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Voices Rising: Exploring the Tensions of Homeschooled Women Defining Themselves within a Religious Culture

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VOICES RISING: EXPLORING THE TENSIONS OF HOMESCHOOLED WOMEN
DEFINING THEMSELVES WITHIN A RELIGIOUS CULTURE

by

NATALIE S. IMMINGS

(Under the Direction of Robert Lake)

ABSTRACT

Homeschooling is a familiar form of education, but nuances such as purposes, curriculum and impact on students are less understood due to minimal studies and lack of participation. Existing research has focused on motivations for homeschooling; however glaring gaps exist regarding the impact on student development. This study is essential due to concerns regarding the impact on student identity as well as the recent increase in the number of homeschoolers from a pandemic and other political trends. In an effort to pull back the curtain on the dominant conservative Christian homeschool milieu this study employed a qualitative ethnographic methodology which allowed the voices of female students to articulate the realities of their experience and impact on their adulthood. The study focused on the question “How do homeschooled women develop a definition of their roles as women?” while also considering the process of transmission of beliefs and realities of gender roles. In order to address the research question the study applied communication and self-efficacy theoretical frameworks which allowed analysis of complicated conversations within the homeschool culture. This cultural study included six women from three different families within the same community who had all been homeschooled from kindergarten through twelfth grade and whose families espoused conservative Christian values. Data was collected over two interview cycles including small group interviews and individual interviews. The results of the study challenge previous literature

regarding perceived indoctrination and control as well as establishes a clear picture of this culture's feminist viewpoint, but does reinforce a need for more research regarding explicit health and sexual education for conservative Christian homeschool families.

INDEX WORDS: Homeschool, Conservative Christian, Complicated conversations, Self-efficacy, Female identity, Identity formation, Communication patterns

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DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

COLLEGE OF EDUCATION

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to the people who helped me become who I am today. To the one who formed me and knew me in the womb before I was born, to my parents who not only raised me, but taught me and invested in the potential they saw inside beyond the messy handwriting and disorganized room, and to my husband who challenged what I thought I knew about myself, seeing a deeper side of me and treasuring me even in the midst of my own fears. Thank you all for having faith in me and pushing me to finish this great adventure.

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My academic journey has been richly blessed by so many, but first and foremost, my parents, Jo and Gary Schulz, who chose to homeschool me which allowed me to discover how I learned and discover my passion for understanding how our world and history shapes who we are.

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I cannot thank my committee members enough for their continuous support as I navigated moving, changing jobs, and a global pandemic in the midst of grounding my ideas and completing this research. Thank you for your patience, encouragement, and feedback. Thank you to Dr. Kessler for challenging me to even begin a doctoral program so long ago when I was a young teacher just seeking National Board Certification. Thank you to my chair, Dr. Lake, for balancing space and freedom with direction and encouragement as I chose to study a topic such as homeschooling.

Finally, much appreciation and thanks to the six participants who gave their voice to this research, sharing their experiences and personal stories while trusting that I would honor their experience with transparency and honesty so that others might see them and understand them.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Education is the gateway to democratic life and students are the heart of that education. Methods of education have grown, expanded, changed in purpose and impact while students have remained the consistent heart of any educational program. American public education is typically the most talked about, criticized and researched system of education, yet there are still other impactful systems of schooling including home education. Home education is not a new concept; however, the modern practice of homeschooling has changed in both purpose and practice compared to historical home education. Over the past several decades, media coverage and research into homeschooling trends has informed our understanding, but a deeper look at the coverage reveals it is only the tip of the iceberg, primarily with regards to the impact of homeschooling on students and society in terms of academics, career readiness, citizenship and social development and identity. Just as with any educational program, homeschooling must be examined specifically with regard to the impact on the students themselves, particularly minority populations. When differentiating between types of homeschooling, at least based on the purpose of homeschooling, understanding the impact of the practice on gender is important and relevant as a first step toward understanding the experiences of all student populations within homeschooling, especially when religion plays a central role in the motivation or purpose of the homeschool.

Background of the Problem

The alternative milieu of home education has many gaps in research and Jones et al. (2015) argue that “we must understand the social and historical context of both traditional and alternative schooling regarding religious freedom, cultural relevance, and the political purposes” (p. 394). Examining the culture of religiously conservative Christian homeschool addresses all

three of these areas as the purpose and culture of such homeschooling seems to be grounded in religious freedom and pushes back against any form of political control thereby creating a unique culture of education. The very culture of homeschooling makes this study a necessity, yet it also presents a unique difficulty as the community seeks privacy and seclusion. Collom (2004) notes that many studies of homeschool families have extremely low response rates, seemingly confirming this desire for privacy. Research that has explored homeschooling has approached the community from without, studying the movement at the surface level and not delving into the culture or voices from within, which arguably limits the understanding of this educational phenomenon. Collom (2004) notes that most research focuses on the motivations for home education and the response rates for quantitative studies are very low. Each of the studies cited fail to consider the students as curriculum, yet the students are significant. While estimates of homeschool students are the only way to quantify the number, the National Center for Education Statistics gathered enough data to estimate that homeschooling is growing at a faster rate and, as of 2003, 1.1 million students were homeschooling in the United States (Princiotta et al. 2004, p. 1). The same study also confirmed that one of the two dominant reasons for homeschooling (30% indicated) was “a desire to provide religious or moral instruction,” further supporting the significance of understanding the cultural impacts of homeschooling on students (p. 2). Since the early 2000s the rate of homeschooling has continued to increase by another 50% to approximately 1.7 million homeschooled students as of 2016, growth from 1.7% in 1999 to 3.4% of the school age population in the United States (Grady, 2017). A 2013 report by the National Center for Educational Statistics reported that 64% of homeschool families expressly homeschool in order to provide religious education with a total of 77% desiring to provide some type of moral instruction (Noel et al., 2013). While Grady (2017) indicates that though religious

beliefs may have waned in comparison to concerns about public school safety and climate, 16% of homeschool parents in his study still cite it as their main motivation for homeschooling, placing religious values in the top three factors influencing parental schooling decisions.

While this study is not specifically examining religion, it is exploring how the conservative Christian culture of a homeschool impacts identity development thus recognizing the influences of religious beliefs from parents is relevant. Myers (1996) specifically examined trends in religious inheritance or transmission from parent to child. In this detailed study he concluded that those from this specific conservative Protestant background and having an educated father figure with a mother spending extensive time with children has the greatest transmission of beliefs to children carrying into adulthood (Myers, 1996). This magnifies the question of how women are specifically impacted by this schooling environment with regards to their beliefs about gender. Given that homeschooled women are even less represented as this alternative milieu has been private, desiring minimal governmental oversight or involvement, how the conservative religious nature of their schooling impacts self is necessary to explore. Education serves many purposes, primarily students, thus who these female students are and the impact of their education on the developing definition of self is highly relevant to the field of education. Bringing the voices of women from the quiet, secluded, conservative Christian homeschool culture to the forefront is both timely and relevant. Examining this alternative milieu of education from a cultural perspective is warranted in order to open other doors for continued research.

Statement of the Problem

Schooling impacts an individual's identity from explicit curriculum exposure to informal curriculum that subliminally shapes beliefs about social constructs, roles and relationships. The

role of parents in a child's education is frequently studied from impacts on academic success, to motivation to resilience and emotional development. More modern studies have sought to establish a link between student development and success based on the parents' role in creating a home-learning environment supportive of or as an extension to the public school experience, with most studies noting a positive correlation (Hill & Tyson, 2009; Jeynes, 2007, 2012; Mellon & Moutavelis, 2009; Pomerantz et al., 2007; Warner, 2010). Given the high interest in parental impact on students enrolled in public education, the impact on homeschooled students may be exponentially more powerful or meaningful. Additionally, when examining home education from the perspective of educational theory, this study is further warranted.

Theorists, such as Dewey (1899/2011), have posited that the goal of education is to shape good citizens and thus the social constructs developed in a homeschool setting are even more influential as the home and school merge into one force. The question stands, how does the conservative Christian homeschool experience shape the identity and future roles of women raised and schooled in this alternative milieu? There is minimal research surrounding this milieu and much comes from the perspective of the male father figure. Research also suggests that the influences of males within the conservative Christian homeschool culture is patriarchal in nature with some extreme possibilities of abuse. Outside research of the movement makes sweeping claims without full understanding, justifying opinions in a few examples or by making assumptions of the unknown. This is problematic on several levels. First, this is indicative of a significant gap in research which must be corrected. Secondly, the repercussions on students if problems do exist and are not addressed may be far reaching and incredibly damaging. Finally, if the research is based on false assumptions, the opposite repercussions are equivalently damaging to a meaningful educational movement. Bartholet (2020) argues in the *Arizona Law Review* that

homeschooled students are in immediate danger, referring to the conservative Christian movement as a “regime” wrought with abuses, yet concrete citations are sparse, specific references reliant upon a single publication by one individual, Tara Westover, about her own experiences or referencing an anonymous group with an expired website, Homeschool Alumni Reaching Out. While the accusations must definitely be addressed, the course of action proposed by Bartholet (2020) and Waddell (2010) for extreme regulation and limitation of religious homeschooling may be premature or irresponsible.

There are clearly two parts to the problem of the gap in research of the homeschool milieu, specifically as it relates to the female experience. First, as an unknown, the participants have no voice, no input regarding the value or challenges of the experience on any level. Secondly, the gap in verified research leaves outside researchers concerned with issues of child protection and well-being without valid information from which to draw conclusions or propose policies and legislation. Filling this gap in research is key to promoting freedom at all levels. Thus, the challenge is in determining how all of these possible influences have shaped women from this culture and understanding possible implications so that families and communities can take appropriate action. It must be recognized that there are public assumptions regarding women from this culture in terms of subjugation and oppression, yet without their voices these are just assumptions which can lead to further subjugation of these women. This study is one that can begin to rectify the “history of exclusion” that has excluded not only people of color, but “women and immigrants in major proportions” (Jones et al., 2015, p. 394). While this study will not intentionally seek out an ethnically diverse population, rather focusing on women overall, if the opportunity is available to be inclusive of people of color or those of immigrant status, their voices would be encouraged in this exploratory research in order to broaden its scope.

Purpose of the Study

Curriculum studies facilitates discourse regarding sociological impacts resulting from formal and informal schooling. The alternative milieu of homeschooling has grown in popularity along with outside critiques of the milieu, yet the voices within the movement have been more silent, particularly from segments that seek privacy. The level of privacy and silence from the homeschool movement is further substantiated in Chapter Two, but given that homeschool participation statistics are estimates, even by prominent homeschool researchers, this indicates a lack of public knowledge of the movement and intentional non-reporting by families in this community exacerbates the issue (Ray, 2021). Additionally, Ray's (2021) collection of research summarily indicates positive results including social and psychological, yet he concludes with a statement that research up to this point have struggled to be conclusive with respect to impact on students. This study seeks to bring silenced voices to the forefront to inspire further discourse. Discourse is needed between various stakeholders such as public schools and homeschools as well as government policymakers and homeschools. More importantly, discourse is needed between homeschooled students and those impacting their education, namely parents. This study will serve as a springboard for homeschooled students to launch their chorus of voices and state their lived truth.

Subjectivity Statement

My relationship to this study is important to understand as it not only positions me with privilege, but in understanding my position I can work to limit my assumptions with regards to the results. As a member of this culture, I have the unique ability to ask questions and speak to these women, yet at the same time, as Ellis and Bochner (1996) articulate about subjectivity and positionality,

Can't we discuss this perspective and help our readers connect themselves to these essays and studies without necessarily privileging our voices? I think it is dishonest to pretend we're invisible...Instead of masking our presence, leaving it at the margins, we should make ourselves more personally accountable for our perspective. (p. 15)

My relationship with the topic is relevant and essential. As Davies (2008) notes, topics emerge from various factors including "personal" and "daily life" as this is often the heart of social research (p. 30).

So what is my position within this study? As an educational practitioner my values, beliefs and philosophies have been grounded in curriculum studies without me specifically recognizing that fact until much later. I became a history and social scientist educator not just because I was passionate about the content, but because I believed students needed to have a context for who they were, how they became, and then develop a larger context for themselves in the world so they could see their own purpose. I also believed, and still do, that all students are unique in how they learn, yet all are equally intelligent and gifted. Combining these driving beliefs, I became passionate about studying student empowerment. This particular study of how women from a conservative Christian homeschool community develop a definition of self and womanhood was born as I grew more self-reflective, realizing that I had "become" without understanding my own context. This study needs to be larger than myself as it is not about self-aggrandizement, but it is important to acknowledge the spark that began the study of a larger culture that has impacted many women.

Given my philosophical framework of students as curriculum with a specific interest in the experiences of women in a conservative Christian homeschool culture, why is that situation or context important to the field of curriculum studies? A key element to curriculum studies, and

to the philosophical perspective of students as curriculum, is the idea of culture. Thus, the theory of cultural studies speaks directly to the design of this research. Just as Dewey (1938/1998) and Schubert (1986) note the value of experience in education, that experience will be interpreted within the influence of culture, and how much more so in a homeschool education setting. Beginning a study through a cultural studies research framework supports my philosophical framework. Research that is engaged in cultural work grapples with not just describing the culture, but facilitating discourse, examining relationships and power structures in terms of what they are and how they have come to exist and finally allowing for challenges to these cultural dynamics (Anyon, 2009; Apple, 2010; Hytten, 2011). While I have always held the philosophical beliefs for this kind of research, the specific idea for this study was born out of a personal struggle with identity and perceived oppression. I grew up in the unique educational culture of a conservative Christian homeschool. As such I have developed a strong sense of self that I never really considered until I began the doctoral program at Georgia Southern University. As I engaged in class discussions, I often felt that my voice was unrecognized or silenced as others made judgments of women with my background, believing them to be oppressed. I began to question whether I was oppressed or free. As I reflected, I considered that if education is part of our journey of freedom, was my particular educational journey of conservative Christian homeschooling reflected in the literature on education, human development and freedom? What voice did my lived experience have in this dialogue? Reading about power structures, oppression and freedom, I began to question even more how I fit into the ideas of feminism and what implications these have on my life as an educator.

My experiences, and thus subjectivity, must be recognized at the forefront to provide context as well as acknowledge my role in facilitating the ethnographic study. I attended public

school for kindergarten and first grade, very much unaware that I was a struggling student. My older sister and I then attended a small Christian school near our home. Small is an understatement. There were only a couple of second grade students and the classroom held first through third grade. During that year I was vaguely aware my parents were discussing whether to homeschool. This was a significant decision as homeschooling was presently illegal in my home state, so when they chose to homeschool my sister and me for our fifth and third grade years, respectively, official curriculum was purchased and a family friend with teacher certification was asked to “monitor” our family. I remember the first time the truancy officer came to our home. I was only eight and I do not recall exactly what was said, but she looked through all of our lesson plans and it was serious. Later that year our family attended a protest at the state capitol building. I remember being proud of who we were and that we were protesting to defend what we were doing.

During the four years I was homeschooled our family grew from four children, two of which were school aged, to six children. After I returned to public school my family grew to a total of nine children, the vast majority of whom were homeschool through either eighth grade or twelfth grade. My mother worked tirelessly, choosing curriculum for each of us individually, writing individualized lesson plans, setting up a daily chore and school schedule, listening to us read, maintaining records and running a household with more and more children. I remember her writing the weekly lessons in our individual lesson books each Sunday evening, books and resources spread across the dining table. Over time my father, a chemical engineer, took on lesson planning for math and science or partnered with my mother in that role.

School was important, so important that it was individualized for us. Most of my formal curriculum was Abeka curriculum, written from a Christian perspective. The English curriculum

included formal grammar such as diagramming sentences and the texts were moral examples based on biblical themes. The science curriculum taught creationism, and more so, taught from the perspective that all things were designed by God, so chemistry and physics revealed the orderly nature and creativity of God. We also chose our own literature for personal reading. We did not have a television, so entertainment was listening to the radio or reading. On a weekly basis I checked out copious numbers of books, often reading biographies of women. My favorites were First Ladies such as Mary Todd Lincoln and the first female doctors such as Elizabeth Blackwell. While this was my curriculum, I began to see how education was personal for our own growth and capacity. My mother began reading about learning styles which led to us taking personal assessments to reveal our learning style. I was auditory. Very auditory. This explained why I took so much longer to complete my lessons compared to my visual sister. I talked through every single thing. All the time. My brother, four and a half years younger, was extremely tactile so his math and reading took on a different, personalized nature as my mother began to deviate from Abeka curriculum. His reading included words on note cards that he could push around the floor to make sentences. His math included a physical scale for numbers on each side where mathematical functions balanced out as he placed the correct numbers on each side of the scale. Homeschooling was about us, about me, as a learner and person. My sister and I took oil painting with the retired ladies at the local Catholic church when I was in fifth and sixth grade. My mother enrolled just me in critical thinking and art classes at the local center for arts where I could explore pottery as well as brain puzzles.

As noted earlier, our daily school schedule included chores. Most children have chores, but ours were intended to be included in routine and thus were part of the curriculum. From a young age I learned to do dishes, laundry, cooking, scrubbing and so forth. Chores were not

based on gender, rather age. When I was tall enough, I was old enough. When I advanced, someone younger took over my previous job, be it emptying the dishwasher or sorting clothes, typically reserved for shorter and younger, to washing dishes or running the actual laundry loads each day, reserved for taller and older. We had to manage our time, remembering to change a laundry load between lessons. Sometimes my mother combined household chores with academic learning. I recall my brother learning to read by cooking and reading recipes from books he chose at the library based on his interest in new cuisine.

School included our beliefs too. We began having church at home on Sundays, which was simply an extension of our daily school. We were expected to read our Bible every day. How and what we read was mostly up to us as individuals and on Sundays we had to share what God had been teaching us that week. I learned how to read and understand what I read. I learned to search the Bible on different topics and critique other things I read based on scriptures. Whether my parents intended or not, the critical thinking was just as foundational to my development as the religious beliefs I gained from this type of study. When I was a teenager, either high school or college aged, I recall an argument I had with my father where this became a key point. I do not remember what we were arguing about, but we did have a different opinion about a decision I was making. I distinctly remember retorting to him that “you raised me to think and question and measure everything against the standard of the Bible, so why won’t you trust me? Why can’t my conclusion be right? You taught me to question everything, and that should include you, that only the Bible is definitive.” This hidden curriculum of thinking and questioning was likely not what my father wanted to hear in that moment as I do not believe he changed his opinion or decision about that specific situation, and he expected me to follow his direction as he was in a position of biblical authority as my father. However, the long-term

training me to think, question and argue was a powerful aspect of my home education that impacted me equal to the religious foundation. This was evidenced by my choices in college and getting engaged to be married without his permission or blessing because I had prayed about my future and felt certain of God's direction in my life.

Each of these experiences shaped who I am as a person, who I am as a woman, who I am as a Christian believer, and who I am as an educator. These experiences were powerful and unique. These experiences were so powerful in shaping my identity that I clearly remember a conversation with other students in my seventh grade English class during my first year back in public school. We were all talking about having a boyfriend or girlfriend. I distinctly told the group that I knew who I was and what I was looking for in someone to marry and there was no way some seventh grader was husband material, so why bother to date. I told them I was not interested in kissing, that I did not care if I went to a party. Later, after high school, some of my closest friends talked about the peer pressure they experienced throughout middle and high school. I was astounded. I never felt peer pressure. I firmly believe that my sense of self, awareness of my direction and self-worth shielded me from such peer pressure experiences. In fact, I had many male friends, but the only person I have ever dated or kissed is the man I married, and I waited to do both until we had been friends long enough that I knew he was the one for me. Some people may view this as a sheltered and controlled existence, but at the time I felt that I was making powerful decisions for myself because I knew where I was going in life, never feeling limited by my desire to be a wife and mother, possibly ending my professional career to fulfill those more traditional roles. While I desired to be a wife and mother, I simultaneously made plans to be a doctor until I realized I could not tolerate blood and then was

inspired to be a teacher. I worked tirelessly to plan my college education and career with full academic support of my parents.

Today I am a career public educator with a passion for teaching high need students, either socio-economically or academically. I am married and enjoy being a housewife when I am not working, particularly cooking, which was part of my daily routine with my mother (continuing even after I returned to public school). I am a lifelong learner and avid reader, having multiple degrees and twice earned National Board Teacher Certification. I am an advocate for taking care of your community, speaking out for children and the impoverished. Some may question if an individual from a religiously conservative Christian educational experience can also be feminist, particularly if one believes in the absolute truth of the Bible. From a personal standpoint I feel that I bridge both belief systems. I believe in the Bible, I believe in submitting to my husband, but I do not believe submission is an act of being a door mat, rather I believe it is an attitude of loving respect. I do not give up who I am within my relationship. Some feminist researchers might argue that I do not have a feminist identity if I do not reject my faith and become a collaborative activist; however, I think that I fit in the feminist continuum and have personal agency in all of my decisions (Aronson, 2003; Chua, Bhavnani, & Foran, 2000; Singh, 2007; Taylor, 1996). This is my experience and could be the experience of others within this movement.

I have come to the conclusion that no one else can write my story or the stories of women who were raised and educated in this culture. Our voices need recognition and space to truly be free as well. Greene (1988) further justifies such a personal study, arguing that

Troubled by impersonality, by abstract vantage points, I wanted people to name themselves and tell their stories when they made their statements. I came to believe (or I

was taught) that ‘reality’ referred, after all, to interpreted experience. Resisting the notion of a finished, predetermined, objective reality, I became fascinated not merely with multiple modes of interpretation, but with all that fed into interpretation from lived lives and sedimented meanings. (p. xii)

In my role as a researcher, I cannot ignore my positionality and subjectivity within the research. I am a homeschooled woman from a conservative Christian household. This positionality allows me to establish rapport with my subjects. My experience also empowered me to be a critical examiner, reflective in my personal practice, which is essential in appropriately placing my subjectivity in this study. My positionality gives me insight to ask certain questions, but I will need to be vigilant in not presupposing others’ experiences by using reflexivity to understand my own evolving subjectivity so that I can best facilitate their dialogue and meaning making. This unique positionality naturally led me to an ethnographic study as this is cultural work where I have the ability to ask questions. Following the methods outlined by Spradley (2016b), Janesick (2010), Ellis and Bochner (1986) and Whitson (2017) I will be able to protect the integrity of the research from my suppositions and experiences.

Research Questions

Conducting ethnographic research requires a recognition of self-limitations and assumptions, particularly when determining the purpose and overall research questions. My journey of self-exploration first led to the question “What are homeschooling women doing to empower their girls?” The challenge with this question is that it is based on an assumption limited by my own story and not a larger context of participants within the conservative Christian homeschool movement. This question assumes that women homeschooled by a conservative Christian mother develop a sense of empowerment as a woman. It also assumes that the mother has the greatest

influence, which, even though data suggests mothers “do” most of the schooling, the influence on womanhood may be more complex. Simply, there is not enough exploratory research to justify this as the primary research question. Janesick (1991) also warns that an ethnographic study should not seek to prove a theory or perspective (p. 115). My first question clearly has a bias and point to prove regarding mothers and the impact on their daughters. Jones et al., (2015) suggest a broader question when studying this alternative milieu, “How does curriculum that students learn help them to make meaning of their lives and the world around them?” (p. 394). Using this conceptual question as inspiration, a more powerful cultural study must ask “How do homeschooled women develop a definition of their roles as women?” supported by related questions including: *How do the values and beliefs of religiously conservative homeschooling families shape their view of the roles of women in family and society? What forces and influences shape a sense of self and beliefs about roles, relationships and responsibilities? Can homeschooled women feel empowered as women while maintaining a religiously conservative belief system? How does this contrast with the perceptions of others outside of this community? Is homeschooling a method of isolation and control or is it really a safe space from surveillance and control where women lead women in developing strong self-identity?*

These research questions facilitate storytelling that has the power to illustrate a more holistic, descriptive picture which can then lead to more analytical research questions that examine issues of parental roles or power structures. Janesick (1991) outlines eight types of ethnographic questions including questions that address hidden curriculum, social contexts, and theories or motivations of educators that impact their teaching and curriculum choices (p. 102). The primary research question and related questions all delve into the motivations of homeschool parents and the hidden curriculum of the homeschool experience. Reflecting back to the work of Michael

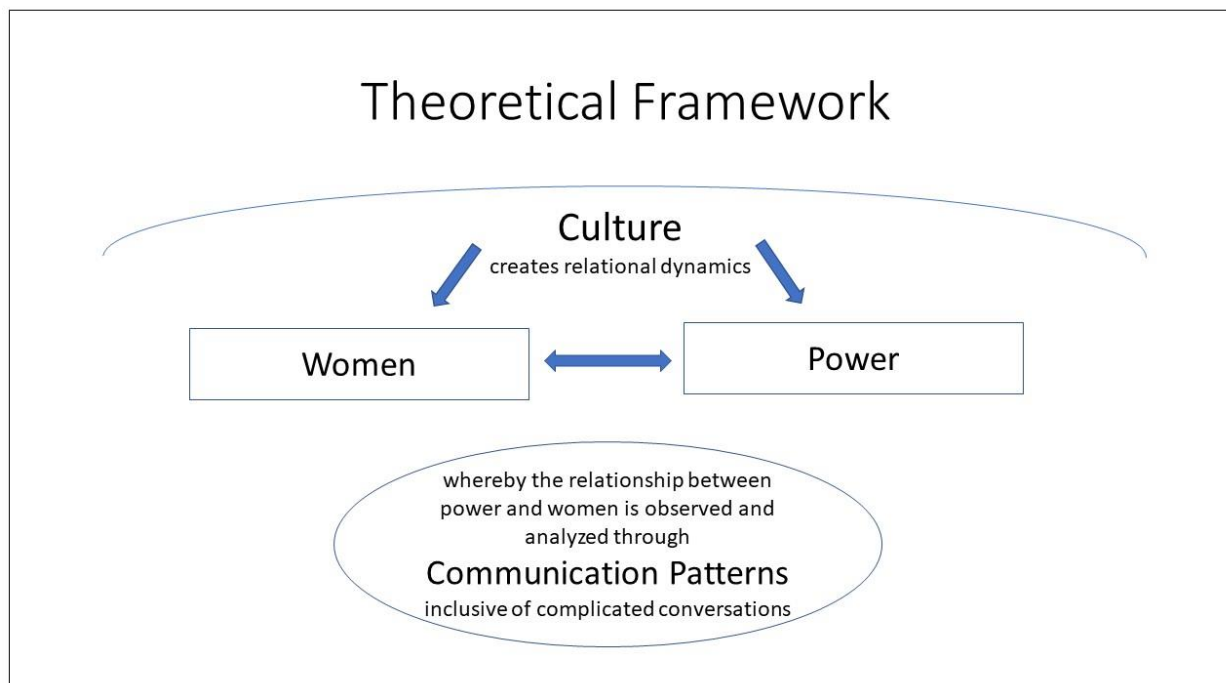
Apple (2010), these questions support possible critical analysis by relating to issues of knowledge power including

Whose knowledge is this? How did it become ‘official’? What is the relationship between this knowledge and the ways in which it is taught and evaluated and who has cultural, social, and economic capital in this society? Who benefits from these definitions of legitimate knowledge...? (p. 14)

My overarching questions seek to explore the dominant messages about women in this culture, how those are communicated and how the female students interpreted, and developed as a result of those messages.

Theoretical Framework

Cultural studies provide a framework for understanding the phenomenon of homeschooled women developing a sense of self or definition of what it means to be a woman. Cultural studies naturally frames the study given that a “culture can be seen as the ways that people live, interact, and make meaning in their lives. It involves such things as behaviors, beliefs, knowledge, institutions, artifacts, customs, morals, and habits” (Hyttén, 2011, p. 205). The cultural studies framework, with a communication lens, gives structure and purpose to the examination of homeschool beliefs, practices, knowledge creation and so forth. Through this lens, the inquiry focuses on how these components create experiences that impact identity formation related to being a woman and reveals power structures which allow for future critical analysis of resulting empowerment or oppression. This can be visualized in the following way:

Figure 1*Theoretical Framework Visualization*

The framework and lens for viewing the stories in this ethnography is essential for empowering those voices and setting the stage for future research. While theories of power similar to Black Feminist Thought are not the primary lens for this study, the issues of power being examined through this exploratory study may serve as a platform for future research and dialogue.

Education and Identity Theory

Experience and Identity Formation

Culture impacts identity, but how do we “see” that culture in action? The lived experiences and conversations within that culture reveal the culture. Lived experience is relevant and purposeful as educational leaders have been considering the role of students in curriculum and instruction for many decades, viewing the experience of students as the most significant factor in their development as a person. Dewey (1938/1998) and Kilpatrick (Kliebard, 2004) first

articulated the value in experience as education. In considering the role of experience on identity formation, we must go beyond students connecting to the learning and see how the students develop independent thinking processes for problem solving as that experience illustrates how they relate to others and the larger world, all components of identity. Dewey (1916/2016) articulates how experiential education forms the person, arguing that shared experiences “modifies the disposition of both the parties who partake in it” (p. 9). As a constructivist, Dewey saw the purpose of education as developing responsible citizens who would contribute to a free democracy. The change in student identity was clear to Dewey (1899/2011) as beyond the visible results of schooling “is the re-adjustment of mental attitude, the enlarged and sympathetic vision, the sense of growing power, and the willing ability to identify both insight and capacity with the interests of the world and man” (p. 35). The learning experience facilitates identity development in thinking capacity, thinking patterns, and global relationships.

Student Efficacy and Identity Formation

There is no denying that educational experiences impact the formation of a child. Dewey’s (1938/1988) theory of experience as education presents a constructivist view of student development that primarily addresses formal curriculum and how educational experiences develop thinking. These experiences outline identity development within the context of what content is acceptable to study and what careers are acceptable to pursue. However, identity formation is far more complex than learning subject matter content. One must also ask - how does identity formation take place informally? Developmental psychologists have many theories beginning with birth. As I am investigating the development of feminine identity in homeschooling, considering the hidden curriculum (Jackson, 1968) of relational contexts at older ages is even more important. The theories of behaviorist developmental psychologists delve into

the subtext of educational experience, examining how relationships and modeling impact ways of thinking and behaving based on understated acceptable roles. Deci and Flaste (1995) challenge many concepts of identity development including those used in modern education with regards to student behavior related to identity. The overarching theory addresses how social relationships build self-efficacy as part of individual identity. Deci and Flaste (1995) recognize that all social relationships, including parent-child, have elements of power and control whereby the socializing agent with power seeks to pass on core values and social mores, “thus play a central role in the conceptions of autonomy and control – and of authenticity and alienation” (p. 8). This overarching theory underscores key elements of home education where parents openly express a primary goal of transmitting conservative Christian values to their children and exercise utmost control by serving as both parent and educator. This research examines how young women develop a personal definition of womanhood and femininity and if there are elements of oppression or empowerment, which Deci and Flaste (1995) directly theorize.

