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A Mother's Love: A Personal Journey of Self-Discovery, Self-Love and Unyielding Perseverance

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A MOTHER'S LOVE: A PERSONAL JOURNEY OF
SELF-DISCOVERY, SELF-LOVE AND
UNYIELDING PERSEVERANCE

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Olga Alexander

2016

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to the memory of my parents, Mr. and Mrs. Marcial Udave. Their life long lessons have seen me through the darkest of moments. They led by example. My mother's sacrifice afforded me the opportunity to have a better life, and her intrepid spirit, taught me to face and overcome my own fears. My father taught me to never settle, to always strive to become a better version of myself, and to have honor. I will forever be grateful for their love, support, and sacrifice.

To my son R.J., I want to thank you for being the inspiration of my work. You have taught me just how deep a mother's love can be. Your beautiful smile and laugh bring joy to my soul. The twinkle in your eye assures me that there is hope for a better tomorrow, and your bravery encourages me to face my fears. I love you mucho.

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by

Olga Alexander

THESIS

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Abstract

In today's world, being a stay-at-home mom still carries a stigma whether one chooses to stay at home or one is forced to by unforeseeable circumstances. My master's thesis is a personal narrative, written through the scope of an autoethnography. It envelopes the vulnerability surrounding the internal conflict, and external interference and influence of cultural, societal, and familial norms. The purpose of this autoethnography is to share my own experience with identity crisis, loss of career, and embracing the identity of being the mother of a special-needs child, and to share my personal struggle with the pressure in having to choose between career and motherhood as well as arrive at cultural analysis and interpretation regarding the research question: What is the phenomenology of the Latina woman and career? The objectivity and subjectivity position within this autoethnography will be coupled and supported by a feminist theoretical framework. Rom Harré's and Fathali Moghaddam's explanation of positioning theory in *The Self and Others Positioning Individuals and Groups in Personal, Political, and Cultural Contexts* will also be used as a theoretical framework to better understand the psychology behind the phenomenology. The objective behind this autoethnography is to open the door to much needed discourse, and to establish literature on the intersectional identities of women, especially those who are mothers of special-needs children, and women from all walks of life who have found themselves in the vacuum of loss of career, loss of identity, and who face the challenges that come with being a woman, wife, and mother. Feminist epistemology about womanhood, motherhood, and career are examined, and the research method of phenomenology will serve as the vessel by which knowledge will be constructed, and made sense of, in an effort to make connections to our culture, to our society, and to each other.

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Chapter 1: Generational Role Reversal Redefined

For many women, obtaining a degree and an advanced degree has helped change their perception and definition of certain gender roles and expectations, which have been long defined and dictated by society, culture and to some degree religion. It has facilitated them in their quest for women's liberation, self-worth, and financial independence. It has helped them navigate and negotiate their way in a male dominated workforce. Yen reported that "for the first time women surpassed men in advanced degrees;" 10.6 million women have advanced degrees compared to 10.5 million men and 20.1 million women have undergraduate degrees compared to 18.7 million men (Yen, 2011, paras. 6, 7). The educational gap between the two genders has been a long battle, which has come to a close with women surpassing men, and in some families, gender role reversal is the norm. According to Census statistics the number of stay-at-home mothers has declined for the fourth year in a row to 5 million while the number of stay-at-home dads has increased to 2 million (Yen, 2011, paras. 3, 9). Clearly these statistics show how traditional gender roles are being redefined. While the long awaited journey of women catching up to their male counterparts in terms of education has been a triumph some women may meet it with some resistance and reservations particularly for Latina women.

El Paso is predominantly a community comprised of mostly Latina/os and Catholicism permeates much of the religious undertones within and around the city. While recent statistics speak of the reversal and redefinition of traditional gender roles and norms, the community at large may have a different perception on how it defines traditional gender roles. The age old

question of one's identity and purpose as a Latina and passing the test of womanhood stems from her willingness and active role of procreation in which one lives and breathes to be long-suffering and be anything and everything for her children and her husband forsaking herself, however to the more liberated Latina the question is "This is it... this is all there is to live for and be?" Suddenly the societal, cultural, religious and personal perception and definition of traditional gender roles is threatened and compromised by the feminist perception, interpretation and definition of self.

Liberated Latinas benefitted from Betty Friedan's feminist points of view, also known as the "mother of modern feminism" ("Is This All There Is?" p.125-129), and lived by a set of standards that defied the belief of what femininity and gender performance ought to have been. To some, she was the voice of liberation and to others she was the tempest that destroyed the voice of tradition and poisoned the minds of wives and mothers. She dared however to rise above the voice of tradition and dared to ask thought provoking questions and speak of the hidden truth and hidden agendas that sabotaged the mere existence and intellect of women. Friedan (2001) disagreed with the dominant belief that "Anatomy is woman's destiny, say the theorists of femininity; the identity of woman is determined by her biology" (p. 136). The traditional outlook on women was that their femininity was defined by their active role in procreation and their willingness to adhere to traditional gender roles and norms. Friedan's outlook on femininity however, was that of women becoming assertive and striving to be whatever they wanted to be alongside the roles of wife and mother. Friedan believed that it was having goals, aspirations,

and ambitions that made women feminine unlike the expert opinion of the day which claimed it was those notions that made women unfeminine, unhappy and impaired them and rendered them unable to love their families (“Is This All There Is?,” 2010). Success exists within the belief and acceptance of the love of self, the notion that one loves oneself enough and the determination to self-evolve that enables one to love her family and not necessarily that one loves herself more than her family. The impairment, inner conflict, and struggle come when the pressure of societal, cultural, and religious norms that dictate and define a woman’s value and self-worth.

A woman’s self-esteem, self-image, and self-worth are conceived and nurtured in her recognition and acceptance of being a human being herself first and foremost. Friedan (2001) argued that “Our culture does not permit women to accept or gratify their basic need to grow and fulfill their potentialities as human beings, a need which is not solely defined by their sexual role” (p. 133). Her self-fulfillment and success stem from the liberty of allowing herself to probe and ask provocative questions that reflect her life and cause disequilibrium in which learning and growth will take place. This imbalance becomes an identity crisis. This “crisis” is an opportunity to examine who one wants to be. For women, however it’s somehow considered a liability for it challenges the purpose of their existence. Friedan (2001), in *The Feminine Mystique* coined this crisis as “a woman’s role crisis” (p. 131) and it was blamed on education. With education, came the freedom for at least some women to think and make decisions for themselves. It broadened and offered women opportunities to reexamine truths, ideas, and concepts which perhaps they had been taught to believe in and accept and it provided them the

opportunity to decide whether or not to accept them as their own. Friedan's book offered women then as it does now the opportunity to reexamine cultural, societal, and religious norms passed on from generation to generation. Its whole conceptual basis is no less provocative in this day and age than it was in 1963. Whether it is an identity crisis or role crisis, its description of the disequilibrium that women experienced along with the shame and guilt holds true today for women like me.

Reflections

My experience as a woman, wife and mother is really no different from that of the description Friedan provides in her book. My experiences, thoughts and feelings stem in part from my experience growing up. I grew up in a home with a mother who willingly chose to be a stay-at home mom. My mother loved being a wife and mother. It's what she wanted to be and do without reservation. It was a comfort to me as a young child to know that someone was home waiting for me at the end of my school day. As I grew older I started to notice *things*. The *things* included wondering why it was always my mom in the kitchen and not my dad. Why was it that my dad got to go out drinking with the men while my mom stayed home? Why was it that if my mother got to have a cup of coffee with the neighbor she had to hurry home in time to have lunch or dinner ready for my dad? Why was it that she had to depend on my dad for everything especially financially? Why was it that he had to go to work and she had to stay home? The *things* I noticed made me more conscientious of some of the *things* I would be intolerant of. From a very early age I decided, "That's not going to be me... no way!" While I prided myself in

the notion that I would not fall prey to the social, cultural, and religious norms that I was conditioned to accept, I soon followed suit.

Following my high school graduation, I got married and soon became pregnant with my daughter. I went from the role of daughter to the role of wife and mother without ever experiencing the identity of *self*. As a Latina, I believe I surrendered to these roles because I was predestined through parental conditioning to fulfill them to the best of my ability; I was groomed to fulfill my destiny. However, no one prepared me for the isolation, confusion, shame, and guilt that stem from the inner stirring and conflict of wanting to be a wife, mother, and more. I desired to be educated for I knew that education would unlock doors of opportunity for me. Friedan (2001) rejected the common belief that it was “education and more education which made women unhappy in their roles as housewives” (p. 66). With all due respect to the experts I beg to differ. Knowledge is power.

Education at any age and level can be empowering. It has been empowering to me. It was in my pursuit and attainment of an undergraduate degree that empowered me to see, accept, and live to my fullest potential as an individual. The discontent for me came in part from buying into the belief that I exist merely to fulfill and meet the needs of my immediate family with no regard for myself. I saw my mother go through this. She had so much potential and could have been so much more but wasn't. As much as I loved my mother, I did not want to lose my soul and identity in the role of housewifery and motherhood. While I was adamant about my refusal to succumb to the image and likeness of a subservient woman, I really had no image of the type of

woman that I wanted to become. Friedan (2001) referred to this as the *private image*: the *private image* being that of a woman that is smart, has an education and is doing something with it or will do something with it; she is a productive citizen she either works from home or travels to a place of employment; she loves and is loved by her husband and children (p. 131). However, when I was growing up this image was scarce. This image would have been deemed blasphemous and in complete contradiction to the norms of the day had it appeared on the cover of a magazine or some other type of media. Still today positive and negative images flood magazines, television, movies, and bombard women with images of what is considered desirable and feminine and are there to help women find an identity. At some point in time, I would venture to say that some of us women have at one time or another accepted the ideas of what is deemed beautiful, desirable, and feminine and have sought to find an identity in such sources. The mistake that most of us make is that of buying into the notion that our identities are set in stone and that we cannot have more than one identity. Identities are intersectional and we navigate them every day with different people and in different settings. These identities can be balanced and can bring much richness into our lives.

Intersectional identities are complex, and can be dynamic. Human beings dissect and compartmentalize identities in order to bring cohesion to their life and to assign meaning. The juggling act of work-life balance has both created a sense of accomplishment and a sense of disillusionment among working and stay-at-home mothers. As a former working mother, I can attest to the challenges that come with the art of such balance and finding a happy median. Roles

are static and have their own set of expectations, however, when one is met with the challenge of assuming a new identity and role it can become cumbersome especially when it involves a special-needs child. The trifecta of balancing work, home life, and mothering a special needs child can then become the epicenter of one's life and one can soon find herself in a dilemma regarding the intersectional identities and either balancing it all or making a sacrifice along the way. Some are forced by unforeseeable circumstances to relinquish an identity and therein lies the problem of having to choose between a career or mothering a special-needs child. This dilemma led to my thesis research question: What is the phenomenology of the Latina career woman and motherhood?

The following is a brief overview of each of the subsequent chapters: Chapter 2 focuses on the literature review and methodology. The literature review defines phenomenology and autoethnography and how it pertains to this autoethnography. The research validates the autoethnography by introducing authors within the discipline of communication and education who have written as ethnographers. Chapter 3 authenticates the methodology by establishing feminist theoretical framework, which explains the personal narrative anecdotes, and positioning theory explains the psychology behind the phenomenology. Chapter 4 and chapter 5 provide the personal narrative through the scope of feminist theory, epistemology and agency in an effort to arrive at cultural analysis and interpretation. The personal testimony provides an insight to the lived experience of the ethnographer. Chapter 6 summarizes the significance of phenomenology and autoethnography and its validity as a research method as well as its scholarly contribution to

the discipline of communication. The interpretation of findings validates personal testimony as an instrument by which to arrive at cultural analysis and interpretation in an effort to identify with the interconnectedness and interrelatedness of our womanhood and motherhood.

Chapter 2: Literature Review and Methodology

Phenomenology can be a powerful tool especially when utilizing autoethnography as the vessel by which to connect with readers. It is conducive as a theoretical framework coupled with research procedural methods. Martinez (2000) claims that “As a research procedure, phenomenology offers a set of methodological procedures through which we can investigate the very terms within which certain possibilities of human existence - over the exclusions of others - come to be actualized in the lived experience of the person” (p. x). Phenomenology allows for an up close and personal view of a person’s lived experiences. It gives the reader insight to the experiences of the subject specifically what those experiences are and how the person experiences what they experience. It engages the reader and helps the reader understand why the subject said what he/she said, felt what he/she felt, and thought what he/she thought. This approach can be effective in provoking much needed dialogue in subjects that may still be awkward and uncomfortable to discuss by allowing the reader to identify with the subject. Martinez (2000) asserts “Phenomenological research always remains open ended-that is, it never really ends” (p. xi). The utilization of this approach calls for thought provoking discussions and perhaps the reexamine of ideals, truths, and norms. It is with this in mind that I have chosen to write an autoethnography to share my own experiences with identity crisis and loss and my personal struggle and pressure faced in having to choose between career and family.

Autoethnography has many different meanings, interpretations, and styles. Chang (2008) defined it as “the combination of cultural analysis and interpretation with narrative detail through

the utilization of confessional emotive writing and descriptive realistic writing” (p. 46). Chang (2008) explained confessional emotive writing as “the freedom to expose confusion, problems, personal agonies, and dilemmas in life” (p. 45). Chang further described realistic writing as “an attempt to describe your behaviors or contexts as closely as possible to what they were with little interjection of your opinions and evaluations” (p. 144). This writing method can be seen as cathartic and self-indulgent in that it can become nothing more than the author sharing personal narratives as a therapeutic form of expression with no academic foundation and persuasion. Within the context of this thesis, both forms of writing will be used in an effort to draw the reader into the world of the autoethnographer, and solicit an emotional response from the reader as well as arrive at cultural analysis and interpretation.

Chang suggests that when utilizing, autoethnography as the methodology, special care needs to be given to the validity of the research method:

Although an obsession with objectivity is not necessary for qualitative research, autoethnographers need to support their arguments with broad-based data as in any good research practice. For this reason, they can easily complement “internal” data generated from researchers’ memory with “external” data from outside sources, such as interviews, documents, and artifacts. Multiple sources of data can provide bases for triangulation that will help enhance the content accuracy and validity of the auto-ethnographic writing. (p. 55)

The objectivity and subjectivity position within this autoethnography will be coupled and supported with feminist and positioning theory, which will substantiate the validity of this methodology. In the rest of this chapter, I will explain the methodological approach by authors in communication studies and education who have written as ethnographers. The four authors I have chosen are Bernadette Calafell, Jaime Romo, Jacqueline Martinez, and Phaedra C. Pezzullo.

Bernadette Calafell's (2007) autoethnography focuses on performance ethnography in which a participatory perspective is used in examining Latina/o performance. Calafell's use of rhetorical criticism as she writes about her experiences with Latina/o identity, performance, and space while earning her doctoral degree at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill establishes the need for further research on performance studies within the communication field. She draws from her day-to-day activities, her sense of community and her interactions with others to write her material. Calafell's sense of performance deals with how people navigate and negotiate through spaces and how language, speech patterns, and identities often change depending on these spaces. For Calafell, her performance became a way of being as she pursued her doctoral degrees at UNC. Calafell uses what other communication scholars such as Gloria Anzaldúa, Cherrie Moraga, Jacqueline Martinez, and Dolores Tanno have written about performance, space, identity, and rhetoric as the theoretical framework from which to draw from to explain her identity, performance, space and the affect and excess that came with finding herself in a diasporic state as a Latina in North Carolina. Calafell (2007) utilizes participatory

epistemology which “allows the auto ethnographer access not only to other ways of knowing herself/himself but also to various types of texts, both oral and written, such as cultural performance” (p. 20)

One format that Calafell utilizes is that of providing her own thoughts, feelings, and experience and then providing the theoretical framework, which explains her point of view and her voice within the text of a paragraph or page. She intertwines it simultaneously one with the other as she writes. Calafell also used prose in describing her male Latino friend and his experiences with identity, space and performance as a doctoral student at UNC. The format for that approach was that of providing theoretical framework coupled with her statements, followed by the interview with her Latino friend in prose form and then followed once again with theoretical framework to explain the prose rhetoric. Calafell (2007) explains, “My desire in using this method is to highlight certain meaning and rhythms in language and the choice of words while privileging the importance of orality in historically marginalized cultures” (p. 20).

Calafell’s use of prose captures the interviewee’s performance and desperate sense to make sense of his diasporic state. Calafell (2007) hoped the text would “open up conversations about Latina/o performance” (p. 138). Her hope is that others will see the significance of how knowing and understanding and Latina/o performance and how much can be learned from it. Calafell concluded that the text would “contribute to the nuanced understanding of race and ethnicity and attests to the importance of Latina/o studies in the field of communication” (p. 138). There seems

to be a gap in academic literature in terms of Latina/o studies; hopefully other academic scholars will take heed and join in the effort to expand the study of Latina/o performance.

Autoethnography encompasses a wide range of genres within its context, as Jaime Romo's autoethnography illustrates. His experience as a student, educator and professor of education led him to write an autoethnography drawing on his own experience as a Chicano activist. His methodological approach in writing an autoethnography was that of capturing what quantitative research methods might not. His personal experience with marginalized groups of students is the cornerstone for his methodology. Romo (2004) explained that he chose an autoethnographic methodology as an approach in an effort "to examine my own development as a Chicano activist" (p. 96). He follows that statement with theoretical framework, which substantiates his approach. He further explained that part of the reason for having written this particular piece was to provide his undergraduate and graduate students with a better understanding of their professor's stance on educators becoming advocates for all marginalized students. Romo (2004) also explained that within the context of his autoethnography he "identified units and then categories from the data" (p. 97).

Romo (2004) stated that "the study calls for educators developing a sensitivity and an understanding of minority identities and examine their own identities; examine their own attitudes, values and beliefs; promote inclusion, hear from those who are oppressed, and school leaders need to recruit, retain and mentor educators to change educational settings toward equity,

inclusion and respect” (p. 110). Just as he wrote about his experiences as a Chicano activist the following author Jacqueline Martinez writes about her Chicana experience and identity.

