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PERSONAL NARRATIVES AND FEMALE
PSYCHOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENT: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

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Abstract

An overrepresentation of male participants in traditional psychological research reflects a gendered perspective in theories of development (Gilligan, 1982). In these theories, maturity is primarily defined by themes of independence and autonomy and women are generally labeled as immature due to their attention to relationships and empathy. Carol Gilligan's research on female psychology discovered the "connected voice" of relationships that speaks throughout the process of development. Gilligan's 1982 book recognized six themes through which this "connected voice" emerged to shape female psychological development: *Responsibilities, Description of Self, Crisis, Motivation, Competition, and Maturity*. This qualitative and exploratory study used personal narratives centered on these six themes to understand the process of psychological development among female college students. Analysis of the interviews found support for the framework developed by Gilligan as well as identified additional findings that expand her work. The three additional themes that emerged among participants were: *Reference to Personal Experiences in Professional Work, a Contextual Orientation, and Awareness of the Self and Others*. Implications for the results of this study are presented.

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Chapter 1

Theories of Psychological Development

Psychologist Erik Erikson described the process of identity development as eight progressive stages of socialization (Dellas & Gaier, 1975). Each stage involved conflict between two opposing demands and an individual's advancement to the next stage was based on resolution of the conflict using the skills obtained in previous stages. For example, in the fifth stage, identity vs. role confusion, individuals required the cognitive and memory abilities gained in stage four to achieve the level of self-awareness necessary to develop a mature identity (Dellas & Gaier, 1975). According to Erikson, a mature adult identity emerged from four factors: earlier childhood identities, biological drive, innate personality characteristics, and the opportunities presented through social and work life. Interpersonal development and intimacy with others were separated from these factors and appeared in Erickson's theory after identity development was to be completed (Dellas & Gaier, 1975). His conceptualization of an individual's mature identity was one of independence and autonomy.

Other male psychologists shared this view. Freud described psychological development through the psychosexual experience of the Oedipus complex, or castration anxiety (Gilligan, 1982 p. 6). Within this framework, women were still attached to their mothers and, as a result of this interdependence, lacked men's sense of certainty, of right and wrong (p. 7). Jean Piaget traced development through children's play and games. He observed girls using exceptions and lengthy reconciliations in the rules of their games and concluded that their psychological development was much less mature than that of boys who remained steadfast and consistent in their rules of play (p. 10). Lawrence

Kohlberg also observed children's play and emphasized the developmental importance of resolving disputes, a process much less common to girls' games such as "jump rope and hopscotch" (p. 10). These theoretical frameworks viewed the female focus on relationships and strong emotional attachment to others as immature and problematic for healthy and mature psychological development (Gilligan, 1982).

In contrast to the autonomous focus of these traditional views, a sense of self does not solely develop from the individual and her/his larger environment for many women, as well as men, in contemporary society. In an increasingly fast-paced, dynamic, and complex global culture, relationships with others can provide a perspective for how many adults see themselves and their world (Konstam, 2007). According to researcher Carol Gilligan, this function of personal relationships has held especially true for women. This orientation towards other people may emerge from the early bond between mother and child; a bond that continues and is strengthened through a mother's attachment and identification with her daughter, rather than the gradual separation and differentiation between a young boy and his mother (Gilligan, 1982). Through her relationship with her mother, a young girl learns sex roles and other early identity roles (Dellas & Gaier, 1975). Thus, a woman's first process of learning and development occurs within the context of a personal relationship.

Carol Gilligan and Female Development

In her book *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*, Gilligan (1982) eschewed the traditional theories to explore how development occurs for women. Through her research and interviews with women, Gilligan described a different understanding of maturity. Maturity in the context of

relationships is different from that of independent, autonomous individuals. In this view of relationships and interconnection, communication serves as the primary mode of conflict resolution and decisions depend on the situation and the individuals involved, rather than strictly defined rules.

Of course there are consequences to this view. With the importance placed on relationships with others, for example, comes a fear associated with separation and competition (Gilligan, 1982). Interestingly, the opposite belief is found in many men who fear connections with others as the perceived loss of their individuality (Gilligan, 1982). Freud did not hide his own fears when he wrote, “we are never so defenseless against suffering as when we love” (Gilligan, 1982, p. 47). Though both fears can impact our behavior, this fear of separation for many women also entails a fear of success in our culture where success and independence often go hand in hand. As a result, many psychologists today still label development as incomplete, or even failed, when the process stops short of achieving personal autonomy (Gilligan, 1982). Gilligan proposed, however, that this female fear of “success” provides an intriguing insight into our culture. What are the consequences of equating success with individuality, why must someone “lose” in order for another to “win”?

