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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explores the narratives of 39 “late-entry women” from across Canada as we recount our doctoral journeys. It considers the challenges we are confronted with as we face a generally accepted cultural consensus that we do not seem to belong in academia. The research is positioned within qualitative research methods, namely, narrative inquiry – including photovoice, narrative writing workshop and individual interviews. These methods helped late-entry women articulate what is helpful to our success and acceptance in the university. As a late-entry student myself, I had an abiding interest in sharing these women’s stories and was touched by many of the themes that surfaced during the research. As such, my insider status – my identification with my participants, helped me to uncover their stories of feeling marginalised, even at times feeling invisible in the academy. Because of others’ comments, some wondered about the value of a newly minted PhD at a later stage in life; and some were tired of the constant need to defend or explain our reasons for returning to school at a later stage in life. These feelings were often tempered by the growing awareness that with age can come recognition that, indeed, we bring years of knowledge and experience that inform not only our journey, but also the journey of those around us. Weaving together the stories of these 39 women, I explored the ways in which this work can give voice and power to the sometimes ignored and undervalued late-entry women in academia. This study is meant to contribute to the growing body of research on non-traditional students entering university. It concludes with implications for how our universities might consider that their policies regarding admissions, grant applications and funding opportunities could better serve the varied needs of late-entry women.
RÉSUMÉ

Cette recherche qualitative explore les histoires (la narration) de 39 femmes à travers le Canada qui ont fait “une entrée tardive” dans le parcours doctoral. La recherche considère les défis dont nous sommes confrontées lorsque nous faisons face à la culture populaire où nous ne semble pas appartenir dans le milieu universitaire. Cette étude se situe dans une méthodologie qualitative c’est-à-dire une enquête narrative qui inclut une approche “photovoice”, des ateliers d’écriture et des entrevues individuelles. Ces méthodes utilisées aident ces “femmes à rentrée tardive” à articuler ce qu’elles ont trouvé d’aident pour leur réussite et dans leur sentiment d’acceptation dans le milieu universitaire. Moi-même une étudiante à rentrée tardive, j’ai un intérêt persistant à partager les histoires de ces femmes et j’ai été touché par plusieurs des thèmes qui ont fait surface lors de cette recherche. À ce titre, ma position d’initiée, mon association avec mes participantes, m’a permis de dévoiler leurs sentiments d’être marginalisés, même à certains moments de se sentir invisible dans le milieu universitaire. En raison des commentaires des autres, quelques unes se demandaient sur la valeur d’un nouveau doctorat à ce stage avancé dans leur vie; de plus, d’autres se fatiguaient de devoir toujours défendre ou expliquer les raisons qui les ont amené à retourner à l’école. Ces sentiments ont souvent été tempérés par une croissante prise de conscience que l’âge nous reconnait, effectivement, des connaissances acquises et plusieurs années d’expérience qui informent non seulement notre propre parcours, mais aussi celui des gens qui nous entourent. En tissant les histoires de ces 39 femmes, j’ai examiné les façons dont ce travail peut donner une voix et une capacité d’accomplissement aux femmes à rentrée tardive qui sont trop souvent ignorées et sous-appréciées. Cette étude contribue à un corpus de recherche grandissant sur les étudiants à cheminement non-traditionnel qui poursuivent leurs études à l’université. Elle conclut avec les répercussions sur les aspects que les universités peuvent reconsidérer dans leurs politiques.
d’admission, les processus d’application et les possibilités de financement pour mieux servir les besoins variés des femmes à rentrée tardive.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Even when I was unsure of myself on this journey, and there were many times, my advisor, Claudia Mitchell has been a strong supporter of my place in academia. I thank her for her endless patience, her insightful comments and her quick responses to my many questions. Her sharp wit added to the pleasure of working with her. I would also like to thank my committee members, Doreen Starke-Meyerring and Teresa Strong Wilson. Their genuine interest in and care about the topic of the late-entry woman’s journey in academia has helped to sustain me on this path. Their careful reading of my work and sensitive questions and observations have helped me to think more deeply about my work and its implications for other late-entry women and the universities we attend.

For the past five years, Terry Wan Jung Lin has been my steadfast classmate in the doctoral program. Her ease with technology and her ability and patience coaching me in this area has helped me through several presentations of my work. She has become a dear friend. As I began to assemble this dissertation, Fatima Khan has been so very helpful. She has shown extraordinary kindness, helping me through numerous edits.

I thank the many women from so many universities across Canada who answered my email that had the simple subject line “Mary from Montreal.” Some of you were not late-entry doctoral students, but you took the time to pass on my emails to women that you thought might enjoy taking part in my study.

In my personal life I have been blessed beyond measure by good health and a precious family. As a mother of four beautiful (inside and out) and talented young women, I felt a profound obligation to explore women’s stories, from the women’s point of view. In doing so I know that I am leaving a bit of history for our daughters. To Justine, Emily, Grace and Claire, I hope as you journey through life you will continue to honor and respect other’s stories, including your own.
Finally to my loving husband and soulmate of 34 years, Peter Skahan, you have given me the gifts of ample space, precious time and above all, everlasting support to complete my doctorate. I hope I have never taken these treasured gifts for granted. It was largely thanks to your encouragement that I embarked on this journey in the first place. Love, always.
DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to the 38 women from across Canada who lent their voices to this research. By reaching out to tell your stories, you have helped me to tell mine. Thank you for sharing your time, thoughts and images to help me and ultimately help others understand the sometimes invisible, but very present, late-entry women in academia.
PROLOGUE

Why on earth am I still here? At school, I mean. I was a baby, child, sister, daughter, student, teacher, student, wife, student, mother, student, mother, student, teacher, and student again and again. See the pattern? All I know is I keep finding my way back to school...I must have something more to learn. I am hoping that I will form some sort of picture that will create some kind of understanding...I want to try and help others create their own story. Since the age of six, I have not gone more than a year without being in some sort of educational environment in the capacity of either student or teacher on a regular basis, whether it has been as a student, a teacher, a mother in a preschool setting or a teacher/mother at parent/teacher meetings. Now here I am, a PhD student. What is it that draws me back and back again? How did I find myself on this educational quest that never seems to end? I must have something more to learn.

(Journal entry, September 1, 2010)
INTRODUCTION

This research focuses on the experiences of 39 “late-entry women,” a term I use to describe women who embark upon their PhD journey later in life than is typical in North America. The use of visual and participatory methods such as narrative inquiry can help various groups, especially those who feel marginalised in some way, to articulate their views. In positioning my research within qualitative research methods, I explore late-entry women’s voices, and how key theoretical and empirical work can link visual and narrative studies. I will also demonstrate how this study is linked to my understanding of my own PhD journey. What empirical studies can shed light on work on women in the academy, especially late-entry female students? Inspired to follow this path of research from my own experiences of being a late-entry student, my work has been and will continue to be influenced by feminist research methods. For example, how do women’s life experiences have an impact on their journey towards becoming a scholar? How do the women I will involve in my study feel they are perceived in the university by faculty and/or by peer doctoral students? And, very importantly, how does my life experience affect my research?

My Inspiration

Even as child, I was interested in listening to women talk about their lives. I remember my mother used to invite ‘the girls’ (her friends) over for tea. Once a month, these neighbourhood women would get together at one of their houses to talk about their lives, their families, their struggles. When they met up at our house, I would listen to their lively conversation from another room and enjoy the loud laughter and the friendships they had formed. It was energising, even to the young child that I was. Little did I know that one day I would find inspiration from those
gatherings for my dissertation fifty years later! I knew from an early age that women find strength, encouragement and solace from their conversations with other women. And so, it was with confidence that I turned to listening and learning from late-entry women’s voices as they pursued their PhD. As I explored these women’s stories, I knew that my curiosity was a reaction to other people’s comments about my age as I embarked on my studies, and I feel that my reaction to such comments was the energy behind the construction of my questions. And this energy has kept me going and fuelled my desire to know other’s stories. As Christine (all participants have pseudonyms), one of my participants whom I interviewed said about the source of her energy for her work:

*I didn’t know if anybody has said this. I think it’s somewhat related to what we said about persistence and tenacity. Yes, the support of my loved ones was important to me – but I did it. They didn’t. So what sustained me was me. I would also say what sustained me was complete utter curiosity. I was like a dog with a bone.*

Her words resonated with me. I could have gone on forever listening to women’s stories – as I, too, was ‘like a dog with a bone.’ While every single participant had her own unique voice, there were so many themes that surfaced again and again in their stories. I couldn’t ignore the familiar threads that ran through the narratives. The pride in their accomplishments, the barriers to get there, and in particular, the stories of the resolve and determination that the late-entry women displayed throughout these narratives, all of these have taught me more than I ever imagined I would learn, not just about the art of narrative inquiry, but about the importance of putting yourself in the story, of opening up to the interviewee. The warmth of the women’s spirit, the candid way they shared the stories of their lives with me – an inquisitive guest for a short period, was humbling. I hope that I do justice to their spirit and that they inspire you as you read this dissertation.

Setting out to learn how the mature woman sees herself as fitting in to the university setting
has for me, been a journey of my own self-discovery. I hope the explorations I share here will help other late-entry women to answer some of the questions they might have about who they are on this journey, or at least give them some questions to ponder. As well, perhaps my study will help to make a university education at a later stage in life something that would be seen as possible for those women who might be hesitant or unsure of themselves as they consider following the doctoral path.

As I spoke with others on this journey, I continued to be struck by how our upbringing can and I believe does affect how we see and experience the world. As such, I remember with fondness those afternoons listening to my mother’s circle of friends, how they met regularly and allowed each other into their lives.

**Background**

I returned to university to pursue my doctorate in the fall of 2010. I was 53. Similar to many of the women I interviewed for this study, at the time I was looking for ‘something more’ in my life. My husband and I had raised four bright and very successful daughters; they were all well on their way in life. The two eldest were about to graduate from university and the two youngest were also on an academic path. I watched them with envy, remembering those days of study and learning, how inspired I was as an education student, believing that maybe I could change the world once I received a teacher’s degree. Wanting to return to an academic environment, and with encouragement from my husband, I inquired about the possibility of entering the doctoral program at McGill University. With support from Claudia Mitchell, I applied and was accepted. What had I done? Where would this lead? Then to my great bewilderment, as if I was not uncertain enough of my abilities, I had well-meaning people, saying things to me like, “Why are you bothering to go back to school at this stage in your life?” Another said, “Why don’t you just coast to retirement?” Comments such as the surprise that I would be embarking on this venture at this stage in my life resounded in my
ears. Like many of the women I ended up interviewing, I, too, was driven by interests that sprang from my personal and professional interests. My life of motherhood and my teaching career both gave rise to many questions that I felt I needed to explore in the formal setting that is the university. Initially this dissertation would have dealt with education, how the lives of children and their families and the education system work together. While this still concerns me as a mother, a teacher and a learner, this question of the late-entry women took over my thoughts toward the end of my first year of study and propelled me to change the research question I had started off with when I first entered McGill. I decided I wanted to probe the minds of women as they make their way towards the highest level of achievement our universities offer. I now consider that, fortunately these kinds of comments only strengthened my resolve to not only pursue the degree, but to try and answer that question, in a formal way, through doctoral research. “Why pursue a doctoral degree at this stage in my life?” It seems it was that question, asked enough times of me that set me on my quest. I wanted to investigate how other women experienced their doctoral education and academic life in general. I was curious to know how they felt they were perceived in the academy. Rather ironically, it was the very notion that people questioned my decision to return to school that became the impetus for this study. Had I been left to go on my way quietly, with no attention given to my age, this thesis would be a very different piece of work. That others’ responses to my return to school at this stage in my life provoked such reaction in me and in them was curious. Reactions are never neutral. Their responses were either of surprise or admiration, or both. As a woman who has enjoyed studying and learning my whole life, I found these reactions to be, on occasion, puzzling, insulting and complimentary. At times I felt these emotions simultaneously. I had visions of myself sitting on those wooden swings that I used to see my grandmother on as she crocheted booties and blankets for her many grandchildren. While I have no doubt that my grandmother, mother of 12 children
in 25 years enjoyed every minute of her senior years, I knew that wooden swing was not to be my destination – at least not within the foreseeable future. As strong and confident as I willed myself to feel about my decision to return to academia, I could not help but be troubled by the comments of others. Echoes of these feelings ran through many conversations that I had with women, how instances of discrimination, while we all know should be brushed off or ignored, were difficult to disregard. They still tended to make many women feel their efforts were being undermined or played down.

**Early Impressions**

I remember when I was first accepted to the doctoral program. I said to a casual acquaintance, a mother of three, who had just herself completed her doctorate that I was about to embark on this journey. Her first words, even before “Congratulations!” were, “Don’t give up!” At the time I found it such an odd comment. Now I know exactly what she meant. I have found that it is true; the dedication required is relentless – especially, I believe, for older students, like me, who have so much in life competing for our time. All the women I worked with were fulfilling so many other roles, sometimes as a mother, a full time worker, a committed partner and/or caregiver – sometimes all of these roles combined. They were often doing this with little to no encouragement or expectation from the university. Their time and energy had to be extremely well managed. There were many times when they felt that their personal, student and work lives collided. They had to be steadfast, tenacious and single-minded while completing so many other roles. It seemed a bit of a paradox.

Through all this talk with other women, I was able to draw conclusions and understandings in part that were possible because of the participatory nature of my qualitative research. The commitment that many of the women felt to get their story right, to contact me after our interview
or to send a note of support was very encouraging. There was a great sense of commitment and interest in my project from the women I worked with; they seemed to know that allowing me to probe them about their lives would somehow be helpful to other women starting out on this journey. As people recounted their own backgrounds and experiences with their parents, educators, partners and children, I found myself examining my personal story, piecing it together, connecting the dots and seeing my fertile past as a rich field that I’ve been sowing, many years before I made my way back to formal education. The many roles in my life, starting with daughter, and especially, it seemed to me, the roles of wife, mother and teacher, helped to prepare me for the steadfast dedication required on this journey. All the women offered advice and/or images of their own stories (with very little probing on my part) and of times when they were unsure of their ability to complete their PhD. Many had truly heart-warming (and sometimes heart-wrenching) stories of how they were encouraged or discouraged by their partners, other students, co-workers, family or their advisors. Often when they doubted themselves, they remembered people who had encouraged them on their journey and they wanted to share those memories with me. For example, Yvette described a woman she’d known only briefly; she said her dissertation dedication would be an ‘In Memoriam’ to this woman. She felt that the woman had given her sight, had been her Anne Sullivan and had inspired her to think beyond the patriarchal, chauvinistic and restrictive values, which she’d been indoctrinated in growing up. She said the woman had given her the support and encouragement she needed to go where she needed to go and that she owed her gratitude. Many women talked about the importance of cheerleaders in this way. I was interested in knowing what guides, sustains or thwarts late-entry women students. I wondered how much women’s earlier lives (when they weren’t students) helped them and informed them on their PhD journey. As Clandinin and Connelly (2004) set out to describe what narrative inquirers do, they note that it is important that we recognise
our own boundaries when performing narrative inquiry. “We must recognize our own narrative history and consider how that perception of our own ways of thinking and being might impact our interactions with those we seek to give voice to” (p. 46). Through a detailed description of their own journey, Clandinin and Connelly illustrate the value and importance of studying other people’s stories and how that study can bring us to understand ourselves better.

Throughout this study I felt a growing understanding of my place in the world of academia. There were times when I was completely overwhelmed by the outpouring of stories from women. It seemed that these stories were just waiting to be told; all someone had to do was ask. Many participants thanked me for choosing this topic. As Carol said, “These are stories that need to be told.” As I remarked on the tremendous support that my participants gave me so readily, Sybil said, “Women going through a struggle tend to support each other, right? They support others going through something that they believe in – they want to support each other.” It seemed so, yet there was irony here. Why, if so many women seemed to really want to support each other, were there so many women who felt so isolated? I reasoned that it had to be the lack of them. After all, seeing yourself as a student on the faces of others seemed important. As an elementary school teacher, I am highly aware of the importance of cultural sensitivity in our classrooms. As teachers, we remind ourselves that children need to see themselves and their families in the stories we read to them, the textbooks we use and the staff that is hired to teach them. I could see a parallel. I was beginning to see that late-entry women would also like to see themselves reflected in the student body.

In my quest for women’s voices on the subject of study at a later age and the presence – rather than absence of women in the university classes, I came across this thought in Mama PhD (Evans & Grant, 2008), a collection of essays written by mothers in university. In a chapter called “The Wire Mother,” O’Doherty (2008), a late-entry student, begins by referring to an observation
on her first day in a graduate school class. I chuckled to myself as I read her words. She recounted how, as the dean addressed the group, she asked herself what possible reason the university might have had for accepting her at her age. “As I sat surrounded by youth, focused intelligence, and cheery certitude, it seemed more probable that I had been taken on as ballast – providing a measure, or at least the appearance, of balance, but ultimately disposable” (p. 39). I am distressed to admit that similar thoughts went through my mind in my first year as I sat among that ‘cheery certitude.’ I gained confidence, but still, I wondered, where were the other late-entry women? So my inquiry began. I began to form a firm belief that I could and would listen to, record and share the stories of other women who set off on the doctoral journey later in life. I discovered many success stories about late-entry women, some of whose stories I shared with my participants along the way. There were many times when I wished that I could have all the women in a room together, so that they could share their stories with each other. To that end, I created a website where they could in fact listen to each other’s stories and interact, albeit virtually. This is discussed more fully in Chapter 7.

**Positioning Myself**

As is already obvious, I am very much in the thesis. The questions and my interest in this subject sprang from preoccupations I had about my place in graduate study at this time in my life. Throughout my data collection and even after, each time I described this project, particularly to women, both younger and older than me, those who are both in and out of school, I have sensed that this is a worthwhile and important area of interest. No woman has looked at me oddly and wondered why I was embarking on this PhD journey, nor expressed surprise about the particular questions I was posing. The participants included in this study are women who have already completed their PhD at a later stage in life, as well as women who are currently studying. It was interesting to listen to the stories of the women who’d completed their degrees: their frustrations/
joys had been very similar to the women who were currently studying, and they remembered them with such clarity. This said to me that we (I) would get through it. I found the similarities among the stories encouraging. It seemed as though the women were linked to each other through me, and I felt a responsibility to complete my research. As I worked with the women, and I heard echoes from one to the next, I found the common concerns intriguing. So many of them felt alone, yet, through my research I was finding a way to alleviate some of that isolation. Writing myself into this research, adding my voice and my concerns was both a privilege and a sense of validation. Initially I was somewhat nervous about asking people to open up and share their concerns about their lives. It seemed that I had no reason to be. Sharing their stories with me seemed to provide a sense of solidarity among them. I knew this from the number of times women said how much they appreciated the ability to reach out (through my work) and let others know their stories. As Cindy said in one of her emails to me, “It’s nice to feel part of a community despite the solitary nature of academic work.” Through me, they seemed to know that their voices would be heard, their stories would be shared and live on.

**Personal Growth Through Research**

As I listened and re-listened to the many voices of late-entry women sharing their stories with me, I hoped that I would have a clearer understanding of my own story. I also anticipated that encouraging women to tell their stories would have value for them. I knew from my own experience of involving mental health patients in a discussion and writing workshop some years ago that talking about your feelings with a caring person in a friendly, non-threatening setting could have beneficial, even therapeutic effects (Cullinan, 1997). To illustrate just how true that turned out to be, as I thanked Pamela, a psychiatric nurse, for sharing her story, she said that she felt talking about herself with me helped her to clarify her thoughts. She, like many others, enjoyed connecting and sharing
her life with another doctoral student. Towards the end of our conversation she commented again on how much she had enjoyed the interview:

It helps me to get focus. You know, it’s funny when you talk...this study of yours is so interesting, because when you talk about your PhD...I could talk for hours about what I’m studying and how interesting it is and how my type of program is helping me to think and how your thinking changes in a PhD and how you can integrate that in your work. Like right now when I go see my next patient...there are so many things to talk about. But it’s funny that what I want to talk about and what is way bigger is my personal journey. It’s funny. So congrats for doing this!

I concurred and noted that to be sure:

Isn’t it funny how so much of this PhD is really about the self. It’s about the change in you. It’s really about how you evolve and how you begin to see and understand the world. It’s a funny thing. I’m sort of part of this parade I’m studying. (I laughed.) It’s a bit of an odd thing.

As Clandinin and Connolly (2004) endeavour to explain how and why they are writing their own stories within the telling of what narrative inquirers do, they say:

Partly, we use the language we do to make it clear that these were our stories. We did live out what we now call cultural stereotypes. This telling of ourselves, this meeting of ourselves in the past through inquiry, makes clear that as inquirers we, too, are part of the parade. We have helped make the work in which we find ourselves. We are not merely objective inquirers; people on the high road, who study a world lesser in quality than our moral temperament would have it, people who study a world we did not help create. On the contrary, we are complicit in the world we study. Being in this world, we need to remake ourselves as well as offer up research understandings that could lead to a better world. (p. 61)
Naturally I was aware of how I was part of the parade. It did seem indulgent at times. On more than one occasion I felt as though I were looking into a mirror. There were so many similarities between my participants and me; as they shared their stories, I began to more fully understand my own.

I approached my research with an investigative spirit. My inquiry led to new knowledge, new understandings for me and often for the women who had agreed to take part in my study. Sharing the insight that I have gained from this project, through presentations, conversations with others and above all learning from it myself has brought me to a place that I never knew I’d get to...We have that capability of transforming others and ourselves through sharing what we know and how we know what we know. There is interconnectedness among us and through talk and sharing we can help each other to find our way in the world. Many scholars (Cole, 2010; Kirsch, 1993; Leonard, 2001; Leonard, Becker, & Coate, 2005; Oakley, 1981; Economic and Social Research Council, 2010) speak of the lack of confidence and the anxiety that many women in academia experience. And those studies refer to women who have made it there. What about the women who are just entering the academy? Or what about the ones who are afraid to even apply, feeling that their voices are not valued or wanted in their later years? The university is not a neutral place. We learn as we make our way through that there are certain ways of being, certain expectations that are so engrained. Older women are reminded of this again and again, sometimes in subtle ways and sometimes in not so restrained ways.

It was easy for me to situate myself in the stories the women told. Time and time again I found myself nodding in agreement, laughing loudly or feeling great empathy as they told their stories. I offer this comment from Marnie, as she recalled waiting in line for a registration package from the young woman who was handing them out:
Marnie: Well there are huge amounts of ageism at the university...

Mary: Mhm.

Marnie: ...see that all the time. It’s funny when I first went back; I mean I was only fifty-something, right?

Mary: Yeah.

Marnie: Young, right?

Mary: A baby! (laughs)

Marnie: (laughs) So when I, I was in an undergraduate program then, so I went to the orientation for students. And a woman was handing out materials. And she didn’t hand out any to me – so I went and said, ‘Excuse me, can I have some materials?’ and she said, ‘We don’t really give them to the parents.’

Mary: (laughs)

Marnie: Right!

Mary: Did you slap her?

Marnie: (laughs) It was tempting!

Mary: Ah! That’s funny!

Marnie: Yes. It wasn’t funny at the time. Well, at the time I was a little taken aback. It happened so often that I was mistaken for a visiting parent, mothers on campus, that kind of thing.

It seemed necessary for women to simply laugh off these kinds of comments on a regular basis.

While they seemed to be able to not let these comments rile them, I wondered, was it really a necessary part of study for an older woman? Did they not have enough challenges without this blatant attitude of disregard? This kind of attitude followed Marnie right into her job at the university after she had obtained her doctorate years later. She said that she was finding ageism was
quite widespread in her program. She was on hiring committees. She said people would say things to her like, “Well we really would like to hire somebody at the beginning of their career – not the end.” As she said, “And even though I understand that, I think, Hang on. I’m here. Can you see me? For heaven’s sake! If you’re thinking that, you know, say it in a different way! We don’t want someone too old, they said.” These words are from a woman who returned to school at 50 to redo her undergraduate degree. She received her doctorate at the age of 63. Talk about tenacity.

Women’s accounts of personal growth and an awakening throughout their doctoral journeys came up repeatedly. It was apparent that doctoral study was truly a voyage of self-discovery and personal growth. On a personal level, I came to appreciate just how much I really do enjoy collecting other’s stories and sharing them in an effort to confer authority and deep meaning, not only on their expertise, but on mine as well. I learned also how much the sum of our experiences informs us as we age and move forward. Like Pamela, many of the women repeatedly expressed appreciation of my sincere efforts to collect their stories, and this helped convince me of the value of this work.

Woven into this thesis are references to my own experiences in the academy as well as those of the women I interviewed. As I gained confidence and a sense of belonging, I began to acknowledge with pride that my observations and my contribution to the study of late-entry women had officially begun and that my work just might leave a lasting impression and contribution to academia.

How does language transform – how do we speak, how do we feel we are perceived and why does that matter? Throughout my conversations with the women involved in this study, I was struck by how much I kept learning. Here I had set out to understand other women’s stories and I found myself nodding, sharing and feeling each time an interview was over that, not only had I collected yet another story, but my own story was clearer to me, or I knew myself a little better. The
women were doing the very thing that I had hoped they would do. They were using the interview to celebrate the knowledge that I craved, and that is to know what drives and sustains the late-entry woman? Through discussion, through images, through the power of language, I was coming to understand our stories. I was definitely on the right track and always, understanding myself better and better. My world of understanding grew with each interview. I was better able to piece the conversations into a compelling narrative that, for me, recognising that although the words came from 39 women, so often they resonated as one – full of magical threads – colored with slightly different shades to become a vibrant tapestry I could not have imagined at the beginning of my journey.

I wanted to look at, in part, what I had acquired on my life route of being a mother, sister, teacher, wife, daughter and friend. Additionally, what have other women ‘acquired’ on their life journeys and how have their skills informed them as they make their way through academia? For example, did they rely on patience and intuition as they journeyed through academia? I think they, we, do. Belenky, Bond and Weinstock (1997) listened to women’s stories from mothering groups. What was striking was, how, after being asked to participate for some time in discussion groups, the women became more confident to speak out about their lives. They began to understand that their voices matter. Indeed, as I spoke to women, often I could sense that they were touched by my interest in their efforts to obtain their doctorates. They all had opinions about their journeys that were often directly related to their age. They lauded me for bringing their struggles out in the open.

As I set out on this path, I considered the amount of time I had already spent reflecting on my own journey. In my first year, I spent hours thinking about my place in the academic world. How could I best share with the world my inquisitive nature and the answers I might find to my questions? How could I best learn how to ask research questions that would matter? Could I, at
this stage in my life, make a contribution to understanding older women students? Would I have something new to say? Would it be worthy of all the time I knew I would be investing in this endeavor? Can a person be too preoccupied with her own life questions? I knew that I had to start with questions that I cared about deeply. I also felt that I needed to ask questions that I believed I’d not seen as fully addressed as I would have liked them to be. As I began to formulate my questions, and imagine how I would go about answering them, I began to understand the importance of self-study and/or autobiography and how it can influence and inform research. While discussing the benefits of autoethnography to a graduate student, Carolyn Ellis (2004) noted that self-study can generate self-doubts and can be difficult. She continued, “Of course, there are rewards, too for example, you come to understand yourself in deeper ways. And with understanding yourself comes understanding others. Autoethnography provides an avenue for doing something meaningful for yourself and the world...” (p. xvii). It is my hope that through this study I will make an authentic contribution to understanding the concerns of some late-entry women’s journey into academia. As Kirsch (1993) notes with her inspiring study on women in university that while we can’t change the fact that gender is an important factor in women’s lives at the university:

...we can educate women about the challenges to their authority that they are likely to encounter. We can also educate them about the courage, wisdom, and commitment of other academic women as well as about the innovative and diverse strategies for addressing issues of authority that other women have developed. (p. 133)

Finding inspiration in these words, I wanted to share with a wider community, (not just the university), the challenges and rewards of study at a later stage in life. What stood out as I worked with late-entry women was how frequently they mentioned the stamina needed to forge ahead with their studies, among all the responsibilities that naturally come later in life.
The Study

For this study I have looked at the responses from 39 late-entry women in academia across Canada. The women had either completed their doctorates as late-entry women or were currently working towards completing it. As noted above, for the purpose of this study, ‘late-entry women’ is a term I use to describe women who embark on doctoral study later in life. According to the Conference Board of Canada (2013), students typically tend to enter doctoral programs in their late twenties. When I searched the Conference Board of Canada’s website, older, mature, non-traditional, late-entry or re-entry were not terms that yielded any results. In fact, statistics given for 16 peer countries and their rate of graduates at the PhD level all report on graduates in the 25-29 year old range only. Older students do not factor in to any of the statistics. Another term that I had considered is ‘the non-traditional learner.’ However, I wanted to indicate that I was listening to women’s stories exclusively at the doctoral level of study and the term ‘non-traditional learner’ did not clearly indicate this. I was also reticent to give a cut-off age. How old is the late-entry woman? When I began to recruit women I was asked these questions, “How young is old? How young can the participant be?” However, I was not asked if a certain age, let’s say 60, was too old. Already the study was fascinating and I’d only just begun. Somehow people seemed to consider that 50 was old, but anyone younger than that, well they weren’t quite sure they ‘qualified.’ As time went on and I was getting responses from people wanting to lend their voices to my research, I decided that if a woman felt that she were older than a typical student, then she was indeed an appropriate candidate for this study. Such is the privilege of the doctoral researcher. It was my study. As such, the age range for the participants in my study ranges from 37 to 77. The ages given are the ages of the participants at the time of the interviews, which were conducted from July of 2013 to March of 2014. There were two women in their 30’s, 15 women in their 40’s, 13 women in their 50’s, eight women in their 60’s
and one woman in her 70’s. Fifteen of the women had completed their doctoral studies as late-entry women and 24 were in progress. Only two of the women were in their first year of study. The others ranged from their second to their seventh with the majority of them being in their third year. Of the twenty-four women who had not completed their degree, 3 were in their sixties, 11 were in their fifties, 8 in their forties and 2 in their thirties. Since I have completed the interviews, 4 of the women (all in their fifties) have graduated. To my knowledge, 2 have withdrawn from their programs. There was a rich variety of research interests that the women had and they were enrolled in the following faculties: Economics, Education, Linguistics, Medicine, Science, Social Work, and Sociology. The professions they held included: chemist, biologist, crisis worker, ecologist, guidance counsellor, historian, librarian, linguist, medical doctor, midwife, nurse, policy analyst, psychologist, social worker, sociologist and teacher. Such an array of careers, yet often resonating, it seemed, in one voice, with many similar concerns. Since all of the women I interviewed came to doctoral studies with such a fertile past, through my questioning I began to learn how the personal and practical knowledge that one possesses is reflected in how they approach their studies.

**Research Questions**

Broadly speaking, the questions I was seeking answers to revolved around the issue of how the participatory methods of research that I chose would help me to understand and represent the late-entry women’s journey through academia. As a late-entry doctoral student myself, I had questions I wanted to examine regarding my place in the academy. Not finding my age group represented in my cohort, I became curious. Where were the late-entry women? I was determined to find them. I wanted to learn about their doctoral journeys. Did they have questions/experiences comparable to mine? What could I learn from their experiences in the academy? I wondered how the responsibility of having a full life, as late-entry women seem to have, has any bearing on how
they cope with the demanding doctoral student life? I also wondered about the benefit or value of a ‘lived life.’ Might the skills acquired during our lives help to propel us forward and inspire our educational journey? How had our past influenced and informed how we see ourselves today? Would policy makers at the head of institutions gain some important insight from a study such as mine? As I proceeded, I discovered that there were many issues that were, in fact, particular to late-entry women. As the findings from this dissertation demonstrate, our universities need to take heed of the comments and concerns that this important group of students brings to Canadian universities. On a personal level, I also wondered, how my insider status would help to inform and drive my research? Finally, I wanted to know, how we can read the lives of late-entry women against the prevailing literature on women returning to school later in life.

**A Note on the Images Throughout This Dissertation**

As I proceeded to work with women throughout the data collection process, I asked them to supply images of their doctoral journey. They were free to provide a metaphoric image or to search through family photos. I encouraged them to supply whatever image they felt helped them depict their journey. In the end I was hoping for some sort of visual representation of their journey. The images I received ranged from very personal photos from their childhoods to family shots to images of animals and nature. The images are interspersed throughout this dissertation. They help to provide an understanding of how the women see their journey and allow for some unique understanding, from the women’s point of view. Always, when the images came back to me, I was encouraged that I had offered a place for the women’s voices to be heard. As they made their way through their PhD journey, I could see the women found encouragement and wonder all around them. On many occasions, I was deeply touched by their words and continually inspired to keep going, believing that my work is significant and helps to document the late-entry women’s journey in
doctoral education. I offer these words and image (see figure 1) from Laurel as an inspiring example.

Figure 1: Laurel’s inspiration, “What Lies Beneath.” Public artwork in Sudbury, ON.

This photo is taken near my home and is a mural that is painted on a Sudbury tunnel wall. I use the tunnel to walk downtown and see “her” regularly. “She” keeps me going with her outstretched arms, offering me a hug for sustenance. “She” tells me to keep going and that my work is important. Spelled out in the leaves above her head is the word “life”. Because I am studying reproductive health care for women, the depiction of the breasts and the uterus is particularly fitting.

While Laurel felt the nourishing hug from this mural, her sharing it with me conferred upon me a certain conviction in my work. So many images touched me for various reasons, and this particular image made me smile. Many women spoke of the light at the end of the tunnel, yet only this one had out-stretched arms to receive her.
Organisation of the Thesis

This thesis is organised into seven chapters. In this first chapter, I have outlined my reasons for turning to doctoral studies at this stage in my life. I chart my development as a learner/researcher from my early years in my family home. I consider how listening to others through narrative inquiry has helped me to understand and appreciate my own and others’ personal growth through the PhD journey.

In Chapter 2 I have framed the study and reviewed some of the literature that deals with researching from a feminist standpoint. I consider how my own life has prepared me for my academic studies and how my position and my understanding of the world might influence my findings. I also reflect on how life experiences of late-entry women might impact their educational journey and that of the students and teachers whose lives they touch. I explore the field of narrative inquiry, including photovoice, writing workshops and interviewing and my reasons for making use of these methods of inquiry. I contemplate how important it has been for me to listen to the interviews repeatedly and discover the deep meaning and similar threads that run through so many of the women’s comments. I acknowledge the subjective nature of qualitative research, trying to include my voice, but not override the general feelings and understandings that I have gleaned from my participants. Being so close in age and concerns, this was at times, a balancing act. I express my deep desire to provide a piece of work where other women can find sympathetic voices and know that they are not alone on this PhD quest and that their insecurities, their growing confidence and their feelings of isolation are felt by many other women. As such, I hope I have succeeded in making a claim that all voices belong and should be included in research.

In Chapter 3 I describe my research design and explore how I went about finding answers to the question how do I, and other women, that is older women, experience the demands and the
pleasures of PhD life? With answers to this important question, I hope to add my voice to other Canadian researchers who have worked with late-entry doctoral students. I have offered yet another dimension to the available narratives of late-entry Canadian women in academia. From an auto/ethnographic viewpoint, using a combination of qualitative research methods including photovoice, narrative writing workshop and individual interviews with late-entry women, I have shared my understanding of their insights and their experiences as I explore my own. Perhaps, through my research, I will help others and myself articulate what is needed to help late-entry women find academic success and acceptance in academia at later stages in their careers.

In Chapters 4, 5 and 6 I discuss my findings. I describe some of the themes that came up repeatedly during my work with the 39 women. I have broken down the themes into three chapters, recognising that there is much overlap within the themes. In chapter 4 I detail what it means to have, what Sandy called “Big Lives.” Big Lives include the challenges of managing family, children, partners and parents. I also look at some of the loneliness, solitude and guilt that many women seemed to experience throughout their doctoral journey.

In Chapter 5 I look at how some of the women manage to mediate their big lives along the way. I illustrate how some of them feel that they relate (or do not) to their advisors. As well, I provide some examples of discrimination in addition to growing confidence as they make their way through the academy. I also make a claim that the late-entry woman has different but very present financial needs from her younger peers. I share some of the lofty goals women have set for themselves – both personal and academic.

In Chapter 6 I talk about, in the words of another participant, ‘the value of the lived life.’ Women were eager to share advice and opinions about their academic experiences. They talked about the inspiration and support offered to them, as well as the tenacity and commitment necessary
on their part. They were cognisant of the fact that the future was quite unsure as it seemed to hold little promise that the world might recognise an older student with a PhD. They were also quite matter-of-fact about the realities of aging, but were quick to point out the benefits of age.

In Chapter 7 I summarise my research findings, drawing attention to the common themes that make up the concerns and the fears of the late-entry doctoral woman’s journey. I also offer some suggestions to the academy so that it might be more welcoming for the late-entry woman. It is my hope that through examining the perceptions and feelings of late-entry women, I might help to encourage more women to choose to return to university at a later stage in life. Articulating how some women navigate academia could help other groups, who might feel marginalised, to discover their voices as well. Indeed, had I myself not been steadfast in my resolve to pursue this academic path, I could have been easily discouraged. I hope that the stories I have shared as a result of my research will inspire other late-entry students as they embark on their academic journey. Perhaps they might pick up where I left off, acknowledging that there is work to be done – and do it.