Jacqueline Martinez is a professor of communication at Arizona State University at Tempe. In her book, *Phenomenology of Chicana Experience & Identity*, Martinez (2000) used personal narrative and autoethnography in an attempt to “make it more accessible to a non-specialized audience, but it also situates me very particularly as author and thus allows the reader to see not only the content of my thinking and theorizing but also the life experiences from which such thinking and theorizing emerges” (p. 2). By doing so, she offered the reader the opportunity to know her as an individual and to delve into her personal experiences and examine and understand for themselves the circumstances that led to all her thoughts, feelings, and reactions as a Chicana.

Martinez utilizes phenomenology because it lends itself to theoretical perspective and research procedure. By choosing this methodology, she engaged the readers in focusing their attention to her lived experiences and the theorization behind such experiences while simultaneously providing methodological procedures, which allow for investigation of the conditions in which certain aspects of human existence come to be. Martinez wrote about her experiences with assimilation as a Chicana feminist and lesbian and the struggles faced by racism, classicism, sexism, and homophobia. Martinez’s work is supported by feminist theoretical frameworks and is embedded throughout her writing. Martinez (2000) shared her personal experiences as a Chicana feminist and lesbian: “my effort is to make available to the

reader the very terms and conditions through which I have come to say what I say here: For my Chicana audience especially, I hope that this work opens avenues for new critical and descriptive dialogues among us and with those who are interested in undoing the damages done by racist, sexist, classist, and homophobic cultures” (p. xiii). Jacqueline Martinez’s autoethnography captivates and draws the reader in by opening up her own avenue of discourse in describing her experience as a Chicana feminist and lesbian.

Phaedra Pezzullo’s book *Toxic Tourism Rhetorics of Pollution, Travel and Environmental Justice* advocates for change in public policy in terms of protecting the environment from toxins that are lethal to communities at large. Toxic tours expose the raw reality of those living within close proximity of chemical industries and the repercussions that come with that. Tourists get to see where these people live, where they work, and where they spend their leisure time. They also see and hear about the physical ailments, the environmental and social problems. Pezullo (2007) contends that “By combining the more traditional categories of nature and culture tourism, toxic tours attempt to persuade tourists (or outsiders) to help mobilize further democratic action for environmental justice” (p. 78). The major players involved in the toxic tours are often members of the community plagued by environmental and social problems, volunteers passionate about environmental justice, and members of the environmental groups and organizations. Pezzullo’s ethnographic participant observation fieldwork in toxic tourism draws readers into an arena where victims of environmental racism demand political, cultural, social and environmental change. Her direct participation embodies

activism and advocacy. It provides an avenue for discourse among the host and participants, and among the tourists. It attempts to narrow cultural and political distances and in addition utilizes witnessing as a “persuasive mode of communication” (p. 145). In this particular sense the tourist is an invited guest to witness the activities of a particular community in hopes of bringing change to that community. At other times the community members bear witness to events within their own community and seek out outsiders to join them in their efforts for change. Pezzullo offers incredible insight to the realities of toxic tours and provokes much needed dialogue in the area of environmental justice.

Autoethnographies such as the aforementioned ones have different formats and styles and the auto-ethnographer has the opportunity to present his/her subject matter in a manner that will provoke thought and dialogue. Autoethnography was chosen to share my personal experiences through personal narratives in an effort to examine the cultural and social interconnectivity between myself and other women in terms of the pressure and struggles faced in having to choose between family and career. The self is the primary subject and the instrument by which I will attempt to connect with other women for the purpose of self-discovery and understanding for both reader and autoethnographer. The *other* women are women who are mothers, those who are mothers of special needs children, and women who share a set of values and norms that are central to the identity of women and central to universal cultural themes. Cultural themes within this context will be analyzed and interpreted through the scope of feminist and positioning theory. Chang (2008) defined a cultural theme as “a postulate or position, declared or implied,

and usually controlling behavior or stimulating activity, which is tacitly approved or openly promoted in society” (p. 132). These cultural themes may help explain the pressure and struggles faced by myself and other women in having to choose between family and career. Feminist theory and positioning theory will further explain the labels and socially constructed identities that are synonymous with human perception, interaction, and identity.

The Politics of Gender and Identity

As a society, our perception, understanding, and acceptance of what are socially and culturally acceptable definitions of gender is dependent on conditioning the mindset. Wood (1999) explained that the definitions of gender are culturally diverse and are conducive to progressive social change: “definitions of masculinity and femininity are interdependent with femininity being more so dependent on the definition, perception and acceptance of masculinity; much of the defining and redefining stems from social change and may differ across cultures” (p. 28). The perception of traditional gender roles has changed due to the reconditioning of mindsets through social changes. With statistics showing the acceptance of role reversal, the definitions of femininity and masculinity have morphed into something socially accepted. Social acceptance does not however mean that all cultures within the context of the majority will accept and more importantly practice the *new normal*. Therefore gender is something we become under social and cultural constructs.

Gender performance within the context of feminist theory is closely associated with Judith Butler. She proposes that our gender performativity is based in part on how culture and

society define it. Butler suggests that our gender is not determined by our sex rather it is determined by our performance, which is culturally/socially created. Butler (1990) argues that “performativity is not a singular act, but a repetition and a ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalization in the context of a body, understood, in part, as a culturally sustained temporal duration” (p. xv). A person is sexed through his/her body by physical genitalia, which categorizes him/her into male/masculinity or female/femininity categories however the physical aspects do not determine the person’s gender but rather on how the person performs, and the performance is subject to cultural/societal norms. These acts performed are predetermined by how we feel others perceive us according to what is deemed socially and culturally acceptable. Resistance to conform and perform to these preconceived notions, ideas and standards of what is acceptable causes disequilibrium or a sense of discontinuity and incoherence within the self and within what is once again considered culturally and socially acceptable and in some cases what may be deemed as taboo.

Within the context of this autoethnography, the premise of gender performance will stem from some of Butler’s key points regarding gender performance and identity. Much of our existence and performance first and foremost is centered on what we have been conditioned to be believe in and to accept culturally, socially, and personally. Butler (1990) asserted that “when the relevant “culture” that “constructs” gender is understood in terms of such a law or set of laws, then it seems that gender is as determined and fixed as it was under the biology-is-destiny formulation: in such a case, not biology, but culture, becomes destiny” (p. 11). Gender

performance is thus determined by what is culturally sound regardless of individual circumstances and people have to perform and adjust accordingly failure to conform or resistance to set norms leads to a discontinuity within the self and society. This can be on larger scale such as the push for same sex marriage produces an incoherence and discontinuity reflected, for example, in protests and demonstrations and the country being divided by polar opposite beliefs or it can be experienced on a more personal level reflected in an identity or role crisis.

Roles can be compartmentalized. One puts on different hats or faces when performing different roles. These roles are governed by culture, society, and even religion at times. These gender roles determine and affect one's identity especially when an identity is centered around a role/s. Anzaldúa (1990) writes “When our caras do not live up to the “image” that the family or community wants us to wear and when we rebel against the engraving of our bodies, we experience ostracism, alienation, isolation and shame” (p. xv). The Latino culture can be ethnocentric in maintaining a certain image in public regardless of the private life. The public perception of one’s *image* carries a lot of weight within the Latino culture, which then imposes upon the family dynamic of perception and performativity when adhering to cultural, societal, and familial norms and practices. If one is unwilling to adhere and assimilate to the dominant belief and norm then it could carry severe chastisement. Anzaldúa (1990) claims that “The masks, las máscaras, we are compelled to wear, drive a wedge between our intersubjective personhood and the *persona* we present to the world” (p. xv). Society coupled with cultural and

familial norms can put pressure on individuals to perform accordingly. Intersectional identities can require a negotiation in respect to the spaces we occupy and within these spaces we decide which *mask/máscara* we will allow the outsiders to see and know. Introspectively, we may have a need to justify the reasoning to ourselves in order to ease the inner conflict that one may experience when masking and unmasking our *persona* to others. Loss of identity can result when one must assume a new identity based on a new gender performative role. Butler (1990) proposed the question, “How do the regulatory practices that govern gender also govern culturally intelligible notions of identity” (p. 23)? A person’s identity is socially constructed and any resistance or failure to comply results in the internal discontinuity and incoherence and therefore leads to an identity crisis.

Our identity as women is dependent on our gender performance and to some extent our biology based on the anatomy is destiny formulation; therefore a woman who is unable to bear children or give birth to healthy children may find herself questioning her womanhood and may experience feelings of failure and inferiority. Beauvoir proposed “that the female body ought to be the situation and instrumentality of women’s freedom, not a defining and limiting essence” (as cited in Butler, 1990, p. 16). In other words regardless of a woman’s anatomical function, she is not bound by her body nor is she limited and defined by what it can or cannot do. A woman may choose to not have children and that choice should not determine her self-worth in terms of womanhood or more importantly as an individual. If a woman should give birth to an unhealthy child it doesn’t mean that she has failed the test of womanhood and the essence of her

womanhood is not wrought by her body's inability to produce a healthy child. Therefore, a woman's identity should not be judged by her anatomical function any more than a man's masculinity in terms of his inability to perform due to specified or unspecified medical conditions or otherwise.

Chapter 3: Theoretical Framework

Identities are socially constructed. One is socialized and categorized by gender from the onset of birth if not before, and one's socialization in the early years comes from play. During play, certain socially constructed rules apply which dictate which toys are appropriate for one to play with. Socialization also happens at the dinner table and there many conversations are held in which family members reinforce identities. These identities are constantly reinforced by familial, cultural, and societal norms. These identities are not questioned for they are normal and embedded within that particular person/family. Mischel explained that "Social learning theory claims that individuals learn to be masculine and feminine primarily by imitating others and getting responses from others to their behavior" (as cited in Wood, 2011, p. 50). As human beings we use different forms to express our identities. We use colors that reinforce our gender identity, such as pink and purple for girls and hues of blue for boys. We play with toys that reinforce gender identity and expectations. Boys are encouraged to play outside and explore their surroundings as it promotes their adventurous spirit and girls play with dolls, which fosters their nurturing maternal instincts. Boys are encouraged to be aggressive and rambunctious, and girls are taught to be reserved and quiet. These behaviors are reinforced by familial and cultural norms. As we become older, we are better able to monitor our respective gender behavior expectations.

Wood explains that we self-regulate our behaviors by keeping them in check with the dominant expectation:

Monitoring takes place inside us, but it involves others. Monitoring happens as we engage in internal dialogues with others' perspectives that we have internalized. As we engage in internal dialogues, we remind ourselves what others have told us we are supposed to think, do, look like, and feel-that is, we tell ourselves what the others have told us is appropriate for our age, sex, and so forth. (p. 160)

We use this as a check and balances of all things appropriate and inappropriate in terms of upholding familial expectations. For one to question these norms in some families and to rebel against them is taboo. Therefore the cycle continues until one has the opportunity to reexamine these norms and make a different choice.

For many women, the opportunity to reexamine their identities and roles came with the release of *The Feminine Mystique* by Betty Friedan in 1963. *The Feminine Mystique* suggests that women should have a sense of fulfillment and satisfaction in their roles of wife and mother and make a career out of house and home with no recourse of being a human being first and having an identity and sense of self. Friedan's publication challenged these social norms. Friedan provided women the opportunity to delve into their own lives and question their existence and satisfaction not merely as women but as human beings. Friedan did not write in an effort to destroy women and families. She wrote in an effort to promote the self-worth of women everywhere. Friedan's writing did not discourage women from being wives and mothers it encouraged them to be that and more. It encouraged women to self-evolve, to have an identity of self apart from the identity of wife and mother. *The Feminine Mystique* described the

dissatisfaction many women felt in their daily roles as wives and mothers in terms of the same humdrum routines and their sense of emptiness. Friedan (2001) described “the problem that has no name” as the definition the experts of day were offering women as an explanation to their distress (p. 63). It was given this name because women could not bear to articulate what was the matter with them. The fear of admitting that they were dissatisfied with their role of wife and mother was blasphemous and the incredible pressure from family, friends, society and culture made women feel as if they were wrong as a person for having felt that way.

Women felt this way in part because some of them had an education and were not using it or they were interested in pursuing an education. The sense of dissatisfaction and emptiness came in part because they were not living to their full potential and capacity. The lack of opportunities to use one’s capacities resulted in the deterioration of a woman’s self-esteem, self-worth and the desperation of having to live up to an image created by society all of which led to an identity crisis, often created by images and narratives in magazines depicting what a woman should aspire to be and most importantly what she should not be. The most popular magazines were not only created by women but by men who had their own ideas of what a woman should be. The image that was lacking then is what Friedan (2001) called the “private image” and defined it to be “a woman who used her mind, played her own part in the world, and also loved and had children” (p. 130). The identity crisis of women resulted from obstacles, problems, and liabilities in terms of women fulfilling their roles as wives and mothers. Those obstacles and liabilities included education, career, intelligence and individuality. These so called obstacles

were the very core of the private image that women were lacking. The root of the problem or blame in terms of a woman's identity crisis or role crisis was not in the images portrayed in magazines or television, but from a lack of a sense of self, and the lack of being a grounded individual/woman. This was exactly the premise that Friedan emphasized repeatedly in her book. Friedan (2001) declared that *the feminine mystique* "denied women the right to have an identity of their own outside of marriage and motherhood and convinced women that their identity as women was defined by their biology" (p. 133). It was these women who experienced the sense of dissatisfaction in their lives.

If women sought to form an identity and gain self-esteem through the possession of material things, sexual satisfaction and motherhood it was because of the disapproval of society/culture, family and friends in allowing her to express herself as a separate and unique human being. Self-esteem and self-worth are gained through goal setting and achievement of goals and self-expression regardless of disapproval. The lesson to be learned in terms of finding one's identity is that of listening to the inner voice that challenges us to ask, "What do I want to do?" "What do I want to be?" and not necessarily asking, "Who am I?" because the feminine mystique's answer would be Larry's wife or Nick's mom.

The key according to Friedan was a new life plan for women. Friedan (2001) asserted that a woman "must create, out of her own needs and abilities, a new life plan, fitting in the love and children and home that have defined femininity in the past with the work toward a greater purpose that shapes the future" (p. 464). A woman should be an individual first owning her own

thoughts, ideas, and feelings and to integrate the roles of wife and motherhood into what she already is as a person. The new life plan represented her personal aspirations and accomplishments. The life plan was also a testament of her contributions as a productive citizen for the greater good of society. The same holds true of those women who are stay-at-home mothers. Often an assumption is made that those who are at home are somehow contributing to the decline of society because they are not in the workforce. Women who are at home are contributing to society in a different scale and pace. Their contributions are not seen in a boardroom, but are seen in the rearing of future productive citizens. The disillusion comes from the devaluation that society has bestowed upon stay-at-home mothers and working mothers alike. Society has equally shunned working mothers. Assumptions have also been made in regards to the decline of society because working mothers are not at home rearing well-rounded, productive citizens. It seems that a win-win situation doesn't exist. It is difficult to appoint any measure of happiness and fulfillment to either situation. Sometimes families are met with unforeseeable circumstances in which the only choice is for the wife and mother to stay home. These circumstances are beyond anyone's control and the decision is a very *personal* one for both the family and the woman. Whether uncontrollable circumstances are the reason one needs to stay home or head back to the workforce, society has no right in dictating what is healthy or unhealthy for individual families. Whether one has a life plan in place as Betty Friedan suggested or one is given the option or opportunity to choose whether or not to stay home, to work from home, or to work outside the home again differs from family to family.

Jennifer Valenti, founder of the feminist blog Feministing.com writes about modern feminism in her book *Full Frontal Feminism* and the obstacles and issues women face today. In reality, the sentiment of women staying at home to raise children and tend to domestic duties is still prevalent today however the only difference today is the verbiage being used. We hear terms such as lean in, opt out, etc. Women still face backlash for having to work outside the home. The truth is not all women are afforded the opportunity to stay home. Valenti asserted that “Most women don’t have the financial ability to just decide not to work” (p. 120). Many women have to work to either supplement the household income or because they are the sole breadwinners for their family. Others face backlash for having the option and the resources in being able to stay home but choosing to work. The backlash stems from deeply embedded societal norms that are intertwined with cultural and religious norms. For others, it is about working toward the goal of having both a successful career and a family. However, whether society feels it has the right to judge and criticize is of no account to families who face unforeseeable circumstances be it fortunate or unfortunate.

Messages about women having it all are still met with mixed reactions, emotions, and reservations. In 2012, Marissa Mayer was named CEO of Yahoo while she was pregnant. She could be considered a role model for women especially those still striving to balance work and family. This historic event was met with what would appear to be oppositional comments. Princeton professor Ann-Marie Slaughter responded to this historic event with the following comment “We all applaud her, but she’s superhuman, rich, and in charge,” “Marissa Mayer isn’t

really a realistic role model for hundreds of thousands of women who are trying to figure out how you make it to the top and have a family at the same time” (as cited in Fuller, 2013, para. 9). Her comments on Mayer being an unrealistic role model stem in part from Mayer building a nursery next to her office so she could remain close to her son while she works. Slaughter’s comments may be somewhat true for the rest of us who do not possess the socioeconomic status, clout, and resources that Mayer has access to. While Slaughter's comments may seem like a personal attack, she explains the rationale behind her comments in her controversial article “Why Women Still Can't Have It All.” Her article is based on her own personal experience as a career woman and mother. In her article, she explores the myths of work-life balance and she proposes changes that need to take place in our society by reexamining societal, economic, and work policies and assumptions that are made about working women and motherhood. She calls for reconditioning the mindset of the majority (men and women in high places) in order to allow the minority (women) to be able to attain balance among career, family, and life. She specifically calls upon women in powerful positions like Marissa Mayer to set precedents that will help future generations of working mothers and women, such as Hillary Rodham Clinton, who openly and fiercely advocated for women and children’s rights. She too had the task of juggling work-life balance as First Lady of Arkansas and as First Lady of the United States. She pursued her own political interests and agenda only after her daughter, Chelsea, grew into adulthood. While Marissa Mayer, Anne-Marie Slaughter, and Hillary Rodham Clinton are some of the few women

who have made it to the top, it gives the rest of us hope that we too in our own way can have it all whatever that encompasses for our own unique circumstances.

