

Collegial spaces: Experiences of a long-term women's graduate student friendship group

by

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B.S., Kansas State University, 2005

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AN ABSTRACT OF A DISSERTATION

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Department of Special Education, Counseling, and Student Affairs
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Abstract

Women master's students face a variety of unique challenges throughout their education including feeling like imposters or like they needed to justify why they were choosing their education over other life priorities (Lininger et al., 2016; Younes, 1998). While Gordon (2016) identified barriers to graduate student success in master's level programs including being "disconnected from peers" (p. 85), few studies have explored the experiences of women with close peer relationships formed during master's programs. Additionally, the transitions literature includes a great foundation in transitioning into a master's program e.g. Lopez (2013) and Perez (2016) but appears to be lacking in transitions that continue to occur during and after master's degree programs, especially among women.

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore how five women who attended graduate school together made meaning of their experiences while participating in an all-women friendship group both during and after the master's program. The participants were selected using purposeful sampling. The participants were known, because the researcher, while not a participant in this study, was also a member of the same friendship group. The participant experiences and design of the study were viewed using symbolic interactionism as the theoretical framework. This study investigated how the participants described their experiences in the friendship group and the meaning of the friendships. The data collection included individual interviews, a group photo-elicited interview, and document analysis allowing the data to be triangulated. Throughout the data collection and analysis, the meaning of the friendships to the participants was sought through "such things as sensations, feelings, ideas, memories, motives, and attitudes" (Blumer, 1969, p. 4). The meaning each participant made of the friendships within

the friendship group was derived from the social interactions they had with one another (and/or with others).

The findings of this study suggest that women who were included in a friendship group with other women during their master's program felt connected, were engaged in and out of the classroom, and felt supported in strengthening their mind, body, and spirit. In addition, the friendship group served to help them determine who they were both personally and professionally. Following the master's program, involvement in a friendship group included navigating unforeseen challenges together and feeling strongly connected to other women who served as resources when encountering similar life challenges. A collegial space was created among women in the friendship group wherein they felt safe to gather and be themselves.

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Approved by:

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Dedication

To my mom who has believed in me, always. It is she who taught me the value of hard work, to go for what you want with dedication, and that your education is yours and no one, no matter the situation, can ever take that away from you.

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To current and future graduate students and other first-generation doctoral students – Find your people and push onward together. All the academic learning is wonderful but the impact of those on your journey with you will teach you more than you ever imagined while enriching your academic experience and your life. This work is for you.

Preface

Navigating a new workload (including more reading and writing than a student may have ever experienced), entering new social situations and making new friends (keeping and also separating from former social groups), maintaining relationships and families, starting jobs in new environments, learning new systems and processes, and working through financial strains. Sound like a first-time freshman in college? A professional in a new job? These are also characteristics of the major life transition I experienced when entering graduate school. I recall being so excited to attend the first meeting for a student organization in my field only to learn that everyone else had attended orientation (while I worked) and were all light years ahead. As the first person in my family to pursue a master's degree, I had never heard of graduate assistantships or comprehensive exams, among other terminology. After graduate school, a similar jolting of everything familiar occurred as I entered the world of work, except this time was different. I was navigating a new environment, learning about my new role, and meeting new people, but I knew five women experiencing a similar jolting and they were all in my corner.

Chapter 1 - Introduction

My experiences as a woman in a non-cohort master's level graduate program and my transition into work as a student affairs professional in higher education influenced this study. Completing graduate programs may include a variety of challenges, and those challenges can affect students differently. The impacts of the rigor of a graduate degree include mental health challenges and imposter syndrome (Evans et al., 2018; Hyun et al., 2006), fear of missing out (Zimmerman, 2016), stress (Glenn, 2018; Lawson & Fuehuer, 1989; Schmitt, 2012), and a decline in physical health and wellbeing (Melnyk, 2019). Through a 58-item survey of 1,355 clinical and non-clinical graduate students, Kernan et al. (2011) found graduate students "were most likely to report a negative perceived academic impact related to psychosocial concerns such as stress, depression/anxiety, and relationship problems" (p. 425). Fast forward to the end of a graduate program, assuming a student persists through these challenges. What happens when a graduate student leaves the safety of their newly-discovered environment and ventures into life after graduate school? Who is there as they navigate transitions, face new situations, try to find work/life balance, celebrate the highs, and encounter roadblocks?

There are surely many sources of support for women who earn a master's degree, but I am focusing first on sources of support within the higher education environment. While faculty relationships are shown to be important to the retention of graduate students, peer support for graduate students was found to be a primary factor affecting graduate student persistence (Gordon, 2016). The literature contains much less depth specifically regarding the peer support for graduate student women while graduate students are navigating major life changes leading to mental (Evans et al., 2018; Hyun et al., 2006) and physical challenges (Melnyk, 2019). My goal

with this study was to expand the conversation around peer support for graduate student women specifically in a close-knit friendship group both during and after a master's program.

A study indicated graduate student women perceive the interactions with major professors who were women more positively (Schroeder & Mynatt, 1993). While the U.S. Department of Education statistics indicated the number of graduate student women increased steadily between 2007-08 and 2017-18 (Digest of Education Statistics, 2017-18), the number of faculty who are women is not matching the increase in the number of students (Digest of Education Statistics, 2019). Therefore, a graduate student woman might perceive a major professor who is a woman more positively, but she may simply not have the opportunity to work with a woman due to the lack of faculty who are women.

This study focuses on peer relationships of women who are supporting women. Highlighting the experiences of women master's students who have persisted provides a lens for understanding the role of peer friendship groups in women's graduate school success during and after master's programs. In the remainder of this chapter, I discuss challenges experienced by graduate student women including the women's relationship to faculty, structured support for women graduate students in the form of assigned cohorts or non-cohort programs, and how women navigate transitions. Further, I include the rationale of the study, the research purpose and questions, an introduction to the theoretical and methodological framework, and the significance of the study.

Challenges Experienced by Graduate Student Women

Graduate student women face a variety of unique challenges throughout their education including feeling like imposters or like they need to justify why they were choosing their education over other life priorities. Younes (1998) explored the experiences of eight women

balancing multiple roles and struggling to justify why their degrees were necessary. Challenges associated with work-life balance among women graduate students were also addressed by Stimpson and Filer (2011) as they investigated persistence in graduate school, while Lininger et al. (2016) focused on experiences of imposter syndrome in STEM master's programs. The challenges women report in these studies are internal battles faced around making education a priority, exploring work/life balance issues, and feeling like an imposter in their fields.

Additional challenges for graduate student women include developing peer relationships. Gordon (2016) identified barriers to graduate student success in master's level programs including being "disconnected from peers" (p. 85). Additionally, Morimoto and Yang (2013) learned graduate student friendships, whether in a formal cohort or not, tended to be more "sporadic" (p. 110). Lyakhovestska (2004) added to the literature with work on the needs of peer support for international graduate students. Younes (1998) also discussed the need to establish new friendships during graduate school, as those friendships students had before entering graduate school were changing. Weidman et al. (2001) included peer group membership and support among graduate students with their discussion centered around socialization of graduate students. Strayhorn (2012) published a pivotal study in which he identified connections between sense of belonging and socialization during graduate school. He further connected that sense of belonging to graduate student success measured by GPA. Apugo (2019) focused on the types and functions of "Sistah-girl" (p. 232) relationships formed among Black graduate student women at predominantly White institutions. These studies and others included in Chapter 2 point to the importance of peer support for graduate student women. The next section highlights additional challenges graduate student women may encounter in connecting with faculty who are women.

Faculty Relationships

Relationships with faculty have been shown to be an important factor in the retention of graduate students (Gordon, 2016); however, not every graduate student has access to strong faculty relationships. Patton (2009) addressed the need for more mentoring especially for Black women in the academy. While this trend may speak to the amount of resilience women graduate students display in pushing through despite a lack of a faculty mentor, it also speaks to downfalls in the educational environment. Student experiences with faculty mentoring and support can vary broadly. Lechuga (2011) found tenured faculty and non-tenured faculty differed in their mentoring styles and in what they were able to offer graduate students in terms of social networking and connections.

Major professors can serve as a source of support for graduate student women. Schroeder and Mynatt (1993) surveyed 151 women graduate students from varying departments at three midwestern universities. They found 92% reported having a major professor who was a man, although those with women major professors perceived their interactions more positively. In addition, Schroeder and Mynatt found “more concern for student welfare and for higher quality interactions when the major professor was female” (p. 568). Because the number of women faculty members is not growing at a similar rate as the number of women graduate students as indicated in the U.S. Department of Education statistics (Digest of Education Statistics, 2019), women wishing to work with a major professor who is a woman may simply not have an opportunity to do so. This is not a new problem. Berg and Ferber (1983) identified similar patterns in the desire for women students to connect with women faculty members. Even in the early 1980s, it was an ongoing challenge because of the limited number of faculty members who were women.

The studies in this section show faculty can play a significant role in graduate student success. The literature also points to women-to-women relationships with major professors and faculty mentors as sources of support. While these types of faculty relationships may be beneficial, faculty have differing approaches and willingness to connect with and support graduate students in meaningful ways. For these reasons, it is critical to explore other experiences that influence the success of graduate student women.

Formal and Informal Cohorts

In identifying sources of support for master's level women, it is essential to include a discussion about formal and informal cohorts. Whether a cohort developed formally as an assigned part of the master's program or organically is relevant to the focus of this study because there is a distinction between the two types of cohorts in the literature. Barnett and Muse (1993) defined a cohort as "a group of students who begin and complete a program of studies together, engaging in a common set of courses, activities, and/or learning experiences" (p. 401). Cohorts are typically assigned as part of some master's level programs to facilitate relationship-building among students. Assigned cohorts in graduate programs have been evaluated in the literature (Barnett & Muse; Hayes, 2012; Little, 2009; Meyer, 2012; Potthoff et al., 2001; Slater & Trowbridge, 2000; Stout et al., 2017; Weidman et al., 2001). Barnett and Muse identified cohorts as effective for forming professional and personal relationships, viewing students as resources, and engaging in informal discussions. Potthoff et al. described educational cohorts as effective for preparing students to do research and write reflections due to the collaboration and sharing of work. Cohort models are not flawless, and some challenges have also been identified. For example, Meyer found some cohort members may not contribute to the group equally, and Potthoff et al. found the cohort might have a strong collective voice in the classroom which may

challenge professors who are not prepared for that environment. Perhaps the benefits of cohorts outweigh the challenges, but these discussions leave room for considering other options for facilitating graduate student belonging and success, such as through friendship groups.

There is far less literature investigating peer relationships in informal cohorts during master's programs. Some of the scholars who have studied that topic include Meyer (2012), Pascale (2018), and Pemberton and Akkary (2010). Meyer investigated whether support, gaining different perspectives, and risk taking in cohort and non-cohort therapy programs led to self-efficacy. The participants reported no difference in self-efficacy between those in a cohort or not in a cohort. Meyer indicated those not in a formal cohort likely found other sources of support. Pascale, on the other hand, focused on sense of belonging and found students not in a formal cohort program believed building friendships was challenging. Pemberton and Akkary's study is probably the most closely related to this study. The focus of that study was seven women in an educational leadership doctoral program. They named themselves "the Sisters" (p. 187). This group was formed independently and naturally. The women were supported by one another through their doctoral programs, and their friendships carried on long after their degree programs. These studies are explored further in Chapter 2. What is important to note here is that only a small amount of work has focused specifically on the experiences of graduate women within a friendship group. None of the foci was specifically on support through transitions during a non-formal cohort master's level graduate program.

Transitions

A time when graduate students might desire higher levels of support is when they are going through a transition. Scholars have long recognized and studied transitions (Goodman et al., 2006; Schlossberg, 1981) and the role of peers in transitions into college (Lau et al., 2018;

Ribera et al., 2017; Rogers et. al., 2018; Swenson et al., 2008;). Schlossberg (1984) defined life transitions as “any event or nonevent that results in change in relationships, routines, assumptions, and/or roles within the settings of self, work, family, health, and/or economics” (p. 43).

Scholars have explored the transition into graduate studies (Davis et al., 2010; Lopez, 2013; Mitchell, 2010; Perez, 2016; Willison & Gibson, 2011). In studying postbaccalaureate transitions of McNair Scholars, for example, Willison and Gibson discussed five areas where McNair Scholars reported struggling during the transition to graduate school: “(1) academic readiness, (2) managing the clock, (3) weaving a supportive web, (4) being accepted, and (5) staying financially fit” (pp. 157-158). Willison & Gibson’s work addressed the desire of graduate students to connect and to be accepted and supported:

Other learning curves have more to do with navigating the world in general. Juggling financial issues; learning how to navigate a new setting; and moving away from home, family, and friends, without the time or resources to stay physically connected, are personal issues that take a toll on a student's ability to succeed in graduate school. (p. 166)

Lacking time and resources to stay physically connected to home and to existing family and friends, graduate students may seek other avenues for support.

Wheaton (1990), a sociologist, conducted a longitudinal study of Canadian adults 18 and over ($n= 3288$ for the first sample and $n=1665$ in the following years) investigating major life changes and role transitions. He reported, “The stress potential of an event is neither an inherent characteristic of the event nor a result of ‘coping’ strategies, but instead is a product of the social environment prior to the occurrence of the transition” (p. 220). There seems to be a gap in the

transition literature focused on graduate students beyond entry to graduate school. This study aims to identify the kinds of transitions the participants experienced with a specific focus on what the social environment was like prior to and during the transitions.

Rationale for the Study

A quick analysis of the national data for graduate students shows an increase in the number of women pursuing master's degrees in the United States over the last 10 years. The U.S. Department of Education's most recent data indicate 493,232 graduate student women completed a master's degree (60% of all master's degrees), while 326,870 men completed master's degrees (40% of all master's degrees conferred) (Digest of Education Statistics, 2017-18). While the data are binary and do not include other genders, it is clear the number of women attaining master's degrees is steadily climbing. In fact, this same data set shows women earned 380,641 master's degrees in 2007-08. Men earned 250,203 master's degrees in that same academic year. The steady increase in women graduates over this 10-year period demonstrates why paying attention to the needs of master's level women may be important to graduate student persistence and an institution's graduation rates. Additionally, the increase in the number of master's level women does not match a similar increase in faculty mentors who are women, as the number of women faculty members just reached 50% of all faculty in 2018 (Digest of Education Statistics, 2019).

The literature in the previous sections outlines the challenges graduate students face and the need for peer relationships among women throughout the graduate school experience. There are significant gaps when understanding how relationships are built among graduate student women who are not in formal cohort programs. Few studies have explored the experiences of women with close peer relationships formed in non-cohort-based programs during graduate school. Lastly, the transitions literature includes a great foundation in transitioning into graduate

school but appears to be lacking on working through transitions that continue to occur during and after master's degree programs, especially among women. This study aims to understand how women developed friendships with women peers during graduate school and how that community developed into a long-term support system through life transitions in and after the master's program.

Research Purpose and Questions

The purpose of this study was to explore how five women who attended graduate school together made meaning of their experiences while participating in an all-women friendship group both during and after the master's program. By examining two research questions, I hoped to gain an understanding of what it meant for five women to be in a graduate friendship group during and after graduate school. The research questions were informed by the theoretical framework of symbolic interactionism. In symbolic interactionism, meaning is generated from "such things as sensations, feelings, ideas, memories, motives, and attitudes" (Blumer, 1969, p. 4). I am seeking to understand the lived experiences and interactions between the participants and how those experiences helped them to make meaning of the friendship group. Two research questions guided this study: 1. How do women who developed a friendship group during a non-cohort master's program make meaning of the friendship group and its value as it relates to their personal and professional aspirations and transitions during graduate school? 2. What were the lived experiences of women in a friendship group, which developed during a master's program, following their master's degrees?

Theoretical Framework

In qualitative research, researchers must situate their study in assumptions that describe how they view the world. Whereas positivism focuses on causal explanations, interpretivism

takes the social world into consideration in the inquiry (including historical and cultural contexts) (Bhattacharya, 2017). In interpretivism, any given object or situation may be experienced from multiple realities. The researcher and the participants both interact and shape the work bringing multiple realities to the study. Interpretivism has been categorized into three primary areas: symbolic interactionism, phenomenology, and hermeneutics. I will focus my attention on symbolic interactionism as the theoretical framework for this study. “Symbolic interactionism views meaning as arising in the process of interaction between people” (Blumer, 1969, p. 4). Additionally, Blumer (1969) noted, in symbolic interactionism, the meanings are derived through an interpretive process. In Chapter 3, I explore the historical premise of symbolic interactionism and how the framework is utilized in this study.

Methodology

Bhattacharya (2017) described a methodology as “akin to the blueprint of a research study. It is the design of the study, the master plan” (p. 6). In this study, I will use a single case study as the methodology. Merriam (1998) described a case study as an “intensive, holistic description and analysis of a single unit or bounded system” (p. 13). Merriam included a case study is a way to gain in-depth understanding of a situation and meaning for those involved. “The single most defining characteristic of case study research lies in delimiting the object of study, ‘the case’ or to ‘fence in what I am going to study’” (p. 27). This case study was bounded by the number of members in the friendship group that is the focus of the study.

The methods used in this study included individual open-ended interviews with each of the five participants, a group interview including photo elicitation, and document analysis of emails and social media posts. Alongside the data collection, I maintained a researcher journal to reflect on how my own subjectivities defined my lens in the data collection and data analysis. I

transcribed the data, coded, and created categories looking for cues that addressed the research questions. Next, I identified themes that began to answer the research questions based on the categories and codes. The themes could not be predicted in advance and instead emerged from the data. I represented the data in a visual way to further process the data and to ensure the themes aligned with the original research questions. Lastly, I performed member checks throughout the process to ensure the rigor and accuracy of the findings.

Significance of the Study

This study contains implications for institutional administrators, graduate level faculty, student affairs professionals, educators, legislators, and importantly future graduate students. Sharing the stories of these women can help broaden the perspectives of what the master's level graduate school experience can be like for women. This work also speaks to life transitions and the experiences of women navigating those transitions when they are part of a friendship group.

Because the participants were all in the same graduate program, this study provides a lens for graduate program administrators to view graduate student relationship development within departments and most specifically within higher education graduate programs. This research adds to retention and persistence studies in higher education which are important since “the largest group of graduate students – those pursuing master's degrees – has received the least attention in terms of retention research” (Gordon, 2016, p. 3). While the number of graduate students at any institution is generally smaller than the number of undergraduates, graduate student needs should not be ignored. Increased positive graduate student experiences come with many benefits for the institution and state. Guild (2018) found an increase in the financial donations of MBA alumni when they experienced a strong sense of community in the institution. Other benefits of a positive graduate student experience could include an employable and

educated workforce and strong word of mouth recruitment for the institution and the industry area. Lasting friendship groups may have long-term impacts for the individual student including contributing to job satisfaction, independence in navigating complex work and life situations, health awareness and support, and further separation from parental dependence.

Operationalization of Constructs

For the purpose of this study, I will use the following definitions:

1. *Graduate students* - A term commonly used in the United States to define people who are pursuing an advanced degree following the completion of an undergraduate degree. Most often the term is associated with a master's or doctoral degree.
2. *Life transitions* - "Any event or nonevent that results in change in relationships, routines, assumptions, and/or roles within the settings of self, work, family, health, and/or economics" (Schlossberg, 1984, p. 43).
3. *College friendship group* - A group formed either by homophilic selection or heterophilic selection (Cohen, 1983) that contains your "best friends on campus" (Antonio, 2004, p. 453).
4. *Non-cohort educational program*- "Refers to a program where students select from an array of classes each semester on an individual basis" (Little, 2009, p. 14) rather than moving through the program together.

Summary

In this chapter, I introduced the study and described why it is focused on the experiences of graduate student women in a friendship group. I explained the rationale for the study, including the role of faculty relationships, and introduced transitions and meaningful peer relationships in a master's program. I outlined the research purpose and questions and introduced

symbolic interactionism as the theoretical framework and case study as the methodological framework. Lastly, I shared the significance of the study and clarified the operationalization of my constructs. The next chapter, a review of the literature, will further explore the empirical studies surrounding the research questions in the areas of graduate student belonging, friendship groups, cohort and non-cohort models, women's persistence in graduate programs of higher education, and transition models.

Chapter 2 - Review of the Literature

The literature reviewed in this chapter informs the research questions: How do women who developed a friendship group during a non-cohort graduate program make meaning of the friendship group and its value to their personal and professional aspirations and transitions during graduate school? And, what were the lived experiences of women in a friendship group, which developed during a master's program, following their master's degrees?

In this chapter, I review existing research in graduate student belonging, friendship groups, cohort models, women's persistence in higher education, and transition models. These topics are helpful in learning more about how women connect with each other through graduate programs, how programs can continue to support women, and how women experience friendship groups during life transitions. Informed by the theoretical framework of symbolic interactionism, this chapter aims to paint a holistic image of what it is like to be in support systems as a means for meaning making and growth during a master's level graduate program and after completing the program.

Graduate Student Women

Graduate student women negotiate both personal and professional roles during graduate school (Lininger et al., 2016; Stimpson & Filer, 2011; Younes, 1998). Several studies have identified managing work and personal obligations as significant to the success of women graduate students. Stimpson and Filer identified work-life balance issues among doctoral student women which differed from the experiences of doctoral student men. Lininger et al. focused on women graduate students feeling like imposters in STEM fields. Younes completed a qualitative study with eight women graduate students to explore how the women negotiated multiple roles. Each of the studies will be included in more depth in this section.

The literature identifies challenges related to work-life balance, socialization, and academic motherhood of women professionals working in higher education (Albin & Dungy, 2005; Blackhurst et al., 1998; Cantrell Robinson, 2017; Evans et al., 2008; Marshall, 2009; Pittman & Foubert, 2016; Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2004, 2012). Those discussions do not specifically look at the needs of graduate student women who may be working in higher education during their programs.

Women and men may experience graduate school differently. Stimpson and Filer (2011) performed a qualitative study with 806 doctoral students to identify satisfaction level and confidence within their degree programs. Findings indicated men were significantly more satisfied with their ability to manage work and life during their graduate program. Single graduate students felt they had to pick up the slack of married or parenting graduate students. Younes (1998) explained the concept of “role multiplicity” (p. 451) in a qualitative study with eight graduate student women as being torn between multiple roles including family obligations and schoolwork. The women tried to remain connected to their community, but their friendship roles were sometimes strained. "Their commitment to self and career advancement directly threatens their commitment to their family and causes them to feel torn between the two worlds" (Younes, p. 456). Several women experienced jealousy from others or off comments about why an advanced degree was necessary.

Women in graduate programs may also experience imposter syndrome or attribute their success to luck instead of their own efforts. Lininger et al. (2016) documented the firsthand experiences of graduate student women. They discussed feeling like imposters as graduate student women in STEM fields. While many graduate students may feel this way, they noted women and other underrepresented groups may feel this more strongly. Additionally, they

suggested women attribute success to luck instead of their own success. When they felt they could ask for what was needed from departments or employers, they experienced more balance between personal and professional lives. Group support systems and mentorship helped them take ownership of and seek resources for success.

Graduate student women wear many hats and take on different (and sometimes competing) roles. As they negotiate multiple roles, friendships are impacted and change, and women may need to establish new friendships with other graduate student women (Younes, 1998). The experiences of graduate student women vary from the experiences of full-time professionals in higher education, and their need for support and friendship may vary.

Graduate Student Belonging and Mattering

The undergraduate and adolescent literature has documented the gender differences in belonging and perceived mattering. Very few studies have extended this work to graduate student populations. Mattering and sense of belonging are two areas heavily studied in the undergraduate literature (Esquivel, 2010; Schlossberg, 1989; Smith, 2020; Strayhorn, 2012; Sullivan, 2019; Tovar, 2013). In this section, I specifically aim to describe mattering and sense of belonging as they relate to women's friendships.

A study of 110 social science undergraduates from a Canadian university (ages 17-25) and 532 adolescents at a high school in Canada (ages 15-19) explored the construct validity of perceived mattering to mothers, fathers, and friends (Marshall, 2001). Marshall found women perceived themselves as mattering more to friends than male students perceived themselves as mattering to friends. While they indicated the construct validity of the Mattering to Others Questionnaire (MTOQ) would need to be tested for applicability to different age ranges, they

found attention from parents and peer relationships are positively associated with perceived mattering and psychosocial well-being.

Still others aimed to investigate the psychological consequences and social causes of the feeling of mattering to others. Rosenberg and McCullough (1981) found people have a need to matter and feel like they make a difference in others' lives. Their data suggested mattering is important not only for self-esteem but also for emotional stability. The graduate student population is predominantly made up of adults, and Rosenberg and McCullough suggested the need for mattering is higher among children and adults and lower in adolescents and older adults.