The Family Communication Patterns Scale can serve as a tool for understanding the communication and power structures as well as responses by students (Bakar & Afthanorhan, 2016; Chaffee et al., 1971; Gupta & Geetika, 2019; Koerner et al., 2002; Rubin et al., 1994). The theory aligns with Deci and Flaste (1995) by breaking down communication into socio-oriented or conformity oriented which disempowers decision-making through tight control and concept-oriented or conversational oriented which invites conversations to develop thought processes and decision-making related to moral, ethical or controversial situations (Gupta & Geetika, 2019; Rubin et al., 1994). Evaluating communication patterns through this lens facilitates analysis of the impact of the educational experience on decision making and thus identity development.

Conceptualization and Application

Dewey presents educational theory that addresses key aspects to identity formation that directly relate to home education. Within the home, student experiences are a powerful mixture of hidden and formal curriculum that subliminally develop beliefs about roles, relationships and self-efficacy as well as openly deny or allow engagement with subjects, experiences and world views. Noddings (2005) challenges modern educators to extend Dewey's educational principles with regards to identity formation as "The structure of social relations has changed dramatically since Dewey wrote...schools should be committed to a great moral purpose: to care for children so that they, too, will be prepared to care" (p. 64). We see this example woven into stories of transformational education that resulted in vibrant students who cared for their greater world. From Schultz's (2008) writings about students tackling issues facing their community to Meier (2002) describing a public school take over and turn around in *The Power of Their Ideas*, the impact of education on who students become cannot be denied. "Schooling is part of child rearing. It's the place society formally expresses itself to young people on what matters" and thus who they become as people (Meier, 2002, p. 114).

The key to each of these theories is the idea of empowerment and control. Theorists including Patricia Hill Collins (2009b) link power to cultural dynamics through visualizations such as a matrix of domination outlining relationships based on positions within the culture. Directly applying these theories is difficult in a burgeoning study of an under-researched culture, thus applying communication theories first is more appropriate for this stage of discovery, even though application of power structure frameworks may be appropriate in analysis or future implications of this research. Therefore, in choosing a predominant communication lens, more appropriately, Deci and Flaste (1995) argue that analysis must consider methods of motivation as

these reveal power structures and resulting empowerment of the learner. Do the stories of homeschooled women reveal autonomy and intrinsic motivation or is it “imposed by some external source” (Deci & Flaste, 1995, p. 30)? The practices in the home can reveal self-efficacy or dominating power structures by examining the level of choice as choice gives way to problem solving and self-advocacy. Choice does not always mean there is no direction or guidance, but rather evidence of options and being heard by those who have the ability to exert control, in this instance, homeschooling parents.

Women and Identity

Women may form a personal identity differently due to their positions within the family and community. This is particularly relevant to understand so that external and internal realities are clearly delineated. Singh (2007) explains that a study of female identity must consider “women’s self-conception, the multiple social environments that are relevant to individual women and women’s relationship with those environments” (pp. 100-101). This set of criteria distill the arenas that impact the experiences and autonomy noted by previous theorists. In order to gather a full picture of a woman’s identity within any given culture, the inquiry must delve into these three areas. Interpreting women’s identity is more complex, requiring a shift from critiquing an environment or social system, such as family relationships within a homeschool, to the actual reality being shared by the women and being open to accepting an identity that may fall on a spectrum of personal power or agency (Singh, 2017). This is a delicate balance as the study seeks to understand *how* women have developed a definition of womanhood through the experience, but the study must first begin by understanding what that definition is for these women.

Identity and Home Education

Challenges of Homeschool Experience

Social identity develops from how we think and position ourselves in relationships and within a larger society. These positions illustrate values and positions of power that reveal oppression or freedom. In considering constructivist educational theory, specifically Dewey, education should strive to develop democratic citizens that value freedom and diversity of all. One of the challenges of homeschooling is that it has the possibility of isolation from diverse ideas and thus limit the value of caring for others. “In a democracy, students must realize that dialogue is central to democratic participation. Students need deep knowledge to debate myriad viewpoints; students must relish interacting with individuals with opposing views; students must attain capacities to process opinion into action” (Ornstein & Hunkins, 2017, p. 190). When educated in a single household, particularly a conservative Christian homeschool, the ideas espoused and practiced may not necessarily reflect the diversity being described by Ornstein and Hunkins (2017). Most perceptions of homeschool demographics paint the families to be homogenous and already part of the elite power structure, as expressed by Oliva (2009), as he claims that these parents tend to have higher education and income, thus more access and more power. Research within the homeschool movement challenges this claim. Ray (1997) conducted a significant study, gathering extensive demographic data on homeschool families. The median family income was \$43,000 and families averaged 3 children and one working parent. Both parents averaged post-secondary education consisting of 2-4 years (p. 30). This data reveals circumstances of highly involved parents with budgeting to allow for one parent to be home full time; however, the income and educational level does not completely concur with the outside assumptions of curriculum theorists. There are criticisms of Ray’s (1997) study, as noted in

Immings (2017) *Candidacy Exam – Doctoral Core*, that the participant selection was controlled, therefore presenting predictable results. Given the controversy surrounding homeschool families and experience, the question remains, does the conservative Christian homeschool experience value diversity, care and advocacy for others and how does this impact feminine identity development? Applying Deci and Flaste’s (1995) theory and using elements of the Family Communication Patterns Scale (Chaffee et al., 1971; Gupta & Geetika, 2019; Koerner et al., 2002; Rubin et al., 1994;) in this instance also provides insight into these power structures. As previously noted, choice is a key indicator of freedom and resulting self- efficacy and empowerment. Additionally, the use of love or acceptance as a manipulating tool to make certain choices is an indicator of negative control and decrease of autonomy in learning (Deci & Flaste, 1995, pp. 112-113).

Complicated Conversations

Education as experience begs the question of what kind of experience. The common thread in this theory is the dynamics and communication of key messages between parent and female child. Oakeshott (1959), Applebee (1996) and Pinar (2012) all address the idea that education, particularly the experience within education, is all a conversation. Pinar (2012) brings Oakeshott’s (1959) description of the conversational experience to a point that the experience is one “engaged in the experience of imagination” (p. 192). Applebee (1996) focuses this on education, bringing to the forefront the idea of discourse or conversations as essential for communicating the “traditions of knowledge” in “which we preserve and transform our cultural knowledge” (pp. 2-3). Essentially, within education, curriculum creates subsets of knowledge which become domains for conversations within the classroom which then facilitate the process of teaching and learning (Applebee, 1996, p. 37). Domains for conversations in public education

may be more focused or defined due to published curriculums; however, when home and education merge, those lines or limitations grow in complexity, increasing the complicated nature of the complicated conversation.

While Applebee (1996) limits these complex conversations to academic conversations, Pinar (2012) expands these ideas beyond formal schooling or curriculum to view them as larger, complicated conversations constructed by all participants, having broader implications than career readiness, rather expanding perspectives and developing viewpoints on sociological issues, thus the conclusion that these experiences and conversations are imagination, a development of ones being or identity (p. 195). Thus Pinar (2012) opens up the idea of a complicated conversation, challenging that it should be connected to and “from students’ lived experience” even arguing that the conversations must include parents (p. 198).

So what is a complicated conversation and how does it bear on this study? According to Oakeshott (1959) it is a “meeting-place of various modes of imagining; and in this conversation there is, therefore, no voice without an idiom of its own: the voices are not divergences from some ideal, non-idiomatic manner of speaking, they diverge only from one another” (p. 19). Within the context of homeschooling, this is an examination of the interplay of voices within that culture and how they weave together and influence one’s own imagining of self or world. While Pinar (2012) challenges Applebee’s (1986) narrow view of the complicated conversation in schools, even his thoughts need to be extended as well. He focuses on the free choice of educators and the troubling voice of politics in the complicated conversation, the idea that these conversations have elements of the whole person is left undeveloped. This application of the complicated conversation within homeschooling actually has greater potential to push back against political control through facilitating the growth of a chorus of voices from within an

educational environment all the while examining the complicated conversations within the home for implications on womanhood. The theoretical framework of a complicated conversation provides a practical tool for conducting research as well as a lens for analyzing the cultural work of this study. It also enhances the purpose by engaging women in a discourse that may not have formally happened to advance awareness and understanding of self and for the outside community (Applebee, 1996, p. 3). Application of complicated conversations to the study serves multiple purposes and ideas of feminism connect the cultural studies framework, identity theory and communication lens of the overall study. The use of investigation strategies from the Family Communication Patterns Scale help identify the complicated conversations as well (Chaffee et al., 1971; Gupta & Geetika, 2019; Koerner et al., 2002; Rubin et al., 1994).

Feminine Identity Challenges

The focus of this study is clearly on gender roles and identity development as explored through the complicated conversations of home education. As noted earlier, the goal of this research is exploratory and not critical in nature, thus issues of social justice are limited. However, in tracing the historical issues of women and gender, this cannot be ignored with regards to the influence on this study and possible outcomes. Selecting a feminist theory as a filter or lens for interpreting data is important and problematic at the same time due to the wide scope of feminist theory with varying implications on the participants and messages of the study.

History of Feminism

Early feminism addressed a myriad of issues that were primarily grounded in political freedoms such as suffrage. As the movement continued, more personal freedoms such as sexuality became part of the discussion; however, this often linked back to relational freedom

and economic ability as we entered the 20th century (McElroy, 2002). The focus on single issues faded as feminine issues exploded in complexity and political implications expanded.

Over the last century, various movements have challenged gender perceptions and roles, pushing back against societal mores that impose power structures limiting relationships, political positioning and economic possibilities. Feminism gained notoriety and spawned variations of movements in response to the release of *The Feminine Mystique* in the mid-1960s (Griffin, 2007, p. 168). These movements fought for liberation, called for recognition of identity and ability while clarifying the difference between biological identification, identity, role and expression of self. Specifically considering feminism, gender role is synonymous with feminine identity in that the role of a woman is developed through social contexts and expectations. “A biological female is expected to identify as a girl or woman, appear and act in feminine ways, and have a heterosexual orientation” (Griffin, 2007, p. 171). The transmission of these expectations and treatment or placement of women within the larger society by those of masculine identity is seen as oppression and discrimination. The argument is not so much that women should not act feminine, but rather how these roles develop and are valued within society is socially unjust.

The conservative movement responded to these social justice efforts in the 1980s. Mary Pride (1985), a home educator, challenges assumptions of the feminist movement regarding gender role and perceived oppression. The premise of her argument rests on the scripture, Titus 2:3-5, which emphasizes a woman’s character as controlled and her role as loving her husband and children while working at home. Pride (1985) explains how this scripture has been distorted by church and culture, telling women to simply stay at home; instead, she argues that women must have a role that is equal and as important as the role of men. This “role obliteration” by the Christian church has resulted in social injustice (pp. xii-xiii). Her argument against extreme

feminist movements is strong and debated, yet she provides a counterbalance to the idea of feminine identity that has value and purpose even within a patriarchal structure. While many within the radical feminist movement may disagree with her argumentation, the end goal of empowered and equal roles for women based on their beliefs of self-value and purpose may be viewed as social justice. The reality of Pride's (1985) argument was the development of an extremist movement within Christian homeschooling that advocated extreme principles of patriarchal control whereby women were highly controlled by their husbands or fathers, limited in educational opportunities outside the home and told their only role was to be a subservient wife and mother (Homeschool Base, 2017; Wagley, 2016, para. 21). This form of conservative feminism represents a small portion of the conservative Christian homeschool movement, but elements of the beliefs have permeated the entire Christian homeschool community (Farris, 2014).

While the radical feminist movement often speaks the loudest, the ifeminist movement offers another perspective. The philosophical foundation of ifeminism is that all individuals matter and thus it is a movement for individuals, not simply feminists. This results in very different goals. McElroy (2002) differentiates that

The goal of radical feminism is not equality with men: it is gender justice (equity) for women as a class...ifeminism claims the opposite ground and considers men and women to be human beings whose commonality far outweighs any secondary characteristics that might divide them. (p. 14)

Under ifeminism, the concept of choice is paramount. No circumstance is inherently bad or evil as long as the individual has the power of choice. Some within the radical feminist group may

argue that if there is no freedom to choose then there cannot be feminism, thus social justice must be the primary goal.

Louis Markos (2013), English professor and Humanities Chair at Houston Baptist University argues that there is a conservative feminism that stands in stark contrast to liberal feminist movements as well as the extremist views of Mary Pride. He has observed this movement develop from the homeschooled women on the university campus. This form of feminism embraces unique roles of men and women, finding empowerment through the elevation of such traits (Markos, 2013, p. 13). A view of feminism as an actual celebration of traditional femininity through advocating for one's voice and perspective as a woman still pushes back against oppression and marginalization, perhaps more so because it does not require masculine logic or methods to achieve such empowerment (Markos, 2013, p. 14). Under this form of feminism there may be balance of traditional beliefs regarding the roles of women, yet personal choice regarding the life path of these women. These women are not silent and are independent enough to pursue education and careers, but free to choose traditional lifestyles at any point desired, in alignment with Deci and Flaste's (1995) theory of self-efficacy and choice. Markos (2013) also connects this idea of feminism to modern social justice theories of care and community, noting that "They have the brains and skill to don the robes of the lawyer, but their motivation for doing so is ... to defend those they love" (p. 14). Markos' (2013) observations and theorizations reiterate the feminist philosophies of Christian author Elisabeth Elliot, as she brings together the feminist values of both sides. Feminine identity need not be viewed as only a career or a wife status, rather, fulfilling each roll appropriately as encountered and gifted. The most unique distinction posed by Elliot (1976, 2004) is in the attitude or mindset in fulfilling

ones' role as she does not advocate that being a wife negates one's ability to have a career (pp. 57-58).

Each of these arguments for feminist perspectives presents a lens for understanding the development of feminine identity as well as evaluating for social justice. Choosing a theory has its own implications as well. While Markos' (2013) ideas may resonate, what implications could this have in applying a male theory to feminine understanding of self? A similar argument could be made with applying Pride's (1985) theory as it contributed greatly to the justification patriarchal leaders of the conservative Christian homeschool movement. In both instances, using either as a lens for interpreting data could subjugate the voices of these women. The cultural studies framework along with the idea of a complicated conversation aligns with the feminist theory of ifeminism where the greater question is one's ability to choose. The research question centers on how women develop their own definition of womanhood and femininity and thus applying a feminist theory focused on choice naturally offers a defined and yet open lens for data analysis which does not judge, but focuses on revelation of personal autonomy.

An additional challenge with applying any feminist perspectives early in my study is that it could predispose my beliefs and thus impact my question development. As noted earlier, there are tremendous gaps in the research from the true conditions of home education to the beliefs of families and how these women develop a sense of self. The challenge is utilizing a feminist perspective in analysis of the results to draw conclusions rather than applying them prior to understanding the cultural framework of the conservative Christian homeschooling in my selected community, applying these theories to the other women before hearing their stories would be problematic.

The Complicated Conversation of Feminism

The primary reason for applying feminist theory as a lens for interpreting data is in response to the overarching question of how women being educated in a potentially patriarchal setting develop a feminine identity. Pinar's (2012) expansion on Applebee's (1996) ideas of schooling present the interaction as a complicated conversation constructed by all participants. This directly links the study to feminist theory, but through an examination of complicated conversations in the schooling environment. The study seeks to create a chorus of voices from within the movement and by engaging women in a discourse that may not have formally happened in the school setting advances awareness and understanding of the culture.

Significance of the Study

This study seeks to give voice to a very private and neglected segment of the alternative milieu of homeschooling. Exploring the lived experiences of women homeschooled in a conservative Christian environment will provide significant insights into the impact of the schooling as well as actual outcomes with regards to how these women view themselves and feel empowered or disempowered in their adult roles as women. The final goal of this study is to bring greater understanding and increase critical discourse. Discourse is fundamental on multiple levels – examining the discourse of the homeschool and beginning new discourse to reveal and empower the voices of homeschooled women. As Jones et al., (2015) note with regards to this alternative milieu, a cultural study that focuses on discourse has the power that

illuminates critical race theory and feminism, theoretical frameworks developed to liberate the oppressed. Such work lends voice to and empowers people who have been marginalized; it shares their experiences in their words and voices that too often have been omitted. (p. 397)

Considering Greene's (1988) writings on freedom in combination with Gee's (1999) ideas on discourse analysis, the two are inextricably linked. The combination of our language in a particular context establishes a recognizable identity in concert with others of that same identity, creating a long-lasting understanding of "human history" (Gee, 1999, p. 18). Without the dialogue and community creation of identity understanding we cannot truly evaluate if one is free, having "freedom of mind and the opportunity to realize certain potentialities," which necessitates the study of discourse within the homeschool community (Green, 1988, p. 65). In fact, Greene (1988) goes on to note that in situations of actual slavery, those who engaged in education and discourse were most likely to challenge status and strive toward personal agency, thus the power of conversation and discourse is essential to examine and create further opportunities for discourse.

Feminist Significance

Feminist research evokes certain ideas of what constitutes feminist work and this study may fit within feminist research. The goal of the research is to explore women's issues related to feminism so that critical research could be a possible next step. Some posit that simply being a feminist researcher is enough to make the study feminist in nature (Brayton et al., n.d.). Lerner (1979/2005) argues that historical views of feminism and feminist research need to be challenged, broadened as new "patterns has brought enormous changes in the status and role of American women; these changes demand a historical perspective and interpretation" (p. 3). The exclusion of women from power, including publicly or privately, in situations of financial control or information control, is a feminist issue (Jones et al., 2015; Lerner, 1979/2005). So what makes research feminist? Modern researchers, particularly social researchers agree on two or three key traits that qualify a study as feminist in nature: generating new information that fills

a gap in literature while also causing social change, emphasizing feminist beliefs by allowing women to construct knowledge from their experience which may have been highly patriarchal, and finally, including women who may have been marginalized and addressing issues of empowerment within the research (Brayton et al., (n.d.); Ollivier & Tremblay, 2000; Swirsky & Angelone, 2016; Taylor, 1998). Essentially, the core of feminist research is bringing silenced women's experiences to the forefront so that issues of gender inequity or oppression can be addressed. Focusing on homeschooled women from a religiously conservative Christian environment fulfills these criteria by elevating the unheard voices from a historically patriarchal culture in an effort to facilitate their construction of meaning and knowledge from that homeschool experience which not only adds to the literature, but creates a platform for empowerment. The results of the study may not reveal expected results, but it will serve to give voice to marginalized women who are marginalized through current silence. I am seeking to break open an educational history with a strong patriarchal narrative and bring to the forefront the lived history of women from their perspective no matter what the end results reveal. This women's study may find that homeschooled women are perceived as limited or oppressed through some feminist lenses; however, the real question of the study is if these women are oppressed or disempowered in their roles as women due to their positionality within a patriarchal culture. Overlaying the concepts of Patricia Hill Collins (2009b) matrix of domination and Foucault's (1975/1995) ideas on power to the results of the communication analysis, I can also begin to examine if these women have needed to or been successful in creating a space of freedom and empowerment within their experience which would open the door to further research on this particular aspect of power dynamics and safe spaces. Prior to conducting the research it is difficult to claim that this is purely feminist research and not simply a women's

study; however, considering the core traits of feminist research and the fact that “Feminist research cannot claim to speak for all women, but can provide new knowledge grounded in the realities of women’s experiences and actively enact structural changes in the social world” (Brayton et al., n.d., para. 7) this has potential significance for feminist research. Finally, while this study is exploratory and, by itself, will not likely result in political action, part of the goal in the research is to empower women through their meaning making of their experience, allowing them to name their identity and name their experience which serves to change their personal behavior which is part of the feminist process (Cancian, 1992; Cook, 1983; Collins, 1991; Fonow & Cook, 1991; Stanley & Wise, 1991).

Schooling Significance

The power of formal and informal curriculum is undeniable and the long-term impacts on a segment of population has the ability to inform various stakeholders as well, including parents, serving in the role of educator, and the larger community that sets educational standards which can and should promote the best interest of students and society. Homeschool parents embark into an unknown and personal journey and often do not have typical credentials to design curriculum, leaving some parents to question the choices they are making (Cummings, 2012; Erickson, 2019). The personal nature of homeschooling as well as the short history, in comparison to public education, in America limits the research verifying that homeschooling has overwhelmingly positive impacts on the whole child, so parents likely have internal fears similar to Erickson’s (2019) that “different is always a little bit scary, especially as it relates to your kids - how can you ever hope to educate your kids *the right way*?” (p. 15). Parental concerns are not limited to academic concerns, but social, mental, and emotional development as well, lending great significance to this study (Cummings, 2012). This study will not comprehensively answer

these questions, but opens the door to understanding the impact on identity and empowerment which informs overall social, mental and emotional development and can lead to further focused research.

This study also contributes to the larger community question of school regulation. When current research and news suggests that homeschool families are irresponsible or havens of abuse combined with unregulated curriculum and instruction, the public questions the need for greater regulation of the homeschool community. However, if research reveals powerful individualization and empowerment for students, the protection of parental rights is defensible. This study can offer insight directly from students themselves, allowing us to begin answering the question “Is it possible to facilitate good homeschooling without also enabling physical maltreatment and educational deprivation?” (Dwyer & Peters, 2019, p. 2). Discourse with students themselves is the missing piece of modern research on the conservative Christian homeschool movement.

Definition of Terms

Homeschooling must be differentiated from virtual public education as both may be classified as home education due to the location of the educational experience. Virtual public education takes place within the home using public schooling or government funded curriculum and instruction through online platforms (Homeschool Legal Defense Association [HSLDA], 2017). In contrast, homeschooling is characterized by private status where parents make curricular decisions, serve in the capacity of teacher and assign grades without the receipt of public funding or assistance all while mirroring the overall experience of schooling that would happen in a public facility (HSLD, 2017; Jones et al., 2015). As the Covid-19 pandemic has led

to hybrid models of public education, this is a key distinction as many families now claim to be homeschooling while really facilitating online public education while at home.

The label “**Conservative Christianity**” is a broad umbrella that may be difficult to define with respect to particular denominational practices of Christianity. Bindewald (2015) clarifies that a more accurate description is the term “fundamentalist” as there are clear tenets associated with this term that hold true for the conservative Christian homeschool culture. Four core beliefs characterize fundamentalists or, as referenced in this study, conservative Christians: belief that the Bible is authored by God and is the only truth, all people have a sinful nature creating a need for a perfect God, salvation from sin is only possible through a belief in Jesus as the son of God, and that the primary calling in life is to testify about the need for salvation to the rest of the world (Bindewald, 2015).

Examining homeschooling within a conservative Christian culture relates to **Ideological** homeschooling, even more relevant as the study is examining the impact of the schooling on ideological formation regarding womanhood. Ideological homeschooling is still formal schooling, but through rejecting public school curriculum for that which is values centered, typically religious and family oriented; so while pedagogy might be changed too, the primary purpose in conservative Christian homeschooling is to provide a specific religious ideology in education (Dwyer & Peters, 2019; Jones et al., 2015; Van Galen, 1987).

Feminism is a complex idea that requires a concrete as well as contextual definition. Swirsky and Angelone (2016) account for the complexities of feminism while recognizing the need for further studies relevant for modern women. Most notably, they articulate that different time periods or feminist ideologies vary with regards to goals, but all consistently hold to three beliefs: recognizing and revealing oppression of women in all its forms, striving to lift the status

of women in all arenas while also raising up other social stratifications, and challenging gender constructs (Swirsky & Angelone, 2016, p. 445).

Feminist Identity is related to feminism, but specific to how we understand an individual's conception of self. Feminist identity goes beyond the idea of feminism in that a person who has a feminist identity not only holds to the beliefs outlined above, but also believes and participates in collective action aimed at promoting the goals of feminism (Eisele & Stake, 2008; Williams & Wittig, 1997). However, in tracing the feminist movement, others propose **Postfeminism** or even a continuum of feminist identity allowing for more flexibility where individuals personally believe in feminist goals, but resist being labeled or categorized as feminist for multiple reasons including negative connotations associated with a specific feminist identity as well as desires to avoid male bashing as they see men as a valued part of their world (Aronson, 2003; Taylor, 1996; Williams & Wittig, 1997).

Self-Efficacy is the evaluating factor in examining the ways women define their roles as women. This factor is key when viewed through a feminist lens or when critiquing the impact of a patriarchal school experience. Self-efficacy may be defined as authenticity and choice with actual ability to move forward with those choices all within a relationship where one does not naturally have the primary power or authority (Deci & Flaste, 1995; Eisele & Stake, 2008; Maddux, 1991).

Complicated Conversations are the conversations within an educational experience whereby discourse transmits knowledge with several purposes, first being continuation of culturally accepted knowledge, but also to allow learners to apply their own thinking processes to develop new meanings (Oakeshott, 1959). These conversations can also be expanded to dialogues that go beyond knowledge transmission to develop new applications or meanings

through the process of the conversations, although it is not necessarily the result of argumentation, rather the freedom of process to engage in new lines of thinking and reasoning, especially as related to identity development (Applebee, 1996; Pinar, 2012).

Hidden Curriculum was first identified by Philip Jackson (1968) as he noted a series of lessons taught in schools through procedures and common practices that are not outrightly acknowledged including being quiet when others speak, being busy at all times, and being on time. Durkheim (1961) had addressed this same concept earlier, observing that educators teach more about life than just the content identified in textbooks or published curriculum. Since that time numerous educational theorists have addressed the nuances of hidden curriculum, all confirming that hidden curriculum are “values, dispositions, and social and behavioral expectations” all of which are transmitted as expected norms for social relationships (Kentli, 2009, p. 86).

Assumptions, Limitations and Delimitations

The alternative milieu of home education is large and varied as well as under researched. This study seeks to be exploratory and not necessarily generalizable, rather opening the door to future research. This dissertation will focus on females who were homeschooled in a Midwestern community and from a select set of families in order to create a focused scope. This delimitation is intentional as culture may vary from community to community while the intent of this research is to begin the conversation and understanding of the homeschool milieu from the perspective of students rather than create a comprehensive picture. This delimitation creates a necessary limitation to focus the scope, in an effort to generate future research possibilities.

Ethnographic studies typically include observations; however, the participants are now grown, therefore the cultural work will use interviews to bring lived experience to the forefront.

Given that the purpose of the study is to explore how the lived experience of homeschooled women developed their sense of womanhood and definition of femininity, a backward look at homeschooling is necessary. Use of interviews rather than observations will limit what is observed and noted to what is recalled by the participants. Given the familial nature of the participants, some interviews will be group conversations, which has the ability to expand memory, deepen description and broaden understanding of the culture. These elements also have the ability to begin new dialogue, essential to empowering the collective voices of women in homeschooling as it will be their voices that rise from the inside out and not my own.

Conclusions

The field of curriculum studies recognizes the gaps in research for alternative milieus and the position of women within that research widens that gap. The homeschool movement has worked to minimize research, particularly of student experience, necessitating a push into that research to empower the voices of students who are at a greater risk of being marginalized as youth and even greater risk as female youth. The power of cultural research in facilitating discourse may open doors for future research and educational improvements for both homeschool and public school for the benefit of all, but mostly for facilitating democratic freedom of thought, personal development and empowerment.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

This study brings together two aspects of education – home education and the experiences of women within home education. Both homeschooling and women’s experiences in education are areas with gaps in the research and potential challenges with regards to the impact of the experiences. Understanding overarching and current issues for women lends insight into how any educational experience impacts them as students especially when coupled with current research on homeschooling trends in the conservative Christian community. The goal of this research is to facilitate voices speaking out from within, creating a chorus of women’s stories to reveal truth of the homeschool educational experience.

Modern Women’s Issues

Beyond feminist ideologies, the realities facing women today also impact any women’s study. First, the societal trends and expectations of women with regards to careers and staying at home impact general education and gender expectations. The Pew Research Center conducted an extensive study of the career paths of women, finding that, in the United States, 68% of married mothers are more likely to remain at home with their children for at least a portion of their childhood with 85% of those indicating the purpose is to care for their children (Cohn et al., 2014, pp. 12-13). Additionally, the general societal view is that children benefit from having a parent remain at home and these statistics indicate it will typically be a mother as compared to a father (Cohn et al., 2014, p. 26). These statistics reveal an underlying belief system about the roles of women in American society that certainly expands when compounded by religious beliefs. The same study indicated that 69% of white evangelical Protestants believe that it is best if a parent is home with a child (Cohn et al., 2014, p. 27). There may be a correlation between parental involvement in a child’s life and educational success; however, the underlying

assumption that women should fulfill this role adds questions about the expected subordination of women.

The prevailing beliefs in American society regarding the role of women being best fulfilled at home correlates to economic trends. While most American women do work, at least part time, the types of careers they seek is still limited. The U.S. Department of Commerce published an executive summary of women working in STEM careers, finding that the benefits of working in STEM are much greater than other career fields, yet the percentage of women in that workforce is significantly lower (Beede et al., 2011, p. 1). As recently as 2009, women accounted for 48% of the total workforce whereas they only accounted for 24% of the STEM workforce (Beede et al., 2011, p. 2). This trend would not be concerning if women expressed disinterest in the field; however, the report claims several possible reasons including “a lack of female role models, gender stereotyping, and less family-friendly flexibility in the STEM fields,” which also relates back to societal assumptions of the female role in the home (Beede et al., 2011, p. 1). Many of the feminist perspectives challenge the oppression of women in the political and economic realm, all of which appears to be ongoing given these statistics.

Feminism and Christian Homeschooling

As noted earlier, there are clearly issues facing women in the conservative Christian homeschool movement when evaluated by the news media or the lives of prominent leaders. These issues compromise the culture and messages to women regarding their role, relationships, freedoms and futures. In the purest form, extremists such as Bill Gothard (Farris, 2014) and the Quiverfull movement (Brewer, 2021; Homeschool Base, 2017) advocate for the submission and abuse of women. While some would argue that those influences are outdated, the reality is that they impacted adult women included in this study and influenced other leaders in the movement

through subsequent decades. A prime example is Josh Harris, a homeschooled young man who became a formidable voice as a young adult, championing a strict form of courtship before marriage through his book *I Kissed Dating Goodbye* (Harris, 2003). While the book did not guide formal homeschooling curriculum, the practices were adopted by many conservative Christian homeschool families in an overt hidden curriculum where women were required to communicate via written letters, often cycled through her father, rather than engaging in face to face and one to one communication with a romantic interest. Others, such as Brewer (2021) argue that these earlier movements, including Quiverfull, have extended into modern times, empowered by controversial politicians such as former President Trump and Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos, working to not only control their families, but return America to a state of racial and gender discrimination of bygone eras. Given these examples and claims, this level of patriarchal control cannot be ignored.