The backlash and more criticism continued when she chose to return rather quickly from her maternity leave (two weeks) to assume her role and duties as Yahoo's CEO. Most women dread the thought of having to leave their baby behind to assume their workplace roles and duties and simply have no other recourse but to do so. Upon returning, she made an executive decision that Yahoo employees would no longer be allowed to work from home angering many working mothers (parents) however she also extended the maternity and paternity leave to 16 weeks and new parents receive a \$500.00 gift. Many working mothers (parents) especially those working for Yahoo have not been afforded the opportunity of bringing their child/children to work with them. Slaughter admits that long hours come with the territory and that having face time is beneficial for collaboration and building trust among colleagues but also asserts that not all hours need to be spent at the office. Slaughter (2012) refers to this as "changing the culture of face time" (p. 12). She calls for redefining face time. In an age of so many technological advances, time in the office can be reduced with the use of email, instant messaging, and videoconferencing. By utilizing these tools, working parents have the opportunity to meet work related demands and still be able to fulfill their parental and familial responsibility. Perhaps in time men and women in powerful positions will take heed to what Slaughter is suggesting and afford their employees the opportunity to better balance work and family.

The world of academia is another aspect of our society that is in need of opportunities to better balance work and family especially for working mothers. In *Mothers in Academia*, Mari Castañeda and Kirsten Isgro compiled an anthology in which working mothers in academia shared their personal struggles with work-life balance in the world of academia. Each story has common tropes in addition to work-life balance such as: working overtime, lack of flexible schedules, and inequality of pay. The U.S. Congress Joint Economic Committee 2010 reports that “As of 2008, more than 60 percent of mothers are working outside the home for paid wages” (as cited in Castañeda & Isgro, 2013, p. 4). The academic world’s workforce is composed of 50 percent female and 65 percent of those are working mothers. The intersectionality of these identities has sparked many books and dialogue on the subject of work-life balance. The testimonies bear witness to the inequity and inequality experienced by women in a male dominated field. An example of such inequality and inequity is that of female faculty members with children having to take positions at junior colleges because it does not require the time, effort, and stamina that perhaps a Research I or II institution may demand not to mention that perhaps publishing may not be required. More often than not women are forced to have to make choices that they would not otherwise make because of institutional policies that are not always family-friendly. Often times women have to accommodate the majority in order to keep peace at work and at home while their ideal schedules and own aspirations take a back seat. Castañeda and Isgro (2013) assert that “Although it may be perceived that “rhetoric of choice” is present in the chapters, to situate each of the women’s narratives in this anthology as involving “private

choices” is to miss the larger neoliberal ideals and values that focus so much on the individual as a way to divert larger oppressive structures” (p. 229). While trying to maintain a sense of agency in their decision making, their sense of independence and freedom is limited. Many times, women make their choices because they feel pressured to fulfill familial, cultural, societal, and institutional expectations and obligations. The external influences sometimes cast all responsibility of any choices solely on women with no regard of the provocation of sources that influence such choices.

Sacrifice often comes with the decisions or choices that one makes. The sacrifices may range from minuscule to life altering and anywhere in between. With these sacrifices, other obstacles and marginalization may present themselves and interfere and interrupt the rhythmic aura of life, in which one operates as an agent of opportunistic individualism and autonomy. One particular narrative, in *Mothers in Academia*, is a testament to not only rhetoric of choice or even private choices, but to “rhetoric of sacrifice.” Castañeda and Isgro (2013) define this as “what these women forfeited as a result of inequity beyond their control” (p. 229). Careers, schooling, financial independence are some of the commonalities women forfeit in exchange for staying home with children while those who either choose to work or have to work forfeit being home with their children, a more flexible schedule, and social networks. Castañeda and Isgro (2013) share the following personal narrative testimony that bears witness to the agonizing process of private choices and the rhetoric of choice:

Vanessa Adel is a mother of four young children and a graduate student working on her dissertation. Vanessa and her partner opened their hearts and home to four adopted children three of whom are blood related. She describes that their lives were pretty much set with their careers and children. Then one day they received a call from their social worker asking if they would consider adopting a fourth child who also happened to be a special- needs child and sister to two of their other children. After much deliberation, they decided that they could not adopt a fourth child especially one who's physical and developmental needs were unclear. However, after visiting and feeding the baby in the NICU, their love and compassion overruled the cons of taking on such responsibility. Vanessa was well aware that welcoming this fourth child into their lives would very likely interrupt if not halt her efforts of completing her dissertation. She had to ultimately choose between her position as a graduate student and future academic and motherhood. She asserts "In reality, the processes of our lives involve both assimilatory as well as resistant dynamics of thought and action" (p. 82). For some, her choice to parent a fourth child with special needs was seen as professional suicide. For others, giving up financial independence, autonomy and intellectual stimulation was seen as social suicide. Their decision as a lesbian couple to parent four children acts as both an assimilatory and resistance stance. On the one hand, they are engaged in a same sex marriage which acts as the agent of resistance whether or not it is socially, culturally, and religiously accepted

or legal and it is assimilatory in that they are enigmatically functioning as a nuclear family.

No one can ever ascertain what is right or convenient for others because in reality the position of being on the outside looking in doesn't warrant the positionality of operating from a rational and ideological point of view. Adel explains "When we operate in congruence with mainstream ideologies of family and identity, our notion of parenting and relationships across age and nurturance suffer from constricting ideas about what is possible for us as people in terms of embracing relationships" (p. 90). Her private choice in embracing this new identity and role defies not only the logic behind mainstream ideology of what the academic world defines as a successful academic, but also the dogmatic constraints set forth by such institutions to further oppress women in their quest for academic achievement and success. Therefore her success is not dependent on these ideologies but rather on her ability and willingness to combine her intellectual knowledge as a sociologist and her experiences as a mother, and use this material for future research and discussion on intersecting identities. This narrative lends itself to the discussion of much needed reform in the implementation of parent-friendly policies at institutions of higher learning and elsewhere. The truth is while in general things have gotten better for working women and mothers we are still a long way from coming full circle with all that encompasses our womanhood and motherhood.

Romantic notions of putting women in their place and making sure they stay there, preferably in the home, are still projected within high and mighty places and people. Valenti (2007) expressed her disdain of such ideals plaguing our society by stating that “traditional ideas about women working are more common than you’d think, and there’s a movement of powerful people out there making sure that their messages are getting across-to you” (p. 112). There are hidden agendas that try to sabotage women’s potential especially those women who have aspired to high positions or those who have infiltrated male dominated professions such as Wall Street. Most messages still project that women must choose between a career and motherhood and that they do not possess what it takes to make it in high power professions. Milligan reported that in May of 2013 Paul Tudor Jones, billionaire wall street trader and hedge fund manager, said the following to an audience at the University of Virginia: “ As soon as that baby’s lips touched that girl’s bosom, forget it...Every single investment idea...every desire to understand what is going to make this go up or down is going to be overwhelmed by the most beautiful experience...which a man will never share, about a mode of connection between that mother and that baby”(Wall Street’s Misogyny on Display, 2013, para. 4). Mr. Jones’ comments reinforce the double standard which still exists today, that men are the only ones who can have it all because only they possess capabilities of remaining focused post children. It seems to escape mainstream culture; that having it all be one male or female is largely in part to a network of supportive people (spouses, nannies, family members etc.) assuming key roles and duties that allow one to

succeed. These messages are just as demeaning, derogatory and sexist as those projected in the 1950s.

By the same token, assigning women to powerful positions speaks volumes as well...that women can balance work and family. While Mayer is considered elite within the corporate world and among women in general, she faced a dilemma in her life and utilized whatever she had available to her. She made it work for her by having the best of both worlds. While the majority of women may not have the same resources available to them myself included, we find our own balance. We look for ways of utilizing whatever we have available and making it work for us so that we can have the best of both worlds. Of course, most of us will not be building a full service nursery next to our offices or cubicles but we can arrange for our children to attend nearby daycare or schools. We can employ trustworthy individuals to come and take care of our children at home. We can entrust our children to trusted family members who are willing to step in and help care for our children so that we can pursue our dreams. This too is a testament to the determination that non-elite working women and mothers can balance work and family.

Balance is not just subject to integrating all aspects of one's life and making it work; it is also necessary in knowing how to filter negative concepts of what is considered desirable and beautiful and take a stand for what is right, manageable, and realistic in one's own world. Valenti (2007) noted that "in a world that makes it near impossible to feel up to par, liking yourself and the way you look is a revolutionary act" (p. 212). Women are subjected to messages on the importance of keeping themselves aesthetically desirable. Whether women work or they are stay-

at-home mothers the messages are just the same. The working woman faces the pressure of having to look presentable and professional at all times and the stay-at-home mother faces the pressure of always looking presentable. The key is to not allow aesthetics or people to determine our self-worth as women but rather recognize where the desire and need for these material things stem from. While women are constantly being bombarded by what our culture and society deems beautiful and desirable one must be grounded and remain grounded and recognize and more importantly accept that our self -worth is determined by the goals we set and accomplish for ourselves, the decisions and choices we make, and staying true to ourselves.

Positioning Theory

As human beings, we have tendencies to seek approval, acceptance and to a degree build our self-esteem around the validation that others provide us. We carefully maneuver ourselves in spaces to gain status and control. It is part of our psyche to assert certain positions when interacting with others. Positioning theory stems from the discipline of psychology and explains the phenomena of this human behavior. According to Harré and Fathali (2003), the premise of this theory is that “people negotiate meanings about their selves and social world by strategically positioning themselves throughout a dialogue” (p. 204). It is within this particular tenet of this theory that identities are constructed and are dynamic. Most of our time is spent in conversations. These conversations are driven by emotion, and depending on the emotion expressed we maneuver ourselves in the position of superiority or inferiority within the conversation depending on our perception. This is especially true when one perceives that the emotion and

direct positioning from the opposing party stems from moral judgement. These emotions and positions are dependent on the identities we hold. Identities can be considered intersectional in that there is not one sole identity or facet of ourselves but several that can come into play within an environment, situations, conversations, and people we surround ourselves with.

As human beings we live by a set of rules, norms, and conditions set by our family, which are set by society, which are set by culture. In any circumstance, we look to this tier for approval, for esteem, and for self-acceptance. In U.S. American culture, individualism is promoted over collective gain and appearance is used in forming identities and more often than not our identity is judged by our appearance. Cultural norms become amended and reconstituted when society undergoes changes. Each generation has a staple of norms that separates itself from the next. While the majority would like to preserve the inherent values and traditions that formed that particular era, the need for change, tolerance, and acceptance is equally present and equally powerful in the reconditioning and reexamining of such staples. Harré and Fathali (2003) stated that “culture specifies for its members goals, values, norms, and behaviors for all of its members in all circumstances” (p. 203). Identities are not solely determined by an individual but by his or her culture. The culture sets the tone for what will be culturally acceptable and conditions the majority accordingly. This collective identity is the backbone for personal identity and all other identities.

As individuals we may pride ourselves in the notion that we are well rounded individuals. We define this well rounded nature to the different opportunities, choices, and decisions we have

made in our lives and we define our personal identity accordingly. Harré and Fathali defined personal identity as “the sum of feelings, beliefs, and impressions that individuals have of themselves” (p. 198). These components of personal identity are the cornerstone behind many of the decisions we make and the behaviors we engage in. A clear understanding of one’s cultural collective identity creates a clear understanding of personal identity. Regardless of how many identities one may possess all of them are cross referenced with the cultural collective identity to keep one balanced. Culture is the cornerstone by which many people formulate their own sense of self. As human beings, we look to family members, friends, and members of our culture for approval and guidance to what is acceptable.

Self-identity grapples with the concept of our place in this world. As human beings we have the need to find our purpose in life and striving toward the goal of fulfilling that purpose. Self-esteem grapples with the concept of ones worth. Harré and Fathali (2003) defined self-esteem as “the feelings, affect, and emotion we have of ourselves” (p. 198). All of our dreams, goals and aspirations and the means by which we accomplish them builds self-esteem. In order for one to have healthy self-esteem, one must have already established a healthy personal identity which stems from a healthy collective identity, cultural collective identity specifically. The cultural collective identity again sets the tone for what is considered acceptable or unacceptable and sets the measure by which one can accomplish ones dreams, goals, and aspirations therefore helping build personal self-esteem.

One aspect of U.S. American culture is that it promotes individualism first and then the good of the collective. This way of being has been more culturally and socially accepted for men more so than women as our cultural and societal history has demonstrated. Throughout U.S. American history there have been shifts in the ideals that define us as a country and as a society. Within these shifts there came a change in what was perceived as acceptable especially when it came to women promoting their individualism over the good of the collective group. Even now there is continued debate over the subject and a delicate balance exists between intersectional identities. As a member of a culture, one may share characteristics that are shared by the entire group; according to Harré and Fathali (2003), they include “a shared history, shared values, shared goals, and a shared set of behaviors” (p. 200). It’s natural for one to make comparisons with other members of one's cultural group or subgroups for validation and for self-esteem. We make comparisons as a means of receiving feedback and keeping ourselves in check. When a member of a group challenges the norms and steps outside the acceptable boundaries set by the group, the individual then makes comparisons between his or her values, goals, and behaviors and those imposed by the collective group. This may cause the individual to experience a sense of disequilibrium and internal conflict and ones self-esteem may suffer to a certain extent because as members of our society we internalize all of what our culture and society imposes upon us.

Our lived experiences form viewpoints that may differ from others’ experiences and viewpoints. As individuals, we have different opinions and outcomes to what may be similar

situations even if we find ourselves in the same locatedness in terms of culture, time, or socio-economic status. These viewpoints stand from what feminist theorists Sandra Harding and Julia T. Wood call standpoint theory. Griffin (2012) claims that “ The social groups within which we are located powerfully shape what we experience and know as well as how we understand and communicate with ourselves, others, and the world” (p. 447). Standpoint theory correlates with positioning theory in that we possess a stance on worldly views based on our personal experience, which stems from the groups we find ourselves in, which in turn shape who we are and how we choose to navigate and communicate our way through social and cultural situations. Some groups may possess the means by which to marginalize others therefore substantiating the position of superiority and inferiority that is synonymous with positioning theory. The standpoint in which we find ourselves shapes our conversations as well. In conversations, we can marginalize the opposing party by imposing a sense of hierarchy based on lived experiences.

Within the context of this autoethnography, the aforementioned theoretical framework will be used to explain my own internal conflict that came with the loss of identity, the sacrifices involved in choosing motherhood over career, and my self-actualization as I accepted and embraced my new role and identity as the mother of a special needs child. Patricia Hill Collins asserts that “one’s lived experience can serve as a criterion for making meaning and producing knowledge” (as cited in Castañeda and Isgro, 2013, p. 9). In my quest for self-understanding, self-acceptance, self-nurturing and love, an affirmation and deliverance took place, in which I came to a realization and an epiphany of sorts that the sense of agency I held was that of my

thoughts, actions, and reactions; and that to a certain degree I was responsible for my own destiny. In choosing to write my testimonial, I am surrendering my vulnerability. I am empowering myself and others for there is power in testimony. Ellis and Bochner explain that “often our accounts of ourselves are unflattering and imperfect, but human and believable. The text is used, then, as an agent of self-understanding and ethical discussion” (as cited in Castañeda & Isgro, 2013, p. 10). My hope with this autoethnography is to open the door to much needed discourse on the intersectional identities of mothers with special needs children, and women from all walks of life who have found themselves in the vacuum of loss of career, loss of identity, and the challenges that come with being a woman, a wife, and a mother. Castañeda and Isgro (2013) assert that “The very act of telling personal narratives reveals how the self is constructed, disclosed, and implicated in a society that has mixed messages about women, mothers, and parenting” (p. 9). Therefore, feminist epistemology about womanhood, motherhood, mothering and career building will be examined and the research method of phenomenology will serve as a vessel by which knowledge will be constructed, and made sense of in an effort to make connections to our culture, to our society, and to others.

Chapter Four: Analyzing Personal Narrative Through the Scope of Feminist Theory, Epistemology, and Agency

Navigating Through Gendered Spaces

In the Latino culture, there is an understanding that women are to assume the role of procreators and caregivers. There is a cultural and genetic predisposition to perform according to our biology. There is no room or tolerance for questioning our predestined identity and role as a wife and mother. We are mandated by our genetic predisposition to adhere to the bylaws of performativity, therefore, subjugating our identity as Latina women. Latina women then have to navigate through gendered spaces carefully as not to dishonor the dominant cultural and familial norm.

In today's world, society, culture, family, and religion still influence and shape one's identity. Women still look to external sources for a sense of identity because much of our identity is based on how we look and our anatomical gendered ability and performance. Friedan (2001) rejected the notion that "Anatomy is woman's destiny, say the theorists of femininity; the identity of woman is determined by her biology" (p. 136). Identity and performativity then becomes an extension of the dominant societal and cultural belief. Friends and family are the immediate enablers and encourage the perpetual cycle of gender performance. No sooner has a couple made an engagement announcement when everyone is asking how soon they will start a family.

These descriptions really aren't so different for me. I grew up in a traditional Latino home with a workaholic father who by all means was a good provider. I never had what I wanted but I always had what I needed. My mother was a traditional Latina housewife in that she always had all meals prepared and served for my dad and us kids as well, always took care of the house work and laundry, and come never complained about any of it. She was always readily available to help with anything and everything. When I left for school in the mornings after having a nice hot breakfast, it was a comfort to know that she was home. It was a comfort to know that if I ever needed anything she was just a phone call away and she would be there momentarily. I thought everyone was as lucky as I was to have a stay-at-home mom. It's only now that I am a grown woman, wife, and mother that I truly comprehend my mother's sacrifice. My mother exemplified *marianismo*. Martínez (2002) explains *marianismo* as "Using the Virgin Mary as point of reference, marianismo defines women as obedient servants who "happily" sacrifice themselves for everyone's good...In marianismo, it is a woman's duty to be subservient and submissive, not to make decisions for herself" (p. 145). My mother was subservient to my father. She did everything he told her to do and she didn't question it or complain. She was always available if he needed her for anything. My father made all of the decisions for the welfare of the family, and her duty was to keep house, have a hot meal ready for him, and keep her mouth shut. The phrase seen but not heard in my home didn't just pertain to the children it pertained to her as well. She literally laid down her life for the rest of us. Whether it was ignorant, or part of a self-fulfilling prophecy the truth of the matter is she sacrificed her entire life so that I could have a better life.

