refused and crawled around the house. On a number of occasions, Shana greeted me in her living room by crawling and swinging herself onto the couch. Grandma Rose, watching from the side, would make her displeasure known with an off-hand comment, “She shouldn’t be crawlin’ like a child.” Without a doubt, this example illustrated a purposeful decision to challenge the notion that individuals with limited mobility must work towards full mobility in order to be thought of as “normal.” It also continued to be a source of conflict

between Grandma Rose and Shana. This conflict resulted in Grandma Rose perceiving Shana as childlike and deviant.

Shana's participation on the swim team also represented a conscious and covert act of resistance. Although Shana loved to swim, she was informed that she could not be a swimmer on the team because she could not tread water long enough to make the team cut off. Instead, Shana secured the position of swim manager with the intent of participating on the team. In this role, she kept, collected, and recorded the times of swimmers. Thus, Shana refused to allow her coaches the opportunity to deny her membership on the team completely.

Shana's membership as a manager is another example of "working the cracks" (Collins, 2000, p. 281). While she would have preferred to be a swimming member of the team, her role as the swim manager allowed her to gain meaningful participation on the team. She traveled with the team, participated in award banquets, and attended daily practices. Shana countered many assumptions surrounding her intellectual abilities. She was required to read a stop watch, add and subtract times, and record times in a log book. She had to do this in a fast-paced environment, nonetheless. She was proud of her active role on the team and of the acclaim she received for her work. She stated, "Everyone was really proud of me, they didn't think I could write that fast." Hence, her role on the swim team also refuted the assumptions that Shana did not read or write well.

Reading and writing also represented conscious, covert acts of resistance in both her home and school environment. At school, Shana received little meaningful reading and writing curriculum, recalling little actual reading or writing. Instead, she remembered

spending quite a bit of time learning to print, sign her name, and fill out applications and paperwork. She reasoned that this was so she knew how to do these things when she went out to look for employment. Yet, while she knew this was very important, she also wished that teachers at the Braille School would have included more reading “just for fun.” As she proudly noted, pointing to numerous romance novels in the corner of her home, “I love to read.” She also loved to write and was meticulous in keeping a daily journal that included her work schedule and brief notations as to what she had to do each day and what had happened throughout the day.

Kliewer and Biklen (2001), Miranda (2003), and Erickson and Koppenhaver (1995) argued that literacy is often denied for students with severe mental disabilities. Because it is commonly assumed that subskill mastery is both required and an impossibility for students with severe disabilities, these students never receive the opportunity to engage in literacy as a process involving critical thinking and interaction (Erickson & Koppenhaver, 1995). Kliewer and Biklen (2001) explained, “They [students with severe disabilities] are steered to stepladders with fewer rungs, which lead to functional or life skills reading or writing, if allowed to engage in the printed word at all” (p. 2). This was true in Shana’s experiences, as she was denied meaningful access to literacy in favor of a life-skills-based curriculum⁷. Thus, Shana’s continued desire to seek out literacy is in direct contention of the prevailing and dominant ideology surrounding students with severe disabilities. She liked to read and write and continued to do so even

⁷ That is not to devalue the importance of a life-skills curriculum, but rather to assert the value of a curriculum that places emphasis on both academic and functional skills.

though individuals around her did not believe she could. This demonstrated a conscious and subtle act of resistance.

In sum, Shana exhibited many acts of resistance. These acts were subtle and overt as well as conscious and semi-conscious. They arose from the many contradictions inherent within her living and educational experiences. Unfortunately, it appeared that Shana's quiet acts of resistance, her nonverbal body language, her resilience in "working the cracks," (Collins, 2000, p. 281) and her outwardly aggressive tantrums were overlooked by most.

Tasha.

When I first met Tasha, she was quick to point out that she had not put up with discrimination. Thus, I immediately understood that she possessed a conscious awareness of the oppressive discourses surrounding her multiply faceted identity. As she continued to speak with me, I also realized that she was largely unsure of herself. I attributed this to the many contradicting messages she had received throughout her educational experiences and a recent automobile accident that had added an additional struggle to her circumstances. At the end of our interview and upon learning that she and her new husband had abruptly moved, I reluctantly deduced that the system had essentially beaten Tasha up. It was readily apparent that she was continuing to struggle in numerous ways. While she told many stories of conscious acts of resistance, it appeared her successes were few.

The majority of Tasha's educational memories and experiences fell into the category of conscious and overt acts of resistance. Most notably, these experiences

surrounded her placement in special education after being labeled with a learning disability in elementary school. In speaking with me, she was frank in stating that special education was nothing more than a “daycare.” She confessed to knowing that others perceived her as a “bad kid” and that she had admittedly internalized the message that students in special education weren’t smart enough to go to college. Yet, she also articulated to me that because her mother had served as such a powerful influence, encouraging her to keep her grades up and go to college, she found herself working diligently to challenge these underlying assumptions.

First, Tasha recognized that the skill and drill approach she was receiving in the special education classroom was inadequate and dehumanizing (Heshusius, 1984; Iano, 1990; Poplin, 1988). She recalled being treated like a baby, noting one incident in which she engaged in a confrontation with the teacher after voicing her displeasure at having been read to. Tasha adamantly declared, “I think we were fully capable of reading to ourselves, and certainly not the baby book she had chosen to read to us.” After making her voice known, the teacher kicked Tasha out of her class. In a final protest, Tasha reacted by kicking the door on the way out. This act of resistance is clearly an outwardly conscious act. It possessed clear intent because Tasha could explain and cite the source of her frustration. Moreover, her behavior challenged the prevailing and dominant methods surrounding reading instruction for individuals labeled with mild learning disabilities.

This act was also immediately transformational for Tasha who took it upon herself to seek out another teacher for help. By doing this, she was actively sought to secure a more meaningful learning environment. She explained, “I knew I wanted Mrs. J

as a teacher because I knew she could help me. She was the kind of teacher who would teach you the basics, but not make you feel stupid.”