Conclusion

I hope my work honors their voices and gives credit to the determination of the late-entry doctoral student. Interlaced were the connections, the similarities, and yes, the contradictions that, even though we are many kilometres apart, I could see we shared so many feelings, uncertainties and beliefs about our place and ourselves in academia. I hope that through sharing this work these women will recognise their voices and know that they are part of a large and dynamic community of Canadian women who have chosen to redefine themselves as doctoral students.
Figure 2: Teatime meant support to my mother’s friends.

Although the subject of my conversations was vastly different from the ones I eavesdropped on in my family home so many years ago, the laughter and camaraderie that surfaced, and how supportive my participants were of me and each other, and how, in many cases, they shared their life challenges while pursuing their degrees was sweetly reminiscent of the kinds of support I could hear from those ‘girls’ my mom invited for tea many years ago (see figure 2). I hope that this dissertation will provide some inspiration and support to those women who seek to find a place in higher education later in life.
My research is grounded in listening to women, 39 women who have either obtained their doctorate as late-entry women or who are currently working towards obtaining it. My questions were deeply inspired by Carol Gilligan (1982, 1993, 2011) and her work on listening. As well, in the spirit of Dorothy Smith (1989, 2005), I have become interested in studying women’s lives from the women’s point of view. As I began my doctoral research I had many questions. Would the women that I interview feel they were listened to and considered an important population in the university? I was also curious to know what, if anything special, did they feel they brought to study later in life as mature women. What particular challenges did late-entry women face? Most of all, I wanted the voices of some new scholars to be heard, understood and appreciated. My primary reason for exploring this question was to make a claim that all of us, should we choose, can/should have a voice in academia. This research not only reports on what’s been said about the late-entry women’s experiences. Rather, I have presented the actual words and images that the women provided at my request, thereby creating a rich tapestry in which the interconnectedness of these women’s lives emerges.

**Being In the Research**

Ann Oakley’s (1981) exploration of women interviewing women, as she herself set out to do just that, interviewing women in their transition to motherhood, helped sensitise her to the importance of acknowledging our bias, our thoughts and opinions during the interview process. Oakley interviewed 55 women four times over a ten-year period. As she says, “The goal of finding out about people through interviewing is best achieved when the relationship of interviewer and
interviewee is non-hierarchical and when the interviewer is prepared to invest his or her own personal identity in the relationship” (p. 41). I was aware throughout my research that what I brought to the interview and how I conducted myself as I worked with the women might affect the research.

As well, I have drawn inspiration from Gesa Kirsch’s (1993) study of women in academia – how they negotiate authority, find their voices and attempt to break down barriers. The women I engaged in this study were honest and forthcoming about their feelings and their academic experiences. This required a trust that I did not take for granted. In most cases we had several email conversations as well as telephone and/or online (Skype) interviews. Without question, my ability to identify with them was an important factor in the success of my research. I was invested in and truly cared about the project of sharing their stories honestly from the outset. To delve into others’ lives and hope that they would be forthcoming required a trust that I had to earn. The success of my research depended heavily on my ability to connect with the women in an authentic way.

I hope that an offshoot of this study will be for other women to see themselves as ‘players’ in this academic world. As Corbin and Strauss (2008) write, “Thick and rich description, case analysis, bringing about change in a difficult situation, and telling a story are all valid reasons for doing research. Each form of research is powerful in its own way” (p. ix). I believe that the power behind this research is the richness of story that otherwise might not be heard if not for this study.

On the need for transparency between researcher and participant, years ago Oakley (1981) noted:

It required, further, that the mythology of ‘hygienic’ research with its accompanying mystification of the researcher and the researched as objective instruments of data production be replaced by the recognition that personal involvement is more than dangerous
bias – it is the condition under which people come to know each other and to admit others into their lives. (p. 58)

Undeniably, this research study was made easier and richer for me by the fact that I identified so closely with my participants. Interviews were often interspersed with the women asking me details about my journey. All wanted me to keep in touch and let them know when I have graduated. Any calls or emails I made or sent after the initial interviews to either ask them to clarify something or to send on an image to more fully explain their journey were answered quickly and enthusiastically, even though in a couple of cases the women declined to contribute any more because of busy work and/or family lives. All look forward to reading this study. They know that they’ve contributed a strand of their personal journey and illuminated the kinds of struggles that some late-entry women face. Sara explained towards the end of our conversation the reason she was interested in keeping in touch:

*Stay in touch with me because I’d be so excited to follow your path and your journey, right until you get the dissertation done. I’ll keep you up to date with my progress, too. One of the reasons I wanted to become one of your research participants is so that I can kind of create a network – connect with other women across the country. It can be very supportive. Well, I can’t wait to follow your work. Let’s do keep in touch. This is very exciting. You can be a...You’re a mentor. You know, looking at the stage that you’re at...I’m going to be at that stage myself very soon. I hope by the fall. It’s just wonderful – just so exciting.*

I also anticipated there would be a therapeutic value for the women that I involved in my study. For what is the value of any research if it can not serve to enlighten the very people who are involved in the knowledge making of the study? That is exactly what happened. On many occasions the women commented on how pleased they were to be talking to someone about their journey, not necessarily talking about the actual work of their PhD, but their learning process. For example, as
Pamela recounted her struggle with eating disorders from early adolescence, and how this struggle informed her research with mental health patients, she commented that it was very helpful to talk to me about her process. She thought that talking to me helped her to articulate the healing aspect of her PhD journey. She felt the balancing act of the studies and family life helped with her recovery. Her recovery included her PhD journey, and she was grateful for the opportunity to share her personal journey with me.

**Who Are Late-Entry Women?**

As I was trying to explain who are late-entry women, I considered Linda Anderson’s (2000) definition. Anderson was a PhD graduate from McGill University. For her dissertation she examined the experiences of 12 ‘re-entry women.’ As this study was completed in 2000, I wondered how similar my findings would be. I wanted to know what helps/hinders women, particularly late-entry women to develop their voices? Building on Anderson’s work, fifteen years later, I too, am interested in how a woman’s sense of authority is affected by her experiences in the academy. Anderson makes a distinction between ‘mature women’ and ‘re-entry women.’ The latter she terms as women who have already completed university and, as such are in a different category, and have a bit more of an edge perhaps than the former, the ‘mature woman’ who has not previously been a student in her adult life. Worried at first that she sounded like an elitist snob, she noted that this group of women had not been sufficiently studied. As she writes:

Thus I am saying this is not an “either/or” issue but a “both/and” issue. We are different from, yet the same as “mature” women students. We are different from, yet the same as, women who are “successful” academics. We re-entry women seemed to be the neglected middle child. So eventually I began to think of re-entry women such as myself as part of a larger phenomenon of growing numbers of women returning to higher education. Many are
women who have made significant contributions to society in different ways and who wish again to take up studies in a formal way. We come to the university wanting to do research, to be knowers in new areas and contribute in new and different ways. Outside the university many of us are powerful women, and we take back to our communities an enrichment which would otherwise be lost. But we could also make a difference within the university. We bring different kinds of knowledge and perspectives, we add diversity to the university population, we bring money to the university. I felt that the university must begin to recognize us and that my study could begin that process of making us visible as part of its contribution to scholarship. (p. 16)

While Anderson focused her research on re-entry women at one university (McGill), my study differs in the way that my participants have come from all across Canada. They have come from a wide array of disciplines; yet often speak in a very similar voice. In part, this study builds on Anderson’s work and provides a fresh perspective on the thoughts and feelings of some late-entry women. Hear the self-doubt in the comments such as the following from 57-year-old Bridget, about to graduate with her PhD. She spoke poignantly about the many obstacles in her way, including an ill mother to whom she tended (several hours away from her home), because as she put it, “I am the person who wants to be that caring person.” Add to that PhD work that found her driving several hours away regularly from her family to interview her participants for her project, while she maintained a full time teaching load. After our interview she provided this image (see figure 3) and words about a time when she was at home with her son, long before her decision to return to university:
Figure 3: Bridget's shelter and comfort at Lac LaRonge, Saskatchewan.

I could easily peek through the tall trees that grew widely out-of-control framing my view of the lake. My back yard was this lake, my sanctuary of unkempt, messy beauty – poplar trees and swampy willows. It held my attention for hours. This was a time when my solitude was only interrupted by the sound of small planes taking off from the water to fly their American passengers to some northern wilderness camp. I could watch their progress through the trees but they could not see me...I was hidden behind this protective wall.

I reflect on this moment as a commentary on how my journey towards a PhD has, for all purposes, been a somewhat camouflaged process. I do not think that the academy would have noticed me had I not simply stood my ground, demanding to be acknowledged. I am older, and as people age I think we become more invisible in society. The academy (even with all their rhetoric of individuality and inclusiveness) has shaped the idea of usefulness in society. On many occasions I’ve felt that my usefulness by both the academy and by society was questioned. Only when I confronted these mainstream ideas, did I suddenly emerge behind the wall of ignorance and stereotypical rhetoric. Even some of my colleagues found it amusing to comment on my age and my usefulness or contribution to academia. This was a painful time for me and it still stings. Yet when I think about this picture, I am reminded that this wall of trees that hid me also provided a protective barrier, shelter and comfort. It prepared me for what was to come. I could see out, but they could not see me...I think I was starting my journey towards a higher education long before I set foot on any campus.
As I read Bridget’s words, I reflect on Anderson’s words. Anderson (2000) claimed that as re-entry women, “We bring different kinds of knowledge and perspectives, we add diversity to the university population” (p. 16). I have read those words of Anderson, as well as Bridget’s words many times. I feel the dissonance as well as the accord. What an important sensitivity an older student brings to the university. She brings sensitivity for the very reason that she has likely felt excluded, ignored or different throughout her studies. How important that this group is acknowledged and welcomed. I am pleased and proud to provide an outlet for these women to be heard and understood, through their own words.

While I can say that I have gone through this doctoral program with encouragement from a devoted and caring husband, bright daughters, helpful classmates and my encouraging advisor and committee members, I cannot ignore this common thread that ran through so many of the interviews that I conducted with my participants and the scores of similar comments such as the one above. Many of the late-entry women I interviewed felt that their usefulness in the academy was not only questioned, but trivialised as well. Working with thoughtful women like Bridget helped me realise and have confidence that it is through narrative inquiry such as this one that we can truly understand each other.

Another late-entry student, Nan Pernal (2009) conducted an investigation into late-entry women at two western universities. She reflected that female students at that time (2000-2005) represented more than half of the students enrolled in Canadian universities, yet, “The overall academic environment often remains indifferent to them, especially amongst this older female population” (p. iii). Like Anderson, Pernal also looked at women’s life stories, exploring “how the personal, political, professional and public aspects of their lives affected their thinking with the entry or re-entry in to university classes” (p. 256). Pernal chose the term “senior re-entry women,”
to describe the life situation of the women she studied. She listed some of the reasons she chose to look at the question of senior re-entry women. Her primary drive was that she herself was one such student. Among the benefits of having mature women in the university setting, she lists the wisdom and diplomacy many have gained through life experiences. She notes that the often-nurturing nature of women might contribute to collegiality in the university environment. They might be able to mentor younger students and their peers. As she notes:

> They provide insight into different learning styles and uncover areas of inequity that should be addressed. Research about this older female subpopulation is necessary because of the broad range of attributes that could be beneficial to academic institutions. Some retiring faculty and administrators will be women so older female graduates might be encouraged towards leadership roles in academic teaching and administration. (p. 26)

Another benefit to having senior re-entry women in universities, she maintains, is that these women definitely improve the atmosphere in the academy. “Their assets consist of contributions to the Canadian culture, monetary support of higher education, vast life experience, and deep expertise in extensive areas of knowledge, sometimes as users and readers, or as interrupted careerists” (p. 75). What an optimistic outlook she brings to the discussion. Indeed in my discussions with women they did mention the fact that the separation of age gave them a different purpose for being in the academy. For example, many felt they were not as competitive as the younger students. In one discussion, a woman named Lucy described a particularly challenging time completing her degree, due in part to a series of changed personnel at her university. The word she used to describe her journey was ‘traumatic.’ As a result she felt the obligation to reach out to others who were struggling. She was even setting up a national conference at her university for female doctoral students to meet and talk about their research with other students in the same field. While referring to this event she said:
I guess that’s the one thing I’ve done with my PhD. I’ve also done a lot of coaching and mentoring with other people. People know that I failed my proposal, so when other people fail I usually get a call. I try and give them a little pep talk about, ‘It’s not always you.’ I think that’s the thing. You know the student gets blamed for the failure. In actual fact, now that I can reflect on it, it was my supervisor. My supervisor made me change what I was doing. You know, this is something that my supervisor wanted but it wasn’t something that I wanted. And I think there’s a lot more failures out there than we know about.

Why Narrative Inquiry?

Listening to such stories can provide a chance for us to experience lives lived in the teller’s own words and to perhaps picture ourselves in a similar story or to invent our own new and different story altogether, with a new and different plotline, rather than feel that we have to follow others’ expectations. It seemed that many of the women were really blazing their own trails and breaking away from the stereotypical expectations that they had lived with from a young age, and unfortunately, in some cases were still living with in their adult lives.

Listening to the accounts of others who’ve succeeded against odds or with little encouragement from others in an area that they already doubt themselves in, allows us to imagine that we have the possibility of not only building our own story, but knowing that we might inspire others to create their own stories. The words from the women I worked with paint pictures of struggle, tenacity and above all, the joy of learning.

As Pinnegar and Daynes (2007) define the turn toward narrative inquiry, they note that there are four themes in the turn: the first theme is the idea of a change in the relationship between the person conducting the research and the person participating as the subject – the relationship between the researcher and the researched. I have been in the interviews. I have not been an outsider. In fact, on more than one occasion, I felt as though I could have finished sentences for my...
participants and they for me. There was definitely a sense of co-construction of knowledge. There were a number of times when a participant wrote back to clarify or change her contribution to the research. They were free to do so. This kind of involvement on their part showed me that they truly wanted me to get their story straight. They were invested in and believed in the narrative process. The second theme Pinnegar and Daynes refer to revolves around the idea of a move from the use of numbers towards the use of words as data. While it would be possible for me to supply numbers such as 90% of the women reported feeling discriminated against while completing their studies, I have chosen to tell what such prejudice looks and feels like, from their point of view, in their words. This will explain the lengthy quotes at times. I wondered how many women I would have to interview before I felt that I had adequately understood the late-entry woman’s journey. I knew that telling one story was in many ways more powerful than supplying statistics. As I went along collecting stories I had to make a decision on when I had collected enough. In the end I interviewed 39 women in total with at least one participant from every Canadian province. I consider that it is an important note to make, to show that the common themes in the women’s stories spanned the country and crossed through so many disciplines of study and lifestyles. The third theme that Pinnegar and Daynes describe is a change from a focus on the general and universal toward the local and specific. Indeed, the recurrence of common themes in each of the women’s stories compelled me to give voice to these stories. I wanted these women to know that they were experiencing many of the same struggles as women all across Canada. So, while the focus was sharing voices across Canada, it seemed, at times, as though the women shared the very same space. Their homes were far flung; yet, they shared many similar thoughts and feelings about their place in the university. Finally the fourth theme Pinnegar and Daynes refer to is a widening in acceptance toward “alternative epistemologies or ways of knowing” (p. 7). Supplying the lengthy excerpts from my participants,
creating a website that they can access and listen to each other’s concerns and see the images that each of them provided has allowed a certain energy to flourish among the women even though it is unlikely that they will ever meet face-to-face.

The participants showed genuine cooperation and involvement. They were free to question me throughout the interview process and I willingly responded, sharing details about my own PhD journey, giving the women the same honesty that I expected and was shown by them. It seemed that we were on the journey together; I was both a spectator and a participant. In addressing these concerns, Richardson (1997) wrote:

Can we re-sign ethnography into life affirming, sanctifying practices? We can, for example, re-sign the in-depth “interview,” as an opportunity for “witnessing” another’s life, hearing testimony, feeling the multiplicity of selves that is ourself and all selves, shadows and doubles of each other. Instead of “going into” the field, we might embark on a “pilgrimage” or imagine ourselves “walking with” people. In “walking with” we are embodied, self-consciously reflexive, partial knowers, conveners, ministers, not “insiders” or “outsiders.” (p. 185)

All the methods (photovoice, writing workshops and interviews) that I used to collect/elicit the information on late-entry women involved the use of narrative inquiry. Using these methods, I hoped to help others voice their ideas and concerns. In his discussion of narrative inquiry, Polkinghorne (1995) noted, “Narrative as story is of special interest to qualitative researchers as they try to understand the fullness of human existence by including in their inquiries the unique characteristics that differentiate human existence from other kinds of existence” (p. 8). As I tried to understand the fullness of the late-entry women’s experience, I looked for common themes in their stories. Exactly what this storied data would provide for me, I was not sure. For example, would I see patterns? Polkinghorne further noted that:
The paradigmatic analysis of narrative seeks to locate common themes or conceptual manifestations among the stories collected as data. Most often this approach requires a database consisting of several stories (rather than a single story). The researcher inspects the different stories to discover which notions appear across them. Two types of paradigmatic search are possible: (a) one in which the concepts are derived from previous theory or logical possibilities and are applied to the data to determine whether instances of these concepts are to be found; and (b) one in which concepts are inductively derived from the data. (p. 13)

I leaned towards this second type of analysis. Trusting my instincts, as well as my own experience as a late-entry woman, I believed there was a story to be told, a story that hadn't really been fully explored or celebrated. To be sure, I had so many women say to me, “Thanks for doing this. These stories need to be told.” Over and over I heard some variation of this. After many of the interviews I received notes from my participants thanking me for the opportunity to give them the opportunity to express their thoughts on becoming new scholars.

As the process of collecting stories and transcribing them is long, oh, so long, as any qualitative researcher can tell you, I was bolstered by the fact that right through my data collection and transcription and analysis processes, I continued to find the women's tales engaging and compelling. I was convinced that if I felt that way, others would, too. I, too, was a new scholar. As Ely (2007) said:

The clear objective is to present and sustain the view that, no matter how excellent the gathering of information, in the final instance people must want to read what we wrote, must want to stay. Toward that aim, our reports must glow with life. This not only to honour our stories but, more important, to support the ethic that undergirds them: Much, if not most, narrative research centres on information people have provided us. Whether
in liberatory mode or not, narrative researchers are obligated to present the stories of those people in ways that cleave as closely as possible to the essence of what and how they shared. Rhetorical forms are key. (p. 569)

I do feel that these stories glow with life. I honour the women by sharing their stories and hope that others might find some inspiration and truth to inform and expand their understanding of the non-traditional learner that the late-entry woman seems to be.

I read Jerome Bruner’s (1986) words on the power of language and feel that I am on the track towards understanding:

Language not only transmits, it creates or constitutes knowledge or “reality.” Part of that reality is the stance that the language implies toward knowledge and reflection, and the generalized set of stances one negotiates creates in time a sense of one’s self. Reflection and “distancing” are crucial aspects of achieving a sense of the range of possible stances – a metacognitive step of huge import. The language of education is the language of culture creating, not of knowledge consuming or knowledge acquisition alone. In a time when our educational establishment has produced alienation from the process of education, nothing could be more practical than to look afresh in the light of modern ideas in linguistics and the philosophy of language the consequences of our present school talk and at its possible transformations. (p. 132-133)

I hope that my investigations into late-entry women have been a step towards giving them (us) voice, a bit of ‘culture creating’, to borrow Bruner’s phrase. Through careful listening, documentation and analysis I present my report and share my participants’ views on their academic and personal lives as they relate to their PhD journey. May my work help us all to be better understood and show those who are interested that indeed, we can have a second chance at defining who we are, not only in the
education system, but in the larger worlds we live in. Motivated to build on these ideas of Bruner, I contacted him. I wanted to share my enthusiasm for his work on the value of narrative inquiry. He was generous in his replies to me, showing this new scholar that he had time:

> As for “the value of talk” in all this, I’ve always found that women in academic life bring an especially rich perspective to things, a multiple perspective. To begin with, they are, as it were, the “minority group” in higher education and are sensitive both to “main line” thinking and minoritarian thinking – and are richer for this multiple perspective. I’ve always been struck by this “multiple perspective” in the women who’ve done their doctorates with me – whether Australians like Jacqueline Goodnow or Americans like Susan Carey and Patricia Greenfield. And finally, about the role of talking and writing in helping us create our identities, I thoroughly agree with you. After all, identity is an intersubjective phenomenon: how else to cultivate it save through intersubjective communication? (personal communication, October 11, 2011)

Listening and re-listening to the many conversations and in the course of follow-up emails with late-entry women I have been able to, I feel, capture some of the richness and the diversity that the ‘late-entry woman’ brings to doctoral study.

Richie (2003) is careful to point out that oral history is much more than that ‘vocal stuff’ that some people refer to as oral history. While espousing the advantages of preserving stories, he maintains that collecting oral history makes history more complex by adding many voices to the story. Interestingly, Richie also advises that in telling stories of others, the oral history teller allows her/his own voice to be heard in the process. Deeply connected to the art of doing life interview is the belief that the researcher is embarking on a ‘journey’ with the interviewee. While the authority of knowledge lies with the interviewee, for it is their story being shared, as I related to my participants, I found we were sharing both of our stories in the process. So while I was helping to bring out the stories, my involvement with their story naturally caused me to consider and share my own.
Uncovering Story Through Narrative Inquiry

Narrative has been characterised by a group of narrative and life history scholars as ‘a way of knowing’ (Hatch & Wisniewski, 1995). They feel that, “Life history and narrative offer exciting alternatives for connecting the stories and lives of individuals to the understanding of larger human and social phenomena” (p. 113). As they investigated the question of the distinction between life history and narrative, they found themselves obliged to use a questionnaire, even an open one. Indeed, I felt the same way as I prepared to interview my participants. Would my questions influence their responses by the very nature of the questions and my own experience as a late-entry graduate student? It was a bit of a conundrum. Nonetheless, I proceeded with this method, as I knew I had to introduce my topic somehow. I felt it was a way to show the women how they might fit into the conversation I was hoping to initiate. While I did provide the women with guiding questions, I made it clear they could answer only those they felt like and add on to them in any way. Once the interviews were complete I sent them a copy of the interview transcript and offered them the chance to retract or rephrase their words, as they felt necessary. Indeed some women chose to delete the name of their university or the city they lived in. It didn't seem to matter; there were so many common themes that cut across the interviews. At times I was truly astonished by the connections among people who were separated by great distances.

In part, this is what I hoped to share with others. All women, should they choose, can find a place setting at the table of academia. They should not be shy to, in the words of Sandberg (2013) in the title of her book, *Lean In:*

In addition to the external barriers erected by society, women are hindered by barriers that exist within ourselves. We hold ourselves back in ways both big and small, by lacking self-confidence, by not raising our hands, and by pulling back when we should be leaning
in. We internalize the negative messages we get throughout our lives – the messages that say it’s wrong to be outspoken, aggressive, more powerful than men. We lower our own expectations of what we can achieve. We continue to do the majority of the housework and childcare. We compromise our career goals to make room for partners and children who may not even exist yet. Compared to our male colleagues, fewer of us aspire to senior positions. This is not a list of things other women have done. I have made every mistake on this list. At times I still do. (p. 8)

Sandberg (2013) maintains that we must get rid of these internal obstacles, which are “rarely discussed and often underplayed” (p. 9). In speaking with women I have heard many similar comments and I hope that this collection of women’s voices as they work towards their doctorates will help them realise they share many concerns and struggles with other women.

Among many of the reasons that Richardson (1997) offers about why narrative is so useful in qualitative research is the following, “The past can be retrieved and relived in the present. Narrative organises the experience of time into personal historicity” (p. 30). It gives us something to hold onto. She continued:

Because people can narrativize their own lives, the possibility of understanding other people’s lives as also biographically organized arises. Social and generational cohesion, as well as social change, depend upon this ability to empathize with the life stories of others. Social interaction depends on actors making sense of others’ actions and motivations from the point of view of the others, from their biographical perspective. Social cooperation relies on this human capability, a capability grounded in narrative. (p. 31)

Making sense of our lives through group discussion, writing groups and sharing our stories can help us to find our place and listen to our voices, and know that they matter. While realistically I
recognised that I couldn’t possibly introduce the women to each other in the traditional sense of
the word introduce, I often considered how much they would have enjoyed meeting each other and
hearing each other’s opinions. It was with this thought in mind that I designed the website, *Echoes of
Late-Entry Women in Academia* (the website is described more fully in the final chapter).

**Research With, Not Research On**

During her keynote presentation at the British Educational Research Association (BERA)
conference, Jean Clandinin talked about the importance of starting with oneself as subject when
conducting research. She maintained that, “You can’t keep yourself out of it – it’s relational kind of
work” (239MikeO, 2012). Regarding the value of narrative inquiry in society, she states that policy
makers want to know what to do, how to proceed, what course of action to take to help others.
Through narrative inquiry, they often find stories compelling and see things they haven’t seen
before; as such, they start to think differently. As researchers we need to take care of and honour
the stories others, and we, tell. Our research can influence policy – if we can reach policy makers.
How can we talk in a way that speaks to those questions that address the needs of the very people
we seek to understand? In my study, many women spoke of the value of being an older student.
This idea of being able to connect the dots and make meaning seems, from my interviews, to come
more naturally with age, as Christine, one of my participants, pointed out as she spoke about her
own research into policy. She talked about the value of having an older person looking into policy
that might affect people like her. She felt that when you are a mature adult, with a whole history of
contexts and life experiences, you make sense of the world in a different way than when you were
in your twenties. She felt that it was better for the state of knowledge to have people going back to
school later in their careers as she felt that the added perspective one gains with age was crucial to
critical research:
As far as I’m concerned, you can’t do what I did in your twenties. There’s no way you’d understand.

You might have been able to read all of the same books that I did and all the same theory. You filter it differently. If you’re doing what I did, critical research – critical social analysis. Unless you can put that in the context of life experiences and the empathy that comes with that. You can’t…whatever sense you make of it and you publish, it’s not going to be as meaningful when you’re young. You can’t be as impactful. So in many ways I would say that it’s better for the state of knowledge itself – for the state of knowledge generation to have people late-career going back. I don’t want a twenty something year old doing the type of analysis I did. It would have been very superficial if they’d done it.

Like Kirsch (1993), I was also interested in listening to and presenting women’s voices about their experiences in academia. In her book, Women Writing the Academy, Kirsch set out “to create a rich portrait of women’s lives as faculty and students; as writers and researchers; as friends, mothers and wives; as human beings with hopes, dreams, and goals for the future” (p. 23). She did so by letting the women speak for themselves throughout the book. Rather than impose the ‘researcher’ voice throughout, she allowed the readers to deduce for themselves the gist of what the women were feeling and knowing.

Hearing descriptions of their doctoral journeys from these late-entry students helped to give me an appreciation of how our lived lives inform our student lives and how the university, if it is to be for the people and about the people who attend it, should be recognising the richness that people bring to study and celebrating learners of all ages. In her discussion of the value of narrative, Richardson (2002) pointed out the wealth of information we gain from others’ stories:

Narrative displays the goals and intentions of human actors: it makes individuals, cultures, societies, and historical epochs comprehensible as wholes: it humanizes time: and it allows us to contemplate the effects of our actions and to alter the directions of our lives. Narrative is
everywhere; it is present in myth, fable, short story, epic, history, tragedy, comedy, painting, dance, stained glass windows, cinema, social histories, fairy tales, novels, science schema, comic strips, conversation, and journal articles. Children everywhere learn how to listen to and tell stories at very early ages. (p. 21)

**Voice in Narrative**

As Gilligan, Spencer, Weinberg and Bertsch (2003) explore the value of listening to others’ narratives, they write about the research Gilligan (1982) detailed in *A Different Voice*.

This method of listening draws from psychoanalytical theories that have long-emphasized the layered nature of the psyche, which is expressed in a multiplicity of voices. (e.g. Fairbairn, 1944; Mitchell, 1988; Winnicott, 1960). The Listening Guide method provides a way of systematically attending to the many voices embedded in a person’s expressed experience. (Gilligan as cited in Gilligan et al., p. 157)

Gilligan et al. go on to describe this method and why it was developed when conducting the research:

It was developed in part as a response to the uneasiness and growing dissatisfaction with the nature of the coding schemes typically being used at the time to analyze qualitative data. These techniques did not allow for multiple codings of the same text, thereby reducing the complexity of inner psychic processes to placement in single static categories. (p. 158)

Analysing the data I collected using Gilligan’s method allowed me a way to listen and attend to the many voices embedded in a person’s expressed experience. The complex intersections of themes such as age and finances, low self-confidence and discrimination, family responsibility and uncertain futures, to name but a few, helped me to see the many competing and compelling issues that women are plagued by as they try to eke out some time for their own personal interests, amidst all the responsibilities they already have. In developing *The Listening Guide Method*, Gilligan drew inspiration...
from clinical methods in psychology developed by Breuer and Freud (1895), as well as the work of Piaget (1929). The language of music also inspired her: voice, resonance, counterpoint and fugue. Indeed, as I listened to the words of the women again and again, first during the initial interview, later during the lengthy process of transcription and again, many times over as I was trying to tease out, collect themes and often, to simply enjoy the conversations I had engaged in over the course of my data collection, I began to regard the stories as symphonic – many instruments joining together to create an orchestral piece that needed to be recorded and shared. I knew the stories would resonate with many – both women scholars who had already completed their degrees and those who had returned as late-entry women, as well as women who were on this journey with me. As I recognised the social nature of the interview, I hoped that my research and my understanding of my participants’ experiences would be research that I could share with others. The camaraderie that surfaced and made the women comfortable opening up to me would serve to enhance my understanding of their journeys and provide encouragement for other late-entry women or other women contemplating study at a later stage in life. As Holstein and Gubrium (2004) describe the active interview, they emphasise that an interview is inescapably a venue for creating meaning and understanding. Regarding the benefits of the active interview, they note:

Treating interviewing as a social encounter in which knowledge is actively constructed suggests the possibility that the interview is not so much a neutral conduit or source of distortion, but rather a site of, and occasion for, producing reportable knowledge. (p. 141)

Gilligan et al. (2003) posit that their method of listening:

...joins feminist researchers, cultural psychologists and psychological anthropologists in their concerns about the ways in which a person’s voice can be overridden by the researcher and their cautions about voicing over the truth of another (e.g., Borland, 1991; Fine &
Through a series of sequential listenings, the researcher can hear conflicting polyphonic voices, a bit like listening to music and listening for individual instruments, rather than the whole orchestra. When we speak, there are changes in our voices, depending on what we are talking about or with whom we are talking. Repeated listenings are necessary to really hear and understand others’ concerns, what they hold dear to them. Not only did I listen to the recorded interviews many times, I also asked for clarification and invited the participants to go over the transcribed interviews to be sure they felt they had expressed their opinions to their satisfaction.

Acknowledging that Denzin (1994) and Richardson (2000) have influenced her, Elaine Martin (2012) espouses the importance of voice in research and calls the inclusion of imagination in research, ‘courageous research.’ As an artist herself, she describes the importance of the artist’s struggle for meaning that is both personal and scholarly. Likewise, for me, if this work is to have value in any way, I need it to be personal and scholarly. I hope I have painted some images that will have resonance for other women on this path. Martin notes:

As researchers, we ourselves are also sites of subjective uncertainty, sites of struggle over meaning and of expression of our meaning. From this perspective, the researcher is a situated translator who offers an interpretation of a complex exploration. Such interpretation will necessarily be formed by who we are as researchers, by our own life story, experience and culture, and this will, of course, include what we have learned of the language, norms and expectations of one or more scholarly disciplines. But it will not be limited to this. The richness of a voice that is spun through the complexity of our individual life history, and interpreted through precious personal human skill and talent, is the voice that I argue should be welcomed and applauded in doctoral research. (p. 282)
Valerie Yow (1994), an oral history scholar, notes that in writing biography, the subject may be quoted, but without long blocks of testimony from his or her life account. “The main part of the text is the author’s words. Although the author has been helped by various narrators, this is not a collaboration” (p. 169). In the case of writing biography, the interviewer has much control over what to include and/or omit from the account of the person’s life. I was not interested in having that control. I was more concerned with the importance of presenting the interviewee’s actual worlds, a moment in time, through their eyes. And so that is why I chose to go over the interviews with my participants and give them control over what to include in the presentation of my findings. They were encouraged to add or delete to the transcripts of the interviews.

Perks and Thompson (2006), editors of a comprehensive collection of articles on the theory and practice of oral history, state that, “Oral testimony is frequently used alongside other sources to recover neglected or silenced accounts of past experience, and as a way of challenging dominant histories which underpin repressive attitudes and policy” (p. 447). By involving the interviewees with the interviewer, as is the case with the philosophy of conducting oral history, there is an understanding that we are telling the story from the point of view of the teller. The benefits to both the teller and the interviewer can be enduring. It’s my hope that a benefit of collecting these stories will be that these women and I, through our stories, might encourage other women to have the confidence to study at a later stage in life.

Steven High (2011), the director of the Centre for Digital Storytelling and Oral History at Concordia University in Montréal, observes that what attracts him to this form of data collection (the oral history interview) is the idea that we get to feel the interviewee. We are not trying to synthesise their words or just copy them on the paper. I see oral history as a reliable and exciting way to transmit feelings and information. The interviewee really does have the last word. In High’s words:
As a community of practice, oral historians emphasize process over product (or subject matter); and reflexivity over confident assertion. As with First Nations history, research ethics is at the core of our conversation. Oral history is also an interdisciplinary field of inquiry, where community-university collaboration is becoming the norm. Certainly, our community of oral historians at Concordia University’s Centre for Oral History and Digital Storytelling provides ample evidence of this broad appeal. (para. 9)

Having attended the training sessions on the art of respectful interviewing as well as some of their round table discussions at Concordia University, I felt prepared to set sail on this journey of studying and giving voice to these new scholars. Of oral history, Frisch (1990) writes:

What has interested me from the start, however, is the way these approaches raise important issues of culture, communication and politics – not only in the material they engage, but in the very processes of engagement, in the altered relationship between historian and “source”, between scholarship and public discourse, and between dominant cultural forms, assumptions, and institutions and the alternatives that practitioners of these methods so often hope to empower. (p. xvi)

While not that long ago, I would have been quite happy with a written record of such a project, I came to embrace the idea of digital technology as a tool to preserve women’s voices. It was with this in mind that I have developed a website for the women in my study to be able to listen and see words and images from other people in the study. Frisch (2004) writes of one of the most important aspects of preserving stories:

The basic point could not be simpler: everyone knows that there are worlds of meaning that lie beyond words; nobody pretends for a moment that the transcript is in any real sense a better representation of reality than the voice itself. Meaning inheres in context and
setting, in gesture, in tone, in body language, in expression, in pauses, in performed skills and
movements. To the extent we are restricted to text and transcription, we will never locate
such moments and meaning, much less have the chance to study, reflect on, learn from, and
share them. (p. 103)

In keeping with the importance of feeling the interviewee, I found that interviewing the women
through Skype and telephone brought me closer to their emotions than I might have been had it just
been through a written response. I could easily find myself in their stories, not just their words but
through the stops and starts in the conversation, all the while helping them articulate who we are
and where we want to go. As well, I could see reflections of each other and me in their stories. Also,
as each interview came to an end I felt more and more determined to share the stories with all of
them – to let them know others were experiencing many of the same feelings on this journey.

Gilligan (1993) goes on to discuss more intricately how our voice connects our inner and
outer worlds:

This ongoing relational exchange among people is mediated through language and
culture, diversity and plurality. For these reasons, voice is a new key for understanding the
psychological, social, and cultural order – a litmus test of relationships and a measure of
psychological health. (p. xvi)

I became interested in what Gilligan terms a form of ‘deep listening’. She developed this method
of listening that draws on voice, resonance and relationship as “a port of entry to the human
psyche” (p. 157). I knew that if I wanted to interview women and really understand what they are
saying, I would have to listen carefully. Gilligan feels that to truly listen to another person is to listen
deeply, to recognise that there are many voices an individual possesses, and those voices are always
embodied, in culture, and in relationship with oneself and with others.
As she discusses the importance of nuance in women’s voices, Carol Gilligan (1993) writes in the preface of the rerelease of her 1982 book, *In a Different Voice*:

By voice I mean voice. Listen, I will say, thinking that in one sense the answer is simple, and then I will remember how it was to speak when there was no resonance, how it was when I began writing, how it is still for so many people, how it still is for me sometimes. To have a voice is to be human. To have something to say is to be a person. But speaking depends on listening and being heard; it is an intensely relational act. (p. xvi)

And so it was, listening to the many women’s voices over nine months, transcribing the conversations, being moved on so many levels, as a mother, teacher and friend, I became convinced that I would share their stories in the hope that others might learn from and find a kind of sisterhood that seemed so lacking for many of the women as they make their way on this journey. Might hearing the voices of other women encourage us all? Often women enjoyed the interview process, finding a kinship that was lacking in their programs and recognising the effect that their presence might have on the university. Listen to Sandra’s reckoning of her place in the university:

Oh, it’s interesting because one of the things – I think that you had asked that in your paper. You know, are you conscious of any role modelling that’s going on? It’s interesting because I always think that’s part of an invisible spin-off. I have had people who have contacted me after we’ve had some kind of interaction two years later or one year later who have said that it’s because of you that I went back to school. Or, ‘Do you know that it was because of you that I became interested in this?’ On one hand that’s very rewarding, on the other it’s quite invisible. I’m not sure what it is they get, except that I share my story. I actually think of it at my own college where I work. And I think of it at the university. And I always remind myself that there’s so much brand management and marketing, you know, zing, that goes into how people, how colleges and universities decide to profile themselves – and there definitely is a voice within that says, ‘Hm...
This doesn’t look like you.’ It doesn’t look like the late-entry, it doesn’t look like the mature woman. This is definitely still going after the young and I would suggest to you – the beautiful. And not perhaps embracing the richness of multigenerational...I am very conscious of that.