Just as these vivid, fond memories bring joy and comfort to me there are those memories that bring me sadness and a sense of disillusionment. I can say that from a very young age I noticed the inequality and inequity that existed in their marriage. The inequality reared its ugly head in the form of my mother not having been afforded the same opportunities as my father, such as working outside the home and making money for herself or pursuing an education to better herself as an individual. It seemed to me that the opportunities were nonexistent because my father pretty much controlled every move my mother made or in this case didn't make.

Inequality manifested itself in the gender roles each of them fulfilled with my father being the bread winner and family accountant and my mother the long-suffering, doting wife and mother seen but not heard typical of the generational curse. Sure there were times when my mother hung out with the neighbors and had a cup of coffee and such or they stood under the tree in our front yard and chit-chatted for a while, but those visits were few and far between. When those opportunities did occur, she couldn't take her time and really enjoy the company for soon she would have to rush back inside to start lunch and what not. Then there was the child rearing to consider as well. From what I could remember and from what I was told by my older siblings my father was pretty much uninvolved. My mother carried the full load of the child rearing from diaper duty, to making clothes for everyone myself included, to disciplining us accordingly. I remember my mom attending most of my school activities such as plays, musicals, and talent shows but never my father. When we would get home, I'd find him sitting on the couch watching television wondering to myself why he didn't go after all he was just watching television. What

could possibly be so important that he couldn't go? The message it sent to me at a very early age was that I wasn't important. I didn't matter to him. What was important to me wasn't important to him. This went on well into my high school years. I just accepted it because that's just how things were at home. It was what it was. All that mattered to me was that my mom was there.

When it came to the decision making, again, my father was the authority on the decisions big or small. From what kind of car would be bought and who would drive it to whether or not my mom would have the luxury of having loose change and cash on her. I remember she never had any cash or loose change on her. My mother didn't have an opinion in any of the decisions and if she happened to have had an opinion it didn't matter. I remember instances when we would grocery shop and my mother would see something she wanted and place it in the cart, and my father would come around and take whatever she put in out of the cart and back on the shelf and give her a dirty look and tell her something menacing like "we're only getting what we need, not what we want" and no sooner had that comment been made when he would be putting a six pack of Coors beer in the cart. I don't think my mother knew any better. Maybe she did, but she could not do anything about it. She had no money of her own, no work skills, and no education.

As I got older, not only did I bear witness to the inequity that surrounded my mother, I understood it. I told to myself I would be damned if I was going to end up in an oppressed state of mind and being, marginalized by cultural and familial norms. I always believed that I would set out and accomplish my goals and have a better life and marriage than that of my parents.

However, I witnessed so much of my parent's tumultuous, volatile, and dysfunctional patterned

behavior that eventually I too fell into the same dysfunctional behavior. I fell into the snare of the *feminine mystique* and I too suffered in silence with ‘the problem that has no name’ and with unyielding determination decided that I would not solely exist for others. I would live for myself too and exchange an empty identity for one with substance.

Blinded by Cultural and Familial Norms

My life mirrored my mother’s in terms of following and accepting cultural and familial norms as a way of life for myself and that of my family to be. I felt a sense of obligation to fulfill my destiny as a wife and mother and to perform my duties as assigned. I needed to feel fulfilled and needed to justify a sense of purpose for my life. In my mind, I felt that this would come from being a wife and mother. At the time, there was no way of measuring what it would bring to my life. Whether or not I would actually feel a sense purpose and whether or not I found it fulfilling that remained to be seen.

As an adult child of parents who religiously lived by cultural norms, I have found that the precepts of cultural identity and specifically gender roles are often not seen as liberating but rather ensnaring especially for women. Like many cultures, Latino/a culture is deeply rooted in patriarchal and matriarchal identities and roles. These identities and roles are quintessential for the perception and interpretation of those on the outside looking in. For some Latinos, my parents included, it was all about the image. What would the neighbors think if my mother wasn’t in the kitchen preparing my father’s food before he left for work? After all, everybody who was anybody in our neighborhood pretty much knew everyone else’s schedule and such.

What would family and friends think and say if I, the youngest of six children and of five girls would have ended up pregnant out of wedlock? I was indebted to the family obligation and expectation of expanding the family tree by taking my place in the matriarchal family structure. Friedan (2001) emphasized the following: “It is my thesis that as the Victorian culture did not permit women to accept or gratify their basic sexual needs, our culture doesn’t permit women to accept or gratify their basic need to grow and fulfill their potentialities as human beings, a need which is not solely defined by their sexual role” (p. 133). Even though I had romantic notions of the woman I wanted to become, I really had no idea. The only thing I knew was that I was destined to become was a wife and mother. I knew I wanted to be a young mom and have plenty of energy to keep up with my child mostly because my parents were older when they had me.

By the time I came along, my parents were veteran parents and they really didn’t have much energy to keep up with me. They took good care of me of course but they didn’t play with me, or read to me or do any of the typical things most young parents do with their children. I hate to admit that as a young child I was embarrassed that my parents were older. All of my school mates’ parents were much younger than mine. I couldn’t help but feel ashamed at times my parents were so much older. It was important to me that my child not feel that way about me so I made sure I started young. When it came to academics, my parents were the typical older Latino generation that really wasn’t involved in academics. This isn’t to say that they didn’t care, but they would only get involved if I got in trouble at school aside from that the teacher and the school’s administration were the authority and their authority wasn’t questioned. I knew I wanted

to have a better understanding and it was very important to me that I understood my child's emotional needs, academic needs, and social needs.

As a young child I often felt misunderstood by my parents. They were from such a different generation and they really didn't understand the new generation. They often criticized and condemned a lot of what my generation was about. I think their criticism and hell, fire, and brimstone judgment was because of their ethnocentrism and being blinded by the *thou shall and thou shall not* of cultural, familial, and societal by laws. I didn't want to be the kind of parent that lost touch with reality and couldn't identify with my child or my child's generation. I was only nineteen and I had no higher education, no trade skills, and I knew I needed to find a job, but I was terrified to get out there in the great big world. I had been sheltered growing up and I was clueless as to how to assume the responsibility of a working adult so I decided that in order for me to occupy my space and time I needed to get married and start a family early. Friedan (2001) asserts that "Without any outside interests, a woman is virtually forced to devote her every moment to the trivia of keeping house" (p.34). I had nothing to offer except myself, and so six months after my high school graduation I married my high school sweetheart and six months later I became pregnant with my daughter. After her birth, I felt I had a sense of purpose. Now I had to stay home to take care of her. Now I wouldn't have to face the obligations of a working adult. All of my time would be dedicated to taking care of her and keeping house. This was satisfactory for a while. Soon the lack of money and the stress it caused our young family became a huge motivator for my looking for a job.

The only identity I knew of was that of wife and mother. I never gave myself the opportunity to grow as an individual and become my own person. I was performing my duties as assigned by a cultural and familial predisposition to fulfill my feminine destiny. I can honestly say that I strived to be the best housewife and mother I could possibly be. I wanted to please my husband and be a good mother to my baby girl. I too had his breakfast ready for him even if it was just a bowl of cornflakes, lunch packed, and set by the front door. When he arrived in the afternoon, I greeted him outside with the little one in tow and had dinner ready for him. This patterned routine went on for the better part of the marriage. I assumed the majority of the parental responsibility as well as the domestic responsibilities and duties.

Early in the marriage, money was scarce so I took on a part time job working at the parochial high school I graduated from as a before and after school provider. The pay wasn't much but it gave me a sense of contributing to our family and I enjoyed getting out of the house. After all, I was only nineteen when I married and twenty when I had my daughter much too young to be stuck at home. Her father (my ex-husband) worked at an automotive manufacturing company and we made arrangements for my parents to watch her while I worked. Eventually, I got a full time job as a receptionist at a local boot company where I worked for five years and we placed our daughter in a home daycare. The lady who operated the home daycare was a family friend so it was very comforting, convenient, and reasonably priced as well. As time went on, I discovered that there had to be more to life than cooking, cleaning, ironing and saying yes dear. I realized that I needed to do something but what?

Soon the boot company I was working for decided to close and so I found myself without a job. At the time, I qualified for unemployment. I decided to take one year off to figure out what I was going to do with the rest of my life. Private industry was great but there was no job security and the benefits weren't all that great and there wasn't much flexibility in hours, sick leave, and paid vacation. While these were the primary motivators, somehow I felt I needed to do something for me. It was just as important to me at the time to help provide for my family but I still felt the need to do something for me... just me but again what? At the time, my daughter started kindergarten and I started volunteering as a room mother. I discovered I had a knack with kids. I enjoyed the volunteer work and felt that this was something I could do and do well. During the summer, I inquired about an undergraduate degree in education and enrolled in the teacher prep program at El Paso Community College the following fall. I had always enjoyed school so heading back at the age of 26 didn't intimidate me in the least. My daughter was now in first grade and the challenge for me was that of balancing being a wife, mother, and full time student.

The Balancing Act of Motherhood and School Work

There has been a litany of literature written about work-life balance (e.g., Mothers in Academia). Even if one is stay-at-home mom or one is working full -time or part-time it requires balance. It requires a community effort to facilitate one's desire to progress in life. There is the societal backlash for whichever avenue one decides to travel. There is the endless criticism if one chooses to pursue higher education and build a career instead of starting a family or the

judgmental condemnation that stay-at-home mothers sometimes face because they are not making a worthy contribution to society. Some middle and upper class women have the good fortune of having husbands with large salaries and it affords them the opportunity to either pursue their dreams and interests or stay-at-home and look after the children and tend to their domestic duties. Unfortunately, not everyone marries well and is fortunate enough to pursue higher education interests. A lot of women juggle working part-time or full-time and tending to all things domestic as well as relying on family members and trusted friends to look after their children in order to pursue their scholarly and career interests. The following is a reflection of my experience and the struggles I faced in having to balance my undergraduate studies and personal life.

I had always assumed the primary care of our daughter so the responsibility of juggling everyone's schedule fell on my shoulders. Our days began early and ended late. The majority of the time I could be found doing homework late into the night after everyone had turned in. Every semester I made sure all of my classes were during the day and that I had plenty of time after my last class to pick up my daughter from school. While I wasn't a complete stay-at-home mother, I had this need to be there for her just like my mom had been there for me. I had this thirst to prove myself. I needed to prove that I could handle the load of a full time student and juggle the responsibilities of motherhood and marriage. So I meticulously chose classes that fit into everyone's schedule. I was lucky every semester's schedule seemed to work out like clockwork.

I attended three days out of the week, which left me a few days during the week and the weekends to get my homework and class projects done.

After school, we would come home and she would have a snack and decompress from her long day as I looked through her backpack. We would then sit down and get her homework done. By the time we were done with her homework, her father would be home and it would either be a family sit-down dinner or we would go out to eat. The latter was always easier. Then it was back home to get her bathed and ready for the following day. Once she and her father were fast asleep I would hit the books. I was much younger then so I had energy to burn. This routine went on for the better part of my undergraduate years. When I needed to work on any class projects that required extra time then arrangements were made for my daughter to stay with family members. With both of us enrolled in school full time, and my husband working full time it remained my responsibility to make sure everything ran like a well-oiled machine. I didn't mind it; in fact, I preferred it that way. I managed my daughter's schooling affairs as well as mine. I was in control of something valuable and meaningful and I spared no expense in terms of time constraints.

Education the Root of All Evil

When Friedan wrote *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963, some women had the option to pursue higher education. Many obtained a degree and found husbands and either entered the workforce or stayed at home. The education factor quickly became a double edged sword for some of these women. Some had their degree and didn't do anything with it in exchange for a

husband and children. Those who pursued and established a career felt a sense of guilt for establishing a career instead of opting for a family. Poduval and Poduval (2009) assert that “Social conditioning entails that the woman put home before career even though no expense has been spared in her education and upbringing towards being independent” (p. 72). It would seem that this luxury of obtaining higher education would prove to be bittersweet in my quest for financial independence. My home life was the number one priority and my undergraduate studies came second. There were moments when I wanted so badly to be selfish and self-centered and put my academic needs first; however, I was quickly overcome by feelings of guilt and shame. The following section chronicles the backlash I experienced in obtaining an undergraduate degree and the sense of satisfaction it brought to my life.

I can say that during my undergraduate study, I grew as an individual and made lifelong friends who I still keep in touch with all these years later. I learned not only academic material but life material. I evolved into a better version of myself. I emerged a confident woman, confidence I had lacked the majority of my life. I suddenly found myself questioning values, principles, and morals I had been taught. I dared to reevaluate some of what I had been taught and dared to question whether I still shared those opinions, that for the most part, were forced upon me. Opinions such as same sex marriage and mothers working outside the home changed from being against to being for. I came to believe that people should be free to express their love to whomever they wish. I believed that there was more to life than being a wife and mother.

My belief was that there was other life among being a wife and a mother not necessarily above being a wife and mother. I felt a sense of agency for the first time in my life. I was dutifully fulfilling my obligations as an adult to my family, but had lacked in taking any ownership of my thoughts, opinions, and actions. I felt liberated. Friedan (2001) wrote that “Some said it was the old problem - education: more and more women had education, which naturally made them unhappy in their role as housewives” (p. 66). During my course of self-discovery, my marriage faltered for I was no longer the young, naïve girl he had married. I remember one particular heated discussion in which he mentioned that I had changed. While I had always been a strong willed and opinionated person, I was still under the spell of family dynamics and politics. I realized I had no control over what other people thought, felt, or did, but for the first time in my life I had control of my thoughts, emotions, and actions and that was priceless. Little did I know that this epiphany would later serve as the backbone for many choices and decisions yet to come.

I eventually obtained my degree in education, and was offered a first grade position at an elementary school. At the time, my main preoccupation became to survive my first year of teaching and to see my daughter through her last year of elementary school. My marriage was hanging by a thread. In his opinion, my quest for education, self-improvement and monetary gain was the cause of the marriage coming to end. In my opinion, the marriage, early on, had been plagued with serious issues such as psychological, emotional and at times physical abuse and somewhere along the way I lost my humanity and fell out of love. I knew the marriage had run

its course and so on the last day of school I asked him to move out. He filed for divorce on my first day back the following school year. I experienced anxiety, as I embarked on a journey so new. This time, I would be at the helm, alone, facing the stormy seas of divorce, loneliness, and single parenthood with only my instincts to guide me.

My personal life was in shambles, but my professional life was about to take on a life of its own. I owed it all to the five long years it took me to obtain my undergraduate degree. Friedan (2001) claimed that “To do the work that you are capable of doing is the mark of maturity” (p. 357). Opportunities would soon find me and unlock the door to my full capacity and competence as a human being and as a woman. The maturity I grew into was that of becoming a whole person for the first time in life. I was in a place in life where I was embarking on a new journey filled with potential and promise. It was because of education and more education that I was able to secure a position with a local school district, which in turn provided me with benefits and financial independence. It was not my quest for education or receiving a degree that rendered me unhappy in my role as a housewife and mother. It was the shackles and chains of codependency, financial instability, and inequality that caused my unhappiness in the home and beyond. For the first time in my life, I would be on my own. My quest then became to redefine myself as a single woman and as a single parent.

Self-esteem: the Cornerstone of One's Personhood

Self-esteem is the backbone of one's existence. If one suffers from poor self-esteem, it reflects negatively in everything one says and does. Some women self-medicate the lack of self-

esteem in their life by collecting materialistic possessions in hope of filling the void and to compensate for their empty identity. Others adopt more drastic measures and turn to plastic surgery as a mean of establishing a sense of self-worth and identity. Unfortunately, we live in a society in which our identity is based in large part on our looks. There is incessant body shaming and women are constantly exposed to images in magazines and television of what society considers desirable. These false and unrealistic expectations affect women's self-esteem and self-image. My self-esteem took a hit during my marriage and following the divorce. I too bought into the false notion of false self-esteem. I discovered that one builds self-esteem by setting reasonable and attainable goals and remaining grounded and true to oneself under the worst of circumstances. The following describes my personal struggle with self-esteem and identity.

The loss of identity, at times, was more than I could bare or so it felt. For sixteen years, I had been with this man and the only life I knew was that of being a wife and mother. There were times during my own identity crisis when my chest physically ached and I felt I was going to die from the emotional pain. All I knew was that I could be whomever I chose to be. The question then became who do I want to be? During my transition period, I sought professional help from a therapist who was a god send. Through talk therapy, I learned to discover, explore and embrace a better version of myself. I learned that therapy is about understanding the self. For a long time, I had walked around with blinders assigned to that one destination of marriage and motherhood with no hope or expectations of living my life to any given capacity outside of marriage and motherhood. I felt fortunate having been a wife and a mother. I always knew that I wanted and

needed more than Friedan (2001) stated that “Self-esteem in woman, as well as in man, can only be based on real capacity, competence, and achievement; on deserved respect from others rather than unwarranted adulation” (p. 435). As I began this new chapter in my life, I began to rebuild my self-worth by not focusing on what had gone wrong, and dwelling on a failed marriage but rather on focusing my attention and efforts on what was going right in my life. I was building a career and was financially able to support myself and my daughter. I was now a successful elementary school teacher making a difference in the lives of my students. I was engaged in meaningful and fulfilling work. I was building professional relationships in which ideas were always being bounced back and forth in an effort to create better learning environments for our students. I was building social relationships, which mostly consisted of fellow colleagues, but nonetheless served as an outlet for building social trust.

As time went on, I became more self-confident in my professional abilities and my personal life and I won the respect of my colleagues, friends, and family. More importantly, I won the respect of my then teenaged daughter. It was important to me to raise her to be self-confident, capable, and self-sufficient. It was important to me to lead by example. I am convinced I became a better parent to my daughter because I was a happy person. The challenge then became finding that delicate balance between being a single parent and a working mom.