Although Mrs. J was a special education teacher, she taught in stark contrast to Tasha’s previous teacher. Tasha commented that she was kind, “taking a real interest in me.” Her teaching pedagogy was also very different. Although Mrs. J must still adhere to the district’s direct instruction special education curriculum, Tasha drew attention to the fact that “she didn’t really do it how you’re suppose to, you know. She didn’t make us repeat after her and all.” Because of this, Tasha expressed how she felt more like a person, stating, “We weren’t just like robots to Ms. J.” In contrasting the two teachers, Tasha explained, “I knew Mrs. J believed in me. The other teacher just thought I was another bad kid.”

In seeking out this teacher, Tasha was also encouraged to confront her fear of doing math. Like most girls, Tasha noted, “I just couldn’t do math, but Mrs. J helped me to understand it.” In fact, Tasha admitted, “Up until my [automobile] accident, I was still taking her my college math for help.” The continued perseverance in the area of math represents a covert, but semi-conscious act of resistance. Although Tasha lacked a clear and purposeful intent in challenging the underlying notion of girls and math, she “did not allow math to get the best of [her].” This act also possessed potential for transformation because Tasha continued to challenge her own underlying ideologies and fears surrounding math in college.

Another act of resistance included Tasha's desire to confront what she felt was an unjust system by becoming a high school mentor to students who were perceived as bad

students. Because Tasha self-identified as a “recovering bad special education” student, she readily accepted an invitation to mentor other students who were like herself, receiving special education or having problems in school. She expressed that she wanted to help these students avoid some of the problems that she had encountered. This experience represented a conscious and covert act of resistance in that Tasha’s intentions were to counter the prevailing ideology by offering support and guidance to students who were victims of it. She recalled,

I wanted to help other kids who maybe thought they were bad. I knew what it felt like to be labeled. Sometimes it could feel so lonely. That’s why I wanted to become a mentor. To share those experiences so others didn’t have to feel bad or alone.

This experience is also subtle in that it entails Tasha “working the cracks” (Collins, 2000, p. 281). She attempted to use her membership within the mentoring group to assist students in situations similar to her own.

Unfortunately, the experience did not prove as transformational as I believed Tasha had hoped. Instead of encouraging students to share their culture and personal experiences, the mentoring program enlisted students who had previously been labeled “problem” and minority students, yet had been successful in assimilating to the schools’ dominant ideology. These students were to encourage other students to do the same. Tasha stated, “I’m not sure I entirely went along with the groups’ message. The group was about re-teaching, you know, to convince students to change their attitudes. School wasn’t supposed to be fun.” In this experience, although Tasha possessed intent, that intent lost its transformational power when she was asked to promote messages that disempowered minority groups and students labeled with disabilities.

Tasha graduated from high school and decided to pursue a college education. With her mother's support and encouragement, Tasha applied and was accepted to a local community college. She admitted that she was convinced by her mother to attend college because she felt it was her only avenue to "get a decent paying job." This decision to attend college was also an act of resistance, although subtle and semi-conscious. The act lacked a clear and purposeful challenge to the system; Tasha's desire was rooted in obtaining a job that paid well and not necessarily as a means to challenge the dominant ideology. Thus, I labeled this act of resistance semi-conscious.

Unlike Kiesha and Courtney who had explicitly viewed education as a means to overcome an unjust system, Tasha did not articulate the same. That is not to say that Tasha did not feel this way. I speculated that Tasha's young age and maturity was influential in that she was just like any other young student straight out of high school—she just wanted to get a job and make some money. Her recent automobile accident also played a pivotal role because she was caught up in dealing with issues arising from this accident. Thus, she was justifiably distracted from thinking about education as means to improve her life circumstances. Nonetheless, I linked Tasha's mother's words of encouragement to the historical legacy surrounding African American women and education (Davis, 1981; hooks, 1984/2000). She believed in the possibilities that education might bring about for Tasha. In supporting Tasha, she laid the foundation in which Tasha might one day also consciously understand her enrollment in college as an act of resistance.

While attending college, the messages that Tasha internalized throughout high school remained. Tasha admitted to feeling scared, intimidated, and unable to keep up with the work load. When she experienced a tragic automobile accident, Tasha's fears surrounding school and her abilities appeared to come full circle. She decided to get married stating, "I never thought I would get married, especially so young. But after the accident, what else was I to do?" I understood this to mean that Tasha felt helpless, given her extensive injuries, and, perhaps, felt she needed to marry to guarantee future emotional and financial support.

After the accident, Tasha also lost all hope for returning to college. Explaining that she had been unsure of college in the first place, she felt it would be impossible to return. She was sure the work was piling up, and she didn't see any possible way to keep up, especially when it took so much effort before the accident. Moreover, the medical bills were piling up, and she expressed that she had no idea how they would pay for these bills, let alone food or rent. For these reasons, although Tasha put forth surmountable amounts of effort in resisting her oppressive circumstances, her situation appeared most dire.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSIONS

Introduction

I began this study anxious to learn about the educational experiences of African American women with disabilities from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds. As I shared in Chapter 4, I approached this study with the underlying assumption that these women were merely victims of an oppressive system. I learned this was not entirely the case.

The story of this research is my participants' strengths. I highlighted these strengths in Chapter 4 by constructing a conversation to illuminate my participants' stories. In Chapter 5, I employed a theory of resistance (Giroux, 1983a, 1983b) to describe, analyze, and consider alternative understandings of my participants' experiences. Central to this analysis, I contemplated: in what ways do individuals express acts of resistance in response or reaction to the prevailing ideology?