It is my hope that my ‘researcher voice’ will be heard along with all the women whose voices I present through this work. I know that my decision to reach out and give voice to these women speaks volumes about who I am. As discussed later in this thesis, we see how other women have decided they want to leave their mark. In Ely’s (2007) words:

After all, the aim of much of our narrative research is to provide a sense of how other people experience life. So our silence counts as we strive to give people voice or as we invite our readers to make sense rather telling them what to think. No matter. A researcher’s voice must be heard. When, how, where, what, and why are the crucial questions. If these are not asked and answered and asked again, there is no research writing. (p. 574)

This whole process has been intensely personal. While exploring the voices of other women, I have, I hope, found my own.

**I Am In the Story**

Cotterill and Letherby (1993) explain the keeping of themselves in their discussion of their academic development as they note the intertextuality of autobiography and biography. They write why they include themselves in their writing. It is “part of our assertion that all academic research and subsequent writing involves, whether acknowledged or not, the weaving of the biographies of all participants and their significant others” (p. 69). Recognising that I embarked on this quest with opinions and beliefs that make me who I am, I knew that there would be a subjective nature to my work. As such, I felt it was important to outline who I am — who I am being the very reason for the inquiry, not only for the readers of this research, but for the very people who helped me create it.
If I am to consider this work a success, it will be that my participants will see themselves as co-constructors of this knowledge, and that they will feel that they have benefitted and understood themselves a bit better from agreeing to join me on the journey.

Cole and Knowles (2001) engage in a broad discussion of what constitutes life history. How and why does one begin to proceed on this journey? How can a researcher make sense of the data that has been collected? They, like Clandinin and Connelly (2004), stress the importance of understanding where the researcher is coming from as they embark on their research. What are their biases or impartialities? Since these authors have been involved in doing life history themselves, they share some of the common pitfalls and pleasures of carrying out this form of inquiry, stressing the importance of understanding just what you will be putting people through if you are to embark on this journey. There is a telling account of Cole being interviewed and interviewing a colleague. Cole explains how it is easy to be misinterpreted by someone conducting research on another. Hence the importance of the aspect of the life history project (that I particularly like) of having the person being researched being involved in the finished product. That is, the printed interview is shared with the participant, giving them the opportunity to edit what they have shared.

As I read more and more about the art of interviewing and researcher bias, I recognised the need to tread lightly. I worked hard to develop the trusting relationships as I spoke with my participants, feeling certain that my honesty about my own situation and my genuine interest in their stories would result in rich data worth sharing. Wolf (as cited in Llewellyn, 2003) argues that:

Ideally, the oral historian hopes for a correlation between the participants’ and the researchers’ inference from narratives, but this does not occur through scientific appeals to objectivity. Instead, it demands fostering a trustworthy relationship in the research process based on the researcher’s continual reflexivity. (p. 95)
As Corbin and Strauss suggest, (2008) I have considered the questions, “What has attracted me to this sort of research? How will my personality enhance my ability to do good qualitative research?” (p. 17) Upon acceptance to the doctoral program at McGill, I became interested in how a community of learners, such as the university community, can and does impact the late-entry student. As I was regularly quite startled by the reaction of a number of people about my return to school, I have endeavoured to ‘situate my work’, knowing that I must illustrate who I am. Who I am and how I am are the very reasons for this interest of mine.

Barbara Ann Cole (2010) describes how her personal life and PhD life collided and were the subject of her dissertation on women who were mothers of children perceived as having special education needs, but who were also teachers of children with special needs (as she was). She explains how she was able to reflect on her journey through the completion of her PhD:

I did not seek objectivity, reliability, validity nor was I an unbiased researcher. I had positionality, which I made clear within the thesis. I cared about the issues; not about what was right or wrong, for the stories suggested that there were multiple perspectives, complexities, contradictions and tensions, but about the importance of different voices being heard, rather than those of policy makers ‘experts’ and the media. (p. 43)

She felt buoyed by her investigations and capable to confront the dominant discourse that positioned women as ‘unrealistic’ mothers. Exploring these gendered stories and adding my own voice to them has created a rich tapestry. Just as researchers Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarule (1997) grew to value the multiple ways women come to know what they know, through intuition, tacit knowing, reliance on the senses, listening, feeling and even the use of dreams, I have come to understand women from their own particular ways of understanding. The intersections of age, busy family lives, confidence, to name a few, joined together the voices, at times both hesitant and self-
assured, weary and often, invigorating. Regularly, I heard echoes of my own concerns and ways of seeing the world that I had entered. Ways that I could not have imagined or considered into being until I had met up with all these women.

Even though the participants were adults, and one might think impervious to criticism, I was struck by how hurtful comments or supportive ones can either steer you in the right or wrong direction, even when you have made the decision to return to study and are well on your way. The way such comments affect us when we are young and they continue to touch us as we age was especially apparent throughout the research, perhaps even more so because of our vulnerability as older students. We see this in the words of Diane, a woman who became a successful doctor in her late forties:

I remember going to talk to one woman. She was the wife of someone at the university and at that point I'd already kind of tossed my hat in the ring and passed my exams. So, I didn't tell a lot of people before that point. But I remember telling her and she got this sort of polite smile on her face and said, “Well, isn't that ambitious!” And I just felt so, I don't know...small...I did.

Interestingly when I later asked Diane to supply an image of her doctoral journey, here is what she sent me (see figure 4). Her words are below the photo.
Here we see echoes of Nel Noddings’ (2005) warnings about what we purport to teach and what the student understands, at all levels. It seemed to me that the late-entry women are vulnerable and sensitive to the climate of acceptance or non-acceptance. I care deeply about this issue and appreciate that the very notion of ‘care’ is a rather feminine quality. From early on in our lives, many women are trained to be caregivers. I have been such a person, caring for and about others from as far back as my memory will take me. Perhaps my deep intention as I listened to and recorded these stories was to make some things right, to make a place where these voices could be heard. In turning towards these studies at this stage in my life, it is fitting that the politics of caring or the examination of how one cares, plays a part in the lives of late-entry women and is at the forefront of my concerns.
Feeling passionate about the subject, I believed I was well suited to this study. Although I did have some hesitancy about studying people who are similar to myself (e.g. Would I be too close to the participants?), I have become more confident about the idea of identifying closely with your research participants. Sociologist Dorothy Smith (1989) argued that women’s lives should be studied ethnographically from the women’s points of view to begin to try to fully understand their point of view. As she observes:

The project of inquiry from women’s standpoint begins in the local actualities of people’s lives. In a sense it reverses the traditional relationship between mind and body wherein mind may examine, explore, and reflect on what is of the body. Body isn’t something to be looked at or even theorized. It is rather the site of consciousness, mind, thought, subjectivity, and agency as particular people’s local doings. By pulling mind back into body, phenomena of mind and discourse – ideology, beliefs, concepts, theory, ideas and so on – are recognized as themselves the doings of actual people situated in particular local sites at particular times. They are no longer treated as if they were essentially inside people’s heads. They become observable insofar as they are produced in language as talk and/or text. Discourse itself is among people’s doings; it is of the actualities of people’s lives; it organizes relations among people; and while it speaks of and from and in people’s activities, it does not exhaust them. (p. 25)

Through engaging my participants in dialogue about their lives as late-entry students, I hoped to understand them and myself better. I did. I found so much common ground, not just with me, but among the participants. As I sought understanding, I began to feel I was not only understanding, but I was finding like-minded people, who, although very different from each other, and very different from me had so many points in common. Regarding the importance of stating our bias, putting ourselves in the story, Cotterill and Letherby (1993) wrote:
Oakley was one of the first to argue that the best way to encourage women to talk openly about their lives is for the interviewer to invest her own personal identity in the relationship. This means the researcher should answer respondents’ questions, share her knowledge and her experiences. (p. 75)

Certain that my identification with my participants not only helped them to feel at ease, and allowed them to be more forthcoming, it also seemed to help me to clarify my own understanding of the state of the late-entry woman in academia, including my own. I was interested in knowing what doctoral study brought to these women’s lives, and in turn, what they have brought and continue to bring to the university. In my questioning, I found myself searching for my own answers to these questions.

And so, 35 years after the publication of Oakley’s (1981) remark about the idea that interviewing women is not a ‘one-way process,’ we are still saying that a feminist way of interviewing is the acknowledgement that there is a give and take in the interview process, a sharing. Both parties, the researcher and the participant, are somehow altered in the process. Acknowledging Pinnegar and Daynes (2007) and their belief that there is a change in the relationship between the researcher and the researched, I would add that the relationship between the interviewee and the interviewer should be non-hierarchical. As Oakley cited in her own involvement in research about women and pregnancy, it was not possible to remain uninvolved or personally not interested in the women’s concerns at that time in their lives. She began to understand that to have a genuine and honest conversation with the women it would be necessary to be honest about her own feelings regarding the very subject that she was interested in studying. Likewise, again and again I found myself sharing my personal journey with my participants. I believe that my openness with the women helped to establish my commitment to the research questions and my genuine interest in their stories. It
seemed that the interview had a salutary effect on the women. Many talked about the loneliness of doctoral study as an older student. The lonesomeness they described is discussed further in Chapter 4. Being in a similar circumstance, it was easy for me to empathise and draw out their stories.

Socially Engaged Research in a Welcoming Environment

I wanted to know what an environment where women can thrive, be accepted and know their voices are valued would look like. In their examination of women’s groups through a program called “Listening Partners”, Belenky et al. (1997) discussed how important it is for a woman to feel listened to, to have a voice and claim the power of her own mind. They noted that it was clear that the metaphors of voice and silence that the women used were general indicators of their developmental status and sense of well-being and found that, “When a woman said she was “developing a voice,” it was likely she was claiming the power of her mind and becoming more self-directed” (p. 7). Belenky et al. explain that when people felt they were listened to, it was likely that they would ask more questions and listen more closely to others. As they felt more respected, they in turn respected others more. Belenky et al. does liken this talent women gain – listening and learning from each other to the important work done by caregivers, often mothers. Mutual respect is not only good practice for raising children, it is just good practice for people at any developmental stage. I could see that by engaging late-entry women in dialogue about their ‘place ‘ in academia, and how they felt they influenced others, I was learning not only about how they felt they were or were not accepted, but also how others saw them. I was interested in learning to what degree the women I interviewed saw their education as a process of collaboration. Did they feel part of the academy? What were the benefits of being older?

Finally, I wanted my research to explore what is, in Oakley’s terms, ‘socially responsible research’ (Economic and Social Research Council, 2010). As a researcher, Oakley has spent her life
focusing on the common themes that make up our lives such as illness and childbirth and notes that the personal is political and that all our knowledge comes from personal experience. She feels that feminist researchers have sensitised us to the need to be relevant and to listen to others. Good social research, she says, is about listening to people and talking to them. She continues saying that as researchers, we must try and produce socially responsible and useful data that is capable of improving people’s lives. This relevant and practical research that I have produced will serve, I hope as inspiration for both the late-entry woman and the university. I am building on Oakley’s assertion that good social research is listening and talking. Understanding where we’ve come from can help guide us towards the future and give us an appreciation of the past. Reaching women across Canada has been energising. The large sample size from which I heard the same themes addressed repeatedly led me to believe that sharing these stories would help to validate the women’s concerns and let them know they were not alone. It seemed they could have no way of knowing how many of them were echoing each other. Many times I felt a profound kinship with my participants wishing that I could invite them all to my place so that they could meet each other and feel less alone. I wished also that I could read them excerpts from the women who have completed their studies. I knew that they would find inspiration in their words and their successes. As Richardson (1997) writes about the importance of really listening and reporting about those who are somewhat on the fringe, as I believe mature or ‘late-entry’ women are:

Among the issues that hound me now are whose authority counts when; how can/should authorship be claimed; where do validity/credibility/reliability fit; how does one’s writing reflect one’s social privileges; what part of my biography, my process, is relevant to the text; how do I write myself into the text without being self-absorbed, unduly narcissistic; how can I write so that others’ voices are not only heard but listened to; for whom should we write;
what consequences does our work have for the people we study; and what are my ethical responsibilities for those consequences? These are not only my personal issues, they are ones that engage (enrage) both feminist and postmodernist researchers. (p. 106)

What has sustained me on this journey was the belief that I was giving voice to so many women through this project. Abma (1999) explained her reason for using stories to elicit the stories from mental health patients to help with their social integration into society. Not wanting to resort to the question and answer way of sharing stories, Abma felt that the social nature of storytelling (the requirement of a listener and the possibility for interpretation) would be beneficial. Sharing marginalised stories might offer the possibility for the participants to realise that there is not one story, one voice, but many. She illustrated how stories can have a transformative power, not only on the teller but on the listener as well. Altering people’s sense of, in this case what is typical or text book cases of mental health patients, can offer up the possibility for a new way of seeing and understanding. In justifying the sharing of narratives, Abma maintained, “Stories are appropriate for conveying the complexity, concrete details, and context of lived experiences, they suit our common knowledge, speak to a public, and are open for social negotiation” (p. 193). I would say simply, Stories invite us in to the conversation, and help others to understand us. One of my participants said, as she encouraged me in the importance of my work:

Well thank you. It was a privilege to do this. I’m really happy that you’re looking into this. It sounds crazy, but I’ve often wondered, myself about older women academics and I figured that there had to be a lot of us out there who were, you know, sort of struggling through similar issues.

Through analysing the talk of late-entry women, I have been better able to articulate how they construct their understanding of the academic experience. I have been sensitive to the nuances and the underlying struggle – often only articulated, it seemed, because I had posed the questions. It
is clear that there is not a ‘typical’ late-entry woman any more than there is a ‘typical’ undergraduate student. Through this study, I have been able to share the diverse voices of 39 women. I have seen how the women’s personal lives and their careers intersected and informed their academic journey.

**Conclusion**

Guided by a desire to shed light on the lives of late-entry women in academia, I have positioned my research within the field of narrative inquiry. I believe that the telling of stories from the women’s standpoints lends authenticity to the work that I have produced. This relevant research that is based on the lives of women who were engaged in doctoral study at a later stage in life, has helped me to find my own voice as a late-entry student/researcher. As well, the exercise of finding the women has been an education of how women see themselves. In so many cases they want to help others, like me, to tell their stories. Giving the women a chance to tell their stories, how they combine private life and work life and how they navigate a university career has been such an enlightening voyage. All these threads of journeys weave together to form a narrative that I hope not only provides an engaging, but a useful glimpse into the lives of the women that I have presented here. I give thanks to Carol Gilligan, (2011) for her work on listening and appreciate Ann Oakley’s (1981) advice on the importance of keeping myself in the picture. As Anderson (2000) noted, these late-entry women have much to offer the university and society in general. We have made significant contributions in our lives and taking up the academic challenge later in life might help us to contribute in fresh and varied ways. Pernal (2009) completed her research on late-entry students some years after Anderson had completed hers. She also noted the value that the older student brings to study, noting the richness that they bring to study, because of their years lived. I hope that the reader will enjoy and learn from the experiences of these 39 women. The use of narrative inquiry, which for this work has included interviewing, photovoice, and a writing workshop,
has, I believe, helped me to paint a portrait of the current concerns of some late-entry women. Through listening, recording and synthesising the stories of these women, I have managed to weave together a cohesive narrative that builds knowledge and helps me to reflect on the late-entry women’s stories.

I recognise that this work is told from my perspective. After all, I have chosen what to include and what to exclude. This thesis details what I have found pertinent to the successful passage of the 39 late-entry women as they make their way through academia. I hope I have made a place for our voices to be heard. I have faith that this research is, in Oakley’s words, ‘socially responsible’ (Economic and Social Research Council, 2010). As well, I have heeded Clandinin’s (239MikeO, 2012) belief in the true value of research as research that is with, not research on, others. Through analysing how these women construct their stories, perhaps I have helped others to better understand how we can ease the sometimes difficult journey through academia. I think there is also much to learn from how the women support and sustain each other.
In this chapter, I outline the design of my study and the methods I used to gather my data. To understand women’s journeys from their point of view, I chose to use narrative methods of inquiry. As exploratory stages, I held a photovoice workshop and a writing workshop for other late-entry women who were studying with me at my university. Then, collecting women’s stories and images through interviews, I worked my way across the country, figuratively at least, finding women in every Canadian province who were willing to participate.

**Overview of My Research Process**

The following timeline (see figure 5) indicates how my research has progressed over the past five years.

![Timeline Diagram]

*Figure 5: Overview of my research process.*
My Inquiry

In the study I was seeking answers to questions such as the following: How were the women’s stories of achieving their doctorates connected to their life stories? How were they challenged by everyday life in ways that are different from younger students? How do they rise to those challenges? How do time and place play a significant role? How about lack of time? How about lack of private space? As interested as I was in their diverse research interests, that was not the subject of my research. I was intrigued from the very beginning about the process of approaching doctoral study later in life. I received my Certificate of Ethical Acceptability of Research Involving Humans from the Research Ethics from McGill University Board III in March 2013.

The Visual Turn

Inspired to use visual data in my research by my own experience of taking part in a photovoice project that was conducted by a classmate, I was curious to see what sort of images the women would use to illustrate their PhD journey. Various researchers speak about the visual ‘turn’ in qualitative research. Emmison and Smith (2000), for example, speak about the ways in which the visual helps to tell a different story. Some researchers such as Harper (2002) write about the use of photo elicitation as a way to engage participants, since the participants themselves provide the images. Sometimes these served primarily as metaphors for how they were thinking about their journey. At other times, however, their comments and reflections could perhaps be described as a type of photo elicitation. Pink (2003), in summing up Emmison and Smith (2000) explains:

...recent approaches to the interpretation of visual images in anthropology, cultural studies and cultural geography have in common emphasized four key areas. They insist that the research pay attention to: (a) the context in which the image was produced; (b) the content of the image; (c) the contexts in, and subjectivities through, which images are viewed; and
(d) the materiality and agency of images. Perhaps most importantly, the arguments developed above have shown that, for the social researcher who is interested in understanding the relationship among people, discourses and objects, it would be important to focus on each of these areas of visual interpretation, as the visual meanings that she or he seeks to understand will often lie at the intersection of these different areas of interpretation, rather than being “revealed” by just one approach. (p. 187)

Indeed, as the women provided me with images of their doctoral journey, the choice of the image was often made after we had spoken about their lives and their experiences as late-entry women. It seemed that the images were closely tied to what was revealed in our conversations, and they delighted in the opportunity to reflect further on their education. It was as though they were trying to ‘dig deeper’ and help me to understand their journey a little better. In turn, always, I felt as though I had a clearer understanding of the women’s reflections. Work with visual images as metaphors, as various researchers have highlighted, can offer powerful statements about the meaning of experience (Van Laren, 2007; Khau, 2011). As my participants shared their images and words, I had a closer look at their lives and what preoccupied them as they made their way through their studies.

**The Research Design**

For my research I have relied heavily on one thing in life that I enjoy immensely: talking to others about what moves them. I wanted to know, understand and eventually share what drives women to return to school later in life. What sustains them? What stands in their way?

A question that preoccupied me before I set out to interview women was how I would let them tell their story? How would I be perceived? Would they open up to me? I soon discovered that I had no reason to be concerned. The women were extremely forthcoming with their stories. (Many were quite fine with me using their real names. However, out of respect for those who wish...
to remain anonymous, I have chosen to give them all pseudonyms). As I spoke with the women, I found that I was better able to talk about my own feelings of trepidation in the academy. It was as if their opening up to me allowed me to express my feelings more clearly, not only to them but to others, outside of the academy, who would inquire about my doctoral journey from time to time. The qualities that I value and have worked diligently to sharpen in my personal life as well as my professional life, those qualities of compassion and tenacity would sustain me on what I knew would be a lengthy journey. I would need inner fortitude, a sense of purpose and most importantly, self-care. I soon realised that those themes would surface again and again, not only in the literature about women returning to school, but also in the actual interviews.

The Four Phases

My study was composed of four phases. The first phase involved working with a group of women on a photovoice project. The second phase involved engaging with these same five women in a writing workshop. The third phase entailed interviewing women from across Canada (including those who participated in the photovoice and writing workshops) about their university experiences as late-entry doctoral students. Women who had completed their studies as well as women who were still studying participated in this phase. Finally, the last phase, which runs beyond the official data collection and which is described more fully in the final chapter, involved the creation of a website. I wanted to share the women's stories with each other and with others who might be curious to understand what drives us to seek out a higher education later in life. I also wanted to give an afterlife to my research.
Phase 1: Preliminary Data Collection - Entering the Field of Qualitative Research

The first phase of my research began with collecting stories from five women with whom I had studied at my university. I interviewed these five in Montréal using a method of inquiry called photovoice (De Lange, Mitchell & Stuart, 2008; Gubrium, 2009; Holm, 2008; Koltz, Odegard, Provost, Smith, & Kleist, 2010; Wang & Burris, 1997). Photovoice (Wang, 2006) is a Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach that can help groups voice their opinions and be heard. It is based on the theoretical literature on education for critical consciousness (a popular term developed by Brazilian pedagogue and theorist, Paulo Freire, 1993), feminist theory and a community-based approach to documentary photography (Wang & Burris, 1997; Wang, Burris, & Xiang as cited in Wang, 2006). These photovoice sessions were held individually with five women over the summer of 2013. (These women then formed the writing group that is discussed in Phase 2). Photovoice can assist researchers who want to encourage participants to get to the heart of a matter, to voice their concerns. It can promote dialogue among a community of people and inform others of how that group of people feel. Photovoice can represent the lived experience of people who may not always be understood or heard. The use of photovoice is often implemented to enact social change, and my interest in using this method was to allow people to listen to the voices of these late-entry women that I sought to understand. I was also using photovoice as a method of self-study.

While explaining the benefits of how photo-elicitation can be a way to prompt rich dialogue, rouse memory and produce useful information, Rose (2012) writes of its four strengths:

First, it is claimed that, since photographs carry a great deal of information, getting research participants to explain and elaborate that information is ‘an opportunity to gain not just more but different insights into social phenomena, which research methods relying on oral aural or written data cannot provide’ (Bolton et al. 2001: 503). Secondly, using this method
allows participants to reflect on their lives in a way that they would not usually, giving them some distance from what they see as ordinary or simply accept without question or reflection. (p. 305)

Rose continues, “Thirdly, using this method of elicitation gives the participants ‘a clear and central role’ in the research process.” And finally, the participant and researcher are truly working in partnership” (p. 305-306).

As I engaged in conversations with the women, I began to have a clearer picture of my imaginings of the PhD journey. Isn’t that indeed the way social change occurs, with an understanding of oneself, one’s place in the world and how one can in fact bring about awareness or social change? Participants were asked to take or collect at least ten images that represented their doctoral journey thus far. In some cases they took new pictures and in other cases they looked through personal photos that represented what they wanted to address in the interviews. They were encouraged to reflect on their doctoral journey with the support of images they chose. This reflection encouraged thoughtful consideration of their concerns as late-entry doctoral students. The photos helped the participants to identify, name and discuss issues that they felt helped or hindered their course of study.

A photovoice interview is conducted from the participant’s point of view, thus giving her the opportunity to direct and guide the interview. I asked the women to take photos of people, places or things that have had an impact on their doctoral journey. For example, some of the participants decided who or what has been a positive influence on her studies. Some took photos of unpleasant images – images of things, places or people that have been a hindrance. Some of the images were metaphorical, such as the one supplied to me by Marian of barbed wire. “This is what’s going on in my head sometimes!” I listened carefully, and the follow-up questions that I posed were directly related to
whatever the participant chose to share. As the participants were the ones to supply the images, they were the ones who led the discussions.

Holm (2008) is a contributor to Jipson and Paley’s (1997) book *Daredevil Research*, an edited collection of research projects. In this collection of essays, the contributors challenge what counts as research. In Holm’s words:

...text is written on maps; text is not written in page wide lines but interrupted by interjecting conversations; and photographs are combined with poems or other writings. The common themes among these chapters are the performance aspect of disseminating the research as well as what count as research. (p. 2)

The contributors to this collection write about alternative ways of presenting research. The common theme among the contributors to this collection is the performance aspect of sharing research as well as what counts as research. Using photos only as a research tool, Holm (2008) asked doctoral students to take photos of their lives to illustrate their doctoral journey. She also asked the students to give the photos they took short titles. “Overall the motivating factors for doctoral studies were dreams of a bright future and their families, symbolized by happy family photographs and a bright sky” (p. 12). She found that while this method was useful for the students to describe their lives, the photos alone were not enough to help the researcher understand the students. She noted that it is helpful if photos are used together with other kinds of data. The presentation of the photographs did allow the students to construct and perform visually their identities as doctoral students.

Inspired by this article during our colloquium, I, and two other doctoral students (Cullinan, Lin, & Polotskaia, 2012) also asked our classmates to choose a photo that represented their doctoral journey of the first two years. Our project drew a similar response to Holm’s study. Almost all students’ photos, depicted a landscape with some light filtering through – reminding us of the cliché
‘there is light at the end of the tunnel.’ It was fascinating to note two things: all students recognised that the PhD is a journey fraught with obstacles, yet all seemed to feel there was a bright light at the end. We all agreed that the light filtering through forests or clouds gave us, as doctoral students, hope. There was only one photo with people in it. Similar to Holm’s study, our classmates did not produce photos of happy relationships with professors. There was only one photo of friendship with another doctoral student. Also similar to Holm’s study, there was little visible sense of friendship among students.

As noted above, as I worked with the 39 women, I asked them each for an image to describe their doctoral journey. Of the 39 women, 19 supplied me with images for my study. Others wrote passages and asked if I might find something that would illustrate what they were trying to convey. I then set to work to try to match their words to an image. When I felt that I had found a good match, I sent it on to the women for their approval. Many of those images are in this dissertation. I received similar images and comments - with the theme - ‘light at the end of the tunnel’ - even from women who’d completed their degree. That theme surfaced again and again. The following is representative of the sort of comments and images that I received. Here are the words from Louise who was close to the end of her studies (see figure 7).
An image? Since I’m close to the end of my journey, I was thinking of an image of someone looking through a tunnel and seeing light at the end of it. At the beginning of the journey it feels like you are looking upwards at a really tall mountain. In the middle it’s like you’re standing on the edge of a cliff that looks as though it could collapse at any moment.

When prompted for photos, many of the women I worked with, for the most part, supplied me with photos that were related to personal growth. The words above from Louise are typical of the types of comments I heard and that sort of photo summed up how many women felt about their return to school at a later stage in life. In Holm’s study, the only communities portrayed were the family and, for some international students, their host families and some other international students.

“Students’ lives seemed more connected to computers than people” (p. 13). My work with late-entry women did not lead me to the same conclusions. In general, the women expressed the positive influence of their families and friends, but often they stressed the personal commitment necessary to forge ahead with their studies and how, at times, their personal relationships suffered.
Phase 2: The Writing Workshop

For the second phase of my research, I held a writing workshop with the same five women with whom I had conducted a photovoice interview. Building on the notion of allowing people into your life as a way to understand your thoughts, (as with the photovoice project), I invited the women who had participated in the photovoice sessions to participate in a writing workshop. I was, and continue to be, inspired by the many claims that writing in a group has therapeutic value (Barrington, 1997; Cole & Knowles, 2001; Ellis & Bochner, 2003; Gere, 1987, Heilbrun, 1988; Miller, 2000, 2002). The writing workshop provided the women and me with a forum for voicing our thoughts on our place in the academy and the weight of PhD work in general. The workshop was held once a week over a ten-week period at McGill University. I was interested in demonstrating that a writing workshop can be a supportive way to help women express themselves on what can be a solitary journey. At a very different stage in my life, (from others in my cohort), doing this degree meant quite a lot of alone time. As I embarked on my data collection, I had often been either at my computer or sitting by myself with a book in front of me. Having finished the required courses in the Winter of 2012, I no longer had weekly meetings with other graduate students. I envied those who had jobs on campus. They could interact with professors and other students. I thought that must be conducive to helping someone develop a scholarly identity. I found myself wondering, “Do other women like me have the same feelings? Do they feel as though they are on their own? Would a writing group be a helpful way for these women to connect?” On the power and freedom our words can give, Carolyn Heilbrun (1988) wrote:

The true representation of power is not of a big man beating a smaller man or a woman. Power is the ability to take one’s place in whatever discourse is essential to action and the right to have one’s part matter. This is true in the Pentagon, in marriage, in friendship, and in politics. (p. 18)
I sincerely believe that in giving voice to women, like myself, I am not only encouraging them to be heard, I am sharing their stories with the hope that others might find themselves and be encouraged to join the conversation. It's important to see ourselves in others’ stories. Van Manen (2011) stated:

> Our personal life experiences are immediately accessible to us in a way that no one else’s are. However, the phenomenologist does not want to trouble the reader with purely private, autobiographical factualities of one’s life. In drawing up personal descriptions of lived experiences, the phenomenologist knows that the patterns of meaning of one’s own experiences are also the possible experiences of others, and therefore may be recognizable by others. (para 1)

Finding myself in the stories of others and being able to share the lived experience with other women helped me to create a sense of community among these women. The camaraderie and trust that developed during the writing workshop helped each of us to find our voices and gain confidence in our academic abilities, while listening to and sharing our words and the words of others. Each of the ten sessions lasted approximately two and a half to three hours. Throughout the course of the workshop sessions I noted whether the social nature of a writing group seemed conducive to the women’s sense of becoming a scholar. As an important part of becoming a scholar is the intellectual conversations we engage in with others, I wanted to note whether the writing group was a helpful way for women to find their voices and gain confidence. Group participants had a chance to write about their experiences, listen to others do the same and articulate concerns about their place in academia. Working with these women in familiar territory, in my university, in my city, helped to bolster my sense of an academic identity. I began to feel comfortable that I could go forward and investigate the subject of late-entry women in academia with women from other universities. I hoped that the writing workshop that I developed might help women articulate
how their journey developed – the positive and negative aspects of studying at a later stage in life. I thought that perhaps the results of sharing my findings might serve to inspire other women on their academic journey and provide some encouragement. I found that the writing workshop was a supportive way to help women express themselves on what can be a lonesome journey. I knew that women who combine university life with other commitments like family and career take on great responsibility and would likely benefit from meeting other women with similar challenges. Denzin (2006) writes about the importance of writing from the heart. By writing ourselves in and out of history, we can better understand it:

Ethnography is a not an innocent practice. Our research practices are performative, pedagogical, and political. Through our writing and our talk, we enact the worlds we study. These performances are messy and pedagogical. They instruct our readers about this world and how we see it. The pedagogical is always moral and political; by enacting a way of seeing and being, it challenges, contests, or endorses the official, hegemonic ways of seeing and representing the other. (p. 422)

I believed that a writing workshop would provide the women with a safe forum for voicing their thoughts. Many scholars point to the value of writing in a group setting (Gere, 1987; Heilbrun, 1988; Miller, 2000, 2002; Barrington, 1997; Cole & Knowles, 2001; Ellis & Bochner, 2003; Goldberg, 2007). As I hoped it would, the writing group that I developed did provide some late-entry women students with time to reflect on their journey through their studies. Goldberg (2007) provides guidance to help people write about who they were, who they are and what they remember, asking the writers to ‘drench themselves’ in the journey of the writing process and likens writing to an ‘athletic activity’ (p. 1). As I was on this same academic journey, I saw myself as a partner in this writing group. It was a bit curious. The researcher was also the researched, I know.
I became increasingly aware of the delicate nature of this aspect of my project. I find personal narrative writing sensitive in its subjectivity - the private nature of it. In writing about the writing process and memoir writing Judith Barrington (1997) explores the craft, the personal challenges and ethical dilemmas of writing true stories. This helped me to consider, was I more careful or less open because I was also a participant? Not to worry, I learned that a group of women discussing and writing about their experiences is a powerful way to build community and courage within that community. It was also a way to generate the knowledge that I felt the women wanted to share. Through discussion and remembering experiences, we could, it seemed, in Miller’s (2002) words, “...keep alive the notion that experience can take the form of art and that remembering is a guide to living (p. 14). Sharing knowledge and life experiences in the academy provided a sounding board and a sense of belonging for the participants.

Were there particular fears, worries, concerns that late-entry women brought to the graduate experience? The writing group would provide a forum to help the women articulate these concerns. Being a part of this group, I was better able to speak about my own views. On another level, I saw my efforts as a way of including voices that we perhaps don’t always associate with the academy. Voices that I could see have much to give. I wanted to identify ways in which women wanted or sought to occupy a place at university? Did they see themselves as having a particular voice to add? If so, how did they define their unique voices? Might they encourage other women to pursue graduate studies? Being part of the writing group, before I embarked on interviewing women across Canada, helped me to gain a certain confidence and assuredness that other women from across Canada would welcome joining the conversation about how they see their place in the university. I could see that the women in the writing group shared many of the same worries and concerns as they made their way. The writing group illustrated for me that there was value to a group of like-
minded people getting together and listening to each other in a safe and trusting environment. I hoped my interviewing the other women would bring a similar trusting phenomenon. Why, even as I try and articulate exactly how that group unfolded, and the value it held for me at the time and now as I reflect on it, the process of writing down my ideas leads me in a direction that I might not have been aiming for, and I am reminded of the tentative nature of our knowing or of our thinking we know what we know.

Gere (1987) pointed out that, “Perhaps the significant commonality among writing groups appears in what they contribute to our understanding of what it means to write. Specifically, they highlight the social dimension of writing” (p. 3). My writing group accomplished that and more. The very act of socialising around a table allowed us to perform and enjoy our role as doctoral students in a safe and caring environment, as we wrote and shared our words in a secure and non-judgemental setting. In fact, writing, as we did, in the university setting, probably helped our efforts to write about our university experiences. As Cole and Knowles (2001) note, the role of context is important to understanding life history. “Lives are never lived in complete isolation from social contexts” (p. 22). Most certainly, the PhD life encompasses every aspect of one’s life. Working towards the degree has an impact on all a student does during the course of her studies. A writing group can provide support and camaraderie – important elements to a smooth journey.

Once the writing workshop was over, and I had interviewed all the other women across Canada, I was comfortable posing the same questions to my writing group members as I had posed to my participants during the telephone and Skype interviews (described below) across Canada. It was my hope that through these individual conversations (interviews) with the women I would be able to determine some similarities among the group members. As my writing mates and I wrote our way along and listened to each other, we could see similar struggles. We have kept in touch, long
after the workshop ended, cheering each other through the many stages of the doctoral journey.

Another preliminary phase of my research was interviewing these women about their experiences in university. I was interested in their reflections on being part of a research study such as mine. During these interviews I focused on their doctoral journey. Did they enjoy, learn and or benefit from being involved with me on my journey of discovering their thoughts and experiences as they moved through academia? Engaging these women in a writing group did allow them to hear other women articulate their journey towards the completion of their PhD and provided them and me some support and encouragement. Sometimes, just knowing that others are on the road with similar challenges helps one to see her way through.

**Phase 3: The Interviews - Skype, Telephone and In Person**

This is how the 39 interviews were conducted: 7 were conducted face-to-face, 18 via Skype and 14 by telephone. Most of the interviews lasted between 30 and 60 minutes. Additionally, there were many follow-up interviews, either through email, in person and in some cases by phone. The conversations were easily arranged and always comfortable to conduct, as there seemed to be a genuine interest from the women to share their reflections and images of their journeys. The women often commented that participating in my research had an energising effect on them. It seemed that few of them were ever asked to talk about their reasons for return to school. They were, however, often the recipients of other's opinions about their return to school. After interviewing the women and transcribing our conversations, I sent the transcripts back to the women for their approval, asking them if they would like to add or delete any parts of the transcripts. Occasionally some of them asked that their location be left out of my reporting. Some added to the transcript where they felt their words were not clear. As I progressed with analysing the data from the photovoice sessions and the writing workshop and interviews with the women in Montréal, I was looking for common
themes. I considered the fact that I had interviewed women in Montréal using photovoice, while my data collection for the women outside of Montréal was collected through an interview via telephone or Skype. As noted above, I asked the women I had interviewed if they would also like to provide an image to go along with their stories. I was overwhelmed by the responses. The participants provided many images. Of the 28 images included in this dissertation, the participants supplied 19 of them. (To respect copyright rules, I bought the other 9 through iStock, as some women had supplied me with images from the Internet and I was not sure of the legality of using them. The pictures were as close as possible to the pictures that they sent me). When asked for an image, some women chose instead to write an evocative passage. I then asked them if I might find an image to go with their words to illustrate what they were trying to convey. All agreed. When I thought I had found a good match, I sent it off for their approval. Some of those images are in this dissertation and some can be found on my website, *Echoes of Late-Entry Women in Academia*. Additionally, I decided to ask the women with whom I had participated in a writing workshop and photovoice sessions if they’d take the time to answer the questions that I had asked the women whom I had interviewed throughout Canada. They obliged. There was no shortage of data. As I collected the information, I grew more and more confident that these stories must be told.