As an elementary school teacher, the hours were somewhat family friendly. There’s a misconception that teacher hours are like banker hours. I still took work home with me every evening and on weekends, but for the most part the hours and ten month school year calendar

worked well for us. I made arrangements for my daughter to attend the middle school and high school that was five minutes and within the feeder pattern of the elementary school I worked at. This made it very easy and convenient for drop-offs and pick-ups, as well as any other time I might need to visit her school. Most of the time, my daughter was preoccupied with extracurricular activities and sports so it made it that much easier for me to stay late at work. It was imperative to model for my daughter that the ending of a marriage and family life as we once knew it didn't mean she and I were not a family. I made it a point to remain a teachable person myself so that I could lead by example. I refused to run into another relationship for comfort and didn't date for quite a while. I needed to get us through the grieving process without the influence of a love interest. We needed to heal as mother and daughter. I continued therapy for many years to come. I wanted to teach her that it was okay to seek help from a professional. It was not a sign of weakness but rather of strength. Therapy was my escape, and the extracurricular activities and sports were her escape. During this transition time, I joined a local gym and used exercise as part of the healing process. I also wanted and needed to teach my daughter that while I loved her very much my entire life wasn't going to revolve around her. I realized that it was okay to be a little selfish and reserve some time for myself. At the beginning of every month, I would sit down and pay all the bills and budget the rest of my paycheck. With the divorce, came a new budget that was very tight. I made a decent salary and the little bit of child support her father provided kept us a float, but we were still living pay check to pay check.

Thankfully, we never went without. While we did not have what we necessarily wanted,

we did have what we needed. This would be the pattern for years to come. It was difficult raising a teen-aged daughter alone. Her father moved on and wasn't around much so the majority of the parental responsibility fell on my shoulders, and thankfully so. She needed stability and a sense of normalcy especially with the stigma society so poignantly places on children that are the product of a broken home, but certainly not a broken spirit. As a single parent, my maternal instinct was to continue to set a good example for her and hope that she would remain grounded and eventually find her own voice.

In Pursuit of Higher Education

In today's society, higher education is a must. People pursue higher education for many different reasons. It can afford better socioeconomic status, and it can open the door to better opportunities that may result in a healthier, and more comfortable life style. Education holds the key to knowledge and knowledge holds the key to empowerment. The old cliché statement of "knowledge is power" enables the potential for control and marginalization of others. Some individuals use the knowledge they have gained to keep from being controlled and marginalized by others. For me, pursuing higher education held the opportunity of gaining new found knowledge, the potential to make more money in the future, and the sense of empowerment. The following speaks of my personal journey in pursuing a master's degree in communication.

A short time passed, and in my quest to become a better well rounded woman, I decided to pursue a master's degree. I decided I was going to pursue a Master of Arts in communication. I came to this decision because of a speech class that I took as an undergraduate student at El

Paso Community College. I had a wonderful professor and in this class I discovered a love for public speaking so much so that by mid-semester I signed up for a speech tournament. By the end of the semester, I had earned an A for the course and my professor encouraged me to pursue a master's in communication. I decided I was not going to take out any more student loans and so I decided to pay for graduate school out of pocket. At the time, the University of Texas at El Paso, did not offer a monthly installment plan so I contacted New Mexico State University, which did, and so I began the enrollment process.

I enrolled in the communication studies graduate program at NMSU during the fall semester of 2005. It was very challenging having to commute once a week to NMSU. For one, I needed approval from my campus administrator to be able to leave right after school, and then there was the long commute to Las Cruces, the three hour class, the long commute back home, and then picking up my daughter from either my sister's or my brother's house and then heading home. I attended NMSU in the fall of 2005 and Spring 2006. Over the summer, I heard UTEP was offering a monthly installment plan so I made arrangements to enroll at UTEP in the spring of 2007. It was a challenge juggling everything and everyone. There was the pressure of remaining a focused and an effective teacher while meeting the campus and district mandates and expectations. There was the brutal reality of being a single parent and the responsibility of remaining an involved parent. There was the need and thirst to prove myself as a graduate student and meet the demands of the heavy coursework. Friedan (2001) stated "But women in America are not encouraged, or expected, to use their full capacities. In the name of femininity

they are encouraged to evade human growth” (p. 437). I was determined to not let anything or anyone get in the way of my ambition. I was determined to better myself professionally, intellectually, and attain better financial stability. I had an obligation first and foremost to myself to continue to evolve as an individual, and it gave me a sense of satisfaction and fulfillment because this was a decision I made. This was something I was pursuing on my own. I learned a lot about myself. I learned to find balance between work, graduate school, and my personal life. It wasn’t easy, but it was doable.

I often thought that if my life had been different in so many other ways would I have embarked on this new journey of intellectual stimulation and growth. My guess is perhaps not. If the course of my life had been a different one then perhaps I would have missed out on the opportunity of pursuing a M.A. in communication. At the beginning of graduate school, I became a bit discouraged because I was an elementary school teacher compared to my classmates, who for the most part, were former communication undergraduate students pursuing their master’s in communication. I eventually got through the course work with the help of my family who were more than willing to step in and help out with my daughter. They assumed the responsibility of picking her up from school and feeding her dinner and making sure she did her homework. Their support made it possible for me to meet my graduate school obligations.

After completing the required coursework at UTEP, I decided to write a thesis in order to complete degree plan requirements. I decided to write about domestic violence based on my personal experience and at the time, the Chris Brown and Rihanna story had just been released. I

was soon engaged in the preliminary steps in writing my thesis. At the time, I was soon approaching my late thirties and my daughter would be graduating soon from high school. I found myself in a really great place in life. However, I suddenly found myself wondering if I would ever settle down again and I entertained the thought of the possibility of having another child. I had always wanted a little boy in addition to my daughter, but it never happened. I had dated a few men, but none of the relationships were ever serious. Somehow, I found myself not only entertaining the thought of having another child but actually yearning to be in a nuclear family, which made me feel badly because I still considered my daughter and myself to be a family.

It was almost as if I had already begun to feel the empty nest syndrome. I anticipated finishing the thesis project, my daughter graduating high school and heading off to college, and then what? As time went on, I became more preoccupied with work, graduate school and seeing my daughter through her last two years of high school. I felt as though I was mentally and emotionally surrendering to the idea of motherhood all over again. I couldn't quite figure out why all of a sudden it became important to me. I figured it had a lot to do with my age. I had a career now and steady income with great benefits. I hoped that eventually I'd meet someone and remarry. After all, some couples seal the deal with the procreation of the best part of themselves so why not me...again? I did meet someone. This someone happened to be a man I already knew, a fellow colleague. He and I had worked at the same elementary school for several years and we were friends. I transferred out of the school during the fall of the 2008/2009 school year, so I

lost contact with him. I happened to be vacationing in Los Angeles over spring break when he called me on St. Patrick's Day. I remember looking at the unfamiliar number as the call was coming in and wondering to myself who it could be. A minute later the call came through again, and this time I decided to answer. It was him. We talked for a short while and he asked me to give him a call when I got back into town and so I did.

We had our first date the day I returned from L.A. and we started seeing each other. After dating for several months, we decided to move in together. We had entertained the thought of having a child together and no sooner had we moved in together when we found ourselves pregnant. Both of us were financially stable and our teaching careers were well established so like any other couple we looked forward to the wonderful changes that were in store for us. However, our baby bliss was soon overshadowed by the baby blues as I was diagnosed with threatened miscarriage during the first trimester, and I was placed on complete bed rest for a month. We were terrified of losing the baby that we wanted so very much. Little did we know that this was a prelude to what was to come in the future. After being confined to bed rest for a month, I was cleared by my doctor and I returned to work and finished the school year without further incident. Over the summer, we prepared for the arrival of our son, and made tentative plans for the care of our son. Our plans consisted of my taking the standard maternity leave (12 weeks) allowed by the school district, and then placing him at a home daycare near the elementary school I worked at once I headed back to work full time. My husband would head

back to work and keep his coaching positions and stipends as this would help us with the new expenses.

Everything up until that point seemed to be working in our favor. The new school year had just started and I was determined to work until my due date at the end of September. Once again I suffered yet another pregnancy complication. I was at my doctor's appointment for a routine checkup and ultrasound. The ultrasound revealed I was losing amniotic fluid not to mention I had pre-eclampsia, which posed a danger to myself and my unborn son. My doctor then suggested I check into the hospital and prepare myself for an early delivery as early as the following day. I was 37 weeks along when all of this happened and although the circumstance seemed a bit grim again there was the excitement of meeting our son that much sooner. We checked into the hospital at midnight and they induced labor; however I failed to dilate and I was facing a delivery via C-section, which later would prove to have saved my son's life.

Chapter 5: Embracing a New Found Identity

Test of Womanhood

Intersectional identities require acceptance and delicate balance. We live in a society that prides itself in the mantra of wearing many hats and openly encourages individualism. It can become competitive among women and mothers in their quest for superiority as a super-mom, and it can become frustrating and exhausting keeping up with the false super-woman image. The pressure can make it increasingly difficult for one as woman to whole heartedly embrace intersectional identities especially when it involves embracing the identity of mothering a special-needs child. Society has made some strides in trying to understand the special population of special-needs children and their parents, however, there still exists a stigma and it is this that breeds isolation and loneliness making it especially difficult to come full circle and embrace this intersectional identity. The following describes the unexpected diagnosis we received, and the emotional upheaval that ensued following the birth of my son.

September 9, 2010

I gave birth to my son, R.J., via C-section, at 9:37 p.m., September 9, 2010. After a difficult pregnancy, his father and I were elated that he had finally arrived. We had anticipated his arrival with much joy, love, and excitement. We had spent all summer nesting, preparing his room, shopping for toys, gadgets and baby gear. We considered ourselves blessed and lucky to have him. After all, we almost lost him to threatened miscarriage early on in the pregnancy. The threatened miscarriage and pre-eclampsia experience riddled us with anxiety, fear and apprehension. However, hearing him cry for the first time gave us a sense of relief; he was alive

and well. The following day his pediatrician came by and gave him a clean bill of health. Later that same day, I noticed his lips were purple as well as his feet and he didn't seem hungry. Two days after giving birth, we were given devastating news that no parent should ever have to hear.

Saturday, September 11, 2010

After a restless night with my son R.J., the morning shift nurse came in to check on me and my son and she asked me if I had noticed anything different with his skin color. I answered that he seemed darker skinned overnight. She looked him over and told me she didn't like his color and that she was taking him to the NICU to have him checked. I had noticed through the night that something wasn't right. He wasn't eating, sleeping and he was crying a lot not to mention I had noticed his feet and lips were purple. I voiced my concerns to the night nurse but my concerns were dismissed. She explained that sometimes newborns are still in a sleepy slumber and that it could take up to 36 hours for them to wake from it. I still felt something was wrong. I didn't bother to wake up my husband because he was fast asleep. The morning nurse had not returned yet with R.J. and his father and I became concerned and proceeded to the nurse's station to get information. When we approached the desk, my son's pediatrician came around the corner, pulled us aside and told us our baby was very sick. His mouth was so dry he could barely speak. I knew then that it was bad. He told us that they were running tests to determine exactly what was the matter with R.J. and that he would keep us posted as information became available with that said we returned to our room. A short while later a technician came in along with the pediatrician, and a cardiologist. When I turned to look at the cardiologist, and I saw the look on his face I knew it was worse, but nothing could have prepared us for what we were about to hear. By this time, we were sitting in chairs facing the cardiologist, pediatrician and ultra sound technician all of them with a grim look on their face.

The cardiologist then proceeded to explain to us the life threatening diagnosis of hypoplastic left heart syndrome, which meant the left ventricle never formed basically he was born with half a heart. He then proceeded to draw a diagram to further explain the diagnosis along with the options (series of three heart surgeries) that were available to save our son's life. My husband and I remained quiet as we struggled to process the devastating news. While I remained calm, on the inside I was overwhelmed with fear unlike anything I had ever experienced in my life. While I understood the significance of the impending surgeries, it offered little comfort and hope that my son would survive. Soon they called us into the NICU. I walked in, saw my beautiful baby boy in an incubator, tubes everywhere, hooked up to monitors, and clinging to life. This tiny little thing had no idea what was happening to him and what was to come. I stood next to him and started to talk to him as if nothing were the matter. I told him how much I loved him, and how happy we were that he was finally here. I reminded him how he and I had already been through a lot together. I told him he needed to be brave and strong just like he had been during the threatened miscarriage. Suddenly, an inner peace beyond anything I could earthly explain came over me and somehow I knew he was going to be fine. It wasn't to say that we weren't in for the fight of our lives. Later that evening, the medical team from Dallas arrived and they prepared and stabilized R.J. for air travel. By this time, his father had gone home to pack a bag and was ready to travel with R.J. My doctor was not willing to release me on account of my C-section. They brought R.J. out to the hallway so I could see him and say good bye. Everyone had gathered around. The strange thing though was that even though everyone was there I somehow focused only on R.J. and it seemed as if no one was there. I sang to him through the incubator openings as everyone looked on including the medical team members that surrounded my son's incubator. I sang a silly little song, a jingle I had made up during the

pregnancy. I wanted with all my soul to reassure him that he would be okay. I figured if he heard something familiar something I sung to him throughout the pregnancy it would somehow comfort him, it would somehow comfort me.

I stood there motionless as I saw the medical team make their way down the hallway with my son. It was surreal like a scene from a lifetime movie only it was real. My husband grabbed his bag and we hugged and gently kissed each other good bye. I watched him as he quickly followed the medical team out. I stood there alone. I didn't know what in the world was going to happen to my son. Soon family and friends said their good byes and I retreated back to my room. My oldest sister and a close friend and colleague of mine decided to stay a while longer. They encouraged me to eat and get some rest. I sat at the edge of the bed in disbelief, in confusion, in fear of the unknown. Soon my friend left and my sister asked me if I wanted her to stay the night. A part of me wanted to be alone and the other part of me was terrified of being alone. My sister left momentarily to pack an overnight bag. I was left alone in my room. I didn't know what to do with myself. I wondered what would happen to my son. I wondered how soon I would be reunited with him and my husband. I wondered what the future had in store for us. I wondered if he would live or die. I wondered what would become of me, of us if he didn't survive. I decided to take a shower. I stood there in the shower and I sobbed. I felt every emotion possible all at the same time. I felt fear, disbelief, confusion, and anger. After talking to my husband upon his arrival at the hospital in Dallas, I forced myself to hang on to the hope I heard in my husband's voice. I forced myself to believe in my husband's reassurance that our son was being cared for by some of the country's most reputable doctors and cardiologists. I then forced myself to get some sleep.

A few days later my doctor released me, and I was able to travel to Dallas and be reunited with my husband and son. The next two months would prove to be the most difficult of my life as I spent them living at the children's hospital learning from the doctors and nurses how to care for my critically ill newborn son. I remember one particular afternoon I was looking out the window looking at the traffic down below and I couldn't help but wonder if this was what the rest of our lives would be like, constantly in and out of hospitals. It suddenly hit me. My life, our life would never be the same. I had become a mother all over again except this time it involved embracing a new identity as the mother of a special needs child who I would have to care for the rest of his and my life however long that would be. I had birthed a perfectly healthy child and now I birthed a child with a major life threatening heart condition. How could I have the identity of being the mother of a healthy child and also that of a critically ill child? What did one identity have to do with the other and why would it matter?

Womanhood Vs. Motherhood

The binary expectations of womanhood and motherhood carry distinct roles and identities. While these roles and identities can be interchangeable both can be an island unto themselves with respective ideologies. The societal and cultural expectations impose a set of standards that can perpetuate a vicious cycle of self-doubt and criticism. Norms infringe upon women a set of standards and expectations and one is expected to adhere and to assimilate to the dominant cultural and societal belief of what each encompasses. Often, failure to obey such norms brings heavy criticism by those on the outside looking in. The following describes the turmoil and fear I experienced in assuming my new role and identity of a special-needs child. I wanted desperately to perform accordingly.

My journey in learning how to care for a medically dependent child would test my patience, endurance, confidence, and my resilience. After a lengthy two month stay at the hospital, we were finally released and sent home. Once we were home and settled in, we solidified ourselves as a family and reality sunk in a bit deeper as we embraced our new normal. Now the true test would come in the form of how I would handle myself around my family members, friends and former colleagues and how I would react to their expectations in terms of my womanhood and new found motherhood. Would they judge me as a woman or as a mother? Arendell (2012) contends that “The very idea of “womanhood” is often synonymous with “motherhood,” with the experiences and identities of each category presumed to be coterminous” (p. 21). After all, I was now in a different category so to speak. It dawned on me that somehow people were going to treat me differently because I was now a mother of a special-needs child and that bothered me. It bothered me because to me as far as I was concerned I wanted to believe I was the same person but I wasn’t. In a short amount of time, I allowed myself to become bitter and angry so much so that I became self-destructive. My self-destruction was projected mainly toward myself not in physical self-harming ways but more mentally and emotionally. The tremendous responsibility of caring for a medically fragile newborn and having to care for him alone was more than I could bear mentally, emotionally and physically. For the next eight months I would care for him solely. My husband returned to work and did the best he could to relieve me in the evenings and weekends but for the most part I shouldered the responsibility. My new normal consisted of scheduling all of my son’s doctors’ appointments and therapy sessions with speech, physical and occupational therapists. I had the daunting responsibility of providing my son minute-to-minute care. I had a new job so to speak and I was unhappy with it because it didn’t seem satisfying and fulfilling enough. I struggled with the concept of not

feeling like I had a sense of purpose even though the sole purpose of was keeping my son healthy and alive. The truth was that I didn't feel a sense of purpose because of how I chose to react to the situation. I lost a sense of what was truly important because of social and cultural stigmas that I allowed to plague my mind and cloud my judgement. My sense of identity crisis was compounded by the reality that soon I would have to make a life altering decision. I would need to decide if I was going to have a skilled nurse take care of my child for part of the day and then rely on family members to care for my son the remainder of the time so I could return to work full time as an elementary teacher or was I going to opt to stay at home with my son. At the time, I was out on FMLA (Family Medical Care Act) and would need to return or resign on the anniversary of my applying for FMLA.