In the following chapter, I summarize my findings and offer additional discussion. This discussion centers on two questions contemplated by Giroux (1983a, 1983b). First, how do individuals within oppressive discourses exhibit behavior that both helps and hinders future success? Second, what was the effect of "un-freedom?" Put differently, when acts of resistance failed to lead to transformation for my participants how did they respond? Last, I discuss implications for educators, students, and future research.

Summary and Discussion

Each of my participants was actively engaged in challenging the dominant ideology surrounding the discourses of race, gender, disability, and class. Their educational experiences were characterized by numerous acts of resistance. These acts of resistance were labeled overt and covert as well as conscious and semi-conscious. Recall covert acts of resistance did not necessarily arise from direct conflict, but were subtle and quietly oppositional. They often involved my participants “working the cracks” (Collins, 2000, p. 281) in the form of insider membership or knowledge that brought about change. In contrast, overt acts of resistance often arose from sites of conflict and were perceived by others as rebellious, deviant, or defiant.

Conscious acts of resistance included experiences where my participants identified and explained at the time the experience occurred their actions as responses to the dominant ideology. Inherent within these experiences, my participants possessed an articulated desire to transform their circumstances. Notably, they often also expressed a desire to transform the experiences of other individuals in similar circumstances. On the other hand, when participants did not articulate their actions as an expressed response to the prevailing ideology or when their actions lacked a clear intent, I classified their actions as semi-conscious acts of resistance.

My participants’ acts of resistance emerged from and centered on three central themes. These central themes included educational and social barriers, questions of identity, and frustrations at the intersections of race, disability, class, and gender. Examining these three themes offers insight into how my participants exhibited behaviors

that both helped and hindered their success. In addition, these themes shed light on the effects of “un-freedom” (Giroux, 1983a, 1983b).

Educational and Social Barriers

Education was a priority for each of my participants. They all recounted a deep desire to graduate from high school. For Courtney and Kiesha, this desire was grounded in a conscious understanding of education as a means to overcome adversity. For Tasha and Shana, education was viewed as primarily a means in which to secure employment. In our conversations, neither Tasha nor Shana spoke of education as a means to counter or respond to the dominant ideology. Thus, I concluded that Tasha and Shana lacked a clear articulated intent or awareness of how education might challenge prevailing ideology. However, by placing their desire to receive an education within the historical legacy of African American women’s pursuit of education, I classified their desire and subsequent experiences as semi-conscious acts of resistance.

In recalling educational experiences, Courtney, Shana, Kiesha, and Tasha repeatedly made reference to social and educational barriers that obstructed their paths. These barriers included teachers, peers, and family members’ attitudes—remember Kiesha’s peers who sabotaged her assignments or Courtney’s personal wellness instructor who left Courtney feeling defeated.

Each woman also expressed frustration at having been underestimated by teachers, peers, and family members. They recollected stories of being restricted in their decision making. Take for example, Shana’s experiences at the Braille School. She was

consistently denied the opportunity to make daily decisions about what time she would wake, dress, eat, or bathe.

In many instances, these women recognized that others did not view them as capable individuals. Subsequently, they were denied opportunities to participate as valued individuals within their school and work communities. For instance, Shana wished to perform jobs at Pizza Hut other than folding boxes, but was routinely denied the opportunity. She felt this was because the managers did not believe that she was capable of making the pizzas, although she had told them on many occasions that she cooked at home. Thus, low expectations resulted in limited access to opportunities.

Barriers also included curriculum and teacher pedagogy that failed to meaningfully engage the women. An example of this was Tasha's experiences with reading in the special education classroom. She had articulated how the reading instruction was boring and the teacher had failed to engage students in any reading whatsoever. Kiesha's middle school teacher who refused Kiesha the opportunity to explore a topic of interest to her—black cowboys—is another example of how curriculum and pedagogy lacked intrinsic value for these women.

In challenging these social and educational barriers, each woman worked diligently to counter the low expectations or stereotypes surrounding their race, disability, gender, or class. In doing this, they often encountered what Kiesha described as “no-win” situations. For example, recall how Kiesha submitted herself to an intensive educational and psychological evaluation. Following this, she agreed to be medicated in order to receive curriculum accommodations from professors. Although she deeply detested the

idea of taking medicine and adamantly declared that she was not disabled, she felt forced to identify as disabled. She stated, “It was either let my professors think I was just some lazy black girl or give them the documentation that proved I needed what I was asking for [accommodations in the form of extended due dates, etc.].” Yet, Kiesha declared that she fit neither stereotype associated with her race or disability. Instead, she placed blame with the university’s inability to support students’ individual needs and differences. She stated, “The climate here [at the Midwest public university] is so unaccepting [sic] of difference.”

Shana articulated a similar situation. Her memories revealed that she was torn between her recollections of living at the Braille School and her current residence at her grandma’s home. She greatly missed the access she had to the community and friends while at the Braille School, but also desired to be a meaningful member of her neighborhood. In short, neither residence met all of Shana’s needs. Yet, the alternative—attending the neighborhood school—had unfortunately never materialized as a viable option for Shana.

My participants’ daily struggles also involved attempting to adhere to “normal” while at the same time resisting what they had internalized as oppressive. Each woman wanted to belong, but found they often had to hide, deny, or sacrifice elements of her identity to gain acceptance. In doing this, my participants inevitably perpetuated the circumstances of their oppression. Recall how Tasha mentored students to “get along” in school, but admitted she was uncomfortable with the message of conformity that she was sending to her mentees. She felt that in trying to teach other students how to “behave” she

was, really, silencing their voices as African Americans or students labeled with disabilities. Although she was unable to fully articulate this experience as reproducing her oppressive circumstances, Tasha felt something amiss. In sum, my participants longed to be accepted as embodied individuals; however, attempts to gain this acceptance often were met by educational and social barriers. Unfortunately, at times, these barriers and each woman's struggle to overcome them led the women to reproduce the circumstances of their oppression.