The reason that I wanted to have participants from every province in Canada is that I wanted to lend a national voice to my project. I had already worked closely with women in Montréal, conducting the photovoice project and the writing workshop with them. I was curious to know how other women’s life experiences had an impact on their student lives. I also hoped that the stories of women who had completed their degrees at a later stage in life would inspire those of us on the same path, and those who might like to return to school as late-entry students. Finally, I wanted to offer the possibility for these women to celebrate their successes and struggles with others who are
on the same route. I wondered if or how their reflections of their journeys would compare with the experiences of the women I had worked with in Montréal.

I wanted the participants to set the perspective that would guide me, exploring the direction their concerns took me, rather than having a set agenda. I did send out guiding questions before the interviews. Participants were free to use the questions as a guide or if they preferred, just talk to me about how their journeys unfolded. Some of the issues that surfaced were how their stories of achieving their doctorates were tightly intertwined with their life stories and how the women were challenged in the process and how they rose to those challenges. I was also curious about how time and place played a significant role. As well, I wondered about lack of time and/or lack of private space.

**The Interview Questions**

What follows are the questions that I sent to the women before our interview. These questions were intended as a guide – I wanted them to have an idea of the sorts of issues I was interested in exploring with them. I soon discovered that a guide was all I needed. The women were very interested in expanding on these questions and wanted to add their opinions to my research.

- Do you feel that the part of Canada that you lived in when you completed your studies played a part in your success as a student? For example, did the weather, the proximity to the country or the city or any other factors play a part in your life as a late-entry student?

- Did life demands such as illness, finances or family play a major role in your life at the time you were studying?

- Did you ever feel discriminated against for any reason while you were studying?

- Do you have any words of advice for late-entry women who are studying at this time?
Do you have any words of advice for women who are contemplating a return to study at a later stage in their lives?

While the women did tend to answer most of the questions with passion, they had all thought long and carefully about their journeys, occasionally they would point out that certain questions did not resonate with them, but usually offered other information and details about their lives that I had not asked about, but that helped explain their particular journey in more detail. This provided a rich tapestry and a way for me to understand more fully the complexities of the late-entry women’s journey than I had ever imagined possible. In turn, I found myself sharing anecdotes about my experiences with study at this point in my life. By conducting this research I was continually giving myself a chance for self-reflection along the way. Having acknowledged my personal interest in this question (Harding as cited in Kirsch, 1993, p. 29) and having welcomed the idea that in the early stages, my research questions might change and evolve based on where the early investigations would take me, made this study all the more meaningful for me.

Data Sources

The data on which this narrative inquiry is based was collected over a nine-month period, from July 2013 until March 2014. The sources include the photovoice sessions described above, reflections from the conversations I had with these same five women during the writing workshop and the subsequent interview and emails and friendly meetings. As noted earlier, I worked with 39 women all together. Additionally, there were follow up emails and phone calls with the women who participated in an effort to get their stories right. Plus, when prompted by me for an image of their doctoral journey, many women did so without delay. I received images and accompanying text of some of the difficulties and joys of study at a later stage in life. All these modes of narrative inquiry enhanced my appreciation and understanding of their journeys. The preliminary stages
of the photovoice sessions and the writing workshop with classmates at my university helped me
to feel comfortable with the art of writing together in a group setting as well as gain confidence
interrogating people about their lives as doctoral students.

**Being Present in the Research**

As I began to interview others about their personal experiences, I was aware that during the
course of the interviews I would be revealing myself, and to some degree most likely shaping the
interview along the way. Revealing myself as a late-entry woman in academia seemed obvious and
imperative. How could I expect the women to be forthcoming? They didn’t really know me at all,
save for the information that I provided in the consent form. How could I expect them to reveal
their struggles if I were reticent to share my own? So, with some reservation initially, which made me
understand how they might feel, I found myself opening up quickly and easily to relative strangers.
I was surprised by how quickly the ice was broken and by how many of the women were so happy
to share their experiences with a total stranger. At one point in so many interviews, the interviewee
thanked me for being interested in her story.

I note in these words that comes from Van Enk (2009), my personality will surely affect the
way I record, the way I will ‘be’ in the interview process. It would not be possible for me to exclude
my humour or my way with a participant. Van Enk recounts her experience with a participant as they
chat about her (Van Enk’s) personal feelings towards what the interviewee has said. (She comments
that she thinks the interviewee has said something ‘really interesting,’ catches herself and says, I am
not supposed to say that). She notes:

Except in relatively token ways, I am not expected in any subsequent discussion of the
interview to address my own presence and conduct; it will simply be assumed by readers
of my research that I was there and behaved appropriately. Yet it is strange that this is so
because my presence and conduct are key to the particular account that emerges. Interviews are interactive, and whether I “do” a distantly neutral interviewer or a chummy, self-disclosing one (and in commenting ironically that I’m supposed to be the former, I’m clearly performing the latter), I cannot avoid influencing the words of the interviewee. (p. 1266)

I could see as I conducted my interviews that I was often in agreement with the women as they spoke of the value they put on their relationships. Their PhD work, while important and hugely time-consuming was not their only concern in their lives. I have no doubt that my identification with my participants enriched our dialogue.

As I listened to each participant, I sometimes offered my own understanding of study at a later stage in life. I did not see offering my point of view as an intrusion; rather I saw my contribution as a sharing of ideas and an acknowledgement of sameness and solidarity. I knew I was changing in the process, and I hoped that, having a glimpse into each other’s lives helped us each to define who we were and who we were becoming. We were beginning to understand ourselves a little better – for a while, at least. Joan spoke of the reality of the heavy load of having a family and for her, the importance of putting her family first. She wasn’t complaining, just stating a fact. She talked of not wanting to uproot her family as some of her colleagues had. While this possibility did not present itself to me, I knew that had I been faced with a similar situation, I would have conducted myself in exactly the same way. And I shared that with her. Although this wasn’t about me, per se, it was important to me that this woman knew that I valued the premium she put on family. I believe our sameness helped put her at ease throughout the interview process. I noted this as I reread the interviews. I remarked how I interacted and ultimately did ‘shape’ the interviews and the data. I have looked at how what I said might and can influence what I hear said. Van Enk looks at “ways in which a focus on interviewing as interaction, and particularly conversation-analytic study of such
interaction, has enriched our understanding of the kind of situation the interview is for personal narration” (p. 1267). I strived to be as attuned to my presence in the interview.

My very presence and my understanding that my involvement with a group would affect my ‘findings’ made me deeply aware that I had to be careful and honest with how I presented myself and my research questions. I anticipated that my identification with my participants would allow me a particular sensitivity that I would not possess if I were, in fact, an outsider. Bearing in mind that I came to this stage of my studies with, oh, so many opinions and years of life experience as a woman (!) almost half of those years as a mom, I proceeded with caution, inspecting my words, striving be fair and open-minded, all the while trusting that my insider position would grant me sharp insight, a perceptiveness that I would not possess if I were not the person who I am. As such, I recognised my researcher bias and shared it with my readers from the outset, hoping that it would guide me and add depth to my research as I discovered my researcher voice, and, I hoped, allow me to make a lasting contribution to our understanding of late-entry women studying at the PhD level across Canada. Furthermore, I expected that the qualities I value in myself, as a mother and teacher, compassion and strength, would sustain me on would be a challenging, lengthy and I hoped ultimately, an enlightening journey. “One can only give one’s audience the chance of drawing their own conclusions as they observe the limitations, the prejudices, the idiosyncrasies of the speaker” (Woolf, 1929, p. 6). I respectfully acknowledge the lens through which I see the world may be limited, prejudiced and idiosyncratic. In fact, I readily admit that I sought enlightenment through trying to understand other women’s ways of seeing the world as they made their way on this journey that requires so much of the self. Being a member of the group of women I sought to understand and represent, I did not pretend to speak for them, rather, I wanted to share their narratives and let them speak for themselves.
Mannay (2010) discusses the critical position of the researcher and her possible bias and one of the ways she was able to circumvent and enrich her investigation and that of the participants through using visual data production (collage, drawings and photographs). Through her discussions with her participants (mothers and daughters), she gained a more precise portrait of who they were – a clearer picture of them:

In order to gain an understanding of the internal narrative of the image, then, it was imperative to acknowledge the role of the image-maker. My own interpretation of the visual data would have been inadequate for, both literally and metaphorically, it is human beings who speak to one another and the lone image is an inadequate tool for understanding other people’s worlds. (Banks as cited in Mannay, 2010, pp. 102-103)

**Finding Participants Outside of Montréal**

Through word of mouth and ‘cold emailing,’ I searched university websites for professors and graduate students whose interests lay in adult education, post secondary education and/or women’s studies. I introduced myself and asked if they might be interested in participating in my research project or if they might know some late-entry women who would be interested in sharing their stories. I am so very grateful for the number of women who passed on my name to those they thought might find my study interesting. As I made my way through the interviews, I had women thanking me regularly for my interest in hearing and sharing their stories. The women’s genuine interest in my project and their attention to wanting to get the story right helped to sustain me on this long voyage. During the course of my research I was able to interview women from every province of Canada. We live in a vast country, but I found the voices of the 39 women were so very similar from province to province. I found myself wanting to introduce them all to each other, knowing that they would find kindred spirits and support that more and more as I progressed.
seemed sorely lacking in their academic lives. It is my wish to do some justice to the richness of thought that the women so generously shared with me. I hope I can illustrate the commitment that they needed to follow their dreams of a higher education while tending to their, as one woman, Sandy, put it, ‘big lives.’ I feel truly privileged to have been able to share the stories from these eloquent women. May their words serve to inspire other women who think that maybe, just maybe they might like to join us and follow their dream of obtaining a PhD later in life. The route does not have to be a lonely one, as they shall see.

**Phase 4**

The final phase of my study involved the creation of a website entitled, *Echoes of Late-Entry Women in Academia*, where I could share the stories with the women. It is discussed more fully in the final chapter in the section, *Towards developing a community of late-entry academics*. Although this phase did not constitute a formal part of the data collection, it is a critical part of the study in relation to the broader issues of impact and the sustainability of late-entry women in academia. It is a site to listen to others’ experiences in academia, as well as a place to be heard by others.

**Data About the Participants: Ages and Provinces of Study**

Figure 8 shows the breakdown of the participants’ provinces of study. Figure 9 gives a breakdown of their ages. I was pleased to have at least one participant from each Canadian province.
Figure 7: Participants’ provinces of study.

The next chart represents the participants’ ages.

Figure 8: Participants’ ages.
Diversity Among the Participants

The women’s engagement would not only sensitise others to the particular struggles they face, but help them to appreciate there were many other women on a similar journey. After my first presentation of my research, a man came up to me and said, “I think your study is interesting, but what about the challenges of the late-entry man?” I had to admit, his was a great question. And, quite seriously, I suggested he look into the matter. Another woman, one of my participants, asked what kind of diversity did I have among the participants. I mentioned that I wasn’t too sure; it was not a question that I had posed. Some of the women did offer their particular life circumstances as they pertained to their study. For example, I had a few Indigenous women and they mentioned this as their status impacted their study. As well, there were a few women who identified as lesbian, and mentioned this fact as it pertained to their studies and the climate of acceptance at their university. Additionally, there were women who were single moms and that proved to be challenging on financial and emotional levels. So, while there was diversity among the 39 women, the unifying theme was that these women were late-entry women, beginning their doctoral study later in life than is typical.

Working With the Stories: Part 1

My data collection and subsequent writing about the data involved two phases. Initially, I took the time to transcribe each interview. The process, while time consuming, was enlightening in a myriad of ways. The hesitancies, the genuine good humor, and sincerity that came through from each interview were remarkable. It helped to confirm that women wanted and needed to tell their stories. Inspired by Butler-Kisber (2010), I began to reread and relisten to interviews and “extract significant statements” (p. 53). I wrote and rewrote about how the women felt and how I felt there was a need to listen to their concerns. As I began to group together the many common themes
that surfaced across the interviews, I could see how much the women held in common. I charted the themes on large chart paper in my study. The papers took up a great deal of space and were a concrete reminder of the sheer magnitude of my study. I felt that there was a need to create a community that the women could reach out to and be listened to, beyond what was my listening was providing for them. As I listed their comments under themes, sometimes the very idea that a woman was the only one that might be suffering from a particular problem made me pause. I realised how, although stories were quite similar, the very notion that the women felt alone in their particular struggle probably made the doctoral journey feel even more lonesome. For example, I had women who felt that no one in their faculty understood the demands of a single mother on a limited income. Another felt isolated and constrained by the obligations put on her by ailing parents as she worked towards her degree. As I made my way through the data, I knew that the women would welcome the opportunity to meet each other virtually through the website, Echoes of Late Entry Women that was germinating in my mind.

**Working With the Stories: Part 2**

The stories these women told were replete with wisdom and humour, as well as worries of uncertain futures and accounts of how they have influenced their friends and families and how they themselves feel others have influenced them. As I explored in Chapter 2, the narrative methods of inquiry allowed the women to expand and reflect on their journeys as late-entry students. It also permitted them a chance to offer advice and inspiration to the women that I hope will be reading this thesis. The emphasis of my study has been on the ‘co-construction of meaning’ between the researcher – me – and the participants. While being involved in and listening to the conversations, I wanted to try to understand what was being said and compare it with my personal understandings. “We, as researchers should not try to ‘fill in any gaps in understanding with ‘grand narratives’,
but rather inquire about how pieces of the stories make sense together” (Etherington, 2004).

The recurrence of themes such as loneliness, ageism, and courage throughout the interviews was noteworthy. Often the comments contained more than one theme. For example, self doubt was often accompanied by the derision the women felt was aimed at them. Or, the responsibility of family was often a reason for delaying study. Examples of these themes are woven throughout the thesis.

As I have sought to create my own narrative, and explore my memories of talking and listening, I am beginning to see some connections that I don’t think I knew were there or did not recognise them. In Denzin’s (2009) words:

> At another level, reflexively oriented scholars, such as Mikhail Bakhtin, contend that there is no essential self or private, real self behind the public self. They argue that there are only different selves, different performances, different ways of being a gendered person in a social situation. These performances are based on different interpretive practices. These practices give the self and the person a sense of grounding, or narrative coherence (Gubrium & Holstein, 1998). There is no inner or deep self that is accessed by the interview or narrative method. There are only different interpretive (and performative) versions of who the person is. (p. 148)

As I moved towards helping others construct their own stories through narrative inquiry, I hoped I would be able to do so in a respectful manner. Denzin (2009) explains his aim in interviewing, he wants to treat dialogue ‘as a process of discovery’ (p. 152). In completing this research, I am comfortable with understanding those words – process of discovery. I am beginning to be able to feel I have begun to answer this question posed by Ellis and Bochner (2003):

> Well, in my methods classes I was taught that I had to protect against my own biases
interfering with my observations and that my research should produce general knowledge
and theory. But the articles you gave me emphasize concrete expressions over abstractions.
So, I’m confused about what my objectives would be if I do an autoethnography. Why would
others be interested? How could I prove that what I have to say about my experience is true?
Autoethnography isn't really isn't social science, is it? (p. 215)

Autoethnography does not confuse me as it once did. I feel it is important and fair to bring in and
acknowledge our biases as we report on our research.

As I struggled to shape the narratives into some kind of story that I could tell, I was aware
that I was the one who was shaping the story. I was choosing how to group the themes that surfaced
in the interviews. As Ely, Vinz, Downing and Anzul (1997) explain:

That this report represents only pieces of what actually happened, leaves out a great deal,
presents a sequence that may be other than chronological, does not take away from what
it comes to be – the ongoing, multifaceted, and often cacophonous stream of narratives
shaped into the essence of experience. The big job for qualitative researchers is not to make
a slick piece but to strive for writing a report that gets as close as possible to the essence –
the whole business of what we studied, felt and tentatively made sense about in the field.
This means that our reports may echo our doubts, discontinuities and various ways of
understanding. Indeed, writing that communicates well may be lumpy and bumpy, but is
always as true as possible to the important legs of the journey and, thus, always fascinating
and worth reading. (p. 37-38).

Grouping the themes, seeing similarities among the women and choosing what to include and
what to leave out has been challenging. What has been easy is finding all the commonalities among
the women. The feelings of growing self-confidence, personal growth and feelings of isolation
were present in every interview. The recognition that the journey towards a doctorate is laden with intense interrogation about one’s abilities, not only from the student but the world around her is unquestionable. My belief that I have provided a study that has value is certain.

Validity and Trustworthiness

More than 30 years ago Ann Oakley (1981) made the claim that a good way to encourage women to talk candidly about their lives was for the interviewer to invest her own private life in the relationship of the interviewer/interviewee. As a result of my own lack of confidence and growing confidence and pride in my work since becoming a late-entry doctoral student since 2010, and my investigation into the question of the place of late-entry women in the academy, slowly, I learned how to claim the title, ‘doctoral student’ and later ‘doctoral candidate’ with self-assurance and pride – understanding that I do belong and indeed, believing that my words do matter and I have something new to offer the academy. This research sheds light on the late-entry woman’s journey, the complex lives we lead and the richness we have to offer the academy.

In thinking about my study in relation to trustworthiness and validity, I also draw on the work of Anderson (2006) who writes about autoethnography. As he notes:

Put most simply, analytic autoethnography refers to ethnographic work in which the researcher is (1) a full member in the research group or setting, (2) visible as such a member in the researcher’s published texts, and (3) committed to an analytic research agenda focused on improving theoretical understandings of broader social phenomena. (p. 375)

Although I did not specifically set out to conduct an autoethnography, I believe that this work satisfies Anderson’s definition of analytic autoethnography. My membership in the community of late-entry women, my honesty with my participants and my commitment to uncovering their stories with care and respect has given veracity and vitality to the stories the women have shared with me.
This use of narrative inquiry has, I believe, provided me with a valid way of reading the late-entry woman’s world and of helping them learn about each other. I have provided important glimpses of how we might understand and attend to the needs of these women. As he addresses the controversy around the evidence-based research movement and looks at standards for addressing quality in research, Denzin (2009) writes:

This may be because many qualitative researchers don’t have data and findings, tables and charts, statistics and numbers. We have stories, narratives, excerpts from interviews. We perform our interpretations and invite audiences to experience these performances, to live their way into the scenes, moments and lives we are writing, and talking about. Our empirical materials can’t be fudged, misrepresented, altered or distorted, because they are life experiences. They are ethno-dramas. (p. 151)

In locating and giving voice to some late-entry women in the academy at the doctoral level, I have been in a position to understand and share how their experiences with peers, professors, family and friends help or hinder them as they work towards completing their degrees. Perhaps I will encourage other women to embark on this journey. As a mature woman and mother, I believe that late-entry women, myself included, represent a particular group – different from the archetypal university student that we see so often on university websites. As I write these words in the spring of my fifty-eighth year, I do not see any students that look like me being courted on university websites. I do not find myself in any fall publicity for incoming students in print or online. In part we are different because of our age and our life experiences, and unusual because of what we expect to get out of our time at the university. Following this thought, I am naturally interested in the idea of ‘who gets to speak?’ Whose voices matter? What counts as valuable life experience within the academy? Part of my reason for rejoining the academy at this stage of my life is that, over and over
again I am astounded and touched by the care and wisdom I feel and recognise in women. These are often women who consider themselves, ‘just moms, and/or, not university worthy.’ I think if I can locate some women’s voices in the academy, the voices of late-entry women who do seek out a higher education, I will give voice to a group of people that I feel have much to give and in doing so, help others who might like to imagine themselves at the university, not only imagine it, but fulfill that dream. I shall make no claims to an ‘objective’ look at the lives of late-entry women.

**Organising the Findings**

In the next three chapters I write about the vast amount of data I collected. The data include comments and observations from the women who participated in the photovoice interviews and writing workshops in Montréal. It also includes comments and observations made during the telephone and Skype interviews I held with women across Canada, as well as the images these participants provided to me to describe their doctoral journeys. The images are used throughout the dissertation and help illuminate the thoughts and feelings of the women who participated in the project. As I tried to categorise the women’s comments and images, I began to see that many of them fell into three broad categories. The first was that of coping with responsibilities outside of the university, that is, in their personal lives, and how the women dealt with many of these challenges. The next general theme consisted of how the women coped with the rigour of doctoral study. Finally, the third general theme covered issues of how the women reflected on the value of their lived lives, their experiences, and how this had an impact on their studies and had, in fact, helped them to stay the course of doctoral study. While there is overlap among the various themes in the next three chapters, for the sake of organisation, I have chosen to divide the chapters as follows: *Big Lives, Mediating Big Lives, and The Value of the Lived Life.*

Chapter 4 is called *Big Lives.* In this chapter I look at the results of trying to manage the
demands of busy lives while tending to all the demands doctoral study entails. Many of the women that I worked with indicated that balancing their already full lives with doctoral study proved to be very challenging. They spoke of the strain on their personal lives. That strain often affected their relationships with their children, their partners and their friends. All of the women reflected on their upbringing and how their relationships with their parents (notably with their mothers) influenced their studies. Many women talked about their feelings of loneliness, solitude and guilt as they made their way, both in and out of the academy.

In Chapter 5, *Mediating Big Lives*, I examine how the women try to manage their lives along with meeting the many demands of doctoral study. Some women told stories of discrimination from their advisors, while others felt very well supported within the university. Most commented that it was satisfying to share their story with me as a way of reaching out and letting the university know they were there and perhaps in need of some attention – attention that they felt the late-entry student not only needed but deserved. Along with those stories, there were many stories of growing self-confidence, which helped keep the women afloat. Some formed strong friendships that continued to flourish long after the doctorate was complete. Many had financial challenges, as funding models do not seem to be geared to older students. Unfortunately, many people felt the need to remind the women that I interviewed that they would never make back the money they had invested in their intellect. To contend with such an attitude while trying to complete scholarly work is a challenge. While most of the women were not hoping for a university position, they did have lofty goals for their research.

In Chapter 6, *The Value of the Lived Life*, I look at how the women shared their advice about navigating the academy. They were generous with advice about how to get through the doctoral journey and provided many illustrations of the tenacity and commitment that is necessary to get
through this course of study. They were well aware of their uncertain futures and the questionable value of their degree later in life. While almost all pointed to some of the physical challenges that present later in life, they were also enthusiastic about the benefits of age. The women appreciated the inspiration and support that was given to them by the people they cared for in their lives, and often this seemed to be a key factor to their success.
As I have grappled with the question, *Why return to doctoral studies?* on a personal level over the last few years, mainly because the question was asked of me one too many times, I have also engaged in many conversations with women who are my age and older and younger, who are at once terrified and fascinated with the idea of returning to school as late-entry students. The conversations invariably end up with them calling me ‘brave,’ a notion that makes me uncomfortable. It seems to underscore a ubiquitous belief that there is a set age at which one can or should return to higher education. These women also often say that they could not embark on such studies at a later stage in their lives. Perhaps because of their noticeable interest in the idea, I found myself prompted to ask them, *Why ever not?* I can only remember one answer I was given. It was said with a small smile, “I just couldn’t, you know?” I didn’t. These conversations, combined with that ever-present question, *Why return to doctoral study at your age?* informed my resolve to find answers to the question, *Why return to higher education later in life?* I hope that through this research I have provided other mature women the encouragement to know that they, too, can embark on this route, at any stage, should they so choose, with confidence. Perhaps by listening to the narratives of the struggles and successes of other late-entry women, they might find the ‘courage’ to reinvent themselves as so many of the women I spoke to felt they were doing.

As I entered McGill University, I concede that I had not really thought about the implications of doing a PhD at the age of 53. It never occurred to me that my age would become such a topic of conversation and that I would find myself explaining my reasons for my return to study to well-meaning people. I sense that certain a boldness must have overtaken me, if I am to
listen to the people around me. As I came to realise the truth of that statement, ‘A certain boldness must have overtaken me,’ I began to hear similar comments from the women I worked with as they described their journeys. What follows in this chapter are some of the accounts of their concerns as well as instances of growing confidence and advice that the 39 women shared with me over the course of my research. The women were forthcoming with stories of their struggles and successes. Many times I felt there was a real desire to shed light on the path to doctoral study and perhaps make it a little smoother for other late-entry women. And always, I sensed there was no real understanding from certain people as to why a woman would take up PhD studies later in life. I never thought that my journey into academia would begin and conclude with me asking the question, *Why return to academia?* As I explained to others what I was doing, that is, studying the PhD process with late-entry women, Laurel, a doctoral nursing student said she had just explained to her husband that she was going to talk to me, a PhD student who was interviewing other women about their PhD journey. Curious to hear yet another opinion from someone outside the academy, I asked her what his response was. She laughed and replied, “Actually, he might be getting quite used to the minutiae that becomes a PhD.” I hope that the finer points of the late-entry woman’s PhD journey that I have detailed will enlighten those who care to consider the ins and outs of this journey, from the woman’s point of view. It never did really seem trivial, as the word *minutiae* seemed to denote.

This chapter called “Big Lives” details how the women I worked with coped with what one woman, Sandy, called their ‘big lives.’ Throughout my research, I could see their ‘big lives’ included their personal relationships with their children, their partners and parents, as well as their friends. All recognised the strain that doctoral study can have on personal relationships. This chapter also includes some of the women’s reflections on their upbringings, in particular, they consider their relationships with their mothers and fathers and how their early years have influenced and informed
who they are today. Most of the women felt there were often elements of loneliness, solitude and
guilt that that accompanied them on their doctoral journey. These themes are discussed in
this chapter.

**Balance**

While Cole and Gunter (2010) recognise how demanding the technical aspects of the PhD
journey can be, they also note that this challenge is only one part of the story. Busy lives take over at
times. As they so aptly and I feel poetically write:

> The thesis becomes and remains—even after graduation – a member of the family. So while
> much depends on agency, it is the structures that shape and control our capacity to exercise
> control that matter, and a doctoral student cannot be successful without being able to juggle
> a range of demands on their time, not least partners and children who expect to be loved
> and cuddled. It is a long process that demands a huge amount of commitment from partner
> and family. (p. 139)

I saw repeatedly how challenging it was for so many of the women to juggle the many demands of
their busy lives.

In their collection of seven narratives from women who have completed their PhDs,
Cole and Gunter (2010) admit that they did not want to focus on the demanding technical side of
obtaining the doctorate, they note that there are many books that deal well with that aspect. This I
know firsthand. I own several. There are also blogs that provide daily pep talks and many students
I have known, including me, turn to them for inspiration and support. Many of my peers in the
doctoral program have tried to eke out time to meet with fellow students on a regular basis to try
and maintain that sense of camaraderie that is usually reserved for the full time younger student. As
I culled together the emerging themes from my interviews, the theme of ‘Busy Lives’ emerged often
and resonated loudly with me. It did not seem to matter whether or not the women had children, parents or a full time job. There was not one particular family challenge that I could say surfaced more often than another. What was constant was that challenges surfaced and obstructed their progress at one time or another during their studies.

Many of the women I worked with already had very full lives as they embarked on doctoral study. These lives included, but were not limited to, children, aging and ill parents and sometimes their own illnesses. Some even have their partner’s or the parents of their partner’s illnesses that they want to tend to. Many also have financial obligations related to these parts of their lives. Additionally, as in the cases of many of the women I worked with, they have either reduced or given up a salary in order to devote time to their studies. This was illustrated by Sandy, who relocated so that she could pursue her studies in another province, away from her home, aging parents and friends. She said she found this challenging, recognising that it took her a long time to come to her degree. Her mum was sickly and elderly and still is. For a long time Sandy didn’t feel comfortable leaving her home province. Finally, she decided to do it:

> You know, part of it was that I was worried that I was just waiting for my mom to die, instead of understanding what I needed to do – the next step in my life – having been laid off...and then who am I now? But that is also part of the challenge. When do we have the right to say this to our advisors? We have bigger lives than younger kids do. And when I say that about bigger lives, you know we have...we’re expected to be the person that your children or parents can turn to...

Joan wanted to warn others about the effects of doctoral study on family life. She felt that a woman had to resist the urge to fully immerse herself, because if she did there would be a cost; the PhD could easily take over. Like Joan, Maya said something similar. She warned women that if they were ‘the glue’ that had kept their family together, they had to know that the family just might fall
apart if they were absent due to their studies. Echoing her sentiments, Joan cautioned:

* I’d say resist the urge to fully immerse yourself because there’s going to be a cost. And I know it, I hear myself, it’s always a fear that I have that if you delve into this too much, that you’re going to lose something. There’s no way to have it all. So, you know, I’ve had problems with my kids that I think might be related to...that I think are related to just immersing myself too much at the master’s level. You know, I won all these awards for my masters work and excellence...beautiful stuff, but I think there was a cost. There was a cost. My children were at a very vulnerable age. And they needed me. And I wasn’t always there. So, I’d say there’s a cost. *

While it seemed the PhD was, itself, a huge responsibility, I was struck again and again about how women addressed the need to have other things in your life, besides the PhD. As we age, our lives naturally become full with partners, children and employment. For the older woman embarking on this project, there are so many variables that come into play as she turns to considering a PhD. For example, Jane talked about the many responsibilities she had in her life. She was a single parent, a teacher at the university and a member of a band. She said that the PhD affected all her relationships. She experimented with cutting music out of her life. Then she realised that music was an important part of her life and she only felt better when she devoted time to her band, not worse as she thought she might. However, most of the women did express the need to let go of some things, and sometimes those things included relationships, especially those with people who simply did not believe in them. Many also mentioned giving up on housework. They had to do so to devote the time necessary to the demanding PhD life. This is evident in the image that Eve sent to me (see figure 9).
The women in the study regularly mentioned being pulled in different directions and being in the middle of it all. They were willing to give up so much of life as they knew it in order to pursue doctoral studies, even though they were cognisant of the demands of their ‘everyday life’ and that in many cases, there wasn’t too much that they could actually ‘give up.’ Several women felt that some people at the university didn’t really recognise the complicated lives older students led and consequently did not make allowances for them. Marian talked about how the graduate program director, upon reading her progress report commented that she hoped that Marian would be working less in the coming year. Marian stated that her report indicated clearly that she was working steadily towards her degree while working full time. She found it frustrating, particularly considering she was in a Faculty of Education, that the director of the program did not value the fact that Marian was getting a PhD in teaching while holding down a teaching job. Hear the anger in her comment:
I am 42 years old and I find it insulting and condescending when a university administrator with a six-figure salary wonders why I don’t want to be a full-time student. Been there, done that...I have a lifestyle to which I’ve become accustomed and I’m not going back to eating Kraft Dinner.

At one point Sandra was visiting her daughter who’d just given birth in Québec. She was trying to complete and submit a paper while struggling with a French keyboard. She found herself trying to explain the situation to her young professor who did not seem sympathetic to the situation at all. She said there was definitely a clash between her commitment to her daughter during childbirth and her schoolwork at that time. It was with some hesitation that Sandra had started doctoral studies at 58, and she talked about how difficult it is to be that sandwich generation. She was not the only woman who used this phrase. She had been very committed to her seven grandchildren and her aging and ill mother. She recalled a day as she stood in line at the pharmacy and the image she had stayed with her. She had a box of Depends in one hand for her mom and a bag of diapers in her other arm for her daughter who had just given birth. And she wondered, “What’s wrong with this picture? Where do I fit in?”

All of the women talked about their rough spots on the journey. Not one sounded like they were breezing through it. All said a variation of, “I thought I would walk away from this.” Several made reference to the fact that qualitative research is so time consuming. Bridget wondered if people realised the large chunks of time that are needed for the analysis of qualitative data:

I mean I don’t know how you felt, but narrative inquiry is so long. It really is. It’s a lot of work. It’s so much more work than doing a quantitative study, right? And I don’t think people understand the effort. You sit down at a computer...I’m teaching a class in the afternoon. I’ve got to prep for that one. So, I’m not going to work on my writing right now, because I need two or three days just to get done one page, sometimes, right?
For many, even though the children have grown up and moved on there is still that ‘pull.’

It seemed from my interviews that mothers never really grow out of the mothering role. Sonya talked of her family that included three adult children, grandchildren and aging parents. She showed me a photo of herself in the kitchen trying to keep up with life (see Figure 10). She was among her schoolbooks and photos of her grandchildren. She laughed and said that in the photo she was trying to make supper while also trying to get some reading done. She described the scene, the family photos on the fridge in the background, her check book, because she owed someone money who was coming around to collect, the stove is on...But, she said, somehow things got done. Such positive voices I heard regularly.

Figure 10: Sonya’s kitchen.
Ripple Effects

I saw clearly that everything – every idea rests on another idea. I saw the ripple effects of comments and the ripple effects of actions. I saw the interconnectedness of all my encounters throughout this process through sharing stories with such a wide variety of women.

As noted in Chapter 2, it was not possible for me to work with these women and ignore my own story as we spoke. After all, many of the women I worked with had a similar story to mine. We shared child rearing stories, aging, ill and dying parent stories, as well as the dilemma of juggling household, partners and finances while maintaining our PhD trajectory. As I researched, I knew I was defusing the ‘myth of hygienic research’ in Oakley’s (1981) words. I was sympathetic as I listened to the many stories the women told of the powerful and positive influence they felt they had on their children as they made their way to their PhD. I, too, had experienced many similar feelings as I considered my own four daughters and the effect my return to study might have on their life paths. While there were quite a few instances of how women felt they’d affected their children in a positive way, there were also references to how difficult it can be to have younger children while you are trying to complete your PhD. Some women talked of the necessary time it takes to raise children and how you can’t ‘put on hold’ issues related to children in the same way you might with issues related to ourselves or teenagers. Several women made mention of the quarantined nature of the PhD writing life. Bonney, who had recently completed her master’s and was just embarking on her doctorate, had memories of her teenage daughter moaning, *When will you ever come out of that room?* Teresa, who identified as lesbian, said her route to her PhD was interrupted with the adoption process and how that process complicated her studies. She obtained her doctorate at 50. She had young children and explained, “I’m a lesbian, and so having children just took...It took more work. So I have a 13-year-old and nine-year-old.” It was Teresa who said, “The family has to understand and not get cranky.”
Unquestionably, the importance of good humour and trying to maintain a balanced life were key ingredients for these late-entry women who were trying to get through the PhD process.

Carol spoke of her daughter who has a learning disability, a reading retrieval delay, and how difficult the learning process had been for her. However, that daughter is now in her second term of massage training therapy, working hard to memorise bones and muscles. Carol said her daughter feels she was able to do this in part after watching what her mom had accomplished, obtaining her PhD at 60. Carol spoke with pride as she described her adult children and the effect she's had on them. Her children say, “You can do anything you want, mom.”

Marnie also wanted to let me know how she felt she had influenced her children. Seeing their mother go back to school at 50, redoing her undergraduate degree so that she would be eligible for graduate school, eventually obtaining her doctorate at 63 was inspiring for them. So much so that her daughter returned to school at 30 obtaining her doctorate as well! Another woman, Sybil said her daughter, upon losing her job at 30, decided to go back to school and become an engineer, even though she'd already earned her master's in Political Science. She said to her mom, “With your example, how could I possibly think 30 is too old to go back to school?”

Sybil obtained her degree at 62. She felt that not only was she fulfilling her dreams of obtaining her doctorate, she was also setting an example for her daughters. Even though things might fall apart, as her marriage did, she said, “You can always pick up the pieces and make something of yourself.” She stressed the importance of having your loved ones believe in you and support you. She told me what a struggle it was at times, saying her daughter would say, “Mum, if you want to quit, it’s okay.” Sybil didn’t, and was glad of that, but to know that it was okay and she wouldn’t be judged by her family made the journey easier. The people who really mattered would still be there for her. As Sybil spoke of her journey, she said she wanted to show her daughters that a person could start over, even amidst the turmoil.
of a divorce. Having been a high school dropout, her ex-husband made it clear that he had no faith in her academic abilities. In part, she acknowledged that she set out to prove him wrong, but more importantly, she wanted to prove it to herself. She admitted it was a long road, getting her BA as her daughters graduated from high school. Obtaining her PhD at 62 was a huge achievement.

Karen talked about the expectation that a young person is expected to choose early in life what they want to do for the rest of their lives. As a parent of young adults she knew that she was setting a positive example – she and her husband had both gone back to pursue doctoral studies in their forties. Their daughter, at 22, knew that she was under no pressure to make any such life decisions; she had only to turn to her parents to see that. Although she was hearing from people around her, *You have to decide to go back to school now or you’ll never do it*, she knew that was not true.

Many women regularly talked about the positive effect they knew were having or had had on their children. Lucy had a particularly trying experience of doctoral study, fraught with so many challenges throughout. She found power from a small gift her daughter, who had leaning challenges, had given her:

> The day of my defense, the best present that I got was from my youngest daughter, one of those, just a journal book that says ‘Keep calm and carry on.’ The inscription inside of it was, ‘Mum, you know you’ve passed this. You don’t need these people to tell you that you’ve passed. You know this better than anybody else. And you have won.’ And I hung onto that book all through my defense.