In an extensive mixed methods study with 360 graduate students at 15 institutions, Strayhorn (2012) focused on graduate student belonging. His study was paramount to the work of graduate student belonging. Though many scholars investigated the experiences of undergraduates, this work extended previous findings to include graduate student populations. The study found a link between socialization during graduate school and sense of belonging. Strayhorn described socialization as moving individuals from being "outsiders" to "insiders" (Strayhorn, p. 98). He further discovered that sense of belonging related to graduate student success (as measured by GPA). He stated, "Graduate students who felt a stronger sense of belonging to their department, peers, and faculty members also tended to earn higher grades in graduate school" (p. 99). While the undergraduate and adolescent literature provides a good foundation for understanding belonging and perceived mattering among women, Strayhorn focused more specifically on graduate students. He connected graduate student socialization to sense of belonging which related to GPA.

Professional Socialization

Part of what women experience during graduate school could include transitioning into professionals in their industry area. How do friendship groups play a role in this type of experience? Unless one or more of the peers is more experienced in the field, peers are often together in the process of socialization. In this section, I focus on the socialization to become a professional and what it means to learn professional roles and culture during graduate school.

Strayhorn (2012) and Weidman et al. (2001) studied socialization of graduate students as they become professionals in their field. Weidman et al. referred to a sense of community as what helps students survive their programs but also learn professional expectations. Because socialization has been linked to a sense of belonging in graduate school (Strayhorn), it is important to further understand how socialization of graduate students is described in the literature. Weidman et al. built a conceptual framework for understanding the socialization of graduate and professional students. They redefined socialization in graduate school to include the “nonlinear, dynamic nature of professional socialization and the elements that promote identity with and a commitment to professional roles” (p. 37). They identified socialization in graduate school as a shift from being a student to beginning to understand what it is like to be a professional:

During socialization, knowledge shifts from being general to being specialized and complex. The novice begins to understand the problems and ideology characteristic of the chosen profession and to understand why alternative professions were rejected. The novice becomes aware of his or her capacity to participate in a professional culture because he or she knows its language, heritage, and etiquette. (p. 16)

Friendship groups can play a direct role in learning how to be a professional in a specific field. Through sharing experiences in the workplace, in intern/externships, and in the classroom, friendship groups can reinforce the language, etiquette, and professional culture for a specific industry area.

Peer Support

Peers support each other in many ways throughout graduate school (Apugo, 2017; Hardré & Pan, 2017; Morimoto & Yang, 2013; Weidman et al., 2001). Hardré and Pan described some challenges within their participants' experiences during graduate school including dealing with personal crises, feeling like faculty did not care or understand, and experiencing stress due to lack of time, among other challenges. The literature presented in this section supports the notion that peers serve as a source of support through challenging times.

Graduate student peers share a variety of information about their programs and courses including discussions about faculty, exams, and jobs (Weidman et al., 2001). Weidman et al. offered the impact of peers generated “a powerful force that nourishes and transforms members” (p. 69). Although they did not use the exact terminology, Hardré and Pan (2017) wrote about group members nourishing each other. They interviewed 1,480 master's and doctoral students in a variety of majors at a research institution. They aimed to learn about what helped and what hurt the students' success in their programs. In their findings, they identified themes based on the positive experiences of the participants. One theme specifically focused on peer support including expanding learning opportunities through peer collaborations, formal and informal volunteer support in times of need, feeling valued and accepted, and the opportunity to be a part of something (the peer group).

Peer support can serve different purposes for subsets of graduate students. For example, peer support was a critical part of the master's programs of 25 first-generation master's students who were the participants in a phenomenological study by Portnoi and Kwong (2011). Portnoi and Kwong identified peer-to-peer interactions as one of five areas that enhanced educational experiences during master's programs of first-generation students. First-generation master's students, much like first-generation undergraduates, may experience feelings of inadequacy or that they do not belong. They may also struggle to understand the expectations of their program. Communicating with family and friends about graduate school may be challenging for first-generation master's students; even if family or friends are supportive, they may not understand what the student is going through. Portnoi and Kwong found peers within the program were viewed as a source of support and "cultural capital" (p. 422).

Another example of how peer support can be influential for subsets of graduate students includes students who are underrepresented at their institution. Apugo (2017) explored sources of support and mentorship for 15 millennial Black women in graduate programs at majority White urban universities. The participants indicated their peer relationships served a source of support in facing perceived racial microaggressions a lack of academic and emotional support. Thirteen of the 15 women attributed some aspects of their persistence and sustainability in their programs to their peer relationships.

Not all types of peer support are the same, and a few researchers have begun to identify different types of support (Apugo, 2019; Morimoto & Yang, 2013). In a phenomenological study, 15 Black graduate student women at predominantly White institutions discussed the types and functions of relationships they experienced (Apugo). The findings represented three types of peer relationships: "Sistah-gurl," "Rival," and the "Proxy-Mentor" (pp. 232-235). The "Sistah-

gurl” relationships were formed in class and were identified as sacred, cheerleaders, and a go-to for processing perceived discriminatory interactions. The rivals provided a source of motivational competition. These peers encouraged the participants to work hard because they were working hard. The proxy-mentors could be men or women who, in this study, were around the same age and were already in roles the participants could strive to achieve. They encouraged the participants to have confidence, and they created safe spaces where they could affirm their own identities at the predominantly White institutions. A section of the findings also alluded to this safe space: “...the content and topics of the dialogue they share with one another are sensitive and issues that only other Black women ‘sharing the struggle’ can understand” (p. 237). While the study identified different types of peer relationships, it did not include participant experiences in the same group or friendship group during their graduate school experience.

Morimoto and Yang (2013) also defined and named types of friendships within three cohorts of sociology master’s students. They identified four types of friendships - mere classmate, academic friend, personal friend, or confidant. What they found was, even in cohorts, friendship formations in graduate school tend to be “loose, sporadic, and gravitate toward low-intensity relationships” (p. 110). They found most participants entered the field as mere classmates and remained mere classmates through the middle of their career. When they did form friendships, they were mostly academic.

Interestingly, Morimoto and Yang (2013) also found men were less likely to acknowledge friendship for a variety of reasons including not finding the graduate setting to be the best for friendship formation. The men in the study were “more likely to form close friendships in hierarchically arranged workplace settings” (p.112). Morimoto and Yang

interpreted this finding to suggest men were more likely to interact and connect with those who could boost their careers during graduate school, such as advisors, more senior graduate students, or faculty members.

This literature identifies peer support as influential in the graduate student experience. These studies included subsets of graduate students where peers served as a source of support and were beneficial for graduate student women to understand their programs, establish their identity, and gain confidence. Additionally, studies have provided terms for different types of peer relationships during graduate school. In the next section, I define friendship groups and identify why that term best describes the group of graduate student women in this study.

Friendship Groups

Scholarly work focused on friendship groups is not new to the higher education scene, but it is certainly not a saturated discussion either. Antonio (2004) defined friendship groups as “the interpersonal environment composed of a student's best friends on campus” (p. 467). In the previous section, I used the term “peer support” to loosely define peers in a graduate program. In this study, I use the term friendship group and not peer group to define the relationship of the participants in a defined, close-knit peer group.

In my study, I am also choosing not to use the term “feminist co-mentoring” (Godbee & Novotny, 2013, p. 177) to describe my participants. The term feminist co-mentoring was used in a case study of two graduate student women. Godbee and Novotny investigated what feminist co-mentoring looks like in practice and what interactional and relational work is involved when graduate student women mentor each other. A mentoring relationship among graduate student women is different than the relationships within a friendship group with regard to group formation, the purpose of the relationship, and also potentially the level of personal versus

professional discussion. A component of the Godbee and Novotny study that may demonstrate an experience similar to a friendships group was the need to have time to tell stories, to listen, and to write down ideas. Time was valuable to the graduate students, and having time was helpful for bringing the participants together.

The term friendship group has been defined and utilized in research about undergraduate students. I intend to extend the definition into the master's student population with this work. These undergraduate studies have been included in this review, because they add depth to what it means to be in a friendship group. Friendship groups throughout an undergraduate college experience can help to develop self-confidence (Antonio, 2004), serve as an avenue for stress relief and cognitive growth (Martínez Alemán, 1997), and help women resist negativity about racial identity and self-worth (Martínez Alemán, 2010).

Friendship groups have been shown among undergraduates to be influential in developing self-confidence. Antonio (2004) studied 2,222 third year students at UCLA who were also surveyed their freshmen year. He found "students who have best friends with relatively high levels of intellectual self-confidence tend to be more self-confident intellectually after two years of college compared to students with less confident friendship groups" (p. 458). It is yet to be determined whether these same findings carry over to women in graduate programs. Martínez Alemán (1997) studied undergraduate women in a four-year project to further understand the value of women's friendships in college. She discovered that the conversations with friends who were women served as:

a respite from academic stress and anxiety; as validation and support of their thinking and their ideas; as a means for the development of a positive racial and/or ethnic gendered

self-image; as risk-free testing sites for ideas and “race talk”; as a source for different and diverse perspectives; and as sources of information and advice. (p. 136)

These conversations were also described as a safe place for “staging the rehearsal of their thinking” (Martínez Alemán, 1997, p. 138), and the conversations “serve as vehicles to transgress the limits of dualistic thinking, of dichotomous ideology” (p. 140). Beyond validation and support, she found women of color used their connections with women to resist negativity about racial identity and self-worth (Martínez Alemán, 2010).

A longitudinal study of same-sex friendships among 73 undergraduate women revealed same sex friendships serve as an avenue for cognitive development (Martínez Alemán, 2010). While undergraduate experiences cannot be generalized to the experiences of graduate students, this study is foundational for understanding why it is important to study women in same-sex friendship groups. Martínez Alemán concluded women in friendships with other women had differing cognitive development including “more complex knowing about self and others” (p. 554). She also discussed the ability to have a frank dialogue, empathy, and understanding with other women friends. This study also points to connections beyond the undergraduate experience, including support and validation extending into their post-college lives.

Although they did not use friendship group terminology, Allen and Joseph (2018) investigated the experiences of Black women in the “Sistah Network,” (p. 151) an affinity group at a predominantly White institution. They performed a case study using interviews, observations, and exit meetings with 18 Black women faculty, staff, and graduate students at the University of the West. What they found is the Sistah Network advanced identity and empowerment, contributed to social advances, afforded emotional benefits, and promoted academic success. Participants described being able to celebrate their identity and the identities

of other women, not having to explain their stories, and observing role models. They held formal meetings with the Sistah Network and left meetings feeling good, with energy and new ideas. Speakers attending the group meetings provided guidance for issues faced in class, like writing papers. They also learned to navigate university structures and procedures through others who had been in similar situations. The implications listed in their study are particularly helpful as they recommended examining the support system needed for graduate students based on the students' identities, and they suggested the Sistah Network provides a template that could be useful at other institutions or in other programs.

In this section, I provided background and explanation for the use of the term “friendship group” within this study. Additionally, the studies describe the value of friendship groups as part of the undergraduate experience. If friendship groups have been found to be a valuable component of the undergraduate experience, it seems reasonable to think they would be a valuable part of the graduate student experience as well. Lastly, the experiences in an affinity group of graduate level students, faculty, and staff (while they vary slightly) may also provide implications for the benefits of graduate student friendship groups.

Cohort Programs

Those in a non-formal cohort program may not share the same experiences as a graduate student in a formal cohort group, but some of the experiences may also be transferable regardless of how the peer group was formed. Here, I investigate the literature surrounding formal cohort groups to identify any themes. As mentioned earlier in the chapter, Barnett and Muse (1993) defined a cohort as “a group of students who begin and complete a program of studies together, engaging in a common set of courses, activities, and/or learning experiences” (p. 401). Recent literature specific to formal graduate student cohorts includes the experiences of working adults

in graduate cohort programs (Little, 2009), teachers in cohort master's programs (Potthoff et al., 2001; Slater & Trowbridge, 2000), cohorts of business master's students in a mixed-format model (in a cohort for one year and then not) (Hayes, 2012), cohorts as an intervention for women in computing graduate programs (Stout et al., 2017), and cohorts in doctoral education (Lake et al., 2018; Mastroieni, 2010; Santicola, 2013; Twale & Kochan, 2000). Positive outcomes of being in a formal cohort are identified throughout these works, but there can also be challenges with this type of model.

One of the positive outcomes of being part of a formal cohort program during graduate school is that cohort members care for each other (Potthoff et al., 2001; Weidman et al., 2001). Potthoff et al. evaluated electronic portfolios and gathered qualitative data through a follow-up survey of 28 elementary, middle, or secondary level teachers pursuing master's degrees with the goal of learning what it was like to be a member of a cohort. They found cohort members cared for each other on a personal and professional level. Many of the participants reported they viewed their cohort as a family. Potthoff et al. revealed a cohort is a good environment for learning because of the sharing of work and increased level of performance. Weidman et al. found, "The cohort influences the learning process, opens support mechanisms, and enriches the experience socially and emotionally" (p. 62).

Challenges within cohort programs have also been identified. Potthoff et al. (2001) discussed the need to prepare faculty for a cohort-based classroom as they may be challenged by the cohort's combination of voices that are more powerful than individual voices. Meyer (2012) indicated dominant personalities, unequal group participation, and cliques were challenges with formal cohort models. When students collectively develop a dominant voice, it can be disruptive or otherwise serve as a classroom distraction or a negative tone toward an invited guest. Personal

issues can also impact the morale of the whole group. Additionally, placing cohort students in classes with non-cohort students may create conflicts. Faculty must learn how to teach most effectively in a cohort model and have time invested in adjusting materials as well (Barnett & Muse, 1993). Overall, whether the positive outcomes outweigh the challenges is a decision for each individual graduate program.

Non-Cohort Programs

How do the experiences of those in a formal cohort program vary from the experiences of those not in a formal cohort program? Meyer (2012) compared cohort and non-cohort therapy-based programs to identify, among other factors, if being a member of a cohort was associated with support, exposure to different perspectives, and also risk taking leading to self-efficacy. Meyer found no difference in self-efficacy between those in a cohort and those not in a cohort. Meyer explained this finding, in part, by indicating that those not in a formal cohort may form their own cohorts or learning communities among peers.

Pemberton and Akkary (2010) studied the bond of seven women in a non-formal cohort of educational leadership doctoral students known as “the Sisters” (p. 187). These women were part of an organically developed doctoral cohort. All seven women in the Sisters group completed their doctoral degrees with the support of each other:

According to these women, within and through this group’s shared experiences, collective efforts, and social and cultural engagements, they developed and supported a mutual commitment to the educational goal of successfully completing a doctoral degree, culminating in a 100% retention and completion/pass rate, a collective identity (i.e., the Sisters), and friendships that persist even today. (p. 193)

A distinguishing characteristic of the Sisters was that the group formed independently and naturally; relationships were not forced, but instead, were based on choice. Pemberton and Akkary (2010) suggested a degree of freedom can be helpful in forming cohorts among graduate students who have an increasing number of competing priorities and distractions. While the Sisters were in a non-cohort graduate program, they were in a doctoral program and their experiences may vary from experiences within a master's program.

Perhaps in some instances, graduate students not in formal cohorts find it more difficult to build friendships. "For students whose programs were not based on the cohort model, building friendships in graduate school was difficult" (Pascale, 2018, p. 406). The participants in Pascale's study seemed to agree that friendships in graduate school were different from friendships as an undergraduate student. How then can faculty members and other university administrators continue to create environments where those in non-cohort programs can form supportive peer networks?

Overall, there is less literature that specifically addresses non-cohort graduate programs. The existing literature identifies support for non-cohort programs with discussions surrounding the space these types of programs create for graduate students to form organic friendships as a source of support. There are also studies that indicate it can be challenging to build friendships in non-cohort programs which is why exploring the experiences of those in a friendship group in a non-cohort program can be especially helpful.

Social Support in Transitions

Transitions are taken up extensively in counseling research. My focus for this study is the transitions of graduate student women and the role of peer support in transition. Schlossberg (1984) described a model for helping adults in transition. Part of that model includes social

support from intimate relationships, family, friends, institutions, and communities. Social support is a key to managing stressful situations and transitions.

According to Schlossberg (1984), transitions are events that are anticipated or unanticipated, chronically occur (home maintenance or challenging relationships, for example), or even nonevents (one expects something to happen that does not actually happen). Contrary to previous research in this area, Schlossberg focused the model around how men and women experience intimacy differently, which points to different types of support needed during transition. Men are more likely to have friendships based on common interactions, and those friendships may lack intimacy. Maturity for men includes autonomy. Maturity for women includes attachment or intimacy. “The term intimacy covers a wide range of close human ties: spouse, lover, parents, children, friends” (p. 30). Schlossberg went on to suggest “intimacy is marked by free interchange and disclosure by reciprocal expressions of affection, by mutual trust, empathy, and understanding” (p. 30).

Studies have focused on the needs of graduate students as they transition into master’s programs (Lopez, 2013; Perez, 2016). Lopez identified the needs of master’s students as they transition into graduate school and how the school met those needs. One of the needs was identified as “student-to-student interaction” (p. 48). Of all the graduate program directors interviewed, all believed student-to-student interaction was critical in aiding with practical needs. The directors also identified living arrangements, workspace, and attention from faculty members and current students as needs of students transitioning into master’s programs. One administrator indicated interactions with peers were how incoming graduate students cope with stress. Others suggested they did not want students to get isolated; they needed to feel they were

part of a community. Lopez suggested social support in transitions was seen as important by administrators working with graduate students.

Grube et al. (2005) studied the experiences of 10 graduate students enrolled in master's programs in student affairs at four institutions to identify how the students sought balance. Many students work at assistantships on campus while completing coursework and possibly performing research. The assistantships may demand long hours and irregular work schedules. Additionally, many of the graduate students are transitioning from being student leaders into being supervisors or colleagues. Some may also hold positions outside of campus. Although they agree balance may not be possible for working student affairs graduate students, they found one of the ways the graduate students attempted to achieve life balance was through having peer relationships outside of their program where they could unwind.

Forney and Davis (2002) discussed the transition sessions established by faculty in the College Student Personnel (CSP) program at Western Illinois University. The students in the master's program gather at set times within the program as a group with faculty. The sessions are mandatory and are typically two to three hours in length. The purpose of the sessions is to give the students space to discuss changes in their roles from student leaders to advisors or supervisors (in their assistantships), to help them better understand the expectations of the program, and to establish community (among other benefits). The sessions were set up to follow Schlossberg's (1984) transition theory and have provided a source of peer and faculty support. They may serve as a model for other programs.

This section focused on how women experience transitions differently than men. While there is some discussion of the transition from student leader to professional during graduate school, the primary focus in the literature is on the transition into graduate school. It is evident

that support during graduate student transitions could be helpful when schools like Western Illinois University establish programs to aid in transitions (Forney & Davis, 2002). This study will explore how graduate student women experience transitions during and after graduate school.

Summary

In this literature review, I identified a number of empirical studies supporting the benefits of peer social support during graduate programs. The literature describes the connection between social support and sense of belonging among graduate students. The needs of women are a specific focus of this study. The literature identifies how the social support needs of women differ from those of men. The role of friendship groups is also identified in the literature. Additionally, the unique differences between formal cohort and non-formal cohort programs are apparent. While many studies focus on graduate student experiences and peer support, the experiences of those in a friendship group throughout and following a non-formal cohort program have yet to be identified in the literature. Research has yet to unveil the experiences of women in friendship groups as they go through transitions within master's programs and following the program completion. Aksan et al. (2009) described symbolic interaction which is the theoretical lens that informed this chapter, "symbolic interaction examines the meanings emerging from the reciprocal interaction of individuals in social environment with other individuals" (p. 902). The topics discussed in this chapter aimed to identify how women utilize support systems as a means for meaning making and growth during their master's program and upon completing the program. I further explore the theoretical and methodological framework for this study in Chapter 3.

Chapter 3 - Methodology

The purpose of this chapter is to introduce the methodological framework, expand on the theoretical framework, and outline the methodology for this qualitative interpretive study. Using a case study approach, I explored how five Midwest women who attended graduate school together made meaning of their experiences while participating in an all-women friendship group. I also explored the lived experiences of women in a friendship group, which developed during a master's program, following their master's degrees. Using symbolic interactionism as the theoretical framework, I identified what the meaning of the friendship group was to the participants as they experienced their master's level graduate program and transitioned into their professional lives. To explore the case fully, I conducted in-depth individual interviews and a group interview including photo elicitations with the five participants. In addition, I analyzed email documents and social media from the time the participants joined the friendship group. Two research questions guide this study: How do women who developed a friendship group during a non-cohort graduate program make meaning of the friendship group and its value as it relates to their personal and professional aspirations and transitions both during and after graduate school? And, what were the lived experiences of women in a friendship group, which developed during a master's program, following their master's degrees?

Qualitative Research

In this study, it was critical for me to hear the voices of the participants to understand in-depth stories and to gather the meaning and value of the friendships and the friendship group to each participant. The participants in this study were five women who are all members of my friendship group which began during our master's program and has continued post-graduation for many years. I chose qualitative research, because I want to gather in-depth, rich information

about the experiences of each of the five individuals from their perspective. I appreciate how Merriam (1998) described qualitative research: “Qualitative research is designed to inductively build rather than to test concepts, hypotheses, and theories” (p. 45). My goal was to co-construct knowledge with the participants. I wanted their voices to be heard in the stories they told. In qualitative research, truth and meaning making are not generated through quantification but instead through the experiences of the participants and the ways they tell their story while also considering the lens of the researcher. Bhattacharya (2017) provided an excellent description:

A chair is not a chair until it is perceived to be so through a human mind and that nothing exists without being processed by human consciousness. In this way of thinking about truth and reality, meaning is constructed based on people’s own understanding of their worlds, experiences, interaction with events, and circumstances in their lives. These kinds of truths, realities, and meanings are relative, situated, and context-driven. (p. 2)

A qualitative study allows the reader to hear the participants’ interpretation of their experiences through the lens of the researcher but also allows space for the reader to create their own interpretations. Instead of focusing on my opinion as a researcher and the conclusions I draw, qualitative research leaves room for the reader to draw their own conclusions. In this way, I documented the participant stories and provided my understanding of the meaning, and each reader will also be able to identify their own meaning.

In this study, I focused on understanding the experiences of the participants and sought to gain contextual details of their graduate school experiences and the value and meaning they assign to their relationships. “Since qualitative researchers are in the business of understanding, interrogating, or deconstructing multiple truths, they are constantly thriving for gaining deep, rich, thick understanding buried within contextual details, social structures, discourses with

which the participants identify and negotiate their experiences" (Bhattacharya, 2017, p. 36). The intent of this study is not to generalize to other programs, schools, or experiences of other friendship groups.

Theoretical Framework

In chapter one, I introduced the theoretical framework as symbolic interactionism. This theory informed the study by establishing a lens to view how the participants made meaning of the friendship group during and after the master's program. This lens guided the topics in the literature review which situated the study in the literature, the data collection, the data analysis, and interpretation of the findings. To further describe symbolic interactionism, I first would like to introduce both my epistemology and ontology. The epistemological assumptions for this study are constructivist. Denzin and Lincoln (2018) described a primary way researchers view knowledge that is generated through the research. They stated, "The constructed meanings of actors are the foundation of knowledge" (p. 120). Both the participants and the researcher collectively construct knowledge based on their experiences, observations, and storytelling.

To understand ontology, I would like to introduce some definitions of ontology. Baptiste (2001) noted, "Research is always an attempt to investigate something. That thing is usually called 'reality.' Ontology deals with the question of what is real" (Ontology section, para. 17). Gruber (1993) defined ontology as "a systematic account of existence" (p. 1). Both of those definitions about existence can be challenging to understand. Bhattacharya (2017) took the definition a bit further by writing that ontology is:

...your nature of being. There are some things you know resonate well with your nature of being and others not. It is precisely that resonance that motivates you to your actions, and to your desire for the topic of your scholarly inquiry. (p. 11)

The ontological framework in this study is relativism. O’Grady (2002) stated, “Relativism is generally contrasted with its polar opposite: absolutism. Calling something relative is to say that it arises from or is determined by something else; it is dependent on its relation to some other thing” (p. 5). The ontological framework of relativism is commonly used in qualitative studies. Relativism aligns with a constructivist epistemology (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). I used relativism as the ontological framework in this study, because I aimed to gain knowledge about friendship groups through humans and human interactions. Without a laboratory study, studies of humans could not be considered absolute because both the researcher and participants have formed their own ideas, reality, and nature of being.

Through the lens of a constructivist epistemology and relativist ontology, this study is grounded in an interpretivist theoretical framework. “Unlike positivism, interpretivism takes into account the cultural and historical interpretations of one’s social world when conducting inquiry” (Bhattacharya, 2017, p. 59). The researcher is placed in the study and the participants’ experiences are not minimized to singular variables. Instead, the participants’ interpretations become the target of the research. One goal of this study is to gain “in-depth individualized understanding” (Bhattacharya, p. 59) of the experience of being in a friendship group. Gaining in-depth individualized understanding is also a characteristic of interpretivism.