This different voice of development carries other unique challenges for women. A fear of separation often leads to a priority of acceptance by others (Gilligan, 1982). Relationships that are reduced to this form of dependence severely limit open expression and can certainly impede psychological development. Suppression, however, is not the only outcome of interpersonal dependence. Nel Noddings’ research views care giving as the embodiment of the “original condition,” in that every person is born, as an infant,

completely dependent on others (Berman, 2004). This memory of being cared for, generally by the mother, forms the basis for psychological development through our human understanding of morals and ideals (Bergman, 2004). Consequently, a crucial step in women's path to full identity development requires re-defining, not ending, one's role in relationships. For many women, however, the idea of negotiating in relationships is often seen as "selfish." According to Gilligan, many women fail to include their own needs in their dedication to care giving in relationships because the idealization of femininity adamantly shuns selfishness (1982). The transition from a quest for constant giving and idealized goodness to a healthy and balanced relationship requires an honest evaluation of the self and one's own identity. One of the leaders in early women's rights, Elizabeth Cady Stanton recognized the female tendency to stray from such inclusion and right to personal growth. She was quoted, "put it down in capital letters: SELF-DEVELOPMENT IS A HIGHER DUTY THAN SELF-SACRIFICE" (p. 129).

Women do not need to choose between caring for themselves and others. In addition to caring for the self, healthy female psychological development can certainly include the actions of care giving for others. Care giving is given and received in a balanced relationship (Bergman, 2004). In her expansion on Gilligans' theory of female identity, Noddings' described how the act of care giving can positively impact both the giver and the receiver's sense of themselves (Bergman, 2004). This is seen through the caregivers' sense of his/herself as a caring person as well as an increased sense of worth and safety for the person receiving care (Bergman, 2004). With honest awareness of one's own needs and the needs of others, a dynamic network can be established and relationships can include both the self and others in a balanced system of interconnection.

Gilligan (1982) also described the way in which women's views of relationships impact their approaches to choices and making decisions. Within the world of relationships and attachment, each decision carries a consequence. Decisions are seen as exerting a direct affect on other individuals. These perceived links contrast with the traditionally male view of a moral hierarchy where decisions are made based on what is *right* although, for many men, what is right is equated largely with their own needs and not those of others. In contrast, a female view includes both sides of an argument. Women's knowledge of the consequences of an action and awareness of the affects of each decision can allow for perception of what men see as details. Women's understanding of people and events is vast in comparison to a black and white moral hierarchy. Life is viewed as a broad spectrum stretching beyond right and wrong, good and bad. Though the response *it depends* does not hold much sway in a traditional courtroom debate, consideration for all sides of an issue is the embodiment of empathy. When this is seen as a failure, rather than strength, however, the skill remains underutilized, and women may even attempt to stifle their contextual view (Gilligan).

What can provoke a transition to this mature view of the self and relationships? According to Gilligan (1982), the shift to further growth and development often arises from experience of a conflict or crisis. A crisis is an event that can lead to growth when it presents an opportunity to confront factors that hinder further development. For women, when the idealized image of selflessness and unbalanced care giving feels empty and unfulfilling, then a new understanding emerges. A common example for many women is the loss of a close relationship. Faced head-on with feelings of loneliness and separation, women discover not only the importance of attachment, but also the gifts of

an inclusive relationship. A mature relationship that encompasses the needs of both individuals allows for both personal growth and care giving at its fullest potential (Gilligan).

In her own research, Gilligan (1982) incorporated the process of sharing experiences with others. Her work included extensive narratives from interviews as she demonstrated how women's personal stories can combine and grow into a new theory of development that hears the female voice. Gilligan identified a "connected voice" when listening to women describe their feelings of connection when thinking about abortion (Gilligan, 2003). As her work continued to reflect this connected voice, she found many young women who associated care only with selflessness and lost their voice in relationships. With the eventual loss of the relationship, women developed paralyzing "inner feelings of sadness and isolation" (Gilligan, 2003). With knowledge of this despair as motivation, Gilligan developed a call to action for listening to their stories.