Questions of Identity

When each woman found her actions failed to bring about or lead to transformational experiences, she was left with questioning her identity. Always at the forefront of this negotiation, each woman questioned who she was and how she belonged. This ongoing negotiation had a significant impact on my participants. Each woman spoke of the emotional toll and profound effect that engaging in acts of resistance had on her identity. They admitted that it was a daily struggle not to internalize the recurrent negative messages they received surrounding their race, disability, gender, and class.

Courtney noted, "Each day was like me up against a bunch of people who were trying to tell me that I was not who I thought I was. I had to work really hard not to succumb to that." Likewise, Kiesha admitted to being stripped of confidence when she entered college. She recalled, "It took me a long time to get myself back. Now I've learned not to let anyone take away from me who I am."

Shana struggled with her identity, as well. I ventured that she very much wanted others to understand her not only as disabled, but also as a woman. I believe this is why

she so adamantly adhered to getting her hair done every Thursday, even if it required the inconvenience of securing additional transportation. Still, Grandma Rose could not understand why Shana felt she had to get her hair done every Thursday. She brushed aside Shana's insistence as if it were a silly request.

At times, my participants also confessed to adhering to some of the overarching messages surrounding their race, disability, gender, and class. In these incidents, my participants lacked an awareness of how internalizing these messages served to reproduce their oppressive circumstances. For example, as I noted in Chapter 5, Tasha appeared defeated and worn out. When she recalled many of her high school experiences, she remembered being known as just another "bad kid." Unfortunately, I feared that this message had a lasting impact on Tasha. She affirmed this for me when she stated, "I just don't think I can go back to college. I don't know that I'm really that smart."

Internalizing this message, Tasha believed she was not "cut out" to go to college. Thus, it was not all that surprising when Tasha dropped out of college. While the car accident initiated her withdrawal, Tasha lacked the confidence, as a result of internalizing messages surrounding her race, gender, disability, and class. Thus, it appeared that she had unwittingly become complacent in her oppression.

Courtney also shared that she had likely internalized messages surrounding her gender. She confessed to conforming to the notion that women can't do math. She stated, "Logically, I know that doing math has nothing to do with me being a girl or a boy, but I still can't seem to shake the idea that I'll never be good at it." And although Kiesha loved math, I ventured that she, too, had partially given up her interest in accounting after her

negative experiences in college math. In these incidents, Kiesha and Courtney had unknowingly reproduced the stereotype that women are unable to excel in math.

Overall, my participants found themselves in an on-going process of negotiating their identities in relation to prevailing ideology. This negotiation was met with varying results. In some incidents, my participants appeared to triumph over stereotypes surrounding their identities, at other times, my participants' actions resulted in reproducing the oppressive circumstances in which they located themselves. Regardless, this on-going process of negotiation gave rise to many acts of resistance. In turn, these acts of resistance informed and shaped my participants' sense of self and being.

Sandstrom, Martin, and Fine (2001) described the development of an individual's sense of self as a process arising from interactions with others. Put simply, a person learns who he or she is through the process of social interaction. My participants came to understand themselves through their continued engagement in reacting and responding to their world. Within their world, acts of resistance played a central role in social interactions and, in turn, their ability to develop a strong sense of self-efficacy.

Sandstrom, Martin, and Fine (2003) defined self-efficacy as

. . . a person's sense of being competent and "in control" as he or she acts in the world and interacts with others. . . . [E]ffective action is a crucial and somewhat autonomous dimension of self-formation. Cooley claimed that we build a sense of self through vigorous and purposeful activity that allows us to *do something* to our environment, thereby asserting ourselves in it and producing effects upon it. According to Cooley, this behavior is rewarding in its own right and provides us with a basis of positive self-feeling that transcends the appraisal of others. (p. 107, italics original)

Within this definition, the authors suggest that a strong sense of self-efficacy arises from one's ability to consciously engage and act upon the world around them. The more an

individual engages and understands that engagement is influential within the world, the greater likelihood that individual has in acquiring an independent sense of self.

Furthermore, this strong sense of self provides the foundation in which one consciously continues to choose to engage and assert one's self within the world. I found the degree to which my participants were able to develop a strong sense of self-efficacy depended upon the opportunity for interaction, the age and maturity of my participants, and their ability to critically reflect on their interactions.

Kiesha and Courtney's (the oldest of my participants) acts of resistance grew more purposeful and conscious over time. Courtney had left an abusive home life. She had graduated from college and was continuing to pursue her education as a graduate student. Kiesha had also learned to advocate for herself. She joined a multicultural group to serve as a mentor, she refused to take medication, and she was graduating from college. Thus, in spite of their numerous struggles, Kiesha and Courtney's acts of resistance had led to successes.

Each woman also recognized their accomplishments as a result of their efforts to resist the dominant ideology. Each had spent a great deal of time thinking about and reflecting on her circumstances and prior life events. This ability to reflect coupled with each woman's continued and prolonged engagement in the world appeared to have a "snowballing" effect. Each woman continued to engage in acts of resistance that further instilled each with a strong sense of self-efficacy. In turn, this strong sense of self served as a catalyst, pushing each woman to continue to resist and challenge the dominant

ideology. This was evident in each woman's career choice, as each possessed a deep desire to advocate for change and chose careers that would allow them to do so.

Tasha and Shana were still in the emerging process of developing a strong sense of self and self-efficacy. Tasha had just graduated from high school and had not had as much time to meaningfully or critically reflect upon her experiences. I concluded that Tasha possessed a general awareness of the ways in which her race, gender, disability, and class intersected and potentially influenced her situation, but had not consistently acted upon that awareness in the form of viable praxis. She had demonstrated both conscious and semi-conscious acts of resistance, yet her experiences did not appear to progress from semi-conscious to conscious acts of resistance.