Symbolic Interactionism

The theoretical framework within interpretivism used for this study is symbolic interactionism. Crotty (1998) documented Herbert Blumer as a pioneer for symbolic interactionism although he was influenced by the work of George Herbert Mead. Blumer was a student of George Herbert Mead, a social psychologist and philosopher. Mead taught at the University of Chicago for 40 years. Herbert Blumer compiled lecture notes and Mead’s papers to

describe symbolic interactionism and its assumptions. Blumer (1969) provided three premises for the theoretical framework. The first premise was, “Human beings act toward things on the basis of the meaning that the things have for them” (p. 2). The things he referred to could include human beings or categories of humans (such as friends). The first premise identified that objects have no meaning on their own but instead a human gives them meaning. Blumer’s second premise was that “the meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of the social interaction that one has with one’s fellows” (p. 2). Here, an object could have different meanings to different people and can share meanings; this does not mean the individual does not still maintain their own meaning. The third premise was “these meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretive process used by the person dealing with the things he encounters” (p. 2), indicating the meaning of things can change because humans can change the meaning they give things.

Use of Symbolic Interactionism in This Study

One of my objectives was to investigate the language that is used to describe the participants’ experiences. “It is symbolic interaction, for it is possible only because of the ‘significant symbols’ - that is, language and other symbolic tools - that we as humans share and through which we communicate” (Crotty, 1998, p. 75). I listened for the meaning portrayed through the discussions of memories and feelings. The meaning can come from “such things as sensations, feelings, ideas, memories, motives, and attitudes” (Blumer, 1969, p. 4).

The first of Blumer’s (1969) three premises for symbolic interaction focuses on the meaning humans give things and determines how humans will act on the things. In this study, the “things” included the friends (the other participants) in a friendship group. I sought to understand the meaning of the friendships to the participants. The meaning each participant makes was

derived from the social interactions they have with one another (and/or others). That perfectly describes Blumer's second premise. The third premise describes the meaning of things being processed in different ways because people can interpret things differently. I aimed to discover how the meanings of friendship within the friendship group was different based on participant interpretations and lenses.

This study is centered around the socialization of graduate students as a means to forming a sense of belonging in graduate school. "To explain socialization using the theory of symbolic interaction, graduate and professional students do not passively respond to specific situations; rather, they actively extract clues to their behavior and continually evaluate themselves in the context of peers, faculty mentors, program expectations, and personal goals" (Weidman et al., 2001, p. 18). I identified the clues the participants provided in describing themselves and their experiences.

Methodological Framework

I have chosen the methodological framework of case study due to the bounded nature of the study. The study will be bounded by the number of members in the friendship group being studied. The length of this study as well as the interview-based format are also a good match for a case study approach. "Case studies can be done for relatively short periods of time ranging from a few weeks, months, to a whole year.... Case study research is commonly used in qualitative research to answer focused questions with in-depth inquiries" (Bhattacharya, 2017, p. 109). Data collection occurred through in-depth open-ended interviewing, a group photo elicitation interview, and document analysis.

This study focuses on the perspective of five people in an effort to make meaning of the friendship and its value to their personal and professional aspirations and transitions both during

and after graduate school. A case study approach was most effective for gathering the data within the bounds of the friendship group. Both Stake (1995) and Yin (1994) based their approach to case study on a constructivist paradigm. “Constructivists claim that truth is relative and that it is dependent on one's perspective” (Baxter & Jack, 2008, p. 545). The reader’s perspective will define the role of friendship (in friendship groups) during and after graduate school in both the participant’s shared stories and the researcher’s description of the participant’s stories.

Stake (1995) identified case studies as being either intrinsic (want or need to learn about that particular case) or instrumental (gain insight into a particular question or use case study to understand something else). This case study is an instrumental case study because the focus is on understanding what the friendship group meant to the participants during the master’s program and in transitions following the program.

Researcher Subjectivity

In describing my subjectivities, I feel it is important to include both my background and my existing assumptions. In talking about the subjectivities or qualities a researcher brings to the study, Peshkin (1988) stated:

These qualities have the capacity to filter, skew, shape, block, transform, construe, and misconstrue what transpires from the outset of a research project to its culmination in a written statement. If researchers are informed about the qualities that have emerged during their research, they can at least disclose to their readers where self and subject became joined. (p. 17)

Simply put, my viewpoints and previous experiences as the researcher directly influence my work. Claiming subjectivities discloses those assumptions to the reader so they can develop their own viewpoint. “In qualitative research, it is important to discuss those assumptions,

beliefs, and values that inform the way you make meaning of your research topic. Claiming value neutrality would be intellectually dishonest because as human beings we have values” (Bhattacharya, 2017, p. 36). Every scholar brings a background, opinions, and direction to the study. Knowing qualitative research is grounded in multiple truths, it is important to define the viewpoints and angles I bring to this study.

First, while I am not a participant in this study, I am part of this all-women friendship group. These five women and I were in the same master’s program, and they became the best support system I could have ever imagined. I was granted the opportunity to connect with peers in a course during my master’s degree. We shared every experience throughout the master’s program. As a friendship group, we navigated challenges and victories in our graduate assistant roles alongside our personal lives and wellbeing.

I do not expect that this work will resonate with everyone, as everyone experiences master’s programs differently. My experiences in a friendship group are tainted with privilege; we are all White, cisgender, able-bodied, and Christian women and were all raised in middle class homes in the United States. Our families consisted of two-parent households; although, at least one of us is from a blended family dynamic. We were all learning in our primary language, English. We also attended predominantly White institutions for our undergraduate and master’s education. Each of us did on-campus work in some capacity in graduate assistant, graduate research assistant, or full-time positions throughout our master’s program. I acknowledge my views expressed within this work speak from a sociocultural majority within the United States at this time and do not reflect the experiences of all graduate students or all friendship groups. I do not say these things to identify a gap between our experiences and those of others but to

acknowledge my privilege in the lens of this study as we inevitably experienced and continue to experience seen and unseen opportunities that others do not.

I would also note that I do not view gender as binary. I understand the nature of this study primarily uses the terms women to describe the participants and also women/men to describe the research surrounding this study. Those in this friendship group identify as women, but that does not mean future studies could not expand this work to include experiences of other genders in graduate student friendship groups.

As a current student services professional in higher education, I interact with undergraduate and graduate students daily. As I am in my 12th year working full-time in higher education, I have observed growth in the number of students who choose graduate programs instead full-time employment immediately following an undergraduate degree. I have also witnessed a plethora of challenges graduate students face in connecting to the campus community and to peers given their many responsibilities and obligations claiming their time. I view connectivity as central to retention and ultimately persistence within graduate programs. I assume connectivity among graduate students occurs between peers or within student organizations, or within a departmental structure (research labs, classes, mentors, advisors, etc.).

I assume graduate students would want to be connected to each other and to their institution, and they have a desire to meet people in their profession and industry area. I also assume graduate students are wanting to share their graduate student experience as a means to navigate this season of life. I acknowledge this may not be the wishes or reflect the experiences of all graduate students. I also acknowledge these assumptions are a part of my lens in the data collection, data analysis, and write-up of this study.

Research Design

The data collection for this study was conducted over a timeframe of one summer (approximately 1-2 months). The data collected included the participant experiences for the entire time elapsed post-graduation. The participants each received a recruitment email asking them if they would be interested in participating in the study. The recruitment email is included in Appendix A. Data sources included one in-depth interview per participant and an in-depth, group photo elicitation interview. Additionally, a document analysis was conducted using emails and social media posts shared between members of the friendship group. I designed the interview guide strategically to probe about how the participants felt about being a member of a friendship group during their graduate school experience. The interviews were not designated for a specific timeframe because I wanted to follow the direction and storytelling of the participants and not be bound by the clock. DeMarrais (2004) stated, “Qualitative interviews are used when researchers want to gain in-depth knowledge from participants about particular phenomena, experiences, or sets of experiences...the goal is to construct as complete a picture as possible from the words and experiences of the participant” (p. 52). Follow-up questions helped me to understand the participant stories and gain depth. Using photo elicitations during the group interview session helped the participants dig deeper. “Elicitations are ways to create a context where the participant speaks about their experiences elicited by some sort of external trigger. This trigger could be pictures, objects, tasks, videos, lyrics, websites, etc.” (Bhattacharya, 2017, p. 52).

In Table 3.1, I included the number of pages that were generated as raw data during the study.

Table 3.1. Raw Data Count

Source of data	Number of pages	Number of pages total
5- individual interviews	14-28 pages each	109 pages
1 - group photo elicitation interview	45 pages	45 pages
Document analysis	44 pages of emails & 64 social media posts	101 pages
Researcher journal reflections	1 page per week	15 weeks = 15 pages
		Total pages = 270 pages

The time it took to complete the data collection and study is available in Appendix B.

Participant Selection

To select participants, I utilized purposeful sampling, based on the needs of the study (Morse, 1991). In this study, the participants were known, because the researcher was also a member of the same friendship group. Patton (1990) described purposeful sampling as sampling that identifies information-rich participants that perfectly fit a given study. In this study, the participants are all women who have persisted through a non-cohort master's program while in a friendship group made up of all women.

The selection of five participants is two-fold. First, this case study was bounded by the number of graduate student women who were involved in the friendship group during the master's program. Second, the goal of this qualitative study was to dig deeply into the participant experiences, not to gather surface level data on many participants. Because of this, I chose to

keep my number of participants within the parameters recommended by Sanders (1982) who recommended between three and six participants for this type of study. Quality was more important than quantity (Patton, 1980; Sanders). Because the goal of qualitative research was to “conduct in-depth inquiries within a small sample size” (Bhattacharya, 2017, p. 18), I focused on the richness of data and multiple methods of data collection and analysis.

All the participants attended the same master’s level graduate program at a large, Midwest public institution between 2007-2012. The student population at the institution was predominantly White, and the women were also White. The participants were all cisgender women who are now 35 to 40 years old. In addition, all the participants identified as able-bodied, heterosexual and have Christian religious backgrounds. All spoke English (institution is predominantly English speakers). Three of the women were married during graduate school, and two were married shortly after completing graduate school. Three of the five were first-generation master’s students. During graduate school, two of the five women had children. Now all five women have children. I, as the researcher, was also in this friendship group but I am not a participant in this study.

Research Site/Gaining Access

As I was already a cultural insider, I did not need to spend as much time establishing trust and building rapport with the participants. DeMarrais (2004) discussed how important it is to build rapport with your participants. I spent time orienting the participants to the research prior to beginning any of the interviews.

I conducted in-person data collection for four participants but utilized Zoom for one participant who could not be physically present. During the group interview, the Zoom participant was able to engage with the rest of the group. I shared the value of the study in how it

could inform future graduate students who may be struggling to ensure the participants understood the value of participating.

Data Collection Methods

Data were first collected through in-depth open-ended interviews (deMarrais, 2004; Moustakas, 1994; Thompson et al., 1989) and a group photo elicitation interview (Haley, 2002). This collection occurred over a 3-day period with member checks (Moore et al., 2012) completed for transcribed data. Data were also included from document analysis of emails and social media posts (Bowen, 2009).

Open-Ended Interviews

For the first interview session, I facilitated a recorded, individual, in-depth, open-ended interview with each participant. This informal and conversational style allowed the participant to engage in the conversation more freely with the researcher (deMarrais, 2004). I began with a conversation about the study itself and had each participant complete the informed consent form (see Appendix C) and then proceeded to the interview guide which was descriptive in nature and aimed to help the participant share stories of their personal experiences. “Following the opening, the investigator suggests that the co-researcher take a few moments to focus on the experience, moments of particular awareness and impact, and then to describe the experience fully” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 114). Notice the term *co-researcher* was used here to imply that the participant was part of the research experience. Because the participant took such an active role in the research process, they were more like research partners. Thompson et al. (1989) outlined some pointers for the interviewer to keep in mind during the interview process:

Operationally, the interviewer desires to be a non-directive listener. The interview guidelines of establishing equality among participants, having questions follow from

respondent discourse, employing short descriptive questions, and not asking “why” are some of the methodological procedures for preventing the interviewer from assuming an overly intrusive role. (p. 139)

I utilized short, broad, probing questions to keep the focus on the participant story. I also utilized follow-up questions in each session. The questions were based on what the participant shared to clarify and add depth. This method allowed me to be more passive in the conversation, without directionally steering what was shared. Open-ended descriptive prompting questions were included in the interview protocols in Appendix D. The interview guide was informed by the research questions and also my understanding of symbolic interactionism as the theoretical framework. I sought the meaning of the friendship group to the participants through the use of symbols, language, and stories. I recorded the interviews using Zoom. I completed a video recording so I could go back and note emotions and non-verbal communication which I may not have caught in the initial individual interview sessions. I transcribed the interviews manually and wrote analytic memos surrounding codes that initially stuck out to me and I knew I needed to come back to. I went back through the transcription to ensure accuracy of the text. Additionally, I maintained a researcher journal to document how my subjectivities may be serving as a lens in how I interpreted the interviews and asked interview questions. I followed the individual interview sessions with a photo-elicited group interview.

Photo Elicitation

For the group interview session, I asked the participants to come with photos or images they felt represented what the friendship group meant to them. The photos or images served as a way to gain depth in this portion of the interview because it led the participant discussions and gave them a starting point in sharing some more intimate stories. The images with wording were

analyzed as data themselves and others were used to elicit the discussion. Haley (2002) further discussed photo elicitation:

Photo elicitation is based on the simple idea of inserting a photograph into a research interview. The difference between interviews using images and text, and interviews using words alone lies in the ways we respond to these two forms of symbolic representation. This has a physical basis: the parts of the brain that process visual information are evolutionarily older than the parts that process verbal information. Thus, images evoke deeper elements of human consciousness than do words; exchanges based on words alone utilize less of the brain's capacity than do exchanges in which the brain is processing images as well as words. (p. 13)

I believe the group session was deeper than some of the individual interview sessions with the participants. I wanted them to really take ownership of this portion of the interview. The idea behind using photo elicitation was to get the participant to elicit stories and explanations of events by talking about a photo that was personal to them and helped them describe feelings and experiences within the friendship group. They were able to be more easily taken back to the moment the picture was created to tell stories about that day or that timeframe. I utilized open-ended statements like, "Tell me more..." to probe for additional information based on their descriptions and dialogue without leading the participants to an outcome (see Appendix D). The photo-elicited group interviews were recorded using Zoom. The audio was transcribed manually and checked for accuracy. I followed the individual and group interviews with member checking allowing the participants to review the transcripts for accuracy. I maintained a researcher journal throughout the group interview as well. The journal served as my internal dialogue, and while it

was not analyzed as data, part of the emotion entered the study to describe my lens in the data analysis or representation.

Document Analysis

I used documents to further explore interactions between the participants and to add to the participant stories. Document analysis refers to “a systematic procedure for reviewing and evaluating documents - both printed and electronic (computer-based and Internet-transmitted) material” (Bowen, 2009, p. 27). The document analysis provided context, history, and background. The documents also allowed me to verify findings (Bowen).

In this study, I coded components of emails and materials from social media from the time when the participants were in graduate school to the day of the data collection. I looked for exchanges among the friendship group that demonstrated the value and meaning of the group to the participants. The documents did not reveal any additional participant questions, so I did not need to go back to the participants to discuss further. I used this method of data collection to triangulate the data. I already had access to these documents but asked the participants for consent to utilize that data in this project. Some of the data was public on social media sites so that was more accessible, but I still asked the participants to agree to the use of such data.

Data Management and Analysis

I used a combination of methods to manage the data. I manually transcribed the interviews in Microsoft Word. I created tables to code the data for further analysis. I also logged journal entries in a Word document. Because I am a very visual person, I created visual diagrams by hand, when connecting categories into themes, which are included in the findings.

In coding the data, I looked for answers to the research questions. I coded phrases that identify meaning of the friendship group and its value to the participants as they relate to their

personal and professional aspirations and transitions both during and after graduate school. Codes provided me with an idea of what the conversations in the data were about. All the data were coded two times using different methods. Throughout this process, I wrote journals describing what I was drawn to and why. For the first cycle coding, I used descriptive coding. According to Saldaña (2013), “Descriptive Coding summarizes in a word or short phrase.... Descriptive Coding is appropriate for virtually all qualitative studies, but particularly for beginning qualitative researchers learning how to code data, ethnographies, and studies with a wide variety of data forms” (p. 88). This method was fitting because my data covered many topics through the six interview sessions. I made analytic memos as I was transcribing to note any excerpts that stood out to me initially. While the descriptive coding was helpful, I struggled to find appropriate categories based on the descriptive codes. I then utilized In Vivo coding for the second cycle coding of the interview transcripts, social media posts, and emails. This process was more beneficial for developing categories because the In Vivo codes captured the participants words and voice much more vividly than the descriptive coding. In utilizing In Vivo coding, the codes are “taken directly from what the participant himself says” (Saldaña, 2021, p. 7). Next, I utilized focused coding to put “together the codes into clusters of what “looks alike” and “feels alike” (Saldaña, 2021, p. 103). I assigned a category to each cluster of codes. Categories allowed me to combine the codes into broader areas to begin to dig into the synthesis level of data analysis. From the categories, I wrote around the topics and created visual diagrams to establish core themes from the data to answer each of the research questions. I created visual diagrams including the coding and categories to further break down and analyze the data and form themes (see Figure 5.1 and Figure 5.2).

Data Representation

I utilized thematic descriptions for my data representation. While using this method, it seemed very natural to develop themes from codes and categories. “Themes can consist of such ideas as descriptions of behavior within a culture; explanations for why something happens; iconic statements; and morals from participant stories” (Saldaña, 2013, p. 267). Themes emerged from the categories and codes and served as concise ways to explain the general guiding ideas from the study.

Ethical Considerations

I attained Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval from my university. This was a checkpoint to ensure the participants would not be harmed. Additionally, I assured the participants’ confidentiality. Although I attempted to ensure that each participant’s identity was not disclosed, I cannot guarantee they were not revealed through a story or situation (even without including their names). In these cases, I presented the data in such a way that it disclosed the least amount of information about the participant. I followed the Codes of Ethics set forth by the American Sociological Association including gaining “informed consent” from the participants (Flick, 2009). This did not, however, eliminate all personal decisions that needed to be made along the way in terms of ethics, because one simply cannot create a guide that speaks to all individual situations a qualitative researcher may encounter.

I wanted to make sure each participant felt reciprocity and benefits from the study as well. All qualitative studies should be two-sided. One side benefits the researcher; the other also benefits the participant. deMarrais (2004) stated, “They may also benefit from the experience of having someone listen to and appreciate their views or their experiences” (p. 61). In this study,

the participants gained the benefit of knowing they are helping other graduate students and program faculty while sharing their stories.

Trustworthiness and Rigor

In this study, I strived for the most trustworthiness and rigor in the study as possible. Because qualitative research is interpretive, it leaves the reader to determine what truths they will make of the study. I reviewed the literature in Chapter 2 to ensure I am adding value to the body of existing studies in the field. I also utilized multiple data sources, performed member checks, and triangulated the data as ways to ensure trustworthiness and rigor in the study. Alongside my data collection, I journaled to write about how my subjectivities and thoughts interacted with the data.

In qualitative research, more people sharing the same experience does not make the study more trustworthy or reliable. Instead, the researcher should ask if the findings make sense. Are they consistent with the data that were collected? (Merriam, 1998) My goal was to share authentic participant experiences, and I did not aim to make the study replicable. One of the primary ways I ensured trustworthiness and rigor in this study was through “the alignment of epistemology, theoretical frameworks, methodology, and methods, data analysis, and representation” (Bhattacharya, 2017, p. 23). When all parts of a qualitative study are aligned, the roles of the researcher and participant are clearly defined, the theoretical lens of the researcher informs the study, and the participant data is accurately represented.

The terms reliability and validity are not as commonly used in qualitative research as terms such as trustworthiness (Bhattacharya, 2017). Morse et al. (2002) stated, “Over the past two decades, reliability and validity have been subtly replaced by criteria and standards for

evaluation of the overall significance, relevance, impact, and utility of completed research” (p. 14).

Before the shift in terminology, Merriam (1998) suggested that “ensuring validity and reliability in qualitative research involves conducting the investigation in an ethical manner” (p. 198). She continued, “internal validity deals with the question of how research findings match reality.... Do the findings capture what is really there?” (p. 201). In this study, I utilized member checking to ensure the findings captured what was really there. Merriam addressed how to get close to reality and thus why internal validity is a strength of qualitative research:

Because human beings are the primary instrument of data collection and analysis in qualitative research, interpretations of reality are accessed directly through observation and interviews. We are thus “closer” to reality than if a data collection instrument had been interjected between us and the participants. (p. 203)

In order to ensure trustworthiness and rigor, I devoted a lot of attention to properly setting up the study and aligning the epistemology, theoretical frameworks, methodology, and methods, data analysis, and representation. Additionally, the use of multiple data sources, performing member checks, and reflective journaling all served as ways I aimed to increase rigor in this study.

Member Checking

Member checking refers to the process of going back to the participants to allow them to review the data. Moore et al. (2012) discussed member checking as “reviewing draft findings by key informants to see if they affirm the validity of the report and recognize their contribution” (p. 265). In this case, I ensured the participants reviewed the data after it was initially transcribed

and again as themes to confirm that what was included was how they intended to relay the message or story.

Triangulation

Triangulation is a component of the qualitative research process that includes using multiple modes of data collection. “Tactics to improve the validity and trustworthiness of case study findings may include triangulation (the collection of data using a variety of methods [for example, tutors, tutees, and administrators]) and using piloted and field-tested (or standardized) protocols” (Moore et al., 2012, p. 265). Simply put, if the researcher uses multiple methods in the data collection and analysis, the findings they present are considered more trustworthy. In this study, data collection included individual interviews and a group photo elicitation interview. Additionally, data were collected from documents (emails and social media posts) compiled from the time the participants were in the graduate program.

Researcher Journaling

I regularly contributed to a researcher journal to write about how my subjectivities and thoughts as a researcher intersected with the study. “During data collection the researcher is primarily describing but may also make notes about potential hunches concerning the meaning behind what is observed or said” (Moore et al., 2012, p. 265). The journal extended throughout the entire research process as a place where I, as the researcher, inserted my thoughts and reflected on how I am being affected by the research. These thoughts were part of the lens in presenting the findings.

Overall, there were many methods I used including but not limited to member checking, triangulation, and researcher journaling to increase the trustworthiness and rigor of this study. My goal with this qualitative research was not to make the results generalizable but to share the

participant experiences in the most authentic way possible. Because the study reflected trustworthiness and rigor, the findings relayed what was actually there in these friendships and friendship group.

Limitations of the Study

The findings from this study were intended to describe the participants' experiences and not be generalizable to larger populations. This study included the experiences of master's level students at a single Midwest university. The experiences of others on the same campus, even in the same program, may vary. Additionally, although the term *graduate students* was utilized, this work was focused on master's level, not doctoral level, graduate students.

As the researcher, I outlined researcher assumptions in the researcher subjectivities section. Additionally, the participants may have had other experiences and relationships outside of the friendship group being studied that impacted their experiences while in the master's program. This study does not account for every relationship or experience. In restricting details about the participants for the purpose of confidentiality, parts of this research could be limited in scope.

Access to participants (now living across two states) was limited based on their time and availability for interviewing and discussions. As parents, their time away from the office was limited, and each ran varying schedules within their work environments. Another limitation included the representation of the participants. Participants represented similar socioeconomic backgrounds, races, gender identity, sexual orientation, age range, ethnicity, and religious beliefs. Despite these limitations, I designed this study to be trustworthy through member checks, identifying my subjectivities as the researcher, and also through triangulating the sources of data.

Summary

Data for this case study was gathered through in-depth, open-ended individual interviews, a group photo elicitation interview, and document analysis. I wrote about my thoughts and assumptions in field notes or journaling were later connected into the overall data representation.

Establishing intellectual rigor was important in all parts of this research project. While there are no clear rules for doing so, there are methods geared toward establishing rigor. “A qualitative analyst returns to the data over and over again to see if the constructs, categories, explanations, and interpretations make sense, if they really reflect the nature of the phenomena” (Patton, 1980, p. 339). Similarly, performing member checks or giving findings to the participants helped to ensure the participant story was represented accurately. In addition, identifying personal “subjectivities” helped to establish rigor (Peshkin, 1988). “How well a qualitative researcher can achieve depth of understanding is contingent on the relationship the researcher makes with the participants, the quality of data collection, and the researcher’s analytical skills, informed by his or her positionality” (Bhattacharya, 2017, p. 36). These were several methods that were employed in this study for building trustworthiness and rigor. In Chapter 4, I introduced the findings of the data analysis.

Chapter 4 - Findings

In this chapter, I present the findings of the case study. The findings are based on the data analysis of five individual interviews, one group interview, and digital data in the form of 64 social media posts and 44 emails. Each of the data sources is reflected in this findings chapter. The findings answer two research questions:

1. How do women, who developed a friendship group during a non-cohort master's program, make meaning of the friendship group and its value to their personal and professional aspirations and transitions during their master's program?

2. What were the lived experiences of women in a friendship group, which developed during a master's program, following their master's degrees?

To present these findings, I first describe a profile of each of the participants based on their individual contributions. Three themes answer the first research question and describe how the participants make meaning of the friendship group and its value as it relates to their personal and professional aspirations during the master's program. Two additional themes surfaced which reflect the lived experiences of the women in the friendship group following their master's degree, thus answering the second research question. The findings are presented in descriptions provided by the participants and in the participants' own words just as the transcripts were coded in the second cycle coding using In Vivo coding to capture the participants' voices.