Chapter 2

Personal Narratives

Gilligan acknowledged the dangers of changing our framework for understanding psychological development. She voiced these fears in a paper titled *Hearing the Difference*, where she wrote "the desire for relationships may jeopardize relationships; the desire to speak will heighten vulnerability and lead to psychological harm" (2003). Nonetheless, she argued, the connected voice must be heard and it will sound "contextual and narrative rather than formal and abstract" (Gilligan, 1982, p. 7). This mode of thinking requires a more qualitative framework for listening and understanding. A

growing method of research in psychology, personal narratives provide a different framework for outlining psychological development (Singer, 2004).

Personal narratives contain this connected voice. A sampling of researchers found the balance between autonomy and relationship to be an underlying theme in interviews (Singer, 2004). Personal narratives also recognize humans as social beings who tell stories of their life experiences, both internally and to others (Singer, 2004). With the connected voice, women often recount past events and collaborate on plans for the future. These stories of a pull towards relationships and the push towards autonomy is one force that motivates psychological development towards maturity and differs from other theories' motivating forces, such as Erickson's conflicts or Freud's sexuality.

According to Pasupathi and Hoyt (2009), the process of sharing a story is the first step in the development of a narrative identity. Narrative identity emerges from personal narratives as people construct meaning from their past experiences and emerge with a unique interpretation of the events and interactions that define themselves, others, and the world.

The quality of these conversations is important to developing narrative identity. Pasupathi and Hoyt (2009) note that studies on the development of narrative identity have examined characteristics in storytelling among same-gender friends in young adulthood. Results demonstrated the benefits to open-ended conversations, including a much greater amount of information shared overall. More responsive and agreeable listeners encouraged greater detail and further analysis by storytellers. When listeners appeared distracted or unresponsive, storytellers actually withheld factual information. Because factual information is critical to remembering and understanding, storytellers lacking an

attentive, responsive listener were unable to engage in the personal evaluation necessary for healthy and mature identity development (Pasupathi & Hoyt).

Personal Experiences with Mentoring

Research on personal narratives demonstrates the criticality of open communication for psychological development. My own work as a mentor motivated my research to combine Gilligan's call to listen for the connected voice with the opportunity to explore identity development through personal narratives. As a volunteer at a local group home, I spent over a year and a half listening and talking with adolescent girls. Up to seven girls live together with staff members and volunteers at this residential setting. The girls are viewed as at-risk because of past experiences including infringement with the law, physical and sexual abuse, and mental health problems. The girls shared with me their hopes and plans for the future, the hurt and pain from their pasts, and the daily ups and downs at school, home, and in between. Sometimes their stories frustrated me. I wanted them to go to college and not to pick up a double shift at the pizza place. Sometimes their stories scared me and I dreamed nightmares with scenes of violent abuse.

From this experience, however, I learned the positive impact that comes from simple communication. Although I wished I knew the expert advice or right words to calm their nerves, soothe their anger, and relieve their pain, I knew I could always be there to encourage their voices and honest expression. From our conversations, I discovered our surprising similarities. In the kitchen preparing dinner, on the back deck dancing to a boombox, and along our winding walks around the neighborhood, the girls

shared not just the traumatic events of their pasts, but also the note they wrote to a cute boy in gym class and what they wanted to do after high school.

Our conversations reflected the way in which we viewed both our relationships and ourselves. They took a familiar tone that reminded me of what I shared with my own best friends in high school when I rode the rollercoaster of first loves and angst about my future. As it turns out, much of my own story was not so different from theirs. My time at the group home raised my attention to the way in which conversations can promote understanding of personal experiences. I was interested in how this understanding of the past could transition into lessons learned for the future.

Research in narrative identity demonstrates the effect of the differences between adolescents and young adults' social and cognitive abilities. Adolescents were found to emphasize the "factual or procedural knowledge" gained from past experiences (Singer, 2004). In comparison, young adults integrated their experiences with broader understandings of themselves and the world, developing a "life story schema" (Singer, 2004). Gilligan described the connected voice as one that includes components of both adolescent and young adult narratives with reference to specific contextual factors as well as awareness of personal experiences. Based on my interest in the connected voice and personal narratives, I wanted to explore the process of psychological development in young women who had just emerged from adolescence. I was interested in the way in which these life stories might differ among individuals and the ways in which their stories might reflect the process of development as understood through Gilligan's framework.

Chapter 3

The Exploratory Study

The current study calls attention to the conversations of our lives and how they function as a process of psychological development for today's young women.