The question is how significantly these have impacted the local cultures of home educators and the experiences of the women educated in these homes. Just as black women face multiple dimensions of oppression when placed on the matrix of domination, women educated in the philosophical framework of an extremist nature may also create a new dimension on the matrix of domination (Collins, 2009b). An ethnographic study of women educated in conservative Christian homeschool has the power to reveal the real application of these frameworks and how students have interacted with and given meaning to them in developing their own definition of feminine identity and possibly set the stage for future research in this area if applicable.

Homeschooling Literature Review

The story of homeschooling in the United States technically begins with the founding of the nation as free, public education was not established in most states; however, the history through modern times is filled with tension and critiqued in many ways. Current research focuses on the history of the modern homeschool movement, formal curriculum, and motivations for home education. These topics are typically examined from an outside view although there are some trends of inside voices speaking out regarding the movement.

Homeschooling in Historical Context

Understanding the history of homeschooling provides insight into the culture of modern homeschooling. Three major eras give rise to modern homeschooling, first a period of expectation for parents to provide for education as the Constitution did not specify a public education system followed by a period of compulsory education in response to growing societal needs such as industrialization and immigration which highlighted the gaps between socio-economic groups, both periods culminating in a challenge for parental rights to determine education based on Constitutional freedoms of the first and fourteenth amendments (Gaither, 2017; Kreager, 2010; Murphy, 2013). The legal tensions of this modern era provide the greatest insight into the culture of conservative Christian homeschooling as a series of Supreme Court cases, beginning with *Meyer v. Nebraska* in 1923, resulted in a multi-pronged decision in 1972, whereby the Supreme Court articulated two reasons and rights for parents to home educate (Gaither, 2017; Kreager, 2010; *Meyer v. State of Nebraska*). The summary decision supported parental rights to choose the type or location of education as well as a specific right to home educate with the justification of the Free Exercise Clause (Kreager, 2010; *Wisconsin v. Yoder*). The implication of this case on the modern homeschool era is the affirmation of religious

practices as the purpose for home education. While some argue that the founding of the United States was a period of religious conservatism and thus home education was somehow religious in nature, there is not a clear link or justification for such a claim; home education was merely a practicality and exercised by those with the wealth and capacity to do so (Gaither, 2017). As Murphy (2013) explains, “homeschooling today is indeed something distinct and different from its pre-compulsory education ancestor. They see the contemporary homeschooling phenomenon as something relatively new and unique, not a resurgence of an old idea” (p. 338).

Outside of the Supreme Court decisions, modern homeschooling was sparked by the counterculture movements of the 1960s and 1970s, forming its own counterculture, sometimes pushing back against desegregation as an alternative to white flight which would require moving from a community, sometimes reacting to the youth counterculture of rebellion by seeking to restore family and parental authority and other times pushing back against federal curriculum perceived as secular humanism (Gaither, 2017; Logan et al., 2017; McVicar, 2015). An explosion of court cases during the 1970s was evidence of the growing resistance to public education for these very reasons, primarily secular humanism (Gaither, 2017, p. 101). Homeschooling was a method to restore the core democratic value of popular sovereignty on several levels, first through increasing family authority and autonomy and secondly, by reducing federal control of a key facet to American life – education (McVicar, 2015).

Gaither (2017) argues that a unique philosophical belief about children, that he terms the “American cult of the child,” also led to this new wave of conservative Christian homeschooling which provides context for gender studies (p. 122). He (Gaither, 2017) posits that parents believe their children are all unique and created by God, full of individual creativity and potential which must be protected from the liberal, corrupt and dangerous public schools which have been

standardized, therefore the individualization allowable through homeschooling is the answer for promoting religious culture, protecting from harm and facilitating individual destiny (pp. 122-123). The belief in individual value and investment in each child presents a backdrop for examining the different treatment based on gender within the homeschool setting.

This new culture of homeschooling has grown exponentially between the 1970s and 2000s as the Supreme Court decision paved the way for states to create laws guiding the practice at the state or local level. As noted earlier, the numbers are difficult to quantify, but establishing a baseline substantiates the need for further research. Generally, homeschooling has multiplied exponentially from approximately 10,000 to 2 million students in the early 2000s and an estimated 4.5 million by 2021, resulting in eight to nine percent of all students participating in home education for some portion of their primary or secondary educational experience (Kreager, 2010; Murphy, 2013; Ray, 2021).

Patriarchal Trends in Conservative Christian Homeschooling

The literature reveals a concerning trend in the history of conservative Christian homeschooling with relation to feminine identity and treatment. Modern decriers have pulled back the veil of a private movement, exposing not only patriarchal ideas, but hurtful and abusive practices. Beginning with the founding of the conservative Christian homeschool movement, significant curricular (both formal and hidden curriculum) influencers advocated and sold instructional practices that used biblical justification for strict obedience of both wife and children in the home, specifically the dynamic, albeit single and childless, Bill Gothard (Bockelman, 1974 ; “Obey Thy Husband,” 1974). The potential impact of these influencers must be recognized as Gothard alone brought in crowds upward of 27,000 at a time for multi-day or weekly training sessions, ultimately reaching over 2.5 million participants over several decades

(Bockelman, 1974; Poll, 2003). More recently, Home School Legal Defense (HSLDA) leaders Michael Farris (2014) and Michael Smith challenged the patriarchal teachings of Gothard and Phillips with regard to impacts on women, arguing that these are “a distorted view of raising daughters” when they teach that “women should not vote” or that “higher education is not important for women” and that “unmarried adult women are subject to their father’s authority” (Farris, 2014, p. 7). Given the millions of participants who paid to attend training sessions in combination with the extreme viewpoints for how to “train up”, to use a Biblical reference, a daughter, examining the implications of such complicated conversations is paramount as these students are now adults.

The historical basis for a strong patriarchal culture in conservative Christian homeschooling stems back several decades to individuals who ranged from promoting home education with strong Christian values to more aggressive gendered agendas. Raymond and Dorothy Moore were likely responsible for bringing many conservative Christians into the homeschool movement through their highly influential book *School Can Wait* due to a widely broadcast set of interviews on conservative *Focus on the Family* which led to their publication of a follow up educational philosophy in *Home Grown Kids* (Gaither, 2017, pp. 146-147). Prior to this couple, another individual was perhaps more influential with respect to strict interpretation of the Bible and relationship to gender roles. R.J. Rushdoony is lesser known by name to modern homeschoolers, but his philosophies of biblical application to all aspects of life from government to family to education laid the foundation for modern critiques of secular humanism and modern homeschool leaders (Gaither, 2017; McVicar, 2015). Beyond espousing ideas of secular humanism versus a biblical worldview, Rushdoony believed “the Bible prescribed a social order in which male patriarchs exercised God’s dominion mandate over the earth through an extended

network of Christian families under the authority of God's law" (McVicar, 2015, pp. 124-125).

The conservative activism of early home education advocates from post-World War II illustrates the dominance and longevity of these values by empowering more well-known and public individuals such as Bill Gothard; however, the question remains, what is the impact on the students? A democracy is built around the freedom of individuals to hold and practice diverse beliefs and even use those beliefs to influence the direction of the government and nation, but the impact on student development cannot be ignored.

The power behind such teachings is a common thread in the literature when we examine impactful publications by homeschooled students themselves. Joshua Harris, homeschooled for his entire primary and secondary education, authored the book *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*, at the tender age of 21 (Harris, 2017). Since authoring this bestselling book in the late 1990s, Harris (2017) has reflected on why he wrote the book and the implications of its message, first commenting that he felt he needed to be "right" in his message and that he could never question that spiritual rightness. Later he tells a story of a woman who shared with him how that book was "used against me like a weapon" indicating the legalistic implementation of the relational ideas Harris had authored (Harris, 2017). This single experience is not alone, Harris (2019) writes on his website how he has collected stories, both positive and negative, and turned them into a self-reflective documentary from which he has learned that "in trying to warn people of potential pitfalls of dating, it instilled fear" (para. 6). The generational influence of conservative Christian homeschool practices are pervasive and questionable with respect to messages to and about women.

Besides the potential impact on formal and hidden curriculum, the abusive impact on families, particularly women, cannot be ignored. Most notably, Bill Gothard was accused by 34

women of harassment or sexual assault while working as an advocate and teacher for the conservative Christian homeschool movement and Doug Phillips, a similar leader, was accused of the same (Farris, 2014 ; “Religious right leader”, 2014). The prevalence and impact of multiple leaders being accused of such heinous acts was ignored by other leading groups in the movement, including Homeschool Legal Defense, which finally took a stand, writing

Frankly, we should have spoken up sooner. How much sooner is hard to say. There is a subtle difference between teaching that we simply disagree with and teaching that is truly dangerous. While we did not directly promote their teachings using our own resources, we did allow Vision Forum to buy ad space to promote their products and ideas. We were wrong to do so. And we regret it. (Farris, 2014)

This statement was courageous, though late. These men have not physically touched the millions of women who have been homeschooled, yet the espoused ideas carry weight for parental actions in their private homes. Concerns for these very practices have led to various legal studies and action proposals to limit parental rights and protect student rights in the cases of abuse (Bartholet, 2020; Waddell, 2010). Deeper examinations of the lived experiences of women in conservative Christian homeschool settings may, unfortunately reveal such sad practices. On the other hand, these stories are what the outside see of the homeschool movement. If that is not the experience of the vast majority, but it is the public story being told, this possible minor truth becomes the larger truth that also shapes outside perceptions of homeschooled women as the prevalence of these trends is concerning. Continued examination of current literature struggles to reveal how influential these ideas have been for modern women as many of these studies have been from the outside view into the community or have been exposés of extremists such as the life of Tara Westover (2018) in her autobiographical account in *Educated*.

Along with these examples of male dominance and abuse, the public view of homeschooling is driven by stories that make news headlines. Headlines about the Turpin family, Duggar family and, most recently, Tara Westover's (2018) memoir *Educated* paint certain pictures of conservative homeschooling that tell true and hard stories of female experiences. In the case of the Turpin family, homeschool parents were charged with starving and abusing their children, but does this mean the majority of millions of homeschool children are in such situations? As Kerry McDonald (2018) suggests, this outlying situation should not be the sole cause for judging homeschooling. Again, we see this trend repeated in the family of the popular television show *19 Kids and Counting* where one of the older sons was alleged to have molested five young women including some of his sisters (Bowerman, 2015). The close proximity and access of homeschooling along with a culture of women serving men seems to have contributed to the allowance and cover up of such a horrific situation. When it seems that headlines are a repeat of famous conservative Christian homeschoolers such as the Duggar family where sexual and physical abuse of young women was quieted and covered (Steiner & Strohm, 2015), what conclusions are drawn?

Tara Westover's (2018) best-selling memoir of her homeschool experiences in a Mormon home, similar to the conservative Christian practices, further confirms these drastic and tragic stories, seemingly convincing the outside public of how women are raised and treated within such environments. Let's assume abuse is limited in scope; what other conclusions are drawn from these popularized homeschool experiences? Westover (2018) addresses messages of knowledge control, freedom, gender roles and self-worth in addition to discussing the patterns of abuse and denial in her homeschool community. In describing her homeschool experience she notes that formal curriculum was not the norm or even respected, having to sneak off to study in

a dank basement because “From my father I had learned that books were either adored or exiled. Books that were of God...were not to be studied so much as cherished” (Westover, 2018, p. 239). This mindset of her patriarch controlling knowledge bound her even as she ran away and pursued college degrees, not fully leaving her until the completion of her dissertation when Westover (2018) reflected on her ideas of historians, realizing her liberty in writing:

My idea of a historian was not human; it was of someone like my father, more prophet than man, whose visions of the past, like those of the future could not be questioned, or even augmented. Now, as I passed through King’s College, in the shadow of the enormous chapel, my old diffidence seemed almost funny. *Who writes history?* I thought. *I do.* (p. 318)

While Westover’s account expands concerning trends beyond physical abuse to knowledge control, the resounding question is still if these headline situations are rare and exotic in their tragedy and not reflective of the majority homeschool experience. Only one study was found to critically examine the direct impact of strong, religiously patriarchal leaders on families’ implementation within homeschool. Vander (2017) looked at the direct influence of Doug Phillips and the biblical Patriarchy Movement, conducting interviews with ten families. The results found that specific values were maintained, but the direct application of gender roles and restrictions varied tremendously within the small group (Vander, 2017). Despite the varied responses, Vander’s (2017) interviews with female students reveal feelings of stigmatization, isolation, guilt and shame with respect to their bodies and involvement in specific activities all of which were linked back to specific teachings espoused by the parents as a direct result of the biblical Patriarchy Movement. Additional research within the conservative Christina homeschool movement is necessary to further reveal or combat these headlines and experiences.

Published Curriculum Trends

Homeschool parents have a wide variety of resources today; however, early homeschoolers desiring a curriculum that reflected their ideology had more limited options. Popular choices included Abeka books as well as a very scripted curriculum published by Bill Gothard's organization. The messages espoused by this curriculum clearly reflected Christian viewpoints and values which would be expected of any curriculum for a private school such as a Catholic school. More concerning is the private, almost secretive, nature of some curriculum such as Gothard's curriculum, "Wisdom Books" (Cummings, 2012, p. 157). Just to examine the curriculum, Cummings (2012) had to complete a full family history inclusive of marital status, alcohol, tobacco, computer and television use, preferred reading materials and personal Christian testimony. The curriculum included moral stories, again not uncommon in religiously influenced curriculum; however, the lessons regarding gender, self-worth and bias were less than subtle. Cummings (2012) quotes specific lessons that specifically indicated what colors not to wear, lifestyles that have strict weight control, illustrations on the tightness of clothing for both boys and girls, and even descriptions of how to properly communicate with the eyes (pp. 161-2). These explicit curriculum messages reinforce the negative controlling concerns with conservative Christian homeschooling, especially given how many families flocked to Bill Gothard's seminars.

Bob Jones University has also made curriculum available to private Christian schools and homeschool families, particularly math and science as these subjects are more difficult to teach at advanced levels (Carr, 2000). Selecting curriculum for its religious attention is absolutely supported by American democracy considering the high numbers of religious private institutions across the nation; however, the impact of the curriculum must also be considered. The teaching

of creationism alongside evolution, as does the Bob Jones curriculum, is not a new way to approach subjects such as biology, yet the additional messages such as the dangers of interracial dating or marriage are more extreme, controversial and potentially dangerous for student identity development (Carr, 2000).

One of the most popular published curriculums available is Abeka, developed out of Pensacola Christian Academy and published by Pensacola Christian College, which offers very scripted curriculum with conservative Christian viewpoints aligned with Baptist style theology (Abeka, n.d.; Spooner, 2016). The curriculum has not received widespread criticism in comparison to Gothard's or Bob Jones' curriculum; however, various parents have posted reviews critiquing the instructional strategies and grade level appropriateness or rigor, citing a preference for experiential methods such as those advocated by Charlotte Mason (Spooner, 2016). The occasional parent or student has complained that the point of view is only Christian (reviewer Lynn) and a few referred to it as cult-like (reviewer Maddie) as they wanted to be exposed to other ideas in order to better understand the world (The Home School Mom, 2020). This curriculum appears to be consistent and rarely controversial other than holding true to a biblical standpoint.

Modern pop-up publishers such as Christian Liberty Press or Maranatha Publications have also catered to the preferences of conservative Christian homeschool parents, increasing the republication of reading and history texts from the nineteenth-century (Pfitzer, 2014, p. 252). Homeschool parents from this culture choose texts from this period which was characterized by the philosophy of Manifest Destiny and religious revivals of the Second and Third Great Awakenings. The reasons for this preference may be two-fold – first to promote religious patriotism, but also as a form of resistance to modern curriculum standardization that promotes

critical analysis of history rather than a master narrative (Nash et al., 2000; Pfitzer, 2014). There seems to be a preference to present history as heritage rather than as a field of study characterized by inquiry that examines historical periods from various perspectives and viewpoints out of a desire to give their children a “birthright” from God (Nash et al., 2000; Pfitzer, 2014). This preference for teaching history as a heritage has led to the political activism against public education as the public education curriculum and instruction is viewed as secular humanism that, due to the diversity of perspectives taught, “promote tolerance for non-Christian lifestyles” (Wilcox & Robinson, 2010, p. 160).

Pedagogically, many homeschool families followed the writings of individuals like Charlotte Mason. Mason was a British contemporary of early educational theorists such as Herbart, developing her educational philosophy during the American Gilded Age and Progressive Era of the nineteenth-century, time periods marked by an influx of immigrants from more diverse parts of the world with less exposure to western European languages, education and lifestyle practices at a time when the Industrial Revolution came to full force in the American economy. This was also the time of the another “Great Awakening” that emphasized reform and civic duty, leading many women to impact the lives of the underserved including the notable Jane Addams with her Hull House. Charlotte Mason grew to prominence during this time period and her personal experience with poverty aligned with the historical circumstances of these activist movements served as a catalyst for her philosophical development (Caine, 2004). Mason’s (1886/2008) seminal text, *Home Education*, outlines a comprehensive philosophy of education inclusive of instructional sequencing, content and instructional strategies. This early text often appeals to modern homeschool families for multiple reasons, particularly the inclusion of religious instruction and religious perspective on all curriculum as well as the desire to

reinforce historical American patriotism from earlier time periods specifically from the century of Manifest Destiny (Gaither, 2017). Mason's ideas (1886/2008) align with Dewey (1938/1998) in valuing experiential education allowing students to explore with the goal of developing thinkers; however, her religious foundation leads to a philosophy that embraces intellectual and spiritual development as co-existent and informing the other.

In analyzing the messages of gender from Mason's (1886/2008) philosophy, she clearly values the activist role of mothers, repeatedly emphasizing the role and responsibility of the mother in educating her children, even going beyond this to claim that mothers were specifically designed and equipped by God to fulfill this role (p. 14). This viewpoint may be seen as fitting within patriarchal values as it relegates the mother to the home, but Mason also references the changing role of women including entering the workforce in new positions as industry changes during this time period, so from her perspective, she is not reducing women to a homebound position either (p. 14). In terms of children and students, Mason (1886/2008) does not differentiate between genders with respect to the curriculum or instruction, promoting character education grounded in religious beliefs, experiential strategies and comprehensive curriculum for all students.

Published curriculum offers one perspective of homeschooling, yet homeschool families have access to other resources including public libraries and, if they limited television entertainment, reading a variety of books opens the door to another formal curriculum. Markos (2019) addressed a seminar of homeschool families on early western literature including Greek and Roman writings and found independent thinkers in children as young as nine and children exposed to classic western literature that was not specifically Christian in genre (p. 38). He argues that modern conservative Christian homeschool families are not isolating themselves

from pagan ideas, rather harnessing the lessons in logic and rhetoric from ancient classic literature so that children can be powerful independent thinkers, able to critique modern messages and propaganda (Markos, 2019). With regards to development of identity, Markos' (2019) conclusions about the use of the breadth of western literature also allows these conservative Christian homeschoolers to question "Who am I? Why am I here? What is my purpose?" and see the self within the context of centuries of stories including Christian writings such as C.S. Lewis (pp. 39-40). Homeschool families have the flexibility of choice in curriculum ranging from prescribed curriculum to natural curriculum that fits each child to classical education centered on the ideas of western philosophy, each of which has different impacts on student development and identity.

The Outside View In: Examinations of Homeschooling

The significance of homeschooling as an alternative milieu has led to continued formal research on the practice. Studies of various types have explored the motivations for homeschooling including religious freedom as well as the types of curriculum employed by homeschoolers.

Outside of the homeschool movement, several researchers have tackled the wide array of issues surrounding modern homeschooling. Van Galen and Pitman's (1991) compilation of studies on homeschool began to address the lack of research in this area, yet most of the research again focused on the contentious relationship between public and home education, the demographics of home educators and the academic implications. As early as 1991, the editors realized that women needed to be studied as either the educator or the student, writing that "Home educators are almost exclusively women, and the significance of this growing number of women who forego their own financial and professional independence in order to teach their own

children is an issue that has been largely unaddressed (Van Galen & Pitman, 1991, p. 5). Despite this call to action, women's studies have not dominated this field of research. The study does begin the process of cultural studies as a form of curriculum studies, including influential research by Van Galen (1991) on the ideologies of homeschooling parents and Pitman and Smith (1991) on the influence of parental interactions with their children and the subsequent impact on how the students learn. These foundational studies provide a context and foundation for more advanced studies of female students as curriculum within the conservative Christian homeschool culture.

Dr. Joseph Murphy has published countless articles and a substantive book on homeschooling, beginning to delve into the significance of religious beliefs as a curriculum, but again, he does not address women's issues specifically. In two of his significant works Murphy has the opportunity to explore the impact on women, and yet never brings that point to focus. In 2012, Murphy published a major book, *Homeschooling in America: Capturing and Assessing the Movement*, where a chapter on the impact of student development, and specifically female students, would have been pertinent and valuable in a text seeming to be comprehensive of the movement, yet this topic is a glaring omission. One of the four key questions Murphy (2012) discusses is the long-term impact on students' including their social development. This section could include a discussion on women from the homeschool movement; however, Murphy only emphasizes data on socialization and general social skills. Another opportunity arises when he pulls together studies on self-concept, yet again, the brief attention to this topic merely notes a scale of overall anxiety and happiness with no attention to potential gender discrepancies. In a more recent article Murphy has another opportunity to hone in on this population, yet misses the mark in "The Social and Educational Outcomes of Homeschooling" (2014). Murphy even

derides the personal stories, belittling the voice of students as “folklore lack[ing] the authority of scientific evidence” (p. 247). His preference for quantitative studies as the only valid method for evaluating the movement further oppresses any opportunity for women to challenge the current narrative of conservative Christian homeschooling.

Michael W. Apple also has numerous publications that delve into various aspects of homeschool; however, most serve as a critique of the movement in relation to religion or public education. One of Apple’s (2006) most notable studies dedicates a section to the unique view of women from within a conservative Christian or evangelical homeschool situation. He acknowledges that outside views see a patriarchal system whereas inside views see submission as a choice and position that actually empowers (p. 27). The nuances of the husband and wife relationship create a powerful position for the wife within the home that may be greater than the influence of the husband (Apple, 2006; Brasher, 1998). This study, another others by Apple, provide a valuable critique and may impact the direction of this study, but there is still a visible gap of inside research about the lived realities from the homeschooled students themselves, as Apple focuses on the mothers doing the homeschooling.

These studies have drawn some generalized conclusions about conservative Christian homeschool families. Lyman (2000) captures the conclusions, referencing the work of Jane Van Galen who concluded that they “want ‘their children to learn fundamentalist religious doctrine and a conservative political and social perspective,’ and they establish homeschools to communicate to their offspring ‘that the family is the most important institution in society’” (p. 110). The voices from the outside are just that – outside. These must be counterbalanced by the lived truths from within the movement, which is an evident gap in current research. Stories from

the inside may reinforce these conclusions or may reveal empowerment through teaching of critical thinking and analysis or resistance and struggle against patriarchal control.

Additionally, modern research on the conservative Christian homeschooling milieu has been stunted in academia with limited dissertations delving into the overall community, providing little clarification for studies as those noted above. In reviewing dissertations on homeschooling since 1985, particularly on conservative Christian homeschooling, the list only included 41 studies and many were qualitative studies; however, only two or three specifically focused on identity from the viewpoint of students alone with none specifically gave voice only to female students (Liao, 2006; Stevens, 1996; Taylor, 1993). Some tackled the religious aspects to home education, but most approach this aspect as either character education or a response to negative political powers outside the community (Kapitulik, 2011; Lynch, 2011; Manuel, 2000; McEntire, 2003; McVicar, 2010; Ruff, 1999; Wilhelm, 2005). The most notable dissertation on gender and religious influence on personal identity focused on the role of the mother in Sherfinski's (2011) "Blessed Under Pressure: Evangelical Mothers in the Homeschooling Movement."

The key to these studies on home schooling is that high quality research is lacking, as Murphy (2014) notes after what many would consider meta-research, that "One of the most stark conclusions one draws when interrogating the scholarly literature on the impacts of homeschooling is just how thin the empirical knowledge base is on this social phenomenon and educational movement" (p. 245). No matter the arena, more research is necessary to create a complete picture of the homeschooling milieu.

Autobiographical and Ethnographic Homeschool Research

While critics such as Murphy clamor for empirical or statistical research, hearing what students have to say about their experience requires qualitative methods. While many dissertations seem to employ qualitative methods, effectively studying culture requires specific methods which have been rarely used to give voice to students. Vigilant et al. (2013, 2014) published two related narrative studies that include one researcher with an insider perspective; however, both focus on the sociological roles of fathers in the homeschool household. While one study addresses role conflicts and stresses of the homeschooling mother, the goal of the study was how the father figure addressed and supported these issues. Research such as this further subjugates the experiences and roles of women in the conservative Christian homeschool culture as it minimizes the experiences of women by presenting husbands as the rescuer who must work and save the wife.

More recently several mothers and families have published narratives of homeschooling, highlighting the challenges and fulfillments of the homeschool experience (Cummings, 2012; Erickson, 2019; Millman & Millman, 2008). Again, each of these are told from the parent perspective and are written for parents. The Millman family supposedly included the voice of the children; however, the chapters are all drafted with the parent voice as primary and the project was coordinated by the parents, thus the pure student voice is merely an undertone, controlled or influenced by the master narrative of the parent (Millman & Millman, 2008). Cummings (2012) takes the most care to question the impact on her daughter, comparing her own assumptions of her daughter's social, emotional and mental development with the realities she observes, coming across very honest in her assessment of the impact her choices have on her daughter; however, the actual voice of her daughter is not expressed.

The most comprehensive ethnographic study of conservative Christian homeschooling life was done by Robert Kunzman (2009) where he engaged in the daily lives and interviewed six families from various regions of the United States. The goal of the study was to truly draw a picture of homeschool life by focusing on four areas – teaching and learning, student independent thinking, Christian citizenship and regulation of the homeschool. Within this study Kunzman (2009) makes observations regarding gender roles in the home and female independence of thinking; however, these are sparse observations in the grand scope of conservative Christian homeschooling. Without being gender specific, Kunzman (2009) concludes that “They want their children to develop into critical thinkers, but see the purpose of critical thinking to be at least as much about interrogating the messages and values of the world as it is reflecting on one’s own faith commitments” (p. 33). This message is reiterated throughout the ethnographic study, parents noting their desire to impact their children’s values and heart with the ultimate goal of helping them define who they are according to religious beliefs before facing challenges of a diverse world. The study illustrates gaps in understanding of how these messages are truly translated to the students and how the students are impacted by the parental messages. The language indicates a desire for strength, independence and thinking, but is that absent of patriarchal oppression?

Voices from Within

Literature from within the movement varies in accessibility, often due to the private nature of the conservative Christian homeschool culture. Examining the voices within the culture reveals stronger voices of parents, particularly fathers, with children, especially females, being the most silent. The themes developing from a compilation of these inside voices reveal intended

curriculum as well as peaks into the hidden culture of the community including glaring gaps in understanding of the homeschooled student.

The Parental Voice

Research within the homeschool movement has been dominated by two forces – formal organizations, such as Homeschool Legal Defense, and parent publications, dominated by men. What is known from within the movement tends to be published by parents, particularly fathers, even though they do the least with regards to home education. Isabel Lyman (2000) opens the window on homeschooling in her book *The Homeschooling Revolution*, and she identifies a handful of books by homeschoolers for homeschoolers. A few were written by mothers or grandmothers, but many were partnerships between both parents. A popular magazine, *Home School Dad*, was published by a father. Popular formal curriculum, such as Saxon math, was developed by men (Lyman, 2000, pp. 74-75). The explicit voices of women and female students within the community is limited.

Children Speaking Out

Autobiographical publications by homeschooled children, specifically women, are limited. A few that have become mainstream include Tara Westover and the Botkin sisters. As noted earlier, Westover's memoir *Educated* (2018) captures an experience that is extreme and tragic and reinforces a perception of conservative Christian homeschooling that judges the movement as abusive in its controlling secrecy. Perhaps a more common experience may be aligned with that of the Botkin sisters who are prolific authors and bloggers about their experience and beliefs as adult women. Their website is open about their experience and promotes a Christian viewpoint on topics ranging from beauty and fashion to abuse to relationships to modern culture to work and education (Botkin & Botkin, 2017). They openly

discuss their experience in a very conservative Christian home that practiced ideological homeschooling, but they also counter many assumptions about their experience. In one interview, they challenge the perception of isolation, noting that many of their friends were not homeschooled, not necessarily practicing Christians and they grew up around people from various walks of life including other religions, even noting that they were least familiar with this group called “conservative homeschooling” until they relocated from New Zealand to the United States (Botkin, 2008). Regardless of their exposure to other people and walks of life, what they do reveal is what and how they were educated which aligns with the description of a conservative Christian homeschool where they clearly understood the value of studying and living according to the Bible, that the Bible directed their self-worth and future as women, stating that

We realize that ‘experience’ is not a pre-requisite to being able to read, understand, and exposit the Word of God, but this background, coupled with the benefit of having two extremely wise parents who’ve been around the block and have the stories to prove it, helped us cement our thinking. (Botkin, 2008, para. 4)

What the Botkin sisters do reveal is a deeper understanding of how their conservative Christian homeschool experience has shaped their view of womanhood. In a separate article, also published on their vast website, they explicitly spell out their beliefs and paradigm on womanhood, challenging many conservative Christians. They begin by calling out the common theology on biblical womanhood and push women to see a different picture while still grounding that view in the Bible. Primarily they argue that a woman is not simply defined by marriage, writing “we have sliced the Christian woman’s character and work up into a bunch of separate pieces – economically-productive work becomes separated from domestic work, initiative and

strength from gentleness and submissiveness, home-focus from serving others in the outside world” (Botkin & Botkin, 2017, para. 6). While they hold fast to the values from their education, they clearly exhibit deep thinking that pushes back against limitations being set by others within the conservative Christian community. Their experience reveals a more complex picture of the impact of homeschooling on identity and feminine empowerment as well as supports the ideas from the theoretical framework including exposure to diversity and choice leading to independent thinking, similar to Apple’s (2006) notes on how women were more empowered within their private homeschool world. Publications such as the Botkin sisters are also limited, emphasizing the gap in research to identify trends and bring to light a larger set of voices on this unique schooling experience.