Participant Introductions

In this section, I present a profile of each of the participants. I introduce some of the main components they included in the individual and group interviews about their life both during and following the master's program. These descriptions help the reader begin to understand the role of each of the participants in the friendship group and some of their individual life

circumstances. Allow me to introduce you to the participants: Dorothy, Hannah, Alexis, Evelyn, and Marla.

Dorothy

Dorothy is one of the founding members of the friendship group. Her name was mentioned throughout the individual interviews and the group interview as a person who brought the group together. She is currently a 38-year-old who identifies as female. During the master's program, she was married and her partner was also pursuing a master's at the same public institution. She comes from a family of college-educated parents and siblings and her faith-based background is Christian. The stories including Dorothy began with interviews as she pursued and attained a graduate assistantship in residential living with another member of the friendship group, Marla. During the master's program, the group celebrated with Dorothy as the couple announced they were expecting their first child. Then in the final year of graduate school, Dorothy was life-flighted to a regional trauma center where the baby arrived at 27 weeks gestation.

Following the master's program, Dorothy moved away from the other members of the friendship group following her spouse's new position, and she eventually announced she was expecting their second child. She once again delivered early, this time at 25 weeks. Dorothy took a break from higher education to be a stay-at-home parent and then journeyed back into a career in higher education. Alexis mentioned, "Dorothy brought us together a lot. The experiences she had when she went in for her second preemie.... I think that's what brought us back together." In 2015, Dorothy gave birth to a child, Dean, at 19 weeks and he was born "straight to Heaven" according to social media posts documenting that journey. Marla talked about how this experience impacted the group:

The pre-Dean is very different from the post-Dean relationship with the girls in my opinion. I think this was a very definitive point in our relationship for all of us because it was something that was completely out of our control. Ummm, when one hurts, they all hurt, and none of us had to go through it before. We had nothing but to cling to each other and were completely helpless.

After gaining a new identity as a NICU mom, Dorothy began a journey into nursing to give back to other NICU parents. She talked about her career shift and the process of going through nursing school with the group. After some ups and downs in her career, she earned her ideal role as a NICU nurse.

Because of this journey riddled with trauma and challenges, Dorothy sought the support of the friendship group on many occasions. She stated that she wanted to quit her master's program after the birth of her first child, but it was the friendship group that supported her and convinced her to complete her degree. After the death of her third child, the group grieved the loss together, and all attended the funeral as a unit.

Hannah

Hannah was married and working a full-time job on campus when she started the master's program. She discussed having a few female friends in the past who had parted ways. She was not necessarily seeking friends during the master's program. She had her first child during the master's program. Hannah is currently 40 years old and identifies as female. She is the oldest member of the friendship group but only by just over a year. One of the other members of the friendship group referred to her lovingly as the mom of the group. In talking about the master's program, Hannah said, "I was already married, I already had a job, it was more I was just getting through it. It was a thing to check off like maybe it would help me with more money

or a better title.” She discussed the friendship group as being “a continued learning environment outside of class.” She faced several challenges while completing her master’s program including balancing working a full-time job and being a new mother:

I think our grad program was awful for full-time working people because I had to....

They would not let me use my full-time job as my practicum. By the time I got to my practicum, I was a mom. So, I had a baby and a 40-hour week job, and they wanted me to work 20 hours and take a class. It was very not supportive of a person who was wanting to return as a non-traditional student.

Hannah completed the master’s program in 2012 (three years after the other members of the friendship group). She is now the mother of three children and works in the same department she did during the master’s program but is now in a leadership position.

Alexis

Alexis was single but in a committed relationship when she started the master’s program. She had been hanging around with a bunch of men and ultimately was seeking women in her life. Alexis stated, “You were my first friend in the graduate program.... I was so excited to have a girlfriend because at that point I had been in town since 2006, and I had only been hanging out with boys.” Alexis brought at least one additional member to the friendship group by inviting Evelyn to connect.

During graduate school, Alexis worked as a graduate assistant in the office of student activities. Later in the master’s program, she shifted to full-time in that role. She married her partner the summer following the master’s program. She is currently a 38-year-old woman. She faced some infertility challenges and had a child born prematurely who spent time in the NICU. She transitioned in her career to a full-time academic advisor position. There, she was in a

situation where she needed to have her newborn at her office during the time she was working. She has since moved to a part-time academic advising role. She is the mother of three children.

Evelyn

Evelyn worked in an academic department, and her graduate assistantship focused on teaching and research during the master's program. She was madly in love with her partner upon beginning the program and had well-established sets of friends. She was not seeking things to do or people with whom to connect. She said, "I've got stuff to do on a Friday night. I'm not just trying to find stuff to fill up my time in grad school." Because this was a professional program, Evelyn was focused on making sure her classmates viewed her as a professional:

Just feeling comfortable talking about that and not feeling like you need to be this professional wall the whole time. That's how I started in grad school. I didn't know anyone in our program. So when I went to class, I felt like I needed to be professional, because this is graduate school and I need to do well and I'm here to learn. So, I think it [the friendship group] let me be able to let down that professional wall. I felt like, "This is Evelyn." I felt like I could make comments and jokes and real concerns, so it became more like a teammate and not a competitor against other people.

She maintained high standards for her academics and focused on her assistantship. Evelyn described meeting members of the friendship group in class: "You and I started talking and you had come up and introduced yourself. We maybe sat together. Alexis and I also had a sit-together situation. It happened organically for us." In a post on social media Evelyn mentioned, "We met by vocation. By the end of grad school, we parted as each other's lifelines."

Evelyn got married the summer after the master's program and moved away from the friendship group geographically. She pursued work in higher education, but during the recession

in 2009, it was challenging. She worked at a local library before transitioning into an advising role in higher education. She faced some unique work situations in higher education. The couple later struggled with infertility. They pursued a pathway of IVF, and the friendship group was a support during that time. After several months of treatments, a challenging pregnancy, and a rough delivery experience, she gave birth to a son. “When we got to the preeclampsia stage, Dorothy and Marla specifically really kind of held my hand through a lot of that.” In both the group and individual interview sessions, it was apparent that Evelyn had odd and somewhat funny things happen to her in the workplace and just in life in general, and she brought a lot of humor to the friendship group. Marla stated, “Evelyn - everything that could possibly happen, happens to that woman [laughs].” This quote and the stories that followed refer to one of many inside stories that were shared during the interviews and a point where the participants shared moments of laughter. Evelyn is currently the lead of an academic advising center at a large public community college.

Marla

Marla worked in residential living during her time in the master’s program. She first met Dorothy during the interviews for their assistantship positions. Marla mentioned:

I remember that because she thought I worked there and was trying to butter me up (laughs). At the Fairfield or something. I was like, I’m here to interview too, who are you? I was kind of snotty to her.

During the program, Dorothy and Marla became increasingly closer knit as friends. Marla mentioned, “I was new to the grad school game. I was a first-generation college student. I left the state, and my parents still thought I was an RA. Like, I couldn’t explain what it was that I did.”

At the same time, Dorothy was encouraging other members of the friendship group to meet and connect. Marla mentioned, “If Dorothy hadn’t connected with all of us, I’m not so sure how we would’ve connected because Alexis would not have been somebody that I would’ve just sought out as a friend.” This was not the only instance of the friendship group starting off on not-so-great of terms. Evelyn included having “a negative view of Dorothy prior to Dorothy’s first child being born, because there was an instance in our class.” Additionally, Alexis stated:

Marla and I didn’t hit it off at the beginning, but because Marla and Dorothy were friends, like, it kinda just pulled together. By the time we were doing comprehensive exams and getting ready to study for those, it felt good. It felt comfortable for all of us to be together.

Events throughout the master’s program brought the group together. Marla was there for Dorothy when she was flown to a regional medical center in labor with a premature child. She picked up Dorothy’s spouse and met her whole family at the hospital. Later, other members of the friendship group met the couple at the hospital.

Following the master’s program, Marla moved away from the friendship group for her new job. She worked in admissions for some time at smaller institutions. Marla and her spouse also faced infertility. According to an email from Marla, “We have to do a semen analysis and I will be starting clomid. I guess I never imagined that we couldn’t have a baby.” The sharing among mothers is strong in the friendship group. This data also illustrates the depth, vulnerability, and personal level of the messages among the group members. The mothering topics of baby showers, births, breastfeeding, and parenting were discussed in depth in each individual interview and also in the group interview session. On a timeline during her individual interview, Marla added, “The twins were born. I don’t remember a lot in a year period there. It

was a solid year of I can't even tell you what happened." The semester the twins were born, Marla began her Ph.D. program in higher education.

Later, Marla found out she was pregnant once more, and the timing was not exactly what she was expecting. She was navigating a sexual harassment case at work and was searching for a new position:

I accidentally peed on a stick one day and I was pregnant again. (laughs). I didn't want to be pregnant again because I was in the middle of turmoil at work and sexual harassment claims and protection orders and all that stuff, and this was not the time. I was job searching. I remember sitting in the bathtub in the basement cuz I like, "I can't be pregnant and I can't tell anybody." Looking back now it was silly. So, I was sitting in the bathtub in the basement, and I called Dorothy and I was like, "You'll never guess what just happened." She heard me out and then she said, "You'll never guess what just happened." So, we both peed on sticks on the same day and found out we were both pregnant.

With her three children by her side, Dr. Marla successfully defended her dissertation and completed her Ph.D. in 2019. She is currently an assistant dean of graduate enrollment at a large public institution.

This section provided insight on each of the participant's stories. The stories and information were provided by the participants through the individual and group interviews and social media posts by the participants. In the next section, I describe the themes identified from the data which answer the research questions.

Themes – During Master’s Program

I described the three themes that emerged from the data analysis describing how the participants made meaning of the friendship group and its value as it related to their personal and professional aspirations during the master’s program. Saldaña (2021) included a chapter devoted to themes in qualitative research, “Themes do not mysteriously or magically ‘emerge,’ as some writers state in their reports; themes are researcher constructions and interpretations” (p. 259). Here, the data are themed categorically.

Table 4.1. Summary of Findings - First Research Question

Research Question: How do women, who developed a friendship group during a non-cohort master’s program, make meaning of the friendship group and its value to their personal and professional aspirations and transitions during their master’s program?	
Themes	Categories
Fortuitous camaraderie	Finding unexpected (yet expensive) friends
	Being catalysts for academic success
	Providing support during stressful times
	Welcoming the families
	Navigating transitions
Strengthening mind, body, and spirit	“Things women go through that men do not”
	Sharing emotions and supporting mental health
	Spiritual support
	Physical health and wellness
“Figuring out who I am”	Reflecting on diverse perspectives
	Career exploration and professional identity

Fortuitous Camaraderie

The data analysis revealed a relational experience that occurred throughout the master's program for the five members of the friendship group in this case study. While not all the group members were seeking friendship at the time and not all members of the group were drawn together from the beginning of the program, all members agreed that by the middle to end of the program, their friendships in the friendship group were strong. This theme, fortuitous camaraderie, combines data about meeting by chance with the overall value the women in the friendship group added to the master's educational experience. The participants referenced instances both in class and outside of class that suggest the friendship group added value to their overall educational experience in the master's program, and as Marla shared, she "never felt alone." Included in this theme are five sub-themes: finding unexpected (yet expensive) friends, being catalysts for academic success, providing support during stressful times, welcoming the families, and navigating transitions.

Finding unexpected (yet expensive) friends. Initially, the members of the friendship group came together in different ways. Some of the participants were not seeking friendships during the master's program, yet they agreed that the friendship group was a positive outcome of the master's program. The friendship group formed organically – it was not assigned as a formal cohort within the master's program. Some of the members met in courses and others met in interviews for their assistantship, but the connections were unexpected.

While the friendship group connected during classes and assistantships, it was the personal connections that stood out to the participants. Marla placed a strong emphasis on relationships being one of the best outcomes of the master's program, "I couldn't even tell you the content of our courses as much as I could tell you about the relationships and camaraderie

that came out of it.” She goes on to say, “We were all in different spots in our personal lives, but we were in the same spot in our education. If I went to [this college] for nothing else, it was for this.” Here, it is clear the relationships and camaraderie were part of Marla’s perceived value of her master’s education.

In her individual interview, Dorothy discussed something very similar to Marla, “I got great friends and a husband and so you guys are kinda expensive friends [laughs].” The interview data align to a social media post in 2016 where Dorothy mentioned, “I was like oh grad school was worth it for meeting these girls and then I thought well, kind of expensive friends.” A social media post from Marla in 2016, references the same idea. The image is the friendship group all on a ZOOM call together. Marla says, “These girls are my world!! Go to grad school; leave with family! Best. Decision. Ever.” This data also demonstrates that the relationships in the friendship group were viewed as a valuable part of the experience during the master’s program.

The category, finding unexpected (yet expensive) friends, incorporated how the friendship group came together unexpectedly and just what the relationships meant to the participants. Data from different sources (individual and group interviews along with social media) contributed to the finding that the relationships in the friendship group were considered valuable in the master’s program and overall educational experience.

Being catalysts for academic success. The participants gained resources and support in and out of the classroom from the members of the friendship group. When describing how the friendship group first connected, Alexis talked about experiences in the classroom, “[We] probably had a project where we had to talk. You know, we were forced to talk in a classroom.” Other sources of connection were discussions around courses, comparing notes, and completing homework assignments. In addition, the group helped to locate textbooks and course materials.

Evelyn asked about borrowing textbooks from the friendship group members in an email: “Do you have either of the following books...? If you do, is there a way I could borrow the first one for next week and the second one until after spring break.” Throughout the email data were trails of encouragement about class and class presentations. For example, an email stated, “I did want to use the Myers Briggs from your section as one of the activities. Your presentation for class came out remarkably well considering the circumstances. Congrats on your hard work.” The group and individual interviews and email documentation regarding courses demonstrate the participants’ willingness to reach out to other members of the friendship group.

Not all members of the friendship group experienced courses in the same sequence. Hannah was completing classes when the rest of the friendship group graduated. When asked specifically about her class experience after the other members of the friendship group graduated, Hannah stated:

I wasn’t nearly as engaged. I could tell having you all in the classes here made it much more meaningful and engaging. I wanted to be there. These were just because I had to get through [points to her timeline after several of the friendship group members graduated]. I was managing it with a baby and a full-time job and it was just another thing to add to my list. This was class, this was work, and I have this other stuff and it doesn’t need to overlap. That’s kinda what happened more later once you guys left, right? Like if I hadn’t met you early on, I wouldn’t have had near the connections to anybody in my grad program.

Hannah also talked more in-depth about the master’s course workload, “I think part of it was just the release. I could talk to you and you understood it regardless...you all had assistantships so you had your practicums on top of assistantships so you understood it.” While the academic load

was heavy, especially for a first-time mother who was working full-time, a sounding board was created among the friendship group that encouraged academic success.

Throughout this chapter, I purposefully did not interject any of my own comments or feedback beyond the analytical memos, because my goal was to capture the stories of the participants. There was a time during the group interview when the participants turned to me and asked me to answer my own question about my experiences in the friendship group during the master's program. Here, I felt it was relevant and helpful data because the friendship group had vastly influenced my professional behavior, self-awareness, and also my desire to be a better master's level student. Here I enter a few of my own comments from the group discussion:

I didn't really have a lot of friends, and I didn't really invest myself in my undergrad.

When I met several of the members of the friendship group in one class, and we introduced ourselves and shared our goals for our master's program, I was like, "Man, all these women were doing things." That wasn't their story. They paid attention and were going to class and cared about what they were doing. I was, like, "Shit!" I better do this better. In my undergrad, I spent a lot of time disregarding classes and drinking. I remember Alexis's story was not like mine and I was like, "I need to get it together."

Alexis responded by saying, "I was a good influence on you?" This response perfectly demonstrated how the group members encouraged and held each other accountable so seamlessly that sometimes they did not even know they were the encourager.

The participants built relationships and established a closer bond in activities with the friendship group outside of class. In her individual interview, Alexis discussed meeting for lunch or studying and sharing more personal details about our lives, "It's not really necessarily the academic piece that has kept us together but the personal aspect." Evelyn added, "It would've

just been school, and I don't know if I would've gone to anything outside of classes [without the friendship group]. I think that at a grad school level, I'm not wanting to go to mixers. That sounds awful." Hannah talked about the experience being different from being an undergraduate student, "It's so much more than just what's in your classroom. I guess that's where it started, but as a grad student, you're not the 18 to 20-year-old that doesn't know what they want."

Evelyn thought she knew what she wanted out of the master's program but was not expecting the friendships:

My experience may have been totally different had we not joined up in the friendship group because I was fairly content having friends in other places. I was working at my assistantship, and I was doing my homework, and I was about to get engaged, and I was fully in love. I had a life, and so many people in grad school have a life, so I don't know that many people in grad school are looking for that. But I do think, "Gosh, if I looked back now, and we didn't have each other, it would be a pretty bland experience."

Evelyn also talked about getting invited to activities outside of class:

You kept inviting me to things. I was fine just going to class, and I kind of had my friends and things from college already. Because I'm an introvert. I wasn't making a big point of going out there and making a ton of friends in the program.

While she was not looking for new relationships, Evelyn admitted that the experience would have been "pretty bland" without the friendship group.

The category, being catalysts for academic success, included examples of academic encouragement and the positive influence of the friendship group both in the classroom and in studying outside of class. While some of the participants were not in search of new friendships, they found the relationships within the friendship group to be beneficial. The findings in this

category demonstrate how the experience in the friendship group allowed the participants to feel connected, to be more open to new experiences and friendships during the master's program, and to ultimately feel that their master's program was less "bland."

Providing support during stressful times. The connections in the classroom were beneficial, but it was the time spent together outside of the classroom during stressful times that helped to cement the relationships. Several events occurred throughout the master's program including social gatherings, weddings, and births. Two especially stressful events stood out in the interviews as significant in bringing the group together. The premature birth of Eleanor (Dorothy's first child) in the last year of the master's program (for four of the five women) and studying for comprehensive exams both changed the dynamic of the group and brought everyone closer.

Dorothy was mentioned as a person who communicated and sent emails to keep the group connected. She also met up with the other participants and began conversations in class. Most notably, she encouraged a spiritual and prayerful tone among the group. In her final year of the master's program, Dorothy experienced trauma surrounding her first pregnancy. Several participants recalled the events of that day. Dorothy had spent most of the day being very uncomfortable. After several calls to her doctor and the medical professionals brushing her off as a first-time mother, she went to class that evening with a camping chair. Little did she know, she was in labor at 27-weeks gestation. Dorothy stated:

Then Eleanor was born premature, and my life pretty much turned upside down. I wanted to quit school, and ya'll talked me out of it. Because you were like, "We're going to help you through it." You guys were my rock, my close-knit rock. My family was very supportive too, but they weren't like physically present. But, you guys were.

Marla recalled picking up Dorothy's spouse, "We drove to a neighboring town which is where I met Dorothy's family and his family... My husband joined me there as well." Dorothy talked about the importance of this event in strengthening the friendships:

You came to Ronald McDonald House. You would not let me quit. Just even serving basic needs outside of anything related to school. Like, I remember you and your spouse coming to see Eleanor and bringing us a meal. I remember when we went to the Carrie Underwood concert, because you got me out of the hospital. When you go through deep, intimate, vulnerable stuff like that, your friendship gets even more cohesive. It is hard to go back to some of the vulnerable times where it was not what you expected (holding back the tears), and then ya'll showed up and helped me study and gave me notes from class.

Marla also described this event as impactful to her friendship:

That's when Dorothy and my relationship went from just friends to something else, because in that moment, she was being life-flighted we had class, so we were going to class. And, she brought a camping chair so she could sit in class and went to the dining center to eat, and she was crying in the booth and the doctors told her it was fine and I was like, "I have no ideas, because I've never done this before."

Dorothy had consistently been a leader for the group. She initiated emails and was core to the social and spiritual network of the group. At that moment, the members of the friendship group did not know how to help but knew they wanted to help. An email conversation was started that included an outpouring of prayer support from each member of the friendship group.

Marla emailed the group:

Hey girls! I thought that I would drop you a line tonight and ask that you keep Dorothy, her husband, and Eleanor in your prayers. Today Dorothy was life flighted and she gave birth via C-section to Eleanor. Eleanor remains in the NICU. Both mom and baby are doing great. Eleanor weighed 2 lbs 8oz. She is a beautiful girl. Dorothy will be coming home on Saturday, while Eleanor will stay until her due date. So, if I can ask you again, please keep their family in your prayers as they adjust to life's curve ball.

The spiritual support shifted among the group members to include much more prayerful messaging and an outpouring of support by all members of the friendship group. Text messages also began flying around with updates. Each member of the friendship group stepped in to support the couple as they stayed for 69 days at the Ronald McDonald House near the NICU, an hour from campus. In the interviews, this traumatic incident was discussed by all participants. Evelyn mentioned, “The Eleanor situation happened. My spouse and I signed up to take them food and we had dinner.” In her individual interview, Alexis stated, “We tried to really come around and support her [Dorothy] in any way we could. I remember getting her a gift card. A few of us visited the hospital together, just a really emotional time.”

Following the “Eleanor situation,” the group faced a second major stressor, the end-of-program comprehensive exams. The group gathered physically every week (in a temporary construction trailer) for several months to break down the content for the exams, discuss concepts and theories, combine notes, and teach each other the content. While Hannah did not graduate with the other members of the friendship group, she still engaged in discussions around the materials and participated in some study sessions. Each of the members of the friendship group addressed the role of study groups outside of class. In her individual interview, Hannah shared about getting together with the group, “I remember we would get together for study

groups for tests.” Dorothy discussed comprehensive exams, “When we were preparing for comps, I think that was a stressor for all of us. I think we were all together all the time because we were all stressed out for that, like studying for that.” Marla talked about the physical environment, “We had to study for comps. I remember all of us being in that trailer. We were studying like maniacs. It became a “we,” and I think graduation – I look back at our photos – you can see us in one picture.”

When making a timeline, Alexis noted, “Honestly, the first time I remember us all fully connecting was when we were studying for our comprehensive exams.” She continued to make the timeline and then decided there were several other significant events during the program around which the girls connected as well, including a member who took her to a football game, a wedding, and the premature birth of a child. Evelyn added, “Comps. We were so worried about comps and maybe having conversations about different instructors and some of their quirks. I feel like that’s when we all officially became a group in a sense, at another level. We were all hanging out together. From comps on, I think we were officially a unit.” While the group was supporting each other in academics prior to these two stressful events, experiencing major life events together led to a deeper personal and spiritual connection among the friendship group.

Welcoming the families. Part of the strength of the friendship group identified through the interviews and also seen in social media posts was how the families became interconnected. This category seemed to fit well in the theme, fortuitous camaraderie, because the families served as an extension of support, and the women also supported each other’s families. The spouses and ex-spouses know the group members and understand the value of the group to each of the members, and they have taken on additional responsibilities at times to allow the women to have time together. Alexis talked about her partner understanding who the group is: “He

knows that's my group, or our group, that has been getting together since - that we've known since graduate school. They understand what the group is."

It was not uncommon for a group gathering to include a child or several children. Alexis included a time when all of the spouses got together: "We graduated in 2009, and we celebrated together. We went out to eat with all of our significant others." In addition, some of the friendship group members have met more extended families of other members.

Evelyn offered support to families of friendship group members. She shared resources with Marla as she sought solutions and recipes when her son was diagnosed with severe celiac disease. She also offered support in an email when a spouse at the time was facing a spinal surgery: "Praying for you all. It sounds like an incredibly painful and difficult time. I had spinal surgery after being hit by a drunk driver in grad school, and surgery definitely helped. It was a long road to recovery." This email addresses the connection among families but also speaks to the spiritual connection among the women in the friendship group.

Navigating Transitions. The participants identified transitions in which they were not alone including graduation, marriage, and finding their first professional positions. The participants described the transitions as being painful and isolating. In the group session, Marla stated, "They [transitions] are fucking painful." In her individual interview, Dorothy said, "I don't think navigating the transitions would be – it would've been very isolating, like feeling like you were alone if we hadn't had each other."

Dorothy described graduation as a major transition for her personally:

I wouldn't be who I am today without your support. It began with you guys not letting me quit grad school when I was ready to throw in the towel. You guys weren't going to let me quit. We graduated. That was really sad, because we all parted ways.

Alexis talked about the transitions occurring after graduation, “We graduated and celebrated together, and then I got married before you. All were invited, but I don’t think as many could come to my wedding or yours. Hannah and I went to your wedding.” Throughout these transitions, support and positive affirmations from the friendship group are evident. An email from Evelyn read, “Hi Bride, I just wanted to let you know that I’m thinking of you.” Evelyn talked about the transition into marriage in her individual interview:

Then getting married was obviously a big thing and moving. We were all kind of going through that at the same time. It was nice and fun to talk about our weddings. Our professor was getting married, too, so all of us had a lunch and compared notes.

In the group interview, Dorothy discussed going through transitions together:

When you go through hard things, it brings people together. I think that’s a reason that we all stuck together. It was just a growing time for all of us, too. At our age, we’re in kind of life stages which were changing.