To be or not to be... a matter of choice?

Women sometimes don't have a choice in whether or not they want to work or stay home with their children. Often one's gender, will be the deciding factor in the matter. The choice may be a conscientious one; however, biology and gender performativity over rule the self and one is then forced by nature to conform and perform duties as assigned. One may not opt to stay home for fear of losing oneself in the role and identity of wife and mother and may very well be forced to by unforeseen circumstances can very well dictate the course one will take. The loss of identity can catapult one into an abyss of confusion, despair and denial. The following describes my personal agony in having to resign from my teaching position which consequently resulted in identity loss and crisis.

After much agonizing pressure and consideration, I opted to resign from the school district and become a full time stay-at-home mom. I remember driving down to central office and having horrible anxiety about having to fill out all the exit paperwork. I wanted to be anywhere

but there. I wished I had someone else's life, anyone's but mine. I wished none of this had happened but it did. I wished there was another way but there wasn't. I wished I didn't have to make this decision but I had to. As I left central office, tears streamed down my face because it was official I had now lost the identity of being an elementary school teacher. As I drove home, I can't say I was thrilled at the idea of staying home full-time. I wasn't happy about losing my financial independence, my benefits, the camaraderie of colleagues and having to solely rely on my husband. Schlachet claims that "The word "choice" has been used, in the context of women working at home versus working outside the home, as a euphemism for unpaid labor, with no job security, no health or vacation benefits and no retirement plan. No wonder men are not clamoring for this 'choice'" (as cited in Valenti, 2012, p. 145). I realized that this job came with no pay, no benefits, no vacation time or personal days, no summers off. I did however love my son dearly and deep down I knew this was the right decision and that the sacrifice I was making was to keep him alive and well and that no career or identity or label or role was as important as caring for him. I did it because I loved my son. The pressure I faced in making this decision was insurmountable to say the least. This was a choice I was forced to make by unforeseeable circumstances.

Isolation

Stay-at-home mothers are home alone with their children. They may have contact with other mothers when they arrange play dates for their children, but the majority of the time they are left to their own devices. This isolation can breed feelings of frustration, resentment and confusion. We are social beings, and as such, we seek to connect with others in an effort to find common ground, and form bonds. It can be a lonely world. Husbands are busy building their careers and stay-at-home mothers are doing their best to produce future productive citizens. We look to one another for validation as human beings and as mothers. With time, the isolation chips

away one's self-esteem, self-image, and identity. The following speaks of my own isolation and loss of identity.

As time went on, I grieved not necessarily what came to be but more for what was not to be. I couldn't help but wonder how my son might grow up feeling lonely and alone. At the time there was still so much uncertainty regarding the future...regarding my son's future. After all, my son would never know what it would be like to not be a non-cardiac child. My son would never know what it would be like to not be in and out of hospitals or what it would be like to not have to go to this doctor for this and that doctor for that. I knew that my son's future success in accepting his condition was dependent on how my husband and I chose to deal with it. I knew that we would have to set a good example for him to follow yet it was difficult to come full circle and accept what had happened. Stone (2007) wrote that "Because identity is a two-way street (as much a function of others' perceptions and what they play back to us as it is our own self-conceptions and how we present ourselves), isolation compounded the loss of identity with which women were grappling" (p. 147). I was having a difficult time transitioning into the identity of being a stay-at-home mom let alone having to accept a new identity of stay-at-home home and the identity of a mother of a medically dependent baby.

One particular evening, I was feeling sorry for myself because of how lonely and alone I felt and the isolation that came with my new normal. As I sat on the edge of the bed watching my son sleep in his basinet, it occurred to me that I was being extremely selfish. I wasn't the one who was born with hypoplastic left heart syndrome. I wasn't the one who struggled to breathe and eat. At that moment, I realized how foolish and inconsiderate I had been behaving. Yes, I felt lonely and alone mostly because of the isolation. I no longer had the identity of a teacher. I failed to see that I was important...important to the most significant person in the whole wide world,

my tiny, fragile little baby boy. I looked at my son and I apologized to him and told him that I loved him more than anything. I even shared with him how lonely and alone I felt and that somehow someday we would get through this together. I struggled and I wavered in attempts to overcome my sense of loneliness and isolation. Some days were better than others and eventually I accepted that isolation would be a part of it and that with time all things would get better. I had to keep reminding myself that life goes on and that it was okay to feel this way under the circumstances and that it was okay for everyone else's life to continue on as well and that brighter days would come in the future.

I felt cut off from the world I once knew. I was no longer in professional development meetings exchanging ideas with fellow colleagues. I wasn't participating in grade level meetings and bouncing off ideas for lessons plans. I was at home planning dinner menus and strategically mapping out my errand outings to make the most of time and gas. No one ever called. No one really ever came by. A friend of mine did come by once and we had lunch but only once. A former colleague also came by but only once. We chatted for a bit. It was as if I ceased to exist especially to those I once considered my friends. There was no interesting exchange of conversations with anyone. The only conversations were those I had with my son's therapists and doctors. The conversations with my husband in the evenings mostly revolved around my son's progress. The conversations were more of a daily report. The conversations became hum drum, redundant and routine. If and when I would run into someone they would always ask about my son. I was grateful that they were concerned enough to ask about him and again the conversations became stale. It wasn't that I didn't enjoy talking about my son especially the wonderful progress he was making it was just that I needed so desperately to talk to someone about anything other than my son.

I felt devalued in that the only conversations people were willing to engage in with me revolved around my circumstances. I didn't want my identity as a human being and as a woman and mother to be solely based on a diagnosis. It was as if the old me ceased to exist and now there was a reincarnated other self with only one identity mother of a hypoplastic child. I felt people as though people lost respect for me because I was no longer in their "inner circle." I wasn't a part of the "bless us four no more club." I recognized I was doing the most important job in the world caring for my son. Sometimes I felt I was working really hard to believe that statement. Others, including my husband, reiterated that statement as well and I wondered if they believed it to be so. I realized I wanted validation and respect for my work as a stay-at-home mom especially from my husband. I think it was because it is human nature to want and need to be validated. We want someone to tell us we are doing a good job at this or that. I feel this is so because as human beings we strive to please others and we seek approval from others as well. With time and a lot of struggle in between I found that validation. It was in my son's progress however small and slow. I decided I needed to focus on other things and people and as a result, when time permitted I would go online and read trending stories especially those having to do with other mothers of special needs children. My purpose was twofold: one to engage in conversations with my husband that dealt with other people and their struggles and to focus on someone else's hurt and woes not for a sadistic purpose but more so to force myself to focus on other people's hurt and pain and to remind myself that there was a world bigger than my pain and sorrow. It was both inspiring and therapeutic.

Keeping House

Many stay-at-home mothers often complain that there is little to no mental stimulation in staying home. There are no intellectually stimulating conversations and it doesn't take much

thought on how to keep house. Often times, some of the conversations among stay-at-home moms when they do congregate with other women revolve around their children, the art of keeping house and relationships. While the conversations provide an outlet and an opportunity to vent and escape the monotonous routine of keeping house, they provide no intellectual stimulation. Some stay-at-home mothers, more often than not have no outside interests of their own and with no sense of purpose outside the home they are forced to occupy their time in keeping house. If they conduct business outside the home it most likely has to do with the children, or business that benefits the household. The following is an overview of my battle with isolation.

As a stay-at-home mom, I can say that there is little to no mental stimulation for me. My life changed in an instant and I went from having meaningful conversations with fellow colleagues to having limited contact with adults other than my husband, therapists and doctors. It's not to say that the conversations I had with my husband regarding our son weren't meaningful as they were very important for my son's wellbeing. The conversations lacked in any intellectual stimulation. I missed the camaraderie that I had with my teacher friends. I missed the structure and rewards that came with my position. At the end of the school year, as I assessed my students, I saw their academic growth. I was proud of them. I was proud of myself and my effort in helping them achieve their own success. I wondered if I would feel the same sense of accomplishment and satisfaction in witnessing my son achieve his milestones in his own time. My job was to make sure that he continued to gain and meet his target weight of eleven pounds in time for his second open heart surgery at six months old.

While the house was a mess the majority of the time with dishes piled up and mountains of laundry, by the end of the week my son's needs were always met no matter what.

Freidan (2001) argued that “Without any outside interests, a woman is virtually forced to devote her every moment to the trivia of keeping house” (p. 34). As he thrived, we had more good days than bad and on those occasions I tended to my domestic duties none of which provided me any mental stimulation. It was the same routine and well quite boring. It was not rocket science figuring how to fold baby clothes or how to remove soap scum, mold and mildew from the bathroom tile. There was no mental stimulation whatsoever and a sense of uselessness and sadness would come over me because there was not anything meaningful in the trivia of keeping house. In the early morning, I would hear the early commuters heading to work and I wished I were going too.

My only outings were to doctors’ appointments and therapy sessions for my son. Some days when the post-partum depression was in full force I literally felt the walls caving in on me. I felt a desperation unlike anything I had ever experienced and it felt I was going to go mad momentarily. There were days when I thought I could feel my brain turning into mush from lack of cognitive stimulation. My son needed minute to minute care, and he was my sole responsibility. Some days I barely had enough time to shower and eat. While I didn’t have time to do the regular things that stay at home moms did, I did have plenty of time to think and unfortunately I didn’t always use that time wisely to think of positive things. There were moments when I did experience joy especially on occasions when my son did something that a non-cardiac baby would do like babble, coo, smile, and drink from a bottle instead of being fed through his gastric nasal tube. Those moments were monumental in his development and his daily journey to reach his developmental milestones. In all the emotional upheaval, I never wavered in loving my son. I never wavered in being grateful that he had survived so much all ready. I was in a constant state of tug of war with an internal conflict battling the inner demons

that plagued my mind and emotions. These battles lessened with time. The internal conflict lessened and was replaced with an internal monologue as I coached myself through some of the worst moments. Eventually my son progressed and got better and when I felt that he was in a good place I decided to continue my work on my thesis, which provided me a lot of mental stimulation, satisfaction and a sense of purpose outside my domestic duties, obligations and responsibilities.

Working mom vs. Stay-at-home mom

Women can and do undermine other women and mothers in an attempt to gain a false sense of superiority over them. One can be the working mother trying to undermine the position of the stay-at-home mother by maintaining a position of superiority over her by manipulating words in an effort to subdue her. And vice versa, one can be the stay-at-home mom undermining the position of the working mother by manipulating words and evoking feelings of guilt and shame on the working mother for not having the opportunity to stay home and raise her own children. The following is a description of a conversation which took place between me and a former colleague. Each of us manipulated words in an attempt to maintain a sense of superiority over the other.

Even though Betty Friedan wrote *The Feminine Mystique* in the 1960s, a stigma still exists in this day and age on women who choose to stay at home by choice or by circumstance, and for those who choose to work outside the home. Steiner (2006) admits the following: “But what I know for certain, because I see it almost every day from each side of the battlefield, is that the two groups misunderstand and envy each other in the corrosive, fake-smiling way we women have perfected over the eons” (p. x). The mommy wars are still in full force. In my experience, women are the only army that tear each other down, shame each other’s parenting style and

criticize one another incessantly over physical beauty, monetary gain and the possession of material possessions or lack thereof. I couldn't remember the last time I was complimented by a woman or the last time I was told I was a good mother by another mother or woman for that matter. I couldn't remember the last time I complimented another woman for being a good mom.

One particular incident and conversation came to mind. This event happened in the early years of my staying home with my son. I believe it was a short while after we got back from our two month stay in Dallas following my son's first open heart surgery. A former colleague and friend of mine whom I had known for quite a while and who happened to be my mentor teacher during my student teaching at the elementary school. She phoned and asked if she could pay me and my son a visit. I said yes of course as I was in need of some company and adult conversation. I knew that we would talk about my son and that was fine but I also knew that we would engage in some adult conversation as well. I welcomed her visit. When she arrived, my son happened to be napping in the den so we sat there to chat. We talked about my son and his progress and we talked about work and school stuff. The conversation was pleasant thus far and then we hit a bump on road. I worked with her for at least six years and I felt I knew her pretty well, as she was the grade level chair.

As our conversation continued she mentioned she never would have imagined that I would have become a housewife. After all, I had been so independent. "A housewife?" I thought as I sat there wondering what this comment was really about and not really appreciating the pretentious and condescending tone that I perceived to be flowing out of her. I was afraid to articulate such a word in our conversation as I felt that if I agreed with her it would make it that much more real even though it was my *new normal* reality. In a curt manner, I responded by

admitting that I had become a housewife by default and not by personal choice. I went on to say that my son needed me and that I was exactly where in I needed to be.

As women, we are prone to have to prove ourselves to everyone. We are held by societal, cultural, and familial norms to a higher standard and the expectations can put a tremendous amount of pressure to perform for the betterment of the collective whole. Often, in this quest for perfectionism, we employ an arsenal of strategies to justify our actions. We have a sense of obligation to our predestined roles and identities to secure a position of superiority over one another in an attempt to appease the greater sentiment imposed on us by societal, cultural, and familial norms. I analyzed the substance of that conversation through the scope of positioning theory because her comment bothered me for some time. In retrospect, I believed that she believed she did right by her family in choosing to continue to work outside her home and better provide for her family. I believed that she believed I too had done right by my family in staying home with my son, however, our individual choices and decisions were based from a sense of moral obligation to our deeply embedded familial, cultural, and societal expectations. According to Harré and Moghaddam (2003) “A position has been defined as a place within a moral order” (p. 30). I couldn’t understand how after all this time the dynamics of our friendship and professional relationship hadn’t changed. She was still in pursuit of asserting a position of superiority over me regardless of my circumstances. During our working relationship, the sense of asserting that superior position came in many forms from dominating grade level meetings, to dominating lesson plans, to manipulating and dominating lunch room conversations. This sense of superiority and control was very important to her and she would go to great lengths to secure that position especially when dealing with administration. This sense of superiority was also seen in her classroom management. She always had the gifted and talented students in her class

because she knew how to challenge them academically. These students in her classroom held the superior position in the classroom over the medium to low students who held the inferior positions. I know this because on more than one occasion I witnessed how she favored the high students over the low students.

Once again, I realized that what was going on during our exchange was her emotion coming through in the form of her superiority as the working super mom and my inferiority as the house wife. According to Parrott (2003), “One party’s emotional expression can be understood strategically as an attempt to establish a superior social identity while assigning an inferior one to rival...The rival’s emotional expression often implies an alternative positioning that refutes the positioning of the first party” (p. 30). The emotion I believed to be showing through was the desire of having had the opportunity to stay home with her third child and not being able to do so because of the obligation of having to provide and accommodate their life style. My emotion came through in my rebuttal comment to her as I then asserted to establish a sense of superiority over her in that I placed my son and his needs first and further establishing my position of superiority by cherishing the quiet moments I shared with my son. As human beings we pass moral judgement on each other based on our emotional positions. We do so strategically in an attempt to assert positions of superiority as we navigate and negotiate ourselves through personal and professional spaces.

Take Pride in Your Appearance

So much of our identity is based on our physical appearance. We are living in a world of social media in which individuals especially women are unsuspecting targets of social ridicule and shaming. In our society, a lot of pride is taken in physical appearance. There is the influx of images that remind women of what is deemed desirable. It is easy to succumb to the pressure of

having to keep up with the latest fashion and make-up trends in an attempt to feel confident and be accepted by one's peers. The irony in the pseudo-identity is that there are just as many messages encouraging women to not fall prey to the global definition of physical beauty and desirability. In today's world, it takes inner strength and courage to remain grounded in the face of revolutionary aesthetics.

One concept that never ceases to amaze me is the constant body shaming and parental shaming that women are subjected through in social media, television, and in everyday personal conversations with family, friends and colleagues. Our eyes and minds are constantly flooded with images of what is deemed beautiful, sexy, sensuous, and desirable. Unfortunately we live in a society in which so much of our identity is based on how we look. Valenti (2007) declares that "In the same way we are brought up by the media and influenced by cultural standards to think about men, relationships, and weddings constantly, we're taught to be forever worried about our appearance" (p. 199). In an ideal society (and this is not an ideal society), we would validate each other's existence through meaningful, constructive means such as scholarly leadership, activism, volunteerism, and humanitarianism. I must admit my self-image and self-worth took a hit when I became a stay-at-home mom. I no longer had the need to wear professional clothing and I had been reduced by limited means to wear yoga pants and tank tops. Since my son was tube fed and had difficulty some days keeping his formula down, it just didn't seem practical to spend what little extra money we had on nice clothes. Taylor, Bougie, and Caouette (2003) explain that "Positioning also occurs in the intrapersonal domain: the term "reflexive positioning" has been proposed to refer to the process by which people position themselves privately in there, presumably subvocal, private discourse" (p. 205). I struggled to maintain focus on what was important. I had to keep reminding myself that no matter what society and culture

deemed beautiful and desirable I was not to succumb to these societal and cultural norms. I had to coach myself through a lot of self-talk that just because I was no longer in a professional environment and not having professional conversations that it didn't mean I was any less intelligent, less worthy, or less than zero. I missed dressing up every morning and I sorely missed being in a professional environment. I still made it a point to look presentable, but it wasn't the same.

I remember one particular day I had a conversation over the phone with a former colleague and friend of mine. I had contacted her because I was looking for help with house cleaning. We chatted about my son and her family and work the usual stuff. In our conversation, she commented that I needed to continue fixing myself up everyday and that I needed to make sure I didn't get too comfortable or let myself go now that I was home. She also mentioned that I needed to keep in mind that my husband worked in a professional environment in which he was surrounded by well-dressed professional women. My response to her was that I was not going to forfeit my physical appearance in exchange for the *schlumpy* look. I also explained that while I was fully aware of the importance of taking pride in my appearance she needed to understand that looking my best everyday wasn't always practical. I further explained that there were days when it was very difficult to shower and eat let alone walk around looking spiffy.

