GROWING-UP STORIES:
NARRATIVES OF RURAL AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN

By

ALINE C. GUBRIUM

A DISSERTATION PRESENTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
OF THE UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA

2005
This document is dedicated to my family—you know who you are
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My work is nurtured by my father, Dr. Jaber F. Gubrium, who has been able to keep me going in the pursuit of a Ph.D. over the last five years, through two dissertation projects which never quite got off the ground, to this third, and final, dissertation project which has taken off soaring. I owe my theoretical perspective and deep appreciation of qualitative methods to him. He has inspired not only me, but many of his students, with an appeal to look at interviewing as an active process, in which both participant and researcher shape meaning making. It was from my dad, putting on his “dissertation consultant” hat at any whim of mine, whom I learned to both critically analyze my data and my writing. His ideas and guidance allowed this project to progress much more easily than it might have otherwise.

I want to acknowledge my mother, Suzanne Gubrium, who supported me both emotionally and financially through graduate school. While my dad served as intellectual stalwart during this dissertation process, my mom helped bring this process back down to earth, as she was concerned about what else was going on in my life (although she was also happy to prod on my completion of the dissertation.)

My twin sister, Erika, was especially responsible for getting me “hooked up” with a nice group of people within the College of Education to whom I could relate, qualitatively speaking. She has remained my best friend and emotional doppelganger through my life and I can only hope that despite the distance now between us that she will remain so.
I would like to thank my doctoral committee: my chair, Dr. Brian du Toit, who has steadfastly remained my advisor through the trials and tribulations of this rather long process; Dr. Mirka Koro-Ljungberg, who inspired me both in her rigorous use of qualitative methods and in the mentoring role that she takes in all of her students’ lives, especially in her provision of a qualitative support group for those, like me, who needed a lot of it; Dr. Sharleen Simpson, whose enthusiasm for my research was invaluable; and Dr. James Stansbury, who agreed to serve on my committee at such a late hour in my Ph.D. program, and who happily challenges me with a perspective from the “other side.”

Finally, I would like to thank my family here in Gainesville: Vince, Lupo, and Arlo. I met Vince as my dissertation was “maturing” and I can only thank him immensely for all of the support he has provided, in all realms, to help get me through this process. He has turned into a great cook as a result. Finally, Lupo and Arlo, though merely dogs, have served perhaps a more important role than anyone else in my daily toiling on dissertation chapters. They promoted much needed writing breaks, to pet their little tummies, and provided me with the human-canine banter that allowed me to keep on working in peace, but did not allow me to feel alone.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS ........................................................................................................ iv

TABLE .................................................................................................................................. x

ABSTRACT ................................................................................................................................. xi

CHAPTER

1 INTRODUCTION ........................................................................................................ 1
   Introduction to the Problem ......................................................................................... 1
   Organization of the Dissertation ............................................................................... 4
   Part One: Afrocentric Discourse as Narrative Resource ...................................... 5
   Part Two: American Dream Discourse as Narrative Resource ............................ 8
   Situated Identities and Cultural Worlds .............................................................. 12

2 LITERATURE REVIEW ........................................................................................... 17
   Developmental Perspectives .................................................................................... 17
   Psychoanalytic Approaches .................................................................................... 18
   Cognitive-Development Approaches .................................................................. 24
   Behaviorist Approaches ....................................................................................... 26
   Primary versus Secondary Socialization ............................................................... 27
   Life Span versus Life Course Models .................................................................... 29
   The Life Span Approach ....................................................................................... 29
   Life Course Approaches ...................................................................................... 30
   The Social Construction of the Life Course ........................................................... 33
   Gender Studies Approaches .................................................................................. 37
   Gender Difference as Central ............................................................................... 37
   Questioning Gender's Salience ............................................................................. 45
   Going Beyond Gender ......................................................................................... 50
   Summary .................................................................................................................... 55

3 METHODOLOGY AND METHODS OF PROCEDURE ........................................ 60
   Research Agenda .................................................................................................... 60
   Theoretical Orientation ......................................................................................... 61
   Narrative Approach ............................................................................................... 64
Methods of Procedure........................................................................................................67
   Setting..........................................................................................................................67
   Participants ................................................................................................................68
   The Role of Key Informant........................................................................................69
   Human Subjects Approval .........................................................................................70
   Interview Guide ..........................................................................................................71
   Interview Process .......................................................................................................74
Data Analysis Methods ................................................................................................75
   Discourse Analysis ....................................................................................................75
Limitations of the Study ...............................................................................................82
Summary ......................................................................................................................83