While autobiographical publications such as these are limited, a few other cultural studies have sought to facilitate homeschooled women telling their stories. Susannah Sheffer (1995) is one of the first notable studies that sought to listen to homeschooled women and bring their stories, including resistance, to light. While this study informs this new research, it is broader, focusing on a different segment of homeschooling that is not specific to the conservative Christian community and intentionally limited participants to “girls whose homeschooling was characterized by a high degree of choice, autonomy, and control” which may or may not align to the traits of my participants (Sheffer, 1995, p. viii). However, Sheffer (1995) does note that one of her goals was to examine the impact of traditional attitudes on homeschooled girls, questioning if they “absorb” those values and roles as females (p. 49) and her chapter “I like who I am” sets the stage for my current research. Her results in this chapter reveal a unique trait of these homeschooled girls where they have a definite sense of self that does not seem to be mimicking their mothers or other women, rather a unique development of personal value,

personal understanding of who she is and being empowered enough to think deeply and have an opinion developed based on her own questions and thoughts. This opens a new door for examining the conservative Christian homeschool movement as a measure of independent empowerment even if the women have chosen to embrace the beliefs of their parents, examining *how* they chose to believe and live is important to consider. Sheffer's (1995) study did not seem to inspire subsequent research, so the gaps in research necessitating this new study still exist.

The voices of students has been quieted so much in published literature there was a movement in the early to mid-2000s where anonymous homeschool alumni banded together to give voice to their experiences in an effort to aid current homeschool students. The Homeschool Alumni Reaching Out (HARO) project served as the parent organization for the blog website *Homeschoolers Anonymous* with the mission of creating

a narrative-sharing platform run by former homeschoolers...an inclusive community interested in sharing our educational experiences...the good, the bad, and the ugly” with the ultimate goal “to bring awareness to personal experiences of homeschool subcultures and work to educate both homeschooling communities and the general public how experiences of abuse, isolation, and neglect arise within those subcultures.

(Homeschoolers Anonymous, 2018)

Both organizations are now inactive, per their respective websites, but the collection of dialogue over several years challenges claims that all conservative Christian homeschool parents are working in the best interest of their children. Recent guest posts on the website include “Ella” and “Maya’s” separate stories detailing different experiences regarding views of gender and subsequent impacts on their personal definition of womanhood. While “Ella” recognizes that her childhood experience was not overtly abusive, the overall message regarding womanhood was to

hide and be a tool for men to work out their sexual frustration or control, as evidenced through the forced dresses and loose-fitting clothing requirements to hide curves and femininity although at the same time her father used pornography (Ella, 2017). In contrast, “Maya” suffered deep trauma as her family directly preached Bill Gothard’s beliefs, that her only value was in being a wife and mother, thus when diagnosed as infertile as a teenager, the toll was unbearable, leading to self-abuse (Maya, 2017).

These individual blogs align with a joint study compiled by HARO and the Coalition for Responsible Home Education (CRHE). The extensive survey, including upwards of 90 questions with responses from 3,700 individuals who self-identified as having been homeschooled for at least seven years in a Christian environment (as defined by the survey), confirms the concerns espoused above (CRHE, 2021). Defining various forms of abuse using legal classification, “58% of respondents reported they had not experienced abuse” with the most common form of abuse being emotional abuse (HARO, 2016, p. 2). When the data was examined by gender, females more frequently reported abuse, with 54% indicating some form within the homeschooling environment (HARO, 2016, p. 7). It must be noted that the survey was not scientifically distributed, first being distributed specifically to an organized community comprised of abuse survivors, then shared with a broader community through social media sharing; however, the quantity of results cannot be ignored as it appears to shed light on a hidden concern for women in this community (CHRH, 2021).

Conclusions

Curriculum studies delves deep into the sociological implications of education and examining the underrepresented culture of conservative Christian homeschooling with respect to identity formation is a complex task. Cultural studies grounded in experience and identity

formation theory viewed through the lens of communication theory of complicated conversations facilitates analysis revolving around feminine identity development. The lens of a complicated conversation will drive the research process whereas theories of freedom and agency within identity formation will drive data analysis resulting in conclusions around feminism, womanhood, oppression and freedom.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

As a researcher my ontological perspective is that we exist to serve and empower others and, epistemologically, I believe that we can understand the world by examining communication choices including language and information sharing. Educational experiences are rich with communication noted by research on formal and informal curriculum, and a homeschool educational experience has an additional layer of complexity with regards to information and message sharing, specifically regarding informal or hidden curriculum (Jackson, 1968). Examining the influence of a specific culture of homeschooling on how grown women have developed a definition of their adult feminine roles supports my perspective regarding the power of communication in empowering others. As noted earlier, this study seeks to reveal educational experiences that shaped women's view of femininity, using reflexivity to reveal control or empowerment in their ability to define a feminine self and utilizing methods reflective of discourse supports my epistemology. Additionally, selecting an appropriate methodology necessitates consideration of both subject and theoretical framework. Jones et al. (2015) note that historical inquiry methods such as oral history and ethnography allow individuals the ability of "recounting of life experiences," further noting that this type of inquiry can lead to critical frameworks such as feminist theory, all of which align to the elements and purposes of this study (p. 397). More specifically, "Ethnographers inscribe patterns of cultural experience; they give perspective on life" (Ellis & Bochner, 1996, p. 16). The goal of this study is to bring to the forefront voices which have been silenced, ignored and assumed through a methodology that reveals the cultural experience of homeschooled women from a religiously conservative Christian environment in an effort to provide perspective on the formation of feminine identity. Upon simple observation these women may appear to be part of mainstream society, visually a

part of the majority, but their schooling and resulting life places them on the periphery.

Ethnography creates an opportunity to tell stories, creating an oral history of this alternative milieu.

Given the focus on women and their ability to make choices regarding their lives as women, applying an ethnographic methodology aligns with feminist methodologies as well. Facilitating an oral history that emphasizes women voicing their experiences through participatory methods in an effort to discover empowerment or inequality supports the commonalities of feminist research (Cancian, 1992; Taylor, 1998). This study may be classified as applying feminist methodology; however, given the exploratory nature, I prefer to view this study as having a feminist perspective where the discipline of curriculum studies supplies the appropriate methods as I strive to listen first to the voices of homeschooled women who have never spoken and truly listen to their experience before analyzing what this may mean for the greater experience of women and feminism (Reinharz & Davidman, 1992). In designing my specific methods, I have chosen to be sensitive to feminist methods and woven intentional practices into my design as well.

Research Design

Ethnographic study was historically grounded in studying the other, the exotic, the culture distanced from our own (Davies, 2008; Ellis & Bochner, 1996; Janesick, 2010; Spradley, 2016b). Modern curriculum and cultural studies have revealed that there are diverse or peripheral cultures within our own spheres which have been underrepresented in research. The conservative Christian homeschool culture fits the idea of exotic in that what has been frequently publicized or known is extremist, such as the portrayal by Tara Westover (2018) in her autobiographical work *Educated: A Memoir* when she exposes extreme abuse, fear and isolation in her

homeschool experience. In exploring this underrepresented culture, applying ethnography to our own cultures must be done carefully as our position within that research is complicated and complex. At the same time, ethnography is the most appropriate methodology. Davies (2008) argues that “if anthropology is to live up to its theoretical scope and comparative vision as a study of the variety of forms of human social and cultural life, it must not exclude anthropologists’ own cultures from this study” (p. 41). Naturalistic studies of an anthropological nature are strengthened by a human research instrument from within the culture as the researcher has tacit knowledge that can be refined throughout the study, all of which contributes to trustworthiness in the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Intentionally using my position as a human research instrument as a member of this specific culture further empowers women by removing the hierarchal tendency of research (Taylor, 1998, p. 370). Additionally, the feminist threads within this study necessitate an oral history and ethnographic study as the exploratory nature makes way for future social justice or critical research as necessary (Davies, 2008; Janesick, 2010). Ethnographic design opens the research to others, by telling stories whereby “all people who can benefit from thinking about their own lives in terms of other people’s experiences” (Ellis & Bochner, 1996, p. 18). One chorus of voices may invite a choir of voices speaking their lived experiences within the specific educational culture, creating an understanding that segues into analysis for a variety of purposes, adding to the existing research in new ways. This supports Reinharz and Davidman’s (1992) argument that a method such as ethnography, derived from the discipline of curriculum studies, is appropriate and the participatory nature of ethnography also aligns with best practices for feminist research, especially when the researcher has the ability to have a position within the culture (Cancian, 1992; Taylor, 1998).

The exploratory nature of the overarching question “*How do homeschooled women develop a definition of their roles as women?*” requires specific ethnographic methods including interview stages, question design and setting of interviews. Given that prior research in this alternative milieu frequently utilized surveys and qualitative studies focused on parental interviews regarding practicalities and motivations, a cultural study of the students adds to current research. The sparse studies on students or student development within the homeschool movement have relied upon case studies and ethnography as well. This study extends upon these earlier studies by focusing on participants who have already “become,” who are able to self-identify and reflect upon their development from that educational experience.

Participants

Criteria for Selection

The broad concept of conservative Christian homeschooling may be broadly applicable; however, community traits may impact family structures, values, resources and experiences thus shaping a specific sub-culture of conservative Christian homeschooling. Naturalistic or purposive sampling facilitates inclusion of participants or informants linked to the desired context thereby able to serve as experts of a sort with relation to this culture (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 1980). As an initial study into this culture, participants were selected based on three criteria:

1. Feminine identity
2. Geographical location of family during homeschooling period
3. Same generation of homeschool experience for a similar time period of homeschooling

These criteria allow for the most consistent cultural experience for examining trends in resulting research and the likely ability to conduct follow up research regarding similar experiences. Some

ethnographic studies of homeschool families, children and girls selected a broader set of participants; however, both Sheffer (1995) and Kunzman (2009) had different priorities. Kunzman (2009) is the closest to a cultural study, trying to define conservative Christian homeschooling while recognizing he was only opening the window to a few particular homes where he then notes differences between those communities (p. 8). Ethnographic studies more similar to this study did limit the community to a single geographical location and defined homeschool support group based on that location (Gilgoff, 1990; Goymer, 2001; Hoeflinger, 2001). Even among these ethnographic studies, the research purpose varied from examining the purpose of homeschooling, to the parent experience or the academic experience of the student, making this study unique in specifically examining cultural messages through a cultural methodology. In selecting a very specific geographical and time bound set of participants a more complete picture of the specific conservative Christian homeschool culture from one geographical community may be developed. The use of naturalistic or purposive sampling is appropriate as there is no attempt at generalization, but rather the construction of new knowledge (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 202).

Sampling Process

The type of sampling and process of selection is unique in ethnographic research. As a member of this culture, I have a natural advantage of prior enculturation which enables me to establish rapport and select participants who will be valuable and good informants as they are also encultured and have comfortability with being an informant along with time to participate (Spradley, 2016b, p. 46). Biased sampling can be concerning in qualitative studies and efforts must be made to be inclusive of a possible range of experience (Weiss, 1994). This study seeks to create a picture of a specific culture and the informants will be chosen based on the above

stated criteria as well as on being in the community at the same time, being members of the same homeschool organization, and willingness or availability to participate in the study. I initially attempted to work through the local homeschool support group, but was unable to receive contact information for prior homeschool families, thus, with IRB approval, I used personal connections to the focus community to recruit participants who were aware of my previous connection to homeschooling and met the required criteria for the cultural study.

The sample included six adult women who were homeschooled for conservative Christian reasons within this community. Five of these women are from large families that include both brothers and sisters. The other woman is from a smaller family inclusive of sisters until much later in her educational experience when her family expanded by two more siblings. These women have taken varied pathways in their adult life including marriage, education, career, and children, allowing for validity in a possible variety of responses for the development of their sense of feminine identity. Given that this is an ethnographic study, it is ethical to focus on the religiously conservative Christian homeschooling culture in a specific location as the study does not seek to generalize interpretations, rather to facilitate a variety of voices from the student experience (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Community and Family Setting

The community is a small Midwestern town of around 40,000 residents characterized by conservative values where the primary industry of the area funds all religious institutions located in the community to promote specific values and family structures. The community itself is very education centered with competitive and well ranked public schools although rigorous course offerings such as Advanced Placement or even International Baccalaureate programs for high school were not added until around the 2000s. There are smaller businesses in the area, but the

highly influential company in the town was the primary change agent for a transition from an agricultural community to an industrial community that today includes scientific research. The family that founded the primary company invested in a public library system, museums and an arts center for both education and cultural enrichment, demonstrating a community value for education.

The conservative Christian homeschool movement began in that community in the early 1980s and organized with an official local and state homeschool support group grounded in Christian values and most families were also members of the Homeschool Legal Defense, known for its conservative Christian values aligned with the conservative Christian movement outlined in Chapter Two. The local association began with eight to ten families and grew to over 100 families over the course of the educational experience of these women, a time frame of approximately eighteen years beginning in the late 1980s and spanning into the 2000s. This community was selected for the known consistent values shared by multiple families and the strong messages of conservatism consistently communicated throughout their educational experiences in an effort to truly examine the impact of this specific messaging on the development of feminine identity. Additionally, the selected women were raised and educated for their entire elementary and secondary schooling within that community.

This community and set of families is highly characterized by educated parents, particularly fathers where all of the fathers have college degrees which are minimally bachelor's degrees and the mothers have either an associate degree or higher. The fathers tend to be scientists or engineers. The degrees earned by mothers are more varied in both level and area. The parents are active members of the community, not simply the homeschool community, but also the larger public and church community, serving as mentors to other homeschoolers, elders

of churches, volunteers with Christian service organizations, and even as members of college advisory boards. Politically, some have been active on campaigns or hosting political candidates, including presidential candidates, at their homes and even serving as delegates for election processes at the state level. The visibility and civic participation of parents in the community has impacted the homeschool community where a competitive debate team was founded more than two decades ago and many students were not only encouraged, but sometimes required to participate, which led to other opportunities such as participation in mock state legislative summer camp experiences.

Parents in this community also support one another, building an active homeschool support group that has spawned a variety of co-operative education opportunities where parents with specific interests or skills teach small group classes on a weekly basis where students from other families can participate and benefit. These range from humanities courses that create holistic English and social studies curriculum and chemistry or physics courses that offer actual lab work.

The larger community offers ample opportunities for all individuals, but specifically enrichment opportunities for homeschool students, if they choose to participate. There is a strong arts community inclusive of local theater productions and a nearby community college and two major universities within a half hour commute.

Researcher Role

My positionality within this research must be accounted for and addressed. As described in my subjectivity statement in Chapter One, I possess a unique role of both insider and outsider. Entering the research as an insider with some level of shared experience gives me unique access that otherwise might not be granted by the participants (Hoeflinger, 2001). Reflexivity

throughout my process in concert with intentional listening and probing stories from my participants will be essential to protect the validity of the study as “even in this research placement [insider], she cannot simply take her insider’s knowledge to be either unquestionably complete or true” (Davies, 2008, p. 221; Whitson, 2017). In the research process I serve as a facilitator and listener, asking questions and avoiding verbal or non-verbal agreement so as not to sway the direction of any response or conversation. However, as an insider, the interviews encourage storytelling and recollection where I also served as a participant observer as our experiences of homeschooling overlapped. Participants expressed strong comfortability in the fact that I was a participant observer and that increased their level of trust and sharing, but this also meant reflexivity was an ongoing exercise for me as the human researcher, critically analyzing my position, my power with respect to the participants and how I navigated my subjectivity as I existed within the research process (Whitson, 2017).

Methods

Ethnography is typically designed around some form of observations which includes conversations as a form of interviewing; however, some ethnographies are designed solely around interviewing. This study requires women to share the process of discovering or developing a personal meaning of feminine identity and, without completing a long-term study over decades, this renders observation impossible. James Spradley (2016b) offers a very strategic method of interviewing for such situations. While other ethnographers may disagree with this structured approach, they do recognize that this specific method of interviewing offers two advantages – a successful method for burgeoning researchers and a strategy for examining culture in our own sphere, both of which align with the development of this doctoral study (Wolcott, 2008, p. 34).

Design

Time Frame

Designing a naturalistic ethnographic study requires some level of flexibility, particularly in time frame as there would be adjustments during the process in response to phases of data analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 187). The study time frame was dependent on the development of the interview phases detailed below; however, it was designed to be short term over a few months with the final interviews being spaced only eight weeks after the initial set of interviews.

Interviews

Interviews were planned in two phases that grow in purpose and depth, all in alignment with the concurrent principle of interview design, creating a cycle of data collection, inductive data analysis, and continued data collection (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 188). The first phase, which may be classified as background or introductory, focused on grand tour descriptive questions followed by a combination of mini tour, experience and hypothetical interaction descriptive questions as well as structural questions designed to provide context and meaning within the particular homeschool culture, as included in Appendix C (Spradley, 2016b, p. 121). The first round of interviews were intended to be small group interviews; however, due to scheduling and participant needs, two individuals requested to be interviewed individually while two other pairs of sisters were interviewed together.

The second phase focused on specific experiences or themes using intentional hypothetical interaction or experience questions along with key structural questions that facilitated sharing of processes that may have impacted identity development, allowing for “focused exploration” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 235). The second round of interviews was

conducted individually to allow privacy as questions went deeper into established topics and themes, probing personal experiences that may have revealed more private or confidential stories. Throughout these phases or cycles, themes and interpretations were confirmed or clarified with the participants to allow for full understanding of the lived experiences (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Using interview cycles whereby questions evolved and focused on storytelling empowered the women through a semi-structured process as it “allow[ed] women to describe their experiences in their own terms” (Taylor, 1998, p. 366). Additionally, using cycles where participants could review, clarify and even reject inclusion of what they have shared established a “gift relationship” whereby the participants controlled and had choice over their inclusion in the process, although Oakley (2016) does note that this empowerment does have limitations in that once the gift of meaning making has been given, the researcher has control over how it is used in the final academic study (p. 208). The rapport established due to the participant researcher status minimized any potential inclusion issues on the part of the participants as they consistently communicated a level of trust with their stories given my history with homeschooling.

Research Questions

Question series were designed to use a variety of descriptive and structural question options and stems. While certain topics were anticipated to create a baseline of understanding for the homeschool culture and an intention to understand identity development, the ethnography was also organic, responding and developing in response to informants’ sharing, thus allowing for thick description (Geertz, 2017; Reinharz & Davidman, 1992). The exploratory nature of the study required that the interviews remained flexible for unanticipated sharing and meaning

making in response to initial questions. Initial questions scaffolded through each of the types previously identified as outlined in Appendix C.

As the study seeks to explore the development of sense of feminine identity, questions progressed to intentional topics or scenarios to elicit this development, all of which were written to facilitate stories of agency. This aligns with the philosophies and processes of feminist ethnographic work described by Frigga Haug (1983/1999) and others in her collective work *Female Sexualization: A Collective Work of Memory*. The question design sought to bridge the experience with the development in order to uncover “the ways in which individuals construct their identity” thus the questions were organized in a way that described “the process of their socialization” so that the informants uncovered how they became a woman within this particular culture (Haug, 1983/1999, p. 40). Utilizing a scaffolded approach of questions beginning with grand tour, then focusing on mini tour and segueing into experiential questions is supported by Haug’s (1983/1999) process where the collective discovered certain key topics and situations and began to relive the situations including “smells, sounds, emotions, thoughts, attitudes” which allowed informants to relive the past “freeing us for a time from notions of our present superiority over our past selves; it allows us to become once again the child” (p. 47). This method of designing interview stages to support both ethnographic and feminist studies supports the legitimacy of the study by empowering the voices of the informants and discovering meaning without supposition (Davies, 2008; Kook et al., 2019).

Part of identity development and praxis relates to the process of developing problem solving ability. Questions also scaffolded to situations where they faced conflict or challenge in order to examine processes and abilities to develop independent skills and have choice or authenticity (Deci & Flast, 1995), looking for avoidance or exploration opportunities related to

these situations as reflected in the Family Communication Patterns Scale (Chaffee et al., 1971; Gupta & Geetika, 2019; Koerner et al., 2002; Rubin et al., 1994). Essentially, what this study looked for in responses are for ways the participants felt “like part of ‘the crew,’” or felt “like captains of their own ship” (Deci & Flast, 1995, p. 9). If responses included references to threats, punishments, surveillance or lack of privacy, or end goals denoted by others, this indicated lack of autonomy and ability to develop personal choice and authenticity (Deci & Flast, 1995, p. 31). Another layer to measuring personal autonomy and freedom of choice is in access to information in order to make choices, so examining ability to choose reading materials, access to variety of curriculum, freedom to question and discuss or experiment are all components to developing personal efficacy (Deci & Flast, 1995, p. 36). Measuring these elements included basic questions about access to curriculum of choice, debatable discussions with parents, but was also measured through less obvious questions that instead explored the actual empowerment by seeking to discover levels of curiosity, personal goal setting followed by mastery or self-advocacy (both as a student and now as an adult) and expressions of personal value, worth or self-esteem in relation to family, spouse, community and career (Deci & Flaste, 1995, p. 143). Embedded within the investigation for personal authenticity and autonomy is the idea of complicated conversations where learning experiences are not simply about the content, but about power over the content and ability to control the direction or application of that learning. Parents willing to engage in complicated conversations encourage concept-oriented communication which stimulates thinking, reasoning and personal ownership of decision-making (Bakar & Afthanorhan, 2016; Rubin et al., 1994). All of this was with attention to how the homeschool culture and resulting experience created agency with careful recognition of the difference between those formative experiences and natural maturation.

Validity and Reliability

Issues of reliability arise from the inability of a researcher to fully know from an outsider standpoint; however, given my unique position as a type of insider as discussed in Chapter One, this alleviates some of that concern (Davies, 2008, p. 97). Using stages of interviews with scaffolded question design facilitates cross-checking and clarifying, creating consistency within the study, increasing reliability as well (Davies, 2008). Including participants from more than one family also increases reliability with regards to creating a cultural understanding of the particular community. Essentially, conducting ethnographic research grounded in discourse, the study as a whole will be measured in how it dovetails with other research as well as the breadth of detail from within the study (Gee, 1999, p. 7).

While validity and reliability will be attended to in the manner described, as an ethnographic qualitative study, perhaps establishing trustworthiness is more appropriate to consider, specifically through establishing or accounting for “credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 247). The premise of the study is that the true culture of this conservative Christian homeschool has not been fully realized due to the missing voices of students, particularly female students, and bringing those voices to the forefront recognizes that there are multiple constructions of that experience and therefore truth. In adding to the narrative of the culture and allowing the participants to approve and clarify the findings, trustworthiness is established through credibility of the overall findings, which satisfies the more traditional requirement of internal validity (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 296). Additionally, my positionality within the research and as the primary research instrument allows me to account for “prolonged engagement,” which is key because “It seems likely that unless the inquirer began as an accepted member of the group or agency being studied, distortions can

never be overcome” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 302). My positionality is an advantage for establishing credibility as long as my subjectivity is recognized and limited through personal reflexivity (Whitson, 2017).

Reliability is a concern for more traditional studies so that instrumentation does not decay and data may be replicated; however, in a naturalistic study such as an ethnography, dependability is more relevant as the results are not expected to be a repeatable experiment (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This study is exploratory to create more knowledge and understanding of the diversity of the homeschool culture that can be built upon in future studies. Confirmability, then, is more important or critical.

Reflexivity

As noted in Chapter One, my position within the research must be accounted for and to protect the integrity and trustworthiness of the research I engaged in reflexivity throughout the research process. My positionality cannot change, but awareness of my subjective empathy with the culture and participants can have an undo influence (Whitson, 2017). I engaged in my own reflections after interview sessions and journaled my reactions and feelings in the margins of the transcripts, seeking to identify how I was being changed or influenced by the shared meaning making. This allowed me to examine the language I used in developing future questions as well as responding to the participants.

Data Collection

Interviews were conducted in small groups and individually during the early phase, as participants were able to collaborate with other participants’ schedules; creating two small group sessions and two individual sessions all conducted via Zoom. Follow up interviews were all conducted individually, also conducted via Zoom. Small group interviews, particularly with

family members, facilitates memory recall and inspiration for other sharing of similar or different experiences through natural and conversational response as our meaning often develops from being part of a collective even though we are also individuals. In women's studies or feminist work "research itself should be a collective process" (Haug, 1983/1999, p. 36). The power of conversation cannot be overestimated. Just as Chapter Two notes the importance of complicated conversations in curriculum studies, that becomes even more important combined with the methods of ethnography. Applebee (1996) argues that "recognition that classroom discourse mediates between broader cultural traditions and schooled knowledge leads to a new way to think about curriculum and instruction;" and in this research method, the data collection process adds another layer to this complicated conversation (p. 37). Collaborative interviews as a method of data collection facilitate a process for informants to realize and reveal their cultural traditions and subsequent ways of thinking as adults. Gee (1999) affirms this practice, explaining that big "D" discourse is about establishing our identity and association within a community or culture, thus certain discourse may reveal itself within a collaborative conversation that reveals deeper meaning and understanding of gender development. Discourse is essential in meaning making, particularly in ethnographic interviews.

The discourse of group interviews or focus groups is especially powerful for facilitating group meaning making, which is not only important to a cultural study as noted above, but powerful for a feminist participatory approach. Group interviews serve multiple purposes including collaboration, encouraging others to share subversive experiences due to the support of others, and unique opportunities for the researcher to delve into taboo or silenced topics through an examination of the participants' interplay (Devault, 1990; Kook et al., 2019; Kruger et al., 2019; Montell, 1999). Spradley (2016b) argues that data collection should be conducted through

“ethnographic interviews as a series of friendly conversations” whereby repeated cycles allow for reflective explanations and questions that develop meaning together (p. 58). This process supports Lincoln & Guba’s (1985) naturalistic research design that relies on these reflective practices to establish trustworthiness. The process of group interviews also allowed for more effective refining of the questions as new language for categories may emerged that were more relevant and meaningful to the female participants (Devault, 1990).

Location

It is preferable for interviews to take place in the homes of the participants as frequently as possible; however, online video conversations via secure platforms were necessary in response to the global COVID-19 health pandemic or participant and researcher travel restrictions. This is in alignment with current Internal Review Board policies published by Georgia Southern University. Participants were able to participate from their own chosen location which typically included their homes, although one participant was outdoors where she could see her children playing. These locations were ideal as the participants were able to balance their personal lives including careers and children with the time to participate in an interview without the need to travel or meet in a public place.

Data Analysis

Data analysis is less about data coding than about developing themes and interpretation from identified categories. Ezzy (2002) explains that cultural research interprets through contextualizing what has been shared rather than dissecting it into pieces. This is important in ethnography as it “locates the interpretation of data within an analysis of broader social and cultural processes” even when there are differences between participants, making sense of the differences “within broader social, cultural and political contexts” (p. 103). Geertz (2017)

expounds on Ryle's (2009) ideas of thick description, relating it to the practice of ethnography where I am not merely describing with lots of detail, but allowing for analysis that delves into subtext and meaning making. Given the purpose of my study to explore the lived experiences of homeschooled women and how that cultural context developed a definition of feminine identity, this form of analysis is essential. Interviews were transcribed, reviewed with participants for accuracy and approval and then coded for categories and future questions that focused on specific events or meaning which revealed themes. Saldana's (2013) multistep process for coding and recategorizing through multiple cycles allowed me to refine and refocus my interview questions. In the first cycle I identified subcodes, which Saldana (2013) defines as "specific, observable types of realistic actions" whereas codes are conceptual and themes or categories are even more abstract, both of which allow for describing cultural experiences within the homeschool context (p. 12).

While coding can feel random, Saldana (2013) discusses three key aspects for coding that will provide initial organization. He draws these from Lofland et al. (2006): "cognitive aspects or meanings, emotional aspects or feelings, and hierarchical aspects or inequalities" (p. 15). Each of these is appropriate to my data collection and analysis as I am examining a schooling experience with regards to emotional experiences and development of gender roles. After the first cycle of coding, I reflected on these aspects to begin identifying broader codes and categories.

On a more specific level, Spradley (2016a, 2016b) discusses domain analysis relative to ethnographic interviews. This method of analysis focuses on language of people in a specific culture or context, looking for semantic relationships and terms that describe these relationships. Given the cultural nature of my research, applying domain analysis may provide unique insight

into understated gender roles and expectations. Spradley (2016b) explains that semantic relationships developed from domain analysis

provide the ethnographer with one of the best clues to the structure of meaning in another culture. They lead directly to the larger categories (folk domains) that reveal the organization of cultural knowledge learned by searching for *informant-expressed relationships*, the ethnographer can find a doorway into the system of meaning of another culture. (p. 112)

Homeschool culture shares unique meaning and relationships as their daily lives are also their educational lives. Understanding the folk meaning for certain terms or relationships will be essential to analyzing the whole of the experience. This type of discourse analysis encapsulates all forms of communication including non-verbal, clothing choices, mannerisms, hair style and so forth as these are reflective of the way we view ourselves and what we want to communicate to others, adding a new layer of complexity to the complicated conversation of who we are and how we fit into our home or educational community (Gee, 1999). While the primary focus of data collection will be on the words expressed, elements of tone, expression and non-verbal cues also inform the study. It must be remembered that these analysis tools are not a formula for exact outcomes, but rather an imprecise procedure for developing meaning and shared understanding as

there are no once and for all tests for who is a ‘real’ feminist, gang member, patriot, humanist, cutting-edge scientist, ‘yuppie,’ or ‘regular’ at the local bar. These matters are settled provisionally and continuously, in practice, as part and parcel of shared histories and on-going activities. (Gee, 1999, p. 16)

This does not render the data analysis pointless, rather that the process begun in this study could and should continue into other cultures, subcultures and generations of conservative Christian homeschooling to develop a more holistic understanding of the experience of womanhood.

Additionally, in coding I will take into account group discourse, much like the complicated conversation (Applebee, 1996; Oakeshott, 1959; Pinar, 2012), where the responses between members in the process of sharing and making meaning reveals silencing, taboo subjects, as well as culturally “expected” or “accepted” messages (Kook et al., 2019, p. 91). Examining group communication patterns may reveal more subtleties regarding hidden curriculum and patriarchal control as it brings to light what is not being said or explored.