Several of the participants transitioned into new full-time roles after graduation around the same timeframe. Evelyn recalls:

Getting our first big girl job after grad school was huge for all of us. That was really helpful to compare notes. I remember – oh my gosh – I had the hardest time getting anything. I was really only looking at higher ed for the first six months, and then I ended up working at the library because there wasn’t anything.

This category, navigating transitions, included the many types of change and transitions the participants experienced during the graduate program. The participants acknowledged that they were all in a similar life stage with lots of change. Additionally, the participants indicated that transitions were painful and would have been more isolating without the friendship group.

Strengthening Mind, Body, and Spirit

This theme described how the women made meaning and described the value of the friendship group through understanding each other as women, sharing emotions and supporting mental health, spiritual support, and physical health and wellness. Included in this theme are four sub-themes, “Things women go through that men do not,” sharing emotions and supporting mental health, spiritual support, and physical health and wellness.

“Things Women Go Through That Men Do Not.” Being with women in the friendship group allowed the members to have a place to share intimate details of what they were going through, address work situations surrounding gender, share emotions, discuss relationships, and relate to physical bodies. At times in the individual interviews, the participants described their experiences of being women during the master’s program and about being in an all-woman friendship group. Alexis began:

Because I was able to go to grad school and make some other friends beyond my significant other, it allowed me to feel like I was more independent again. I know it maybe sounds weird, but I didn’t want to rely on just one person. We’re friends. We love each other. We’re best friends. But, I understand the importance of getting away and having girls to be able to talk to because we’re women. We have - there are certain things that bond us and certain things we can go through that men don’t.

Alexis also addressed being a woman during her graduate assistantship, “In my job at the time, there was one particular person that the way he communicated with me, I didn’t like it. I don’t know if it was because of my age or because I was a woman and that has always bothered me.”

Alexis mentioned going through things that men do not:

There are some things that women go through that men do not, whether that be how we are treated in the workplace to what is going on in personal lives, I think that it probably made us more open, because if we needed to complain about a husband or significant other, we felt like we could do that without bashing another male that might have been in the group. So, it has allowed us to be more free with our communication.

Dorothy talked about sharing emotions about relationships in the friendship group, “We have all cried together. We need friendships with women because we can talk about our relationships and how they are weird and messed up and some normal. I think that would be very awkward from a man’s point of view.” Alexis talked about the nature of the conversations in the friendship group are specific to being women, “You know whether that be just our monthly stuff or kids or getting married or just dealing with living with another human being and what that means.” Marla added, “We can all relate to each other’s physical bodies and needs to some degree. Could you teach a man those things? Sure. Of course, you can. It takes a lot more energy but you can do it.” In summary, as women, the members of the friendship group felt they were able to talk about relationships, address feelings surrounding workplace situations, and relate to each other’s physical bodies.

Sharing Emotions and Supporting Mental Health. Sharing emotions and supporting mental health were critical components of the friendship group. Discussions of mental health and affirmation from the participants were woven into every interview and were also evident in the email data. The women all agreed that navigating many different types of emotional and mental health situations has made the group closer. According to Marla, “All our versions of tough shit are very different.” The participants described being angry, saying blunt and honest things, gaining confidence, and feeling others’ emotions.

During the group interview session, Marla was emotional in discussing the role of the friendship group in facing loneliness, “Honestly, there is no way I could even get up if I didn’t have you guys to talk to (pauses), because it is a very lonely place right now. Very lonely. So I’m just thankful that we get to – whether it is here or on the computer, wherever it is that we have a chance to get together.” Dorothy disclosed her emotional feelings in an email, “Not going to lie – I feel like I live in an emotional whirlwind and cannot figure it out. I seem to be overly emotional lately and just can’t get it under control.”

Members of the friendship group were comfortable enough in the group to express a range of emotions very openly with one another. In an email, Marla wrote, “I’m sending this in an email, because it is easier for me to communicate without all the crying.” My analytic memos throughout the interviews contained notes about participants breaking down in tears and erupting in laughter. The support of the friendship group for mental health was a top priority. In the group interview, Dorothy connected our academic backgrounds with the experiences of the group, “Mental health wise, I would say we are all in the counseling field. That’s a cool part of our friendship that has tied our professional, like, what we studied was counseling and that has overlapped into helping us with our personal lives.” Marla added, “Good friends are cheaper than therapy.”

Getting more in-depth with mental health support, Marla mentioned, “I think it’s critically important to my mental health. Not just people who are going to tell you what you want to hear.” Dorothy also very candidly shared about mental health support, “It’s hard work, but I feel like the group encouraged that because we know the importance of mental health in being able to move forward in life.” She continued:

You guys were always advocating for me to get mental health counseling and psychiatry. There were a few times that I tried to take my own mental health upon myself. There is a deep friendship that makes you tell the encouraging stuff, but you also tell the hard stuff too. There were times when some of us would go silent and not hear from each other for a while. That could trigger a red flag and usually it was related to mental health. Not that I ever wanted to shut you guys out forever or anything – but it’s just like too hard. You all just helped me be more level-headed, because my anxiety was just so high with the unknowns.

Dorothy talked about seeking support and modeling from the group, “A spouse was dealing with depression, and I was dealing with depression. She [Marla] would try to learn perspective a little bit from me. We would submit questions on the app seeking support from the entire group.”

As an example of providing accountability for mental health progress, in the group interview, Dorothy talked about the period after the passing of her third child:

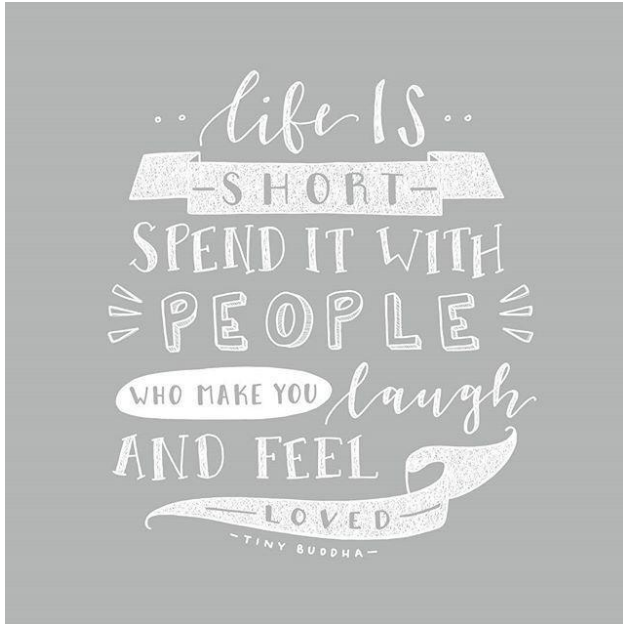
It was a ridiculous baby step. Like, I did one load of laundry or it was like those were the baby steps I needed, but (in tears) ya’ll celebrated that with me and no judging. It’s so hard to be like, “Yay!” I did one load of laundry, and I took a nap, but ummm, just like being brave.

Support and positive affirmations within the friendship group were both seen and heard throughout the interviews. At one point in the group interview, one friendship group member brought a box of tissues to a friend who was getting emotional. Another jumped up to immediately offer a hug. Support and positive affirmations included words and actions.

In the photo elicitation portion of the group interview, Alexis provided the graphic in Figure 4.2. In describing why, she stated, “I feel the laugh and feel loved were two very

important pieces of our group because whenever we get together we laugh but we also have that love, that connection, that deeper stuff. It's not all about the funny stuff.”

Figure 4.1. Photo Elicitation - Life is Short



Dorothy provided a photo of the group all wearing socks that she gave to each member of the group (see Figure 4.2). Each of the pairs was embroidered with words of affirmation that were specific to each member of the friendship group. Dorothy stated, “I thought about this, because there is a lot of different things we all bring to the friend circle. So the words are awesome, amazing, smart, brave, confident, and strong. We all have our different strengths.” The gift of these socks was a positive affirmation of those characteristics for each of the members of the friendship group.

Figure 4.2. Photo Elicitation - Affirmation Socks



In the search for social media data, I came across this post that I made and several of the girls liked or loved, “These friends feed my soul, make me laugh, cheer me on, share the ups and downs, and provide honest feedback when needed. I encourage you to find who those people might be for you, and hold on tight.”

Spiritual Support. The spiritual connections among the friendship group became much deeper when the group experienced the birth of Eleanor (Dorothy’s first child). The group members shared faith-based messaging and increased the amount of conversations surrounding belief in a higher God. All members of the friendship group openly shared prayerful spiritual support and communication. In an email, Marla expressed spiritual support for a friendship group member:

Take one day at a time and know that I am praying for you and know that the Lord will walk with you in this journey. You are a strong woman who cares with every ounce that you have. These crazies cannot and will not run your emotions. They will not take over your attitude. You are in control there!

In her individual interview, Alexis mentioned, “Whether you really needed something from us or just that emotional prayer support, we’re here for you. No, we can’t do anything, but let us know how you are doing and how things are going.” The spiritual support can be seen in navigating work situations as well. In an email, Evelyn stated, “I agree with leaving. It’s not worth the strain it’s putting on you and your family. We love you and are here for you! I will continue to keep you and your family in my prayers.” Hannah also shared in an email, “I’m with the other girls. Start looking for something new, and definitely put your family first. Love you bunches. Keep your chin up, and know we are sending positive thoughts and prayers to you guys.”

Overall, the data suggest that the spiritual and prayerful connection among the participants served to provide a deeper level of support and encouragement during the master’s program. Working through stressful situations increased the amount of spiritual support among the participants. Spiritual support was evident in the wording of emails and discussions during the interviews.

Physical Health and Wellness. The influence of the women in the friendship group supported the physical health of the friendship group members and their families. From the group interview, Dorothy stated, “Physically, we have gone through phases of motivating each other. You know, we tried to do a water challenge.” In that same discussion, Evelyn added, “You guys did that last workout with me on that 80-day obsession. It was nice because I had support for that too.” The group trained together, and most of the group was able to participate in a 5K race together. Alexis stated, “We were supposed to do a race together or run, and I think it was St. Patrick’s Day. I didn’t end up getting to go, but we had t-shirts.”

In an email, Hannah talked about the members of the friendship group providing motivation, “I definitely need motivation and some ‘partners’ to get going! I started a Jillian Michaels workout video Monday. I will do that one day and then the running the other. I used MyFitnessPal last summer.” Marla also talked about providing support and motivation to members of the friendship group, “Think about you marching off the beaten path and facing fertility struggles and health issues. If we didn’t have this, what would it be like?”

The participants encouraged one another through a variety of medical situations. Marla described how Hannah has endured multiple surgeries the group was aware of and supportive in her recovery. Similarly, Evelyn recounted her experience with the friendship group following a car accident involving a drunk driver that resulted in a neck surgery, “I do remember when I was hit by a drunk driver the summer between our first and second year. I remember there being assistance from people afterwards.” Marla’s son and Evelyn were both diagnosed with celiac disease. In learning about her son’s diagnosis, Marla immediately turned to the friendship group for support, “When he [Marla’s son] was diagnosed with celiac, she was my biggest resource.... That was a life change, but fortunately I had somebody to lean on.”

The participants demonstrated the value of the friendship group to their physical health. In multiple instances throughout the data collection, the participants suggested the friendship group had motivated them to improve their mental, spiritual, and physical health and to work through health challenges (including health challenges among family members).

“Figuring Out Who I Am”

The theme “figuring out who I am” became more apparent after the In Vivo coding cycle. One of the ways the participants made meaning of the friendship group was through their own personal growth and development. The In Vivo coding cycle revealed categories that indicated

the participants were developing their individual identities through reflecting on diverse perspectives, concealing identities, and career exploration and professional identity.

Reflecting On Diverse Perspectives. The members of the friendship group have been able to continue to define their own personal and professional identities by asking questions of the friendship group and gaining varying perspectives to become more self-aware. All of the friendship group members valued the roles and personalities presented within the group as a source of strength in the friendships. “We have the emotional ones, the analytical ones, we have the free spirits, and we have the people that are out of fucks.” Marla continued, “In all these different events, every single one of us has a different perspective and opinion. Sometimes they align, not always. That is another thing that has made this stronger over time is that we do share those opinions.”

In the group session, Dorothy discussed the different strengths among the group, “There is a lot of different things that we all bring to friend circle. We all have our different strengths. We take on different roles. Someone is the encourager and someone’s the – “I’m really pissed with you.” Hannah added something similar during the group session, “We’re all on different spectrums of agree or disagree, we’re all just not one mold.” Evelyn also talked about the mix of personalities among the friendship group:

We really are a good mix. We have the kind of steady Alexis, Dorothy who tends to feel things very deeply, and Marla who will give tough love. Hannah who has knowledge because her kids are older and just seems more - I don’t want to say mature because at this age, that starts to sound old, but just seems to have different experiences and has been working longer than us. She seems like the mom of the group.

Hannah summarizes these thoughts well, “You’re going to get a God honest ‘this is what I think,’ and it may be completely different from what this person thinks. And, it’s ok that we say those things.” In the group session, Marla added, “Perspective is a valuable thing. We each bring a different perspective to the table.” In the same group conversation, Dorothy noted, “We all bring different strengths to the table at different times and for different reasons. It is pretty special for sure.” The different strengths and perspectives presented at varying times by the members of the friendship group overall helped the participants make stronger, more informed decisions and grow as individuals.

Concealing Identities. While many of the participants discussed openly sharing with the group, members of the friendship group also navigated their own identities in determining which of their experiences and identities they wanted to share with the friendship group and how much detail to include. While concealing identities was not the overarching message across the friendship group, it certainly impacted some of the participants experiences within the friendship group.

My analytic memos indicated a lot of emotion surrounding discussions of the amount of sharing of personal details among the group especially when it came to the identities of being a mother or wife. Participants had their own level of comfort with how much they shared with the group. While many of the friendship group members were open to sharing it all, some friendship group members revealed in their individual interviews why they were hesitant about oversharing. One member (who is more private so I will omit her pseudonym from this discussion) stated:

I admire how vulnerable we all can be, because I’m not vulnerable in any other space in my life. Like I am. I don’t share. I don’t even share stuff with you guys (holding back

tears). So, like, it's a vulnerable space that I'm very glad I'm a part of. And, I learn a lot, but I still haven't let myself let my guard down fully.

A few members seemed to process an internal debate while sharing. It was as if they knew this was a safe space, but they still held back at times. They said things like, "If it was something with a husband, they aren't going to judge him because they never see him, so it doesn't matter." Then they also mentioned:

Even though I don't share.... Because, when I look at others, I don't have those troubles. You know what I mean? Like, I don't have sick kids, I don't have like (emotional and in tears). I've never been like "mine is a big deal." I will handle it. I don't need to, and I don't want to overshare. I want to protect the perception of what is my family, my spouse.

Just as the members of the friendship group bring different shifting roles and perspectives to the group, they also bring varying levels of comfort when sharing personal details about their different identities.

Career Exploration and Professional Identity. The members of the friendship group modeled different career paths and shared experiences which led to career exploration among the participants. Alexis talked about learning about different functional areas within student affairs because of the differences between the friendship group:

I think as far as building the relationships with the girls – discussion of our jobs, what everyone was doing, what they liked about their jobs. Cuz you know you can't sample all of them. There just wasn't time to do them all. So, you did a lot in career services. So, I knew that was interesting, but I wasn't sure if that was a good fit for me, right? Other people did residence life. Again, it was like I could hear it from the stories. Hannah had

been working with international students. So knowing what all those were without having to experience it myself. I kind of understood what those types of jobs could entail.

The idea that Alexis felt she was able to learn more about the careers in her industry area was a significant strength of this friendship group. Alexis continued:

I always felt for myself like “I’ve got myself together.” I’ll know what to do, but I think it’s still hearing things. That’s how I know what to do, because I’ve already heard it once or twice, so I think it helped.

Marla shared, “I don’t think any of us could do or take the kind of risks that you take, and I think it’s good for all of us to see that those risks are worth taking.” Dorothy discussed establishing who she was as a professional:

We were all personally trying to figure out how we were going to be as a professional identity. You go through classes, and you’re like, “Oh, StrengthsFinder.” You’re finding out more about yourself but then also journeying along other people who are also trying to figure that out.

In the group session, Marla included how she utilized the friendship group to continue to understand who she was and what her worth was in her role:

Talking through what’s important to me and figuring out who I am. What my worth is. My challenge was becoming more self-aware. There were hostile work environments. Don’t get me wrong. Those were a matter of personality. Dorothy and I have very strong, similar personality types, and becoming self-aware was a challenge as a woman I had to figure out.

Within the friendship group, the members were able to experience other career options in higher education through stories told by others, establish who they wanted to be as professionals,

and also gain information when other members had already experienced a similar situation. The three themes, fortuitous camaraderie, strengthening mind, body, and spirit, and “figuring out who I am” describe the meaning and value of the friendship group to the participants during their master’s program. The women identified value in academic motivation and engagement; support during stressful times; mental, spiritual, and physical health; and identity and career development as a result of being a part of the friendship group.

Themes – Following Master’s Program

In this section, I introduce the themes and categories in response to the second research question: What were the lived experiences of women in a friendship group, which developed during a master’s program, following their master’s degrees? The findings for these themes are presented in descriptions provided by the participants and in the participants own words just as the transcripts were coded in the second cycle coding using In Vivo coding.

Table 4.2. Summary of Findings - Second Research Question

Research Question: What were the lived experiences of women in a friendship group, which developed during a master’s program, following their master’s degrees?	
Themes	Categories
Dealing with painful firsts	Entering motherhood
	Making meaning of workplace challenges
	Dealing with grief and loss
	Facing divorce
“Together”	Becoming family
	The Wonder Women gather
	Staying connected through Voxer

Dealing with Painful Firsts

The participants described several events in which the members of the friendship group were experiencing a life event for the first time. These painful firsts were times when the participants turned to the friendship group to vent, to gain help with making decisions, and to feel supported. The painful firsts included challenges entering motherhood, making meaning of workplace challenges, dealing with grief and loss, and facing divorce.

Entering Motherhood. In each of the individual interviews, the participants wrote out a timeline to help them describe their experiences in the friendship group. Each of the timelines included pregnancy, births, and mothering. Often those more personal items were added to the timeline before academic or professional experiences. Hannah stated, “All of ’08 like Eleanor (Dorothy’s first child) was born and Haley (Hannah’s first child) was born. I remember all these personal things.” Alexis also referred to some of the more personal experiences first, “At some point, more people had babies (laughs). We’ve been together for multiple life events.” While not all members of the friendship group have been mothers, this is a transition area where support was evident. Together, the participants experienced pregnancy, infertility, and challenges after birth.

The friendship group members often discussed the journey to pregnancy in depth within the group. Evelyn emailed the members of the friendship group in 2011 after another member reported that the intervention they were utilizing for conception was not successful, “I’m sorry to hear the IUI didn’t work. You will be wonderful parents.” Evelyn later faced her own journey in conceiving. Marla stated, “For Evelyn it was hard to get pregnant so there have been issues there

too. So, it's a very unique journey." In her individual interview, Evelyn detailed how the friendship group supported her during her IVF journey:

It just feels hazy looking back at it [the IVF process], and I know I was regularly needing just comfort and optimism and thinking through options. And, I was stuck in another state for a week during the first go around when we did the egg retrieval. Just the ups and downs of "oh everything looks great" and then the next day being like "oh we only see this many" and feeling devastated because you know the more the merrier in IVF.

In her timeline, Marla included, "We all had kids throughout this time. Evelyn struggled. You're fighting your own battle right now. But this whole time you see support."

After they gave birth, the group continued supporting each other as parents. Hannah details a time she struggled with feeding:

I got breast milk from Dorothy for Haley (Hannah's first child). She was the one I called when I couldn't get my pump to work. I knew she had all that experience from Eleanor (Dorothy's first child) being in the hospital, and she came over and I couldn't get it to work. Nothing would come out. It was one of those slaps in the face like, "What are you actually feeding your daughter, because you can't get anything to come out of this thing?"

Evelyn was also supported by the friendship group through nursing challenges:

Nursing is the worst thing in the whole world. Breast feeding is not natural. I kept trying and trying. Alexis was very, very helpful about "try this, do this. It's ok if you are just pumping. Yes, you're tired, but think about it when you're not so tired and make the decision then."

Through each of three NICU stays, the members of the friendship group served as a sounding board, in-person presence, and a source for ongoing discussion and venting. In an email to the group during Dorothy's second pregnancy Marla stated, "I know you are scared – I believe that you have every right to be scared. Trust your gut. See a specialist." In her individual interview, Dorothy said:

Then he came early too. Then it was really hard, because my first experience was with Eleanor, and my cohort of you guys being physically present there to now kind of experiencing a similar thing 15 hours away. I remember you guys came down to see us and stayed. You were insistent on you guys taking care of Eleanor and like doing everything and just like serving me in basic needs stuff, so I could focus on my second child.

Evelyn also discussed premature births during her individual interview, "Dorothy kind of knowing that road with pre-term and Alexis too because her first child was early. She had her baby on the day we had a baby shower for her."

In another instance, the friendship group heard of a member in distress and jumped into action and made a quick plan to be there in person. Marla said:

Just getting the app messages and knew she [Evelyn] was not ok. We drove to her town. We didn't even have her address. We had to figure it out. That's one time when she was screaming for help but never used those words.

Evelyn also recounted the experience in her individual interview:

Marla and Dorothy coming when I started having post-partum anxiety so bad. I had panic attacks. They came and helped out and wanted to make sure I got help. They are part of the reason I went ahead and called my therapist on Saturday.

Making Meaning of Workplace Challenges. The friendship group endured a variety of painful firsts in work-related situations. The group members were able to provide support and advice in making challenging decisions. The situations included standing up for themselves in the workplace, a sexual harassment case, and navigating negative/hostile work environments.

Hannah discussed different actions presented by the friendship group members surrounding situations at work:

Marla is like, “Don’t ask. Just tell them. And, that’s not me. So, there is definitely this side of others that is a professional side, and I’m like, “You can do that? You can say those things?” There are still times I don’t do it, because I’m still scared as shit.

In making decisions and working through situations at work, Evelyn also included her interactions with the friendship group, “Comparing notes. There were times when we’d all tell each other hmmm that doesn’t sound that bad or I kind of get their point. She didn’t do a good job of explaining that, but here’s what I think she probably meant.”

Marla endured a very challenging workplace situation with a supervisor who kissed her ear in front of her staff in a staff meeting. After reporting, she endured other acts from the same person and experienced a hostile work environment. The decision of whether or not to report weighed heavily on her, and she discussed wanting someone to get mad with her:

Sexual harassment. Yeah, that was hard because I didn’t tell anybody for two weeks.

The people I trust most. I couldn’t tell. Not because I didn’t want to, but because I didn’t know how to.... My husband was unmoved by that entire experience and that was hard, because I wanted someone to get mad with me. I wanted someone to get mad, to feel the feelings I was feeling. I remember sitting on the stand and looking at him and nothing.

So this was a very isolating period. Very isolating. Once I did say something and

reported it, you guys were the next people I told, and you all got mad. It was that validation that I needed to know that I was doing the right thing by saying something. Once the friendship group was aware of the situation, the app blew up with support, and the group talked out loud about the situation and helped Marla find the words and confidence she needed.

Others navigated negative/hostile work environments. Dorothy mentioned a situation in residential living at a large private 4-year institution, “Housing was a nightmare, and you all helped me a lot through that. That was not a safe environment to work.” Emails also referenced the same situation:

I can’t believe this is happening, and honestly, I do think they are pulling the “you are emotionally unstable card, and you can’t handle this job” when in fact, it’s the position they are putting me in! Not to mention there was a pot smell in my apt again today [in a live-on role].

Alexis discussed a situation of working in academia:

When you’re on the academic side and you’re an academic advisor, they don’t always see you as still a professional, so that can be a challenge. I don’t know if that is necessarily because I’m a female or more because of the position type. But again, there are a lot of academic advisors who are females.

Evelyn discussed her first higher education position, “I realized, ‘Oh my gosh. That is a shit show [first higher ed job]. And well, it can only go up from here, right?’ So, that definitely took away some of my work innocence. But, we went through that.” In a 2011 email to one of the members of the friendship group, Alexis discussed a hostile work environment, “I’m so sorry

that you have had to deal with all of this! It is definitely a hostile work environment if you feel it is.”

Dorothy faced multiple firsts as she navigated career decisions as a stay-at-home mom and then moved back into higher education and eventually became a NICU nurse. The friendship group reminded her of her unique skillset and helped her build confidence. She said:

I always saw myself going back into the professional world somehow. I confidently can say I put in the that work, and I have had so many insecurities since you first met me. I've had many. I definitely feel like you guys have helped build me up in that not just from validating but being like, “Dorothy, you have these skills.” Just helping hear that and I truly believe that now.

Alexis decided with her second child that she needed to be able to take the baby to work with her physically to the office:

After I had my second child, I was taking her to work with me. I remember that being a stressful time because I was like, “I don't know how this is going to go.” And, I remember sharing my feelings during that time. My stress and anxiety with it and just kinda being emotionally like, “I'm not sure if this is the right decision, but I feel like it's what I have to do.”