4 BEING SPIRITUAL......................................................................................................86
   “I Don’t Ask God to Move the Mountain, Just Give Me the Strength to Climb It”:
      Luella Mae ..........................................................................................................87
   Spirituality as Adaptive Mechanism .......................................................................97
      “Being Blessed” as an Adaptive Mechanism .....................................................97
      “Learning Patience” as an Adaptive Mechanism ..............................................103
      “Gaining Wisdom” as an Adaptive Mechanism ..............................................108
   Spirituality as a Worldview ......................................................................................110
      “Growing Up in the Church” as Worldview .....................................................110
      “Being Yourself” as Worldview .......................................................................115
      “Doing the Right Thing” as Worldview ..........................................................119
      “Being Part of a Larger Plan” as Worldview .....................................................122
   Situating a “Being Spiritual” Identity through Traditional Structures in the Active
      Construction of Linked Cultural Worlds ..........................................................126
      World Building ....................................................................................................126
      Socioculturally-Situated Identity and Relationship Building ..........................130
      Connection Building .........................................................................................133
Summary ......................................................................................................................134

5 “A [VIRTUOUS] WOMAN…YOU JUST BE A GOOD WOMAN”:
   TRADITIONAL CONSTRUCTIONS OF GENDERED EXPECTATIONS ...........137
   “I Don’t Play That”: Roxanne .............................................................................142
   Older Women as Moral “Rocks” in the Lives of Younger Women .................154
   Women as Caretakers ..............................................................................................161
      “Being Prepared” for Caretaking Roles ..........................................................162
      Other-Mothering Roles .....................................................................................163
      Elder Caretaking Roles .....................................................................................166
      Caretaking Roles in the Workplace ................................................................168
   I Need Someone to Care for Me: Roles of Dependency .....................................170
   Staying Inside and Keeping Quiet: Roles of Decorum ......................................176
   A Role on the Border of Proper Decorum?: “Being a Tomboy” .......................179
   Honor Thy Father: The Double Standard of Gendered Expectations ...............186
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Life Review</td>
<td>297</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identity</td>
<td>298</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Growing Up</td>
<td>298</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF REFERENCES</td>
<td>299</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH</td>
<td>306</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table</td>
<td>page</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A-1</td>
<td>295</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Abstract of Dissertation Presented to the Graduate School of the University of Florida in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

GROWING-UP STORIES: NARRATIVES OF RURAL AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN

By

Aline C. Gubrium

May 2005

Chair: Brian du Toit
Major Department: Anthropology

This dissertation considers how African-American women assemble stories of “growing up” in the rural South. “Growing up” is used as a metaphor for gender socialization, in that the telling of a growing-up story elicits the meaning making of gender socialization experiences. This analysis works against theories of gender socialization that focus on women’s experience through time from a human development perspective, which tends to culturally decontextualize the maturation process.

The perspective taken in this dissertation, in contrast, brings into view respondents’ varied lived experiences and situated realities, realities mediated by race, locality, socio-economic class, family relations, culture, as well as dominant discourses of human development, all of which are used by participants as resources in telling their growing-up stories. Rather than looking at gender socialization as a series of phases (or stages—these two terms are used interchangeably through this dissertation) of development, this research views it as a storied process, in which participants themselves construct who and
what they have become through time, often anchoring their stories to key incidents or
events in their lives. The focus here is on the participants’ growing-up narratives, on the
explanations they provide for their behaviors and decisions over time, reflecting their
constructions of the socio-cultural worlds around them.

In-depth interviews were conducted with 20 rural, African-American women
between the ages of 18 and 60. Through discourse analysis of participant narratives, this
dissertation examines the linkages that participants make in order to assemble various
cultural worlds in which they participate, in order to construct particular identities and
relationships, and in order to make connections between their varied life experiences.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Introduction to the Problem

In 1978, Molly C. Dougherty published her book, *Becoming a Woman in Rural Black Culture*, which has served as a treatise on gender role socialization in the rural south. Dougherty’s book takes a developmental perspective to gender socialization. Developmental perspectives use various thresholds as landmarks of the life course, taking for granted the “objective existence of commonplace entities of the life world that shape experience and age-related transitions, entities such as behavioral contingencies, mastery styles, cognitive orientations, roles, and system needs” (Holstein and Gubrium, 2000, p. 23). In developmental perspectives on socialization, these "objective" entities are accepted as the focus of analysis.