It hadn't occurred to me that she may have a point, and the last thing I needed to worry about was my husband comparing me to other women at work or elsewhere or worse yet lose interest in me because I wasn't looking presentable all of the time. I didn't have the time or inclination to invest what little energy I had on fretting about the outcome. It took every ounce of energy and confidence to reassure myself that my self-worth and self-image was not dependent on my physical appearance. I am not suggesting that being presentable is not important. It is

common knowledge that personal appearance and dressing nicely does have an impact on self-esteem and self-image. I don't discount this at all; however, I was not willing to cave into the societal and cultural norms regarding physical appearance.

I hate to admit it but there were times when I did fret and worry about it. My personal situation couldn't be helped. There were days when I didn't feel all that confident. There were days when I would go grocery shopping and I would see a well-dressed woman and I would admire what she was wearing and deep down I wished I had the means to afford to dress like that. Then I would ask myself if I had the means would I actually dress up that nicely just to go to the grocery store? Probably not. I would most likely wear something practical to go with my practical thinking and my practical self. I reminded myself that this situation was temporary and that in time things would get better. R.J. would get better and be in a better place and when the time came I would embrace the better times and have the opportunity to return to the workforce and once again collaborate with fellow colleagues and have meaningful conversations outside of marriage and children. Until then, I would remain focused and steadfast on the bigger prize seeing my son through two more open heart surgeries and nursing him back to health, remaining hopeful that he would meet all his milestones in his own time and that together we would come out stronger as individuals and as a family.

Emotional Dyadic Communication

It is not uncommon for couples to argue and disagree. It is a normal part of human nature and dyadic communication to assert one's position. The pressure of caring for a fragile, medically dependent child can compound the already strenuous circumstances. A nonthreatening environment is then needed for open communication. Dysfunction can quickly set in when one

party is determined to undermine and over power the other party. It is our natural instinct to strategize one's rebuttal when one feels verbally attacked or misunderstood and it can lead to more serious and hurtful verbal insults, which then perpetuate the vicious cycle. The following is an example of the dynamics surrounding the communication between my husband and myself.

The arguments between my husband and me became more strategic and personal. One particular evening, we were arguing in the middle of the hallway. I had already put our son down for the night at least until the next scheduled feeding. I had good days and bad days in terms of dealing with the postpartum depression and that particular day was a bad day and I just needed him to listen to me. I just needed him to put his arms around me and hold me and tell me that I was loved. I needed him to validate my existence. I needed him to tell me I was doing a good job. I needed his kind words. I just needed him. I felt desperate and I needed his undivided attention. I told him I needed to talk to him. I told him I was dealing of a lot of different emotion and that I didn't understand why I was feeling the way I was feeling. I explained that I felt he could do more with our son. His rebuttal was that he was doing more than enough with working full-time and coaching softball. He said he was doing the best he could and my response was that I was doing the best I could for everyone. I reminded him that it wasn't so much about helping me out as it was about being our son's other parent. I told him that I didn't care about his practices and games and that if he had enough energy for that then he could find enough energy to help tend to his critically ill son. He then accused me of having too much time on my hands and thinking too much. My immediate response was that most days I barely had enough time to shower and eat but I had too much time on my hands? He had a parental obligation to his medically dependent son to do more than fill his feeding bag with formula and turn the pump on. I expressed to him that I did not have the luxury of watching television like he did every evening

after he got home from work. He then proceeded to tell me in a very aggressive tone that he was going to bed because he had to get up early to go to work the following morning. I remember thinking to myself how nice he has to get up early as if what he did was so much more important than what I did not to mention that I was sleep deprived from waking up every hour and a half through the night to tube feed our son. I tried desperately to get him to understand that parenting was all about sacrifices and about being emotionally available regardless of the circumstances.

Emotional Roller Coaster of Validation

Emotions are powerful and fickle. One can launch an inferno of fiery words based solely on one's emotion. By the same token, one can finesse a situation by manipulating the emotions of others. As women, we are emotional beings. We are moved by our emotion be it positive or negative and we tend to allow our emotion dictate the course of our actions and reactions. We have no control over other people's emotions. We can only control our emotions, thoughts, and actions, and we can choose to pre-act instead of react to someone else's emotion. The following describes my personal experience with the tempestuous emotion of anger and the paradigm of the emotional distress within my dyadic relationship.

I already felt unimportant even though I had the most important job in the world...keeping my son healthy and well by providing him minute to minute care. So why did I feel so unimportant? Why did I feel so unproductive? Why did I feel like less than zero? It made absolutely no sense to me. I knew that losing my financial independence was going to be tough to swallow. I think for me it wasn't just about not having access to my own money to buy myself the day to day things I needed. I had one pair of tennis shoes which I kept for at least two years. He had a pair for each day of the week. I had one jacket. He had ample number of jackets and sweatshirts. His justification was that he was a coach and worked outdoors. No matter how tired

and sleep deprived I was I was still expected to meet everyone's needs and stay on top of all of my son's needs and keep track of all of the household expenses and domestic obligations. His justification for this was that he worked and he earned his right and privilege to watch his favorite shows if he wanted to every day because he had earned it. If I was sick with thyroid issues or passing a kidney stone it didn't matter. It was my responsibility to stay on top of things. This inequality I found to be unfair and it fueled the anger, the resentment and bitterness. I understood that I had a choice whether or not I would allow these emotions to rule and control my life but it became increasingly difficult when the inequality emerged on a daily basis. I accepted that things would never change that was not to say that I was accepting of them as being okay. I knew this was a battle I would never win because of his lack of understanding and compassion. I eventually stopped arguing with him regarding these issues.

The saddest part of it for me was that I realized he wasn't the lifelong partner I wished to be with for the rest of my life. I didn't want to stay with a man whose mother provided him everything he needed because of the financial situation we were in. I strongly felt that her providing him everything he needed and then some took away from his responsibility as a husband and father. I knew that he couldn't or wouldn't understand my point of view or my anger.. This was the emotion I felt and expressed the majority of the time. Parrott (2003) explains that "Relabeled emotions involve only one emotion, which is labeled as one sort of emotion by one party and then is relabeled as another sort by a second party" (p. 33). I knew that confronting him would only fuel the fire and that it would turn into a nasty argument in which I would most likely be accused of being jealous of his success and I in turn would accuse him of provoking my anger to justify his actions.

I understood emotions were present in all relationships and that negotiating them proved challenging. In my mind, I felt my feelings of anger, frustration, and bitterness were at times provoked and justified. I felt this need to shout during our heated discussions in order to be heard. I realized that my shouting wasn't only about asserting a position within the relationship it was also about my feelings being validated as a human being. Friedan (2001) explained that "This "will to power", "self-assertion", dominance", or "autonomy", as it is variously called, does not imply aggression or competitive striving in the usual sense; it is the individual affirming his existence and his potentialities as a being in his own right; it is the courage "to be an individual" (p. 429). Yes, I was emotional for many reasons, however, the inner most part of my being was desperately seeking to assert my own human existence within a dysfunctional relationship. At times, I felt the need to finesse the situations and conversations in order to keep the peace. I accepted the probability that things were not going to change and that I needed to remain true to myself and grounded as a individual.

Superwoman Is a Myth

Society places a great deal of pressure on women to 'do it all'. The superwoman syndrome has been over rated and has left women feeling less than capable. For the life of me, I do not understand why anyone in the world would want to do everything on their own. There is just not enough time to get it all done. There was a time in my life when I had to do it all and I was miserable and cranky and tired. A part of me prided itself in the illusion and myth of supermom and then I got over it because trying to personify this fictitious alter ego was draining and unrealistic. I know that there are women who unfortunately do not have help and they have to do it on their own. I cannot imagine for a moment what would have become of me and my family if our son had not qualified for respite care. I can't imagine going through my son's

ordeal without help. The following section chronicles my entry into the world of academia as a graduate teaching assistant.

Graduate Teaching Assistantship

When one is preoccupied with holding down a job, it lifts one's mood and makes one feel productive and important. It appeals to the human psyche because of the contribution to the greater good. One is providing for the family and making strides for a better and more comfortable life. I had longed for a long time to be a part of something different from what I had previously done. Deep down I knew I did not want to go back to the elementary classroom full-time. I felt I had been out too long and my son still had his needs and I felt I didn't have the energy and desire to keep up with other children and then come home drained to deal with my son. In the summer of 2015, I was offered a graduate teaching assistant position in the communication department at UTEP. The following speaks of the wonderful opportunity of teaching university students.

In the fall of 2015, I was offered a graduate teaching assistant position in the Communication department at UTEP and I accepted the position. I had a great schedule and it allowed me to work outside the home, contribute to my home and it provided me an opportunity to teach outside my comfort zone of elementary students. It also offered me the opportunity to learn a bit more about the world of academe. On Monday, Wednesday, and Friday mornings I worked at UTEP. During the fall semester, I needed to be on campus by 9:30 a.m. and during the spring semester I needed to be there by 8:30 a.m., so in order to have less chaotic mornings I had to be up by 4:00 a.m. to be ready by 6:00 a.m. so that I could get my son ready for school and either drop him off at school or have the bus pick him up. Either way he needed to be in school by 7:30 a.m. From there I would head to work and then in the afternoons, I worked at the

elementary school from 2:30 - 5:30 p.m. Monday through Thursday. My son was in school half days and my daughter was home on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays to meet him after the bus dropped him off from school. I had Tuesday and Thursday mornings off and I would greet him when he got home from school. The remainder of the time my daughter would babysit him from 12:00 p.m. until 6:00 p.m. I had about an hour and a half window between the two part time jobs during both semesters. I would run home after my back to back classes and have a quick lunch or sometimes run errands or start dinner early. I would get home around 6:00 p.m. in the evening and either finish dinner or start dinner. My husband would get home from work around 6:45 p.m. We would have dinner as a family.

After dinner, my husband would then get my son's breathing treatment ready and give him his evening meds. My husband would then sit on the couch and enjoy watching his favorite shows, one or two for each day of the week. I cleaned up the kitchen if I had enough energy, otherwise the dishes were tabled for the following day. While my son was getting his breathing treatment, I got his school clothes and backpack ready for the following day. Then I would give my son a bath and put him down for the night. By this time, it was about 8:30 in the evening and my husband would go on to bed and then I would grade for a few hours and check email. By that time, it was close to 11:00 p.m. and I would head to bed just to wake up a few hours later and do it all over again. My daily frustration and quarrels with my husband was that I worked just as hard to provide for the family and that I worked just as many hours as he did inside and outside of the home setting and that I once again I didn't have the luxury of taking a break because as usual I shouldered the majority of the responsibility of our son and all the domestic obligations without skipping a beat while he got to decompress every single evening and weekends as well. On the weekends, I shouldered the responsibility of catching up on errands: grocery shopping,

picking up meds for everyone, and paying bills etc. Steinem emphasized that “You can’t do it all. No one can have two full-time jobs, have perfect children and cook three meals and be multi-orgasmic ‘til dawn...Superwoman is the adversary of the woman’s movement” (as cited in Stone, 2013, p. 123). It was the frustration of having to do it all when there was help available. My madness stemmed from my mental and physical frustration.

This was just the thing that outraged me as the inequality that continued to exist within the relationship and my desperate attempts in appealing to my husband to step up and help out more. Once again, my desperate attempts fell on deaf ears and I knew that things were never going to change. It struck me it was *the feminine mystique* in the monotonous routine and rituals of wifery and motherhood.

Back to the Grind

Many stay-at-home moms have the daunting task of having to manage the finances, run the errands, keep house and tend to the children. Some have the luxury of not having to worry about having to work outside the home for supplemental pay and can focus on their family. Others aren’t so fortunate and have to either work outside their home full-time or part-time to help make ends meet. During my time at home with my son, we were able to survive on a teacher’s salary plus coaching stipends. Money was tight and I managed all of the finances. Somehow I made it work. Bills were always paid on time and we scaled back on groceries as I only bought what we needed minus the extras. As time went on, and the economy faltered it became increasingly difficult to survive on a teacher’s income. I had to return to the workforce; however, it would prove to be difficult as my son’s medical needs still needed to be met. This would be the challenge, balancing work and meeting his needs. The following chronicles my reentry into the workforce.

My son was homebound for the first five years of his life mostly because of his heart condition and minimizing the exposure to unwanted and unneeded germs. The common cold kills non cardiac children and adults in the U.S. and my son's risk level was heightened by his heart condition. With the economy being what it was and the extra expenses as R.J. got older well the time came in which I needed to seek employment. Valenti states that "Most women don't have the financial ability to just decide not to work" (p. 120). The time had come in which even a part-time job would help with the growing expenses we had incurred. I was eager to head back to work and I still harbored some apprehension toward full-time employment. At the time, we were still awaiting my son's third open heart surgery so it was going to be a challenge finding an employer that was going to be willing to take the risk in hiring me. After all I left my teaching position because of my having to stay home with my son so the circumstances warranted my having to stay home again to nurse him back to health after his third open heart surgery.

At the time things were looking pretty well for me to head back and reenter the workforce at least part-time; however I decided to go ahead and apply for both part-time and full-time positions. I searched the job vacancies posted online on the websites of the three largest school districts in town hoping to get called for interviews. Sure enough I was called in for many interviews but to no avail as not a single one offered me a job. Then I got a call from one of the local elementary schools within one of the three largest districts in town. The position was for a literacy coach, who is in charge of training teachers in English Language Arts otherwise known as ELAR and monitoring teacher and student success within the scope of ELAR and analyzing student data and performance. The interview went well. The administrator disclosed that they really liked me and were considering me for another position. I got a call back from them for a second interview. When I got there the administrator informed me that the position I had

interviewed for had been offered to another candidate but that they really liked me for a fourth grade position. She then explained to me that this was a done deal and that human resources would be contacting me. She also explained that human resources department was at a job fair and that they would be contacting me on Monday to fill out all the necessary documentation. I then told her I needed to disclose some personal information to her. She then disclosed that she had contacted my former administrators and that they had made her aware of the situation and she thanked me for my honesty in bringing up the matter. I then explained in detail to her the situation with my son and that we were awaiting his third open heart surgery sometime in the spring and this would require me to leave for a period of four weeks providing there wouldn't be any complications. I also explained that upon returning I would need to take some additional time to nurse him back to health. I felt the need to disclose this information because I felt I needed to be honest and because the position that was being offered to me was that of a fourth grade position.

The administrator then told me that she could no longer offer me the position because she needed a teacher who was going to be there to see the students through the testing as they would be tested in the Spring. She then told me that she had a kindergarten position open and that it would probably be better suitable for me since it was not a testing grade level. She asked if I would be interested in that position and I said yes. She then suggested I wait to hear from her on the kindergarten position as she needed to relay the information to the interview committee and she would get back to me. When I got to my vehicle, I couldn't believe what had just happened. I drove off and as I drove I continuously mulled over in my head I was offered a position and just as quickly as it was offered it was off the table because of my personal circumstances. I was despondent. I was in shock so much so that I pulled over and called my husband because I was

so upset. He couldn't believe it either. I felt I was being punished because of my personal circumstances. It wasn't like the position wasn't offered to me because I lacked teaching experience and training. Over the weekend, I hadn't heard from her so I checked the district website and saw that the kindergarten position she had offered me was no longer posted as an open vacancy. I never heard from her.

The interview calls continued and I accepted to interview for a 5th grade position at one of the other school districts. The position was advertised on the school district website and from the advertisement I assumed that the position would be filled for the second half of the school. The interview went well and I was called by the administrator and asked to come back for a second interview the following day late in the afternoon. The timing couldn't have been worse. My son's third open heart surgery was around the corner. I explained to the administrator the situation with my son. I shared with the administrator that I needed to share some personal information with her. I explained that my son would be facing a third open heart surgery and that the surgery had not been scheduled yet and that if Dallas called we would need to leave as soon as possible. Her response was short and to the point. She said that the position needed to be filled immediately and that she could not wait for me. She wished me the best of luck with my son and good-bye. I felt so discouraged and upset because I was considered a liability. Once again, I wasn't being considered for the position for lack of experience or training but because of an uncontrollable circumstance.

For a brief moment, it felt like things were never going to get better and that I would never find a full-time position or find a potential employer that wasn't going to consider me a liability and pin my potential on my son's diagnosis. I didn't understand. I felt hopeless and helpless. Still I reminded myself that if these doors closed it was for a good reason and that the

right position would come along in due time. I still had one surgery to nurse my son through. It took six months before I was employed again by the district that I had originally resigned from. I did inform the program coordinator about my son's condition and we were awaiting his third open heart surgery. She said the job was very flexible and that she understood and would be willing to give me the time off. I started that position in January of 2015. The scheduling was perfect. I worked 12 hours per week Monday through Thursday from 2:30 - 5:30 pm and was paid a certified teacher's rate. This particular program is federally funded grant. I was hired with the understanding that when the grant money ran out so did the position and I was fine with that. I taught third grade students and the great part about this teaching position was that it didn't require the rigor that is often required and expected in a regular classroom setting. I actually was allowed to plan fun lessons. There were expectations of me in that I was expected to analyze student data and performance and create my TEKS (Texas Essentials Knowledge and Skills) based lessons around the data in order to better facilitate student's need and performance. The first few weeks I was a bit rusty but soon I was on my way to once again making a difference in student's lives especially students identified as at risk. The school actually happened to be in the next neighborhood over from where I grew up. It was almost as if I had gone back home. It was ironic.

Part-Time Better Than Nothing

Part-time work can be both a blessing and a curse. It provides women some respite and provides a means for them to help provide for their family. Part-time positions often do not come with any benefits, and the pay is usually less than a full-time position. It may not provide any sick leave so if the employee doesn't work then they don't get paid. It can offer flexibility in terms of hours. I was fortunate enough to have found a part-time teaching position with the same school district I resigned from. The following reflects my personal experience with finding a part-time job.