For example, recall how Tasha asserted and advocated for herself while in the special education classroom. This was an example of a conscious act of resistance. Yet, Tasha's decision to attend college was not rooted in a conscious desire to challenge her circumstances. Thus, I surmised that Tasha was still in the process of moving towards more conscious and transformational acts of resistance. I believed she was still largely unsure of herself. I ventured this was perhaps because of a lack of maturity. She had not had as much time to engage in continued acts of resistance. Thus, she had also not reaped the benefits that continued acts of resistance may have brought her. A recent automobile accident had also drastically complicated her situation. As a result of the extensive injuries she had received, she was unable to continue with her college education at the present time. She was engaged in a more immediate struggle attempting to "make it through the day."

Like Tasha, I came to understand Shana as in the emerging process of developing a strong sense of self-efficacy. Because of her segregated school setting, the dominance of her disability label, and current transportation difficulties, Shana had fewer opportunities in which to interact within and upon her world. Fewer opportunities resulted in fewer successes and a slower process of transformation. That is not to say she did not explore issues surrounding her gender, race, class, and disability. As I highlighted, Shana exhibited numerous acts of resistance. These acts of resistance were a combination of conscious and semi-conscious, as well as overt and covert.

For Shana, overt acts of resistance were less successful and often perpetuated stereotypes surrounding her disability. For example, when Shana engaged in a “tantrum,” she was perceived by her grandmother and others as child-like, out of control, and irrational. For these reasons, it was less likely that Shana would be taken seriously when she engaged in a tantrum. Instead, this overt act of resistance led her grandmother and others to reaffirm many stereotypes they held, thereby reproducing Shana’s oppressive circumstances.

Shana’s subtle challenges through “working the cracks” (Collins, 2000, p. 281) were most successful for her. These challenges had given way to autonomy in keeping track of her money and freedom from physical therapy. In fact, I believed that Shana recognized these small successes because she readily engaged in these covert acts of resistance. She understood that these subtle acts of resistance were bringing about change. Thus, I determined that Shana was slowly emerging and imagined she would continue to engage and offer challenges in the face of prevailing ideology surrounding

her race, disability, class, and gender. Grandma Rose confirmed this stating, “That girl—she sure is something else. Never gives up.”

At the Intersections

As I briefly mentioned in the above section, acts of resistance in response or reaction to educational and social barriers resulted in “no-win” situations and struggles with identity that could not be solely attributed to any one experience or discourse. These no-win situations gave rise to many acts of resistance that both helped and hindered the women’s success. Because these women’s experiences revealed that the influence of any one discourse changed given the context of a situation, the acts of resistance that each woman engaged in were also constantly changing, thereby making it difficult for each woman’s experience to lead to transformation.

For instance, Kiesha secured the necessary educational accommodations for herself by identifying as disabled, but then encountered racism when working with peers during a group project. It appeared that once one obstacle was overcome, another obstacle was erected. As Kiesha eloquently stated, “If it wasn’t my race, it was me being a woman, or my so-called disability. It was always something and somebody telling me no.” Thus, while each woman was engaged in various acts of resistance, the success of these acts largely depended upon how an act was perceived or interpreted by teachers, family members, or friends.

Acts of resistance were rarely acknowledged as critiques of the dominant ideology. Most often acts of resistance were ignored, punished, or misunderstood by teachers and family members. Take for example, Shana’s desire to crawl. Family

members and teachers failed to respect Shana's preferred means of mobility. They also failed to acknowledge her desire to crawl as a protest of the grueling physical therapy and its underlying implication that to be considered "normal" Shana must walk or, at the very least, work towards walking. Moreover, they refused to consider that Shana's wheelchair and crutches actually slowed her mobility and made life more difficult. Instead, Shana was punished for being late, ridiculed when she crawled, and, ironically, denied adequate accessible transportation when she did concede to their wishes.

Acts of resistance were also misinterpreted as manifestations of laziness, deviance, or inherent low intellectual ability. When conceived of in these ways, acts of resistance inadvertently appeared to solidify or perpetuate existing stereotypes surrounding race, gender, disability, and class. This made transformation even more complex because it often seemed my participants' acts of resistance may have been doing more harm than good. One of the most poignant examples of this is when Tasha angrily stormed out of the room in protest of the reading curriculum she was receiving. Her teacher failed to understand this behavior as an act of resistance. Instead, as Tasha recalled, her teacher attributed it to Tasha being a bad kid or just another lazy special ed kid, thus perpetuating the myth surrounding race and disability. Fortunately, Tasha successfully sought out a teacher who understood her behavior was not a manifestation of deviance, laziness, or lack of intelligence.

When acts of resistance were ignored, punished, or misunderstood, my participants felt isolated and angry. In turn, these feelings led my participants to again

engage in the process of questioning their identities and self-worth. For instance, Kiesha recalled her experiences of working in a group:

For a while, I questioned myself. I wondered if I should have gone along with the group. I also felt a deep sense of loneliness because I knew I didn't have an ally in the class, not even the professor.

This complicated the womens' experiences because when acts of resistance proved far from transformational the women were hindered in developing a strong self-efficacy. As I described above, a strong self-efficacy requires the ability to experience success. The women needed to feel as though the ways in which they were resisting mattered and were influential, even if only in small ways.

Kiesha was not the only woman who experienced feelings of self doubt. Tasha and Courtney described similar experiences and feelings. Courtney shared immense feelings of isolation, especially surrounding her decision to leave her mother's home. She shared that these feelings still remain. She stated, "I still feel a tremendous loss of my family. Like I had to choose between my mother and being who I knew I was." Similarly, Tasha expressed feeling isolated in the special education classroom. Yet when she volunteered to mentor other students, she felt she had compromised what she believed in. Overwhelmingly, my participants deeply wanted to be understood and valued for who they were and what they did. This meant being understood holistically. As Courtney eloquently stated, "One of my biggest wishes is to be seen as a whole person, not a black person, a disabled person, or whatever. A whole person." Yet, when their attempts to be understood as a whole and embodied individual led them to acts of resistance that protested the oppressive circumstances surrounding their identities, the behaviors were

often misconstrued. As a result, my participants were left feeling confused, fragmented and forlorn.