Stephanie talked about how all through her degree she doubted whether she would ever complete it. She was a single mother working full time. Of the 39 women I worked with, only ten were, in fact single parents. The majority of the women had a partner who helped with the children, bills and household chores. Nine had no children. As mentioned earlier, a few made reference to the fact that they did not have children and recognised that this fact most likely made doctoral study
easier. However, those who mentioned that they had no children were often tending to aging and sometimes ill parents.

Bonney joked about her teenage daughter’s reaction to the lengthy hours she spent on her master’s thesis, perhaps imaging what the consequences might be as she started on her doctoral work. “There were times when she used to say to me, you never do anything with me, or, I can’t talk to you.” Bonney also found that she had to quell worries from not only her daughter, but also her younger brother, with whom she was very close. In the past they’d often travelled together. He felt that her doing this degree meant they’d have less time together, saying, “Oh, we’re never going to see you now because, you know, you’re going to have too much work to do or you’ll be too involved in your studies.” Bonney felt that her brother seemed to think she would be absent from his life. She acknowledged, “I can see this as I feel this past term I have not been able to maintain contact with many of my friends because I have been consumed with my work. I am assuming it will get easier than last term as I had so much going on.” I said nothing here. I thought to myself, It doesn’t get easier, you just get busier! Who was I to warn her? I believe in the late-entry woman!

**Not Having Children**

While there were lots of comments from women who felt they’d had a positive effect on their children throughout their studies, a few women mentioned the benefits they felt they enjoyed as a result of choosing to not have children. As Yvette pointed out, she felt doctoral study was accessible and achievable for her because she did not have the responsibility of children. As a woman who did not have children and a husband to focus on, she felt the doctorate was something she was able to accomplish and that it would help her to validate herself as a scholar in her field of health science. Her great interest in nursing medicine combined with the freedom to pursue doctoral study, without the responsibility of children and a husband, she believed, allowed her to pursue her passion with little interruption.
Cindy pointed out that she could definitely see the trade-offs to not having children as she pursued not only her doctorate, but also the job search that followed the completion of her degree. She was struggling financially and not having children allowed her the option to travel anywhere, without the worry of where her children would go to school or where a partner would find work. She found herself applying for jobs in Asia, Australia and Europe. Had she had a family, she would not have been willing to uproot them for the ten-month contract, which was her current job in Britain – and was, in fact, leading to a tenured position.

Sandy mentioned that early on in her life she had made the decision to not have children and, as a result, had more disposable income. She also mused that perhaps life as a doctoral student was a little less stressful for her. She thought it must be difficult to maintain partners and children while following a rigorous course of study. Then again, she considered, it might be nice to have someone say, “Let me do the shovelling. Let me get the groceries.” Eve, also childless, mentioned that when you had a partner there were two people paying the bills and spelling each other off for childcare. Perhaps the added structure actually helped to keep people organised and forced them to set aside time for study. However, Eve also pointed out that she knew no single mothers who were studying for their doctorates in her program. She herself was in so much debt that at 53 she wondered how she’d ever pay it all back.

Strain on Personal Relationships

For some women, the strain of doctoral study was just too much for their personal relationships. Julia talked of how her marriage failed during the course of her studies. While she reasoned that her studying was not the only cause for the breakdown of her marriage, she felt her return to school certainly contributed to it. She revealed that her ex-husband felt threatened by her pursuit of an advanced degree. He would make sarcastic comments to their children if supper was
late like, “She has time for her computer, but no time for us.” Julia said little things grew into big things until she decided she would not stay in such a caustic relationship. Her ex insisted that she would never make back the money she had spent on her studies. As Julia said, “It was not about making the money back. It’s about doing something for my brain.” This was a common refrain among all of the women – doing something for me. In contrast, Sarah spoke lovingly of the unwavering support she received from her husband. She said that he was retired and did seventy percent of the housework and never complained if she needed to work into the night or during the holidays.

Danielle also talked about the disintegration of her marriage just as she was beginning the third year of her program, saying it was difficult to stay the course, both financially and emotionally. Her husband just walked away:

> So, you know, with going to school and whatnot...three years into the program, I just couldn’t swing it. There were other things going on, too. My father...it’s just so classic. My father, of course my parents are aging, he had a bout with colon cancer. I only came to this area because of the program, not because of my family. But because I’m here, I’m able to help out more with my parents, as they’re getting older. So, I actually took two years off, the last two years to work. I thought when I was hired; they were really supportive of my studies. They said, ‘Oh, yes, yes, that’s excellent. Work on a PhD. I paid part time tuition for two years and didn’t progress an inch. Not anything. And it was so disheartening, I was so discouraged, watching my colleagues who had started with me – much younger colleagues – who had started with me going off, graduating, you know finishing up in the five years. I was really getting bitter, that’s probably the right word. Yeah. It’s just the little pieces. It’s stuff that you don’t even think about. You know making sure your dad’s eating. Mom was in the hospital just last week. I taught my class and I went straight from my class to the Sobey’s to make sure dad had food for supper. Little things like that, you know. It has nothing to do with smarts anymore. It has to do with tenacity (laughs).
Many women made reference to the fact of how difficult the path was at times, especially as they neared the final stages of the PhD. The work was gruelling and many were trying to balance very hectic lives while attending to their studies. Many considered the notion of abandoning the doctorate altogether. Teresa said she, too, had considered this possibility. It was such an intense time, writing for hours, getting little sleep and trying to keep up with her busy family life. The only space she had to work was evenings and weekends. Her weekends would start early and finish late. She laughed as she said:

"That was the point where I said, why the hell am I doing this? This is painful. No one’s going to read this. Only my supervisor and the external reviewers and the occasional random other PhD student who needs a quote! In that moment I just sat there and I stared at the computer and said, What? Have I just wasted seven years of my life? And that’s the moment you just have to just keep pushing it through. No one almost quits in the beginning. And I see why people quit near the end. To me that was the hardest because you couldn’t just say, Oh I’ll spend two hours on this. You’re like, Oh my God! I need six hours. And oh geez! I’ve only put in a hundred words and I’ve cut out five hundred."

**Upbringing**

Some women mentioned the lack of encouragement and support for formal education when they were younger. I heard from many that while their parents valued learning, they did not see the university as a place for women. Several women that I worked with mentioned that they had not been raised to have career aspirations of any kind. Sybil commented that she was so pleased that she could participate in my study, finding it such an interesting topic. She thought there were a lot of women, especially of her boomer generation, who were brought up given the following advice that she’d received:
All you have to do in your life...I certainly was literally told this by my father; you know, you have to marry well. That’s your education. That’s your insurance. Of course you come around to realising, ah! Maybe that doesn’t work so well (laughs). Some are lucky and some just aren’t. So for me it was a long journey – to realise that this was not working and yes, I had to do something else. But in the end, you know, getting a PhD has not really affected my income in any positive way, but it’s been a satisfying journey. I wanted to have that behind me to demonstrate to my girls that, you know, you can go on and do other things when something doesn’t work out. There are always other possibilities and you can take things on later in life...go back to school.

Families weren’t always a source of encouragement. At times they seemed to cause some friction for some of the women. Yvette, a doctoral student in nursing felt that family acceptance was actually one of her biggest challenges. She felt that personal fulfilment was not seen as necessary to the development of the female psyche. She said with some sadness and puzzlement, “I’ve yet to hear my mother congratulate me for entering academia. What I get is, Well, you’re not going to be a real doctor. Why did you go through all that?”

After reflecting on our conversation, Yvette wrote back to me. She wanted to, in her words, clarify and add context to the path and experiences associated with women like her, who pursue a PhD later in life. She wanted to describe her mother’s struggles to get an education as a young woman of 18 in Ontario. She said that her maternal grandfather paid to have her two uncles educated, whereas her paternal grandfather could only afford to send her father to the same school. That is how her parents met. Yvette said that her mother was not supported in the same way that her father and uncles were supported. Her mother had to live as a nanny in exchange for room and board. Her mom remembered the address and together they visited the neighbourhood where her mom had attended college. Here is Yvette’s recollection of the visit:
My mom recounted the events that preceded her education and one of those moments was a discussion with grandpa regarding her desire to be educated. He said, ‘Une fille n’a pas besoin d’une éducation’ which translates to ‘a girl doesn’t need an education.’ Although my mother fought against the morality and prejudice of her day, her behaviour was peculiar in that I would have thought she would have been more supportive of my own academic pursuit. This permeated a conversation she and I had when I was 18, when I was selecting a post-secondary education. I wanted to attend a university nursing program and she was strongly in favour of a local college program. I distinctly remember her words, ‘You’re just going to get married and have babies so why waste your time in university. Go to the local college and you’ll be a nurse like your sister anyway.’ I guess some struggles are generational and it takes a huge shift in one’s fundamental beliefs to change what we learn as children and adolescents. It should not come as any surprise, the struggles that women continue to experience throughout their adult lives in matters related to personal growth and intellectual development. Looking from where we come can give a whole lot of insight as to the direction we may be headed. It takes a strong, wide, deep rudder to turn a big ship around. Historically, social changes require several generations before they become accepted as a new normal.

This reflection most definitely helped to put context to Yvette’s path. Indeed, social change is slow.

Soon after this comment, I listened to Noreen as she explained her decision to break the cycle in her family. I considered that Noreen would be about the same age as Yvette’s mother. Noreen talked about her desire to break a cycle. In her ‘academic family’ it was only the men advancing themselves:

*We had three doctorates in the family – all males. It enhanced the patriarchy of our society. Many females, although having excellent ability, simply don’t have the time (or encouragement) if they marry and have babies. Very often females step aside and support males who regard themselves as the breadwinners.*

As Noreen described her struggles obtaining her advanced degree, I asked her, “Did anyone encourage you on your journey?” Her answer? “No. It was just not something that a woman did.”
Sandra also talked of her motivation, saying it was internal. She said as a child the whole school experience had been a positive one for her. But a girl was not expected to go too far with her schooling. You got married. You didn’t go further. After reflecting on our conversation, she supplied these words and the photo (see figure 11).

![Figure 11: Somebody thought Sandra could.](image)

I mean I can remember having that conversation with my mother and father. But my father was particularly, you know, very blunt about women. Women get married and they have babies. They don’t go to school. So I think I was so young and so naïve that I believed that. I wasn’t wise enough to know that I could have gone on if I’d wanted to. I think I didn’t because there was no motivation. There were no models. There was no inclination that I could do anything that was against the normal family expectations. So, I think because I had a parent that said that, I did get married young. I did have children young. I was very engaged in their schooling. It was actually my eldest daughter’s grade 1 teacher that said to me one day, ‘If you’re going to be here so much you might well go back to school. Do a degree and get paid for it.’ And I laughed. I thought isn’t that funniest thing? And she said, ‘No I’m serious. I’m really serious. I can see how much you love teaching.’ So that was my, I guess my original motivation. Somebody actually told me they thought I could. That was the start of my journey, many years ago.
It’s interesting to note that at 64 Sandra still recalled vividly these comments, both the one from her father and the one from her daughter’s teacher. Maybe Sandra’s dad did not encourage women to ‘get an education’ but Sandra was doing her best to spread the word that it’s never too late. She was a walking example. She said she felt there was an invisible spin-off to telling her story, saying she’s had people who have contacted her a year or two after she’d met them to tell her, that it was because of her that they went back to school or that they became interested in something. She said that she found that rewarding, yet invisible…and I thought, a little like the late-entry woman. Sandra said, “I’m not sure what they get, except that I share my story.” Through my research it is my privilege to continue to share the stories of Sandra and others like her. Could that grade 1 teacher have any idea how she had affected the future, for Sandra and as a not so invisible spin-off, for me? If only she could know just how far her words would resonate.

As Stephanie talked about the emancipative affects of doctoral study, she pointed out that she was not raised to believe that women could be as she put it, ‘knowers.’ As a mature student she said this notion, as she came to understand it, was ‘mind-blowing’ for her – spoken like a true boomer! Other women talked of the generosity from their parents, even though as Alice said, “You know, neither of them needed me to go back to school. Neither of them graduated high school, actually. I’m certainly the first PhD in the family.” Yet they still supported her.

Sarah was certain that when she graduated there would be a world of possibilities for her with her newly minted PhD at 54. She also talked of her upbringing. She said from the time she was born she was led to believe that education was everything. “I was surrounded by books, right from the time I was born, I had the fire in my belly. I credit my parents with that.” Sarah had lots of praise for her parents who were getting older but were still extremely supportive of her. It seemed Sarah was passing on what gifts she’d been given by her parents as she talked of how she enjoyed working with her young
co-worker at her school. She also pointed out all the support she enjoyed from her husband. The healthy working environment in which she found herself helped her to follow the doctoral program with some ease. She recognised that many people were not as fortunate:

At work I'm a core leader, so I have somewhat of a voice. I'm long in the tooth. I've got courage now that I didn't always have in speaking against such things as systemic injustice and social injustice – those kinds of inequity that we sometimes see in education. Of course that is a huge part of my own research.

Elizabeth, one of my younger participants, talked of how both her parents and her partner had an academic background so she felt she always had support. She felt fortunate that everyone thought she would go back to school.

Clearly the encouragement that some women mentioned that they felt from a young age from family members and from their parents’ legacy of the love of learning stayed with them into adulthood. Bonney talked of her dad, a carpenter and labourer all of his life, who had passed away in 1998. She said he continued to exert his influence over her, noting that he believed that if she was ever going to make something of herself, she had to go to university. He told her this on a daily basis and she felt that was in part why she was driven at 50 to pursue her doctorate. As well, she had an older brother who had left home when she was quite young to attend university. “He would always write letters to me encouraging me to study and make sure to do well in school. As I got older there was no doubt that I would go to university – there was no other option.”

As Diane reflected on her upbringing and how it might inform her PhD journey, she declared that she had come from a difficult family background, where she often felt guilty for anything that was done for her. She was thankful that her husband was not like that. When they had to move away for her school, he accepted the move, although uprooting had been difficult. Diane said it was nice to know that she didn’t have to keep apologising for disturbing people’s lives. She
was appreciative of the support from her husband and said, “You can’t go through with doctoral studies if you have an active force trying to sabotage your study times.”

**Mothers**

Women found support from many people: classmates, partners, advisors and sometimes, as illustrated above, in the memories of their parents or other family members who had valued education. As I spoke to women, one subject came up repeatedly. That was the subject of mothers and how they had influenced their life journeys. Many women spoke of the influence, support and interest and on a few occasions, disinterest from their mothers. What stood out was the influence that mothers can and do exert over their daughters in both positive and negative ways, it seems. As well, the tremendous dedication these women showed towards their moms was present in most conversations. There were aspects to this that I found disheartening and heart-warming at the same time, both as a mother and a daughter. More than a third of the women I worked with had their studies interrupted by their mothers’ illness and/or death. As my own mom had died rather suddenly in 2009, I knew the strain these women were experiencing first hand, as they tried to come to terms with the illness and/or death of their mothers while trying to live the graduate student life. As Bridget recounted her story about her relationship with her mother who’d had a stroke last summer, I could hear her conflicting feelings:
Being that I'm the only child near her – my brothers and sisters live out of the country...it was my responsibility to care for her while she was in the hospital and since then she's been transferred to a long term care facility. The demands of that...I mean you don’t have a summer break, for example. I know it sounds very selfish. Being the age that I am and my mother’s turning 90 – I was the only one here to care for her. She was very dependent on me to do that. And now I’m trying to break that tie a little bit so she’s more independent – which she is getting better at...I have to take her for appointments...she doesn’t live here. She lives still another two hours from me, so for me to make those trips back and forth once a week or twice a week is...it’s time. So being sort of the midst of it all...everything’s going around you...I still teach a full load. I’m a full time PhD student doing full time research. My communities that I research are not here. I drive to First Nations communities. Some are two hours away.

As Bridget spoke of these obligations, she did not speak of them in a self-sacrificing way. In fact, she insisted that she was the person who wanted to do these things for her mother. She was simply stating who she was, how this care giving was part of her nature and something she felt she had to do, recognising that, “These obligations do have an end result of piling up. The shoulders are not quite as broad as they used to be, I guess.”

As Madeleine talked about her decision to return to graduate studies, she said that she had completed her masters in 2007 at 51. At the time she was deeply connected to her mom, who supported her in everything that she did. When her mom passed away in 2009 she said her death freed her up. It seemed that the health of parents, particularly mothers, helped to either inspire or hold back women. In any case, it always informed the women’s journeys. As Joan described the toll her mother’s illness was taking on her decision to return and stay the course of graduate study, she said that just as she was beginning in the doctoral program her mom became very ill and she had to look at crisis placement. Up to that point she had been taking care of her mother at home. She had
almost decided to pull out of the program when the phone rang, they’d found a bed for her mother.

She said:

On one particular morning, I was at the point where I was writing my list of daily things to do. Like not even long term...papers or anything. Yeah! Like what am I going to get through today? One of them was to call the director of the PhD program to drop out. I was ready. And on that particular day I got the call that we had the bed at the nursing home. So it was just the way things fell, just like fate, you know? But, yeah, this family, like life, takes over. And this PhD just has to be pushed aside.

Teresa also talked of her mother’s illness and how she finally had to put her studies on hold while her mom was dying. She said sadly how much she missed her mom and how unfortunate it was that her mom didn’t live to see her complete the degree. At first Teresa thought maybe she could hurry the degree along, to share her accomplishment with her mom. She tried to hurry the process but couldn’t; the pressure was just too much. She had to travel some distance to see her mom on a regular basis and she didn’t want to take the time that her mom had left for granted:

When she started to get really ill, then I went to visit her a lot. And then after she died I just couldn’t do anything. I was zonked; I was just really out of it. It was so sad that my mother didn’t see it, because she’s kind of the only one in my family who got it. I mean she was a teacher all her life. And she kind of got what it meant. My other siblings...they’ve been supportive, you know, one’s a teacher, one’s a nurse. But I don’t think they got what it took to do it.

In a strange way, it seemed that the significance of this major undertaking was often minimised in many women’s circles, even within their own families. Trying to reinvent oneself should really be seen as admirable, yet several women mentioned conflicting feelings when referring to those closest to them. It seemed that many people held ‘opinions’ about the women’s return to school. Negative reactions from older family members came up a number of times. On some
level they must be proud, but many women reported that those close to them didn’t really seem to understand or think it ‘necessary.’ As Jane recalled her grandmother’s reaction when she told her she’d be returning to graduate school to work towards her doctorate, she said her grandmother responded with, “That’s nice,” in a way that Jane knew her grandmother was most probably thinking, Why aren’t you having babies? Jane said she found her grandmother’s reaction ironic in that she and her grandmother shared so many qualities. They both enjoyed writing, which was in fact Jane’s research subject. Her grandmother had written and bound the story of her own life. So, even though this grandmother had very liberal values and was open-minded, Jane felt that she just didn’t consider a university education as very useful, or as Jane put it, even that ‘attractive.’ She imagined what her grandmother might also have been saying when she said, That’s nice, was, Why would you want to stay in school?

Jane also talked of how her own mother had not attended university, though she would have liked to, having always wanted to study psychology. When Jane was a child her mom had written her own natural foods cookbook. She said that was such a big project and had made an impression on her. Her mom took over the living room with her electric typewriter, a desk and shelves. Jane mused, “So I think that she had aspirations for herself, that she didn’t fully accomplish. That definitely informed my ideas about what I would want to do in life.”

Joanne talked about her urge to complete the doctorate in a timely manner because her mother had been diagnosed with Alzheimer’s when Joanne was a few years into her degree. Joanne wanted her mom to be a part of her success. When she started the degree in 2003, her mom was in relatively good health. When she was diagnosed with Alzheimer’s, Joanne was just a year shy of graduation. As it was still early in the disease, Joanne noted that she didn’t have to do a lot of arranging for home care. She felt the diagnosis was a good incentive to get the degree completed in
a timely manner. She knew that her mom would want to know that her daughter had achieved this milestone! “She was really getting a kick out of this doctorate thing. She was going to want to be there. I graduated in 2008 and I was really glad to graduate when I knew she would appreciate how big a deal it was. That was good.”

For the most part, women did not complain about the many duties they had in addition to the PhD life. As Mara said with quiet acceptance, “My first commitment is to my family.” She felt that doing the PhD had contributed to her becoming a stronger person. Dealing with all the responsibilities that go along with daily life and adding to that the rigour of the PhD commitment had, she felt, built character as she declared, “If I can do this, I can do anything!” This seemed to be another surprising side benefit to doctoral study: women were forced to reach within and mine strengths they did not know they possessed. The women I worked with mentioned a variety of ways that they survived the journey and how the friendships they formed made up an important aspect of staying on even ground. However, the themes of loneliness, solitude and guilt surfaced in many of their stories.

**Loneliness, Solitude and Guilt**

As I worked with the women, I was struck by the number of times a woman commented on the loneliness of the journey and the guilt many women experienced as a result of returning to study for their doctorate. And as I have mentioned elsewhere, often there seemed to be a general lack of understanding, even puzzlement, as to why a woman would bother to pursue her PhD. It seemed to me odd that people would challenge a woman on this idea of why she would do this? Yet, I heard it often. Leonard’s (2001) suggestion that we might see the stress that is inherent in doing the doctorate as a new ‘expert knowledge’ seemed to resonate with the stories I was hearing. She suggests that universities should recognise the real anxiety that women experience as they make their way through their doctoral studies. Understanding the process and connecting with others who
are going through a similar journey (other doctoral students) might help to demystify and provide support to older students. Yet, she notes:

The possibility of establishing such networks depends on the physical presence of a fair number of women in the institution. It is difficult to establish women’s groups if most women students are part-time, or if there are not many postgraduates in your field (say in social work or architecture). (p. 172)

By listening to the accounts of their doctoral journeys, I was giving the women authority, as well as respect for their stories and providing them with the encouragement that yes, there were others like them, late-entry women who were struggling, but managing to find their way. I knew that I was not only informing myself on this journey, but also providing an important outlet for the women to share their own stories. In a way, I was connecting them through their stories.

The majority of the women that I worked with did not seem to be fully immersed in university student life. They didn’t have the time to be. They had, as Sandy had put it, ‘big lives.’ She felt this posed a couple of problems that were related to the isolation and loneliness of the journey. First of all, it limited the amount of time one can commit to studies. Secondly, she felt that for her it meant that other students did not really have that much time for her. She had moved away from her home province to pursue her studies, leaving behind aging and ill parents to do so. By leaving her friends and family in another province at 52 years old, Sandy found it difficult to try and engage with a whole new community, because as she said, “The people my age have got their grand kids etc, they’ve got this and that going on. They’re busy. And so, they don’t have the opportunity to open up their lives to me here. I find that very lonely, you know.” She found being on her own challenging. However, on the bright side, Sandy did feel well accepted by her younger peers in the program. She said they had been warm and friendly, even inviting her to parties. “Here I am 52 years old, at a party, chugging beer. I thought, what the heck? I’ll
play Beer Pong on Halloween, you know? Well, my team didn’t win. I said, Ah, I’ve got to tell you guys, it’s been a very very long time since I’ve chugged beer.” Sense of humour, even here, as it is tinged with loneliness, was displayed throughout all my research, and not taking oneself too seriously seemed key to surviving!

As Laurel described her ‘place’ in her university she noted that in her program, while most of the students were, like her, some sort of health professional prior to enrolling in the PhD program, and that helped to elevate the age, she did feel like a bit of a outcast when she tried to attend a barbeque put on by the Graduate Student Association. She laughed and said, “I was just a freak. There was almost nobody to talk to! So in my little corner of the campus it isn’t unusual, but widespread it is.”

Sandberg (2013) reminds us that moving forward involves getting rid of ‘internal obstacles.’ Women’s frequent mention of loneliness and lack of confidence surely fit that category. How do we build confidence in ourselves? So many women seemed to rely on the strength they gained from their partners and friends. When a woman was more or less on her own, she often mentioned feelings of loneliness as an impediment on her path to success. For example, Marian, a single woman of forty-two, felt that some of her loneliness stemmed from the fact that she lived on her own with just her two cats. As much as they were an important part of her life, she felt that they were not a replacement for having someone close to you who might be able to reassure you. She sensed that having a partner would make a difference and might help to keep her on track. She did talk about how her mother who lived in another province had every confidence in her, saying, “My mother thinks I can do anything! She has no idea how hard this is.”

As Joan spoke of the isolation she felt on the PhD journey, as a mature student, she noted that her husband was her ‘rock.’ However, she said she knew women who joked that, “No one makes it through a PhD without a divorce.” This troubled her and she vowed that she would sooner abandon her studies before she let her family fall apart. Joan also felt in addition to the pressure she was
putting on herself to get the degree completed in a timely manner, that the university was also pressuring students. She felt as a mother of teenagers and working full time she had to continually shield herself from those external pressures and the comments she would hear like, *You’re still at that? It’s taking you a while, eh?* She was interested in taking part in my study so that she could connect with someone who had a similar life circumstance. As she reached out to share her story, our sameness made her more forthcoming, I am certain. Joan felt there was not one other woman like her in her program. There was no one with teenage children, who had recently lost a parent and who was teaching full time. Her loneliness was palpable.

Many women thought carefully about their reasons for study and about the toll the PhD work took on their families. They felt that it was difficult to separate themselves from the work at times. Yet, as discussed earlier in this chapter, many also spoke of the positive effect they thought their return to school had on their adult children. Joan said that although people were impressed with what she had accomplished, she felt very vulnerable, ready to drop everything before she would put her family life at risk. She said, “I feel very alone in my journey having no other student that I can link with that shares a life like mine – older when I started grad studies plus children plus being a career women, like this lone arrangement.” She supplied this photo of a sculpture (see figure 12) and these words to describe her doctoral journey.
I’ve named it Balance in isolation, meaning that I frequently feel all alone in this huge undertaking and often fear that this PhD, which should only be the very top rock, is replacing the second from the bottom and taking over. The other rocks, my children, my husband, my health, my career as a professor should be larger as these are my priorities. I should be able to throw off that top rock at any time if it was placing the others at risk. Unfortunately, I find my balance very poor at times and I become frail. Any more pressure could tip me over – like this lone arrangement. However, I keep pushing with every new day watching the horizon with hope that I will have made it through, weathered by the process but intact. To those around me, it is quite amazing that I can do all of this, but to myself, it does not seem natural just like rocks should not be stacked this way.

Many women tried to describe the stress as they made their way, and I thought that Marian’s image and words on the subject were most evocative. She was really struggling with ideas and, at times felt enormous pressure. Wanting to illustrate how she felt, she supplied this image (see figure 13). She laughed as she described her state of mind sometimes.
Ah, yeah, the barbed wire, it, ah...I just feel as if that’s what’s going on in my brain sometimes (laughs). Everything is just a big mishmash. Nothing really fits properly and I’m trying to get through it, but I’m stuck. And, often when I’m trying to do my work, I get images like this in my mind.

As much as Marian’s head was full of barbed wire, Danielle saw things quite differently. She looked for order in her work and when asked to supply an image (see figure 14) that reflected her journey, she said she found inspiration from this image.
This photo just really speaks to me. In fact, many of my research partners like it too and it has gotten used by several of us that participated in a Coastal Community University Research Alliance. I took it in 2009 while I was on joint fishermen’s, community, and aquaculture coastal clean-up day. I like it because it’s beautiful and messy, necessary and redundant, complex but tidy. It shows requirements and extras, all at the same time.

Guilt was another emotion that came up quite regularly. For example, Louise talked of how she had considered that maybe she shouldn’t be spending the money for tuition on herself; maybe she should be putting it away for her children’s education or her and her husband’s retirement. She wanted to caution others on the subject:

If you’re going to be going back to university when you are at that stage in your life – when you might have elderly parents or kids at home – first of all – I think it’s really important to have a spouse that’s 100% on board with you going. My husband, he is proud of me and very supportive. He’s not an academic, either, right? He considers the university to be one of the most screwed up institutions in – forever! He doesn’t understand it at all. He is constantly, you know that question, when are you going to finish this? And then really kind of not understanding the processes and the steps that you’re going through. He gets it, but he doesn’t, you know? Even with someone that’s really supportive – I am still constantly feeling guilty that that I’m going back and I’m doing this. I feel like it’s such a luxury. I feel I’m so privileged to have this opportunity to go back to university at my age and just be having fun! I’m really enjoying this. So part of me is saying, ‘Yay! This is great!’ Part of me is saying, but what am I doing? I’m not contributing really to the family income at all. I see my husband working like crazy. I feel like I should be doing more to actually contribute to the family income.

Life getting in the way seemed another variation of guilt and it sprang up regularly. Sonya has both her own aging parents and her husband’s aging parents and three adult children. She also
has grandchildren who occupy an important place in her life. She said that her husband often asks, “When are we getting our kitchen back?” He would regularly eat in a small corner of the table, with her schoolwork spread out everywhere. She admitted that it wasn’t really fair. She pointed to the phone and said, “That phone is no good. It’s not good. My aging parents call, what are you doing? I say, same thing I was doing ten minutes ago.” She said during the writing phase it was difficult but necessary to hold back on making commitments to family and friends.

Sarah felt that it was critical to be organised, saying you have to manage every day with absolute precision! While Trisha’s concern was the need during all of this to have some time alone, when she wasn’t cutting into work and family life, when she didn’t feel guilty. I consider – when you calculate all the time taken for work and family, does it even leave any time for much else?

Louise talked about how she sometimes had feelings of regret and how at times she doubted herself and her decision to return to school. She felt, “Writing that dissertation, that’s the hardest part.” Joan said that in retrospect she didn’t think she would start the doctorate, knowing what she now knew. However, she said, “And now that I’m in it, I can’t give it up. Not because I want to, because I can’t...give up on something.” The underlying notion of guilt was detectable in many conversations, and I could see that women tried hard to not take the hours away from what they often considered their number one responsibility, usually their families.

It was easy to see the pull in different directions, as well as the conflict. How do we, as women negotiate the many responsibilities and the genuine desire to keep everyone close to our hearts while following our own hearts? Bonney said that she would never have pursued doctoral studies when her children were younger. She also talked about the stress of having her two adult children still living at home – feeling that having them at home affected her, in terms of her work. She felt their presence created a real difference, saying there had been times when she found herself
alone in the house and she was more able to just get on with her work. "You know, it's a different feeling when you do have the place to yourself. There's no doubt about it. And it's not that you don't enjoy having them or that you don't want them around. It's nothing to do with that. It's just creates a different kind of dynamic." We can hear the slight tinge of guilt in Bonney's comment. Oh, for a room of one’s own.

The pull of family and women's desire to be that caring person in the lives of the people they loved surfaced regularly. Along with this desire came the guilt that women so often feel when they don't measure up to the ideal that they or others have somehow set for themselves. Putting themselves first didn't seem to come naturally. Bonney thought about her life and her responsibilities. She said that her mom was 85 now. She knew that her mom sometimes felt that Bonney did not always have the time to do the things that her mom wanted, particularly this past Christmas. She had work due at the university and felt that, at times, the PhD definitely affected her relationships.

**Conclusion**

Keeping my self in the story, while trying to maintain the researcher stance was a delicate balancing act at times. After all, I too felt I had a big life. I shared many of the women's concerns about balancing family and work while striving to stay focussed on the serious job of being PhD student. As Ely et al. (1997) point out:

Because self is somehow implicated in where we position ourselves, it is important to tackle the issue of how ‘truth’ can be found or how ‘validity’ and ‘reliability’ can be gleaned from one person's interpretation of qualitative data. We feel that a responsible research report is one that can be believed. This is linked directly to how each researcher-writer shares the story of meaning making that underpins the writing. (p. 34)
Throughout the research process, being highly aware of the similarities between me and my participants and all the while sharing that similarity helped to keep me in the story, understanding myself and, I hope, helping others to be forthcoming with me. As they revealed their feelings about their lives, on issues from children and partners, to parents and upbringing, to the strain on their daily lives, I found their thoughtful comments helped me to recognise the importance of my research all the while tending to my *big life.*
This chapter draws attention to some of the external factors that seem to naturally affect the doctoral journey. These include our relationships with our advisors, our most direct contact with the university, the university system itself (the bureaucracy), and financial concerns. It also includes some examples of how some of us deal with institutional and societal discrimination. I will shed light on some of these external forces that help to propel us forward or, unfortunately in some cases, put obstacles in our way and seem to cause us to break our stride. I heard both positive and negative comments about the student/advisor relationships. Many of the negative comments were related to age, in some way. The interactions, be they positive or negative, had a direct impact on the level of self-confidence that the women experienced. The added financial burden at a later stage in life also created stress for many women. Some, but not all of the women, felt discrimination. I’m happy that I can say that feeling of being discriminated against did not really define too many women’s journeys. However, the instances I did record were upsetting, and I would have hoped, not present today. In Bridget’s words, “They stung.”

**Advisors’ Attitudes: Both Positive and Negative**

Perhaps one of the most important relationships of the doctoral journey is the relationship that the students have with their advisors. The women often mentioned how that connection helped them or hindered their progress. Basella and Debelius (2007) point out how important it is for graduate students to keep in touch with their advisors: “the key here is to unfold that road map for yourself and not let your advisor do all the navigating” (p. 25-26). Laurel talked about the difficulties she was having with her advisor, not feeling supported and getting answers to her attempts at
academic writing like, *That’s not it. You don’t have it.* She said such comments were of no help at all. Her advisor was not interested in having any talks with her. Instead she would say, “*Just send me an email.*” Laurel described her frustration as she realised she wasn’t getting what she needed from her advisor. Yet, in the spirit of the self-advocacy that Basella and Debelius (2007) recommend, she had the courage to seek out someone and, perhaps, *because of* her age, had the finesse to do so with care, so as not to insult anyone. She said she was at the point where she really doubted her ability to continue with the program, because of the kind of guidance she was getting or rather not getting. Finally she decided to approach one of her committee members, asking if she would consider being one of her co-academic advisors. She felt in this way she would not have to, in her words, “*divorce anyone and create anything messy.*” She said this new advisor gave her amazing feedback, and was open to meeting to discuss Laurel’s work. She believed in talking things out. She would lend Laurel books and give her recommendations. Here she describes her situation and the solution she found for her problem:

> *I just brought this new person in last August as a co-academic advisor and got my final research proposal approved last week. I went through one draft with her and she gave me amazing feedback and good pointers. She helped me a bit with organising my work. The other advantage is she believes in talking things out. Twice I’ve been to her home to have tea where we just talked for an hour. I’ve met her in her office three times to do the same thing. Just talk. Whereas my first academic advisor, when I asked her if I could just come over to her office and talk about my thoughts, she said she wasn’t interested in hearing what I had to say. She’s only interested in hearing what I write. So, put it in writing and submit it. She needs two weeks to read anything I submit in writing to her. So, that wasn’t really getting me very far. Whereas this co-academic advisor, I was always welcome to come and visit and talk and chat and share my ideas. So I credit her with my successful research proposal...that it actually, you know, all came together. I really get it now.*

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Laurel and I talked about how important it is to bounce ideas off someone, have a sounding board and how you come to understand your thoughts as you discuss them. She described the encouragement she has gotten from this advisor. She felt that it was so important to talk out ideas and how so much growth happens through talk. Through those important conversations Laurel was able to create her academic identity and move forward with her ideas. How fortunate for her that she was able to have the courage to seek out that person and have those collegial exchanges and not lose self-confidence.

Marian felt that the support she had gotten from the women in her program was essential to her success. She said that she could call them when she was in a rut. She supplied this image (see figure 15) to represent the closeness she felt towards the women.

Figure 15: Marian’s support from friends, supervisor and family is essential.

*I have to say, if it weren’t for the support of my women friends and then a few of the professors that I’ve had...all these females that have been giving me a lot of support, that I wouldn’t even still be in the program. It makes a big difference.*
Marian continued saying that she felt her supervisor was helpful and understanding, pointing out also that she felt her supervisor had a balanced yet busy life. Whenever Marian was in frenzy, she could go see her. She always had a way of calming her down. Marian said, “She gets the fact that we have lives beyond all of this. And she tends to supervise a lot of women who are also working. So, she knows exactly where I should be – at each stage.” Unlike Laurel’s supervisor, Marian’s seemed to not only appreciate the need to have an understanding advisor, but to be one as well.

Most women were highly aware that they were non-traditional learners, different from the other students in their programs, but just as smart and capable. As Pamela said, it was important to be mindful of the considerable commitment of doctoral study. She did not put too many expectations on herself and was trying to enjoy everyday. She spoke glowingly of one of her supervisors who had had tremendous stressors in her life, one of which was a son who was dying. This woman still managed to find the time to check in on her. Pamela herself had had some life-threatening issues with eating disorders. As she managed to stay well, she knew that it was important to enjoy the journey, maintaining an awareness of all of the people who had helped her make her way. In particular, she wanted to share these kind words from her advisor, who had offered her a way to look at the demands of the long doctoral journey:

One of my advisors, she gave me some good advice at the very beginning when I was feeling overwhelmed. She just said...there is some kind of a story, and I forget what it’s called...but it’s something to do with...when you have a lantern in front of you in the dark...you’re just walking where the light hits. So you’re walking that little bit. And when you get there, the lantern is going to shine light on the next little bit. And you’ll walk that far. So that was really helpful from the very beginning. Learning how to live in the moment...
Other women talked about the value of being more mature and being able to ‘survive’ the journey at this ‘mature’ stage in their lives, whereas they doubted they could have in their younger years. What follows is an excerpt from a communication with Shirley Brice Heath (2012). She was commenting on my decision to give voice to ‘late-entry women’ in the academy:

*What a lovely idea. You are right that this group seems to have slipped off the map for everyone. I suspect it is because a) they are a relatively small group, b) those who see these women do this think they are tough and strong and do not need to be heard, c) few people these days seem to take much time caring about the multiple demands on women in the current global economic market. Note that in spite of women’s rising educational achievements, they have less and less representation on the boards of large corporations or in public life.* (personal communication, October 24, 2012)

The 39 women were demonstrating to me on a regular basis that indeed, while they were very tough and strong, they needed and wanted guidance as much as they wanted to be heard. The importance of their advisors’ encouragement was just one of the ways they needed encouragement.
Bridget praised her advisor, saying that she felt that her advisor and another woman at the university understood the challenges she faced as an older woman who wanted to do narrative based inquiry in a science-based curriculum. She credited them for helping her to maintain passion and commitment in her program. She said in their company, she found a home, a place where she belonged where she hadn’t felt that before.