The objective entities of Dougherty’s analysis are the rites of passage she describes for girls in the Edge Crossing community, also located in rural North Central Florida. Dougherty follows Arnold Van Gennep's (1960) model of transitions to express girls’ socialization patterns within this community. Her research looks at the socialization process of girls as they transition through several rites of passage (including separation from childhood, courtship, peer group interaction, pregnancy, and childbirth) in order to effectively prepare for their roles as mothers. Dougherty sets motherhood as the clincher in southern, rural, Black female gender socialization, as an important maturational event that allows girls to become women—as active contributors and regenerators of their communities.
Dougherty’s book takes on the functionalist tone of traditional anthropological ethnographies popular in the 1970s, which objectively describe the various aspects of life in the target community and how these parts function to create a working whole community. She divides her book into three parts; part one is dedicated to the description of structural aspects of the community, including the use of space, the economic system, the educational system, and community rituals. The second part of her book focuses on the kinship system and the descent group system of the community, and how these are linked with childhood socialization. The final section of her book focuses on communal rites of passage in female adolescence—rites of passage associated with a girl becoming a woman.

Dougherty’s seminal work on gender socialization in the Black rural south serves as a developmental link (no pun intended) for this dissertation research on growing up in a rural North Central Florida community called Port Charles. She writes the story of growing up in the rural south (1978), but from an earlier anthropological tradition which relied more heavily on description and generalization at the expense of presenting the participants’ own meaning-making processes. The topic of this dissertation arises out of more recent trends in the social sciences to understanding the meaning behind socio-cultural processes; in this case, that of gender socialization. Particularly when it comes to action-oriented research dealing with the possible prevention or intervention of a range of social problems, social science researchers have come to realize that in order to construct a culturally-sensitive program, one must understand the meanings behind socio-cultural processes that provide a context for the social problem.
This dissertation holds policy implications in that the stories participants assemble may be linked to an array of meanings about their sexuality and perceived gender expectations within their community. With an increase in both HIV and other STDs in rural communities, prevention programmers have begun to take note that their target population’s perceptions of gender and sexuality, in particular how these perceptions are linked with individual behavior and notions of responsibility, are an integral component in the construction of effective prevention programs (Bentley & Nathanson, 2002; Crosby et al., 2002; McCoy & Wasserman, 2001; Stover, 2002; University of California San-Francisco Institute, 1998). These perceptions are embedded in personal narratives, which provide a fruitful basis for understanding and intervention.

Rather than write about socialization from the objective, detached view of the traditional social-scientist ethnographer, this dissertation aims to provide a participant perspective on gender socialization, on the meanings rural, southern, Black women ascribe to growing up, themselves. In particular, I look at how meanings of growing up are linked with the participants’ life experiences and social circumstances. I look at how ordinary people talk about the life course, particularly the images they create through their stories, in order to make sense of their growing-up experiences.

The central research questions of this dissertation are: what life experiences do the participants link to their constructions of growing up, how is the telling of growing-up stories inflected with the situated realities of the participants’ lives, and how are these stories framed by dominant discourses of life course development? Describing the life course is an interpretive process: the purpose of this dissertation is to shift the focus of analysis on socialization from “the objects of experience” to the construction of this
experience; the ways that the participants themselves construct their socialization process through descriptions of growing up.

Throughout this dissertation, I look at the ways that participants use discourses of human development in telling their growing-up stories, while also allowing their everyday experiences to spell out the course of these narratives. A narrative approach takes the situated realities of the participants into account, allowing the participant to tell her own story. Other approaches that take a more traditional perspectives to gender socialization—such as those that look at gender socialization as either an object to be accomplished in human development or those that look at gender socialization from one perspective (i.e., through the monocle of gender roles, class roles, or race roles, etc.)—do not give much voice to the multiple realities of the participants. Traditional perspectives (in the context of this dissertation: Discourses of human development) look at gender socialization as a process that individuals experience in the same, or similar, ways. A narrative approach, taking both participant discourse (or understandings) and larger cultural Discourses into perspective, is important in formulating more nuanced, contextual, understandings of gender socialization, the life course experience, and human development. These understandings may be used in developing more culturally-sensitive policies and prevention programs targeting rural communities.