Each woman coped with the interwoven nature of each discourse and the subsequent feelings that arose in a variety of ways. What stands out as I reflect is their strong internal desire to triumph over their circumstances. They conveyed this desire with their actions and words. Kiesha declared that she knew she had to “rise above” her situation if she were to “make something of herself.” She declared, “I won’t let anyone stand in my way!” On numerous occasions, Courtney expressed a similar sentiment. Tasha was also determined. She stated, “I won’t let anyone discriminate against me.” Last, Shana’s purposeful glances, crawling, her checkbook and her well-stacked novels in the corner affirmed she was strong-willed, as well.

All of these women also received varying amounts of encouragement and support from family members and the occasional teacher that helped them cope. Most notably, these women all had strong and influential women in their lives. Shana was extremely close to her grandmother, while Tasha, Kiesha and Courtney had close relationships with their mothers. While these relationships often resulted in mixed feelings of love and anguish, my participants readily credited their successes with their mothers and grandmother—all of whom served as role models, catalysts, and sources of strength.

Tasha, Kiesha, and Courtney also encountered the occasional teacher that provided support and encouragement. As Courtney best articulated, these teachers resembled “warm fuzzies.” They assisted the women in “challenging their energies” most productively. For Courtney, it was a teacher who encouraged her to assert her voice via a

local radio show. For Tasha, it was definitely Mrs. J, who she credited with helping her graduate from high school. For Kiesha, it was the sociology professor who convinced her, among other things, to speak with me. In sum, these teachers were pivotal in providing guidance and confidence. They often facilitated opportunities for the women to meaningfully challenge their situations.

As I reflected on these teachers, I could not help but wonder what if these women had encountered more “warm fuzzies?” Equally important, what if classrooms and curriculum had been more accommodating and accepting of these women’s needs, desires, and interests? While it is too late to answer these questions with regard to my participants, they are, nonetheless, important and relevant questions. They were especially significant as I approached the end of this study and contemplated what I had learned and what this study meant for schools and educators.

Implications

Above all, this study illustrated that the women I interviewed were not merely passive victims. They possessed a great deal of strength, resilience, and fortitude that was illustrated through their numerous acts of resistance. Their stories point to a number of implications for educators and students, as well as future research.

Educators

This study reaffirms the need for educators to understand their students holistically and to work towards building strong classroom communities. One of the first steps in coming to know and understand students deeply and holistically requires educators to acknowledge the influence that the discourses of gender, race, disability, and

class have within classroom settings. As Jolly (2001) asserts, it is important not to ignore any one aspect of a student's identity. Instead, he asserts the need to create contexts in which all aspects of a student's identity may be acknowledged and brought to the forefront. Jolly (2001) stated:

As young people explore the many aspects of who they are and what they bring to a range of circumstances, teachers will be challenged to recognize the whole of the student. If we are to enable students to grow into multidimensional adults, we must be able to support the expression of the many factors that are reflections of the complex identity all students have. We must see each aspect of identity yet also see beyond any one factor in order to recognize and support the expression of all the diversities a student brings into a learning environment. (p. 52)

Coming to know students through in-depth conversation and careful listening is one way educators may come to know students more deeply. While the act of listening may appear rather common-sense, Lovett (1996) and Heshusius (1995) argue that we, as educators, often fail to truly listen to our students.

In fact, Heshusius (1995) asserts that we often do just the opposite, distancing ourselves from those who we teach through a process of "self-other distancing" (p. 117). Through this process, educators come to understand themselves and their role in the classroom as distinct and separate from the students they teach. Educators are often limited and shaped by their own concerns, goals, and aims, thus they are precluded from truly listening, connecting and knowing students. While this is understandable, given the vast demands that are placed upon educators, it may potentially lead to misunderstandings or overgeneralizations with regard to students located at the intersections of gender, race, disability, and class. Thus, Heshusius (1995) suggests that educators must "learn to temporarily let go of the self and direct complete attention to the

other” (p. 122). Learning to listen in this way, Heshusius (1995) asserts brings about a deeper relationship between the self and other. In this type of relationship there exists a mutual caring and respect for one another. As this relates to classrooms, listening and coming to know students in this way allows students to assert their needs, preferences, and concerns in a safe environment. For educators, listening attentively creates opportunities to learn about students through a student’s perspective. This type of listening then allows teachers to honor a student’s voice and respond to an individual student’s needs.

Thus, coming to understand a student in this way requires educators to rely on the student as one of many experts in the classroom. In listening to students, educators must acknowledge each student as an expert with regard to their own personal experiences, circumstances, and future goals. Educators must trust students and be willing to act on the information shared with them. For example, Courtney was very aware of her needs within her P.E. class. Unfortunately, when she shared those needs she encountered a teacher unwilling to listen and act on those needs. This resulted in a classroom experience that left Courtney feeling isolated, depressed, and a failure.

The above example also points to a need for teachers to work towards creating classroom communities where the discourse of difference positions all students and their unique traits as positive, valued, and respected (Stiker, 1997). What might such a classroom look like? Nel Noddings (1994) proposes that teachers and schools be committed to bringing an ethic of care into the classroom. Within such a classroom differences would be embraced and explored through open dialogue, modeling, and

reciprocity. Noddings (1994) argues that to do this teachers must be afforded the necessary time in which to build trusting relationships with their students. Furthermore, the task of introducing an ethic of care into the classroom must be understood as a valuable and appropriate endeavor. Achievement and academic goals must also be balanced with a desire to instill a moral element into the classroom that celebrates diversity.