I was proud and grateful that someone was willing to take a chance on me. The down side of the position was that I was not a contracted district certified teacher. It meant that the school district was under no obligation to find a certified position within the district for me once the grant funding ended. It also meant that the position came with no sick leave or benefits, and as a part time certified teacher I could only work up to 19.5 hours. If I needed time off for any reason, I could have the time off, but I wouldn't be paid. If I worked fewer hours one week then I would have to adjust the expenses at home accordingly. The only time the program director allowed the certified teachers to work the 19.5 hours was during the summer program, which was the entire month of June. The position did not require the rigor that is required during the regular school day. I worked collaboratively with the respective grade level. I got to teach fun lessons to the students. It required some structure and lesson plans were required. The lessons needed to reflect student centeredness and needed to also address target goals for struggling students. All in all it had been a blessing. It got me back into teaching. It allowed for camaraderie with fellow teachers and colleagues and it provided an outlet for me outside of home and my personal circumstances. It provided mental stimulation and it gave me a sense of purpose. I wasn't solely focused on my

son all of the time now, granted he was in a much better place now, which thankfully did allow me to work outside the home and focus on other people's children even if it was just for a spell.

Chapter 6: Summary and Findings

Summary

Autoethnography as a research method is vital to the study of communication. There are different opinions within the discipline of communication that beg to differ as to the significance and validity of autoethnography as a research method. Studies within communication especially those written in the form of an autoethnography cannot be measured quantitatively. This is not to say that for specific studies mixed methods cannot be used. This methodology is subjective and offers incredible insight into the vulnerability and the mental, emotional, and physical state of a single perspective and experience in an effort to create much needed critical discourse within the study of communication. Martinez (2000) explains that “As a theoretical perspective, phenomenology focuses our attention on the life world and the lived experience of persons” (p. ix). My autoethnography reveals my life world and lived experience. There is power in testimony. My vulnerability offers insight into my thoughts, feelings, and actions. I want my lived experience to be a stepping stone in arriving at the interrelatedness and interconnectedness of our lived experiences as women and mothers especially those of special-needs children. López (2011) writes “ It is the belief that Latinas should live in the shadows of their men-father, boyfriend, husband, and son” (p. 125). Yes, I lived in the shadows of my husband and son. I lived in the shadow of my husband’s career and success. I laid down my life for my son so that he could have a fighting chance at thriving despite his diagnosis. Some may consider it living in the shadows of *marianismo* and perhaps this has been the case, however for these reasons the dialogue of intersectional identities needs to be further explored to create meaning and connect to one another.

This autoethnography was the culmination of a series of life altering events that took place within a span of six years. These events influenced the tone and perspective of this personal narrative. Events such as: losing my mother to breast cancer in December of 2010, my son's second open heart surgery in March of 2011, being diagnosed with Graves disease and passing a kidney stone during the fall of 2012, losing my father to pulmonary disease in January of 2014, fighting with siblings over my father's estate, experiencing female reproductive ailments, and nursing my son back to health after his third open heart surgery in the spring of 2015 and following a double hernia surgery during the spring of 2016. All the while, I was determined to persevere and continue moving forward with my thesis. I understood its significance to the discipline of communication. The purpose of this personal narrative is to establish a sense of common ground between my personal experience and that of other women, especially women who are mothers of special-needs children. While the premise was that of identifying with mothers having similar circumstances, the realization that the life altering events and the aftermath that followed these events was not limited to mothers of special-needs children but also to women from all walks of life who may have experienced similar circumstances in their life.

There is a litany of literature on motherhood, career, motherhood and career and children with disabilities or special needs; however, in my research, I found that there was limited literature on the intersectional identities of women in regard to motherhood, career, and parenting a child with special-needs. Brock (2014) specifically examined the participants' perception of self based on their role as a mother and then their identity separate from their role as a mother. This particular article did not speak of intersectional identities of motherhood, career and mothering a special needs-child. Zibricky (2014) also examined her marginalized

position within motherhood. Again this particular autoethnography covered mothering a disabled child and there was no mention of intersectional identities specifically examining motherhood, career and mothering a special needs-child. Our gender alone marginalizes us into intersectional roles and identities that are subject to societal, cultural, and familial scrutiny. In my personal experience, I felt marginalized by the unspoken expectation of being a *good woman* translation being a good wife and mother. Martínez (2002) writes “ What is problematic is the double standard; the patriarchal definition of what it means to be a “good” woman; the reproduction of a superior-inferior power dynamic via culture and religion; the marginalization of women, in particular women of color, in the economy; and the emotional dimension of guilt” (p. 144). If I had outsourced care for my son then I would have felt an overwhelming sense of guilt for not providing the minute to minute care he needed and I would have felt like a bad mom. If I had gone back to work in order to contribute to the financial stability of our home then I would have felt equally guilty for pursuing an identity outside the home and seeking monetary gain in exchange for not being at home with my son. So I decided to make a decision that I felt was in my son’s best interest and that was to stay home and see to his minute to minute care. I still assumed the roles of intersectional identity, however, in my pursuit of continuing my thesis and in doing research it occurred to me that limited literature existed in intersectional identities involving motherhood, career, and mothering a special-needs child.

With this existing gap in the literature, it presented the opportunity to write from the perspective of my own lived experience, therefore, formulating the research question of “What is the phenomenology of the Latina woman in choosing between career and motherhood?” Martínez (2000) further explains that “Phenomenology takes this focus because it recognizes the inherent interconnectedness of human conscious experience and the fact of our locatedness in

time, place, history, and culture” (p. ix). My research question embodied many facets of my own identity and experience and examined cultural, societal and familial norms through the scope of feminist theory. The theoretical framework validated the methodology of autoethnography as the research method and further established the validity of feminist epistemology and agency. Areas of analysis included giving birth to a medically dependent-special needs child and the comparison between my experience with motherhood the first time as a young adult and my experience with motherhood as an older adult; the effect of my son’s birth on my emotional, mental and physical well-being and the pressure in having to choose between career and motherhood, succumbing to traditional gender roles and gender performance as well as identity loss, isolation, and the dyadic inter-communication between my husband and myself, as well as my reentry into the workforce. The aforementioned categories were examined in an effort to arrive at cultural analysis and to better understand our sense of agency as women and mothers as we navigate and negotiate our way through gendered spaces. My lived experience is open ended. This personal narrative will continue to build upon itself. My hope is that it will open the door to much needed critical thinking and discussion of the intersectional identities of motherhood, career, and mothering special-needs children.

One area for further research and discussion is that of the role class plays in Latina identity in regards to motherhood, career and mothering a special-needs child. While this thesis touched on the overarching themes of class, it is not comprehensive on this issue in terms of its breadth and depth. As a Latina living in the borderland of El Paso and the binary of two cultures, white and Latino, I can say that class played a role in my worldview. As I learned to navigate through gendered spaces, I weaved in and out of conscience identity depending on the subject of conversation, the group I found myself in, or the situation I found myself all in an effort to

assimilate to the more dominant group. Class and its role in the intersectional identities of Latina women in regards to motherhood, career, and mothering a special-needs child warrants further study and discussion.

Interpretation of Findings

A woman's body is expected to perform almost on command. It is the vessel by which all humanity has been born. It is expected to perform accordingly and deliver healthy children. The fruit of her womb is considered gift. Unfortunately this is not always the case. There have been instances in which a woman's body miscarries. Instances in which the mother delivers a still born baby. Instances in which the baby is born prematurely. Instances in which the baby is born with birth defects. A woman may experience a sense of guilt and shame for her body failed to produce what otherwise should have been a natural process. This can lead to feelings of inadequacy and fear, such as my personal agony in dealing with a difficult pregnancy and the difficult diagnosis following my son's birth.

My interpretation of my experience is that a woman's body doesn't define her as a human being and that it is the very instrument by which a woman should experience freedom. Freedom to be, freedom not to be a woman's body is the very thing that should free her, and that a woman is not limited by her body in terms of performance. Butler (1990) noted that "Beauvoir proposes that the female body ought to be the situation and instrumentality of women's freedom, not a defining and limiting essence" (p. 16). If, for example, a woman's body does not perform as it should naturally this should not define the essence of who she is as an individual and therefore should not determine her self-worth as a human being, woman, and mother. If, for example, a woman cannot have a child that shouldn't make her any less of a woman because of her body's inability to produce what is otherwise considered a natural process and is an expectation as such

because of her biology. In my case, I had a child but my body failed to produce a healthy child. My body was supposed to have done what it did the first pregnancy which was to go through a natural process of producing a healthy child. In essence, my body did go through the natural process; however, it did not produce a healthy child. After the diagnosis, I felt betrayed by my body because it failed to do what is supposed to.

For some time, I was overwhelmed and overcome by a sense of guilt and shame. I blamed myself for what had happened to my son. I felt overwhelmed by questions of whether I could have done anything at all to have prevented it. Should I have eaten more fruits and vegetables? Should I have had better coping strategies for dealing with the high levels of stress I experienced during the pregnancy due to teaching and my personal life? I felt this urgency to analyze my part in his diagnosis. I feared that people would judge me and consider me to be the defective one since my body incubated my son. I felt that the worthiness of my womanhood was in question. Butler (2000) asserts that “When the relevant ‘culture’ that ‘constructs’ gender is understood in terms of such a law or set of laws, then it seems that gender is as determined and fixed as it was under the biology-is-destiny formulation. In such a case, not biology, but culture, becomes destiny” (p. 11). For a short while, I felt defined by my body's inability to produce a healthy child and that now all of a sudden I was defined and seen in an entirely new and different light, especially by other women. I feared how my husband saw me as a woman. I wondered if he blamed me too. After all, here was a man who had been married to another woman for 18 years and never had children with her, and yet I could not give him a healthy son.

This guilt and shame I carried for quite a while as I grieved. In retrospect, I wasn't just grieving what had happened to my son but I realized I was grieving what we didn't get to experience the birth of a healthy son and the plans we had made as a couple for our family

wouldn't come to fruition in the way we had planned and hoped. It was not until I learned of other woman younger than me, women of different races who had also given birth to hypoplastic babies that the sense of guilt and shame and unworthiness began to lift. As I understood and more importantly accepted that this was just something that happened. I began to embrace my womanhood and motherhood. It was unexplainable to doctors this phenomena known as hypoplastic left heart syndrome and if doctors couldn't unlock the cause of such a life threatening condition then how was I to deal with it? I knew I had to make a conscious decision to accept the circumstances as they were more importantly to accept my son as he was, alive and thriving under the circumstances. I knew that I couldn't afford to continue to wallow in self-pity that somehow some way I needed to pull myself up by my boot straps and continue moving forward, however, there is a school of thought that our gender identity and performance is culturally constructed and it is the set of norms and rituals set by our culture and society that predetermine our gender performance and in some cases actual laws are created and upheld to prevent others from living to their fullest potential and fulfilling the pursuit of their happiness. I think that women are predestined still today by certain preconceived notions set in place by society and cultural norms in terms of roles and identity. So 'culture becomes destiny' in terms of gender performance prevailed and it would be these cultural constraints that would bind me to perform accordingly.

It's All About Choices

The societal nuances of parenting are to blame for the mass confusion among parents. There is an arsenal of books and magazine bombarding people on how to be a better spouse and parent. There is a leading expert on marriage and a leading expert on parenting and parents are continuously flooded with sometimes conflicting information. Nothing seems to be left in the

realm of personal choice; however that is exactly what it should be *personal*. I made personal choices that were incredibly difficult to make and it didn't help that everyone had an opinion on the matter. Yes, there is such a thing as a community effort in raising children the *it takes a village* perspective of raising children; however this should not be misunderstood as a green light and open forum on telling one another what is best for our child/ren.

Even today, there exist the infamous *mommy wars*, women pitted against each other as to who is the better mother. Is it the working mother because she has an identity outside of her home and children and is working to provide a better and more comfortable life for her family? Is it the stay-at-home because she is there at home solely meeting the needs of her family? Personal choices should not be legislated by culture, society and family. As Steiner (2006) argued, "First and most undeniable: The mommy wars are not really between different cliques of women over what kind of motherhood is superior...The real battles rage inside each mother's head as she struggles to make peace with her choices" (p. 328). My decision to stay home with my critically ill son was a personal one and I experienced turmoil at first. While it was the right decision, it failed to provide me the satisfaction and fulfillment that working outside the home provided me. Yes, I stayed home to nurse my son back to health after each of his three open heart surgeries and that was the best decision for him and for us as a family, however, it rendered me helpless in my crisis of identity. The battle raged on in my head as to all I had lost and all I had gained from our unexpected diagnosis. I wavered constantly in my resentment and gratefulness in staying home. There were moments when I felt an overwhelming sense of guilt for not feeling happy about staying home only to just as quickly be overcome with feelings of thankfulness for the opportunity to stay home with my son.

As time went on, and my wounds began to heal I realized that there are no guarantees in life about anything really. All of us have our own cross to carry. Each of us has unique circumstances that need unique strategies and plans in order to keep our lives intact. Societal, cultural, and familial norms do not have the right to dictate to anyone how they should lead their life by a set of expectations especially under unforeseeable circumstances, and the Marissa Meyers, the Pamela Stones, or Leslie Steiners of this world can impose their ideas and solutions for personal choices. Whether modern feminists called it rhetoric of choice it still remains a personal choice and it should be left at that *personal*.

Caregiving a Community Effort

Children require a lot of time and attention and raising children is a full-time job. The pressure can be compounded by the birth of a special-needs child. By natural instinct and societal constraints, women have a tendency of shouldering the majority of the child rearing. Mothers who work outside the home have no choice but to entrust the care of the child/children to others whether it be a private or public daycare or close family and friends. Stay-at-home mothers face the same dilemma when in need of an extra hand. As mothers, we are fiercely protective of our children and we can be adamant in our belief that we are the only who can provide them the best care.

The first eight months of my son's life I cared for him alone, and it was difficult. At the time, he was so fragile and medically complex that I had a hard time entertaining the thought of anyone else stepping in. I wrestled with the thought of whether I wanted to bring in skilled nursing to help me out with him or if I would go at it alone. It wasn't that he and the special care he needed were burdensome, but rather that it was mentally, emotionally and physically exhausting to keep up with everything. It became impossible. He was the priority and his needs

were always met; however that meant that others things were neglected like housework, laundry and meals. I decided I needed help and filled all the necessary paperwork for respite care services. My only regret was that I didn't do it sooner. The respite care was a life saver. It allowed me to time to tend to the housework, run errands, cook meals and have them ready on time. The respite care provider stayed with my son at home while I tended to my daily chores. It was a win-win situation as I would go out of the house while the care provider was there and it was a comfort to know that I was nearby if they needed me. Valenti (2012) believes that "When we take the pressure off ourselves to be the one and only caregiver for our children, it will not only free us from the increasing loneliness of solitary caretaking but also open a world of love and support to our children" (p. 166). As time went by, my son grew stronger and it gave me the confidence to allow family members to come and watch him there at home while I got caught up with whatever it was I was behind on at the time. I realized that the times I felt resentful and almost regretful were the times I felt the most overwhelmed with the pressure of caring for a child with a medically complex diagnosis and trying to keep up with everything domestic, the times I felt I was slipping deeper into the abyss of postpartum depression and isolation, the times I grappled with the painful loss of identity, and when I tried to write my thesis. I learned that it was okay to let go and let my son know the love, affection, and care of other people be it family members, friends, or teachers. Perhaps the most important lesson I learned was that it was okay to admit that I needed people and that it wasn't a sign of weakness but rather of strength.

Surrendering

The act of surrendering means you relinquish all to a situation or a person whatever the case maybe. It can seem final with no hope of getting back what one has surrendered. As women and mothers we are in a constant state of surrendering. We are surrendering to the societal,

cultural, and familial norms and expectations imposed on us. We are surrendering to our families' needs. We are surrendering to the calling in our life. We are in a constant state of give and take more giving than taking and all the while we are to grin and bear it. We are surrendering ourselves to identities and roles that leave us at times feeling empty and unfulfilled. As women we do it because has been bestowed upon us by our mere gender to do so while yearning to keep something just for ourselves.

As a woman and mother, I can say that I have sacrificed my body, my mind, my emotions, my career and what I believed at the time to be the best part of myself for the greater good of our family. I reluctantly gave up a teaching career to stay home and care for my medically dependent son, all the while determined to get it my life back. I fought and worked through the loneliness and isolation, the postpartum depression, and the loss of identity. I always feared that I would not be able to get the old me back. I am glad the old me never came back. In all this madness, I have emerged stronger and wiser. I discovered just how deep my love was for my son. I fought to keep him well and alive. I discovered that it is my choices that define me and my willingness to not surrender all. The legacy I wanted to leave to my son was the importance of being present. The importance of having made making sacrifices in the name of love. The shackles and chains of societal, cultural and familial expectations were not enough to bind me and imprison me into a lifetime of servitude. I learned that understanding and accepting that I was exactly where I needed to be in life was liberating. It was not my ability that defined me as a person but my choices, fortitude and unyielding perseverance. Krasnow (1997) a freelance writer and author of the three book series *Surrendering to Marriage*, *Surrendering to Motherhood*, and *Surrendering to Yourself* wrote "Note the "Surrendering in the title rather than "Surrendered"; adapting to motherhood is still a process, it is not a completed act" (p. 4). Every day presents the

opportunity to learn and grow as a woman and as a mother. Every day will present the task of adapting to the needs of my family. I will for a long time to come hone the craft of surrendering without having surrendered all. I have not surrendered all. I am surrendering for the love of my son and family.

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Curriculum Vita

Olga Alexander was born and raised in El Paso, Texas. She is the 6th child in her family and one of five daughters. She is a wife and mother of two children. In May of 2002, Olga Alexander received a Bachelor of Interdisciplinary Studies with a specialization in Early Childhood Education from the University of Texas at El Paso. After receiving her degree, she secured a teaching contract with the Ysleta Independent School District where she taught for nine years. She pursued higher education and enrolled in the Master of Arts program in Communication at New Mexico State University during the fall of 2005. During the Spring of 2007, she transferred to UTEP and pursued a Master of Arts in Communication. In January of 2015, she returned to Ysleta Independent School District and worked at Presa Elementary in 21st Century after school program servicing at-risk students. During her graduate studies at UTEP, she secured a graduate teaching assistantship for the 2015/2016 academic school year.

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