Two additional unique work situations include when Hannah was asked to pay back a raise, “I've always got the short end of the stick with everything [at work]. I was the one who had to apply for every job to move up. There was one time I actually got a raise, and then they asked me to pay them back because they miscalculated.” Another unique work situation occurred with Evelyn when her supervisor used the Bible to humiliate her in a meeting:

I have temporarily decided that I will resign on Monday. Only a small slap on the hand was issued to my boss, and my boss has been even more difficult since. Today, in a staff meeting, he humiliated me and used the Bible to say in conflict it never says to go to one's supervisor.

The friendship group offered support in areas of workplace challenges. The main topics in the data included helping women identify priorities, building confidence in careers and career decision making, sharing positive affirmations, reinforcing decisions to quit positions, helping with wording when approaching difficult situations, and supporting friendship group members when career directions or outcomes were not what they expected.

Dealing With Grief and Loss. One point in the data collection process was especially emotional for the members of the friendship group and was a painful first. The discussion of the death of Dean (Dorothy's third child) at 19-weeks brought out many emotions. Some of those emotions the participants displayed included pausing during the interview response, changing their tone, getting emotional, and other more physical responses like hands shaking or lips quivering. All of these emotions demonstrate the seriousness of the topic of grief to the participants and the depth and connection in the friendships.

Dorothy, the mother of Dean, discussed the friendship group's involvement in the grieving process in her individual interview:

We got pregnant with Dean, and there were definitely some choices through that like whether we risk that and there were some deep conversations around that based on my history. That was also just a personal faith journey where we hoped for a different outcome. But, he died, and that was 2015 in October. You guys journeyed through that again emotionally too. I'm sure it was exhausting for you guys as well, but you just kept

me going and tried to keep me positive and level-headed and validated. I remember you guys validating all my feelings.

Evelyn recalled her reaction to the news:

I just remember it hurting so bad knowing at that moment, she was losing her baby. Then we all came to the funeral and then there were some really rough days with Dorothy after that. I mean, I was legitimately worried for her and how we could help her.

The friendship group had never faced anything like this before, so they did not always know what to say or how to react. Evelyn stated, “It was just nothing that we had ever experienced before...and she’s the only one that had to go through that.” Marla also said, “NEVER would have thought we’d have a kiddo passing away. Those are the kinds of things you can’t prepare for. I think we have been through some of the toughest shit.”

Dorothy later faced an additional emotional hurdle when she realized, “There was no way we were having more babies after the loss and stuff, so that was another part of grief. We’re done having kids, and there is going to be no rainbow baby. But, everyone has a different story with that.”

The participants attended the funeral as a group and prepared a book of all the social media posts and uplifting prayers, scripture, and messages the couple had received. Later the members of the friendship group went together to purchase a star for Dean. Dorothy recounted that experience on social media, “My besties just called to tell me they have gifted me a star in the sky named after Dean for his first birthday in Heaven.... Couldn’t do life without these girls. So thankful!”

Facing Divorce. Another painful first faced together with members of the friendship group was divorce. One participant recalls the day the friendship group received a message in the phone app (which the participants share):

She was just like, “Girls I need to talk.” Then, she stepped back. And then, we were like, “Crap,” and we were worried about her. And, I think you even reached out via text like, “Ok, something is going on, and we need to get connected with her.” But her and her husband going through the divorce. That was all a shock to us, and she obviously was emotionally distraught. And, all we could do was – again we were in a pandemic so we couldn’t go there. If we could, we would’ve all driven up that day.

In this section, I am utilizing an additional level of privacy and not including pseudonyms. Given the sensitive and personal nature of the following data, and also in protecting the confidentiality of the ex-spouse, I have elected to not reference pseudonyms.

A member of the friendship group described the experience of her spouse coming out as gay. While the participant spoke with confidence, I noted a change in tone and many emotions surrounding this portion of the interview:

This is a source of stability in my life, and I don’t think I realized it until January 2021 when my husband came out as gay, and I became a single mom. And it’s not really an easy story to tell, but you all were the first ones I told because I know there is no judgment. I know that there is no questioning. I knew I could. And this is the loneliest point in my life, and strangely, I never felt alone. This is me figuring out, and not a one of you has told me how to do it. I think ya’ll letting me do whatever it is that needs to happen, whatever that may be is like getting the biggest hug possible and I’m not saying this as a sexual relationship. I’m saying the degree of love that he had for me versus the

degree of love that we, the girls, have for each other are very different and that [friendship group] relationship is so much stronger than any relationship I ever had with my husband.

Another member of the friendship group described her experience in trying to help, “I think individually we each had to grieve that and also grieving for her. And, I had no idea how to help with that. She’s also the first one of us to get divorced. Hopefully the only.... It was another first.” The friendship group was a source of listening and support while the participant faced significant transitions in learning of her partner’s sexuality, navigating the pending divorce, and becoming a single mother.

Together

This theme in one word described the lived experiences of the members of the friendship group following graduation - together. While the participants were together especially during the final part of the master’s program, every example and story post-graduation was together. In the group session, Alexis said, “That is obviously what our group has done throughout these 12 years is we’ve gotten through things. We didn’t know what we’d have to try to get through, but we still made it through together.” The categories providing evidence for this theme include becoming family, the Wonder Women gather, staying connected through Voxer, and being a “safe space.”

Becoming Family. Throughout the process of collecting data, I learned of participants who viewed themselves as selfish prior to becoming part of the friendship group. Some of the members were not seeking friendships at all. Perhaps with the growing level of self-awareness the women discussed, they also began to view their world through the lens of others alongside their own perspective. Marla stated:

For me, it went from being very selfish, to learning there was a family, to learning that it was a really, really important family, to realizing that if I didn't have you all, like, I don't know what I would do. (pauses) I honestly don't know what I would do. As I'm going forward and looking at what life has to hold, that person doesn't just marry me and my kids. They marry the girls, too. And the app, right? It's a package deal.

In the group session, Alexis talked about the uncertainty about what the group will face in the future but knew it would be faced together, "We don't know what all will be thrown at us or continue to be thrown at us. But, we're going to do it, and we're going to have fun doing it. And, we'll get deep every once in a while, too." Dorothy added:

When we would get together it was like all the personal stuff came out and we just naturally bonded in that way. I think you become [breaks down in tears] just a like a heart friend when you go through crap stuff and you're vulnerable with each other. You guys have always been there even though I've had multiple times where I needed support.

Marla identified Dean's (Dorothy's third child) death as something that pushed the group to become a family, "We went from me to we to a really (during the time of Dean's death) – like to family. Like we were really close before but this is the point when all of us became family.... We crossed bloodlines." In the group interview, Hannah talked about the growing depth of the relationships:

There is a daily reminder that there are people that care about me, that I care about. Raw and genuine are two words that come to mind. I think that raw doesn't always mean good things, but it's real. There are plenty of people I can fake nice to. There are things that happen that we can talk about. It almost seems like an alternate reality. I can check out. If there is something going on with my spouse, I can't go tell my sister because she's there

every day. She's going to judge him or she's going to be pissed at him and resent him.

You guys aren't going to do that. I've never had a bond like that, so I knew I didn't want to let it go.

In the group interview, Dorothy also mentioned, "You just pour your heart out and it's ok. We can all tell each other the tough love parts, like you don't want to hear but also celebrate victories like, 'Hey, this is what I did today.'" Evelyn stated, "We realized everybody here was genuine and not self-seeking."

Not everyone gets to experience a friendship group with such a unique bond, and the members of the friendship group realize this is special. Marla says:

Like it's no big deal to me that we talk that often but I now have the perspective to realize that this is unheard of for us to actually have and maintain this kind of relationship. Most people are lucky in their life if they have one really good friend. It's not until you have to tell somebody who has no idea what a friendship this deep is like – because quite frankly, they probably haven't had the opportunity to feel something like this. When you realize there are people in this world who don't ever get to experience this. That hurts too.

Because they should.

In the group session, Dorothy also shared something similar:

Our friendship is like no other. I had three close girlfriends in high school. I had friend circles. When you go through really tough stuff [in tears], the people who stick around. You really know who your true friends are. It's just a special group, heart friends. That is like deep friendship. At this stage, I'm not looking for new friends. My friendships have been fulfilled in what we have here.

Marla also stated, “People just don’t have relationships like this. This is the stuff that matters in the end.” A social media post from a group member also included, “Not everyone finds friendship like this.”

The Wonder Women Gather. The members of the friendship group made an effort to travel and to physically show up for each other even after several members moved to different cities. There were instances where members needed to drop everything and go because of a challenge, but also times when the group members wanted to show up for celebrations as well.

There was some uncertainty around when the group decided on the brand “Wonder Women.” Some thought it was around the time of the trip to Texas to support Dorothy following the birth of her second micro preemie. Some thought that the group identity as the “Wonder Women” became a real thing when the group made t-shirts for another weekend gathering when the group wanted to run a 5K. Regardless of when the brand came about, it became a very important part of defining this group of women as a unit. Here I used the pseudonym “Wonder Women” because the name of the group is recognized by others who know the group. The visits and reunions became known to the participants, their families, and others who know them as “Wonder Women Weekends.”

In her individual interview, Marla stated, “I don’t remember when we started having reunions. I have no idea, but I do know we need to do them more often.” Alexis talked about events separate from the full weekends when some of the girls would meet [getting together for lunches on campus or off]. “That was always a fun time for us to debrief and tell each other what was going on in each other’s lives.” Overall, having a physical presence (whether in-person or through ZOOM) has served as a critical part of the continuation of the friendship group.

The “Wonder Women Weekends” were described as fun, necessary breaks from day-to-day stressors. These weekends were planned months in advance about once per year and were usually hosted in a city where one of the “Wonder Women” lived. Sometimes the gatherings included planned activities such as a breakout room, an art/craft event, a 5K run, movies, dinners, shooting at a gun range, shopping, or wine tasting. Sometimes the weekends simply included relaxing in comfortable clothing with no make-up and no agenda. All the “Wonder Women Weekends” included heart-to-heart conversations, discussions of children and families, inside jokes and stories among the members, laughter, and a variety of other emotions. A social media post from Dorothy included a photo of four of the women on a bull statue, “Wonder Women Weekend 2010 – Fun times in Texas.”

When the group learned that Dorothy was going into labor with her second micro preemie, they took action. Alexis says, “Even if all of us couldn’t go down to Texas to be there to support her, the ones that could then were able to communicate back. That was a good jumping point of ‘Let’s make this more significant.’” In her individual interview, Marla discussed being pregnant but feeling so compelled to travel to be with Dorothy, “Before she had her second child, she was going into pre-term labor. She was in the hospital.... I was sitting at my office desk, and I bought a plane ticket.” An email further documented her feelings:

I have cried for hours this morning about this very issue. There is a plane I could catch today and get there tonight, but my Dr. doesn’t think that is a good idea. It just sucks that I can’t give her a hug. Please hug her for me.

The friendship group discussed facing obstacles throughout the year and then being able to get together in-person to process it all. Alexis stated:

I know I need to get away every once in a while, for my mental health and having then a group of women that I met and we were all in kind of a similar place. I think Hannah and Dorothy were already married, but they were still all around the same age, going through the graduate program together. Even if it wasn't a specific cohort, it allowed us to kind of build that. Find friendships where we were at, with similar interests and backgrounds.

In the group session, Alexis stated, "I remember you [Marla] always getting mad at her [Dorothy] if she couldn't come to a reunion weekend." As the discussion went on the group talked about that being out of love because Marla knew just how much Dorothy needed that time with the other participants to recharge. A social media post about this period of motherhood among the friendship group included a photo with 7 children and 3 participants. Dorothy said, "Love whenever two or more Wonder Women are gathered." This picture represents, once again, the bringing together of families among the friendship group. In a social media post, Dorothy wrote, "Yay! So excited one of my girls is coming over for a visit tonight! Yay for adult interaction!"

There were so many social media posts recounting the reunions, I could not possibly include them all. Marla posted, "I haven't had an adrenaline rush like that in a LONG time!" Alexis posted a screenshot of the ZOOM session with the girls, "So fun seeing my girls this weekend for a quick chat!" In another year, Evelyn posted, "Because some nights, you just need to hang out with your best friends! #milesdontmatter" Evelyn also posted a picture of four couples and five babies/toddlers, "I love this group!"

Several participants mentioned showing up for weddings, baby showers, and after births of newborns. Additionally, a social media post in 2017 documented a surprise trip to the grand opening when one of the friendship group members opened a store. Dorothy posted, "Loved

seeing some of the girls and supporting a Wonder Woman at the grand opening of their store yesterday! So proud of you!”

The value of physically getting together was evident throughout all forms of the data: emails, social media posts, and individual and group interviews. The respite from everyday life and motherhood was a key component of the reunion weekends. Additionally, the brand of the group was noted as something that others recognized and served as a source of connectivity and strength among the group.

Staying Connected Through Voxer. The friendship group utilized in-person communication, email, text messages, ZOOM, phone calls, and an app called Voxer to communicate. The focus of this category is the positive addition of Voxer, an app which allows voice recordings, images, and text to be shared thus adding emotion and voices to the ongoing discussions. Alexis said:

Before then, we were communicating, doing emails once in a while but we weren't fully immersed. Then Voxer came along, and I feel like that was a really, really big piece for our group in a sense that we were able to communicate at our own pace through the app and we could do voice. So, we could actually hear each other talk and laugh and share or cry.

Marla summarized this category well in saying, “As time has gone on, our communication hasn't increased. It has absolutely stayed the same. I think because we are still checking in routinely, we're still having these conversations, we're still holding each other accountable.” Alexis continued to discuss Voxer as an integral part of her day:

Voxer messages are an integral part of my day. Whether it is a laugh, whether it's just a put-in-check that shits not that bad – like might have a bad day but then I hear, “Oh, I need to put some stuff into perspective.”

Hannah added:

Moreso than text, I think the hearing of the voices is much more personable than if we just had a text group. That would be very easy to ignore to be honest. I mean, I have family chains that are like, “Oh my God. There are 15 of them.” But, it's much different when I can play it and hear your voices. And, it's like a true conversation. I really think a true conversation keeps a connection – you can hear the emotion, you can hear the rawness. The talking made it so much more personable. It would be easy to forget or have an email be buried or have a text message be buried. But, for some reason Voxer has always been something that is easy to play in the car. You felt it. It didn't feel like you were miles away. It really is like a conversation.

Marla included:

There is nobody I talk to more with the use of my phone than the girls. Turn your volume on and walk down the grocery store aisle and let people look at you because your pocket is blowing up. This morning, Voxer was on fire, and it was going off right and left. There I was explaining [to a friend] that this is part of the package.

In the group session, Evelyn discussed Voxer making communication with the friendship group more convenient:

We got Voxer right after that. I do think that made a difference because the email stuff was hard to read through, and then you'd have to have time to write. With the app, you could just give an update and listen when you have a chance.

One of my analytic memos included Voxer going off during an interview. I stated, “During the interview, the app goes off and a member of the friendship group is speaking – we laugh. There is an example of the app – both texts and voice.”

Being a “Safe Space.” The friendship group was a safe space for the participants. The In Vivo codes include the word, “vulnerable” seven times, the words “safe space” six times, and the words “raw” or “real” ten times. This is a strong indication of the security felt within the friendship group. In her individual interview, Evelyn mentioned:

When you have gone through so much together, they just get it. Like, if I try to explain a joke to somebody else, they don’t have that background or they might be like, “Oh my gosh. I know that I’m overreacting, but you’ve got to listen to this.” But if I tried to tell someone I live with or I go to work with, maybe I don’t want to sound like – there’s just no fear of judgment.

Hannah described the nature of the group as being raw and vulnerable:

I don’t think we would’ve been near as raw and vulnerable if we hadn’t been [all women in the group]. We say things that aren’t malicious and mean but it’s true and its feelings we all feel. It’s like this one said it, and I’m feeling it, like they are the same things.

During the photo elicitation portion of the group interview, the participants were asked to bring a photo, meme, or anything that describes the friendship group to them. Hannah brought screenshots from the Facebook page, “Sister I am With You.” As she started reading and explaining why she chose those excerpts, the entire group got emotional (see Figure 4.3, Figure 4.4, and Figure 4.5).

Figure 4.3. Photo Elicitation - Feel Seen and Heard (facebook.com/sisteriamwithyou)

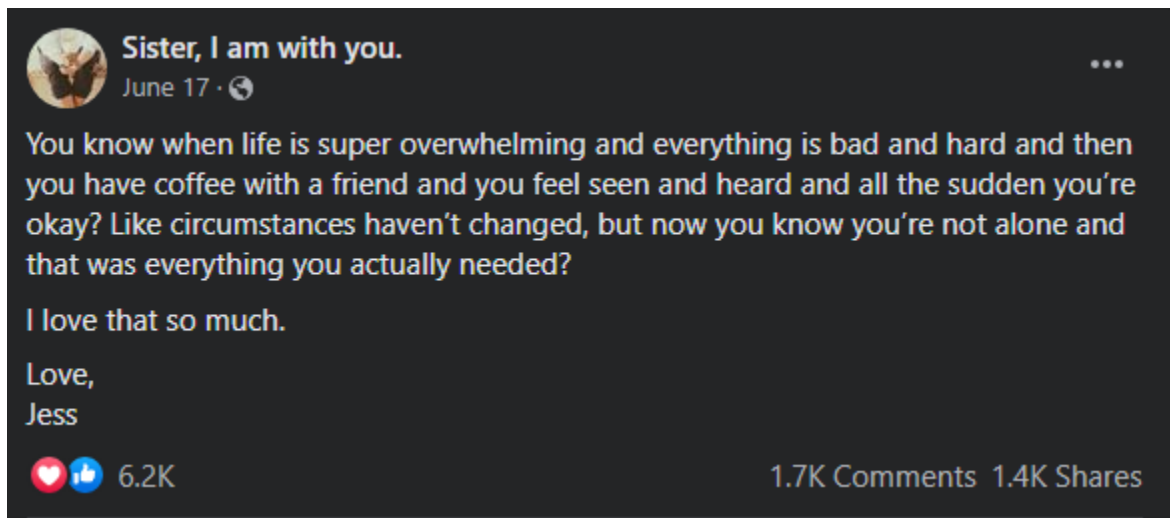
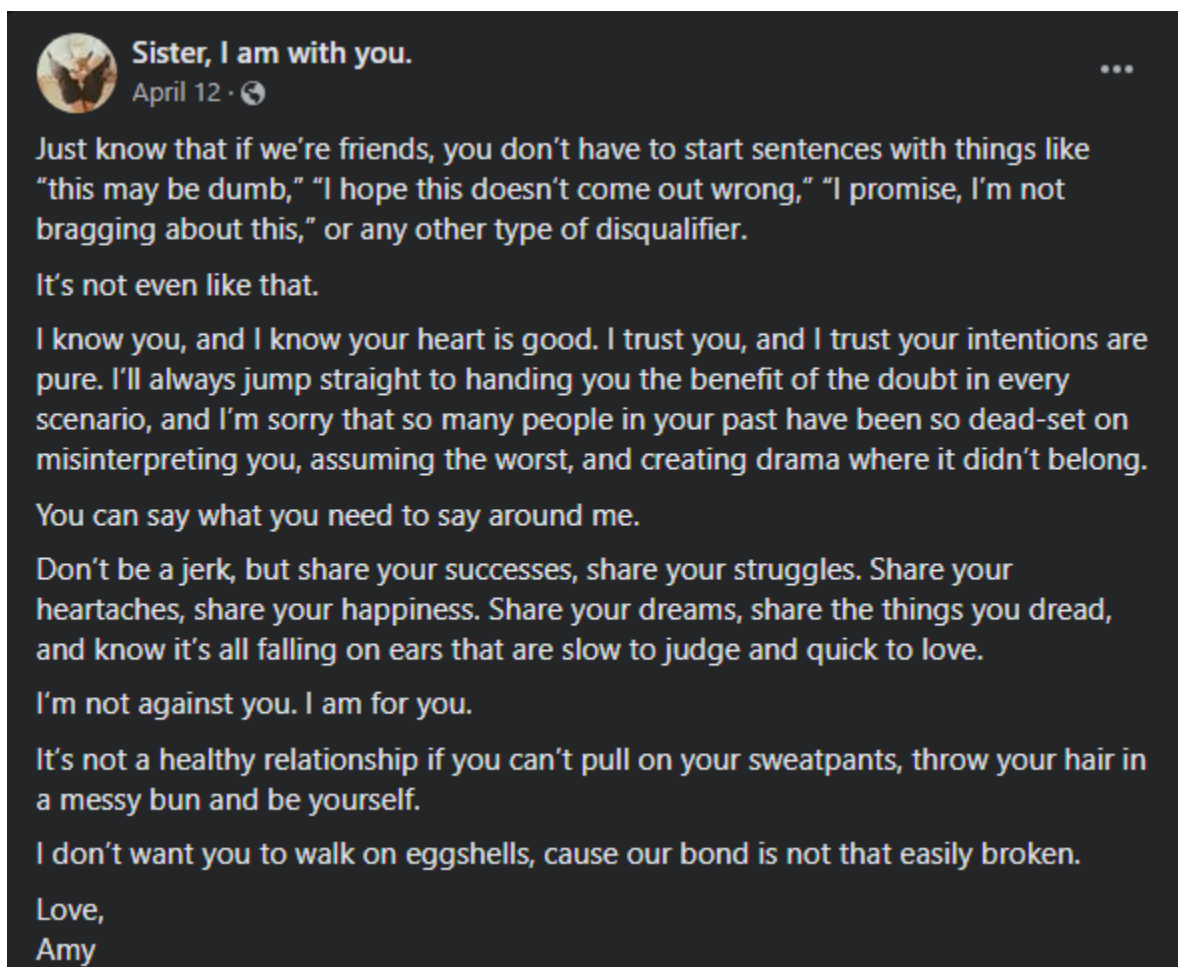
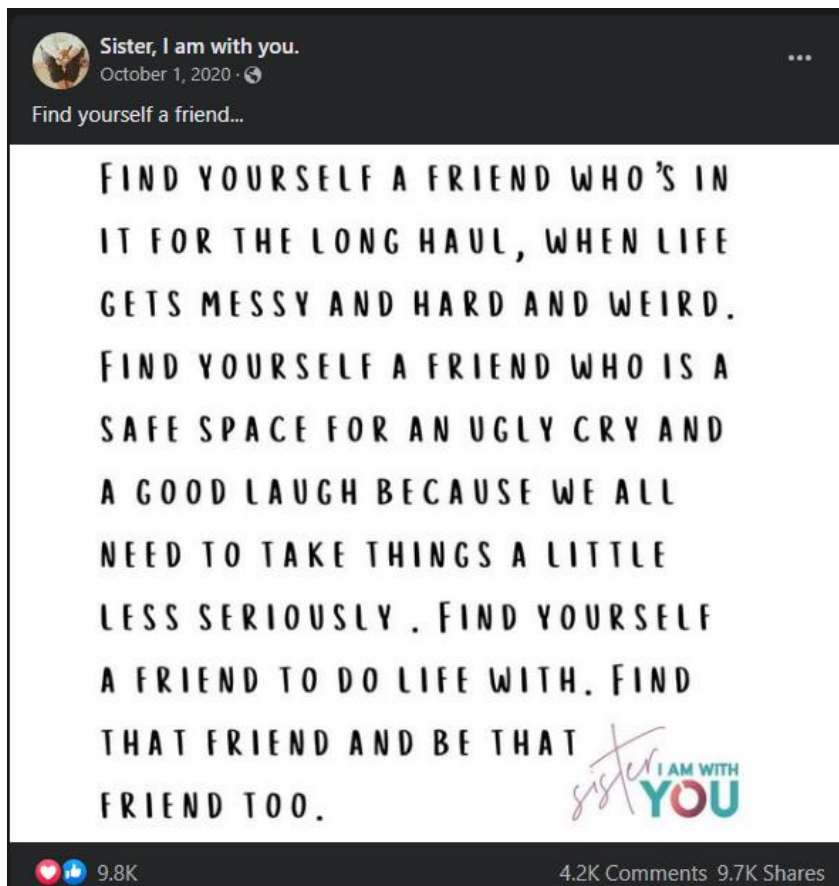


Figure 4.4. Photo Elicitation - Your Heart is Good (facebook.com/sisteriamwithyou)



At some point, Alexis had to take over reading, because Hannah was too emotional to speak.

Figure 4.5. Photo Elicitation - Find Yourself a Friend (facebook.com/sisteriamwithyou)



In describing why she chose these images, Hannah stated:

I can't think that I imagined however many years ago that we all met that we would go through as much as we have - that we would have that type of bond. Because I can say, I've had friends in the past and none of them are anywhere close. I don't talk to them. I don't see them.