Organization of the Dissertation

When asked to talk about their growing-up experiences, participants used shared discourses—common narratives—to story their lives. Alasdair MacIntyre (1984) refers to “common stories” in calling for the need to analyze and present case studies when conducting social and political policy interventions: “I can only answer the question ‘What am I to do?’ if I can answer the prior question ‘Of what story or stories do I find
myself a part?” (p. 216). This dissertation is divided into two parts, according to the Discourse, or story model, utilized as resources by participants in framing their growing-up experiences.

**Part One: Afrocentric Discourse as Narrative Resource**

Part one of the dissertation focuses on an Afrocentric Discourse and is referenced in chapters 4 and 5. Within these two chapters, I focus on the situated identities that are constructed in participant narratives relevant to an Afrocentric Discourse in the rural South. Prototypical events, or key incidents, are used in constructing particular cultural models, of what it means to be a “typical Black woman” in this southern rural community. I analyze the cultural models of *being spiritual* and *being a good woman* first by an exemplar story of one participant, then through comparative data with other participant narratives, in order to flesh out these two situated identities used in assembling an Afrocentric Discourse of traditional gender expectations. By looking at exemplar stories of identity construction, I look at how participants construct particular situated identities for themselves which follow the key incidents (also thought of as plotlines, turning points, or themes) of an Afrocentric Discourse.

Norma J. Burgess (1994) defines Afrocentrism as "see[ing] the African American experience as a dimension of African history and culture" (p. 392). She writes that gendered expectations of African-American women tend to derive from this perspective:

Many of the activities and characteristics of Black women in America have their roots in Africa. Leadership in the community and in the home, prominence in the world of work, independence and pride in womanhood are usually pointed to as evidence of the strength of African American women. Individual women [are] expected to 'carry their own burdens,' irrespective of gender...[this] necessitates an understanding for the tradition of female independence and responsibility within the family and wider kin groups in Africa and the tradition of female productivity and leadership in the extradomestic or public domain in African societies. (p. 397).
From an Afrocentric perspective, women have a dual responsibility of being self-
sufficient, strong, and resilient, while also holding responsibilities to one's family and
one's surrounding community.

An Afrocentric perspective also emphasizes the importance of divine realms in the
lives of African Americans, focusing on spirituality and a commitment to common causes
found within the community (Daly et al., 1995). In an Afrocentric Discourse, African-
American success is linked to individual and family resilience: "To varying degrees,
success results from a strong value system that includes belief in self, industrious efforts,
desire and motivation to achieve, religious beliefs, self-respect and respect for others,
responsibility towards one's family and community, and cooperation" (Daly et al., 1995,
p. 242). This Discourse asserts that African Americans hold strong self esteems through
their group identities; notably through their connections with others in kin-related and
religious activities.

Likewise, an African-American ethos rejects the concept of intrinsic evil. Rather,
evil comes about when individuals focus on themselves at the expense of others. Sin
occurs when a dominant group oppresses a group with less power. An African-American
ethos is focused on group justice and affirms group connectedness (Leslie, 1998). From
an Afrocentric perspective, morals reside in principles, not in modes of behavior. In
other words, morals are never divorced from community-based principles and are not
looked at purely through the scope of individual behavior.

Finally, an Afrocentric Discourse acknowledges and values feelings and emotions
as well as rational and logical thinking (Collins, 1993; Daly et al., 1995). In valuing
feelings and emotions, an Afrocentric perspective constructs a form of knowledge that is
based on lived experiences, known as “wisdom.” Prominent Black Feminist theorist, Patricia Hill Collins (1993), writes of two types of knowing within African-American communities: knowledge and wisdom. Wisdom is said to derive from lived experiences and is linked to survival within the Black community. In turn, concrete experiences are used in constructing gendered meanings and expectations. In other words, through a dialogue of experience, “wisdom” is used in shaping participant conceptions of what it means to be a black woman. Knowledge based on wisdom occurs through one’s connection with others and it is expressed communally. Collins (1993) writes of call-and-response systems of knowledge transfer within Black churches as an example of the importance of dialogue in transferring wisdom. She links this dialoguing and connectedness in knowledge transfer with feminine ways of knowing and an ethics of caring (see also Chodorow, 1993 and Gilligan, 1982).