Beyond applying interpretive methods to collected data, analysis will be guided by the driving question focused on personal development of feminine identity. This question requires analysis to consider the process, the agency and ability of each woman to define herself through and beyond her home educational experience. When analyzing the messages, transformative power will be the key, hence applying the interpretive lens of feminist theory. Greene (1988) reiterates the importance of agency, writing that “It is not only a matter of the capacity to choose; it is a matter of the power to act to attain one’s purposes” (p. 4). Freedom and choice as part of the educational experience or as resulting powers of the educational experience for these women connects to the educational theories of this study. In fact, Dewey (1993/1998) argues that freedom is not true if the individual does not proceed with purpose and mission, synonymous with autonomy as outlined by Deci and Flaste (1995). In applying these theories through a feminist lens during data analysis will focus findings on the causal nature of the learning environment on perceived long term personal agency.

Publication

Publication of the study may take a traditional dissertation format or an alternative narrative style depending on the data analysis. Regardless of writing format, the results will be situated “as historically located, subjective and relative” (Ezzy, 2002, p. 102). Results will be shared not as quantifiable data, but as a window into a journey at a given place and time without judgment, prediction or conclusion. There will be recommendations for next steps within the conclusions, particularly related to social justice issues and feminism.

This study seeks to bring unheard voices of women from a specific culture of conservative Christian homeschooling to the forefront so that their experiences can inform current research. The first phase of interviews provided greater context on the homeschool experience including curriculum, both formal and informal, instructional strategies and experiences offered by both the parents and the local community. Additionally, several themes came to the forefront, allowing for more specific follow up questions in the second series of interviews. In this chapter I create a more detailed description of this unique community and the families as well as analyze the themes surrounding how these women were impacted by their educational experience with regards to who they are and perceive themselves to be as adult women within the context of their schooling experience. In order to visualize the interview phases, responses and resulting themes, the tables below capture key responses to significant questions. Participant responses are grouped by family.

Table 1*Round One Interview Questions, Responses and Themes*

Question	Family A Responses	Family B Responses	Family C Responses	Theme
Could you describe a typical day of school?	Elementary: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Led by mother • Structured • Group lessons • Field trips in PM • Secondary: Planned, but independent • Co-op classes • Lots extra curricular activity 	Elementary: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Led by mother • Structured • Group lessons • Field trips in PM • Secondary – Independent, done by noon • PM field trips Library • “after focus” session 	Elementary: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Structured • Chores • Bible time • Group lessons • Individual practice Secondary: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mom did lesson for context • Independent • Co-op classes • Extra curriculars or job 	Culture and Autonomy

Question	Family A Responses	Family B Responses	Family C Responses	Theme
Could you describe your experience with extracurricular activities?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Band • Debate • Synchronized swimming • Horses • Music lessons • Field trips to newspaper, post office, ice cream 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Did not do clubs or sports • Music lessons • Field trips to swim, library, cider mill, printing press, auto plant 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Debate • synchronized swimming • Fleet feet • Skiing • Some music lessons • Field trips i.e. local radio station 	Culture and Choice
Could you describe the formal curriculum?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Well researched • Konos • Saxon • Calvert • Bob Jones • Dependent on child 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Abeka (predominant) • Rod & Staff (elementary) • Video series for math (only Mary) • Rosetta Stone 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parents went to conferences • Saxon • Konos • Abeka • Christian based • Dad wrote science & creative writing • Community college 	Culture
Could you describe the literature you read (assigned or choice)?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Read whatever wanted • Kids classics 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Juvenile fiction & mysteries • Little House on Prairie • Beverly Cleary • Cam Jansen • Comics • Famous Americans • Missionary biographies • Grandma's Attic • American Girl 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Whatever we wanted • Nancy Drew • Hardy Boys • TinTin comic • Classics • Little House on the Prairie • Uncle Tom's Cabin, • Bobbsey Twins • Biographies • Required to read I Kissed Dating Goodbye 	Culture and Autonomy
Did you ever choose to read anything your parents did not approve of?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parents did not pay attention to what students chose to read 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No wizards allowed • Later watched Harry Potter movies by self • Comic strip books 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not allowed to read Harry Potter or witchcraft • Later read or listened to it in secret or as adult 	Passive Resistance

Question	Family A Responses	Family B Responses	Family C Responses	Theme
Could you describe the role of religion in your education?	Elementary: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bible time • Memorization Secondary: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • History of the church • Learn about other denominations and religions • Intersection between Islam and Christianity 	Elementary: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bible time Secondary: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • History and science through religious lens • Independent Bible reading 	Elementary: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bible stories • Memorization Secondary: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Memorization including whole books • History curriculum – ancient history parallel with biblical events • Science, curriculum • Generally not “in your face” • Learned other countries and their religions 	Culture and Religious Studies
Could you describe how you handled needing help learning something? What did you do if you struggled or failed at a learning task or assessment?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Math! • Go to mom or dad for help • Ask questions. Hated math • Like co-op for different ways to be taught • Differentiation by parent 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Afternoons ask questions • Ask dad for help with math (cry), Later got a CD with videos for math • Wanted more feedback on writing • Older siblings helped younger siblings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask for help (usually dad for math) • He saw logically, didn’t connect to needs of student (cry) • Bought new curriculum for some subjects 	Struggle
What kinds of things did you want to be when you grew up? Why? Were there certain roles or careers your parents encouraged? How? Discouraged? How?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Drive a tank • Veterinarian (loved horses), • Lawyer (inspired by debate, realized did not like blood) • Took aptitude tests & given experiences 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Minivan mom • Take care of babies • Modeled how to be moms • Also wanted us to go to college • Aptitude tests at community college 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Paralegal • Teacher • Mom • Veterinarian 	Gender Roles

Question	Family A Responses	Family B Responses	Family C Responses	Theme
Role of mother? Role of father?	Mom: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stay at home • Initiated and researched homeschooling Dad: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supported mom • Helped with math and science in high school 	Mom: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stay at home • Teach even when it was a struggle and not accepted Dad: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supported • Helped with math and science in high school 	Mom: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Designed & wrote daily lessons for individuals • Taught group lessons • Designed experiences like act stuff out • Discussions Dad: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Taught math and science • Modeled example problems • Illustrated or diagram 	Motherhood and Gender Roles and Struggle
How do you think you became aware of gender (roles)?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Observed parent roles • Saw more traditional • Mom cleaning and cooking • Dad taking care of outside • We had choices of chores though – choose to do dishes or barn chores 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explicit and implicit • Boys had to learn ALL skills • Girls only had to learn house keeping skills • Girls could do outdoor if wanted (i.e. mow lawn, welding) which made roles less defined 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strongly modeled and reinforced traditional roles through chores. Females did indoor • Males fixed car, mowed lawn • Some disagreement between siblings on things like mow lawn 	Gender Roles

This data allowed me to clarify the culture and patterns within the homeschool so that I could ask questions that explored the processes and impacts of the experience on identity development. The table below includes selected quotations from each family that illustrate thinking patterns and experiences related to specific themes that had begun developing based on the first cycle of interviews.

Table 2*Round Two Interview Questions, Key Quotations and Themes*

Question	Family A Responses	Family B Responses	Family C Responses	Theme
How do you think the struggle (described in interview one) impacted you as a person and how you developed?	It [struggle] did, you know, teach me that I don't have to love something to be able to do it and to get through it and to learn a concept and do well enough.	I'll sit back and think - You know if it's an I can either, I can figure it out, or I can try figuring out myself or somebody else will ask about it. Or if I can't get it figured out, I can just ask.	I think it definitely made me a very independent learner. So it's kind of like instead of going to someone and asking a question, my default, like even today my first instinct is, okay, let me reread the book, you know if it's a textbook type of thing, let me Google it, let me read, let me ask all these sorts of questions, let me basically exhaust all other resources to try to figure it out myself before I go and ask someone or, at least if I'm going to go ask someone, I now have like a better question to ask	Struggle

Question	Family A Responses	Family B Responses	Family C Responses	Theme
Could you describe family discussions of controversial topics?	I think it really taught me from a young age, that you know if you want to make an argument you got to go make your best argument and you can't just say "I feel this way" - like who cares how you feel about it, like why? Like what's the point what's, what would back it up, why would that be a good decision? And so I felt like those were really good skills that I certainly used in college and then, in my professional life, as well, and I think also my parents taught us very much not to have a fear of authority.	You know, what are kind of, my parents would kind of say, you know, like what are biblical absolutes or what are the for sure things, and then, what are your convictions and then, you know, there are things that can be decided from there, so. I would say it was kind of more like. For me, it was probably guidance as things came along.	Now again, if you differed in the viewpoint of my dad, we would still have the discussion. And then at some point you'd be tired of the discussion, so then maybe some of my siblings and I would get like okay, you know we're just gonna "yes you're right" and move on.	Religious Studies and Passive Resistance
In secondary years you mentioned independent Bible reading. Were you ever taught how to read, understand or interpret the Bible? If so, how?	As we got older we were in a, my mom lead a Bible study for at least one or two years I was in high school and included some of that stuff. They also taught some of our Sunday school classes at church also.	I would say lots of different like specific tools. I would say lots of different like specific tools.	We did a lot of talking about the Bible. We would sit down, maybe like once a week. And we would go through a topic in the Bible, and so we did have a lot of teaching on the Bible, and how to apply it.	Religious Studies

Question	Family A Responses	Family B Responses	Family C Responses	Theme
Could you describe how you learned about religiously controversial topics and/or roles of women? How did your parents respond to questions and conversations with you on these topics?	We always, when we would learn something, my mom would always try to give us like the big picture, and so, whether that's like studying the other side of the issue, or that part of thing, that was always a part of what we learned and did, especially in high school.	We would pretty much every week listen to Unshackled, maybe on the way to church in the evening and I'm not sure I would have identified this, but my parents did. I have heard them and they said it was a good way because it introduced us and opened up some of those topics in a way, that was a way that we could talk about it and learn about it and realize that the world, so we weren't naive. I think, I think that's the part of teaching us critical thinking skills and teaching us research or exploring. And so my parents, my parents gave us these tools sometimes that resulted in us going beyond what they would have maybe said.	I remember thinking that like, oh so it is godly for her to wear a head covering and it's godly for you to not wear a head covering, they're both godly...I remember thinking, I remember that instance and that's come up to me, several times that I think it helped me realize that you have permission to have a different looking relationship with your husband than someone else and still both be God honoring. I think probably generally we kind of were on the same wavelength um. But I think I tend to be a little more open minded about things. But I would say, from a young age, I really did take my faith, as my own. And I really I believe that I had my own relationship, um that was definitely through their influence, but it was real for me.	Religious Studies and Gender Roles
Could you tell me about a specific religious lesson or influence from your education that impacted your beliefs about being a woman? How?				Religious Studies and Autonomy

Question	Family A Responses	Family B Responses	Family C Responses	Theme
How do you feel your mother influenced you in becoming your adult role?	I feel like my parents, you know you kind of are like “Oh well, naturally it'll work like how they did it” but you learn, and I feel like they taught us that it wasn't like it had to be that way or it was the wrong way, it was just that's what they did, and I think that is seen as the very traditional way.	Mom tried to keep herself within a certain bounds, but when she was in those bounds she could be all the way in charge. So she was very, very much like felt that she was supposed to be a teacher, that God had given her insight to help younger women that once she's learned these things she's supposed to pass them on.	I definitely saw mom just wholeheartedly submit to dad... I saw her really just taking the path that he made for the family and she followed that, and she almost had, she didn't have a lot of say. I think she was, in a way, like happy to do that. I think that's really shaped me as an adult now and as a wife. At times it's been a struggle for me because if I feel like my husband is trying to steamroll, doesn't try to, but if he maybe is, I can be very forceful about being hurt, so I'm like kind of the opposite way. Where it's harder for me to submit because I am like, I don't want to be my parents in that way, and so I really try to hold on to myself, I hold my opinions in high esteem, I want to be heard, I want to be an equal partner.	Motherhood and Gender Roles

Question	Family A Responses	Family B Responses	Family C Responses	Theme
How would you define femininity?	I feel like my parents, you know you kind of are like “Oh well, naturally it’ll work like how they did it” but you ’earn, and I feel like they taught us that it wasn’t like it had to be that way or it was the wrong way, it was just that’s what they did, and I think that is seen as the very traditional way.	So like it’s you know biblically women somehow are supposed to clothe themselves with an inner beauty, gentleness, meekness, and all that kind of stuff. I think femininity is learning a maturity of who God wants you to be... Like it’s not, it’s not wearing dresses and cooking food. It’s easier for me to say a lot of things that it’s not.	I think I struggle with defining femininity just because I feel like there’s a very broad spectrum. I mean, I myself, I think I would fall on like a more masculine of the spectrum of like what people envision femininity. Um I think like femininity, I think, is really more of how you present yourself, how other people are observing you, maybe how you dress or your mannerisms or even to some degree, your interests.	Gender / Gender Roles

Question	Family A Responses	Family B Responses	Family C Responses	Theme
How would you define feminism?	I think that equality means that we're all on the same footing, so in my opinion feminism should be about equality between the sexes, with the same opportunities.	I think it would be being a woman, or what I would want it to be, would be accepting being a woman without having to prove that you're just like a man, which I think is, has been something in careers that women have struggled with because you can either be a man-woman or else you can stay home.	I think feminism is seeing the differences between yourself and a man and viewing them as powerful, viewing them as a unique perspective and using them to benefit the world. Not to say a man is worse or a woman is worse, we're we're both different, but both uniquely amazing. And so I think feminism, to me, is not losing your voice, because you're a female but saying no, I am female, so I have this different perspective.	Gender / Gender Roles

Themes fell into two larger categories of schooling as experience and womanhood. Within schooling as experience, participants described the experiential component of curriculum then explored issues of autonomy, struggle and critical thinking versus indoctrination. The womanhood category included themes of lessons from their mother, explicit gender roles and reflections on becoming herself within ideas of feminism. In order to protect these women and their families, each has been given a pseudonym and all location details have been generalized (i.e. local community college rather than the named institution) or changed to pseudonyms as well.

Creating a safe space for these women to share their stories was a delicate balance made successful in that the researcher filled the role of not only researcher, but a collaborator and participant researcher from within that understood context, thus asking questions and sharing difficult stories was easier or more comfortable. As one participant noted at the conclusion of the first interview, “I do feel your perspective as being from a big family and a homeschool background makes this much easier to talk about because I wouldn’t, I wouldn’t talk freely with just anyone about this...we can be somewhat judged or maybe people don’t understand when you might be saying something and you’re not really meaning it in a negative way.” And each of the participants began their second interview with statements that they trusted me with their stories when I asked if they had clarification or even elements of the first interview they wanted to redact. This level of trust is essential for research in this community.

Coding for Themes

The first cycle of interviews focused on questions from the Grand Tour and Mini Tour questions, all specifically designed to provide an overview of the schooling experience. These allowed the participants to recall their early childhood through secondary educational experiences, creating a picture of daily life as well as patterns of curriculum, parental choices and student choices. In the coding process several topics emerged including struggle, autonomy, religious studies, passive resistance, and broad ideas about motherhood or gender roles and careers. Using these topics, specific questions focused on experience and hypothetical interactions as well as structural questions on femininity were chosen for the second cycle of interviews, allowing for expansion and depth of responses. The clarity from the second transcripts brought two overarching themes to the surface – schooling as experience and

womanhood. The themes and topics, combined with an understanding of the predominant curriculum present a cohesive picture of the unique culture of this homeschool community.

Culture & Curriculum

Families

The six participants represented three different families from the same community. I made the choice to interview some individuals that were sibling groups as this allowed me to ascertain if certain parental decisions were consistent trends or grounded in differentiation based on student needs. As noted above, in order to protect the privacy of the participants and their family members who did not participate, each has been given a pseudonym and references to specific locations has either been generalized or given a pseudonym as well. To create a picture of the participants, this chart captures relevant relationships and characteristics that provide context for the study, particularly as this ethnography is revealing of a particular community.

Table 3

Participant Demographics

Participant	Family	Age	Graduation Year	Current Residence	Career
Sarah	Family A	39	2000	Mid-Atlantic	Lawyer
Elizabeth	Family B	39	2000	Midwest	Educator
Mary	Family B	33	2007	Midwest	Nurse
Rebekah	Family C	34	2005	Midwest	Executive Assistant
Hannah	Family C	30	2009	Midwest	Stay-at-Home Mother
Rachel	Family C	28	2011	Midwest	Engineer

All participants were homeschooled for the duration of their school experience. Sarah is from a family that was generally smaller, having only three children until she was older. Elizabeth and Mary are from a larger family of more than six children with Rebekah, Hannah and Rachel also being from a larger family of more than six children. All three families are characterized by a father who worked for the primary industry in the area which is strongly

scientific in nature and a mother who stayed home with the children. All six parents hold a college degree with all but one being at least a bachelor's degree. Only one parent has a background or degree in education. In each of the families the mother took the lead in homeschooling; however, the fathers often assisted or took a leading role in the science or math courses, particularly at the higher levels. In one family the father retired while the younger children were still in school and he took a much more significant role in homeschooling, not only teaching his own children, but offering co-operative classes such as chemistry and physics which included labs.

All six participants have college degrees ranging from an associates degree to a doctoral degree, the majority being bachelor's degrees. According to a comprehensive study by Dr. Brian Ray (2003) of the National Home Education Research Institute (NHRI), fifty percent of homeschooled adults took at least some college courses and more than eleven percent earned a bachelor's degree, which, compared to the general population, is a higher percentage. In this study one hundred percent of the participants have taken college coursework and eighty three percent have earned at least a bachelor's degree. Five of the women are married and have children, but all six expressed a desire to be married. While these details might lead someone to assume all of them stay at home to raise the children and even homeschool, only one parent is currently a stay-at-home parent and her children are too young for school, although she is planning to homeschool. Their careers range from engineering, nursing, teaching, being a lawyer and working as an administrator for a church. These statistics more than confirm and actually exceed modern research into adults who were homeschooled. These occupations also fall within the typical occupations held by others who were in this first generation of homeschooled as Dr. Brian Ray (2003) also notes that while slightly more than seven percent now are stay-at-home

parents who may homeschool, about the same work in professional fields like nursing and two to three percent work as teachers and another two percent work in professional fields requiring advanced degrees. While the percentages in this study are much higher, this study is a much smaller scale given the qualitative nature and the range of careers are reflective of the comprehensive quantitative research published by NEHRI.

In terms of diversity, the families reflect the majority ethnicity of the geographic community with all being Caucasian. This study did not seek to preclude diversity; however, limiting the study to this specific location significantly limited availability of ethnically diverse participants which is a noted limitation of the study.

Another key element to the homeschool culture was the structure of the educational experience with regards to grade levels. Homeschooling does allow for tremendous flexibility with respect to students and traditional grade levels since everything can be individualized. While all participants discussed opportunities to take courses at the local community college during high school, each described an experience that aligned with traditional public school meaning that elementary school spanned kindergarten through about sixth grade, middle school being seventh and eighth grade and high school spanning ninth through twelfth grade. All participants graduated from high school at the typical age of seventeen or eighteen. Some did take a few classes at the community college, but these were focused courses such as higher level math and science that a parent may not be able to teach or a course that would benefit from group discussion such as American government, all of which would parallel a public school Advanced Placement or dual enrollment experience.

Curriculum

The families chose to use a wide range of curriculum, although a few major programs were consistent including Abeka, Konos and Saxon. Each of these reflect the curricular trends noted in Chapter Two. However, the participants shared how curriculum choices were made after much research by the parents and sometimes were specifically developed by their parents, such as Rebekah, Hannah and Rachel's father who developed high school science courses. While other parents were not credited for writing curriculum, the heavy emphasis on math skills was consistent across all interviews. Often curriculum was changed to meet the individual needs of the student if they were struggling or if the parent recognized a different learning style such as purchasing a CD or DVD curriculum inclusive of video tutorials for Mary when she struggled with math.

Another consistency in formal curriculum was the reading of Bible stories and memorization of Bible verses during elementary years. All six participants discussed this aspect of their education. While this was consistent at the elementary level, the explicit religious instruction varied in older grade levels with some participants communicating that this was not part of their formal schooling even though it was a family expectation to continue religious studies. The various methods of religious study at higher grade levels is discussed later in the results as it directly relates to a specific research interest of this study.

Finally, extracurricular opportunities were extensive across all grade levels. At the elementary level all participants described a wide variety of field trip opportunities – some with just their family and some with the larger homeschool community. Field trips focused on both cultural exposure and career exposure. All families regularly visited the local library where children could pick out books or even select a movie. More traditional field trips included going

to a local art museum that included both art and science exhibits, a local nature preserve that included historical homestead buildings, nature walking trails and an indoor nature museum, museums in neighboring communities, a cider mill, an ice cream store that made its own ice cream, a local printing press, the local newspaper, a local radio station, a nearby auto manufacturing plant that was still operational, the post office and even a veterinarian office. Some field trips fulfilled physical education requirements too, including trips to go swimming at the local pool or a day trip to go downhill skiing. Skiing during the winter often included a regular ski day where a number of homeschool families would go to the same skiing location every few weeks.

Within the home, extracurriculars included music lessons, often taught by parents or older children, and cooking or horseback riding, if the family owned animals. Other options in the local community included sports or clubs organized by families within the homeschool community. These included a debate class and team, a competitive synchronized swimming team, basketball and volleyball. Students also participated in community extracurriculars such as drama through the local children's theater production or track through organizations like Fleet Feet. Many of the participants also discussed involvement with church groups such as youth group or young adult groups where they might simply attend or even be involved in other aspects such as singing with the worship team.

Schooling as Experience

Choosing curriculum was a serious endeavor for each family, often including the use of purchased curriculum as referenced earlier, but each decision was based on research regarding instructional strategies as well as belief systems. Sarah noted that

My, my mom loved to research curriculum and decide what she wanted to use. I know in early elementary we did use Konos, which is like at that time was more of a, oh gosh, well unit study kind of thing. And have history, English, and all of that kind of stuff. We every, once we got to like fifth grade we'd use Saxon math, all the way through. We usually used Bob Jones for science and it would be based on what my mom had researched and determined was the best.

Research for sound curriculum that also aligned with values was reiterated by Elizabeth and Mary whose mother had a background in education. While using popular curriculum was important, none of the participants mentioned or recalled the Christian emphasis as having particular messaging other than using biblical type examples. However, what most participants did lead to was the eventual individualization of the curriculum based on their needs. As Sarah described,

And then she would try different things too; and different things worked better for some of us than for other ones. Like I really loved for a few years, we did Calvert where they would send you all your books and your entire curriculum and exactly what you had to do every day, kind of thing. And so I loved it, my sisters hated it. So it was just, you know, it's very much dependent on the child, what they like it do, so I did it for a couple more years, and my sisters did something else.

In addition to curriculum being differentiated based on learning styles or needs, even electives were creatively developed to meet the needs of the students, much like my parents chose to send me to specific art or creative thinking classes while my siblings did not have those experiences. Rebekah captures these trends, explaining

I would agree that it was for the, I would say the majority, probably 75% of our curriculum was purchased from well researched, popular homeschool curriculum companies. I remember my parents going to different homeschool conferences to hear about different curriculum. I really do feel like they tried their best to find good curriculum that we could use. I know for like more elective type courses like, you know, I mentioned the art class earlier, and I remember taking like a geography class that my mom, kind of, she more developed that herself, but it wasn't like it was necessary, it wasn't a math class that she was making up, it was art. So, I also took [classes] at the homeschool co-op that I mentioned. There was several classes that I took there too, so the curriculum was chosen based on whatever that teacher wanted to teach. So I did do Konos history.

The women all felt a deep sense of care from their parents, noting the amount of intention, research and work that went into the curriculum development. While the curriculum was influenced by national trends and conferences, possibly by the likes of Bill Gothard, the common thread of this community was research for the best academic choice for each child. This highlights a culture of educational intentionality, parental awareness of each child's learning needs, parental research and flexibility from year to year in contrast with a set and controlled curriculum solely promoting one particular educational strategy or belief system.

While all participants noted similar themes regarding the selection of curriculum, the instructional component had the greatest impact on their development as an individual. Instruction was characterized by a few key traits - self-pacing and experiential, both of which led to two significant impacts, autonomy and struggle. Regardless of the formal curriculum, all participants described being given lessons for a week, or even the entire year, and being

independently responsible for completing the tasks and asking questions as needed. Even co-op experiences were weekly and thus daily assignments were self-paced over the course of the week prior to the next group session. Elementary learning experiences were characterized by more rote curriculum, like Rod and Staff, which Elizabeth described as “very conservative Mennonite Amish curriculum, very traditional...in that approach of like the three r's... And a lot of drill and rote and very, very much a moral curriculum.” However, middle and high school instruction seemed more application based, which had direct impact on the college experience for the participants. Elizabeth explained that her schooling experience made her feel inadequate as she was not familiar with typical things like lockers and class time, but that she was very adept at adjusting to new situations, learning and teaching online and project-based learning. Rebekah illustrated with a specific story which highlights education as experience which created a challenge for her, but also equipped her to problem solve.

I had one class that I did struggle in. It was my only, I got a B plus in the class. It was my only B my entire college career, so I really struggled in it, but I blame it 100% on the professor, but I do think that I, maybe was at a disadvantage because it was, he would like literally just like stand up and like throw Wikipedia sheets on the projector. He was a - what history was it? It was like Asian history, or so I mean it was like ridiculous, so it's all of these like Asian names and dates and everything and then he would make you, basically you had to write down everything he said and memorize everything. And then his test, you have to regurgitate it all. So, some of it would be writing, but some of it would be like “What was the name of the person that did xyz?” and it would be like some random thing, and you gotta remember this like Kim Jung Un III or whatever.

And it was so hard for me, and I remember making like hundreds of flashcards and like trying to memorize them, and I would get like a C on his test versus, like I would study with somebody, and he was publicly educated and he would do fine on his test. And I'm like why? Like we would study together and I just, so that whole memorize and regurgitate, I really do struggle with. If you give me something where I can logically figure out the answer, I can do it, but if I have to memorize and regurgitate, I am not good at that and I didn't do that in high school ever.

The educational experience during upper grades was intent upon preparing each participant for their future life, to have a career that could support them. Sarah provided a different example that reinforces the experiential education in another way when her parents exposed her to horses and fostered her interest in being a veterinarian by doing field trips to a vet office, but then when her interest changed, she was encouraged to take debate which led to her moving into the field of law. Rachel's father also took experience as education to another level too when he developed a unique science curriculum for the freshman year. As she describes,

It was just a bunch of like practical home application sorts of things, like how expensive will your water bill be based on how hot and long and hard everyone's showers are?

How, how can you calculate the gas mileage on your vehicle, things like that...they were practical, like how do you physically just go and do something, find it out. So, it was just a bunch of experiments basically that he wrote and you had to deal with, kind of things around the house that he wanted to answer questions.

Education in this culture did include typical textbooks and practice problems; however, the key trait is in the outcome or assessment aspect as well as the level of responsibility for the students with respect to their growth and mastery. While the experiences described by Rebekah, Sarah

and Rachel are very different situations, each exemplified the real-life applicability of their learning. Each woman describes being able to problem solve or see how the content translates to a career or real situations. While there seem to be traditional assessments at various points, the lived experience that was most meaningful and impactful on them as individuals was the ability to think and apply learning, revealing a homeschool culture that values thinking and skills and independence over memorization or pure content knowledge. These experiences reveal the educational culture of the community, but also the larger impacts on identity development which were two-fold, creating women who were autonomous and independent as well as ones that had to handle struggle.

Autonomy

The schooling experience at the high school level, and sometimes middle school, was designed to be very independent. While all participants described participating in learning co-ops, which are collaborative, even that experience required a high level of autonomy as well as intrinsic motivation. Weekly learning was designed by one parent and then released the students with the expectation they would ask questions or seek help as needed. Participants describe this autonomy similarly:

Mary: And then high school was much more of your, your textbooks - learn the stuff, come to me when you need a test and get it done. When you are done with it, then you can do the rest of your stuff for the day.

Rachel: In high school it was, I think I only had like individual instruction, maybe, or instruction from my parents, maybe once a week, and it was normally with my sister who is two years older than me. So, we would do that once a week, otherwise I would just do

my assignments every day it was up to me when to do them I mean I would start in the morning; I think that was expected.

Rebekah: Very self-directed, and that was just how it was for all high school, but I will say with mom, she was very good. I don't remember if dad did this or not, she was very good; she had like weekly lesson plans like written down for each of us, we each had our own notebook with Monday through Friday and then all the subjects, and she would sit there and she would have it all written out for you on Monday of everything you had to do for the whole week. And so it was very easy for you to know. Okay Monday, this is what I do in this subject, in this subject and to know and be able to check off, and so she was very good about being very organized and deliberate in that way. I don't think dad ever wrote anything down, but it was, you kind of knew what, you knew what you're supposed to get.

Sarah: And then in high school, um, we still started around 8:00 AM or 8:30 AM. But we all kind of did more of our own thing. It was little, it was a little more independent usually my mom would go between kids to handle things, but a lot of stuff you know she would give us and we would have a plan at the beginning of the year, what we had to do every week, or she would give us like the assignment for the week and it was like our responsibility to get it done. So, I felt like high school was a lot more independent, a lot more like what you would do in college.

This trend of independent work reveals a culture of freedom and trust where the parents released learning into the hands of their children which allowed these women to develop their own processes for learning, tackling challenges and even investigating other messages without surveillance by a parent. None of the participants recounted stories of questioning the curriculum

other than intentionally designed controversial topics such as creationism or advocating to take one class or another such as debate versus chemistry, but at the same time none expressed indoctrination from the curriculum either. In fact, when asked about curriculum and the secondary learning experience in particular, most vaguely recalled which curriculum was used, rather recalling the experience of learning and their role within that experience. This stands in contrast with some of the literature in Chapter Two where some other students left reviews on curriculum publisher websites criticizing the messages about belief systems or gender expectations; in this community the formal curriculum appears to be a flexible tool where the primary lesson was individual success and applicability as well as a larger message of personal responsibility to take ownership of learning no matter what is the tool or textbook in front of the individual. While this independent learner aspect of experiential learning created moments of struggle, it also created opportunities for non-curricular learning related to tackling struggle.

Struggle

Struggle rose to the surface as a predominant theme in the educational experience, partly due to how education happened in the home and partly related to content in concert with parental teaching methods. On a daily basis, each woman had to choose how to tackle daily lessons and when to ask for help or even to make choices to avoid difficult concepts. Several participants recounted stories of avoidance and hiding their academic gaps, but then had to be transparent when they realized some content was building to other content and they would never have success if they did not stop and get help. This process reveals a level of trust on the part of the parents that each student would choose to get help and would arrive with the right questions to get help. Beyond the content struggle, the students struggled with ethical boundaries and self-

advocacy, ultimately independently developing those personal standards and a voice to ask for help.