Conversation and storytelling through personal narratives may come naturally to many women and girls, but this form of self-expression did not always find its way into the traditional research on developmental psychology. This study continued Gilligan's research on the connected voice by using personal narratives, shared through open-ended interviews, to explore the way in which young women view themselves in today's world.

Participants

Eleven individuals participated in this study. All of the participants self-identified as female, attended The Pennsylvania State University, and were at least 18 years of age. Three were enrolled as first-year students in graduate programs, while the other eight were undergraduate students. Because this was an exploratory study, no other demographic data was collected in order to retain focus on the variable of gender. Gender and age of participants reflected my interest in Gilligan's work with women and research on the effects of age differences in developing identity through personal narratives.

Procedures

A recruitment email was sent to staff members representing three University-recognized student organizations (The Center for Women Students; The Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Ally Student Resource Center; The Schreyer Honors

College). These three organizations were chosen to elicit a purposive sample (intentional selection of respondents with different perspectives) of female students. Each organization's website provided contact information for staff members. Convenience sampling was then used to identify the participants.

Individuals participated in one-to-one interviews, using a semi-structured interview guide. Interview lengths ranged from 8 to 24 minutes, with an average duration of 16 minutes, and were audio recorded. Major themes in Carol Gilligan's book, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*, formed the basis for the six questions in the interview guide. Sample questions included: "How would you describe yourself?" and "Are there any experiences during adolescence and early adulthood that you would identify as a crisis?" Each participant received a \$5 gift card in appreciation for her involvement.

Data Analysis

Interview recordings were transcribed by the lead researcher and then the data was examined using The Listening Guide developed by Carol Gilligan. The Listening Guide process involved three steps, or readings of the transcripts to listen for the different voices within an individual (Brown & Gilligan, 1992). The first step identified the ways in which personal views might influence interpretation of the narrative in a short paragraph of the reader's initial response towards the participant's words (Doucet & Mauthner, 2008). The second step focused on how the participant spoke about herself by highlighting active "I" statements (Doucet, 2008). The third step focused on conflicting, or contrapuntal, voices within the narrative (Brown & Gilligan, 1992). More specifically, this study analyzed data for the three conflicting voices of (a) separate versus a connected

self, (b) conviction versus hesitation, and (c) action on behalf of self versus others. These three foci were selected in order to compare this study's data to Carol Gilligan's findings on females' attention to relationships in their personal identity development.

Chapter 4

Findings

Comparison to Gilligan's Themes

The semi-structured interviews constituted a representation of psychological development in today's young women, as demonstrated through participants' responses to Carol Gilligan's six themes: (a) *Responsibilities*, (b) *Description of Self*, (c) *Crisis*, (d) *Motivation*, (e) *Competition*, and (f) *Maturity*. Quotes from the interviews are used to illustrate the findings.

Responsibilities. This theme refers to Gilligan's 1982 model of psychological development for women as based on understanding conflicting responsibilities to others, rather than traditional developmental models that place emphasis on identifying distinct rights. Examples of these conflicting responsibilities for women include care giving and empathy for others while maintaining attachment among the celebration of separation, autonomy, individuation, and natural rights in our society.

In response to the interview question "*What do you view as your current responsibilities as a college student?*," participants described both responsibilities to themselves and responsibilities to others. These multiple responsibilities were not described as conflicting and were spoken with much more of a voice of conviction rather than hesitation, as compared to the voice of hesitation in other responses. One participant

said, “I have a responsibility to do well in school. I think of it as a full-time job for me, being a student. And I have a responsibility to my family and friends.” In comparison, she responded to later questions with phrases indicative of hesitation, such as “I would...” and “I like to think...”

Within the variety of different responsibilities mentioned by participants, responsibilities towards others were often mentioned initially, before describing those directed towards the self. This is seen in three participants’ responses: “I feel that...we’re also here to teach other people, because knowledge is to share. I also think having fun is one of the things I’m responsible for”; “I feel responsible for maintaining the relationships I have... My health is a big responsibility”; “I think there’s family... And keep in touch with your friends. And to keep your GPA up.” One participant did, however, describe her responsibilities to herself before listing those directed towards others. She defined responsibilities as “priorities” in saying, “I guess my main priorities are staying ahead in school, being in shape, healthy eating... I think it’s really important to contribute to your community and be an active advocate.”