Hooks (1994) envisions a caring classroom as one where the concept of democracy would be the underlying principle. Students would feel safe and respected to actively engage in classroom dialogue, learning, and activities. Moreover, hooks (1994) relying on and extending Freire's (1970/2003) work, advocates that a pedagogical shift must take place. This pedagogical shift requires educators to embrace teaching as the "practice of freedom" where students are encouraged to make decisions, act upon, and critically reflect about their world. From this perspective, students are no longer obedient and passive consumers waiting to absorb the knowledge and information of an authoritarian teacher standing at the front of a classroom. Rather, classrooms are facilitated by teachers who work with, for, and along side students. Such a pedagogical shift supports the concept of building a classroom community.

This study also brings to light the need for educators to teach and provide students the opportunity to resist and challenge pervasive stereotypes individually and collectively. A classroom community becomes a place where students are able to explore how the various discourses may connect and intertwine within the classroom, as well as the wider society. Educators play an intricate role in such an examination. They actively

seek curriculum infused with opportunities to critically address topics that directly relate to student's lives and the wider society. They also facilitate the delivery of curriculum to provide opportunities for every student to share his or her unique perspective. This study provided insight into how teachers may recognize acts of resistance as outward signs for a need to share individual struggles within the classroom.

My participants engaged in acts of resistance that I described as overt and covert. Overall, my participants had greater success in challenging the oppressive nature of their circumstances through covert acts of resistance. These acts of resistance fell under the category of "working the cracks" (Collins, 2000, p. 281). Overall, these acts of resistance were not perceived by others as deviant or defiant, and thus, led to greater opportunities for my participants to transform their circumstances. In addition, engaging in acts of resistance through "working the cracks" provided more opportunities for critical reflection and thought. Hence, as this relates to educators, students must be taught and encouraged to challenge the oppressive nature of their circumstances through "working the cracks." Specifically, this may entail educators recognizing students' strengths and teaching students how to channel those strengths in productive ways.

Take for example, Courtney and her high school teacher who recognized her ability to communicate and talk effectively. As Courtney noted, it was this teacher who lovingly called her Oprah, who helped her to channel her energies productively, and ultimately, led her to seek an education in Communication Studies. Not only did this teacher come to know and understand Courtney personally, but he also taught her how to utilize a personal strength in ways that favorably reflected Courtney. Hence, educators

must help students identify avenues for resistance and the necessary supports to engage in a critique of the dominant ideology through “working the cracks” (Collins, 2000, p. 281).

Another way in which educators may assist students in critiquing the dominant ideology is for educators to make time for and encourage on-going discussion that critically engages students in reflection surrounding their experiences. Hooks (1994) affirms this need stating that educators must allow for students to critically respond to the oppressive nature of their circumstances. She encourages teachers to engage in creative classroom practices “that create ruptures in the established order, that promote modes of learning which challenge bourgeois hegemony” (p. 185). Again, while most educators speak of classrooms and schools as embracing democratic ideals, hooks (1994) argues that we continue to support ideology that devalues diversity and sends a message that one must conform to belong. Thus, spaces must be created within classrooms where the expectation is not one where students are required to learn an alternate culture or set of rules (see: Delpit, 1995; Payne, 1996) in order to experience success. Instead, an expectation must exist that educators and students will work together to transform the current system to one that is more democratic and equitable. Lovett (1996) supports this vision. He reaffirms,

The work of liberation is not to train and shape the oppressed to be more accepting of or more acceptable to oppressing systems but to impart the vision, means, and power to contradict oppression and to disrupt and destroy the dynamics that destroy it. (p. 10)

For example, Kiesha’s teacher might have chosen to support her black cowboy research project. In doing this, Kiesha’s teacher would have not only assisted Kiesha, but other

students to challenge stereotypes surrounding race. The overarching lesson for everyone would have been a broadening of the concept of “normal.”

Finally, educators must also seek out and engage parents and guardians in the classroom community. This entails that educators attempt to understand a parent’s perspective and acknowledge that perspective as valuable. While this may, again, appear common-sense-like, Fadiman (1997), who studied a Hmong child living in the United States, argues that often a tremendous gap exists between parents and professionals. This gap is often a result of a clash of perspectives among different culture groups. In her book, *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*, Fadiman (1997) documented the resentment, anger, and frequent misunderstandings that occurred among professionals and family members as a result of a failure to attempt to understand someone different than ourselves. As this relates to this study, I argue there is often a clash of understanding among individuals from marginalized discourses and educators. This clash of understanding often leads to alienation and creates the condition in which an “us” against “them” dichotomy develops. Within such a dichotomy, there exists little hope for understanding.

For example, take Tasha and her desire to research black cowboys. Again, if her teacher had sought out Tasha’s mother in an attempt to understand Tasha’s desire to research black cowboys, it is likely she would have not only stretched her understanding of “normal,” but also developed an important and mutually valuable relationship with Tasha’s mother. Instead, in denying Tasha the opportunity to research black cowboys, she created an adversarial relationship between herself and Tasha's mother. Although

Tasha eventually moved on to another classroom, the mistrust and suspicion of schools and education had lasting effects for Tasha and her mother. Thus, Jolly (2001) argued that drawing upon a parent's insight and actively involving parents in the educational process may bring about greater understanding on the part of students, parents, and educators.

Students

Complimenting the many implications for educators, students must also engage in on-going critical reflection that involves coming to know and understand oneself deeply in order that one may learn how to resist and challenge pervasive stereotypes. Students must be willing to ask difficult questions of themselves. For example, why did I act in this way? What was the result? Could have I acted in a way that may have brought about a more positive outcome? While these questions may be uncomfortable and may require acknowledging behaviors or incidents that are less than flattering, they are important and necessary questions. Examining the actions of oneself critically and deeply may potentially lead to transforming one's circumstances. For example, while it was difficult for Courtney to acknowledge that she had likely become pregnant because she was engaging in attention-seeking and promiscuous behavior, her ability to honestly ruminate gave way to personal growth. For this reason, the ability to honestly reflect and understand oneself deeply is significant as it holds the possibility of transforming one's circumstances.