With regards to formal curriculum, specifically the math curriculum presented the greatest challenge for the participants. While math may be a typical area of struggle for any student, the experience of struggle was unique in both the experience and resulting impact on these women. Elizabeth noted that the math curriculum format was a challenge for her, but that when she reached algebra content she found herself being more successful. In contrast, four of the participants all noted that math often resulted in tears, primarily as they would struggle to understand, need to wait for their father to help them in the evening, and often his methods of explanation did not make sense. As the women recount the experiences with math:

Elizabeth and Mary: So, if it was math, you take it to dad in the evening and sit on the couch, explain it to you and you wouldn't know what he was talking about. You'd just sit there and cry because it didn't help. I just pretty much toughed it out.

Hannah: So he couldn't explain it okay. That was basically my experience. I remember very often, just him explaining things and I would say, I still don't understand and his response would be 'I'm not going to spoon feed you.' And I'm like, that's great, but I still don't understand. Like what else do you expect me to do? And so then it would pretty much always end in tears. And I felt stupid.

Sarah: There would be a lesson and you'd have to do like, I don't know, thirty problems or whatever it was. And so she had an idea of how we were doing...But so, um, I don't know, my mom would sit down with me and when I started missing too many problems, and we'd go over stuff. And I remember going to her many times, like 'this makes no

sense, I don't understand what they're saying' type of things and then, also, well maybe I didn't do math.

Initially, these stories seem to reveal failed struggle and communicated incapability, yet when revisiting the topic of struggle, especially with math, the narrative changed. Most of the women reflected on the skills they developed through the experience of struggle and how that shaped their interactions with siblings, decisions in college and even their habits in their careers. This mirrors the lessons they were learning in general through the schooling experience in identifying when one has a challenge and finding ways to advocate for oneself to an adult or find other resources to be successful.

The impact of struggle on identity development was profound and powerful. First, the parental expectation of mastering math and pushing each child, including females, to master mathematics through algebra and higher courses communicates consistently high expectations and college readiness regardless of gender. The fact that the father, in particular, transmitted his math and science expertise (all fathers worked in the science field) to the daughters through math and science instruction implies daughters have the capability to master the content and possibly have future careers in these areas. The experience of learning was difficult and initially created circumstances of doubt and struggle, but the greater impact of this struggle came from the ability to problem solve independently. In response to struggle, Hannah was inspired to use research to empower herself to make hard decisions such as when she chose a career and job out of state at the age of eighteen, just out of high school. Rachel reiterated the same impact of self-reliance,

I think it definitely made me a very independent learner. So it's kind of like instead of going to someone and asking a question, my default, like even today my first instinct is, okay, let me reread the book, you know if it's a textbook type of thing, let me Google it,

let me read, let me ask all these sorts of questions, let me basically exhaust all other resources to try to figure it out myself before I go and ask someone or, at least if I'm going to go ask someone, I now have like a better question to ask.

Rebekah explained how struggle shaped her personal initiative and problem solving in the same way, noting

I think so [struggle] yeah because it allowed me to say, instead of saying oh, I must be dumb, I said, 'Okay I'm probably not studying the right way, what is another way that I can study, so that I can learn it, so that I can learn this material and do well?' Instead of saying, oh I'm just, I'm just going to get a bad grade.

And while each woman may have taken away the message that they were incapable, instead they saw opportunities for problem solving, found ways to research and teach themselves and ultimately believed that their parents' goal was to prepare them for college or a career. Sarah captured this, explaining

That's a good question because I think it [allowing to struggle], it did you know teach me that I don't have to love something to be able to do it and to get through it and to learn a concept and do well enough. You know, in that that area because I will say you know, math that was always my lowest grade and so it was always just a struggle in high school and so that ability and my parents not letting me quit. You know, they're like you have to get through Algebra 2, you have to like achieve; and I think I did statistics as well. You know you have to at least achieve this level to like be prepared to go to college, to go out into the world and do whatever you end up doing.

The experience of struggle also created a collaborative environment where the participants found ways to impact their siblings' education as well. Mary discussed how she benefitted from

Elizabeth's struggle. When Elizabeth was older, she would teach or tutor her younger siblings when they faced the same experience with math. The net result being collaborative learning, peer support and leadership development for all of the siblings. Struggle created opportunities for problem solving and critical thinking, all of which characterize this particular community.

Critical Thinking Versus Indoctrination

As much as critical thinking may have developed from the allowance of struggle, the breadth and depth of critical thinking was further revealed in the data. Religious instruction was an undeniable aspect to the homeschool experience in this community. While at the elementary level, all of the women recalled memorizing Bible verses and reading Bible stories, the curriculum, parent-teacher expectations and instruction during secondary years was more profound on identity development. Some families included religious instruction overtly, creating a course for the high school transcript called "Bible" and assigning a grade. Other families made it part of the daily routine and found other ways to reinforce religious learning. Multiple families noted how religious instruction impacted traditional content such as science when learning about creationism and evolution. The instructional strategies employed by the parents created windows for assessing student empowerment and decision-making as they developed their ideas of womanhood.

First, each participant was asked how they learned to read the Bible and understand it at older ages since the first interviews revealed continued reading was an expectation through high school. The goal was to ascertain if there were methods of indoctrination or opportunities for thinking, questioning and discussion. All of the participants expressed that modeling was a huge factor in their religious instruction, watching how their parents read, discussed and applied scripture to life. Many of them shared explicit strategies as well. Two families referenced Bible

Study Fellowship, which Rebekah explains is “very focused on breaking down scripture, analyzing it, writing a sentence that culminates it all, and then, how do you apply it to your life.” This strategy came through in other ways as well. Mary noted how her mother provided various books and tools that they could choose from in their study, but always framed as optional. She described it as

She never really, I wouldn't say, like sat down and was like here, you need to understand what this book says, or whatever. But it was more like, ‘Oh here's a style for how you can pray’ or here's a style. So, for instance, like there's the ACTS style [for prayer], so it's adoration, confession, thanksgiving, supplication and you could pattern after that. Um and she would have us do, she liked us to do daily Bible reading and she'd give us like journals or whatever to journal in because that's like a good strategy. One of the things that she liked to do is ‘What does it say, what does it mean, what does it mean to me today.’ I just sort of think that maybe it was more like giving us ideas, rather than forcing us to do stuff. And then also, from example I guess too, because she did Bible studies.

Teaching and modeling strategies for processing biblical messages is very different from teaching specific lessons and requirements from the Bible. Rebekah, Hannah and Rachel had similar experiences, although they talk more about their father's role in religious instruction, noting that he had definite ideas and liked to talk and teach. They were encouraged to read and learn how to apply various beliefs to their own lives as well. Rachel shares

When we were older, we would sit down, maybe like once a week or once every other week or something. Even when it was just my brother and younger sister at home. And we would go through a topic in the Bible, and so we did have a lot of teaching on the Bible, and how to apply it. I think, I think we had both um, I mean you know that Dad

loves to teach. So there was always a lot of him talking. But I do remember we had opportunities to share as well.

Hannah expanded on this experience, noting specific strategies they used to do in depth study of scripture.

We were strongly encouraged to read the Bible and come, you know, on a weekly basis and share with the family in like a morning Bible study of what did you learn, you know. And I don't remember ever being critiqued as like oh you, you came to share this and it was oh that's wrong, but it was kind of, we are encouraged to study and come, come with something that we learned that we could apply to our lives. And so that was one way. I also know - I don't remember if it was part of school or just something that we were asked to do - was kind of like pick a topic that you want to study in the Bible. Like I remember, I was wanting to study patience. And so it was like okay so you look up the definition of the word, you look in the cross reference in your Bible and read all these different verses on patience, you could go and look at maybe some other Christian resources to see what is their term [or definition]; so it's kind of like it was also like a word study. So I think there was a book that kind of taught you, outlined how to do it, I think it was a had multiple chapters and different methods to study the Bible, that's just the one I remember. I don't know if I did every one or not, but I mean I think they wanted it to be relevant in our lives, that's something that was you know not just something we casually read, but something that actually had impact. And we were taking it seriously and that is a way that they kind of were getting us to do that was it okay. Okay, now you read your Bible, but now we want you to come with applications. So that was like we can't force you to apply, but we can force you to come with an application.

The emphasis of religious instruction and continued religious study reinforces the conservative Christian nature of this homeschool community whereby religion was not limited to a church on Sunday, but incorporated into daily life and the educational experience. It is not enough to merely note the religious element, but the lesson topics and instructional methods provide insight into the transmission of beliefs and resulting impact on the students. First, the lessons at early ages were specific and intentional as evidenced by the reading of popular Bible stories and memorization of scriptures, which leans toward indoctrination by specific teaching; however, the greater detail and complexity is revealed by the religious studies at older ages. The primary pattern of curriculum was the Bible as a whole, where each child chose what to study and what to learn from that study, as Rachel shared that she studied patience at one time. Just as all of them discussed the choice of topics to study, none of the participants ever referenced a forced topic study or belief, rather going into details about the process of learning to study the Bible for their own understanding and application. Therefore, the second common theme of these stories is that of independent study which was discovery based and relevant to their lives. Rather than teaching specific lessons, the participants experienced training in studying, analyzing and thinking about biblical messages. Even in training how to study the Bible, the strategies and resources were varied and optional. The impact of these methods of instruction are characterized by critical thinking. While the ideas were definitely grounded in Christianity and used explicit Bible instruction, the ultimate results were not so much indoctrination of a set of rules for living as evidenced by how each participant described using these ideas and values and skills. Each of the participants discussed critical thinking, often using that terminology. Sometimes it was in direct reference to Bible study, other times in reference to how the Bible influenced regular content instruction such as how they approached creationism. Specifically in reference to Bible

study, Rachel shared how she used these skills to justify her decision to be a working mother, noting that this is different from many others in her family, and yet she took time to examine the Bible and "...there's nowhere in scripture that says a wife must stay at home with their children and the man has to work; like there's nothing biblical about that. You know it's like, it's just a Christian cultural thing more than a biblical commandment."

Hannah was more specific, connecting the instructional style for religious studies directly with critical thinking and how it shaped her choices and behaviors, even as a student.

Well, I think that our parents taught us critical thinking, that was probably the biggest thing. Which, maybe they didn't expect this but through that teaching, we were taught to even, you know, to think about what they were teaching us. And so I didn't accept everything they said to me as just face value true. I, I really did internalize it and think about like 'Oh, do I actually believe that as well,' and if something didn't sit right with me, then I would, I would kind of explore it more. Oh yeah when I was younger, early teens probably, I remember writing like an essay or something. It probably wasn't even for school. I wrote out this thing about how like rock music was good, or something and how it actually could be Christian. And you know mom and dad were like completely not against it, but they just didn't like it. They don't understand the words, it sounds angry, I don't know. They just didn't like it, and I just wrote out this whole thing to try to convince dad that, like the music that I listen to, it's still Christian. Maybe it's not, you know, up your alley, it's not your taste, but you know what, people at, people at rock concerts they get really excited and into the music and isn't that how we should be with God? Like we should be excited, like I just wrote this whole thing about it and I gave it to him and he actually thought about it and was making some pretty valid points.

This story illustrates the power of choice in biblical studies as Hannah was able to choose a topic she was passionate about and engage in a persuasive conversation with her parents about that topic because she was interested and wanted to challenge their thinking. This was not a topic that was assigned to her and the research and writing was not assigned either, rather it developed from her personal religious studies. Not only did this process exemplify freedom and choice, but an openness in conversation between the parents, as teachers, and the children, as students, whereby the student hoped to impact the thinking of the teacher through her research and writing. An outside perspective may minimize this experience because music does not seem controversial; however, within the conservative Christian community as a whole, music has often been a highly controversial issue where mainstream ministers such as Jerry Falwell and Jimmy Swaggart preached that it was of the devil and sinful, condemning and rejecting those who listened to such music (Erwin & Erwin, 2021). Voluntarily challenging this mindset is reflective of freedom, choice and open dialogue.

Mary and Elizabeth also specifically spoke about critical thinking although it was not just during Bible study. Mary shared several situations where moral issues were being discussed and therefore her parents returned to biblical values for the discussion, but the discussion was open and critical in nature, emphasizing teaching and understanding and analysis. Mary explains, “They encouraged us to use different translations and like compare.” In one instance the family moved to a new church with more conservative practices such as head coverings, so their father had them examine the scriptures as written in Greek to discern the original meaning. The conversation concluded with the idea that different Christians could disagree, but still act in respect toward one another. This learning experience did involve specific guided study, but involved multiple resources including a measure of more primary sources by comparing

language meaning from translations going back to the original Greek to discuss different interpretations of a religious practice. This exposure to multiple sources and interpretations involved questioning and research, indicating openness and, combined with the family conclusion that Christians could disagree, but support one another, communicates value of thinking and diversity of ideas rather than limitations and strict indoctrination, particularly around gender issues. This situation certainly did not include examining the belief from other religions; however, it was related to a specific Christian practice. There are similar practices in other religions which could have been discussed, but examining this situation for the context in which it took place, a conservative Christian homeschool, the teaching of how to research all the way to root languages in primary sources to arrive at an opinion as well as be accepting of diverse applications of the religious practice of head covering is more informative of the impact on the participants. There was a measure of complicated conversation as the family had to navigate disagreeing with other members of the Christian community and the parents modeled how they engaged in that process.

In another situation Mary brought a situation to her parents and rather than dictating her choice, they coached her, as she described a party situation that was going to involve alcohol.

My parents would kind of say, you know, like what are biblical absolutes or what are the for sure things, and then, what are your convictions and then, you know, there are things that can be decided from there, so. I would say it was kind of more like, for me, it was probably guidance as things came along. Yes, they weren't so much about rules, it was more like well, what do you think is the right thing to do? And in general, I think, hope that we came to the right conclusions.

This situation reinforces the openness of the complicated conversations where the purpose seems to be guidance rather than strict rules regarding lifestyles. Certainly the parents did not want Mary to engage in certain behaviors, but rather than being combative, created an open and safe space for questioning. Christian values were evident and used as the guide for decision making, this story illustrates how the curriculum of questioning facilitated critical analysis of beliefs and choices in application of those beliefs.

Beyond explicit religious instruction, multiple participants also discussed how they were taught about creationism and evolution, linking it to both religious beliefs and critical thinking skills. In at least two families they were taught about creationism, but not simply indoctrinated. They were exposed to books from different viewpoints such as Ken Ham and publications by the organization Answers in Genesis along with others. Sarah and Elizabeth noted similar experiences, that their parents wanted them to be thinkers. Elizabeth explained that they wanted her to

know how to evaluate that and answer or find answers to be prepared...I think the idea was so that you can evaluate it and find the resources and certainly they didn't want us to go to college and become evolutionists, but...it was really approached in the critical thinking and approached in the idea of learning to articulate a response and an argument. Sarah reinforced this,

You know being raised in a Christian home, but like, why do you believe that and looking at those sides. And so I don't know, it just was something, like I just remember like reading a book on one and reading a book on the other... I think it was really good, because I think it really taught me from a young age, that you know if you want to make an argument you got to go make your best argument and you can't just say 'I feel this

way' - like who cares how you feel about it, like why? Like what's the point? What's, what would back it up, why would that be a good decision? And so I felt like those were really good skills that I certainly used in college and then, in my professional life, as well, and I think also my parents taught us very much not to have a fear of authority.

Elizabeth reiterated how the emphasis on reading, thinking, questioning, and exploring has developed her in various ways that were also empowering, encouraging her to look beyond the familiar.

I think that's the part of teaching us critical thinking skills and teaching us research or exploring. And so my parents, my parents gave us these tools sometimes that resulted in us going beyond what they would have maybe said, and I don't mean like you're going way out there, but even from an example would be like, I like to try cooking different foods and my parents they come over like that and I cook one night a week and they'll come in asking is anything hot? What is this red thing? Or like my dad will say, 'We never know what we're going to eat when you go to Elizabeth's house.' Well you guys have only yourself to blame like, you're the people that once a month we like got the cookbooks out of the library and tried all these foods and we went to all like the Asian food places. I mean if you have only yourself to blame if I give you chopsticks to eat with because you're the people that taught me this, right? So we may be like you taught me these skills and so, if my view, is a little different than maybe what my mom has, you're also the person that shaped me in this direction. It's a dangerous thing if you teach them how to think.

Considering the conservative Christian curriculum implemented by each family, specifically Abeka and Bob Jones as referenced in Chapter Two, and the explicit expectation to study the

Bible through all grade levels, the outside assumption may be that heavy indoctrination is the end result; however, these women challenge this assumption while holding their own strong Christian beliefs. Each articulates experience with reading, researching, and questioning. At times this resulted in them challenging their parent or parents or stretching their parents' experiences, much like my argument with my father where I openly challenged him, using his own teaching as the basis for my argument. The nuances of these complicated conversations are more subtle as the participants did typically chose to hold to core conservative Christian values which may be viewed as indoctrination; however, the process of arriving at those beliefs was characterized by open dialogue, research and reading and questioning which reinforces critical thinking whereby they each had the ability to choose differently.

Controversial & Difficult Conversations

Part of conservative Christian instruction is also how the families handled difficult discussions, be it different opinions on moral beliefs, controversial books and ideas, or exposure to sexual and health education. When asked about difficult or controversial conversations some families focused on debatable topics such as politics while others leaned toward moral or emotional topics such as sexual education and even abuse. First, it was evident that the parents wanted to address difficult topics, but were not always comfortable with how to have those conversations.

Some participants described lessons or conversations about sex or even “guys,” meaning love interests, as “super awkward” and “very uncomfortable” to the point where Rebekah articulated that “I did not like to talk to her [mom] about that kind of stuff at all.” With respect to conversations with her father, it was apparent that it would not be much of a conversation as Rebekah explained “And I already knew my dad’s opinion on all of that, and there was no

discussion, so it was, there was no point in asking the question because my side wasn't going to be heard." However, this seemed to be the one area of controlled conversation as she followed with a note that "if you differed in the viewpoint of my dad, we would still have the discussion" indicating that other difficult topics were debatable. This may have changed over time as Rachel noted that she and two other siblings were given a book about sex before marriage which she was expected to read and discuss weekly as a small group with her siblings and parents. She reiterated the awkward and uncomfortable feeling with this method of conversation, primarily because she was pre-puberty and did not fully understand what sex was, so that contributed to the nature of the conversation.

Another family used a Christian radio program to introduce their children to difficult, real-world experiences and facilitate conversation around those stories. Elizabeth shared

Did you did you guys ever listen to Unshackled? It was on in the evening. We would pretty much every week listen to Unshackled, maybe on the way to church in the evening and I'm not sure I would have identified this, but my parents did. I have heard them and they said it was a good way because it introduced us and opened up some of those topics in a way, that was a way that we could talk about it and learn about it and realize that the world, so we weren't naive. But also, not just being exposed to everything. So that that would have been a way that opened it up to learn about rape and incest, abortion, drug abuse that sort of thing. And these were life stories, true ones. And they did they didn't gloss over, but they also didn't glorify it, so I think that was, I think that was good, like you know, you need to know what rape is, you need to know what incest is, you need to know what abuse is, but you don't - that's how I learned about homosexuality - but you don't need, you don't need to know lots of details of that point. And I believe pretty

strongly in that. And I, I am concerned about some very conservative or sheltered children that I like, yeah we don't want to give them, we don't want to scare them, but like we need to talk about these things, because I want you, need to have an adult that you can go and talk to if you're like I'm not sure if this is right or not, rather than not even knowing.

This story presents several interesting elements to this difficult conversation. First, her parents used a tool to broach topics such as drug abuse, rape or incest which opened the door to questions. Secondly, the topics were approached from a conversational perspective rather than a lesson with absolutes where the goal appears to be awareness and protection and creating an environment where future questions can be asked in a safe space. Finally, Elizabeth references how this impacted her, that she believes all children need awareness of to protect themselves and a safe adult as a resource. Within this she references concern for those who are “very conservative or sheltered” as if she does not view her own experience as falling within that label, further revealing an openness in her educational experience. The openness of her experience is shared by Mary as she recounted a real experience of her own with a more controversial religious values situation. She had been taught that homosexuality was sin and when she encountered a situation with someone, her parents focused more on her response than on the situation she encountered.

I would say, we did have discussions on that [homosexuality] and I personally remember, I must have been an older teenager because I was driving. Okay, and I remember going to Walmart and the guy at the cash register was like flamboyantly gay. I remember coming home, and I was just like, it was so abhorrent. I was like, I never want to go to Walmart again...And I remember that dad was like, that is not the proper response. He's like, that

is not what God does. He said yes, that's a bad lifestyle and that is sinful and we know that from the Bible, but Jesus taught us to love people. And he's like, that feeling that you have in your heart toward that [homosexuality], that is not Christian. And just in the same way that we can't do that to other people who are doing wrong things.

The message regarding homosexuality is to be expected within conservative Christian education; however, this conversation reveals more depth to the educational experience whereby the emphasis included how others are treated regardless of our beliefs. These experiences of open conversation that were reflective and focused on care for individuals created an openness and safe space for learning recognized by Mary as she followed her story with the statement that "...as I went through life and bumped into situations and then would come home and talk about them, then mom and dad used that." In these instances, the complicated conversation was actually where the participants were holding tight to a particular lens for viewing behavior and the parents stepped in as educators to challenge the thought process and application of those beliefs. Education arose out of experience and difficult topics were not avoided or controlled.

With regards to sexual topics in particular, the families all created instances to address the difficult conversations; however, some were more open than others. Primarily this seemed related to parental comfortability rather than an effort to restrict their children, as even the first family changed methods from limited and awkward conversations to a planned book study, which seems to support that conclusion. The results of these stifled or awkward learning experiences created more complicated conversations that were truly conflicting.

Passive Resistance / Sibling Pacts

While difficult conversations happened across all families, the range of openness and impact on students was evident. The interviews revealed that while critical thinking was a

powerful element to this homeschool culture, sometimes there were still taboo topics, stifled discussions, or even lack of education with the impact on the women varying from a culture of passive resistance and underground sibling agreements to lack of confidence as they became adult women in relationships. However, this type of complicated conversation seemed primarily isolated to one family and not all families included in this study.

Early in the educational experience this was rare, but individual passive resistance developed related to reading books that were not approved of by the parent. In one family the children continued to read comic strip books such as *Tin Tin* or *Family Circus* even though their mom expressed it was not worthy of reading because it did not foster reading skills or quality literature in terms of themes and so forth. This mild form of resistance may have segued into more dramatic pushback at older grade levels. From a conservative Christian stance, five of the six women indicated they were not allowed to read the *Harry Potter* series because it delved into dark spiritual realms through the use of magic. While the women all expressed a strong belief in the reality of a spirit world, several secretly listened to the audiobooks as an older teen or read the books as a young adult around the age of eighteen. This form of passive resistance may be typical for teens and the examples were very limited in scope therefore this specific situation did not seem to reveal an overly controlling and isolated homeschooling experience as was described by the likes of Tara Westover (2018) in her autobiography. However, another aspect of the schooling experience was how discussion of these controversial topics took place and the impact of those complicated conversations on thinking processes, freedom and identity development.

Specifically with regards to gender, there were taboo topics that were tightly controlled. Discussions surrounding dating, romantic interests, and sex either did not happen or were presented as a lesson for Rebekah, Hannah and Rachel. When these topics were broached, it was

to either distribute a book, such as the popular and previously referenced *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*, or to communicate that dating was only to choose whom to marry and with purity as the main priority. Hannah describes how she handled restrictive gender conversations,

I think even when I was younger, I was like I said, you know, even when my mom would make comments about stuff, I would be like I don't know if I really agree with that, but I didn't argue with her. So I think I feel like I'm probably this kind of the same. I've embraced some ideas that they've given me, but I've also explored my own beliefs. So I would say, if I was to categorize myself, I would, I would still say I'm, I'm quite traditional in the way that I view gender.

This description reveals independent thinking and decision making even though the messaging from her mother seemed conformity driven, so with an expectation to conform to her beliefs, Hannah made distinct choices to explore other ideas and arrive at her own conclusions. So while the discussion may have been restrictive, the overall homeschool environment allowed for space to privately read, research and think independently. In contrast, Rachel shared that she was very young when these limited discussions happened, but she was included, possibly so they would only have to take place one time, yet she was not developmentally ready, describing

I was only 11. No one had told me what sex was, and I'm like, I'm 11. I've just gone through puberty. I don't know what any of this is. Sure, I'll sit here, and smile and nod and agree with all of it because I don't know what any of it is.

This is an interesting reality where discussion was often very closed regarding some topics, and the women agreed to not discuss or challenge them openly, yet felt confident in reading and researching on their own to privately question the taboo topic. Ultimately, the sibling groups

would form underground communication patterns to answer questions or move away from the discomfort of the discussion. Rebekah explained about general controlled discussions,

Yeah, I can't think of a specific instance, but I do feel like we would do that. Now again, if you differed in the viewpoint of my dad, we would still have the discussion. And then at some point you'd be tired of the discussion, so then maybe some of my siblings and I would get like okay, you know we're just gonna "yes you're right" and move on.

In these instances the agreement from the children was not internal agreement, but a conscious decision to move on from the discussion whereby they may individually or collectively arrive at their own decision later.

Many of the discussion topics shared were focused on beliefs about lifestyle and behavior, which may have been easier to independently and privately study from the Bible or other resources; however, when the participants were experiencing puberty and needing to learn about sensitive and controversial issues such as sex, it was necessary to help one another through some form of underground communication. The sisters shared:

Rachel: I think it helped having, like my older sister because it's like I think any questions I might have had, for some reason she had answers. I'm assuming she Googled them because I don't think she had conversation my parents about it, or maybe again maybe she asked Rebekah. So it's like, I think if I did have any questions of like, how does any of this function or things like that, I felt comfortable talking to her, and she typically provided a lot of answers to me.

Rebekah: And there were, I think there were a lot of things amongst us siblings that we just kept amongst us siblings. That it was like an understanding, like I'm not going to talk to mom and dad about this, and this is just between us.

The necessity to form underground communication or use passive resistance was fairly limited, but did present some initial challenges for some because there was no safe space to ask questions and receive additional messages or corrections to interpretations of the message being transmitted. Rebekah captured this with her experience transitioning into adulthood.

I think it's, it was negative for me, because I had to, in my marriage, figure out everything, because I wasn't informed, or even I was made to feel guilty. And so then when you're all of a sudden magically in the freedom of marriage, how do you get rid of that guilt that you, was pressed on you for so many years? It was a sign of like, well, you know, we used to wear the purity rings. You know it was like, "I'm a virgin" was like, the best thing that you could say about yourself. And so now that I'm married, I'm not a virgin. So it's like, am I like that now?

In this specific family the tight control of messages regarding sexual information or behaviors restricted information and created conditions where the women felt awkward or even ashamed although none expressed long lasting impacts into adulthood as they developed other relationships where they could discuss and discover more information to broaden their view. This series of complicated conversations about sex and sexual health was less about dialogue of an actual conversation between student and parent/teacher, but an internal complicated conversation where they located information, communicated with a sibling and formed different ideas about sexuality, carefully navigating various messages and making choices for themselves outside of the limited information being controlled by the parent as teacher. Ultimately, schooling as experience in this conservative Christian homeschool culture grappled with tough and complicated conversations, but ultimately created an environment of deep study and questioning whereby women learned critical thinking which allowed them to transcend outside

assumptions as well as gaps from their parents to find answers for who they could be and could become.

Womanhood

Lessons from Mother

Research shows that typically the mother “does” most of the homeschool as was evident for most families in this study, so lessons learned from mother, as both mother and as teacher, were inevitable although not always what might have been expected. As described in Chapter Two, fears of controlling households where women are silenced or controlled were unfounded although submission was a common theme. Each woman expressed unique lessons learned from observing their mother which shaped how they perceived their potential, abilities and future roles within the world including chosen submission, strength and investment in others.

Submission was referenced throughout the interviews, but not always to describe a woman who was voiceless and lesser in skills or values. Submission was described as a choice to fulfill a certain role in relationship to her husband and to meet certain needs of her family and that choice was fulfilling. Several even noted how, looking back, they have realized how empowered their mother actually was as their view of life expanded and they had the ability to see the larger world with their mother in it. Sisters Rebekah, Rachel and Hannah voiced similar perspectives of their mother. Rebekah noted, “I often say, even to this day, that my mom is the perfect picture of submission to her husband.” Similarly, Hannah described, “As I got older I kind of reflected on this more, but I definitely saw mom just wholeheartedly submit to dad...But I saw her really just taking the path that he made for the family and she followed that.” Rachel continued, reiterating

I don’t think I ever looked at her role and thought like ‘Oh, it was limiting’ or it was like there were so many options she was exposed to so many things because she did so many

different things with her children...I think I maybe would have thought differently if she was like 'Oh, I want to, I wish that I was doing this job or something' like if she had expressed dissatisfaction, I think I would have thought about it, but I think that she was doing what she wanted to be doing for the most part. Like if she was given a different option, I don't think she would have picked it.

Seeing mother as a picture of chosen submission was only part of the lesson learned, as other messages were communicated at the same time. Mary captured this, explaining that

"...mom tried to keep herself within certain bounds, but when she was in those bounds she could be all the way in charge." Rachel took more away from her mother's role as a message of fulfillment and less about required expectations, adding "I think it's [self-satisfaction] important, but I think it's important just for everyone. You know, it's like what, what is your role? Do you feel like you're, it's you and it's fully what you chose to be doing or do you need to modify it so that it fits you better?" So how did this message of choice and flexibility come through for these women?

First, submission was not seen as an isolated message, so who they could and should be was a combination of messages. Rachel added that

"I think a huge part of it is that my parents always expected me and all my siblings to have a college education or in some sort of job that could support you completely. So it was kind of like there was an expectation you're going to go to college as long as that's in line with what you want to do that's going to make you money...So I think that I received a lot less of the 'You're going to have kids, you're going to be a wife, you're going to be all these things.'"

This illustrates how submission was less about a station in a home or family, but choosing a relational mindset within whatever technical role you fill. This is illustrated through the expectations and support of going to college and preparing for an independent career. Even Rebekah felt the message of submission much stronger and yet her educational experience also countered the traditional message of submission, freeing her to be more flexible in her role. The teaching of reading scripture to inform how one should live facilitated her ability to question the realities of submission once she was an adult and in a marriage.