Description of Self. Gilligan’s 1982 model recognized differences between men and women in the way in which other people defined individuals’ sense of themselves. For men, personal identity depends on separation and individuation, while women do not depend on such autonomy to define themselves. Gilligan believed that the problems in women’s identity, as identified by traditional psychological theories of development, came from the use of increasing separation as one of the markers of childhood and adolescent development. This second interview question, “*Could you describe yourself*

to me?,” explored the way in which relationships played a role in how participants viewed themselves.

A connected voice emerged in 9 out of the 11 responses to this question. This voice referenced both friends and family as demonstrated by the following responses, “I’m really social...I have lots of friends from different international backgrounds” and “Family [is] number one, definitely, I’d die for them.” The connected voice also referred directly to what others have said regarding participants’ self-descriptions. For example one participant began, “I guess I’ll take my descriptions from what people have said” and another stated, “I think others would describe me as...”

The responses to this question also closely related to participants view of their own maturity, which was the last question in the interview. One participant described herself as follows, “...I am a very open-minded, tenacious character... I am pretty fun-loving though kind of particular at times.” Her use of the separate, rather than connected, voice was present again in the interview only in her view of maturity. She responded to this later question regarding her maturity in stating, “...I would define myself as a mature. I think maturity comes with knowing your weaknesses and your strengths.” Another participant described herself as, “I can take control and be the leader. But I prefer to be a follower. So it switches, depending on the people I’m with, depending on the situation I’m in, depending on my comfort level with that situation.” She then defined her maturity as, “I think that I do have a certain level of maturity that’s higher than my age...But there are other portions of me that are extremely immature... Everything is situational for me.” These two responses were primarily shaped by contextual factors, an influence not seen in her responses to other interview questions.

In addition to the link between descriptions of self as sense of maturity, which will be described in more detail below, participants' descriptions of themselves that referred to actions on behalf of others (compared to those on behalf of self) were spoken with a voice of conviction and not hesitation. One participant said, "I'm interested in trying to empower people. A lot of my interests revolve around gender, or around parts of the world that are particularly disadvantaged." In contrast, another participant stated, "I like to have some give in my life to be able to change my mind..." She immediately followed this voice of action on behalf of herself with a clause of hesitation, "which I guess is a good and bad thing."

Crisis. This theme addressed Carol Gilligan's definition of crisis as a transition towards growth that occurs when a new experience does not fit with our earlier understanding of things and a crisis is experienced. The related interview question asked, "*Are there any experiences during your adolescence and young adulthood that you would identify as a crisis?*" For this question, 10 out of the 11 participants described their experience of a crisis with a strong voice of conviction (versus hesitation). Responses included statements like, "It changed my life so much"; "Finding who I was as a person, what my values were, what I like to do, who I was, was a big deal"; "And when I came back I had a completely different attitude towards how things had been"; and "I know that they helped shape who I am."

As defined, narrative identity develops from new understandings of past experiences, similar to Gilligan's view of a crisis experience as a spur to transition towards growth. For each and every participant, responses to this question included detailed reflections on personal experiences and reflections on how these continue to

affect them today. One participant described the rehabilitation process after a nearly fatal car accident and then stated, “I think that’s why I’m so energetic, because I had this experience... You could die at any moment, yeah people know that, but until you really experience it, I don’t think you really understand.” Another response demonstrated this continued influence of a past experience as one participant lived abroad for a full year after high school and noted, “And when I came back I had a completely different view of how things had been, it definitely changed my family dynamics.”

Motivation. Carol Gilligan described women’s psychological development in part as a movement from a concern for achieving idealized goodness in relationships to a search for balanced relationships and personal truth by acknowledging personal values and motivations. Truth requires inner judgment, which in turn requires honestly evaluating self and acknowledging own intentions. The fourth interview question asked, “*What motivates you in college?*” and participants’ responses included both the separate and the connected voice. One participant described her motivation from a past experience that she now refers to as a sense of connection to others, “I had that big thing happen to me, [that] I don’t want to happen to other people. Knowing that people are experiencing the stuff that I experienced is just so painful to me. It really pushes me.” Another participant divided her motivation in two parts: for others and for herself.

Competition. Gilligan (1982) described women’s view of competition as another important difference between male and female psychological development. According to some researchers, women’s anxiety about competitive achievement demonstrated a “perceived conflict between femininity and success” (p. 14). Gilligan, however, valued

women's ability to understand the "other side of competitive success" and to recognize the negative implications when personal success is defined by another's failure (p. 15).