As Lilly described her frustration with her advisor, I could see that she was drawing on her life experiences and trying hard to rise above the obvious irritation that he was causing her and just carry on with her work:

My advisor is exactly my age and I do have difficulty with him more than anything. It seems as though, well, I almost feel as though I’m pegged into a traditional kind of subservient role or something – because I just get the sense that he’s in a bit of a power struggle with me. Thinking positively perhaps this is a way of toughening me up to the extreme rigors of academic debate. Sometimes I just feel that he’s downright rude, you know? I think that he just doesn’t know how to relate to people my age. To be honest I don’t feel respected and this triggers inner turmoil. I ruminate over his comments and in my lower moments question if I am in over my head and if I have the mettle to fully withstand the process and challenges as an older woman in academia.

Lilly explained that she tried hard not to react to his comments, but at the same time she questioned herself. However, showing inner strength that I surmise can come with age, she also said, while she did feel his comments were an affront to her integrity, she decided that this was not the hill she wanted to die on. “I have come too far to throw in the towel now.” Such metaphors to battle I heard more than once! This notion is explored by Batchelor and DiNaloi (2006), as they use words to describe the doctoral journey such as loss and retrieval, change and renewal – and perhaps most significantly, unknown territories with new horizons. All these words could be used to describe
women’s journeys at various points.

Many women did cite their partners, their advisors and their classmates as the people who supported them. Almost all felt that a support group of your peers was essential to staying positive. Marnie supplied the following words and photo (see figure 17) to illustrate where she found support.

![Figure 17: Marnie - Helping each other to stay afloat, despite the rapids and rocks.](image)

In this picture, I am part of a group that is madly paddling a raft on the Elabo River, trying to keep going forward and not fall into the river! This experience reminded me of the group of grad students (all women) with whom I worked. We named the group, “Study Sisters.” The purposes were to support each other in our educational adventures and our personal lives – to help keep each other afloat and moving forward in spite of the rapids and rocks we ran into along the way. Both experiences were exhilarating although, admittedly, one was much shorter than the other!

This kind of realisation, this growing confidence in self was another theme that surfaced regularly and is discussed in the next section.
Self-Confidence

Why did self-confidence figure so prominently in my research? Why did the issue surface with every single participant? Here were women who were accomplished in so many areas of their lives: they had had successful careers, some had borne children, many had cared for ill parents, and many had been the recipients of scholarly, even national awards. Yet, they still displayed genuine apprehension when it came to their place in the academy. Often it seemed this was fuelled by hurtful comments from family, friends and sometimes from the academic circles that they were attempting to join. Diana Leonard (2001) as discussed in Chapter 3 of this dissertation, wrote how women are less likely to be encouraged and as a result are less likely to put themselves forward, particularly as they age. She advises, “In the end, doing a doctorate itself should train you in more realistic self-assessment and increase your confidence” (p. 77). This was definitely the case for many of the women who had completed their doctorates. The ones who were still studying were not as sure of themselves, but I could see their confidence growing. There was a reverberation of hesitancy to believe in ourselves. Many women talked of how so many times during their studies they felt that that they couldn’t go on, they wanted to quit. In fact, one woman, Lucy, did quit. As she discussed the many problems she’d had with her supervisor she said that going to meetings with her supervisor was like going to a firing squad. She supplied me with the following image to illustrate her point (see figure 18). She also felt there was so much posturing among the academics at her university – they seemed to want to ‘get at’ their colleagues’ students. She supplied this image, as though her words weren’t evocative enough!
So, for me I had to go through that firing squad, but then afterwards my supervisor would come and say, You didn’t do this right, you didn’t do that right. You weren’t quick enough. You took too long in responding to that question. You need to be sharper. You need to be...etcetera, etcetera. So, I took two semesters off. And I came back to her and I said, Okay. First of all, I want to come back. I think I have something of value to add to this university. I recognise that you don’t like my topic. You don’t think that it will be funded for anything...blab, blab, blab, blab, blab...So, this is what I propose. I am going to do this and here is why.

One of Lucy’s inspirations was sociologist Dorothy Smith. Smith (1989) argued that women’s lives should be studied ethnographically from the women’s points of view to begin to try to fully understand their point of view. A sincere effort at recognising where the late-entry woman is coming from, and all she has to offer, in terms of understanding the value of her life experience and all that might offer the graduate student experience, her own and those around her, would go a long way to making the university environment a richer place to be for all. Lucy had years of experience in her field, yet none of this seemed to be celebrated or valued as she tried to rely on her vast work experience in the PhD program. Similar to other women that I worked with, Lucy relied on her
own inner fortitude to stay the course and complete her degree. It was however, obviously still very painful for her as she recounted her story. Interestingly, her study had to do with the attitudes within the university and how certain groups were treated. Who better could examine that question? One would have hoped Lucy’s advisor would be her advocate.

Many women expressed a variation of the following comment, including me. Trisha said, “I found that lack of confidence in myself was a big issue also! ‘Cause I always thought that it was only me.” As I entered this program, this question of how and why late-entry women return to school was not one I had on my mind. It grew from my experience of having other people ask me, why are you going to school? At first my answer was, I want to. That did not seem to respond to their questions. After a while, it did not satisfy me, either. What did not satisfy me was the idea that people felt they could be incredulous at the idea of someone my ‘age’ returning to school. It seemed tantamount to a form of discrimination that I felt I’d not previously experienced in my life. Often the comments come from well-meaning people who seemed to want to warn me that I didn’t really belong in an academic milieu. I was asked, what sort of ‘new knowledge’ do you think you will contribute? There was an underlying assumption that I couldn’t, it seemed. I soon discovered through my research that there were many others, like me, who had to endure such attitudes towards their serious attempt to complete a doctorate. I had not calculated that I might have to give clever answers to such questions. The truth was, I just wanted to be in an academic environment again. I felt I had something to offer from my varied life experience. I wanted to return to school, and as a teacher, deepen my understanding of the learning process, that of my own and others. In particular, I was interested in the stories of the women who choose to return to school later in life. I have always admired painters; they can interpret their world and give it back. I wanted to do the same. Instead of using paints, I would use my words. It is through words that I can share what I know and have learned. Through
my own understanding and work with these late-entry women, I could help them to be heard by
others and be listened to by each other. The very act of choosing to study a group of people can
help them to see that their views are valued and important to others. Ultimately, my hope is that
my voice, my words and my interest in this group will encourage others in my age group to join
the academic community if they so choose. In turn, this might lead to a better understanding and
appreciation of late-entry women and all we have to offer and, in Oakley’s words, provide ‘socially
responsible research’ (Economic and Social Research Council, 2010).

As women regularly mentioned their lack of self-confidence, I wondered if perhaps it
became easier to acknowledge this feeling because they were actually doing something about it.
Working towards their doctorates, they seemed to experience a growing self-confidence. Many
mentioned the importance of having a group of like-minded people who might share their fears.
Many preferred to find people in their own age bracket and for that reason it seemed were happy to
talk to me about their concerns. As Anderson (2000) wrote:

I argue that re-entry graduate women encounter the problem of “authority” at several
levels: in our experience of our selves as academics; in our experience of academic “other”;
and in our relation to texts (our own and others”). My data show that the lived experience
of graduate studies confers on re-entry women an identity of not belonging and thus
undermines the sense of authority as academics which we seek. Thus authority and identity,
like writing itself, are revealed as social processes. (p. 12)

Sonya disclosed to me that in the beginning she felt so uncertain of her ability as a doctoral
student. At 52 she asked her advisor, and prefaced the question with, “Don’t laugh at me.” She said:
Do you really think I’m smart enough to do a PhD? And I didn’t mean that with any insult to anyone or snobbery. I knew I had a lot of experience. But what did I know more than another teacher who has taught 28 years? And she said to me, you’re going to bring your experience. And I remember my first class. I think I told you — I’m listening to all these thirty year olds — believe me — with all respect, they’re all brilliant.

They quote and cite...And use terminology that I can use today, so I guess I’ve gained knowledge, as well. Shows you’re never too old to learn.

Clearly Sonya’s advisor believed in her; but I caught the hesitancy in her voice. I could also hear her growing confidence, which was surely helped along by her advisor’s belief in her. During the course of my research Sonya defended and can now claim the title – PhD. I tell her, “I guess you really are smart enough!”

Lucy talked about how she was able to stand up to the teachers that she felt were trying to pigeon hole her into the idea of single mother, full time student with children who are struggling in school. She felt she got a reputation because she spoke out, feeling that university gave her that chutzpah:

It was a hard thing, going back to school and worrying about my children’s success. I was trying to not be part of that stereotypical role of a single mother...That was part of why university was good to me. I could quote the literature back at some of these teachers who were fresh out of school. Maybe that was development of my militant phase of life.

Tricia also talked of her uncertainty of her ability to write academically. She said she hesitated to return to school, because while she knew she had lots of experience, felt she was not an A plus student:
I didn’t know if I was smart enough, I guess, sometimes. Yeah. I still feel that sometimes. I’m smart enough as I go along. I think of one colleague of mine who did finish her PhD...she gives me quite regular motivational speeches. (She laughed here.) You are smart enough. Of course you can do it.

It was clear that women needed regular encouragement from their friends to get through this. As Alice said, “You can’t do it on your own.”

References to lack of confidence were almost as common as the growing confidence that women experienced as a result of their return to school. While many did point out that their age was a topic of discussion, many felt they were more able to deal with the rigours of graduate school at a later stage in life because of years lived. Perhaps not surprisingly they were cautious in their growing confidence. In this case, the confidence seems to have come after the doctorate was conferred. As 77 years old Noreen commented:

I didn’t apply for any scholarships – I’m looking over some of my thesis here. I don’t know why. I just thought I wouldn’t qualify for a scholarship. I didn’t really know where they were, how they were. But I should have, and I should have looked it up more, because I might have been able to.

Even though they were currently deeply engaged in their studies, the women were acutely aware of their past failures as students. A few had dropped out of a doctoral program in their twenties, saying that they were just not ready for it at that point in their lives. Yet, this decision still seemed to nag at them, even though they could see that they were much better prepared for doctoral study at this point in their lives. However, they continued to carry some of the guilt of having given up once. Here we can hear both the lack of confidence as well as the evolving new scholar in Marian’s words:
It took me years to get over that. I see though, that I’m getting much more out of it now. And I’m able to bring more into it as well. I see that it’s a much better choice to do it now. But the funny part is, although I know a lot more now, I have less confidence that I had in my twenties. ‘Cause when you’re in your twenties, you think you can do anything!

Women cautioned how critical it was to really make the decision to focus on their studies, while being cognisant of the danger of spreading yourself too thinly. Perhaps that was something that is most easily learned with age. As Laurel said, “At some point you are just going to have to drop everything else and focus.”

I was pleased to hear women congratulate themselves on their accomplishments till now. Pamela spoke about her feelings when people would ask that dreaded question, When will you be finished your PhD? It was the dreaded question that any doctoral student hates to hear! Her ‘mature’ reply was:

You know what? I’m doing it today. And having no expectations. If I don’t finish this, that’s fine, because today I’m a PhD candidate and it feels friggin’ good and I’m learning a lot today and Wow! That I’m even here! And I don’t have any expectations for tomorrow. And if it all fell apart that’s okay, because of what I’ve learned up to this point...I’m just letting go of the expectations.

As I mentioned earlier, Pamela had suffered from eating disorders and the rigour of doctoral study had, remarkably, helped her to climb out of her depression and her illness. She felt so passionate about her PhD work in the field of mental health. She said:

PhD work is rather independent and it feels like it is a part of my own growth and vision for my life and my health. When I am doing my PhD work, I don’t feel too stressed and my family fits in just nicely (meaning, I’m not irritable or distant). PhD work is Me and I am the work...especially the research part.
When asked for some photos to describe her doctoral journey, Jane provided me with a photo of the heron. As she compared herself to the heron on Dow’s Lake in Ottawa, she said she thought it was an unusual sight (see figure 19). Her First Nations boyfriend said, “Maybe it’s your spirit animal” Jane investigated. She said that one of the things about the heron is that it is independent and works on its own. She felt that definitely represented the kind of work that she was doing. She had to be self-disciplined which was difficult. She said:

*The heron wades in the water and brings things up from the water into the air, spanning these different realms of consciousness or awareness. The earth, of course, is like the ground that holds us all, that grounds us. And then the water represents the unconscious mind. The Heron brings things from the unconscious to the conscious. The heron sees opportunities where other birds don’t.*

It seemed that Jane saw herself as independent and strong – a good thing… remember, she was the woman whose grandmother’s response to Jane’s return to study was simply, *That’s nice.* Betty was a bit more wary than Jane to show her confidence. It was slower in coming, but it was coming. She likened herself to the giraffe saying she found the animal awkward yet majestic (see figure 20).
Figure 20: Betty is feeling awkward yet majestic.

They are so tall, and their legs are so long, too. It reminded me of my awkwardness in the program. It really did, it made me think of that. How I’m growing different muscles, yeah I can do it too! You know introducing myself into all these new worlds of activity.

Sandra talked about how throughout her life she has known that skills are transferable and that rarely do we make our way through life in a straight line, without interruptions. As she reflected on her life, she said:

A journey unfolds in a myriad of side paths and reiterations of intent than where it started. So, if anything, I try to encourage as many people that ask or that are interested – you know – in many ways, education is one step at a time. It often times leads in a different direction than what you anticipated... like life.

Sandra believed that we should hold on to our dreams, and that maybe when it seems as though they have disappeared, they will present themselves in another way. She continued saying that she was probably the oldest person in her cohort and with that came challenge and excitement. She enjoyed the range of ages, the cultural differences and the variety of different work experiences among
the students. She pointed out that as someone who was not following a traditional path, she was carving out her future as she moved along and that seemed to bring her pleasure. While she did not feel discriminated against on her doctoral journey, she did feel as though she was a non-traditional learner. That was one of the reasons she was so happy to talk to me. She wanted to share her story.

As one of my participants, Nora said, that while she had a strong and supportive committee, it was at times hard to remember why she came to doctoral study. As she had completed her degree recently, she said:

> How can you both give your passion for something and you’re very much, you know...it’s such a hierarchical system, too, you know. You’re going through those steps, but you’re navigating the relationships constantly – with your committee, with the university centre, wherever you are and then the university itself. I think my main point here is to find ways to be gentle with oneself, and find or stay with the “love”, the passion for the work that brings us into this – amongst the many obligations and challenges of the journey.

In a later email conversation, Nora provided me with this image (see figure 21) and words of her doctoral journey. She wrote:

> Here it is – an image from my research, of the goddess Puja. The research was very inspiring, as I got to travel to a beloved place and be with beloved women – my doctoral journey was pilgrimage-like – not sure where the destination really was/is...but being with the people and places along the way – can the academy grow in such love-centered ways itself? Towards fulfilling a very much-needed scope of human potential and practice...
As I am a teacher by training, it was difficult for me to remove my ‘teacher hat’ during these interviews. As the women spoke, I couldn’t help imagining them as they sat in their classrooms feeling at times discriminated against because of their age. According to Noddings (2005), “No responsible educator would claim that all significant learning can be achieved incidentally, but much that we acquire this way becomes more nearly permanent than the material deliberately transmitted and tested in the planned work of classrooms” (para. 14).

As Sybil, who had been a high school dropout, described the day of her defense, she spoke of camping near the university, in an effort to keep costs down (see figure 22). Her government position had not been renewed. She went for a long run in the morning, through the park and back to the trails she had discovered with fellow students at the beginning of her PhD journey. She spoke of the friendships she had formed with other graduate students who were half her age. I could feel her joy as she spoke these words of a time spent with her roommate. “We decided to logroll down the side of the dam – I was 55 and she was 27 and there we were giggling like schoolgirls as we picked up speed rolling back down to our trail – we had sprinted up.” As Sybil arrived in Guelph to receive her diploma, she returned
to the trails that were a reminder of her doctoral journey. She continued, “Hence that morning of my defense, I felt like I had come full circle, finally on the verge of finishing my project and my journey.” It was Sybil who pointed out that she disliked the term ‘young scholars’, preferring instead the term, ‘new scholars.’

![Figure 22: Sybil’s accommodations at Guelph Lake.](image)

**Discrimination**

In several instances the women said how satisfying it was to talk about their journey with someone who had had similar experiences regarding age. Some of the women felt no discrimination whatsoever within their faculty, while others felt it very strongly. Additionally, some women felt ostracised within their families and social circles. The issues they addressed often caused the women to say that I was reminding them of the reasons why they’d gone back to school in the first place and of the people who had encouraged them along the way. Some remarked that they hadn’t thought about that for a while. As Diane recounted her slow realisation that she wanted to return to school as a mature student, (eventually becoming a medical doctor at 48!) she said she used to walk with a
friend who was also a stay-at-home mom and bemoan their life circumstances until one day, inspired by her friend’s decision to enroll in university, she did likewise. She remarked, “It’s funny. Until I talked to you, I didn’t really realise that. So thank you! That was a pivotal relationship.” This just reinforced my belief that talking helps us to make connections and clarify our thoughts.

Women tended, for the most part, to appreciate their age and the wisdom that comes along with it. They did not, in fact, express too many instances of discrimination, but when they did, it was clear that it really stung. As Nora, a recent PhD graduate, reflected on her time in the university, she wondered, that while she felt her own research was most fulfilling, almost pilgrimage like...(she had, in fact, like me, worked with women and their stories) she wondered if the academy could also grow in such love-centred ways? As I pondered that question, I continued to talk with women in various faculties all across the country. There were many examples of where women found support. However, there were also many instances where the women were faced with what seemed to me rather peculiar interpretations of their return to study. Louise said she actually avoided spending too much time at the university. In that way she would not have to hear harsh comments like:

> Whatever possessed you to do that? Or, Why would you want to do that? It’s not like you’re going to get paid more money... Or even get a job at the university. They’re not hiring people right now at all. And you certainly wouldn’t be the first person they’d hire. There are a few people that have actually said that to me, right? And so I’ve chosen to... I’ve actually chosen to avoid spending too much time around the university. I just quietly get my work done.

This speaks to the question that Nora posed, “Can the university grow in such love-centred ways?” At times it seemed the answer was, “no.” Happily, these women did not take these negative comments on board. Rather, many of them chose to share with me the many instances of support and encouragement that they received during their studies.
As Diane talked about how she made her way through her medical residency in her forties, she recalled that she became a bit weary of having to explain her presence to well-meaning people who showed authentic interest in hearing her story. Eventually she said she didn’t want to stand out:

I would walk into a classroom; the students’ eyes would scan across me and immediately kind of pigeonhole me, as ‘this could be my mom’ and then make me invisible. So a lot of students never even saw me from then on, because they just didn’t have the social skills to interact with somebody my age. So, what was curious, Mary, is that I actually used myself as my own litmus test, in that I would think, Hm, if this person is interacting with me, they’re comfortable talking to me. We’re exchanging email addresses so that we can be part of a study group. I would just know then that therefore they have good social skills. So in undergrad I met that way more. When I got to medical school I found that there were a lot of very personable people there. And I thought, oh, very good! They have this kind of multiple mini-interview process that they use which is supposed to select people with good clinical skills, you know, personable and good bedside manner. And again, using myself as my own anecdotal litmus scale, I’d say it worked – because everybody in my class was comfortable talking to me and engaging with me.

Other women were mindful of their age saying that they felt being older gave them an edge over their younger classmates. Louise, who was near completion of her degree at 48, talked of seeing herself as a mentor, saying she has made a point of being there to support the women who were younger than her on their journey. She was reminded of her own self, how she had felt she couldn’t do it, and so, made a point of reaching out to them.

Diane felt that her age gave her an advantage when talking to her professors. She felt that she spoke fluent mortgages and teenagers and husbands and so on. “You know, it was great. It was like I was bilingual. Although I’m very bad at languages, in this way it worked.” She admitted that it was easy to be envious of the younger students, especially when you consider how much more time they have
ahead of themselves than she did, saying with acceptance, “I will run out of time before they do.” She also felt that they had to put a lot of time into figuring out how things work and making mistakes – feeling that at her age there were a lot of things that she just knew. “I felt like I could relate to professors. I felt as though they sensed a kindred soul, they would talk to me a little bit differently. Some of them actually said to me, Thank you for not being twenty-four.”

As Sarah talked of being an older student she remarked that indeed she felt older. She’s had 26 years as a teacher and guidance counsellor and is looking forward to retiring in a couple of years. Sarah felt the lens with which she saw the world was different, particularly the critical pedagogy. She acknowledged that the PhD study had not been easy. She was working full time as she pursued her degree and sometimes felt envious of those who could just devote all their time to study. But in a thoughtful or maybe a ‘mature way’ she noted, “My world is carved this way and I didn’t feel discriminated against. I did feel separate and I felt unique but in a really really good way.”

The outright ageism that some women had to endure seemed outdated, yet quite present in their daily lives. Imagine how Teresa, a woman in her late forties felt, when, after stating that she was working towards her PhD, a professor who was her age said to her, “You’re too old. Why are you bothering? You’ll never get a job.” Teresa said that in that moment she almost quit. “I was just stunned. I didn’t know how to respond. Now I’m on faculty at the same university. I see her all the time. She probably has no memory of this comment.” How interesting, I thought. Teresa felt a part of her wished that she had done the degree earlier because she really wanted a faculty position. She was teaching, but only on a part time basis. She thought perhaps eventually she might get a tenure track job, but by that time she said, “I’ll be really old!” However, as with so many of the women, she seemed to keep her good humour through the indignities of such comments made to her.
Carol talked about a subtle form of discrimination that she faced during her studies. Some of the comments she heard seemed to indicate that she wasn’t quite a typical or hard-working enough student. As she made her way through doctoral studies, she was both a single mother and a full time teacher. She remarked that her early education had not really prepared her for the rigour of doctoral study. She said as she sat in upper level philosophy courses alongside younger students who had been immersed in study, not having been out in the work force yet, she felt quite inadequate. She would hear professors and other students, particularly males, she noted, saying things like, “I don’t know how you can work and be a graduate student at the same time. When I was a student I would sit around and talk for hours with other students.” As she continued in frustration she said:

I’m sitting there and I’m just feeling so stupid. But knowing in my heart, knowing myself, knowing how fascinated as I am with history and life and philosophy and the psychology of everything. Knowing I’m not stupid, but feeling that way. I don’t even know how I did it. Looking back on it, it’s like wow!

As Carol noted, the reality of her situation did not permit leisurely scholarly talks, but it did not mean she was not capable of them, nor did it mean she didn’t crave them. In keeping with the spirit of Carol’s comments, Lucy felt that it was really important for older graduate students to recognise that they would be going into a very ageist institution. She felt strongly about this, having experienced quite a lot of frustration, she felt, largely because of her age. She felt that funding models were geared towards younger students, none of whom had a family to support as she did as a single parent.

**What Does a Doctoral Student Look Like?**

Perhaps my research and definition of what a doctoral student looks like will contribute to redefining the prevailing narrative. When I expressed to Sandra that I found it curious that the mature student did not figure in any of the university recruitment pages online, she agreed with me,
saying that even at the college where she worked she felt there was so much ‘brand management’ and marketing.

Most of the women talked about the practical and real life experience that they had brought to their doctoral study. However, many of them often mentioned that while they honestly felt this was an enriching part of what they naturally brought to academia, they did not feel it was always valued. Some mentioned that they did not feel that they were taken seriously, and that they were at a distinct disadvantage because of their non-academic background. They also felt that it was hard to relate to some of the younger students because of the age difference. Louise sounded very discouraged in this letter she wrote to me after we had spoken. I could hear echoes of many women’s observations about their experiences in academia. As Louise talked about how she didn’t fit the traditional graduate student mould, she said she often felt frustrated throughout the journey and pulled in many directions. She also felt that the university did not value the practical real life experience that she brought to academia. She explained:

> Almost all of the other students in my program went directly from their undergraduate to masters to PhD and have little, if any experience, outside the university. Most will graduate with their PhD’s before they reach 30. Most are brilliant, wonderful students and I’ve enjoyed getting to know them but I find it hard to relate to them sometimes. Our university says it is reaching out to the community and supporting lifelong learning but I find that this is lip service. They still cater to a younger demographic and overall I don’t feel as though I have a future in academia as I started off too late in life in my graduate studies. I love academic research and writing and would do anything to get a tenure-track position at my university but I recognise that this is probably no more than a pipe dream.

I pondered this comment in light of the many similar comments from other women who spoke of both the positive and negative aspects of being older in the classroom. While they recognised the
many advantages of being older, maturity, a philosophical attitude, better able to accept criticism, to name a few, Laurel talked about the advantages to just staying in school from the undergraduate right through to the doctoral level. She sensed that the students who did this were so tech savvy and seemed to have a 100% commitment to their work. While she felt she was becoming more confident, she did not have the comfort that the other students around her seemed to exhibit. She reflected on her life path. She had been an active midwife for many years, building all that experience in her hands. Coming back to academia, she felt she was a bit of a square peg in a round hole. When I reminded her that perhaps that was true, but didn’t she think that she had so much to offer in terms of her ‘real world experience?’ She acknowledged that she did. When it came to using that ‘real world experience,’ she felt that her communication and problem solving skills were proficient and they did inform her in subtle ways. Unfortunately, Laurel said they were not really helping her to win any grants. She felt those important qualities did not really come up on any grant application forms and honors such as grant money were going to students who had been in the system and been president of the student council or headed up this or that committee. While Laurel did not feel discriminated against, she said that rather than being the one that younger students might look up to, she was finding she had to turn to them for help. It seemed to me that such a humbling experience could only serve to build character:

...I filled out, I don’t know, somewhere between twelve and fifteen grant applications and have been turned down every time. I’m not really getting recognised for my communication (laughs) or my problem solving! You know, these things tend not to come up on those grant applications.

Diane felt that what held some women back from embarking on doctoral study was the fear of standing out. She said, in fact, from her own experience, you will stand out. And that can be tiring. She recounted her early years of medical school when she was in her mid-forties, and how she
would often be mistaken for a teacher. She got used to that and eventually just accepted it. She felt that people who did make the decision to return to school did so because they saw a need and felt they had to change something in their lives. She felt that people generally admire that in others. So yes, she acknowledged, you do stand out – in a good way. She said that people would assume, based on her age that she was the teacher. As she said, “It wasn’t a mean-spirited thing. It just felt awkward. It felt like I stood out.” She felt that this was unavoidable and cautioned, “You will stick out. However, most of the time, if you go at it with the right attitude, people are just going to assume that you’re there because you want to learn, ‘cause you do want to learn.”

One of my younger participants, Cindy, who at 36 went back to school after a successful banking career had just gotten started, said her colleagues in the private sector thought she was ‘out of her mind.’ They were incredulous, why would someone give up a perfectly good paying job to spend time being a student again? Although Cindy said she found the remarks discouraging, she was able to dismiss them and stay the course and graduate with her PhD at 41.

There were a variety of comments about how the women felt they were discriminated against. As Louise described her frustration with her advisor’s attitude towards the students in his own (and her) university, she said she felt one of the barriers at her university seemed to be that there was the perception, even among the faculty that they were a second rate university. She felt the university was not interested in hiring their own students and often spent great sums of money flying people in from elsewhere for interviews. One day she listened to her advisor as he spoke with one of his colleagues. They were talking about how one of their sons was applying to go out of province to university. As she listened to them, she heard one of them comment, “The best students leave their home province. And we are stuck with the ones that can’t go anywhere else.” As she vividly recalled the conversation between the professors, she said, they looked at her listening to them and said
quickly, “Oh! But that doesn’t include people like you who can’t go anywhere else.” She felt that this was clearly a reference to her being tied down with family. I could only imagine her rage as she came back with her own observation:

That attitude is a problem. What is that supposed to do for students like me who are doing my degree here? How does that make me feel? What’s the point of me doing this? If nobody – even senior full professors are discounting the university? And they were really talking about the fact that we don’t get the kind of research dollars that other universities get. I said, ‘You guys should be the champions of your university. You should be talking about the good things that the university has going for it. Not just bad-mouthing everything about it.’ I mean I was really kind of disenchanted by that, you know? That was pretty early in my studies. I was still taking my courses...

As Danielle talked about her experiences in university I could hear the frustration and resignation as she came to terms with the fact that she was probably not the next in line for a grant in her advisor’s eyes. She felt that the younger students coming in to the program would be a ‘better bet.’ As a woman over forty, she had been through a divorce, had lost a child and then given birth to a stillborn child. She was now dealing with aging and ill parents. She said quite matter-of-factly:

Who would you put forward for a huge grant – the 27-year-old who is stable? My supervisor never said that, but I think it was easier for her to see the 27-year-old as a sure thing. She wasn’t going to have any more trouble with her. No divorces, no dads with colon cancer. You know what I mean? So, I think your prof looks at all those life things. They think, ‘What else is she going to come up with? (laughs) What else could possibly...?’ (laughs) I think they saw that as, ‘Wow! Well she’s not dedicated.’ I mean, you’ve got to pay for a divorce, you know at that time I would have been 43.
As she announced what she wanted to pursue for her doctoral work, Marnie did not have to infer what her advisor was thinking. She explained to her advisor that her interests lay in understanding the connections between interpersonal violence and women’s learning in graduate school, as she herself had been a victim of a violent relationship (see figure 23). In addition to that, she had taught children who had been victims of violence. She wanted to study an issue that was close to her personal life; however, she was not finding the encouragement she needed from her advisor. She recounted that time saying, “Interestingly, when I told my advisor what I wanted to do, her comment was, you’ll never find any participants. She said, you’ll never find people because we weed them out. That’s what she said. We weed them out.”

Figure 23: Marnie was not going to be weeded out.

Marnie said that while she did understand where the advisor was coming from, she persisted with her idea, saying, “Well, I’m here. So there must be more of us.” Fortunately Marnie had the resolve and the belief in self to carry on, obtaining her PhD at the age of 63. She currently teaches students in the Bachelor of Education at her university. What a critically important perspective she must bring to her students! As I went along, I had to admire the tenacity of women like Marnie. I was continually inspired by their steadfast determination. It helped to keep me on track and wanting to share their stories.
Finances

Almost all the participants conveyed anxiety about financial stress, recognising, as many people liked to point out to them, it was unlikely they’d ever recoup their investment. As Cindy reflected on the financial strain of graduate studies, she talked about the need for support. There wasn’t really regret in her voice, because as she said she loved teaching. However she felt she hadn’t been really prepared for all the financial insecurity and stress that unemployment with a PhD can bring. She jokingly said, “Find someone who will support you!”

Many women commented that other people would note the loss of income when you go back to school. However, when they did refer to it, many freely admitted they were in debt, but they felt it (and they!) were worth the cost. Noreen talked of how her small pension from working part time covered her fees. It was interesting that while other people seem to criticise and question why someone would want to go back to school because of finances, the women did not really dwell on that aspect. Some women talked about putting study on hold until their children were no longer dependent on them to finance their education. Louise had thought about pursuing her doctorate for about fifteen years before she actually decided to do it. She said she was not in a position financially to do so until recently. She was busy raising her children and once they were in university she didn’t want to compromise anyone’s goals by getting into any sort of financial crunch where she would not be able to help out her children. She also made a point of saying she did not consider her children a burden.

As women talked of how people tried to advise them against a return to study because of the costs and the unlikelihood that they would ever make back the money, I could hear their bewilderment. It was as though people saw this pursuit of a PhD as strictly an investment in a career and a means to increase one’s earning potential. Yet, very few of the women I spoke to mentioned
any such aspirations. As well, even though many talked of the lack of financial reward and the hardship involved in doctoral study, not one woman regretted the ‘investment’ they had made in their intellect.

As Lucy addressed the financial and emotional support her mom provided, she said that she could not have managed to make ends meet on her own. Being an older student who was employed she did not qualify for the loans and bursaries under the PSAC laws in Ontario. She said the scholarships that were available at the time didn’t recognise that a student might have children to support and a mortgage to pay. She continued saying, “The institutions were set up for twenty somethings. That’s how it’s organised in academia.” Christine echoed her sentiments. She mentioned the irony of not having funding, especially in light of what she was studying: the discourse of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) over the last 30 years. A lot of that involved the OECD’s evaluations of different programs and systems that different countries have in place.

What kept striking Christine, as a mature woman returning to school, was that these systems are developed with the expectation that students follow a traditional path, that is, attend high school and then go on to university – with no interruptions in between. She felt that the funding models in many countries, including Canada, don’t really account for the changing demographic. For example, if a mature student wants to return to school and they have savings in retirement funds or they own a home, they are not eligible for student loans. As she examined the shifting demographics around the world, she felt that the changing faces of student populations are not being recognised in public policies. She went on to describe the contradictions that she felt existed:
The discourse is heavily imbued with the idea of lifelong learning—continually. Oh! We’re supporting the idea. People should be able to go back throughout their life course. They should keep retraining. They have to! If they don’t retrain the country’s going to fall apart! We need workers to go back to upgrade their skills because their skills are lost. Okay, but we’re not going to fund them.

Such a paradox—there seems to be support for lifelong learning in theory, but a lack of funding for mature students in practice.

Danielle’s comments seemed realistic and shared by many of the women. She tried to articulate some advice, saying a person has to have the right motivation for doing this and that first and foremost, you have to do it for yourself and not have any illusions, as she did not, that she would find a tenure track position as a professor somewhere. She recognised that she was 45 and said that as soon as she started thinking, “I’ve got to get this done so I can get on to the next phase of my life”, that would be wrong. She knew she had to do it because she wanted to be doing it. That was what really mattered. And that perhaps there would be no tangible reward such as employment or money. Finances were a concern for her as they were for many of the women I worked with, yet it did not seem to hold them back. Frustrations were with funding models that don’t take into account the financial situation of the mature student. Hear Christine’s frustration as she echoed the feelings of several women when she said:

If you own your home, guess what? You’re rich! You have a hundred thousand dollars, two hundred thousand dollars in equity, right? So you don’t qualify. What happened with OSAP and me is they said, “You have two hundred thousand dollars in RRSPs.” I said, “Yes. But I don’t have a pension plan.” But, you have two hundred thousand dollars in RRSPs, so just take that out. Hello! I’m fifty years old! I would like to be able to retire before I’m ninety! I—don’t—have—a pension plan! I have to have RRSPs. But, no, I’m sorry, we’re not going to give you anything, because, you’re rich!
Her annoyance with the lack of funding for older students was obvious, yet, Christine completed her PhD in record time. It took her three and a half years.

**Lofty Goals**

Women often mentioned lofty goals as reasons for working towards their doctorates. It confirmed for me the notion that as we age we might still want to change the world. And we can! Sometimes women surprised themselves with their academic capability and their philosophical side. As Laurel described her newfound interest in philosophy, she laughed and said, “I know I’m getting a PhD – a doctorate in philosophy, but I never thought...I was really getting a PhD...in philosophy!” Many women often referred to the ‘me’ time that the degree provided and the ever-expanding enrichment for the mind that doctoral study permits. Why, Laurel had even joined the local philosophical society. She said that this new level of study helped her to wake up to how much she really enjoyed philosophy. Hearing these women articulate the idea that they had this time to explore ideas that actually matter to them was inspiring. It seemed that doctoral study gave women the chance to reflect, take stock and really engage with research about what mattered to them in a systematic and yes, philosophical way. Women were thoughtful about their intellectual journey, and were looking for answers to those existential questions. Trisha addressed the insight she gained through some of the elders of the First Nations communities. She said, “I think, oh they’re going back after that long. You know, I should be able to, too. So they’ve actually inspired me to continue on as well.”

Even taken at a later stage, I could see that the PhD was giving women life skills, which, although not directly related to their PhD, seemed to be an offshoot of it. Carol talked of how happy she was that she had completed her PhD. She felt that because of her work, she had a broader and more informed perspective on life. She had a firm belief that she had something to contribute. She had knowledge and ability and was more tenacious in her approach to learning. She said with a
wry tone of someone who’d recently graduated with her doctorate at 60 years old, “And I know that if I don’t have the information I need, I sure know how to get it. I can design a research project around it if I need to!” Carol talked about the devotion necessary and the drive and passion required, saying if there is something that you love, if there is something that you wonder about and it leads you somewhere, then you should do it. She felt the completion of the doctorate bolstered her confidence in how she approached life.