Students must also be willing to open themselves up to classroom instruction and arrangements that require critical thought and raise sensitive issues to the forefront.

While difficult to talk about, bringing issues of class, race, disability, and gender to light is vital if students are to move beyond stereotypes and generalizations that plaque our understandings of one another. To do this, students must be willing to work towards caring and trusting relationships with individuals who may be different than themselves. This often requires risk on the part of students; however, until students and educators can set aside the fear associated with coming to know someone different than themselves, meaningful relationships cannot develop. Meaningful relationships are necessary to alter our understandings of others and gain new insight and perspective into the contexts and conditions that perpetuate inequality for individuals located within marginalized discourses.

Students must also seek to identify their own strengths and personal interests. They must be willing to work with and alongside educators in developing these interests. Moreover, they must be willing and unafraid to utilize resources, reach out to support groups, and develop relationships with individuals outside their comfort zones in an effort to capitalize on their interests and strengths. Finally, students must understand the value in learning to identify arenas that present opportunities to “work the cracks.”

Most importantly, this research holds the possibility of empowering students within the marginalized discourses of gender, race, disability, and class. This research encourages individuals at the intersections to share their experiences with one another, to learn from one another, and to grow from one another. Simply stated, this research is a catalyst for beginning a conversation that otherwise may not take place. Such a

conversation may eventually lead to a more collective strength and empowerment for individuals located within the discourses of gender, race, disability, and class.

Researchers

As I conclude this research study, there continues to be areas ripe for additional study. A number of questions continue to remain prevalent and important, while new questions and lines of inquiry have emerged. With regard to the concept of intersectionality, additional research studies that continue to explore and tease out the intricacies concerning the lived experiences for individuals located within multiply oppressive discourses are needed. The question that lingers: how might we continue to understand and theorize these experiences?

Examining the lived experiences of individuals located within other marginalized discourses is also needed. This may include exploring the experiences of individuals from other marginalized cultures or ethnicities, as well individuals who identify with a marginalized sexual preference. For instance, what are the experiences of an African American lesbian with a disability?

Additional inquiry is also needed with regard to a theory of resistance. Specifically, more detail and attention might be devoted to how students often engage in behaviors that reproduce their oppressive circumstances. Although I alluded to this, noting that many of my participants found themselves in “no-win” situations that failed to lead to transformation, additional ways to theorize how and why this happens are needed. This identified research need raises an additional question. How might educators and/or classroom pedagogy reproduce the oppressive circumstances experienced by individuals

located within marginalized discourses? Finally, research that focuses on how educators perceive, understand and act upon students' acts of resistance is needed.

Other lines of research were also brought to the forefront as a result of this inquiry. Specifically, the role of guardianship and self determination surrounding African American students with severe disabilities was raised. For instance, while I admittedly found Grandma Rose extremely over-bearing, over-protective, and intrusive, I came to understand her role and influence differently through delving into African American women's history and culture. While many in the disability scholars (for a discussion of self-determination and guardianship see: Harris, 2005; Hoyle, 2005) may be critical of Grandma Rose's behavior as coming dangerously close to guardianship and effectively denying Shana the right to be a self-determined individual, I began to consider additional questions. What is the influence and role of one's culture and heritage as educators promote self-determination for individuals with severe disabilities? To what extent do families play a role in the process of self-determination? When one's culture clashes with issues of self-determination and guardianship, how might these issues be resolved?

Reflections

In reflection, this study reaffirmed the need for educators to talk openly, freely, and critically about race, class, disability, and gender. As educators, these are discussions that we often avoid. Hooks (1994) attributed the unwillingness to acknowledge race, gender, disability, and class within the classroom a result of fear. We are afraid of saying the wrong thing, of offending someone, or creating chaos within the classroom. We fear emotions will make learning impossible, yet what we should fear is that without these

conversations learning cannot take place. Perhaps, we are most uncomfortable with the implications these conversations may bring about. We would certainly be forced to reflect on our teaching, our schools, and the learning process in ways that are less than flattering.

In my personal experiences, I admit to shying away from these topics. As I confessed in the pilot study to this research (see Petersen, in press), I was initially interested in approaching the intersection of gender, race, disability, and class from only a theoretical or conceptual framework. I was afraid of getting to know someone different than myself. I was afraid of really engaging in the discussion. I also feared that I was somehow unqualified to explore this line of research because I was a white, middle-class woman with no apparent disability. Yet as uncomfortable as I was, I knew there was an inherent value in doing so.

When I began this research study, I realized others also shared my initial fears. Family and friends were often surprised to learn of my research topic. They also wondered what business I had in exploring issues of race, disability, and class. They were just as uncomfortable speaking about and bringing to light these topics.

I was also confronted by two African American women at a research conference when I shared the preliminary results of this research. Clearly angered by my research title, these two women pointedly questioned my motives and ability to capture my participants' stories. Anxious and apprehensive at the same time (I had anticipated such an encounter would eventually arise), I thanked these two women for expressing their

concerns. I attempted to assure them that my motives were sincere. I shared that my participants had similar reservations, yet they had agreed and willingly participated. Then, I posed a question that I believe to be the guiding force behind this research study. I asked it because it was a question that I had grappled with. Would it be better to not have these conversations at all?

This is the answer I arrived at: Until we talk candidly and meaningfully about race, gender, disability, and class, we cannot begin to recognize the influence they collectively have on students' lived educational experiences. Moreover, if we are unable to acknowledge this influence then we cannot begin to productively understand and respond to students' acts of resistance. Consequently, we continue to maintain the dominant ideology that oppresses individuals labeled within any of the various discourses including African American, woman, disabled, or economically disadvantaged. Thus, the importance of such a conversation and, specifically, this research is that it may bring about greater understanding for teachers, researchers, and students alike.

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