The fifth interview question asked, "*Do you see yourself as a competitive person?*" Participants described competition as negative when others are impacted negatively. Responses included, "I try not to align with competition against other people, because I don't think that's healthy or positive" and "I think competition can be negative because...competition can be driven by jealousy." In contrast to hurting others, participants indicated the possibility of an alternative for competition. As one participant stated, "I think competitions that result in good things... That's good competition. I think it [competition] usually can be positive, as long as people have other goals and have some sort of integrity."

A voice of separate from others also emerged in responses about competition. Competition was often expressed positively when defined as competition directed toward oneself. Two participants described this form of competition, "When I think of competition I think of it as competition for myself, like being better than I was yesterday... I'm incredibly competitive with myself" and "I do not ever want to be average."

Maturity. This theme addressed Gilligan's finding that women define maturity in the context of their relationships. Development into maturity follows a path of inclusion into a growing network of relationships while discovering that separation can be protective and not just isolating (Gilligan, 1982). The last interview question asked, "*Do you see yourself as a mature individual? Are there any specific experiences or situations that demonstrate your maturity?*" Participants used a connected voice as they

described their view of their maturity relative to others. Responses included, “I guess for as old as I am, I’m pretty mature just because I’ve had more life experiences than a lot of other people my age” and “I would say that I’m really mature, at least for my age, because I’m definitely not a typical college student.”

Participants also defined maturity by a sense of awareness of both the self and others. Responses indicating this included, “I think maturity comes with knowing your weaknesses and your strengths; it takes perspective and looking at different peoples’ viewpoints and looking at your own and how you feel, and being able to stand alone” and “One defining thing about maturity is to be able to realize your mistakes and do the right thing, like, correct them.” The separate and the connected voice both emerged as participants’ responses referred to the traditional view of maturity as one of defined by individual actions as well as the relationships included in Gilligan’s model of identity development.

Additional Observations

Within the interview process, many observations emerged. Three of these stood out as components of Gilligan’s six themes as well as representative of the unique responses from individual participants. First was participants’ use of personal experiences as motivation for their future professional work with others. Examples of these personal events included acquiring a traumatic brain injury, “coming out” in one’s sexual orientation, and struggling with a negative body image. Academic and professional efforts that stemmed from these experiences included research on the effects of brain injury in girls, advocacy for Gay, Lesbian, and Transgendered groups, and work with women living abroad.

Second, participants shared a contextual orientation in how they viewed themselves and others. This was seen during the data analysis when a voice of hesitancy emerged as participants transitioned between different experiences and interactions with others. The hesitancy mainly consisted of short, connecting phrases such as “I try” and “I think.” These phrases reflected a sense of contradiction or confusion only when isolated from context of the speaker’s larger response that included multiple themes. For example, one participant’s description of herself included, “I’m social. I like to tell jokes to people, be silly. I think I’m open to lots of different things.” This otherwise straightforward description of herself included a statement that sounded doubtful and uncertain (“I think I’m open”). When recognized in the context of her larger description, however, this phrase serves as a transition between interconnecting components of her larger identity as one that is comprised of a social self as well as an individual personality.

Thirdly, participants demonstrated a very high level of awareness when responding to the interview questions. This awareness was reflected by the uniqueness of each participant’s responses that interwove their relationships and close connections to others with components of their strong individual identities. Participants reflected on each interview question with responses that included voices of a separate and connected self, conviction and hesitation, and actions on behalf of self and others. The variety of structure and emphasis among the participants indicated individualized views of the self even within the consistent theme of an orientation to others.

Chapter 5

Discussion

This study collected personal narratives to explore the process of psychological development and the way in which young women view themselves. Interview questions addressed themes in Gilligan's theory of the connected voice. The findings support Gilligan's theory, however specific components of this study shape the context for discussion of findings.

Eleven participants attending the same University do not reflect an overall representation of today's young women. Future research that examines the perspectives and experiences of college students at multiple institutions is encouraged. Additionally, recruitment and convenience sampling could have an effect on the representativeness of the sample because participants shared some connections through their involvement in University groups. Finally, the semi-structured interview format allowed for some variation in the specific wording and timing in which questions were phrased to participants. These differences may have impacted participants' understanding of the focus or emphasis of certain questions.