In her individual interview, Hannah stated, "It is raw, it is real. There are still those individual connections but you know it's a safe space. It's not like there are secrets (pauses) it's not easy to tell everybody but there is a not a secret within the group." Dorothy also mentioned something very similar, "Because of that heart level of friendship, you could tell me things I didn't want to hear. It wasn't all fluff. I also valued seeking out you guys and being like, "Look,

am I being irrational here? Give me some feedback.” Alexis referred to a level of comfort among the friendship group, “We love getting together and laughing and joking and being real and not having to worry about if we have make-up on and jeans.” Hannah included, “It just became that safe space that no one else could get to.”

Dorothy talked about how having her child prematurely impacted the group dynamic, “We can be honest with each other. It’s a safe space. I think because we had deep, vulnerable - like Eleanor’s thing. That brought us together in a deeper way.” Each of these examples from the data describe the space created between members of the group as both safe and vulnerable.

Summary

Based on the findings of this study, the women in the friendship group describe the meaning of the friendship group and its value as it relates to their personal and professional aspirations and transitions during their master’s program through in and out of class shared experiences as they never felt alone. They also described the value and meaning of the friendship group through encouragement for mental, physical, and spiritual wellness. Through storytelling of multiple perspectives which strengthened decision making, the women developed their identities and also progressed in their career development.

In addition, the findings indicate that the lived experiences for women in the friendship group, which developed during a master’s program, following their master’s degree included facing painful firsts together and being supported through trauma and significant life events as part of the friendship group. The participants also identified being together as a significant lived experience through officially branding the group, showing up physically, maintaining communication, and continuing to create a safe space.

Chapter 5 - Discussion and Implications

In this chapter, I interpret the findings and situate the findings in the literature according to the themes presented in Chapter 4. To do so, I utilize the theoretical lens of symbolic interactionism to continue to identify the meaning the participants made of the friendship group and symbols the participants used to describe the friendship group. Additionally, I include implications for practice and research.

It was my goal, in this study, to add to the literature about master's level graduate students by including the experience of women in a friendship group during the master's program and following graduation. While studies indicated peer social support during graduate programs was beneficial for the student (Apugo, 2017; Hardré & Pan, 2017; Portnoi & Kwong, 2011; Weidman et al., 2001), those studies did not specifically include master's level women's friendship groups. The term, "*friendship group*" was utilized in the undergraduate literature (Antonio, 2001; Antonio, 2004; Martínez Alemán, 1997; Martínez Alemán, 2010), but I did not locate evidence of the use of "friendship groups" among master's level students. Additionally, Gordon (2016) identified barriers to graduate student success in master's level programs including being "disconnected from peers" (p. 85). This gave me reason to investigate how peers connect with each other during master's programs. In this study, I aimed to explore how five women who attended graduate school together made meaning of their experiences while participating in an all-women friendship group both during and after the master's program.

To better understand the participants' individual experiences in the friendship group, this study answered two research questions. They were how do women who developed a friendship group during a non-cohort master's program make meaning of the friendship group and its value as it relates to their personal and professional aspirations and transitions during graduate school?

And, what were the lived experiences of women in a friendship group, which developed during a master's program, following their master's degrees?

I utilized individual interviews and a group interview with photo elicitation as well as document analysis methods to perform a single case study. A case study methodology best fit this research design because the friendship group was bounded by the number of members in the group, and the timeframe for gathering data was relatively short. During the data collection, I sought to understand each participant's experience within the friendship group from their individual perspective. Throughout the data collection and analysis, I utilized the theoretical lens of symbolic interactionism to understand the meaning of the friendships to the participants through symbols such as language, memories, feelings, ideas, and attitudes (Blumer, 1969). In symbolic interactionism, it is imperative to learn how the participants interpreted and made meaning of the friendships within the friendship group. The meaning is based on the social interaction with one another. Within the findings were three themes and 10 sub-themes or categories which responded to the first research question. Those themes included: fortuitous camaraderie; strengthening mind, body, and spirit; and "figuring out who I am." The findings included two additional themes and eight sub-themes or categories to respond to the second research question. Those themes included: dealing with painful firsts and together.

In the following sections, I interpret the findings in relation to the current literature and discuss how the findings align with the literature. Additionally, I use the lens of symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969) to describe how the theoretical framework for this study helped me make meaning of the findings. Lastly, I discuss the implications and recommendations for research and practice.

Situating and Interpreting the Findings

In this section, I will interpret the findings and situate them in the literature. After coding the data using both descriptive and In Vivo coding, descriptions of experiences, memories, emotions, and spoken/written language that identified the meaning of the friendship group and its value to the participants became more clearly defined. In qualitative research, the findings may be interpreted differently to each reader or through a variety of different lenses. I encourage readers to make their own meaning of the findings through their individual perspectives. Here, I provide my interpretation of the findings through my perspective as the researcher using symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969) as my lens for viewing the data. I identified the meaning making through the stories told by the participants. To situate the findings in the literature, I will describe the meaning of the friendship group to the participants first during the master's program, then the experiences of the participants in the friendship group following the master's program.

I aim to demonstrate how each of Blumer's (1969) three premises for the symbolic interactionism framework informed the interpretation of data. While all the premises informed the findings, I will break down the different premises among the discussion and implications. The first premise was, "Human beings act toward things on the basis of the meaning that the things have for them" (p. 2). The second premise was, "The meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of the social interaction that one has with one's fellows" (p. 2). The third premise was "These meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretive process used by the person dealing with the things he encounters" (p. 2).

During the Master's Program

In this section, I describe the meaning of the friendship group to the participants during their master's program. Additionally, I situate the findings in the current literature. In doing so, I will incorporate components of the three themes including fortuitous camaraderie; strengthening mind, body, and spirit; and "figuring out who I am."

Fortuitous Camaraderie. The theme fortuitous camaraderie incorporates findings which describe both the meaning of the friendship group to the participants and the value of the friendship group during their academic program. The participants made meaning of the friendship group through serving as catalysts for academic success, supporting one another during stressful times, welcoming the families within the group, and navigating transitions together. Blumer (1969) defined the first premise of the symbolic interactionism framework as identifying objects have no meaning on their own but instead a human gives them meaning. I specifically searched for meaning the participants give the object (the friends within the friendship group). Here, I situate the findings in the literature about socialization and sense of belonging, persistence, mattering, cohort and non-cohort programs, perceived value of the master's degree, transitions, and understanding professional expectations.

The findings of this study align with the socialization work of Strayhorn (2012) and Weidman et al. (2001). Strayhorn found a link between socialization during graduate school and sense of belonging. Weidman et al. included peer group membership and support among graduate students in their discussion centered around socialization of graduate students. Strayhorn discovered that sense of belonging related to graduate student success (as measured by GPA). In this study, one participant, Evelyn, described going to class and working at her assistantship but having other friends and not really seeking to connect with new people. When

members of the friendship group approached her and continued to ask her to attend gatherings, she described being more connected to her program and having less of a bland experience overall.

The participants described a sense of belonging and also attributed their persistence in the master's program to the friendship group. Hannah mentioned having commitments outside of school and class being another thing to check off her list. She described a sense of belonging when the other Wonder Women were in the same classes and sharing similar experiences. She felt she had someone to talk to about the challenges she faced. Dorothy also discussed the friendship group as a primary reason she stayed in school when she wanted to give up. This finding aligns with findings from Apugo's (2017) study of 15 Black graduate student women. In that study, 13 of the 15 women attributed their persistence in their program to peer relationships. It was clear in these findings that Dorothy attributed her persistence to the friendship group not letting her give up and providing her with resources and class notes. In this study, sense of belonging and peer group membership in the friendship group contributed to graduate student academic success, socialization, and persistence and added to the literature on master's student persistence.

Rosenberg and McCullough (1981) found people have a need to matter and feel like they make a difference in others' lives. Their findings suggest mattering is important not only for self-esteem but also for emotional stability. This study echoes those findings. The participants described gaining confidence and clarity when they bounced ideas off the members of the friendship group. The findings also include evidence of the participants gaining emotional support and stability through being part of the friendship group.

Additionally, the literature surrounding formal cohort programs identified that cohort members cared for one another (Potthoff et al., 2001; Weidman et al., 2001), and the cohort influenced the learning process and socially and emotionally enriched the experience (Weidman et al.). This study demonstrates the dynamics of a non-formal cohort as also meaningful and powerful which adds to the non-formal cohort master's level literature. The participants discussed the group forming organically through similar classes or assistantships. They identified themselves as different from programs with cohorts set up for them by faculty. The participants had to work to come together and to stay together. The informal cohort members in this study demonstrated care for one another through responsive communication, providing a sounding board, and physically showing up for other members of the friendship group.

The participants identified being part of the friendship group as significant and valuable during the master's program. They discussed this in terms of their recall of the experiences within the friendship group versus recall of content in their courses. They described the experiences outside of class with this group as equally as important as the experiences in class. Additionally, they described gaining these friendships as one of the most important components of their master's program (even if they did not know they wanted or needed friendships at this stage in their lives). Guild (2018) found an increase in alumni donations of MBA alumni when they experienced a strong sense of community. While the participants did not discuss value in terms of donations to the school, this study aligns with the findings of Guild's study. A perceived value of the program was accredited to the relationships and sense of community among the friendship group.

Schroeder and Mynatt (1993) found women perceive their major professor more positively when the professor is a woman. They found, "Compared to their male counterparts,

female graduate students appear to have less opportunity to interact with same-gender faculty” (p.556). To address this gap, this study focused on peer relationships where women were supporting women, peer-to-peer. Highlighting the experiences of graduate student women who have persisted provided a lens for understanding the role of peer friendship groups in women’s master’s program success.

The findings of this study adds to the Weidman et al. (2001) study of the socialization of graduate and professional students. In that study, graduate student peers were noted as sharing information about their programs and courses. That information included discussion about faculty, exams, and jobs. The findings of this study also included instances of the members of the friendship group (as graduate student peers) sharing information about coursework, faculty, exams, and jobs. In addition, this study adds to those findings comparing course notes, completing homework assignments together, collaborating for projects and presentations, locating textbooks and class materials, and encouraging effort in completing coursework. This study also included relating to similar experiences regarding the workload within their program and helping the friendship group members make connections within the program.

Weidman et al. (2001) attributed sense of community to helping graduate students better understand professional expectations. This study included findings that support that notion. Alexis discussed being able to explore different positions within the field by listening to members of the friendship group describe their experiences. Marla included becoming more self-aware in a professional environment throughout the graduate program with the help of members of the friendship group. Several participants indicated that they learned more about what to do or not do in a professional workplace from supporting others in the friendship group when they faced challenging work-related situations.

The participant experiences in this study counter a finding by Morimoto and Yang (2013) who found that, even in cohorts, friendship formations in graduate school tend to be "loose, sporadic, and gravitate toward low-intensity relationships" (p. 110). This study demonstrated that the relationships formed within the friendship group were anything but sporadic. In fact, the findings indicate that participants considered the relationships and camaraderie within the friendship group to be one of the best outcomes of the master's program.

This study extended the transitions literature to include the experiences of women in master's programs. Dorothy described being in "life stages that were changing" during the time of her master's program. Others described the transitions as painful and potentially isolating if they had not had the emotional and spiritual support of the friendship group. The literature about transitions included a model for helping adults in transition (Schlossberg, 1984). That model included social support from intimate relationships, family, friends, institutions, and communities. Lopez (2013) and Perez (2016) identified the needs of students as they transition into master's programs. Travers and Gaston (2021) included the role of identity in navigating transitions during a higher education graduate program but did not specifically address what some of these transitions might be aside from entering the program. This study extended the transition literature to include transitions women master's students face during and after their programs including marriage, becoming mothers, finding their first positions, graduation, navigating workplace challenges, and facing stressful unexpected situations.

In this section, I have connected the findings of the theme, fortuitous camaraderie, with the literature. Here, I interpreted what the friendship group meant to the participants through: socialization and sense of belonging, mattering, attributing persistence to peer relationships, care for one another in an informal cohort, support in addition to faculty members, sharing

information about class, understanding professional expectations, gaining self-awareness, and support during transitions.

Strengthening Mind, Body, and Spirit. In this theme, the findings suggest the interactions with one another involving physical, mental, and spiritual wellbeing were a way the participants made meaning and gained value from the friendship group. Just as Blumer's (1969) second premise of symbolic interactionism indicated, "The meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of the social interaction that one has with one's fellows" (p. 2). The discussion around health and wellness was centered around the meaning the participants derived from the shared experiences with the women in the friendship group. This study adds to the discussion around health and wellness of women master's students. Much of the literature surrounding health is focused on graduate students, including doctoral students (Evans et al., 2018; Glenn, 2018; Hyun et al., 2006; Kernan et al., 2011; Lawson & Fuehuer, 1989; Schmitt, 2012) or is not specific to women (Melnyk, 2019). The participant experiences in the friendship group included stories and written documentation of the group of master's level women contributing to mental, physical, and spiritual health.

The participants in the friendship group utilized social support from the group to navigate mental health needs. Hyun et al. (2006) studied mental health among 3,121 full-time graduate students. They found:

The prevalence of mental health needs among graduate students is high. Almost half of the graduate students in the study responded that they had experienced a stress-related problem that significantly affected their emotional wellbeing and/or academic performance in the previous year. (p. 260)

They suggested ways to help graduate students develop social support as a means for mitigating graduate student isolation. This study adds to that work with the addition of peer-to-peer master's level women's friendship groups as a source of mental health support. The participants in this study included stories about advocating for getting mental health counseling and conversations where the group did not just agree or say what the participant wanted to hear in regards to mental health. The meaning of the friendships in these instances was determined by the interaction with others within the friendship group. Dorothy mentioned group members going silent and how that would trigger other members to reach out and check on them. She discussed that those were usually instances where a member needed some mental health support. She also included the friendship group helping her take a "ridiculous baby step" with no judgment. Alexis described the group being fun and funny but also getting to the "deep stuff."

This study supports the notion that social support is a positive factor that is related to lower levels of depressive symptoms as identified by Charles et al. (2021) in a study of 3,600 master's and doctoral students. Dorothy, Evelyn, and Marla included instances of working through depression or anxiety and seeking support from the friendship group. Dorothy included several instances of depression and anxiety following the death of her son. Surrounding all of the instances were mentions of support and conversations with the friendship group and how that helped her through some of those challenging places with her mental health. Evelyn identified the friendship group's role in helping her seek professional help for post-partum anxiety.

The findings included the participants providing support for one another during stressful times. Stress during graduate school was addressed in studies by Glenn (2018), Lawson and Fuehue (1989), and Schmitt (2012). Glenn indicated graduate students need outlets for stress in order to be successful. Lawson and Fuehue discussed the need to "examine the role that other

people play in helping graduate students cope with the stress associated with graduate school” (p. 193). Schmitt focused on the perceptions of stress, job engagement, and satisfaction of doctoral students in psychology. They found that “students who are engaged show increased vigor, absorption, and dedication than their stressed peers, which likely leads to increased satisfaction with their career path” (p. 32). This study adds to the graduate student literature surrounding stress because it addresses how the friendship group provided support for the master’s level women during stressful times. The most prominent instances discussed during the master’s program were the premature birth of Eleanor (Dorothy’s first child) and then comprehensive exams at the end of the master’s program. The women gathered physically, shared emails and text communication, and provided encouraging prayerful and spiritual messages. It was during these stressful times that the women felt the closest to one another and really felt even closer as a friendship group.

The participants described supportive experiences within the friendship group which helped them navigate multiple priorities. Stimpson and Filer (2011) identified work-life balance issues among doctoral student women which differed from the experiences of doctoral student men. While this study did not include men or doctoral students, it does have implications that support challenges with women’s work-life balance during graduate school. Younes (1998) investigated how women negotiated multiple roles as graduate students. This work supports that study in further describing how women negotiated roles during the master’s program. Hannah specifically discussed her program as not being very accommodating for working mothers. She described challenges in scheduling and viewing her classes as something on her checklist that she needed to check off to get to the next thing. Dorothy also described challenges in balancing having a new micro preemie and making time for schoolwork. Both women described the role of

the friendship group in helping them push through the challenging situations. These findings align with Younes's study with eight graduate student women as being torn between multiple roles including family obligations and schoolwork. "Their commitment to self and career advancement directly threatens their commitment to their family and causes them to feel torn between the two worlds" (p. 456). Hannah's experiences as a mother working full-time and trying to also complete the master's program were filled with challenges and barriers which caused her to make decisions between her family obligations and coursework, practicum experiences, and work.

This study adds to the discussion around the physical health of master's students with the addition of the influence of the friendship group. Melynk (2019) indicated, "The formation of the student's health culture in higher education institutions, regardless of profile, can and should become one of the most important tasks of a holistic system" (p. 224). In addition, Kharadze et al. (2017) found that master's students who were psychologically or physically well helped them better meet their set goals. It was clear the friendship group influenced positive and healthy physical well-being among members in the group. The participants described training together, talking about workouts, doing fitness challenges, and the group supporting Evelyn during her recovery after an accident involving a drunk driver. Additionally, several of the participant stories indicated the members of the friendship group provided resources for other members and their families for diagnosis such as celiac disease. I would suggest then that this study adds to the literature around physical health and well-being of master's students to more specifically include the role of a friendship group in influencing positive physical health among master's level women.

A key component of how the participants explained the meaning of the friendship group was through a spiritual connection. While many studies address spirituality among undergraduate students, few specifically include master's level students or graduate students. Travers and Gaston (2021) explored what it means to be authentic when it comes to including one's spirituality in transitions both during and after a higher education graduate program. They suggested to "live authentically in their salient identities when navigating transition" (p. 46). Calicchia and Graham (2006) investigated the relationship between spirituality, life stressors, and social resources as buffers of stress in graduate students. Their findings partially support spirituality and social supports as effective buffers of stress. They found "spirituality had a limited ability to buffer stress" (p. 316). Prest et al. (1999) studied the beliefs, behaviors, and spirituality of marriage and family therapy graduate students. None of these studies identified peer-to-peer friendship groups as a source of spiritual connection among women master's students.

In this section, peer-to-peer master's level women friendship groups are further situated in the literature and interpreted. The members of the friendship group described the meaning of the friends based on their interactions with each other as a source of mental health and stress support, a means to navigate challenges with work/life balance among women, a positive influence on physical health, and also an avenue for spiritual connection.

"Figuring Out Who I Am." The findings within this theme suggest that the members of the friendship group were able to gain perspective from the members of the group and make more informed decisions which allowed them to grow as individuals. One component of identity development within the friendship group that was discussed was concealing identities or deciding when to share a certain element of the participant experience or part of their identity

with the friendship group. Blumer's (1969) third premise is reflected in these actions as the meaning of the friendships can change because humans can change the meaning they give things. While the participants valued the safe space within the friendship group, some participants also made decisions about how much information they wanted to share depending on the situation. Chandoir and Quinn (2010) studied a group of undergraduate students to learn about their experiences with disclosing concealed stigmatized identities. They found that "receiving support and positive feedback during the first time a stigmatized identity is disclosed may lead people to experience a greater sense of trust in others and a comfort in disclosing personal information" (p. 581). Further, Newheiser and Barreto (2014) found that "hiding a stigmatized identity has the ironic effect of actually decreasing feelings of belonging" (p. 68). Additionally, Newheiser et al. (2017) studied concealed identities in the workplace. They found:

Concealing a stigmatized identity has negative consequences for individual wellbeing that impinge on one's ability to relate positively to others and feel that one belongs in the workplace. Our findings suggest that identities in part serve the purpose of interacting with others; when one is not fully open about one's true self, social interactions suffer. (p. 356)

These studies demonstrate that there is good reason to continue to draw members of a friendship group in so they feel more comfortable disclosing concealed identities. When a member of a group discloses concealed identities for the first time, the group response to that disclosure of information could lead to more trust and comfort for others to disclose. While revealing concealed identities was not always found to be positive, it can lead to increased interaction with others and sense of belonging within the group allowing the participant to be their true self.

In this section, I included my interpretation of the meaning of the friendship group to the participants during the master's program and situated those findings in the literature. I specifically addressed the themes of fortuitous camaraderie, strengthening mind, body, and spirit, and "Figuring out who I am." In Chapter 1, challenges faced by women during graduate school were identified as work-life balance (Stimpson & Filer, 2011), feeling like imposters (Lininger et al., 2016), needing to establish new friendships and negotiating multiple roles (Younes, 1998). While group support systems were mentioned to help graduate student women take ownership for their success (Lininger et al., 2016), none of the studies connected friendship groups specifically as contributing to master's student success. This study provides a premise for further investigation of friendship groups and their value in combating some of the challenges faced by women in master's programs.

Following the Master's Program

In this section, I examine the lived experiences of women in a friendship group following the master's program and situate those experiences in the literature. Here, I will include two themes: dealing with painful firsts and together. In this section, all three of Blumer's (1969) premises of symbolic interactionism are present as the women defined the friendship group as valuable and continued to build the relationships among the group. Additionally, their interactions with one another continued to strengthen the meaning of the friends to each participant. Lastly, the individuals worked through challenging situations and re-interpreted the meaning of the friends throughout the life changes.

Dealing with Painful Firsts. The findings within the theme, dealing with painful firsts, included the value of the friendship group to the participants during times when they faced new situations following graduation together. These new experiences included entering motherhood,

facing workplace challenges, dealing with grief and loss, and facing divorce. The participants turned to the friendship group to vent, to gain help with making decisions, and to feel supported.

The participants described the friendship group members as sources for diverse perspectives, information, and advice. Martínez Alemán (1997) studied undergraduate women in friendships with other women. She discussed conversations with other women friends as “risk-free testing sites for ideas...a source for different and diverse perspectives and as sources of information and advice” (p. 136). The findings in this study reflected similar experiences with the women in the friendship group especially when they faced new experiences. Therefore, this study expands the work of Martínez Alemán to also include women in a friendship group even following master’s programs. Additionally, Martínez Alemán (2010) concluded that women in friendships with other women had “more complex knowing about self and others” (p. 554). In this study, the women acknowledge coming together and building even stronger connections when they have faced challenging situations. One might conclude that facing challenging life experiences while being in the friendship group enabled participants to have more knowledge and awareness of themselves and others.

A significant painful first identified by the participants was mothering and becoming mothers for the first time. Negron et al. (2012) identified:

Instrumental support postpartum is an important factor in the emotional and physical well-being of mothers and their newborns...interventions aimed at strengthening mothers’ ability to rally social support may not only reduce early postpartum depressive symptoms but may enhance a mother’s postpartum recovery. (p. 622)

Additionally, Leahy-Warren et al. (2012) found, “There was a significant association between informal social network (family and friends) support and maternal parental self-efficacy at 6

weeks post-delivery” (p. 393). This study coincides with Negron et al. (2012) and Leahy-Warren et al. (2012) in identifying social support, specifically peer-to-peer support of women in friendship groups, as instrumental in participant postpartum experiences. Dorothy and Evelyn included times of specifically reaching out to the friendship group for postpartum support. They recalled asking questions about the baby health and breastfeeding. They gained support for their basic needs so they could focus on the new baby. Additionally, Marla recounted experiences of knowing other women needed help postpartum and reaching out to them or physically showing up to help. In these cases, the women discussed feeling reassured of their parenting decisions by the other mothers in the friendship group.

The participants found value in the friendship group when they struggled with workplace situations, especially as new professionals. Renn and Jessup-Anger (2008) recommended that graduate programs prepare students better for working in student affairs by preparing them to transition to the world of work, to explore professionalism, to be lifelong learners, to work with supervisors, and to find mentors. This study adds a component to Renn and Jessup-Anger’s (2008) findings: preparing students to connect with peers at a similar professional level, who do not work in the same office or unit, as a source of support in early career. The findings in this study indicate the participants found value in the peer-to-peer career feedback and advice provided within the friendship group. Both complex and day-to-day workplace challenges were brought to the friendship group by participants to share ideas, to gain perspective, to make decisions, and ultimately to help participants establish their own professional identities.

Most of the participants remained working in the student affairs field after graduation. But, one moved to part-time employment, and one shifted careers entirely. McKinnon-Crowley et al. (n.d.) interviewed mothers working in student affairs. One finding in that study indicated

the working student affairs mothers did not find their work environments welcoming to their needs. “Individually, participants were trying to do their best to succeed in a field and in office environments that were rarely willing to make room for their unique needs. If they were supported, they felt the need to articulate how lucky they were” (p. 27). Based on the data I collected, this study confirms the findings in that the mothers in this study felt supported at times in their work environments but also faced some less-than-desirable work environments and supervisors. In each career situation, the participants came back to the peers in the friendship group to determine if that environment was acceptable, to navigate conversations with challenging supervisors and colleagues, and to learn how to make career decisions.

Together. Participants frequently used the term “together” to describe their lived experiences following graduation. In this theme, the findings reflect the group coming together as a family, gathering physically through Wonder Women weekends, using the Voxer app for maintaining communication, and also being a “safe space.” Here, I will interpret some of the findings in relation to the literature.