Madeleine also spoke of impressive goals for her work. She recognised that, at 58, she would not have an important academic career, however, as a black woman living in New Brunswick, she wanted to challenge the current colonial narratives. She spoke with great enthusiasm and the character in her tone left me no doubt that she would indeed do exactly what she set out to do, with ardour and grit. She found inspiration from the Inukshuk (see figure 24). Her words follow.

Figure 24: Madeleine is grounded and in touch with the earth.

The Inukshuk. Although it means many things or stirs much with each individual who gazes upon this image, for me, it stands for endurance, a sense of being grounded and in touch with the earth, as well as an ancestral connection that also keeps me grounded.
As Madeleine talked about why she wanted to return to school, she acknowledged that she would not have an academic career ahead of her. That was not why she had returned to school. What was her reason for going forward with her PhD? She wanted to leave her mark, her story.

"I didn’t want to be 65 and have regrets. I didn’t want to look back and say, ‘Why didn’t I?’ I don’t even know if I’ll ever finish this. I hope that I will. I mean today, yes, I will. Yeah! I’m trying to think about retirement; because I’ve got X number of years from my government job. In my perfect case scenario it’s to have that PhD finished by the time I’m 60. And to blow out of the provincial government and just do what I want to do. And that’s not full time teaching. That’s doing the writing I want to do, maybe part time teaching. Just connecting and telling the stories. Doing public events and talking about the history of my ancestors."

None of the women I interviewed took the support they received for granted, recognising and being mindful of all the encouragement they enjoyed. Bonney said that her husband was very supportive, both financially and emotionally, recognising that many people could not afford to pursue studies, even if they wanted to. Louise felt that women are worse than men in underestimating our abilities, using herself as an example. She talked about how easy it was for her to become discouraged. However, she said she had a couple of good friends who understood what a commitment she was making, as they had also pursued higher education. She said they would ‘get on her case’ when she started to see the down side. Lilly echoed her feelings saying how important it is to have some kind of support network – people who would help her stop that negative self-talk. She said we need someone to call and just have a good cry. Someone to whom you could feel secure saying, ‘I don’t know what I’m doing!’ All felt it was important to have some collegial support, people who would encourage you and just say, “Keep going!”

Sybil did not hesitate when I asked her where she found encouragement. It took her nine
years to complete her PhD. She said that her cheerleaders were her advisor, a girlfriend who is a senior academic, her daughter and her master’s supervisor. Added to the benefits of having people believe in you, she also felt she benefitted by getting to know her advisor, who was so brilliant and humble at the same time and so unlike her ex-husband. This was just another example of the side benefits of embarking on study later in life that I heard so often. It seemed to change women in ways that they’d not anticipated.

In preparation for our interview, Stephanie brought along a quote from Ouspensky (as cited in Shulman, 1995) that she’d found in a book while she was studying. It helped inform her and in turn gave me something to mull over long after our talk together. “Think long thoughts, each of our thoughts is too short. Until you have experience from your own observation of the difference between long and short thoughts, this idea will mean nothing to you” (p. 54). As Stephanie talked of needing to learn and understand deeply, her words resonated with me. They helped me to articulate my own reasons for return to study. I wanted to find a place for myself, realising that I wanted to have those long thoughts. In having those conversations, those philosophical ‘aha’ moments throughout my research, I, too, was finding my place.

Margot also talked about the search, the thirst for knowledge. She felt the image (see figure 25) of her desk with its piles of books, papers and computer illustrated her curiosity. She reflected on her ‘time left,’ which, I guess must be a reference to age that we might not often hear articulated with a younger person. There was even a sense of frustration as she said:

**Sometimes I think I would have more peace if I hadn’t started this journey, but now I have become addicted to it. Ultimately, what drives me is my eternal curiosity to answer the existential questions: Who am I and what am I doing here?**

Those eternal questions...
The themes discussed in this chapter, navigating the advisor/student relationship, dealing with discrimination and difficult financial situations, setting and trying to realise lofty goals and learning to develop self-confidence came up regularly. Yet, all women sustained the belief that they were working towards something fulfilling. Despite the obstacles along the way, it was a challenging journey worth all their time and effort. The women I interviewed were not, for the most part, working towards finding a place as a university professor and perhaps this fact added to their different outlook. They enrolled in doctoral study at a later stage in life from their classmates. Many were actually investigating a burning question that had been building up in them for a long time. Often the research was very personal and related to many years of solid work and life experiences. In some ways it seemed they were unprepared for the derision that was aimed at them. Indeed, my own questions grew from this peculiar attitude I was faced with as I began my doctoral journey. My questions were directly related to the very act of returning to school later in life and surfaced only
after my first year of study. Bringing forth these stories, I thought, perhaps I could help the women to understand themselves a little better and help them to inspire others who might choose this path. The stories of frustration with the academy seem, to some degree, tempered by the sheer resilience that so many women displayed. I hope that through these words and images I am helping to redefine what a PhD student might look like, and I hope I am contributing to the development of a more accepting climate for possible late-entry students to come.
In Chapter 4 I explored some of the challenges that the women I worked face in their personal lives when they returned to study at a later stage in life. As well, I looked at some of the people they feel have influenced them on their journey. In Chapter 5, I examined some of the challenges the women confront as they make their way through the academy. In this chapter, I address some more of the personal issues that came up repeatedly that affect the late-entry women’s doctoral journeys. In some cases, some of these issues seem to be inevitable, such as issues of aging – however, the positive effects of the wisdom that seems to come with aging temper this issue. This wisdom also seemed to help women deal with the avalanche of advice that others seemed determined to offer them. Women also shared their concerns about uncertain futures, but this worry was somewhat mitigated by the inspiration, support and the growing self-confidence they experienced. In all cases, I found their expressions of tenacity and commitment inspiring. I celebrate and give value to, as Teresa put it, the value of ‘the lived life.’

**Advice: Giving and Getting**

As I set out to design my project I considered that I would be talking to people who were older than traditional students, who had a great deal of life experience. I wondered if they had any advice to give? Were there things they wished they’d known in the beginning that they knew now? I felt certain there would be some interesting answers to these questions. And so I posed the questions, do you have any advice for women? Are there things that you wish you’d known before you embarked on this journey? The women were generous with their advice and curiously, most found that during their own studies, other people were also generous with advice for them – often
unsolicited. They had thought deeply and repeatedly about not only their place in the academy, but also about how they might best offer advice to others on the same journey or those considering doctoral study. I found it noteworthy that so many of the women talked about the danger of doctoral study taking over your life and almost all cautioned of this hazard. Perhaps because of their age and the many responsibilities one naturally has, they recognised this danger. As Eve talked, keeping in mind what was really important in life and how everything is connected, she said of doctoral study:

> Those things all leak in. Like the way that you take care of your friends in the world. I tell people, well partly to tell myself, you can take a little longer to do your work, but, family’s important, friends are important. Take care of that stuff. Don’t become that wacky academic who just stays home and writes. You’ll go crazy and your people will move on. Don’t let it move on without you. We need each other, so, I did take care of those.

I was certain most of the participants had probably overcome various challenges and I thought surely they must want to offer some advice or practical suggestions to others on the same route. What came out loud and clear was, Believe in yourself. Most followed that with comments similar to this one, I know it sounds like a cliché, but it is harder to do what you can imagine. All made reference to the vast life experience that we all have. As Sybil said, “Believe in your strengths and don’t give up. You know, I’ve heard those words so many times. I would lie in bed and think, Why am I doing this? But I would get up and keep at it.” Most certainly a function of making sense of all the time one lands up devoting to the doctorate must be the ability to wax philosophical about it.

As Bridget talked of the commitment and the qualities necessary for doctoral study and how that commitment just looks different in the late-entry woman, she said that there were certain people that she would glide towards, and others that she would avoid. She would not waste her time on
people who were not part of her energy or her wellness. She knew what she valued:

I’m writing a paper right now with a group of nurses. We’re going to Europe in April to present it. One of the things that we’re finding out is that you really have to know who you are as an individual and be cognisant of your strengths and cognisant of your weaknesses. That’s also a part of the competency that you will carry with you. I think so often we are intimidated by higher education. I know I certainly was...until I got into the academic — you know — relationship — working for a university and working through all the crap and posturing that’s in a university.

Several women spoke of the need to not let others try to dissuade you from a return to study. Lilly said she had ‘well-meaning’ people ask her, “Why are you doing this? You don’t need this kind of stress at your age?” To further belittle her efforts and reduce the meaning of her decision to study she had others say, “You should be spending more time with your grandchildren, concentrating on them instead of doing this.” She didn’t let these people dissuade her, saying, “My focus is this journey.” And she added, “You know, it’s just interesting. For some reason people who have approached me, they think the only reason I’m doing this is to achieve some major goal...or result or whatever.” I wondered, was there something inherently wrong with that, that is, trying to achieve some major goal? As I write, Lilly is in the process of working on her thesis proposal and completing her ethics proposal. I think about her and wish her all the stamina necessary to get through those stages. I hope Lilly’s grandchildren recognise how grandma really is, in many ways, looking after them – leaving them with quite a legacy of courage and tenacity.

Teresa was philosophical reminding me (and herself) that sometimes you need to have some distractions. You have to say, “You know what? I need to go to a movie. Or, I need to see some friends.” As I complete my fifth year of doctoral study, I try to heed her advice. Some of the women commented on the difficulty of combining PhD life and child rearing. One woman, Bonney, said she would never, ever have even attempted the degree when her children were younger. At the same time she
posed the question, “Why is it that we feel we are ‘neglecting’ our families if we (women) choose to pursue careers? I wonder, do men give it a second thought?” I kept this in mind as Louise reflected on a conversation she’d had with a colleague who wanted to have another child. She said the woman was worried because she was not yet tenured. After this woman’s assessment she was told that she needed to free up more time to focus on her writing. Louise said that this woman felt that people in her department did not even realise that she had children, as she never talked about her home life at work. Louise felt that these issues are important and if we ever want to have more women as Canada Research Chairs and full professors, this kind of attitude needs to stop. Paradoxically, or perhaps not really so much so, Louise also said that while her husband was extremely supportive of her pursuit of a PhD, she still felt that the child rearing in their family was largely up to her. Taking care of her mother-in-law’s furnace problems or doctor’s appointments or taking care of the children when there was Professional Day or a Snow Day at school also fell to her most of the time. Instead of complaining, Louise just wanted to state emphatically that if a woman chooses to return to school while she has young children she must have a spouse who is 100% on board with her. Even then, she should prepare to be overworked! Many women echoed this sentiment. No one suggested this was an easy way to spend your time. They all needed not only freedom to get their work done, but also the support from their loved ones. It was clear that support is central to smooth sailing. Here is Sarah’s image (see figure 26) and her words that she sent on to me.
The image of these tulips in snow represents what I am trying to create (and therefore live the rest of my life) through growth in the PhD program. While I have a lot of support of those around me, the journey sometimes holds the isolation and frostiness of winter. This photo speaks to the perseverance that is needed despite huge obstacles. It also speaks to patience and grace.

At 77, my oldest participant, Noreen, wanted to tell women not to be afraid to ask questions:

You know how you feel sort of stupid sometimes asking questions? Ask questions. Also, you set examples for other women. You know if you ask a question it shows that you don’t always have to be the smartest or know the most or anything else.

Many women also talked of being pulled in two directions and feeling divided. All agreed that at some point in the studies it would be necessary to take a leave from paid work and concentrate only on the doctoral work. Yet, several of the women I worked with did complete their doctorates while working full time – never taking a break from paid work.

While all the women did show stamina on their journey, Julia talked of how she knew
many women who had in fact, given up. She, too, talked of the unwavering commitment that was necessary as you made your way through doctoral studies. Reflecting on her own time as a doctoral student, she pointed out the enormity of the work involved. Julia was mindful of the women she knew who hadn’t completed their dissertations – mindful that they were all women. She cautioned that it was important to understand that you had to be sure of your passion as you embarked on this journey – that no matter how you looked at it, intellectually, family life – every aspect of it. She felt that you had to take a long look at yourself. As she recalled her PhD days she said:

> I know so many people who never finished. They did the coursework. They did all the seminars. They did the comps. They did the proposal. They didn’t do the dissertation. And I only know, okay, I can think of one male, but the rest of them are all female.

As she reflected on the demands of the PhD, she tried to describe the leap between a master’s and a doctorate saying, “It was a huge chasm” (see figure 27).
Many women revealed to me that they’d heard a variation of the comment, “Why return to school at this stage in your life?” When I confided to Carol, a dance teacher that I had been asked repeatedly why I was bothering to do this at this stage in my life she responded excitedly that just before she graduated she had someone say to her, “You knew you were turning 60. Why did you do this? You could have just stopped at your master’s. You don’t need a PhD.” As I continued to talk to women about their experiences, I was so relieved that these women who’d had such negative comments said freely to them did not appear to be disillusioned. I couldn’t help but wonder, how many women did in fact drop out? This idea that people could have opinions that seemed to make sense enough that they would utter them, it came up again and again. Fortunately it did not really seem to undermine the women that I worked with; rather, it often appeared to strengthen their resolve.

As she described her arrival on campus, Diane, a forty something year old medical resident said between chuckles:

> Sometimes I felt quite taken aback by how taken aback people were with me. I worked with one physician, just a single morning. I was at his clinic. Upon seeing me he said, well, you’ve been around the block a few times! (laughs) Which was really not very, not very polite! But to be honest it was the rarity.

Another woman, Mara, said she also felt at times that she had to justify why she was going back to school. She was not asked, “What are you going to study?” Rather, she was asked, “Why are you going to study?”

A few of the women made references to people trivialising their endeavours. Bonney who had embarked on doctoral studies at fifty-two said one of her younger friends said to her, “You’re not really doing this for a career, are you?” She laughed when she told me this and wondered, “Well, what am I doing it for? You know, it’s as though I’m just doing this for fun. I mean, I don’t think you are really taken seriously.” Teresa said a man said to her one day, “Oh, everyone’s getting their PhD” She quietly said, “No. They’re not.”
As Lilly talked about the ‘mixed reactions’ from other people, I wondered how are people even entitled to have a personal reaction to another person’s decision to do whatever? More importantly, why is it that the women I spoke to even cared? I decided it must be something to do with our desire to please and our concern about others’ perceptions of us. I speculate that it seems difficult to redefine who you are as you get older. As Lilly tried to explain some of her frustrations she said:

I find, well, there are kind of well mixed reactions, you know – when I say I’m pursuing education. Depending on whom I talk to, it’s almost like they don’t know how to respond to me. You know, that I’m pursuing more education...I’m thinking of comments like, why are you doing this? Why are you doing this at your age? The element that I miss is support and just to go out and have coffee and vent. You know, have a cry.

Tenacity and Commitment

These were words that came up repeatedly. Lucy talked about taking a full time course load while working full time. She was a single parent and with a nod and thanks to her mom she said she was paying the babysitter more that she was paying in tuition. She says she felt fortunate that she was able to find a babysitter she trusted and that her mom could help her financially. She spent many days reading academic articles at soccer games and swimming pools. She wanted to let me know that all her children finished high school, which was not what the school personnel seemed to predict for them – as they were the children of a single parent who was pursuing her doctorate. Lucy felt the school staff did not seem to see a bright future for her children. With satisfaction and pride she told me that one of her children had decided to pursue an education degree.

Many women spoke of the unwavering commitment necessary for doctoral study. Some of the women talked of getting up at four in the morning just to have some time alone. Others talked of how they gained this new ability to drown out noise in the background. The conversation that I
had with Pamela depicted just how strong the desire to complete the doctorate was for her. She had been suffering from an eating disorder at the same time that she wanted to return to school for her doctorate. Her psychiatrist insisted she could not return to school at that time, as her disorder was affecting her health. He told her, “You are sick. You are not going back to school. What are you talking about? You’re sick.” Pamela said that she wanted to go back so badly that, even though she was in denial about her serious mental and physical condition, it was that doctor telling her that she could not follow her dream of returning to school to pursue her doctorate that turned her life around. She said that up to that point she did not have the cognitive ability to see how her disorder was affecting her husband, her son and herself. “So, it took that doctor telling me I’m not going to do my PhD for me to realise that my life was falling apart. It was the doctor telling me that I couldn’t go back to school that snapped me out of it.”

Carol had difficult memories of her years as a student and I feel hers was perhaps the most poignant example of adversity combined with belief in self. As she pondered the question, who encouraged you, she said it didn’t matter so much, who? For her, the more significant questions were: What adversity did she overcome? How did that adversity motivate her and why? Wanting to right the wrongs of adversity, she felt that people didn’t know her for her full human potential. Fortunately, she had a strong inner sense of worth, nurtured by a family background that couldn’t provide much financially, but was loving and caring, where she always felt understood and appreciated for who she was. She felt the “who encouraged her” question was trivial. She explained:

If I had to assign a numerical value to the meaning of those who encouraged me I would give it about a 5 out of 10. But if you asked me about the effect of the adversity upon strengthening my resolve to do this degree...I’d say it would be right up there – around 8 out of 10. My personal desire and passion to do the work that I love is a 10 out of 10.
As Marnie talked about support and how she treasured her ‘Study Sisters’ group that she had formed with some other women, she said she often had people question why she would be doing a PhD. Finishing the degree at 63 she was too old to be considered for a tenure track position. She said, “It seemed to others questionable from the beginning.” People were puzzled by the lack of monetary rewards the completion of a doctorate would bring. She would not be able to offset her expenses.

Why would she do it? Marnie was ready with answers:

My answers had to do with expanding my knowledge, trying to understand the education system better, doing research that interested me. These and other such answers were looked upon with suspicion and derision. Currently, I am still paying back student loans that allowed me to go back to school and I am often asked if it was worth it. My answer (a resounding, YES!) is met with the same reaction. It would have been easy to let these skeptics discourage me from finishing. I would advise older women who go back to do a PhD to find someone who understands what they want to do and why and ignore everyone else! And, trust yourself! You know what you want. Go for it!

Even with encouragement from others, I could hear the tentative nature of some of the women’s belief in self. As Eve described her decision and reasons for returning to school as an older student, she said a friend of hers encouraged her, saying this:

You should go back to school. Why not? Really. You’ve got nothing to lose. You can maybe get some scholarships. You’re pretty smart. Go. And I never really thought I was smart enough. But, whatever! Don’t ever let that stop you! Really! You are smart enough! So I just went well, what the heck! So she, Linda, my friend was, she was one. She was quite instrumental.

Eve said that at the time she lacked self-confidence and felt that she did not possess the necessary discipline or the ability to focus and develop for herself a coherently structured schedule in order to research and write such a big piece of work. I am thrilled to report that she just defended this past
summer! So while women did definitely express this lack of confidence it was tempered by the many instances of comments about growing (albeit slowly) self-confidence. Such support and faith from others that you can do it was central to many of the women’s successes.

Wanting to be an inspiration for her family, Noreen said she considered that she needed to show the women in her family that women can do this. She had a son and a son-in-law, as well as her husband who all had their doctorates. “That made three males to zero females, until I achieved mine.” She said she felt angry about what she saw as unfairness in society. She wanted to set an example and that she did, obtaining her degree at sixty-seven. She observed, “All my life...I probably would have gone back to university earlier, but because of the children...they were going to university. So, I worked until I was, actually I worked till I was 70.” She continued, saying that while she was studying it was hard to get things done, things like groceries. For many like Noreen, the drive and determination came from the women themselves. Hear this voice of determination from Noreen, who was my oldest participant, as she reflected on the question, did someone encourage you to return to university? Noreen said, “No, no one really encouraged me. It just wasn’t what someone my age did.” The motivation came from within:

Well, I think it was because I lived in a university environment. My husband’s an academic; he’s a history professor. I was always exposed to academia. Also, I had been a good student in school. I was sort of academically inclined. I certainly wasn’t gifted. I had to work hard. I always used to hear from my husband what a good student he was. What a good student he was! And I thought, I was a good student too. And just all of this was always going on in my mind.

Karen expressed an odd problem. Even though she works in an education system, she felt they didn’t want her schoolwork to interfere with her job. She didn’t bring up her schoolwork at all when she was at work, making sure if there was something she couldn’t complete for work they wouldn’t say she had homework. Such a glaring lack of support seemed
impossibly contradictory. At times, these interviews were rife with irony and paradox.

Christine talked about the reasons she chose to do a doctorate later in life. She reflected that as a single mom she had done everything for her two sons. At some point she decided to do something “just for me, something selfish.” She uprooted her boys and moved across the country. And she said, indeed her boys were proud of her. “And to have your teenage boys proud of you? It’s really nice.” Doesn’t really sound like it was just for her, does it? What a role model of a strong woman her boys had in their mom.

I was struck by how positive the women were who had completed their studies. Not one said to me that they wished they hadn’t done it. All were proud of themselves and all said that at various points along the way they were ready to quit. Alice cautioned that while she was so proud of herself, it was at times, quite difficult. She said there were times of struggle and doubt and, at times, it was harder that she’d ever imagined. She carried that knowledge as she went forward as a teacher and a mentor. She said her job was to keep believing in and encouraging her students when they didn’t believe in themselves, even if they felt they couldn’t do it. She said, and I am certain she was reflecting on her own success, “I know that they can.” Women seemed to want to celebrate and share their wisdom. They knew that they were different students than they were when they were younger. Doing the doctorate gave them that chance to consider their own personal knowledge and how they best might share it with others. For example, Laurel talked of the knowledge in her hands. As a midwife in her forties she began to realise that she could not keep up with, nor did she want to, the long hours a midwife must maintain. She said by the time you’ve caught a thousand babies you have a great deal of experience in your hands. However, she felt she lacked the stamina to keep long hours that go along with the career of a midwife. Part of her reason for returning to school to obtain a doctorate was that she felt it would be a way for to contribute to the profession
of midwifery in a slightly different capacity. Her interests were turning to research and teaching. “Otherwise, all this experience and skills are just gone.” The profession would lose her.

As Sandy, an aboriginal woman reflected on her life, she said that people often marvelled at what she had accomplished, especially when there were so many studies about why would she be a success when so many in aboriginal communities fall into drugs. In trying to put into words the reasons for her success she said that throughout her life she had turned to people on a regular basis who were positive about who she could be. At 52 she said, “I hold those people still in my life, you know? I’ve encountered them at various stages. I maintain a real effort to listen to those people who will say those good things. You’re amazing; you can do it.” Clearly, Sandy was able to hold onto those positive voices. They helped guide her towards success. Like Sandy, many women talked of where they found inspiration. That is the subject of the next section.

**Inspiration and Support**

The women I worked with mentioned a variety of ways that they survived the journey and how the friendships they formed made up an important aspect of staying on even ground. They spoke of the support they enjoyed and where they found inspiration. While some women made reference to their upbringing and how it has affected their thinking today, some of the women spoke with pride about how they have affected their children, while others spoke of the need to reinvent the past. As Carol pointed out to me, she didn’t do the degree for money, as she had already peaked in terms of earnings in the public school system. She was not the slightest bit interested in turning towards an academic career at 60 years old. See her joyousness in her words and image she supplied (see figure 28) below.
The process of doing this degree has been one almost of getting to know myself better, rewriting early history, showing myself that I could do this in light of many people in my past who did not support my education attempts (some of them have died but their voices still resound in my ears). Yes...I think it was a process of reinventing myself...rewriting script...after all the deep reflection, connecting with my passion for dance in a meaningful way...nurturing from two amazing women who believed in me every step of the way...as senior supervisor and committee member. I definitely came out the other side of the wall of fire knowing myself better, believing in myself more...understanding DUENDE...the Spanish flamenco older woman dancer who “knows what she knows” when she dances...knowing now that I know what I know...in this dance of life...I am duende now...Yes...I have a few things to say about the process...it was simply one of the most important and best things I could possibly have done in my entire list of life experiences. $$ Cost be damned!

Carol could not have known how her words resonated with me. While I was not really sure of the answer to the question I had been repeatedly asked, why are you doing this? The answers I
was getting from women were helping me to understand myself better. If other women could use expressions like, *I know what I know*, and say it in a peaceful and assured way, in a way that I could understand, I knew I was also on my way to understanding *duende*.

All the women were mindful of and grateful for the support that they were given. As Alice said, when she would tell people she was working towards her PhD, people would actually ask her partner, “*Why are you supporting this?*” His answer? “*She is totally passionate about it. She loves it! And I want to be with someone who’s passionate about what she’s doing. That’s why I’m supporting her.*” Alice also talked about her friends who gave her a place to stay while she worked on her dissertation. She felt they were like patrons and she recognised that this was a tremendous gift. Cindy, an ex-banker, while she didn’t really find support from her banking friends found great support from her family. She said they never made comments like, “*This is going on for so long and you’re so broke!*” Rather, they provided financial assistance in the way of living arrangements from her brother, who offered for her to live in his condo.

Lucy’s struggles with her advisor went on for the course of her degree. She talked of how her advisor belittled her. Lucy was a single mother and found great support from her children during that time. She said she was also fortunate to have been supported by her mom financially, but the one thing that kept her afloat was her kids’ attitudes. After failing her proposal defence, they said simply, “*So, do it again mum.*” They were, she said, echoing what she would have said to them when they experienced failure.

Joanne, someone who had come to doctoral study after a career as a lab technician said she wanted more. She had always loved history and when she decided to go back and study history at thirty something she was told by the university that she had nothing in her background that would suggest any ability in such a subject. She ignored the comments and found herself pursuing a history
degree. She had a lot of planning to do during her research in England, and said with gratitude that her husband was her planner. She felt she would never have gotten as much done if she’d not had his support. When Alice talked of the support she received from her parents she noted that her parents didn’t even necessarily get it. “They were probably thinking, why do you want to keep going? But when I was doing it, they were very supportive. Both of them were supportive financially, too. Support is so critical. You can’t do it without support. You can’t.” That thought rang true throughout the interviews.

In thinking about support, Teresa said she felt the support from her partner was invaluable. They had young children and the PhD became a family affair. She laughed as she said, “Sometimes the kids watched more TV. Whatever! I have work to do! Play more video games! I don’t care! I need four more hours!” While her partner was supportive, she noted, “It does go on. It’s not something that’s over in a year.”

As Eve talked about her reasons for wanting to return to graduate school, I could see that although she wanted to enter another phase of her life, embark on something new, all the knowledge that she had acquired during her work years would surely inform her doctoral work. She had been an activist, a feminist rape crisis worker and an antiviolence worker. She wanted to step back and see a bigger picture – make sense of it from a different perspective. Her return to graduate studies began in 2003 with her masters. She wanted to make connections between theory and practice, which she felt came more easily to her because of her age. As Eve completed her doctorate in the summer of 2014, she offered this image (see figure 29) and advice from her years as a student.
Figure 29: Eve - You think you’ll never reach the top.

This is a staircase along the coastal cliff near Sechelt, BC. Both the rings and the steps represent the way to, well, the next adventure, I guess. That hike is practically straight up a mountain for about 3 km. There are some stairs and rope barriers so you don’t fall, or go astray and exacerbate erosion. It’s pretty daunting. But there’s a point where you can’t turn around. You think you’ll NEVER reach the top, sometimes you have to stop and catch your breath, and your legs and butt BURN, but once you do (and you will), you’ll feel like a million bucks. But none of the images speak to the relationships – the mentoring, the inspiration of previous scholars, the challenges, the support of your peers, and the love and faith of friends and family – I guess that’s the steps and the banisters and the metal rings. They represent the supports and structures that offer guidance and some protection one receives from colleagues and teachers. There’s a lot of ‘self-direction’ involved. It is often confusing and emotionally fraught, but you never have to be alone, there are many who have done this before, or done it in a particular way, who can offer suggestions and support. I learned how to be a better person there. More confident, more humble, less afraid.

It seemed that an appreciation of their age also helped women to gain perspective and know that they would be able to weather the process. As Sarah talked about how difficult it was to get through her comprehensive exams she adopted a pragmatic approach, saying simply, “What do I have
to do to get past this?" She felt that the comprehensive exam had been somewhat of a traumatising experience for her, and that the level of criticism that she was expected to endure was simply not pedagogically rational. Yet, she felt that as a result of all the criticism she’d had to endure, she was in fact, a better writer. She suffered a bit of a slump, and felt her self-esteem was bruised. She must have been stronger for it as she said, for her, quitting was never in the picture. “They’re going to have to throw me out. They haven’t yet. I don’t think they’re going to.” Sarah had a solid work background. She’d had many rewarding years as a teacher and guidance counsellor, was in a stable relationship and felt that all the support she enjoyed helped to keep her focused through what she felt was at times, quite a painful experience. She also felt she had a strong and supportive committee who really did stand behind her.

Mara talked about the benefit of being older. She felt the fact that she was intensely aware of the limited time she had left helped her to complete the work in a timely manner. She said sometimes her younger classmates were impressed with the way she ploughed along. Mara was quite matter-of-fact, saying she didn’t have time to take days off...she needed to keep at it:

> I have to go back to work. I’m a teacher. I took this year off and I have to go back in September. I was talking to one of the young guys and I was saying how far along I was. He said, ‘Wow!’ He was looking at me. I could tell he was impressed. I looked at him and I said, you know, I don’t have a choice.

Bridget felt that when women, particularly older women, made the commitment to doctoral study, that commitment came from the heart. She had no interest in compromise or in doing anything that was not authentic to her. Eve commented that it was her age that permitted her to see the broader picture in her work with the impoverished women in Vancouver’s East End. She said her professor gave her credit for the kind of lateral thinking she was able to do. She felt this was partly due to her years of experience and her ability to see the bigger picture. After many years on
the front lines, she wanted to spend some time making some connections between the theory and
the practice. In Bridget’s case, she felt that she didn’t have the ‘whole picture,’ she wanted to explore
some ideas. Because of the tentative nature of her qualitative research, she had a hard time finding
a committee that would trust that she would find her way. She thought she had found a committee
that would recognise she had years of experience in her field of health care. She knew she was
capable of finding her way as a researcher. She also knew what had value and what would carry
her through. However, she soon recognised that she didn't fit the committee's idea of a researcher.
Perhaps because of her age, Bridget decided to change universities. She looked for mentors who
valued the kind of qualitative research that she was passionate about. She reflected on her early
stages of research saying that she knew what she wanted to do. She knew it had value:

I knew who I was. I knew where I was going and I knew what I wanted to get at the end of this journey.
And because it wasn't fitting into their idea...it wasn't valued. So I think for me when I changed universities
I found a committee that was completely different. As I said I have people who are very nurturing of the idea
of narrative inquiry and nursing research and nursing education. I still have a few people on that committee
who do not value narrative inquiry which drives me crazy, but that's a whole other issue. I said to some of my
committee members, I don't have forever to take. I don't want to take seven or eight years to do a PhD. And
they sort of laughed, ha ha. Why is this, why is that? I said because I’m going to retire within a few years. I
want to be able to put my mark where I want to be able to put my mark. I don't want to have someone place
my mark for me. I want to be in charge of that and I want to do it. And if you don’t want to follow me,
fine, don’t follow me. I’ll get somebody else to. And so I think being...I’m not saying that I was headstrong or
I had an attitude or anything but from my experience at the other university, I certainly did not want to do
that again. I think the end result of that was, was that my committee started recognising the value I had in
creating more knowledge in a certain area.
As I write, Bridget defends very soon. Many women talked about the reasons for wanting to complete a PhD and often, it seemed that they, too, like Bridget, wanted to leave their mark. As Bridget talked about her reasons for embarking on her PhD, she said, at this point in her life, she was confident that she knew what she wanted to know more about. This was a little reminiscent of Carol’s comments about duende. These women had soul and spirit as they described their intellectual awakening throughout the doctoral process.

Some women talked about the value of being more mature and being able to survive the journey at this mature stage in their lives, whereas they doubted they could have in their younger years. Margot had recently relocated to British Columbia from Germany. She felt that Canadians around her did not consider her age an issue at all. In Germany, she felt that there was no support for an older woman going back to school later in life. She said that there, the first thing people would consider is your age. They would say you were too old! She continued, “If I told them I was doing a PhD at my age (47) they would just think I’m totally crazy to go back and do a PhD because you’re old in Germany. I’m old!” Two advantages she was sure she possessed at her age were her ability to accept criticism and her openness to learning. She felt her age actually gave her an advantage over the other students. Margot laughed as she talked about her age and how she felt more mature and able to handle the ups and downs of the demanding process of doctoral study. She felt better able to not take any criticism of her work personally, as she might have when she was younger. She had recently talked with her supervisor whom she felt was a great, but tough guy. He returned her SSHRC application for revisions saying, “It’s not clear enough!” As well, he insisted on so many rewrites during the comprehensive exam process...She said, “There are moments when you really can’t take it. You think you can’t do it.” Margot felt as an older student she was better able to survive the humiliation and accept criticism, be open to learning and understand that you would have a better result in the end. She
shared this thought with her professor, saying that if she were 25 she couldn’t survive the stress. His response? “I know! I have students who run out of my office!” Margot was not the only woman who used the word survive when talking about getting through doctoral study. There were many.

In striking opposition to the many comments about experiencing a lack of support and feelings of isolation, there were a seemingly equal number of times that the women expressed feeling well supported and inspired. The positive thoughts and comments from others helped many to keep afloat. Many women cited their partners, their advisors and their classmates as the people who supported them. Inspiration came from quite a variety of sources. It seemed for some women, the fact that others believed in them provided them a real source of inspiration. Sybil talked of how she financed her studies, taking in university students as boarders to help cover her living expenses. She thought people were inspired by people like her, who despite all the odds, were struggling to do something academic or whatever! Remember, Sybil had been a high school dropout, obtaining her high school diploma later in life and her doctorate at 62.

This theme of supporting each other came up regularly. Leonard (2001) tries to puzzle out why women put off doctoral studies:

One reason women often come late to their doctorates is tied to a phenomenon widely noted in the literature on gender and education in many countries (and noted in the introduction): that girls and women are trained not only to be more self-effacing and diffident that boys and men, but also to think that if they were good enough, someone would have noticed and encouraged them to proceed. (p. 76)

She maintains that typically there have been fewer opportunities for older women, as they are not often recommended to do postgraduate work (Moses as cited in Leonard, 2001, p. 76). She continues and I smile at this next remark:
So, particularly if you are older and considering doing a doctorate, look to and believe the support and encouragement you get from family and friends; and at any age accept that you should be confident and prepared to put yourself forward. (p. 76-77)

Indeed, the women I interviewed regularly cited the support of family and friends as a crucial factor in their ability to continue their studies.

Many women mentioned the vital patience and love of their partners, who helped in a myriad of ways: looking after children and/or aging parents, helping with research trip planning, housework, academic writing, preparing meals and snacks, and offering financial assistance. As I began to try to define, what does support look like? I thought Nora made an interesting comment. As she tried to put into words who helped her and how, she said that the way her father and her stepmother questioned her about her research probably bolstered her. She said:

*My father and my stepmother would ask me! They're really curious! My dad was even curious about my research methodology. So we'd have discussions! He's an arts person, a filmmaker and a philosopher in his own way. He's curious and interested.*

**Uncertain Futures**

Women made varied statements about the reasons for embarking on the PhD. Some women wrestled with the practical doubts and concerns of the questionable future value of a newly minted PhD later in life. For example, Teresa had her heart set on securing a faculty position at the university where she was lecturing, whereas Carol, a few years older than her had absolutely no interest in working, having just retired after a career in teaching. She was looking forward to travel and the occasional substitute-teaching job to pay for her airfare. While yet another woman said, “Well, why the hell am I doing this, if not for a job?”
Maya, a professor who herself had achieved her doctorate as a late-entry woman at 52, talked about the emotional toll that study at a later stage can take on people’s lives. Her reason for returning to school was to ensure an income in her later years. She’d been part of the Canadian fishing industry that was quickly disappearing. Yet, even though she found work in university, when asked, she did not recommend doctoral studies to other older students, men or women. Maya felt that as a teacher with a newly minted PhD, if you wanted to work in academia, you spent so much time serving the institution before you got to do what you wanted to do. She had seen some of her friends go through this and be sorely disappointed with the role of a beginning professor at a later stage in life. She felt it important as a tenured professor to warn people of this before they embarked on doctoral study.

After talking with Alice about her doctoral journey, she sent me this note. While she had recently completed her doctorate, she didn’t find herself in an academic setting. She felt what she termed, the fierce paradox of being a doctor who can’t call herself one. She felt that living outside of the academy, she didn’t really see anywhere she could use the title, except maybe on her personal checking account. She thought perhaps using PhD after her name was ‘easier to get away with.’ She also felt there was the conundrum of marrying the spiritual renunciation of position and status with the valuing of accomplishment and effort. Alice continued:
Can I use the language of the LGBTQ community to call attention to my right to identify in a way that feels authentic and meaningful to me? Are pride and the desire to be seen as a scholar, philosopher as well as artist/teacher bad things? I have read Lean In by Sheryl Sandberg, the latest book on the subject, how women belittle their accomplishments and betray their ambitions for fear of appearing too pompous or arrogant. I wonder how this impacts your study? Do women avoid graduate study because they feel uncomfortable assuming that it is within their reach? What barriers exist in their own minds and in the culture that deter them? Of course there is no promise of employment...however for personal growth, absolutely, and opportunity for learning, conversation, challenge and stimulation.