Gilligan viewed psychological development in women through six major themes: *Responsibilities, Description of Self, Crisis, Motivation, Competition, and Maturity*. Participants confirmed Gilligan's understanding of women's relationship orientation and how it affects identity development through the connected voice. Beyond Gilligan's six themes, additional observations arose and provided further understanding for the differences in women's psychological development. The connection between past

experiences and future professional work, a contextual view of the behaviors and events, and the high level of awareness of the interactions between the self and others found in this study all carry exciting implications.

Implications for this Study

The findings from this study can be understood as an updated version of Gilligan's framework of the connected voice and identity development in women. The three additional themes that emerged from the interviews can be incorporated with Gilligan's theory and understood as the tones of that voice, uniquely harmonizing with others and ringing clear within us. This study demonstrated the way in which personal narratives can be used to define identity, especially for young women who display a high level of awareness of their past experiences. Through 11 interviews with young women, this project contributed to a greater understanding of the differences in psychological development for men and women. These differences, however, extend beyond building and maintaining relationships in young adulthood and impact the way in which women view themselves, their careers, and other people throughout their lives.

In order to account for the unique tones of voice that emerged within this study, we can support expression of individuals' past experiences, present motivations, and future goals. For some, this expression may come through active mediums such as art, sports, or travel. For others, this understanding may emerge from reading or learning in a classroom. Through open expression we can all increase awareness of ourselves while interacting with others. Combining individual and interpersonal development accounts for the interplay between the separate and connected self and our society will only strengthen as we continue to hear each and every voice.

Our dynamic society continues to grow and change with new understandings of others and ourselves. From economics to education, we have experienced a transition from a generalized and concrete framework for understanding to awareness of the nuances of human thought and emotion and how this impacts actions and behavior. These critical distinctions emphasize the importance of thorough and thoughtful interactions with other people in order to capitalize on the gifts we can each contribute. Every person has a story to share as well as the responsibility to listen. I hope that my work will continue to accurately reflect our unique selves by sharing the stories I collected and inspiring others to listen and share their own.

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Vita of Eliza Zimmerer

EDUCATION

- Schreyer Honors College, The Pennsylvania State University** University Park, PA
Bachelor of Science in Rehabilitation & Human Services, Minor in Psychology 2007-2011
- Senior Honors Thesis: Personal Narratives and Female Psychological Development: An Exploratory Study

EXPERIENCE

- State College Area School District** State College, PA
Intern, Family Outreach Services January 2011-May 2011
- Coordinated youth programming for 25th annual Parenting Conference
 - Initiated interactions with high school students and local human service agencies
 - Created and maintained basic catalogue system for office resources and contact information

- Hunter Advisors, Hedge Fund Executive Search Firm** New York, NY
Intern, Research Department Summer 2010
- Evaluated media sources for information pertinent to clients and candidates
 - Coded candidate resumes and entered records into company database
 - Proposed revisions to candidate questionnaire based on review of literature in management practices

- Cross-Cultural Solutions, International Volunteering** San Carlos, Costa Rica
Intern, National Learning Institute of Costa Rica September 2009-October 2009
- Teaching Assistant in an intermediate level English classroom at a local community college
 - Developed lesson plans to advance student's English language skills
 - Introduced N. American culture and international travel

- Girls Group Home, Centre County Youth Service Bureau** State College, PA
Mentor and Volunteer January 2008-September 2009
- Led girls on afternoon walks and arranged for participation in group exercise classes
 - Prepared fresh after-school snacks and initiated healthy dinner preparation
 - Tutored in academics and assisted with applications for employment and higher education

HONORS and AWARDS

- Featured Essayist for Penn State Public Broadcasting: *This I Believe*** July 2009
Invited to submit essay http://wpsu.org/radio/single_entry/LL-2603/believe
- Essay "What We Have in Common" selected to be broadcast on radio
- Featured in newspaper article: "Helping Neighbors"** July 2009
The Centre Daily Times <http://www.centredaily.com/news/local/story/1382009.html>
- Described my volunteer service at a residential home for adolescent girls
- Volunteer of the Year: Centre County Youth Service Bureau** May 2009
The R. Paul Campbell Award
- Awarded annually to recognize outstanding volunteer service to the youth of Centre County
- Study/Travel Grant to San Carlos, Costa Rica** May 2009
Schreyer Honors College
- \$500 scholarship awarded for international study during academic year
- Academic Excellence Award** 2007-2010
Schreyer Honors College
- \$3,500 scholarship awarded annually