And you know, of course, we read the scripture, you know wives submit to your husbands as to the Lord, and my mom was very good at that. I say that I'm not, but I had to learn that submission in my marriage looks very different. It doesn't mean that I'm less godly, but it does look very different...I really struggled when I first got married because my husband is not the same person as my dad. I'm not the same person as my mom, but I was expecting our marriage to look the same way.

Clearly the idea submission was transmitted, but the "how" or practice of submission was more flexible as participants worked out what that meant in their adulthood. The larger question remains, how this message of happy submission translated to these women as they determined who they should and could be. Sara felt the message was not one of mandated roles, simply one of tradition modeled while not required, describing her own marriage

We've also learned my husband likes to cook, I don't like to cook. And so I would, say I do the grocery shopping, but he cooks. And I'm really good at reheating leftovers, and you know, making the rice to go with it, or whatever. But, so I don't know I feel like my parents were like 'Oh, well naturally it'll work like how they did it,' but you learn, and I feel like

they taught us that it wasn't like it had to be that way or it was the wrong way, it was just that's what they did and I think that is seen as the very traditional way.

Messages of submission were intertwined with other messages about questioning and being independent as evident in their discussions about submission, but also when viewing the larger picture from the interviews where they do not just talk about submission as their only role, but also having choices and careers. So while a few participants referenced not wanting to disappoint their mothers today, they used the critical thinking to justify their choices today in spite of the residual messages of remaining at home being part of submission. Mary explains it this way:

Definitely, for me to go to work is a difficult thing, and I feel like my mom is very sad every day when I have to go to work because I have to leave my children. Okay, and so that part of it, like I enjoy my job, but it does make it a struggle, I think, even for me now because the best thing for me to do is to take care of my kids and, like my husband and I have talked about it and he's like 'You are taking care of your kids. This is how you take care of your kids, it's by going to work and making money, so that we have a house for them. So this is, this is you taking care of your kids.'

Rebekah shared similar emotional struggles regarding submission and her role as a wife and mother, but ultimately made her own decision regarding working or staying home with her children, recounting

I taught until we had kids and then I became a stay at home parent. And I do, that was the desire of my heart, and I do feel like it was right for our family, but I just recently started a job and I remember being so nervous to tell my parents that I got a job because my kids are still young and one of them is not in full time school and during the summer, they're not in school, so I was going to pay someone else to watch my children and I remember

feeling like oh my gosh my parents are going to be so unhappy with me. And it comes back to them wanting them to see me in a certain way. I, so I just remember being so nervous about that and, here shows the growth in, that is, they were like both so excited. And I mean it helps it like I'm working for the church and you know, whatever, but they were both very excited for me, and I remember, I like told my dad I was like I was a little bit nervous because I wasn't sure how you guys would take that, me going back to work, and he goes well, you weren't planning on homeschooling, right? And I was like no. He goes, then what's the big deal?

The underlying lesson learned from mother as parent and teacher was to choose to serve God and impact those around you, namely your family; however, that could look differently as each woman was taught to think and analyze the Bible for herself and as well as pushed to pursue higher education outside of the home. While the outsider looking into this culture may see the visible modeling of a traditional home and therefore perceive blind submission from the women, the unseen mindsets, attitudes and choices were present in each woman's education and manifested as seen through their ideas on gender roles and feminism.

Gender Roles

Learning gender roles is particularly complex when homeschooled as messages may be received through explicit schooling, but also through hidden curriculum including observations of parental interactions. Each of the women identified and rejected certain stereotypes of gender roles, telling stories that not only reveal their beliefs about gender roles, but how those developed through their experience. Several women used language like "tradition" or even "church values" in relation to gender roles that they rejected including the requirement to wear dresses or the expectation to

cook all the daily meals, with all women even challenging ideas of women staying at home as a requirement as well as some aspects to submission in a marital relationship.

Gender Appropriate Tasks

Learning gender-based roles revealed complex patterns with a dichotomy of expectations. Elizabeth and Mary recalled that boys had to learn all roles including cooking and laundry while the girls did not have to learn how to change the oil in a car or change a tire. However, they were not limited and shared that they did mow the lawn or drive tractors and farm implements and even learn to weld, but the frequency was more a choice for them as girls. In their family, as Elizabeth notes, “In some ways, like they were sort of gender roles, but they weren’t in other ways, as defined as you might think.” Sarah described similar circumstances in her family, although she qualifies it with the fact that the older set of children were all girls for a long time, so doing outside chores or inside chores was not gender based, but preference based.

Rebekah, Hannah and Rachel expressed similar experiences although a few moments stand out as stronger definition between male and female appropriate experiences. Rebekah commented that her brothers never had to make a meal plan whereas she never had to mow the lawn – although Rachel added that she had to mow the lawn as one of the younger children. Their mother also expressed that paintball was a boy activity and did not allow them to participate with friends who were boys. These limitations did not stifle the desires or limit the thinking of these women with regard to gender roles however. Rachel illustrated this with a scenario around car maintenance. While all of her brothers had learned how to change their oil, this was her experience:

I remember in high school, I said to my dad ‘Can you show me how to change the oil in my car? I want to know how to do it.’ And he’s like, ‘No, you’re not going to do it anyway.’ He’s like just take it and pay the \$25 to get your oil changed and I was like, ‘I’m sitting here

asking you to show me how to change the oil in my car and you're telling me no.' I was asking from a pure 'I just want to know how,' I don't care that it's the same price.

These situations reveal there were definite perspectives about gender appropriate roles that were sometimes more enforced than others, yet the women each found ways to navigate these roles and even challenge them out of personal desire and interest. This space for challenge and personal interest reveals the dichotomy between some stated beliefs about gender and realities for how the women were being educated in terms of their worth and ability.

Marriage

While most women referenced gender roles being modeled, but not demanded, Rebekah felt that she had been explicitly taught that a woman should sit in submission to her husband and stay home with her children. In each situation though, the women reflected on their training to read the Bible and apply its teaching to every aspect of their lives and therefore this had informed their lived realities for gender roles as they developed. With respect to spousal relationships, each woman felt that there is an idea of submission, but what that looks like is a choice to honor God by partnering with their husband through respect. Hannah is choosing to stay home with her children, but with respect to her husband, she describes it as

[It's] definitely a partnership because our goal is to have a family, our family is like the most important thing for us to live, have a family, you have to have the finances, that's his side of it, and I'm taking care of the home and taking care of the children, that's my side of it, both are important and necessary.

While Hannah is choosing to stay home as her part of the partnership, others agreed that it is about a mutual and respectful agreement. Rachel and her husband are building a family, but have chosen

for her husband to stay home as she enjoys her degree and career, noting with respect to their marriage that

If we weren't on the same page then, yeah, that wouldn't be biblical because it's like you are supposed to be loving and respecting each other, that's actually a commandment. So it's like if my husband was not okay with it, then it would be a problem.

So even though there is scripture about submission, what that means seems to be flexible if the relationship is viewed as a partnership where the wife must be in agreement with the husband. Some may wonder about how agreement is reached and if there is an actual control element in reaching agreement, but the reasoning these women provide paints a very strong picture of two individuals choosing to work together to align their beliefs about their relationship to best use their strengths and glorify God in the process. Rebekah captures this,

I think number one is to be God honoring, so live your life a way that pleases the Lord. That's the number one role of a woman *and* a man. We were first of all, we were created to bring God glory and to bring him pleasure and that is our first and primary role.

So when scripture is considered and the often quoted phrase of "wives submit to your husbands" comes into question, Hannah puts that concept into a larger context,

I think probably the main thing was for me to understand that God created male and female. What's the word I want to use, equal but different. That one, the wife is not lesser than, she doesn't have less value. And I don't know, maybe I just learned that through my walk with him [God]. But just that he created women to be a very powerful force, just like he created men. But you know that verse where it says 'women or wives submit to your husbands and husbands, love your wife as Christ loved the church?' And when you read that, it's like some men have such like how do I say it, they have such a harder calling, but like people

don't talk about that and churches don't talk about that. It's like men – are you, do you really think that you can love your wife like Jesus loves the church? Like that is such a big deal. And so, like I just saw that verse differently and I thought, if God is putting such a strong emphasis on husbands, he doesn't just care about submitting the woman. He cares so much more about how that woman is being loved.

Essentially, women need to have open lines of communication and work as a partner to support common vision and goals. While these women do not seem to believe this, they did recognize that some people believe in the Christian faith believe that submission is to be a method of control in a marriage, but they then argued that it cannot be ignored that men actually have a harder or more valued responsibility in that marriage relationship when looking at the rest of that scripture passage. Each woman spoke about seeing the modeling of their parents, but then used their own study of scripture and experiences to qualify how and why they have varied from that path within their own marriage.

Parenthood

With respect to a woman's role in raising children, most of these women have careers and do not stay home. Rachel clarified, "There's nowhere in scripture that says a wife must stay at home with their children and the man has to work, like there's nothing biblical about that. You know, it's just a Christian cultural thing more than a biblical commandment." Both Hannah and Rebekah shared at different times that they struggled choosing to be different from the mother they held in high esteem, but in both circumstances, felt the Bible did not command them to stay home with their children and, with their husbands being in agreement, felt they could serve in a career as well as facilitate godly child rearing in other ways such as through private Christian schools. Hannah summarizes the fact that women can follow different paths, observing that "based on seeing my

sisters and how none of us have been able to do what our mom did and yet all of us are living our lives in a way that we feel is glorifying to God.” The common theme was that these women saw clear messages regarding submission and gender roles, but it was coupled with training in how to apply the Bible to their lives and that skill was more dominant and powerful in their development of self, resulting in choice and freedom in who each became.

College Expectations

Another aspect to gender roles and how each woman formed beliefs about how she can and should fit within society and her future family is expectations regarding continuing education and career development. While each family participating in this study had a two-parent home where at least the mother was home full time to homeschool, the educational experience communicated a clear message about self-reliance through college education and career paths. From an early age each participant was encouraged to explore interests which might lead to career paths. Sarah shared great detail about her changing career interests and how her parents invested in them, including supporting her interest in enlisting in the military, notably not a typical career for a woman either.

I wanted to go to the Air Force Academy and I talked to my dad about it. And my dad was like, ‘Okay, well if you want to do that, you know, then maybe we should start running in the mornings and we should do these things.’ And he took me to that little airport in town, the small local one, where they have a program where they will give you free rides in like little airplanes. I forget what the program is called, but like Harrison Ford used to be involved in it...to get kids interested in flying. So I went up on a little airplane like a little Cessna thing and I realized this is not for me...so I decided not to do that and I decided I wanted to join the JAG, the Judge Advocate General.

While Sarah did not go on to JAG, as she explored other interests such as being a veterinarian, her parents found ways to expose her to those careers and choose high school classes that would allow her to be college ready for those careers. Other participants shared how they took career aptitude tests at the local community college or were required to research various careers as part of a high school assignment so they could make a wise decision about careers that not only interested them, but also would support them financially. As described earlier, each woman pursued higher education and found a career path, even if making the choice to stay home at a later time. The emphasis on college and career directly challenges traditional stereotypes of controlled women who are expected to remain at home under the control of the parents until they are married and control is transferred to a husband. These experiences with varied gender roles as well as expectations to pursue independence as a woman created conditions for feminist thought.

Becoming Myself: Am I a Feminist?

This study examined how these women became and formed a meaning of what it means to be a woman, which includes the process, but also the final definition of self and womanhood. When asked to specifically define what femininity and feminism meant to them individually, a few patterns emerged. First, with regards to femininity all of the participants spoke to biological gender and leaned into women being special and unique; however, all of them viewed visible femininity as a spectrum or scope, often rejecting common stereotypes such as liking the color pink or “being afraid of spiders,” as Elizabeth noted. Each woman expressed a desire not to be judged or assumed as they see themselves on a spectrum of womanhood where motherhood or singleness or other characteristics will vary from others. Yet in this desire to be seen on a spectrum, common threads emerged around the uniqueness of women in contrast to men. While the literature reviewed in Chapter Two seemed to indicate that women from this type of culture are programmed

to be stay-at-home mothers as that is their only role, the definitions these women have created for themselves are much more. Mary expressed it this way, considering the image of her mother as a model and yet not the only definition of femininity.

Biblically women somehow are supposed to clothe themselves with an inner beauty, gentleness, meekness, and all that kind of stuff, so...I think femininity is learning a maturity of who God wants you to be. I think that I would have to say, a lot of that is based on seeing my sisters and how none of us have been able to do what our mom did [meaning stay home and homeschool] and yet all of us are living our lives in a way that we feel is glorifying God....it's not wearing dresses and cooking food.

Hannah visualized femininity within the context of gender, considering male and female and recognized enormous power behind femininity, explaining

God created us as women, that is, I would say my foundation and what I believe, so again, I believe that women are equal, but different to men like in terms of our value, we have the same value....I think that God created us [women] to be the epitome of beauty, which I think is a big deal. I think beauty, in general, the thing about beauty or art or nature, it is something that is in the whole world, is in every country and culture. It's something that is honored. It has power. It has great effect on people and it's used in every industry. And I think that, you know men have beauty too, but God really, he shows his beauty through women, not just the way we look, but also that we look, I mean women across the whole world are just, they are esteemed for you know, the way that we look. But just in our, we just have such a great influence in the way that we present ourselves.

Both of these descriptions capture a clear sense of strength and purpose and value, that women are to be held in high esteem for inner qualities and there is no one position that limits or defines who

a woman can be; however, they do believe their worth stems from God in that God created and designed each of them.

In developing these definitions of womanhood and femininity the women subtly referenced their home education experience, comparing themselves to their mothers and referencing biblical messages as a starting point to their definition of self and not as a limiting factor. Messages about a woman's body did rise to the surface in two ways, both negatively although the women have been striving to change those images for themselves. Elizabeth discussed how others, be it family or society, are "concerned about me living by myself and why can my friend go backpacking by themselves, but people would freak out if I did that and guys maybe never had that feeling of it's unsafe" where she is perceived as physically weak and needs protection. She rejects this limitation, but feels that she must challenge this perception imposed by others. Similarly, Rebekah explained that she was never spoken to about her body or, if she was, it was off-hand negative comments about sizes of things such as breast development. Rather than taking these messages as being a woman is bad, negative or worse than a man, she has concluded the educational experience was not the best with regards to femininity and she has made it her goal to impart clear and powerful messages to her daughters, such as

Whenever my girls ask me questions, like they'll ask me questions like about, you know, where does the baby grow or whatever, so I always use that as an opportunity to say God made you so special as a woman because you get to grow a baby inside of you and a man can't do that. Like you get to grow a baby and you *get to*. Your body is able to push that child out of your body, it's amazing! They think it's so crazy. And then I'll say 'out of your vagina' and we talked about, we use that word. I don't think that was ever used growing up. And we'll use the correct anatomy, but I'll talk about it in a very positive way, like we

should be so proud that our bodies have these things, let's be proud of them. And it's a really amazing miraculous thing that God has done when he created a woman. So I talked about, talk to that with my kids because I want them to see themselves as beautiful and as something so special that God made.

This illustrates that the gaps or negative messages about her body resulted in powerful positive messages as an adult. She did not indicate that she felt damaged, but uncomfortable and therefore sought out positive messages including how God created her physically and now uses those to empower her own children. While there were no explicit messages about womanhood or femininity, each expanded on their experience with the common theme being the uniqueness of women, as Sarah summarized,

I think being a woman means that you are physically different than a man. I think that it means you have different strengths and you have different weaknesses and that it doesn't make you less of a person, it doesn't make your ideas less worthy of attention...we're just different than the men and that's okay and that's a good thing. The world needs more women in it.

The ideas of femininity reveal a different perspective than the literature, but the question still remains, are these women experiencing limitations or do they have self-efficacy within their perceived role of womanhood? First, several wrestled with what they perceived as the outside, non-homeschool and possibly non-conservative Christian world's definition of these concepts. All of them strongly felt opposed to what they term "liberal" and some seemed to have an unstated pressure to define it differently from popular culture, which reveals interesting messages from their experience, and yet the definitions they each articulated are also in contrast to what current research seems to claim about the thinking patterns and beliefs of these conservative Christian women as

they feel free and beautiful and strong and equal to others including the masculine gender, all of which seems supported by the variety of life and career choices they have each made as they transitioned from homeschooling to adulthood. Ultimately, feminism was defined as possessing unique differences from men that are equally valuable requiring equal voice and opportunity for either to choose from based on their desires and interests and goals while also qualifying that women are not superior to men just as men are not superior to women.

Feminism versus Femininity

Several women discussed career options specifically as part of their definition of feminism. Elizabeth defined feminism as “accepting being a woman without having to prove that you’re just like a man, which I think is, has been something in careers that women have struggled with because you can either be a ‘man-woman’ or else you can stay home.” Rachel supported this, expounding on career opportunities, “I can go into a workplace and, as long as I’m qualified, I can have that same job. So that wasn’t always the case.” Opportunity and choice rise to the surface as important elements of feminism for these women.

Feminism is more than just careers, but a larger idea of self within the world. Beyond careers, Rebekah saw feminism as an identity in relation to men, articulating,

I think feminism is seeing the differences between yourself and a man and viewing them as powerful, viewing them as a unique perspective and using them to benefit the world...we’re both different, but both uniquely amazing. And so I think feminism, to me, is not losing your voice because you’re a female, but saying no, I am female so I have this different perspective. I think differently than a man. I don’t think the same way and that’s good because I can offer this different perspective, and so using it in a powerful way.

This perspective bridges the definition of womanhood with the views on feminism for this particular community and culture where women are seen as different, but in valuable and powerful ways where women should have impact as they choose. Even though each woman may deny being a feminist when asked explicitly, when considering various feminist theories, these women seek to empower their children, make a difference in their world, see themselves as critical thinkers and worthy of having a voice, all of which align to the spectrum of feminist theory.

Summary

The experience of conservative Christian homeschooling was filled with strong formal curriculum as well as hidden curriculum of which all the women were adept at recognizing the influence those had on them as individuals. While the experience included challenges, these served to shape them into stronger and more independent individuals with a strong sense of self with the ability to articulate who they are and what they believe today. The influence of their mothers and the influence of the Bible were common themes that drove much of their experiences and provided a platform for them to dive off in creating their own definition of womanhood rather than a controlling force molding them into miniatures based on the family model.

Homeschooling has a distinct place in the ongoing history of American education and the implications of this alternative milieu cannot be ignored, yet current research has merely scratched the surface of this movement and cultures within the movement. While motivations for homeschooling seem to shift based on political climate, public school options and even global health pandemics, religious aspects to homeschooling continue to be a stable element of many families, further justifying a need to examine this specific culture (Noel et al., 2013; Grady, 2017). The release of popular television star Kirk Cameron's self-described documentary on Christian homeschooling set for June of 2022, as not just a documentary, but a promotion of a return to homeschooling for religious reasons further emphasizes the continuation of this particular aspect and culture in homeschooling (Quintanilla, 2022). In an effort to bridge the gaps with both homeschooling and the religious culture of homeschooling, this study sought to address the question "How do homeschooled women in a conservative Christian culture develop a definition of their roles as women?" There are multiple elements of this including the official and hidden messages about gender roles and, adding to the complexity, individuals from this community are not always forthcoming, in part due to outsider judgments of their experience.

The field of curriculum studies examines sociological impacts of educational practices which supports this study's examination of identity formation of a specific demographic such as female students, as they experience home education. Maxine Greene (1990) connects ethnographic storytelling of this study to the field of curriculum studies when she articulated that

Each of us must enact a course of understanding in the recognition that the same person is engaging in behaviour that might be called observable and objective and, at once, experiencing herself/himself in an open-ended question, whose end can never be

guaranteed. Realizing this, realizing as well that our viewing of what surrounds us is always perspectival, from the place of our particular location in the world, we must always recognize that there is more to be grasped and to be known. That being so, there are always possibilities of new developments, not only in ourselves and in our thinking, but in the lived world itself (para. 8)

Essentially, this study allows for women to place themselves in their own educational context to explore who they are and how they became through telling their own story, but also challenges this research to go beyond that context to examine this culture in larger contexts, such as homeschooling as a totality or from other more diverse perspectives, for that is where deeper meaning and implications come to light. This study applied a cultural framework which examined family communication patterns to better understand the impact of educational experiences on women related to their ideas of self as they told their stories. The lens of complicated conversations (Applebee, 1996; Oakeshott, 1959; Pinar, 2012) allowed me to create a fuller picture of the culture as well as identify common themes in the actual messages these women received regarding their role as women while also addressing some outside concerns regarding the homeschool movement. The analysis of this ethnography requires a two-fold approach whereby the stories of these women are respected for the place in their own context, but also situated in the larger context of others, as Greene (1990) stated (partially quoting Habermas) in an address on multiplicity, “Tarrou, I am sure, would agree with Habermas on the importance of holding in mind ‘particular forms of life and life histories’ that form a background context (1985, p. 215) even as we reach towards some intersubjective agreements on what might be called ‘validity claims’ (para. 13). There is importance in recognizing both aspects of a story in order to challenge our own stereotypes and preconceived notions while also engaging in

complicated conversations of intersubjectivity. These conclusions will begin with understanding the culture of the homeschool and the development of female identity within the culture because first an ethnographer must place herself/himself inside the community to “understand phenomena from an insider perspective” to avoid judgment and then will engage in my own reflexivity to grapple with meaning through intersubjectivity (Boeri & Shukla, 2019, p. 26).

The Conservative Christian Homeschool Culture

Much outside research has attempted to label the culture of conservative Christian homeschool culture using quantitative statistics about family income, ethnicity and religious identification or by using the headlines of a handful of tragic stories that made news headlines. Demographically, the families in this community reflect the commonalities from the literature review as characterized by having large families of five or more children where the mothers stayed home to facilitate the education and the families holding the value that at least one parent should stay home to raise children, additionally at least one parent has a minimum of a bachelor’s degree (Cohn et al., 2014). Finally, all the families in this study represent the majority ethnicity, Caucasian, which also reflects the demographics of the larger local community as there is minimal ethnic diversity across the specific town.

The realities regarding family values and dynamics presented by the participants from this specific midwestern community stands in stark contrast to other research, revealing homeschool families that do seek to transmit strong conservative Christian values, as evidenced by daily Bible study, weekly family study and selection of formal curriculum that includes moral stories or studies of creationism. However, a closer examination of complicated conversations deepens the understanding of this culture where these moral and religious lessons include questioning, discussion, analysis, comparison, outside perspectives and debate - all the markers

of critical thinking. The participants consistently referenced Bible reading, sinful behavior, and reading restrictions related to magic, but more often used the term critical thinking in reference to how they were taught to face difficult or controversial things.

The conservative Christian homeschool culture of this community was also grounded in diversity of curricular resources rather than flocking to a nationally popular pathway as seemed to be popularized by the research in Chapter Two. Participants referenced some curricular choices that came from major publishers, but the changing choices from child to child and from year to year reflect an independent community of parents that made decisions not from indoctrination by those national leaders, but out of a desire to do what was best for their children. The most common religiously conservative and biblically based curriculum used throughout the culture was Abeka (Abeka, n.d.; Spooner, 2016). Some parents chose less mainstream curriculum that was also religiously conservative, such as the Mennonite curriculum referenced by Mary and Elizabeth, but the prevailing curricular culture was one of flexibility to meet the needs of individuals and promote thinking or college preparation, all of which aligns to Charlotte Mason's philosophy, although none of the participants referenced her work as it is not a curriculum, rather a curriculum philosophy (Mason, 1886/2008). Removing any religious tones, the curricular culture also reflects the ideas of Dewey (1938/1998) where experiential education values thinking.

Conclusions

Identity of Thought

The homeschool experience was characterized by autonomy, struggle and critical thinking. Various stories brought these elements of identity development to light as each revolves around thinking processes. High levels of schooling within any homeschool may be

characterized by independent learning that support being autonomous which results in personal independence, but struggle and critical thinking are very specific traits which align to self-efficacy in ones thinking process. Perhaps the most powerful narrative across the three families was the experience of learning math, continually seeking help and struggling to understand, often ending in tears on the couch each evening. I was drawn in by their stories. When they cried on the couch, struggling to learn math, I was crying in the kitchen after failing the same science test for the third time when it was only one question long and I still did not understand. I cried because I did not know how to ask for help in a way that I would receive it. I cried because my father did not understand why my brain was not grasping the concept. I cried because I was stuck and had failed and could not move on and my father was the wall I could not get through. These moments of struggle and tears could have been roadblocks to our academic journey, but that is not the narrative these women or I share as we tell our stories. Out of this struggle we learned to think, articulate questions, problem solve and learn how to learn independently, all defining factors of who we are today.

From an outside perspective these moments of intense struggle might symbolize lack of autonomy, but Deci and Flaste (1995) argue that autonomy is really about whether we feel a sense of our own control and develop intrinsic motivations to learn and move forward or whether there are “deadlines, imposed goals, surveillance” (p. 31). These learning experiences that impacted our internal thinking processes developed because there were no evident timelines for mastering the content, rather an open-ended invitation to struggle together until we reached success. So even though my father felt like the wall blocking my progress and success, later I was able to recognize the strength I gained from that challenge.

Even looking at religious messaging, autonomy and freedom in thinking processes impacted identity of thought including a firm belief system as adults that each feel they can support through their personal study. The data do reinforce a clearly Christian curriculum, but the curriculum was woven with opportunities to understand other points of view, even learning about other religions of the world as the women studied different regions in their history curriculum. Even if the parents wanted their children to hold to Christian values, the ability to acknowledge other beliefs, express a desire to understand other beliefs, and even justify changes in how they apply Christian beliefs supports autonomy and self-efficacy as there was less control and restriction of learning content and discussion. Curiosity is the outcome that exemplifies this level of autonomy (Deci & Flaste, 1995, p. 143). Each participant narrated their own curiosities from varying literature choices to vacillating career interests, to experimenting with various ethnic foods, to messages about bodies to ones own little children that explore the uniqueness of childbearing. My own curiosity was strongly fostered as a child, allowing me to design my own science experiments with food coloring and flowers, but I think also carries through to me as an adult doing this very dissertation. I love learning and have pushed myself to do challenging things like National Board Certification and this doctorate because I want to learn more. That internal desire and drive to think was empowered by my formative homeschool experience just as these women have experienced.

The tensions between Christian beliefs and personal identity are not what one would expect as no one expressed a challenge to the beliefs being transmitted, but each expressed active engagement in comparative thinking to understand why they each agreed with and continue to practice the values evident in the conservative Christian homeschool experience. Lack of assumed tension that would indicate rejection or rebellion from those beliefs does not mean there

was no tension, just different ways of engaging in meaning making. This is evident when Elizabeth and I were sharing how our families did or did not expose us to sexual health issues including sexual intercourse, premarital sex, homosexuality and rape. Elizabeth's experience helped her frame conservative ideas within a mindset of protection of self and even spurred a concern for those who were more sheltered or even more conservative Christian as they might be at risk of abuse. Her sharing made me question my educational experience and see myself as overly sheltered, where almost no information was part of my education, in an effort to help me maintain my "purity" which, unfortunately meant that in college I was unable to recognize or help a friend who was in trouble. These educational experiences allowed Elizabeth to balance reinforcing of her conservative beliefs, but with an activist mindset of care for others and today I was also able to analyze my own experience similarly. Tension of thought is more complex than outright rejection of a message, but being able to sift through a message to firm ones own beliefs with new meaning and application such as that of Elizabeth.

Being a Woman

These women value being a woman, finding great beauty and satisfaction in identifying as a woman while also not feeling limited emotionally, relationally, educationally or career wise based on their identified gender. The process of self-identity uniquely developed from the process of their home education whereby complicated conversations created conversational situations which facilitated independent thinking, self-efficacy and choice. Their identity may be seen in relation to self-concept as well as their relationship to other social environments relevant to their lives (Signh, 2007).

Complicated Conversations of Womanhood

Complicated conversation are opportunities for imagining oneself in the world as developed through dialogue with oneself and others in various contexts (Applebee, 1996; Oakeshott, 1959; Pinar, 2012). Analyzing qualitative interviews for complicated conversations both past and present is complex, so applying the Family Communication Pattern Scale as a tool for conclusions, particularly the revised version that broadened the scope of application to all family communication, lends unique insight into the complicated conversation (Bakar & Afthanorhan, 2016; Chaffee et al., 1971; Gupta & Gettika, 2019; Koerner et al., 2002; Rubin et al., 1994). Quantitative studies would utilize a survey to categorize family communication into conversational or conformity driven patterns. Rather than using a survey instrument, in this study transcripts were analyzed for descriptive detail that mirrored the quantitative survey items. Instead of asking for an agreement rating on conversational elements like “every member of the family should have some say in family decision” or “I can tell my parents almost anything” or conformity elements such as “When I am at home, I am expected to obey my parents’ rules” or “My ideas are right and you should not question them” (Bakar and Afthanorhan, 2016, p. 37), questions were posed to elicit stories that naturally revealed these patterns of communication which clearly leaned toward open, conversation oriented patterns.

In recent years ethnographic studies have broadened in scope and format to meet various needs, but hold true to markers such as naturalistic inquiry with a small group or single subject with the purpose of understanding a culture within its own context. This study is not the typical longitudinal and observational study, but still meets the cultural understanding elements of ethnography. Even though the research used interviews, the questions were naturalistic in nature, asking for description of specific scenarios or moments within experiences. The interview

questions were limited then so as not to influence particular topics and propose topics as either positive or negative, therefore participants did not always reference popularly controversial topics such as perspectives on homosexuality. The absence of conflict or highly controversial topics does not minimize the value of the complicated conversations as the definition examines meaning making through the transmission of prior cultural knowledge in new contexts.

Communication Style.

In academic situations, such as literature and science, communication patterns reflected a conversational approach which facilitated freedom of thinking and choice. All of the participants described how they were able to read any literature they chose with the rare exception being Harry Potter, which was an early publication in the trendy genre of magical fantasy that is popular today. Sometimes there was little to no communication with some participants, such as Sarah, noting that her mother did not typically review what she checked out from the library, which indicated pure trust and freedom or, at minimum, lack of surveillance which would have enforced conformity. Others, like Elizabeth and Mary giggled while recalling their love of comics and, despite their mother's decries of comics having no educational value, they continued to check out their beloved comic strip books for light reading. As Elizabeth noted, "Mom...she liked us to smarten up our brains too. Comics are not really...they're just entertainment." This collaborative recollection revealed open dialogue between siblings making the choice to read silly, illustrated fiction for imaginative purposes as well as open protest of mother's preference, revealing self-efficacy to feed the brain how desired while at the same time acknowledging and rejecting a prevailing desire from a person in a position of power.