Even though Alice had recently completed her doctorate, her inner conflict is apparent. Receiving this note after our interview, I thought that perhaps her involvement in my study had given rise to these many questions she raised and that she was indeed a spokeswoman for others like her, like me. The healing power of Alice telling her story was tangible. As Connelly and Clandinin (2006) describe the value of sharing stories, they write:

People shape their daily lives by stories of who they and others are and as they interpret their past in terms of these stories. Story, in the current idiom, is a portal through which a person enters the world and by which their experience of the world is interpreted and made personally meaningful. Viewed this way, narrative is the phenomena studied in inquiry. Narrative inquiry, the study of experience as story, then, is first and foremost a way of thinking about experience. (p. 477)

I couldn’t make or be the difference that Alice wanted to see and feel – that is the struggle of how and why to honor her hard work. However, her sharing some of her story with me not only allowed me a glimpse of the after life of a PhD, I do believe I was helping her and many other women articulate who they were in the world and how the doctorate shaped them in ways they might not have imagined.
While many women recognised that achieving their doctorate later in life would not make them eligible for a tenure track university job, some acknowledged that because they lived in a smaller or rural town, there were in fact more opportunities. So, in a strange twist, living in a remote part of the country meant you had fewer people vying for university positions and therefore more opportunity for advancement at a later stage in life. However, due to the smaller populations in those towns, there were, in fact, fewer opportunities. Furthermore, a number of women said that in some of the smaller towns, a person with too much education was suspected of thinking they were better that the others. Diane said she came from a town where people said having too much education ‘ruined a person.’ And Yvette said something quite disturbing about a small town environment:

> There was even one time where I applied for a position that had been advertised as requiring a master’s degree or they preferred a master’s degree. To my knowledge I was the only applicant who was pursuing a masters. The other applicants either did not have masters or did not have a bachelor’s degree. And the successful applicant was someone who did not have a bachelor’s degree, but she had a personal relationship with one of the managers. So, you know, that in itself was telling. Well, it sort of colours your experience when you start thinking, ‘should I go and pursue a PhD? What’s going to happen if that was the case with the masters?’ (laughs) But I needed to get out of that environment. The university environment was much more supportive than my workplace of pursuing grad studies. That story would definitely be the one that had shaped my trajectory. But times do change. And there are some other employees who have obtained their masters degree and that workplace is slowly changing. And the conversations are becoming different.

Louise was not hopeful at all about her future employability saying that she felt it might even be a barrier because there is almost a perception by people that you are too academic and don’t have that real world experience.
As Nora spoke I could hear some helplessness in her voice. Having obtained her doctorate recently she wasn't really sure what she would be able to do in her city. She had children and a husband; relocating her family was not feasible. She said she was tired and wanted some sustainability, feeling that the PhD was not leading to a known for her – beyond all the different granting ideas that she was working on. She said at 45, “I'm still trying to figure out what I'm going to be able to do!”

Balancing these negative outlooks, Sarah at 52 felt very optimistic about her future in academia. She saw her future doctorate as a beacon of hope! She was set to retire at 55, in a few years and felt that the opportunities in her province were infinite. I have to say, she was in the same province as Louise, who felt no hope for her future. Hear Sarah’s joyfulness as she speaks:

As I kind of wind down one phase in my life, I really feel with a lot of hope in my heart that there’s this incredible new phase that’s going to be awaiting me. So, really, when I say, life is just beginning at 50... they look at me as if I’m a little nuts because you know, they see the bags under the eyes and that kind of thing...and the bifocals and I’m trying to see you! (on Skype) I really mean it. I have never been as fulfilled and as happy and as full of hope and all of that. And of course the PhD program is a good part of that.

Physical Issues

Many women commented on their awareness of time left and how their sensitivity to that truth informed their PhD journey. While there was no difficulty for women to talk of the value of being an older student, a few did mention some difficulties with older brains and learning – the physical reality of aging. When I asked Maya, herself having been a late-entry woman, obtaining her PhD at 52, whether or not she had felt discriminated against as a mature student as she completed her PhD, she replied that she had 'always' felt discriminated against. She felt that the university, especially the lecture system is geared towards young brains, not older brains, and that the system
was based on rote learning – recognition and recall, not conceptualisation, not meaning making which was far more conducive to adult brains. In fact, Maya cited this fact as the reason she became involved in adult education. Her interest stemmed from discriminatory teaching practices.

Many of the participants made reference to their failing bodies, not their minds. What was interesting for me was that the women who commented about the downside of being older did not dwell on it. They just accepted these drawbacks as a fact of life and moved on. When I asked Daphne, who was studying Health Management if she had any advice for other women considering study later in life, she responded enthusiastically, saying she wanted to tell others, “Don’t wait too long! ‘Cause your brain doesn’t seem to absorb as well.” She laughed as she spoke. She felt that when she was younger it was easier to memorise facts and figures. She said nowadays she had to write things down and really work at remembering. There was no hint of frustration in her voice; it just was what it was! Lilly at age 65 said quite bluntly that at her age she needed to write things down whereas, she used to pride herself on her memory – remembering many things simultaneously! Now, she said laughingly, “If I leave things too long, that information seems to be gone and replaced by something else.” Good humour was displayed continuously, especially as many women made references to the aging process. As Sonya showed me images of her journey, she chose to take a photo of her glasses (see figure 30), pointing out light-heartedly that she had forgotten the ones she was now wearing.
Figure 30: Sonya - My journey is my eyes becoming weaker!

They were my old glasses when I started my research journey...And I think I was 1.25. Okay? Now, I’m up at 3! Okay? And it’s only three years! These are my sunglasses because my eyes hurt already! (laughs) That’s from sitting at the computer. My eyes are so sore. Really. Actually (referring to ones she is wearing), these are the pair that go in between here and here. I forgot to put them in! Sometimes I’ve just got to put on sunglasses and just give my eyes a rest! So, that’s my journey. My journey is the eyes becoming weaker! And that’s work! It’s work!

Sonya had explained to her husband that I had asked her to take photos of her doctoral journey. Shortly after, he came home to find her snoozing at her computer (see figure 31).
Oh, yeah. I’m finished on that one! This is me falling asleep. Sitting up! Okay, that’s like an age thing, eh? I don’t know. Well, it’s lucky I didn’t erase everything on my computer! Delete everything! My husband, he grabbed the camera. I have the camera right here. And he said, I can’t believe it! She fell asleep! I fell asleep sitting up! So, my husband took a shot. He knew about the fact that I was trying to collect some photos of this journey. He said, that tells a lot! It’s fatigue! So your study is about women... I wonder... I’m sure! Young or old! Everybody gets tired.

Indeed, many get tired embarking on this journey. I wondered why women so often called it a reflection of their age. I have yet to meet a young person doing doctoral work who does not talk of the fatigue of the experience.

Nora talked of how she got quite sick once she had completed her doctorate and hadn’t been able to work since. It had been a year and a half. She said she’d gotten a bad flu and simply couldn’t seem to recover. She had just started doing some volunteer work at an art gallery. Sandy felt sure that the brain processes differently as we age. She also thought that as she was aging she was more interested in the details. She thought that when she was an undergrad, she was not as
interested in such things, saying that as an older student, she was not just *getting through* school. She found herself asking questions and questioning herself more and more – much more than she did when she was younger. She felt as an older student, she came to her studies differently and perhaps was actually putting more stress on herself. She felt that maybe she needed to let that go a little bit. Chastising herself she said, “I should just relax a little bit more and not think so deeply about every single sentence in life, you know?” I did know what she meant. Rather than agree with this comment, I considered how each of the women that I had interviewed seemed to express a similar attitude. They took their PhD work very seriously, and really gave me the impression that they were not just *getting through* school. They wanted to leave their mark, their imprint. The PhD was a challenge they undertook with the understanding that the completion of it would bring neither guarantee of future employment or a recoupment of their financial investment. The physical toll that the rigorous course of study was taking on their bodies was just one more hurdle, but not insurmountable.

Interestingly, I found that none of the women seemed to register any frustration about the aging process. It truly just was the way it was. They were calmly philosophical about it. While Teresa did acknowledge some irritation with it she said:

> It is quite the journey. You know, ageism and sexism are very there with you. I don’t consider myself old.

> Age has never bothered me until now. I’m trying to get a tenure track position, because I really like the combination of research and teaching. I love that. It’s a really good combo for me. University is the only place you can do that. So that’s where I am feeling it. I get really frustrated that I feel that, too. Because I say to myself, Oh, get over it. This is the age I am.
Benefits of Age

As Teresa talked about her role of preparing young undergrads to make their way in the teaching world, she noted that as an experienced teacher she felt well qualified to teach young student teachers in the university system. As she reflected on the very young staff at her university who were training the undergrads, she wondered:

Where is the value for the lived life and all the experience the older student brings to academia? The Bachelor of Education students go crazy with some of the faculty that have never been in a classroom. And I always say, you have to have a mix. You have to appreciate the theoretical. But it is hard when I see some of these 30 plus PhDs (laughs)...tenure faculty teaching the B.Ed. students. I just think, oh...

It’s hard not to agree wholeheartedly with her respect for the value of lived experience – at any juncture.

Louise also talked about the value of lived experience and wondered why there wasn’t more support for that. While she understood the importance of understanding theory, she felt that some of her best professors were the ones who were able to bring that real world experience into the classroom. In fact, the very reason she wanted to study was because of the inspiration she gained from one of her professors who had been directly involved in government in the eighties:

He was able to bring all these fascinating stories about his work and life. He was able to make it practical to the students. It went from being a discussion in a textbook to how it applied in real life. So for me that was part of the reason why I did want to get some experience outside of the university before I ever went back.

As I listened to Sandra, who went back to begin her doctorate at 58, I couldn’t help but think how much her life informed her PhD life. Sandra spoke of being very self-directed, self-correcting and even self-critical. Yet, she acknowledged that while this was so, she also had a lot to draw upon.
She paused and thought about how much her lived life has offered her in the way of knowledge and experience, noting that it’s not just going to school that educates you:

It’s engaging in family and in community and being an engaged citizen in the workplace. You know, all of those things contribute to your growth and development. So in many ways you feel that going back to school validates that... for whatever reason. Whether it’s because you have an opportunity to demonstrate your knowledge or whether it’s because you get to tick one more course off that is required. It is a rewarding experience in itself. I like to think of it as wisdom, as well, you know, practical wisdom. And that I think is really important to bring forward. Because I think too often we get tangled up in not just theoretical constructs but in information that takes us to a place that’s far away from our lived lives. And for me, I was one of the first people in my family, I think the first in my immediate family to go to university. It’s very important for me to stay connected, to stay grounded and at the same time I still value, you know the academic, if you will, the academic experience.

We can hear in Sandra’s voice the importance of, as she puts it, ‘staying connected’ but also the importance of the academic experience.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter I have explored some of the more personal issues that affect the journey of late-entry women. As I spoke to many women, many jokingly said things like, “I’m 50 years old and I still don’t know what I want to do with my life?” While they tended to make the comment with some awkwardness, the fact that they said this to me made me think that they were, indeed, interested and on the way to ‘reinventing themselves.’ They were not put off by harsh comments and opinions of others, sometimes from people they had been close to, about the unlikelihood of ever finding work that would reflect their new academic credentials. For many, the inspiration and support necessary to complete the degree came from within themselves. They didn’t allow the physical downside of
aging or others’ attitudes to frustrate them for too long. Rather, many reached within and tried to maintain the company of people who believed in their dream of obtaining their doctorate. All the women were tremendously articulate and cognisant about the benefits of age. They recognised that their lives had been great preparation for the doctoral journey. They brought with them years of knowledge and understanding to this stage of their lives. Many participants commented on the very real worries about some of the physical frailties that come with an aging body, but they did not dwell on them. Many women were keen to share their feelings about participating in my study, all appreciating the opportunity to share their stories (and opinions) with me. It is my hope that through sharing these women’s stories, I will help to, not only, relieve some of the sting that, unfortunately, seems to go hand in hand with study at a later stage in life for many women in higher education, I will have also shed light on the hopes, concerns and, most importantly, the value of the lived life of the late-entry woman in academia.
In this dissertation I have outlined my reasons for seeking answers why some women, women like me, who are older than the average student, choose to return to school later in life. I have shared some of the many challenges that we face both within the university and in our private lives. I have described the many issues that came up repeatedly in an effort to suggest that, perhaps the concerns that this group of students has is worthy of some attention from the university.

In Chapter 1 I provided a brief introduction to the reason for this study, and how it happened that I would become interested, rather, preoccupied with why women would choose this path. Why are some woman drawn to take on this challenge, considering that most of us already had a very full life before embarking on their PhD studies? What in my own life prompted me to investigate this question?

In Chapter 2 I explored the value of posing questions about women’s point of view and our ability to reflect on the choice to return to study later in life. I also show how I feel my study builds on and is an important contribution to the question of late-entry women returning to school. Influenced by feminist research methods, I have recognised the importance of my relationship with the women I have interviewed. The personal nature of the interview, my ability to identify with the participants and my own agenda – that is a desire to understand myself a little better on this journey – have all contributed to rich, revealing and meaningful conversations. My identification with the participants, my insider position, my bias, has allowed me a particular sensitivity that I would not possess if I were, in fact, an outsider. I find these realisations are anchored in the literature about qualitative research and in particular, in the research about narrative inquiry. The
trusting relationships I formed with the women during my research was genuine and comfortable and it was key to helping the women reveal their thoughts, fears and joys on the doctoral journey. In part, the research was made easy for me as I identified so closely with them. We shared so many concerns. Women were keen to have their voices heard. In the process of asking women if they would like to be interviewed I had only one woman who declined, explaining that she had once been part of a research project many years ago and felt that she had been misquoted. She would not be part of such a project again. Mindful of this possibility, I was careful to send transcriptions of all conversations to my participants with the understanding that they were free to delete or add any comments. I am happy to report that there were almost no deletions and a good deal of adding to the conversations. In fact, had I not been obliged to stop and get the research done, I can imagine the conversations would still be going on!

In Chapter 3 I describe the four phases of my study. I also describe how the narrative methods of inquiry I used, such as photovoice, writing workshops, and individual interviews with women who have completed their doctorates as late-entry women, as well as those who are in the process of studying have helped me to draw out their stories. Additionally, I have detailed my own personal thoughts on this journey and how I felt a kinship with the women whose stories I have shared.

In Chapters 4, 5 and 6 I have presented my findings, looking for common threads that made up the women’s lives as they made their way in the academy. I have chosen to focus on particular key themes that cut across the interviews, which include the themes of the challenges and joys the late-entry women experience. As well, they include the themes of feeling marginalised, even at times feeling invisible in the academy. All the participants spoke of the tenacity they felt was required to stay the course and without exception, those who had completed their degree said that they had
wanted to quit at various points along the way. This exploration of other women’s stories, combined with my own story has provided me an opportunity to reflect on these journeys and consider what we late-entry women have to offer the university at this stage in our lives.

Are late-entry women finding their rightful place in an academic environment? Do we feel our voices are being heard? Or is there an unspoken or tacit understanding that our presence is not valued? If that is the case, what can we, as articulate and experienced women do about it? Are there barriers, sometimes spoken, sometimes culturally engrained in our psyche, that have prevented women, like me, from even contemplating a return to higher education? These are the issues that we explored together through interviews, writing and sharing images of our lives and our learning.

**My Questions**

With this study I set out to explore several research questions. I was curious to know how place, where one lived, had affected the women’s studies. I found out that many women were willing to travel great distances to complete their doctorates. To my surprise, women did not refer to the geographical location and the ease of access to study that I was expecting. Rather, women talked at length of how their return to study would have an impact on their families and how they wanted to minimise that impact by not moving or uprooting anyone. Most were sensitive to their family’s attachment to home and they did not want to disturb their family lives. In some cases, they chose the university closest to home so that they would not inconvenience their families or disturb others’ schedules; yet in some cases, the women found themselves travelling great distances to complete their studies. When a move was necessary, many returned home regularly to look after aging and ill parents. The fact that so many women mentioned this desire to cause as little as possible bother to their families, I felt, spoke to their continued devotion to others, while trying to eke out time for their own study. While their studies were important to them, they seemed to systematically put their
families first. Some also mentioned choosing to study later, once their children had completed their studies, not wanting to financially compromise anyone’s future. At no turn did they seem to consider that maybe, they had compromised their own. That I never heard such a sentiment is, I think, worthy of note.

I was also interested in the kind of impact doctoral study had on the women’s lives. I wanted to know how much of a role their personal lives, (family, illness and finances) played in their ability to complete their studies. The many challenges that so many of the women overcame to complete their studies, while tending to so many other responsibilities was notable. Their stories of commitment to their studies as well as their loved ones, in particular their mothers, illustrated steadfast determination, and the power and desire to regularly put others before themselves, while undertaking such a significant challenge. It is also worth mentioning that so many of the women were willing to make financial sacrifices with no promise of ever making back their financial investment. Incredibly, many of them confided in me that they were reminded of this fact regularly.

I was also curious about issues related to feelings of being marginalised or discriminated against. Almost all the women had stories of insensitive comments made to them by others. In some cases, close friends or family made the comments. However, these comments did not deter them. In fact, they just seemed to make them more resolute in their decision to stay the course. Many found strength from their peers, their advisors and their families. Perhaps what was most surprising for me throughout this process was the reality that the women were not deterred by any kind of roadblock or feelings of unfairness that they experienced. They showed great determination and were quick to point out the many areas where they did find support. I felt certain that any late-entry woman who had managed to stay the course of doctoral study would have words of advice for others who were on the doctoral journey. I was right. Women were generous with advice and most pointed out
As they considered my questions, all the participants commented on how important it was to have support on the journey and how grateful they were to have found that support. All of the women felt my study was an important one and appreciated having their voices heard and their opinions recorded. They were anxious to help other women in any way they could and were always available to clarify or add to the conversations we'd had together.

In general, most women credited their partners with helping them. Very few of the women I worked with claimed that they did it on their own, although a few did. Many said that although others supported them, the motivation came from within themselves.

**Contributions to New Knowledge**

When I embarked upon this study, I believed that it would be important for me to conduct a qualitative research project, as I was interested in listening to the voices of other women. I was not interested in a quantitative study. I wanted to hear and feel other women's stories. Choosing to study women from across Canada struck me as an interesting concept. I wondered if women would have similar stories even if they were from different cities, different universities and very different programs. In fact, as I soon found out, their stories were very similar. Through my work with these 39 women, I have shown that there seems to be some very concerning unease and anxiety that accompanies the late-entry woman’s journey into academia, no matter what part of Canada they live in or what they are studying. What can be learned from that? Shouldn’t universities be made aware of the very real concerns and barriers that tend to obstruct the late-entry woman's path to academic success? Or, should the late-entry woman be expected to constantly question her ability in a way that does not seem required of her younger classmates? Lilly, one of my older participants, wondered
why she was not getting the respect she felt she deserved from her advisor, saying, “I ruminate over his comments and in my lower moments question if I am in over my head and if I have the mettle to fully withstand the process and challenges as an older woman in academia.” I hope that other women might take up this challenge of proving the ‘value’ of the late-entry student. Perhaps we need to consider how important it is to warmly welcome all ages of students into our universities, realising the diversity and richness that multiple perspectives offer any university program and life in general. Perhaps my way of celebrating these women will invite others to find the confidence to make their way along this path, recognising that they have knowledge and skills and, should they so choose, are able to travel this route.

This work builds on the importance of listening to women, in the spirit of Carol Gilligan (1982), and her interest in “the interaction of experience and thought, in different voices and the dialogues to which they give rise, in the way we listen to ourselves and to others, in the stories we tell about our lives” (p. 2). I believe that while all of us have lived lives that inform our PhD lives at any stage in our lives, the particular lives of women, with all the responsibilities they carry with them as late-entry students, should be celebrated and examined closely, if we are to invite other women to take up this PhD challenge. I found great comfort in the words of Diana Leonard (2001) as she encouraged women to take up study later in life. It was somehow consoling for me to know that women are not often encouraged to seek out high-level degrees, and as such, they don’t tend to put themselves forward. Through this research, I hope that I have put these women forward. In doing so, I have put myself forward, not always an easy thing to do for me. It might be surprising for younger women to understand that there are so many of us “older” women for whom the possibilities and the encouragement of a higher education were not there when we were in our twenties and thirties. It is gratifying for me to realise that I and other late-entry women have
managed to spin tales of success when no one expected much of us when we were younger.

I have celebrated how women come to know and understand who they are as students and as researchers. As Kirsch (1993) pointed out, it is important to educate women about the challenges they might face as they make their way in academia. Forewarning about some of the challenges a woman might confront can help her to anticipate and be prepared for and question some of the prejudices she may have to surmount. Gathering strength before the journey in the way of educating yourself might prevent some disappointment for some women. I know that I would have appreciated hearing some cautionary tales before I embarked on this journey with my head in the proverbial clouds! Oakley (Economic and Social Research Council, 2010) insisted meaningful research consists of producing relevant and practical research that will improve people’s lives. I have presented meaningful and thought provoking research, with a hope that other stories of women’s struggles and successes will continue to be told. Sociologist Dorothy Smith (1989) wrote about the importance of studying women’s lives from their point of view. Such words rang true as I sought to listen and understand the lives of the women, through their stories, and in doing so, come to understand myself a little better. This study addresses the need for an awareness of the diversity of students that make up our graduate students. The late-entry woman is not featured in any recruitment campaigns that I have seen. Maybe her time has come. Maybe, through this research, I have helped to develop that thought. This study has created a platform for these women’s stories to be shared. It has illuminated some of the struggles that, not unlike the late-entry woman, can be invisible, yet very present.

While Anderson’s study (2000) examined the lives of 12 re-entry women at one university and all studying in the one faculty, and Pernal studied the lives of 23 women from a variety of faculties at both undergraduate and graduate levels, I have focused my study on the lives of 39
doctoral graduates and students from a variety of faculties. Mine differs from their studies. It is a Pan-Canadian study. I believed that by exploring the voices of 39 women in a variety of universities from across Canada, whose mother tongues were both English and French, I have shown that a very real problem exists. It is not a regional one. Late-entry women from a wide variety of disciplines, ranging in age from 37 to 77 all agreed that more attention was needed to the particular needs of the late-entry student. The recurrent stories of trying to juggle busy lives, solitude, discrimination, financial concerns, uncertain futures, and above all, stories of tenacity, commitment and growing self-confidence bear witness to the need to bolster, welcome and honor students of all ages to our universities. Encouraging diversity among all student populations should be an essential part of any educational institution’s mission. Perhaps through taking note of narrative inquiries, like this one, policy makers can make informed decisions about what is needed for late-entry women to flourish.

**Limitations of This Study**

One concern I had along the way was my ability to remain objective throughout the study. Early on, it became apparent that I could not leave myself out of the stories that were emerging. Many times I felt compelled to share my own reflections with the women. And so, throughout this research process I have been up front and honest with my participants, indicating to them my personal interest in this study, explaining that I am, like them, a late-entry student. When I felt it was appropriate, I shared my own stories of feeling invisible in the academy or my own concerns about limited time that was in front of me as an older student. Always, I felt that my honesty only served to make my participants more candid, relaxed and forthcoming.

All the women had opinions and/or reactions to all of my questions and to the state of the late-entry woman in general. For me, the most significant contribution that I have made through my work is in sharing the thoughts and feelings of these 39 women. I acknowledge the personal
nature of my research and how I have chosen to interpret and share the findings. The work is shared through an admittedly biased view of one late-entry woman – me – celebrating other women who are also late-entry women. I hope that I have offset the biased nature of the work by the number of women whose voices I bring forward and the remarkable similarities that we all seem to share, right across Canada. Throughout the research process, I was taken aback by the parallel lives the women led, regardless of where they lived or their life situations. As one woman admitted to me, she had so many responsibilities and did not feel that the university had time for her or took her very seriously, and as a result of these feelings she said, “Most of the time, I just quietly get my work done.” To that I say, “Indeed, get your work done. I’ll make some noise while you’re at it.” The combined noise, I rather prefer to liken it to music, has a timbre and tonal quality that resounds as one stirring and melodious voice.

Considerations for Future Study

As I made my way through my work with these women, the repeated sameness of the women’s concerns resonated across Canada. This resonance has given me the courage and confidence to say that there are some definite ways that our universities can improve how they welcome, or do not welcome, late-entry students. One of those ways might be to take heed of narrative inquiries, like mine, that opt to give voice to this rather invisible group of muted students–late-entry women. How can universities better accommodate students who have, as Sandy put it, Big Lives? Rather than seeing this fact of life as a hindrance, these Big Lives, perhaps we should be re-examining the notion of ‘What does a doctoral student look like?’ Maybe we should be saying instead, ‘What can a doctoral student look like?’ The varied life backgrounds that these women bring to doctoral study most certainly inform them on their journey through academia. Furthermore, their diverse upbringings and their work past and family experiences that they bring with them add to the texture of their stories and most definitely enhance their experiences of life as a student, as well as
the lives of their fellow students. While the women shared so many thoughts and feelings on the same issues, not one had the same story. However, the themes of solitude, loneliness and guilt ran through many of their experiences as university students later in life. Surely, attention to this reality by the university for the late-entry women might help them to feel more a part of the university community, as well as help them to stay on track through the rigorous course of study that the doctoral program naturally is.

The common complaints about bureaucratic issues like the lack of funding for mature students must also be addressed at some level. Mature women have very different financial needs from their younger peers. They might own a home or have savings, and as such are assumed to be well off. However, a return to study most usually involves some financial sacrifice. This was an issue that came up regularly. From my involvement with the 39 women, I felt that there must be some sensitisation to the varied financial needs of the mature student.

As both a parent and a teacher, I was impressed by how much our early lives can and does affect how we see ourselves later in life – how we approach our studies and what lingers, long after our parents have passed on. And so, it was a poignant experience for me to see how the women felt they had, not only affected their children, but how they felt they had been affected by their own parents and in some cases their grandparents. Perhaps, as educators, we need to help each other honor those family memories; so that we recognise that we indeed do grow and learn from our ancestors. In doing so, we can be mindful of how we can and will touch the future. Young men and women should understand that we have so much to learn from studying how attitudes evolve and the part that they can play in the development of a fair world, both in and out of the classroom. I offer as an example from my work, how we respond to others who express a desire to return to university, for I feel it speaks to how we honor and respect others who might be a little different from the norm.
I wonder, how many in university realise that the advisor/student relationship is pivotal for the late-entry woman? Listening to the women detail their struggles, I could see that in many cases that relationship was the primary university connection for the women, as they tried to juggle work, studies, finances and family. An awareness of and sensitivity to this reality is essential for advisors when they are dealing with late-entry women.

As many of the women expressed that they found support and friendship from each other, I considered the question, what can others learn from the way that they seemed to bolster each other? Indeed, as a novice researcher, I was heartened from the very beginning of my data collection. I encountered interested and supportive participants all the way through this research. The women willingly shared their stories and responded enthusiastically to any requests for clarification or appeals for images to go along with the stories they shared with me. All seemed to trust that through sharing their stories, they would be in some way helping others, including me, to bring clarity and thoughtful understanding of their particular journeys. As I advanced in my research, I often sensed loneliness among many of the women. Along with their loneliness, there was gratitude that someone was reaching out to tell their stories.

The participants were well aware of the wealth of knowledge and life experience that they brought to graduate study. While they were mindful that there might not be an academic career in their futures, and it was unlikely that they would recoup their financial investment, they were steadfast in their belief that they had a contribution to make to the state of knowledge. Yvette, a doctoral student in nursing, put it quite simply, “This PhD journey is a considerable investment of time, resources and of self. I can’t think of another person more deserving of my time and energy.” I had to agree.


Towards Developing a Community of Late-Entry Academics

A critical outcome of my study was the realisation of how important it is for women to have a supportive community of other women scholars with whom they could connect. So many of the women felt isolated and welcomed the opportunity to talk about their challenges on the doctoral journey with me. It was with this in mind that I developed a website called *Echoes of Late-Entry Women in Academia* ([http://marycullinan.wix.com/echoes-of-late-entry](http://marycullinan.wix.com/echoes-of-late-entry)). It is my hope that the conversations will continue and perhaps, through them, provide some much-needed support for late-entry women in academia. The compelling words and evocative images from the women combine to reveal narratives that are enlightening and helpful to understanding the late-entry women’s journey through academia. I have just begun to share the website with the women in my study, and I have received so many encouraging comments. For example, one of my participants wrote to me to say that inspired by my study, she was going to be approaching the ethics committee at her university to apply to look at the journey of doctoral students in her program there. Another woman contacted me to tell me that she felt that hearing about the stories of other women as represented on the website was validating. This comment was from a woman who completed her degree several years ago. It seems that even once we have reached that pinnacle, we still need encouragement. In the words of another recent graduate:

*It’s true, we have been treading water for many years, and often times against a current. Incredibly enough, individuals who have played a crucial part in our lives, like fathers and siblings were the current. Maybe that is why we succeed so well today, we are determined individuals. I have just graduated. My defence was in February. Amazingly the university was open – so many snowstorms in February. The university was closed the day prior to my defense, then closed again for another two days following my defense – second storm lasted a couple of days. I thought it was fitting!*
Yet another woman wrote, “Your site has implications for further conversations on reflexivity and researcher identity...I see many possibilities.” I, too, see many possibilities. I hope that through this site I will be able to join together not only the women who seek a community of other late-entry women, I also hope we will be heard by those whose policies within the university might affect our futures.

**Final Reflections**

I recognise that there are many marginalised groups that should be given a voice, late-entry women being just one of many. Indigenous women are vastly underrepresented in our universities. As I made my way through my studies I met only one man who was older than me who was completing his doctorate. These are two groups, late-entry men and Indigenous women that deserve to be studied and courted as possible students in our universities.

As a late-entry woman myself, I began this inquiry with many questions. I was looking for other late-entry women who would be interested in sharing their reasons for return to study at a later stage in life. In doing so, I thought that perhaps their stories, along with mine, might encourage other women to find the confidence to follow in our paths. Initially I was inspired to do so because of the absence of older women in the program I had enrolled in at McGill University in 2010. I was curious to know, where were the mature students? What about women older than I was? At 53, I felt that there were surely lots of women older than me who had much to offer the university, as well as much to gain on a personal level, from a return to study later in life. I reasoned that older students had years of lived experience, and this lived experience would surely add an interesting dimension to their studies and to the educational experience of the other students with whom they would be studying. Having taught for many years, as well as having stayed home with four daughters for eleven years, I felt that I was, in fact, an ideal student. I had years of experiences and reflections that had grown from my daily life of engaging with children, both in and out of the classroom. I had a strong
and loving relationship with my husband of almost thirty years and understood what commitment to something that I truly cared about looked and felt like. Like so much that I had worked at in my life, I knew the doctorate would involve hard work and commitment. I was anxious to begin a new journey in academia. I knew that it would require tenacity and a belief in self. As our children were grown and leaving home, I felt the time had come for me to contemplate what I had learned and perhaps see what would come of putting my energies into something outside of my teaching life and my family life. Yet, I was not certain what I would actually study. As I began to focus on the subject of late-entry women, I doubted myself at almost every turn. Could I actually inform others and myself while studying a question that was so close to my own heart? Would that be valid research? One day I wondered aloud to one of my professors. Would this question be important enough? Would it be PhD worthy? She looked at me and with great seriousness replied, “Mary, if it is important to you, then it is important.” At that moment I understood what they had been saying over and over in class and in any article that I had picked up (I had picked up many) or any blog I perused about PhD work. You had to care deeply about a subject to make it your life’s work for five or six years. I knew that I did care deeply about the question of late-entry women in academia and I set to work forming my questions.

As time went on, I saw that the more I was able to situate myself in my research and find myself identifying with my participants, the more honest my research became. The themes of solitude and loneliness, as well as growing self-confidence surfaced regularly as I interviewed women. The themes were close to my heart as they were often the very feelings that had preoccupied me as I was making my way through the doctorate. Locating these women’s voices at the doctoral level of study across Canada has been a voyage of discovery and of making new friends and feeling less alone on this journey. It has also been a way for me to find my own voice. It was a validation
of sorts that so many others shared all these emotions I felt. I worked with women, like me, and women very different from me, yet we all shared something in common: a burning desire to return to school and find answers to questions we had developing inside of us over the course of our lives. Combine this fact with the endless questions from others, and sometimes ourselves, about why we would possibly be interested in formal education at this stage in our lives. My conversations with these women helped to keep me afloat. Their compelling answers to my questions would help me stay the sometimes-painstaking course that has become my doctoral study years. To situate more concisely my position at that time, here is an excerpt from a journal entry that I wrote at the beginning of my second year of doctoral study:

*Over the course of the last year, I have had a chance to look back over my life and reflect on how my upbringing and the choices I have made throughout my life make me into the person (daughter, wife, mother, teacher, learner, sister, friend) that I am. I guess that is the one impression that I was left with at the end of my first year of study – how our experiences of the world affect our interpretations and colour our views and how we evolve through our experiences and the people we meet along the way. I hope through my studies, I can help people, whether they are children or adults understand each other’s world a little better.*

(Journal entry, September 30, 2011)

Now at the end of my fifth year of study, I still have the same questions and desires. Fortunately, I feel that I also have some answers. The process of inviting women to tell their stories has been one of helping me to get to know myself better. As I laughed and sympathised along with women I barely knew, it seemed that their voices were rising together to paint a rich and fertile picture of, in some instances, loneliness and solitude, tenacity and strength, amazing good humour and above all, emerging self-confidence.
As I embarked on my studies, I wondered if I would find women who shared my vision that there could and should be a place for them in academia. How did they negotiate the realm of student life? How did they weather the challenges of graduate student life? Did they feel that the university was a welcoming place for a mature student? I wondered how they managed to cultivate the inner strength and belief in themselves to persevere with their studies, despite the fact that many had dismissive remarks made to them about their efforts along the way? I found a whole community of strong, eloquent and caring women, who, like me, knew that they had so much to offer the ‘state of knowledge’ and were not afraid to put themselves forward. I trust that through sharing these voices, these stories, I will be making a place for these women and others to come, to feel comfortable and to say, “I belong, wherever I choose to be.”

My study has provided an important outlet for 39 late-entry women to express themselves on the subject of returning to school to pursue a doctorate later in life. This research, this reaching out to others, has also helped me to appreciate the importance of my work, and helped sustain me as I have made my own way on this PhD journey. Along the way I have wrestled with the demands of my busy life, all the while trying to answer that question, why return to doctoral study at this point in my life? This research has been for me one of constant reflection. What in my life as a daughter, wife, mother, teacher, learner, sister and friend has prepared me for this ultimate academic challenge? What hasn’t? As I move ahead, I want to say I have learned much that is, I would say peripheral to the study. Being a neophyte when it comes to technology, I learned what I would almost say was another language. I learned what so many young people knew before I really understood, I can make friends in other parts of the country through the wonders of technology. I’ve made connections with so many like-minded women, even though chances are I will never actually meet many of them in person. I carry their thoughts and how they inspired me and I remind
myself of the power of friendship among women that I learned many years ago from my own mother and her group of girls who gathered together once a month for tea. Connecting with the women in the bitter cold winter of 2014 warmed my mind and fed my intellect. I had the luxurious task of thinking ‘long thoughts’ as Stephanie said, quoting Ouspensky (as cited in Shulman, 1995, p. 54). Until I embarked on the PhD, my life was mostly focused outward; it seemed, on relationships and my career. The PhD gave me important time for not only self-reflection, but also, time for listening to others express themselves and taking those stories and endeavouring to, in the words of another participant, Eve, “spin the words into some useful knowledge.” Nora encouraged me as I began my writing saying, “May you find the gems you need.” I like to think I have found those gems and some useful knowledge. In a way, as I searched for meaning in my data, my own ability to articulate and give form to the women’s narratives almost took on a life of its own. I take immense pride in sharing these stories. While I most certainly don’t own these stories, these words, I can’t help wondering, had I not embarked on collecting these narratives, where would they be? Would these utterances, these wishes, concerns, these experiences, these tales of intimidation as well as inspiration go untold, but in the minds of the women whose stories I share with you? Where would I be? Now that is a question...

It is my hope that this dissertation will relieve some of the sting that women experience when they enter the academy. As I celebrate the stories of these women, I have come to a sense of knowing, a sense that I can tell a story, a good one, that is textured and layered. I can lay claim to knowing, a rather difficult claim for me to make. These are the stories of 39 women. I am in there and it is with gratitude to the other thirty-eight that I am comfortable making the claim of knowing something. As I have moved in and out of the stories of these articulate women, I have begun to answer these important questions that Laurel Richardson (1997) poses: “How do we put ourselves in our own texts, and with what consequences? How do we nurture our own individuality and at
the same time lay claim to “knowing” something? These are both philosophically and practically
difficult problems” (p. 88). It was, in fact, during the writing process that I can say I learned the
most: making connections, revisiting conversations and reflecting on the difference I felt I made in
the lives of the women whose stories are shared here, that I truly began to lay claim to the statement
that, indeed, I ‘know’ something. I finish with another journal entry, from before I was certain of my
research question:

> How important it would be if I could work on something that would help our own four daughters gain
> an understanding of their place and their possibilities — which I believe are limitless! How might they see
> themselves as people who can improve our knowledge of what we can do to contribute to our understanding
> of women’s lives? (Journal entry, September 30, 2011)

I believe I have been writing the answers to these questions all along. It is my wish that our
daughters will build on them as they move through life, in or out of the university.


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