In the literature, I discovered several articles in which the authors used the term “*counterspace*” (Gonsalves & Chestnutt, 2020; Hernandez Rivera, 2020; Ong et al., 2018; West, 2019a; West, 2019b). In each of these articles, the description of the counterspace matched a similar description of the space created by the participants in the friendship group. A counterspace was described as “culturally homogenous” (West, 2019a, p. 176) while Gonsalves and Chestnutt (2020) described a counterspace as a safe space. West (2019a) indicated a counterspace was a place where it was okay to be yourself, to share about faith, to discuss relationships, and to encourage professional development. Hernandez Rivera described a counterspace as a place where experiences and stories could be validated and Ong et al. found a

counterspace was a space to combine academics with socializing, navigate the politics of graduate school, get advice about homework, and form study groups.

I am choosing not to use the term “counterspace” in my interpretation of the findings for a few reasons. The primary reason is that a counterspace is described as a place for groups of people to escape environments where they feel marginalized. In this case study, none of the participants described being uncomfortable or feeling marginalized in their class or work environment on the basis of gender, religion, nationality, or race. The participants are not seeking a space to counter the dominant culture in their classrooms or workplaces. Instead, I will use the term “collegial space,” as it better represents the experiences of those in the all-women friendship group. Here, I define a collegial space as a place for gathering physically or virtually with peers who have a similar background or interests. The difference between a collegial space and a counterspace is that, in a collegial space, the participants are not seeking to get away from something potentially harmful but rather to come together for a shared purpose.

One of the critical components of staying connected in this study was the use of an app called Voxer that allows text, voice, and photo messages to groups or individuals. Green (2016) described Voxer as a “digital walkie-talkie” (p. 299). He described the app as a way to communicate with colleagues and students. The app “provides a level of convenience and efficiency communicating with my colleagues and students that e-mail and other methods do not provide” (p. 302). This study reflects similar convenience and efficiency in communicating with the use of the Voxer app. It adds to the discussion the use of voice as a way to hear emotion and to feel a sense of belonging and closeness as opposed to using email or individual or group text messaging alone. This is similar to the findings in Carpenter and Green (2017). They wrote:

The relatively more private context of Voxer conversations, and the human voice element, could make it a more suitable platform for reflecting critically on one's own practice, seeking emotional support, or discussing challenges such as dealing with particular students, parents, colleagues, or administrators. (p. 62)

Their findings suggest Voxer is considered more of a community builder among their participants as it supported an "authentic social connection among some users" (p. 62). This closely aligns with the findings of this study wherein the participants described the sense of community that was maintained through the use of the Voxer app.

The participants described their lived experiences following the master's degree as a vulnerable and safe space. In this section, I interpreted the findings to include the term, "collegial space" as a description of the environment created by the participants in the friendship group both in person and virtually. Additionally, I situated the use of the Voxer app in the literature as a tool enabling a sense of community through the use of text, photos, voice, and emotion.

The findings of this study suggest that women who are included in a friendship group with other women during their master's program felt connected, were engaged in and out of the classroom, and felt supported in strengthening their mind, body, and spirit. In addition, the friendship group served to help them figure out who they were both personally and professionally. Following the master's program, involvement in a friendship group included navigating unforeseen challenges and feeling strongly connected to other women who served as resources when encountering similar life challenges. A collegial space was created among women in the friendship group wherein they felt safe to gather and be themselves.

Implications for Practice

Given the depth of data provided by the participants through sharing of language, memories, feelings, and emotions, the findings of this study are rich and can be useful in practice by student affairs administrators, faculty, master's students, university administrators, and women professionals. The findings demonstrate that women in a friendship group with other women during their master's program felt connected, were engaged in and out of the classroom, and felt supported in strengthening their mind, body, and spirit. Following graduation, the friendship group navigated challenges and served as resources when encountering similar life challenges.

There is good reason for administrators and faculty to pay attention to the social support needs of master's students who are women. According to the U.S. Department of Education's most recent data, the number of women who completed a master's degree rose by 166,362 over 10 years while the number of men completing master's degrees rose by just 76,577 (Digest of Education Statistics, 2017-18). Given the increase in the number of women who are pursuing master's degrees, pausing to understand their needs for support may have implications for retention and/or persistence thus impacting an institution's bottom line. Additionally, Gordon (2016) concluded that students pursuing master's degrees are the largest group of graduate students and have received the least attention in retention research. Better understanding the needs of this population can impact decisions made in program design, recruitment, and enrollment management.

Paying attention to the social support needs of women master's students is important because as Hyun et al. (2006) suggested in a study of master's and doctoral students, "The prevalence of mental health needs among graduate students is high" (p. 260). The findings in this

study also support that notion. The participants described experiences in working through mental health challenges with support from the other members of the friendship group. In addition, the findings suggest that the women went through experiences that were different from men. As an example, Alexis mentioned in discussions among the friendship group: “There are some things that women go through that men do not and whether that be how we are treated in the workplace to what is going on in personal lives, I think that it probably made us more open... it has allowed us to be more free with our communication.” Stimpson and Filer (2011) identified work-life balance issues among doctoral student women which differed from the experiences of doctoral student men. This study identified work-life balance as a significant challenge for at least two of the participants during the master’s program.

It seems reasonable to suggest faculty who are women take an even greater role in the social support of women master’s students, because as Schroeder and Mynatt (1993) suggested, major professors can serve as a source of support for graduate student women. But, we also know that the number of master’s students who are women is growing more rapidly than the number of professors who are women given the number of women faculty members just reached 50% of all faculty in 2018 (Digest of Education Statistics, 2019). Additionally, the student experiences with faculty mentoring and support can vary (Lechuga, 2011). So, faculty alone should not be expected to serve as a single source of support for these students in holistically addressing student needs including mental/physical/spiritual health, sense of belonging, and identity/career development.

The findings in this study suggest that participants came together organically, but many were introduced to each other in courses. Continuing to examine ways to bring master’s students together organically in and out of the classroom is one cost-effective approach to potentially

increase retention and persistence of master's students who are women. While faculty and staff cannot force relationships, they can create opportunities in the beginning of the course and throughout the semester to form small groups, do introductions, and exchange contact information. They can also encourage students to use technology such as Voxer or group texts to connect with classmates. Lastly, faculty can give students permission to form study groups and work together to teach each other the course content. Some of these opportunities already exist and students just need to know to take advantage of them. Additionally, these exchanges of information and interactions will not necessarily guarantee someone would form an informal friendship group, but it would provide opportunities for connections to be made throughout the program.

Current master's students can benefit from understanding why investing in friendships with others in their program can be valuable both academically and personally. Hardré and Pan (2017) found that peer support among master's and doctoral students expanded learning opportunities through peer collaborations, formal and informal volunteer support in times of need, feeling valued and accepted, and the opportunity to be a part of something (the peer group). The findings of this study suggest that the women in the friendship group credited growth, both personally and professionally, to the interactions and conversations within the friendship group. It could be especially helpful for incoming master's students to start making connections early in their program. Lopez (2013) identified one of the needs of incoming master's students as "student-to-student interaction" (p. 48). Hearing from other master's students in the program or at that institution about the success of connecting with peers through webinars, orientation days, visits to student organizations, and in-class discussions can be relatable to students who are navigating similar situations.

Working professionals, especially professional women, could benefit from belonging to an all-woman friendship group. This study presents experiences of women engaging in collegial spaces created in women-to-women friendship groups which were helpful for the women as working professionals. In this study, the collegial space allowed the participants to share about workplace situations, gather peer-to-peer feedback and advice, learn to be professionals, and establish their own professional identities. In addition, going to the friendship group as a sounding board allowed the participants to navigate toxic work environments and challenging situations in the workplace. The participants were able to discuss workplace situations outside of the office or institution where the participants worked.

In summary, the implications for practice include administrators and faculty paying attention to the social support needs of master's students who are women and not leaning on faculty who are women to be a sole source of support for master's students who are women. Additionally, implications for incoming and current master's students include finding ways for students to hear about the value of peer-to-peer relationships with others in their program and connecting early and often with peers. Lastly, women working professionals can benefit from belonging to a friendship group as a sounding board to discuss the workplace outside of the office.

Implications for Research

This study identified the meaning of a friendship group during and following a master's program to the women in an all-women group. In this section, I introduce implications for research including expanding the master's level friendship group literature to include other populations and further examining how master's student study groups can serve as a source of socialization and connection. Additionally, the implications include investigating specific

experiences in the master's classrooms which served as connectors of peers and implications for career development and career decision making.

Friendships during master's programs could be formed among many different types of groups which are not always homogeneous. This study documented the experiences of one all-woman friendship group and the research indicates that other experiences may vary. The literature suggests that the experiences of graduate student women may be different from men (Stimpson & Filer, 2011). The findings in this study also indicated that an all-women friendship group allowed the participants to share things that men might not understand. The literature indicates the challenges faced by women include work-life balance (Younes, 1998) and feeling imposter syndrome (Lininger et al., 2016) but do not know how those challenges may be different for men or other genders. The support women may need during transitions can also look different from that of men (Schlossberg, 1984). Additionally, while there is literature around peer support of graduate students (Apugo, 2017; Hardré & Pan, 2017; Portnoi & Kwong, 2001; Weidman et al., 2001) and socialization (Strayhorn, 2012; Weidman et al., 2001) there is no other friendship group literature at the master's student level. These differences between the experiences of women and others, and the lack of depth in the friendship group literature, leads to the need for further research to understand the experiences of master's level friendship groups with different combinations of backgrounds, ethnicities, sexual orientations, religions, and genders.

While this study mentions study groups as a connector for the friendship group, it contains less depth on how study groups can serve as a source of socialization and connection. Shaw (2011) found study groups to be effective among 24 master's women in curriculum and instruction. The study focused on the academic benefits of participating in study groups and not

on the socialization and connection created in these spaces. Bartle and Brodwin (2006) discussed study groups in preparing for comprehensive exams during a master's program. Most of their conclusions include relying on faculty as a source of support, again not including socialization or connection. Hartnett and Katz (1977) focused on the needs of doctoral students and suggested, "Peer exchange of ideas, mutual encouragement, and critique are vital both for the intellectual life of teachers and their effectiveness in the classroom" [referring to teaching undergraduates] (p. 660). In that study, the focus was the experiences within doctoral programs, and the study focused on the academic experience and benefits of being in a study group. These studies and also the findings from this study leave room for research of study groups as a source of socialization and connection in master's programs.

The findings in this study included experiences of the friendship group members meeting by sitting near each other in class, talking before and after class, and interacting through group activities in class. The literature could expand on the specific experiences gained in master's classes which served as connectors of peers to further inform instructional practices. Discovering the types of assignments, activities, and projects that bring peers together in class could benefit master's students and further inform instructional practices.

There are also implications for the role of friendship groups in career development and career decision making among women master's students. New studies could expand more specifically into the experiences in a friendship group as it pertains to career decision making and career development following completion of a master's degree. Additionally, there may be other factors that could also be investigated beyond peer support in friendship groups which contribute to career decision making and career development such as familial influence, finances, geographic location, or opportunities for advancement.

Summary

This case study was designed to inform future master's level students, faculty, administration, and professional women of how women in an informal cohort (friendship group) made meaning of their experiences during and following their master's program. In this chapter, the findings were situated in the literature and interpreted through the lens of symbolic interactionism as a mechanism for understanding how the women made meaning of their experiences in the friendship group. Additionally, implications for practice provided practical ways the findings from this study can inform faculty, administrators, master's students, and working professional women. Lastly, the implications for research suggest ways this study could be expanded to further explore friendship groups, peer-to-peer connection, and socialization among master's students.

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Appendix A - Recruitment Email

Dear _____ (Name of Possible Participant),

I am writing to seek your interest and availability in participating in a research study with the goal of understanding the experiences of women who were in a friendship group during graduate school. As a member of our friendship group, I am very interested in having you as a participant in my study, and gaining a deeper understanding of your experiences with storytelling as a teaching and learning tool.

The timeline of the study is from June 2021 – April 2022. As a participant, you would be asked to participate in two interviews with me that would last around one hour each, in which we would have a conversation about your experiences during and following graduate school. Additionally, I would be interested in using any emails shared between members of the friendship group during 2007-2009 and also select social media posts with your consent. As a participant, you would be free to withdraw from the study at any point and/or choose to not respond to any question in an interview you find uncomfortable.

If participating in this study is of interest to you, and you are available to do so, I would like to visit with you in July 2021 to further discuss the study including research purpose and rationale and what you can expect as a participant (e.g. time and types of questions to be asked). After this meeting, if you remain interested in participating, I will provide you with an informed consent form to sign.

Thank you so much for your consideration. This research will be helpful to college faculty and administrators who want to know more about how women master's level students navigate their degrees. I look forward to hearing back from you!

Best Regards,

Dana Nordyke

Appendix B - Timeline

Dates	Duration of activity	Description	Participant role
December 2020	1 week	Consulted with Dr. Craft and other professors about timeline & topic	None
	All Study	Reflective journaling	None
April – May 2021	2 months	Proposal to dissertation committee	None
May – June 2021	20 hours	Submitted for IRB approval	None
June 2021	1 week	Contacted participants by email	Decided whether or not they wish to participate
July 2021	+/- 60 minutes	Met participants in-person. Data source #1: Performed individual interviews with researcher journaling/observations	Met with researcher to answer any questions about study. Responded to open-ended questions
July 2021	120 minutes	Data source #2: Performed photo or document elicited group interview with researcher journaling/observations	Shared stories/documents/websites
August 2021	2 weeks	Transcribed group and individual interviews	None
August 2021	1 week	Member check with each participant via email	Responded to transcript of individual interview
September 2021	2 weeks	Preliminary data analysis	None

September 2021	1 week	Data source #3: Performed document analysis of emails	None
September 2021	40 hours	Performed preliminary coding for both interviews and document analysis	None
September 2021	6 hours	Developed categories	None
September 2021	20 hours	Determined themes from categories and codes utilizing reflective journaling and created visual diagrams	None
November 2021	30 minutes	Member check	Reviewed themes and sub-themes for accuracy
November 2021	10 hours	Begin writing data analysis	None
December – February 2021	25 hours	Final write-up	None
March 2022		Defense	None

Appendix C - Informed Consent

PROJECT TITLE: Confidants: Experiences of a long-term women's graduate student friendship group

PROJECT APPROVAL DATE:

PROJECT EXPIRATION DATE: **LENGTH OF STUDY:** **11 months**

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Dr. Christy Craft, Professor

CO-INVESTIGATOR(S): Dana Nordyke, Graduate Student

CONTACT DETAILS FOR PROBLEMS/QUESTIONS: Dr. Christy Craft, ccraft@ksu.edu, 785-532-5940

IRB CHAIR CONTACT INFORMATION: For the subject should they have questions or wish to discuss on any aspect of the research with an official of the university or the IRB, please contact: Rick Scheidt, Chair, Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects, 203 Fairchild Hall, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS 66506, (785) 532-3224; Cheryl Doerr, Associate Vice President for Research Compliance, 203 Fairchild Hall, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS 66506, (785) 532-3224

PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH: The purpose of this study is to explore how five women who attended graduate school together made meaning of their experiences while participating in an all-women friendship group both during and after the master's program. By examining the following questions, I hope to gain an understanding of what it meant for five women to be in a graduate friendship group even after graduate school. This study addresses two research questions: How do women who developed a friendship group during a non-cohort master's program make meaning of the friendship group and its value as it relates to their personal and professional aspirations and transitions during graduate school? And, what were the lived experiences of women in a friendship group, which developed during a master's program, following their master's degrees?

PROCEDURES OR METHODS TO BE USED: This study will include one individual open-ended interview, one photo elicited group interview with others in the friendship group, and document analysis as data collection methods. Interviews will be the primary data collection method. Interviews will be conducted at least twice with each participant. In the photo elicited group interview, participants will be asked to share photos. Interviews will be held in a quiet and private space or virtually via Zoom, where the participant feels most comfortable. These interviews should last around one hour each and will be audio recorded and transcribed. Additionally, document analysis will be used to analyze emails from between 2007-2009 and social media posts.

RISKS OR DISCOMFORTS ANTICIPATED: Minimal risk is anticipated in this study. Some discomfort may be experienced in reflecting and discussing experiences from the past.

Participants will be free to choose not to respond to any questions that cause them too much discomfort, and to withdraw from the study at any point. Participants are also free to choose to not participate in this study at all without penalty.

BENEFITS ANTICIPATED: Understanding the experiences of graduate student women in a friendship group during a non-cohort graduate program will inform administrators, faculty, and mostly future graduate students.

EXTENT OF CONFIDENTIALITY: I will take all steps possible to ensure confidentiality. I will use password-protected folders and laptops to store all data related to the study. I will omit any identifying information from the interview sessions with participants to ensure the information included in the results and discussion is accurate and permissible to include. We will remove any information participants do not wish to be shared.

Terms of participation: I understand this project is research, and that my participation is voluntary. I also understand that if I decide to participate in this study, I may withdraw my consent at any time, and stop participating at any time without explanation, penalty, or loss of benefits, or academic standing to which I may otherwise be entitled.

Do you agree for the sessions to be audio-recorded? (Please circle one) Yes No

Do you agree to bring photos and participate in a photo elicited group interview and also an individual interview? (Please circle one) Yes No

Do you agree to allow the researcher to utilize content from emails and social media posts for document analysis? (Please circle one) Yes No

Signed Name

Date

Printed Name

Appendix D - Interview Protocol

Interview #1 Guide (Semi-Structured)

Length: 60 minutes

Primary Goal: to see things the way you see them... like a conversation with focus on your experiences, opinions, and feelings. There are no right or wrong answers here. I'm interested in genuinely understanding your experiences.

To begin, please take your time in drawing a detailed timeline of your experience in a friendship group from the beginning of graduate school to now. Would you talk me through what you are adding as you go?

What are some transitions you made when entering or moving through your master's program, and how, if at all, was this friendship group involved in them?

How did the friendship group help you through personal challenges throughout your master's education?

Can you think of specific times when you reached out to your friendship group during your master's program for any reason? Please share about each one.

Can you think of specific times when someone in the friendship group reached out to you for support? Please share about each one.

Tell me about being a woman in graduate school. What challenges did you face?

Why do you think that the members of the friendship group were able to stay connected?

Tell me about an experience you have had with a member of the friendship group which positively influenced you.

In what ways has your life been altered as a result of being in this friendship group?

What were your experiences in this friendship group as you transitioned out of graduate school?

What are some examples of things you talked about among the friendship group during graduate school? After graduate school?

Do you think being all-women impacted the dynamic of the friendship group?

Examples of Follow-up Questions

If you mention something significant but do not go into a lot of detail or I want to know more about a specific topic you mention, I will utilize follow-up questions such as:

1. What did you do then?
2. How did you react to ____?
3. Could you say some more about that?
4. What do you mean by ____?
5. Do you mean that ____?
6. That is really interesting. Can you tell me more?

Interview #2: Photo-Elicited Group Interview

Preparing Participants: After participants have completed the consent to participate and the first individual interview, I will have a discussion to prepare them for the photo-elicited group interview.

What to Bring: A photo that you feel describes the meaning of the friendship group to you.

What to Expect: You will have an opportunity to share your photo, tell stories, and discuss more about your friendship group in a gathering with the other members of the friendship group. The interview will be approximately one hour (we won't limit the time) and will be recorded using ZOOM.

During the Photo-elicited Group Interview: I'll start with purpose of the interview. The purpose of this interview to learn more about the meaning of the friendship group and explore its value to your personal and professional aspirations. I'll then remind the participants that their responses and discussion will be treated confidentially by myself as the researcher. Next, I would discuss that I cannot guarantee how other members of this group may share information outside of the group but my goal is for this to be a safe place for sharing.

Interview Questions

1. How did you come to join this group of women?
2. Tell me about your photo and take me to that place and time.
 - a. Why did you choose this particular photo?
 - b. What emotion comes to mind when you think about that photo?
 - c. How would you describe the members of the friendship group during that time?
 - d. What responses do the other participants have about that memory? Feel free to discuss.
3. What meaning did the friendship group have for you personally during your master's program?
 - a. How do you describe your professional development or growth during that time?
4. How do you describe transitions you faced both during and after graduate school? What were those like for you?

5. Can you think of a challenging time during or after graduate school that the group faced together? Tell me about that experience.
6. Wrap up: What else would you like me to know about this group of women in your friendship group?

Examples of Follow-up Questions

If you mention something significant but do not go into a lot of detail or I want to know more about a specific topic you mention, I will utilize follow-up questions such as:

1. What did you do then?
2. How did you react to ____?
3. Could you say some more about that?
4. What do you mean by ____?
5. Do you mean that ____?
6. That is really interesting. Can you tell me more?

Structuring Statements

I would like to move on to a different topic.

Relate what is said to what was previously said.

Gently challenge what was said if there are inconsistencies in responses

Appendix E - Member Checking

Email Correspondence

Hi ____,

Thank you again for completing the individual interview on Saturday. The interview attached is transcribed word-for-word. Would you check review the attached draft of the interview transcript to ensure accuracy. If you want to change anything for meaning, etc. you can send me any alterations.

Thank you much,

Dana

Hi ____,

Do you have a pseudonym that you would prefer for my final report? Your information will be handled confidentiality. Your name, the names of your family members, and the name of your location will not be included in the final report. If you do not have a preference, I am happy to choose a random name for you.

Thanks,

Dana

Hi ____,

Can you take a moment to review the themes I have developed from the data? Do you feel like those are fitting given the discussions we had and the email or social media data presented?

Thanks,

Dana

Figure 5.1. Visual Diagram Used to Establish Themes

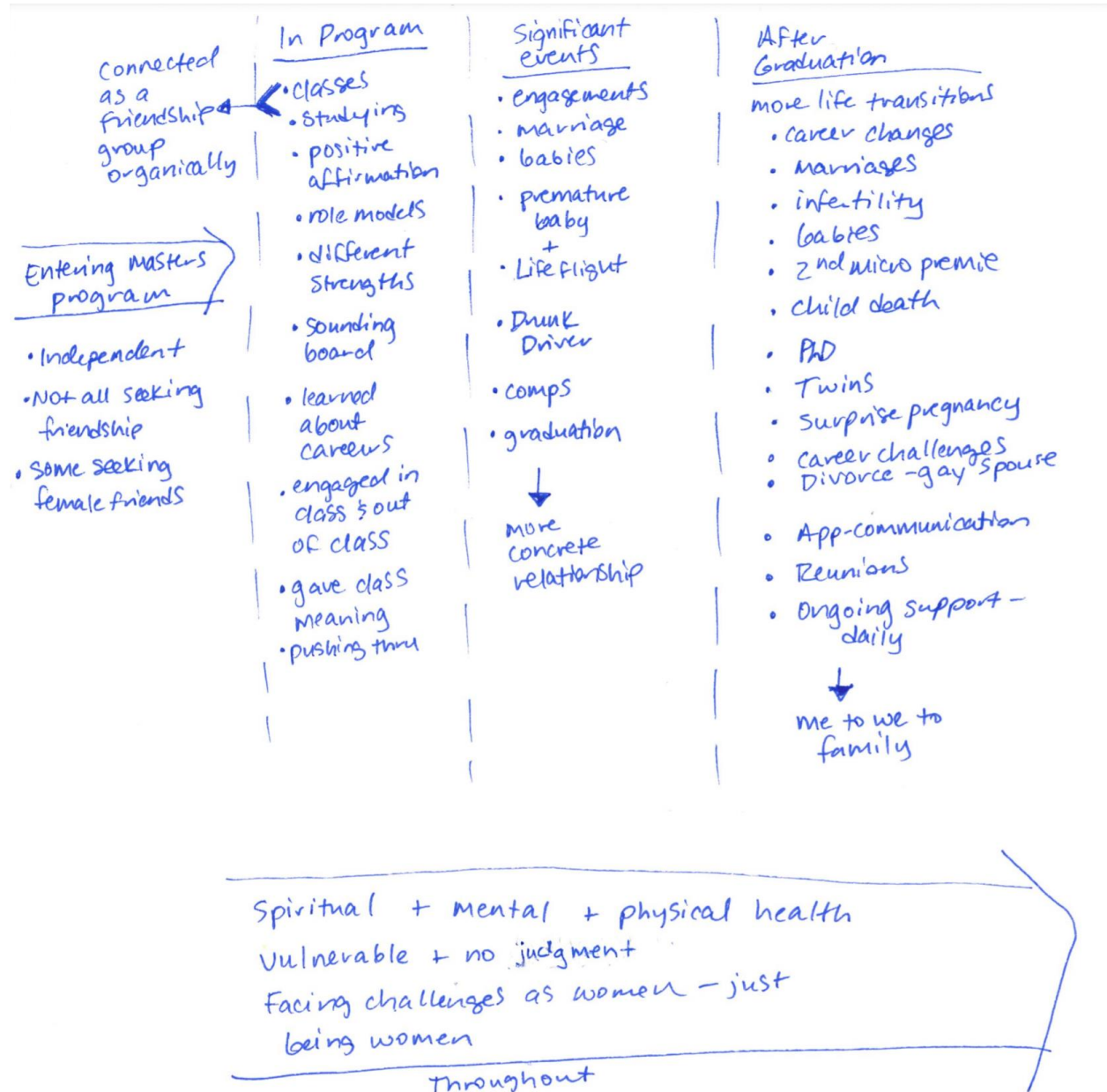


Figure 5.2. Visual Diagram Used to Establish Themes