In learning situations where controversial topics arose, such as creation versus evolution, the participants described their parents encouraging reading and discussion from both points of

view rather than choosing only creationism. Two of the three families specifically recalled reading literature on both sides of the issue. Sarah felt that her family wanted her to choose a point of view based on what she read and even though she believes that they hoped she would lean toward creationism, the skill of research and questioning was more important than which side she took on this topic. In comparison, Elizabeth and Mary were also encouraged to read controversial literature as well. They both felt the reading and discussion was to help them fully develop the skill of taking a position and defending it by understanding the opposition, which implies the parents desired they believe in creationism, but again, were focused on developing articulate thinkers who understood both sides of a controversial topic. Additionally, multiple participants from at least two families were encouraged to take the co-op debate class and compete on the debate team which involved research, critical thinking and questioning of ideas, often leading to participating in summer political process camp experiences, which also supports the development of research and questioning skills over one set of forced beliefs. These patterns support developing self-efficacy over conformity of specific belief systems.

More broadly, all of the participants described how their educational experience was grounded in conversational discourse where they were empowered to negotiate and ask for certain experiences ranging from chores to electives and field trips to the level of math necessary for graduation from high school. Each felt empowered to advocate for herself, most strongly evidenced by Sarah proposing that she skip a grade and Hannah voluntarily writing an argumentative essay to persuade her father that Christian rock music was worshipful and positive. These situations illustrate that not only was conversational communication a norm, but welcomed, as they both felt free to persuade a person in a dual role of power (parent and teacher) on an optional topic, willing to risk disappointment with no fear of relational rejection. Thus a

key trait of this culture is a prevailing practice of student empowerment through communication practices that not only allow, but often encourage open conversation and questioning, reinforcing the idea of self-efficacy for the students and minimizing ideas of oppression.

Moral and Religious Messages.

The complicated conversation revolving around morals and religious messaging present a more complex situation, but again, applying the criteria of the Family Communications Pattern Scale to the stories and experiences distills the messaging. First, the clear expectation to engage in religious curriculum and literature as well as read the Bible on a daily basis appears to align with conformity driven communication patterns; yet a deeper examination reveals there were nuances to this, balancing toward a conversational approach. Five of the women referenced incentives such as prizes or money to continue reading the Bible at older ages which implies some level of choice. Additionally, even when Bible reading translated to a credit on the school transcript for one family, Rachel did not even realize that had been put on her transcript until she and Rebekah were collectively recalling and sharing as part of the interview process, revealing less pressure or conformity than appears on the surface. Also, when delving into the actual practice of Bible study or religious study within academics, the women referenced being given optional tools for study, choosing topics they were interested in, such as Rachel's choice to study patience, and even being provided a variety of texts from different points of view to learn about creationism versus evolution. Additionally, many of the tools were study strategies and not doctrinal resources, the prime example referenced by the majority of the participants being Bible Study Fellowship where the emphasis is reading scripture to understand and personally interpret for personal application. The implications of these patterns were women who did not feel limited or mandated to believe exactly as their parents' taught. This freedom of choice in the learning

stages translated to self-efficacy as they shared how they did make conscious choices to live differently from their parents as adults, being cognizant of their parents' beliefs about the value of women staying home with their children while choosing to dig back into scripture to evaluate their own thinking and make a different choice. All of this is evidenced by four of the five being working mothers.

An outside perspective may judge this community as controlling because there is a shared Christian value with continued application of biblical principles, but deeper examination of these women's experiences and resulting lives reveals a more complex situation where there is freedom and choice without rejection from parental power structures. There were three specific instances where participants shared some level of struggle regarding religious messaging and how it has impacted their lives, but each also shared they used other skills, also taught at home, to overcome these fears or struggles. Mary noted how she feels her mother is sad because she goes to work and sends her children to school, but that she has gone back to biblical expectations and believes that she is fulfilling the same value, but in a different way than her mother, so in spite of the messaging from her mother, she feels confident in her decision. Similarly, Rebekah recounted her fears surrounding telling her parents she was not going to homeschool and was going to return to work, yet when she did tell her parents, they expressed joy for her new work position and acceptance that she may not choose to homeschool. Finally, Rebekah, Hannah and Rachel shared more conformity driven conversations regarding health or sexual education; however, these were also tempered with the thought that it was more an issue of discomfort with the topic than prescribing or mandating a set of beliefs as none shared specific behaviors that were demanded, only lack of freedom to ask questions and learn. This takes me back to my first year back in public school when I had to take a required health class that included teaching on

meditation as grounded in eastern religions. I remember my parents coming to the school, meeting with the counselors and principal to review the curriculum. When it was confirmed that the formal curriculum was grounded in other religions they asked if I was free to bring my Bible and discuss opposing beliefs that I might have. Only when the school denied that request was I exempt from that course. Clearly, Christian values were strongly transmitted, but not to isolate me from other beliefs, in fact my parents wanted me to engage with the curriculum on a critical level with access to multiple ideas including the values from our home education. As a student fresh from homeschooling, I remember being proud of who I was, not embarrassed by my parents. I was curious about the curriculum in that class, but also remember feeling like I did not want to be led into meditation exercises without fully understanding them or being able to check what a teacher was teaching against what I thought the Bible was saying. While I was not given this opportunity for debate right out of homeschooling, that is likely why I was a critical activist in high school where I challenged my American Literature teacher about a film we were watching with regards to value related to the curriculum versus other social messages in the film. I was granted the opportunity to read a book of my choosing and complete an alternative writing assignment.

These limited examples of possible conformity driven communication patterns from their educational experience are outweighed by the other open messages that have ultimately facilitated their self-determination as adults. Evaluating self-efficacy within the social environments and relationships relevant to these women, freedom to navigate, differentiate and separate from important people was evident (Singh, 2007).

These experiences again align with my experience as well where I was strongly encouraged to receive messages, specifically religious messages, and question them, always

seeking more context such as going back to the Bible and looking at surrounding scriptures to evaluate the situation in which something was being taught to see if it was being misconstrued in the present teaching. While Christian beliefs were clearly part of my experience, the individual ability to examine any teaching was empowering and just as important to me.

Naming Oneself

Greene (1988) and Haug (1983/1999) reinforce the power in not only naming oneself, but collectively bringing stories and personal meaning to light, all of which supports students as curriculum and value of experience as education. By sharing lived experience in collaborative stories, who these women are rises to the surface through their own narrative. The unspoken conversations of womanhood from the homeschool experience revealed themselves when asked how they would define feminism. After asking clarifications such as “how does the world define it?” and adding qualifiers such as “to me,” the struggle to define feminism stood as a true complicated conversation between themselves and their own education as well as myself as the participant researcher where the transmission of clear religious values and cultural norms had to be grappled with to develop their own meaning for feminism. The participants clearly did not want to sound like the “outside” which they had been taught was wrong or evil or misled, but at the same time desperately wanted to have a free and independent voice. Listening to these stories and definitions and then reflecting on my own journey transported me back to my doctoral classroom where I questioned who I was and how I had arrived, trying to identify and place the forces that shaped my thinking, both past and present. Was I free enough to accept new ideas and possibly reject old ideas, or reconcile them with new ideas? I feel free. I like my life. In my place in the world, I care not just about myself, but deeply about others’ struggle which has allowed me to feel uncomfortable when there is injustice, prompting me to openly challenge others who

do not feel or see that injustice. Is this enough for me to say that I am free? Is this enough for me to be type of feminist?

As noted above, when I began this study, it was born out of my own contemplation as classmates verbalized assumptions and judgments as to my experiences and their perceived oppression of me from those experiences. As I reflected on my peers' points of view, I found that I had to question myself to really reveal who I was from my experience. The same was true for my participants as I asked them to define womanhood and feminism for themselves, identifying what they each believed and why and how it was the same or divergent from the teachings of their parents. At times this was easy, but more often they expressed discomfort as if there would be judgment from the outside, and possibly from the inside of their community, for how they named themselves. The greatest fear that these women shared was not of their parents, but that others who had not lived their experience would not understand and would negatively judge their schooling and their definition of self.

Application of Self-Efficacy.

First, these women clearly were empowered to choose and self-determine from a young age. This was seen as they each described the freedom to explore the public library even as young elementary students, choosing various literature from different genres and topics as desired, segueing into them asking and even pushing to experience various field trips based on their desires and interests. However, self-efficacy is not just being allowed to be curious, but being empowered to make decisions for self-determination. The data describes schooling experiences that were individualized for the academic benefit of each student, college preparatory experiences through specific math and science courses as well as dual enrollment opportunities at the local community college, all of which created circumstances for each woman

to choose to advance herself independently from both her parents and a potential husband. Additionally, within these schooling experiences, major themes of autonomy and personal agency through struggle and critical thinking emerged. The results of these formative experiences carried into their adulthood where they have each felt free to live independently, pursue higher education and careers as well as choose to maintain their religious values all while fostering curiosity and love of learning academically and religiously. These traits align with Deci and Flaste's (1995) argument that the act of choice, not the actual type of choice, is the marker of self-efficacy, most obviously the choice to pursue a career and not homeschool her own children as is the case for four of the five women in this study. However, again, that is almost measuring the actual choice rather than the action of choice.

Definition of Self.

These women collectively name themselves as unique and empowered individuals created differently from men, but holding value and a voice the same as men. This stands in stark contrast to current literature that presents a disempowered, controlled demographic that are mandated to remain in their father's household while single (Farris, 2014) or even shamed if they do not bear children even when it means destroying a young girl's sense of self when having children is not even physically possible (Maya, 2017). They have actively questioned and sought out who they are in relation to their education and belief system, arriving at a comprehensive point of view that defies both modern feminist theories as well as popular conservative Christian beliefs regarding women.

First, these women did discuss traditional roles including marriage, childrearing, and careers, but as they spoke, they used language of empowerment including "choice" and "voice" and "equal" and "partner." Myers (1996) argues that families such as this are successful in the

transmission of moral and religious values, which is confirmed by the emergence of the common theme of submission within a marriage; however, evaluating the complicated conversation on submission reveals a more complex impact and interpretation by the women. All of them referenced seeing their mother serve in a traditional role, making the choice to submit to her husband's leading. Yet each of these stories must be viewed in the larger context of other religious messaging. All of the participants also emphasized that their mothers' modeled Bible study practices and the homeschool experiences reinforced biblical analysis and understanding. Coupled with submission, these messages of biblical study and lived submission combined to impact these women and their understanding of self uniquely and in contrast to outside assumptions. Hannah repeatedly used the term "partner" with respect to her marital relationship and the idea of submission. All of the participants used the term "equal" repeatedly, describing their understanding of self as "equal, but different" or "an equal partner." This complexity is best captured by Hannah, explaining "I believe that women are equal, but different to men. Like, in terms of our value, we have the same value...I think that God created us to be very complimentary to each other and that's a really beautiful thing." Ultimately, with regards to submission and self, this specific culture reinforces the ability to choose to play certain roles within a partnership for the benefit of the marriage or family while maintaining a voice, sense of self and equal value.

Within marriage and life, each woman described conscious choices informed by their own Bible study. As adults, each woman has taken a very different path from a working mom as a lawyer to a single woman working as an educator at both the university and high school level to a working mom as a nurse or office professional to a stay-at-home mother to an engineer with a stay-at-home father. These flexible gender roles developed from the lived experience whereby

they were encouraged to take higher levels of math, dual enroll for college courses, be college ready or have a career selected to sustain oneself, choose whether to do dishes or muck horse stalls or mow the lawn, and choose hobbies or electives from debate to synchronized swimming to welding. The primary element for each of them was doing what God had gifted them to do and they found meaningfully important that also supported where they mutually wanted their marriage to go, if they were married. Rebekah summarized this, explaining that, “We were first of all, we were created to bring God glory and to bring him pleasure, and that is our first and primary role.” Mary expounded on this as well, relegating actual roles such as worker or stay at home mom to a lesser status compared to inner qualities, adding

...it’s, you know, biblically women somehow are supposed to clothe themselves with an inner beauty, gentleness, meekness, and all that kind of stuff, so there is some amount of...I think femininity is learning a maturity of who God wants you to be.

As I listened to these women articulately describe womanhood through a Christian lens it made me pause to clarify my own experiences as a student and now as an adult. Attitudes and mindsets have always been what I took away from my education, going back to how I learned from my mother through observation. My mother always expressed that she homeschooled because she loved to spend time with us, saw us as people she had helped create and did not want to lose time with us by sending us to a public school. Her message to me was that of *her* choice to have children and homeschool. In her decisions I never saw her argue with my father, but I did see them working out life patterns together such as our Thursday evening family cleaning night. Keeping the house clean, which is typically viewed as a female’s responsibility in a conservative setting. Cleaning and homeschooling were not always in balance so my father chose a night and set up cleaning jobs for the whole family together so it would not rest solely on one person,

namely my mother. Each of us had a job, including him (mopping the whole main floor that was not carpeted). My mother's only job was to spend time organizing any paperwork from that week. This was teamwork, support for my mother and space for her to take care of her own business. While my mother would teach about submission, referencing Bible verses, this memory illustrated a deeper message of what submission and relationships were really like. In being reminded of this I had to think about what I did learn about gender roles and spousal relationships. I think mutual respect was profound and one that I expect in my own marriage. And yet, I also believe in submitting to my husband, letting him listen to me and make decisions while I trust that he cares for me and will lead us together for our mutual benefit.

This freedom to differentiate between doctrinal type behaviors to a broader decision of living a life that is pleasing to God, no matter the role, captures the definition of self in relationship with family and others. These decisions and descriptions resonate with Deci and Flaste's (1995) ideas of freedom and self-efficacy. Some may argue the religious belief system is evidence of indoctrination; however, all students will hold to some type of belief system and holding to a Christian value system is not purely indicative of the lack of personal freedom and choice; rather, the ability to make decisions for oneself *through* a belief system without other humans disempowering those choices is the greater measure of self-efficacy.

These women do not see biological function as a limitation, rather as an element of their personal power as a woman. Rebekah is transmitting this message to her own children as she talks to them about their bodies doing amazing things like giving birth, which biological men cannot do. They see themselves as powerfully different from men where different life circumstances, personalities and preferences will mean their lives will be lived out in a range of ways, but the key is seeing the value in oneself because of how God created women. As noted in

Chapter Four, they define themselves as feminist in that they have the power to be heard and make choices for themselves reflective of their goals, skills, and desires. Just as Singh (2007) argues that identity is seen within various contexts, these women do qualify their feminist ideas within the context of gender, arguing that differences should be recognized and should be valued as that allows the true value of women to rise to the surface because equality is not about sameness, but about freedom to navigate life with an independent value.

Additionally, the study focused on the female experience and while I was interested in feminist aspects, the study was designed to be more womanist in nature, elevating female voices without regard to actual feminism as that would impose my ideas on the participants. However, in examining the data, self-efficacy was clearly established in the process of defining oneself as a woman. Feminism cannot be classified as one set of values, but rather a spectrum or range of values which does include the ability of a woman to navigate and choose one's pathway, as supported by iFeminism. This can be critiqued by other feminist studies, and should be, especially as research on homeschooling expands to include other voices; however, that should not minimize the experiences and truths from within this particular community of conservative Christian homeschoolers as it does empower women by adding to the story of women's experience in education.

Implications & Future Research

Voices Rising

These women were excited to participate in this research and wanted to share their stories. They expressed a desire to be heard and understood in a world where they feel unknown and judged by being unknown. The biggest issue in expressing their views and sharing their stories is that who they are as women would be misunderstood and misused. When considering these fears in the

context of feminist theory, these are valid concerns as some feminist theorists may see their choice of marriage or experience of homeschooling as an injustice as there is perceived oppression (McElroy, 2002). Is feminism about religious beliefs or is it about personal agency and relationships with others? Can someone hold a religious belief system that some perceive as oppressive toward women and not be oppressed as well as not oppress others? The results of this study reveal a cultural community that finds value in who they are within God and values others just as they are valued. This is demonstrated by their consistent belief that they are to invest in others, be it their own children or other's children and demonstrate love toward those who do not live or believe as they do. More importantly, their voice being heard and recognized by other women is foundational as women must empower other women to speak the truth of their experiences and identities. Feminist movements cannot grow through alienation of other women. There must be space for these women's voices to be safely expressed. Some may argue that these women are not a part of a feminist movement if they are not collaborative activists, but that is debatable and difficult to measure. These women did discuss how their mothers planted seeds of investing in others and one shared how she is impacting her own daughters with different messages than she received, but is that enough in the eyes of some modern feminists? I think this question reinforces a key concern participants in this study expressed which must be recognized for its feminist implications.

The driving fears expressed prior to interviews and during the interviews was difficulty trusting those outside of their homeschool culture to understand without judgment. This study presents one specific community's culture through the voices of six women in addition to myself; there must be more research to validate the experiences and identities of women from the conservative Christian homeschool movement. Just as I sat in my doctoral classes listening to

judgments from my peers when they had never spoken with me or others like me, just as people are shocked that I am a public school teacher who was homeschooled, just as I have to explain to others that my lack of a television did not limit me, rather opened doors of curiosity, our voices must be heard en masse. If those who see themselves as modern feminists cannot allow these voices to be a part of the larger women's story then can a bridge ever be built? Can conservative women have a place in feminism and who has the power to decide that place? These critical questions need to be grappled with openly if we want to understand and empower women as a whole.

This study is clearly a cultural study of a specific homeschool movement; however, the questions about the culture cross into other areas including feminism or womanist issues and issues of power. These other areas were not the focus of the study, but the study results provide initial insight into these pertinent topics which can also guide future research efforts. First, there is a clear and unique womanist culture within this conservative Christian homeschool community. I believe their ideas of feminism deserve to be considered on the spectrum of feminist beliefs because the realities of empowerment and value as well as these participants' belief in impacting younger women align with goals of other feminist movements. However, from a modern feminist perspective the traits of these women may not align with modern goals because there is not enough diversity including ethnicity, values and beliefs as well as activism to bring equality on a large scale. While this study was not intended to be a feminist study, the examination of tensions in creating one's identity can be broadened to analyze oppression and empowerment through a modern feminist lens. More research must come from within a broader scope of conservative Christian homeschoolers to create a fuller picture of their identity as feminists so that this can be added to the literature as well as find ways to align women from other positions or experiences.

Additionally, issues of power were revealed throughout the study which allows some limited conclusions regarding oppression and applicability of other theories such as Collins (2009b) Matrix of Domination. By examining empowerment through a feminist lens it allows for an evaluation of oppression to draw conclusions for future research. As referenced earlier, other communities and groups do experience challenges and oppression which can be measured through such theories, but do these women, who are part of a typical majority group given their ethnic and socio-economic background, experience other limitations due to their schooling experience and the specific religious element? This research does not appear to lend itself to that framework as there does not appear to be oppression based on relationships within the family structure or even due to the religious instruction even on topics such as submission as each woman clearly expressed ability to choose her station, her marital relationship, and her career without any limitations and even with strong support of those in positions of power. However, as this study was not intended to be generalizable, there is not a broad enough understanding of the totality of conservative Christian homeschool culture to apply a theory such as this. More research must be conducted to add to the chorus of voices from this study, especially the inclusion of minority and immigrant women, to truly understand if there is a limiting power structure at play within the broader community.

Limitations & Delimitations

The future research recommended above is reinforced by the limitations and delimitations of this study. An ethnography automatically creates certain limitations in terms of the generalizability of the research, which is true in this study. The study sought to reveal lived truths to compare or contrast with stereotypes of homeschooled students from a conservative Christian community. In this community the stereotypes have been shattered when examined from within

current understanding of that community. The known literature portrays tightly controlled, limited and possibly abused women and yet these women make independent choices and engage in dialogue or debate with parents and, as adults, have developed healthy relationships with others having no indications of previous physical or mental abuse. Within this community, the typified house bound, pregnant and uneducated woman is not present. As an ethnographic study, the delimitation of a specific community allowed for the initial identification of cultural traits and patterns as there has been a serious gap in research inclusive of students, namely female students.

Given this delimitation there is now a need to continue the research using these results as a starting point for additional studies in order to expand our understanding of homeschool communities grounded in religious practices. Even more importantly, this study limited participants to adult women who are no longer being homeschooled. While there is justification for a reflective style ethnography, an expansion to a full observatory ethnography of a current homeschool community to see the communication patterns and track participant experiences over time would further clarify and substantiate themes and gaps identified by this study.

Additionally, this study must be viewed from other lenses as the perspective may be different. This geographic community, not simply the specific homeschool community, is very homogenous from an ethnic standpoint and the diversity of ideas espoused in the homes, on topics such as other religions, seemed sparse, thus presenting another limitation. From another culture's perspective this may not reveal an empowered and free-thinking community. So how do we evaluate the results of the study given this limitation? First, returning to the purpose of an ethnography, it is to view the lived experience of a community through its own context, history and situation. While we may desire to open up the dialogue to more critical analysis, that is applicable for future research and not necessarily this study given its limitation, which also fits

the goals of this study to serve as a springboard for other voices to be heard, including more diverse voices.

Abuse and Control

The story of these women paints a picture of supportive learning experiences that fostered thinking and investigation as well as religious values. In terms of explicit messages regarding womanhood and responsibilities of women, there were clear moral messages regarding sexual purity prior to marriage and spousal relationships; however, indicators of isolation and abuse did not appear. The most significant impact was limited to one individual from a family whereby she initially struggled with her identity as a married woman as she was no longer “pure,” so even though marriage is biblical, there was still an internal struggle. However, this was not pervasive even in that particular family as one of the other sisters remembered getting a purity ring, but felt that it was given because everyone had one, not because there was a specific pressure associated with that ring. This community challenges major news headlines and anonymous accounts of other homeschoolers. What this means is that there is a need for further research of other communities to bring more voices to the forefront so there is a more comprehensive understanding of two things.

First, there must be more research to discover if physical or emotional abuse is a reality for other communities or to identify environments where that is a greater risk. The challenge in this future research is how that should be done. Homeschool communities have consistently demonstrated an unwillingness to participate in mass quantitative research and issues such as this are intensely personal and may cause greater harm to respondents if they participate without necessary support such as counseling. Thus, qualitative studies that allow storytelling and collaborative meaning making are the recommended strategies for homeschooling and the lives of

women (Cancian, 1992; Jones et al., 2015; Taylor, 1998) but again, this research must be done by those who are within the community and have the ability to bridge the cultural understanding gap.

The remaining question related to abuse is how to quantify the results and differentiate between abusive home situations and valid home education in creating educational policy. The first step is for homeschool families to be brave and bold enough to share their stories and make public the realities of not just their academic accolades, but the total experience. Only through transparency can there be full understanding and dialogue between the homeschoolers, the public and the government. Studies such as this can serve as a model for future research where lived experiences are valued and heard without judgment, rather with an ear seeking to hear the beautiful harmonies resonating from each woman rising from the complicated conversations of her educational experience and finding her place in the world.

Secondly, there must be more research regarding the process and curriculum for sexual education in conservative Christian homeschools. While this study did not reveal long term challenges from the participants' experiences, the very different strategies and expressed silence or discomfort in some situations was definitely a topic that should be explored further to help families make curricular choices that can both safely address sensitive issues while also educating and protecting female students. One participant shared a positive experience learning about issues such as rape and incest, but at the same time expressed concern that not all families were as open and that females from families lacking openness would potentially be at greater risk. Additionally, another family struggled due to minimal teaching and conversation on any sexual topic and the resulting need for self-discovery was impactful on their development into adulthood. The purpose of this research is to begin the conversation on educational impacts so that all stakeholders, especially homeschool parents and students, can make better decisions and this is an area that

needs more research to better facilitate quality educational experiences for the protection and health of female students.

Summary

Complicated conversations must be had to hear the specific notes of abuse while differentiating them from the larger chorus that seems likely to have beautiful stories of empowerment as evidenced by this particular community. These women seem to express less tension between their identity development and the beliefs transmitted through their homeschool experience, but struggle with tension between self and outside perceptions of who they are today. In order to expand our understanding of this unique milieu, we must walk through the opened door into a culture that is complex, one that values critical thinking, education, and impacting others and is not afraid to empower its women to be independent financially and with regards to ideas surrounding themselves and others in their lives. We must walk through and continue to explore the space. As these women have opened a door to their culture, this research is the background for plot development of a much bigger story to be told.

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APPENDIX A

IRB APPROVAL LETTER

**Institutional Review Board (IRB)**

Veazey Hall 3000
 PO Box 8005 • STATESBORO, GA 30460
 Phone: 912-478-5465
 Fax: 912-478-0719
IRB@GeorgiaSouthern.edu

To: Immings, Natalie; Lake, Robert

From: Eleanor Haynes, Director, Research Integrity

Approval Date: 11/10/2021

Expiration Date: 10/31/2022

Subject: Status of Application for Approval to Utilize Human Subjects in Research –
Expedited Review

After a review of your proposed research project numbered **H22139**, and titled **“Homeschooled Women Defining Themselves within a Religious Culture,”** it appears that (1) the research subjects are at minimal risk, (2) appropriate safeguards are planned, and (3) the research activities involve only procedures which are allowable. You are authorized to enroll up to a maximum of 6 subjects.

Description: The purpose of this study is to investigate how women who were homeschooled develop their own definition of womanhood.

Therefore, as authorized in the Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects, I am pleased to notify you that the Institutional Review Board has approved your proposed research.

If at the end of this approval period there have been no changes to the research protocol; you may request an extension of the approval period. In the interim, please provide the IRB with any information concerning any significant adverse event, **whether or not it is believed to be related to the study**, within five working days of the event. In addition, if a change or modification of the approved methodology becomes necessary, you must notify the IRB Coordinator **prior** to initiating any such changes or modifications. At that time, an amended application for IRB approval may be submitted. Upon completion of your data collection, you are required to complete a *Research Study Termination* form to notify the IRB Coordinator, so your file may be closed.

APPENDIX B

PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT SCRIPT

Hello, this is Natalie Immings, formerly Natalie Schulz. Thank you for taking my call. If you recall, we were homeschooled during the same time period. I am now a doctoral student at Georgia Southern University. I am working on my dissertation and, because of my background with homeschooling, am interested in how the conservative Christian homeschool experience has impacted women in their understanding of being a woman and how that experience impacted personal agency. I am reaching out to you because I remember your family and I know that you were an individual who was homeschooled during the 1990s or 2000s. Would you be interested in participating in this research? If so, let me tell you a little more about how the research will take place and how it will be used.

[If I receive an affirmative response of possible interest in participating:]

The study will include four to six adult women from the same community who were all homeschooled during the same time period. The goal is to learn about this particular cultural experience for female students to help future families and communities with their homeschool practices. There will be two rounds of interviews, each lasting about an hour. The first interview will be a small group interview if it is possible to coordinate schedules with two or three participants at a time. The goal of the first interview is to gather some information about the overall experience and the group can help define common practices and curriculum by sharing together. The second interview will be individual. This will allow me to follow up on specific topics and facilitate more specific and confidential sharing. All interviews will take place via Zoom due to COVID as well as to accommodate for the various locations of the participants as well as myself.

I will be sharing with you a letter of informed consent which provides greater detail on the procedures for interviewing, saving and using the data as well as the methods for maintaining confidentiality. If you have questions about how your identity will be protected, please do not hesitate to ask. Additionally, you may give or remove your permission at any time during this process. You will also have the ability to review the transcripts of the interviews to further clarify or correct things that you have said and can, at that time, request that certain information not be included in the study.

What questions do you have for me?

What days of the week and times work best for you to participate in interviews?

What is the best email address and physical address so that I can send you the detailed informed consent for you to consider? If you still agree to participate, your participation in the first recorded, online interview will serve as consent. Thank you so much for your time and I will be in touch within the next week with a date for our first interview.

APPENDIX C

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Grand Tour

- Could you describe a typical day of school for you?
- Could you describe your experience with extracurricular activities?
- Could you describe the formal curriculum used in your homeschool?
- What subjects did you enjoy? Not enjoy? Why?
- Could you describe the role of religion in your education?
- How do you think you became aware of gender? Could you describe the difference in responsibilities at home for your parents? Siblings of different genders?

Mini Tour

- Could you describe the variety of literature you read, either as a formal text your parents used for instruction or that you read by choice? Did you ever choose to read something that your parents did not approve of? Why?
- Could you describe how you handled needing help learning something? What did you do if you struggled or failed at a learning task or assessment?
- Could you describe a time when you completed/did a project?
- Could you describe a teacher led lesson from your mother?
- Could you describe a teacher led lesson from your father?
- Could you compare your educational experience with your sibling's/brother's educational experience?

- Could you describe how you learned about religiously controversial topics? How did your parents respond to questions and conversations with you on these topics? How did that make you feel about yourself?
- Could you describe what type of clothing you wore as an elementary child? How did your clothing choices change as you advanced through middle and high school?
- When you were a child, what kinds of things did you want to be when you grew up? What inspired you or gave you those ideas? Could you describe how you learned about different career options when you were homeschooled? Were there certain roles or careers your parents encouraged? How? Discouraged? How?
- Could you compare your adult beliefs about femininity with your formative years?

Experience

- You've probably had some interesting experiences learning at home as a student and child. Could you tell me about some experiences you had learning math? Science?
- A student in traditional public school would likely have experienced group and whole class discussions on themes in literature or the importance, impact or meaning of times in history. Can you describe your experience with discussions or conversations such as this in your learning experience?
- Could you tell me about a time you specifically remember being praised by your parents?
- Could you tell me about a time you specifically remember being corrected or criticized or judged by your parents?
- Could you tell me about a time where you questioned your parent as a teacher?
- Could you tell me about a time you experienced conflict over clothing choices with your parent?

- Could you tell me about a specific religious lesson or influence from your education that impacted your beliefs about being a woman? How did your parents respond to questions and conversations with you on these topics? How did that make you feel about yourself? How did that shape your thinking as a child and now as an adult?
- Could you tell me about a specific lesson on gender relationships or sex education or how this was incorporated into your school experience? How did your parents respond to questions and conversations with you on these topics? How did that make you feel about yourself?
- Tell me about a time as an adult that you have relied on skills and beliefs from your schooling to help you grapple with a challenge.
- Tell me about a time as an adult that you felt unprepared by your formative education.

Hypothetical Interaction

- If you did not want to read a certain book, how would you have handled that? How would your parents have responded?
- If you wanted to attend public school, what do you believe the response from your parents would have been?
- How might your parents have handled the situation if you had expressed a desire to not get married? Not pursue a college education? How would you have handled their reaction?

Structural Questions that Elicit Explanation/Identification

- How would you define femininity? Feminism?
- Could you expand on your beliefs about your role and responsibilities as a woman?
- How do you feel your mother/father influenced you in becoming your adult role?