In presenting traditional applications of cultural categories to gender socialization, I am choosing those participant narratives that serve as “exemplars” in “worlding” an Afrocentric Discourse. The analytic concern in this first part lies in using the exemplar cases of being spiritual and being a good woman as prototypes of the southern, rural, African-American woman framed through an Afrocentric Discourse. While the way participants construct themselves as a part of this Discourse is discussed, participant departures from this Discourse are also taken into account. In particular, questions asked include: how fixed or established are these stories for the participants, what types of motives might be attributed to these stories and the characters within these stories, and how do the situated identities of being spiritual and being a good woman intersect with gender role socialization (Emerson, 2004)?
**Part Two: American Dream Discourse as Narrative Resource**

Part two of the dissertation focuses on an American Dream Discourse and is referenced in chapters 6 and 7. This part of the dissertation focuses on participant discourses or conversations used to construct particular socially-situated identities which follow the storyline of another Discourse of human development: the American Dream Discourse (see Gullette, 2003, for more on the American Dream Narrative as life course discourse). The American Dream Discourse may be thought of as a “success story,” in which participants, usually unconsciously, take up a particular storyline in assembling their own identities. It is a cultural model, or a theory or storyline used to explain one’s experiential trajectory, that is oft-referred to by participants in narrating their growing-up stories. The American Dream Discourse asserts a positive development course, based on the capitalist notions of individualism, accomplishment, and what are usually thought of as white, middle-class values. While this Discourse may be seen as oppressive in some theoretical perspectives (i.e., feminist or post-structuralist approaches), it is readily taken up and applied by the participants of this study. However, while the basic storyline of this Discourse may be similar across the U.S., the situated identities within the story are linked to the locally-grounded, situated realities (influenced by socio-economic and cultural contingencies) of the participants.

In particular, this second part looks at situated identities constructed in participant narratives which are relevant to the American Dream Discourse. These situated identities are constructed by participants in contrast to the cultural models thought to be objectively found within the community. The cultural models of *being spoiled* and *being responsible* are first presented through an exemplar story, then through comparative data with other
participant narratives, in order to flesh out several of the situated identities used in assembling the American Dream Discourse.

Gee (1999) makes an analogy of cultural models as being videotapes in our heads, which contain the experiences we have had, heard about, or imagined.

We all have a vast store of these tapes, the edited (and, thus, transformed) records of our experiences in the world or with texts and media. We treat some of these tapes as if they depict prototypical (what we take to be 'normal') people, objects, and events. We conventionally take these prototypical tapes to be the 'real' world, or act as if they were, overlooking many of the complexities in the world in order to get on with the business of social action and interaction (p. 60).

When I went to conduct interviews with participants, a television was often playing loudly in the background. Whether participants were actively watching it or just had it on in the background, I remarked a number of times in my field notes that I needed to ask the participant to “please turn down the TV volume” so that I could get a good recording of her interview. When asked about their daily activities, many of the participants said that they watched “the stories” (soap operas) and daytime talk shows, sometimes linking concepts in the interviews (i.e., talk of promiscuity and “trashiness,” talk of women being nasty to each other, and reflections on being spoiled in their youth) to what was going on in these TV shows. After one interview, I followed a participant into her house, as I was going to buy a plate of home-cooked food that she and her mother were selling to make money for their church. In my field notes for that day I wrote:

We went inside the trailer, which was surprisingly nice inside for how it looked from the outside. Of course, the huge TV was on and One Life to Live was on. I stayed there long enough, waiting for the rice to be done and the pork to be fried, to get to General Hospital, which was the next “story” on TV. Seems like most people watch and know the “stories” on TV. This would make an interesting study in itself, looking at why rural African Americans are so interested in these very white (upper class) soap operas.
As I was transcribing my interview tapes, I began to reflect on just how much participants incorporated aspects of these success stories in assembling their own identities. Gee (1999) writes of people being “colonized” by the success story, in that many cultural models are taken up by people, despite their situated realities (i.e., being poor, rural, Black, women), and applied to themselves and to others as a form of judgment on one’s progress or status in society. Often these models are applied without critical reflection on how much they might serve a person’s own interests or oppress the interest of others. In other words, these cultural models are not just used to reflect experiences. They are also used to project a socially-positioned viewpoint or “standpoint” about what is right and wrong in the world (Gee, 1999).

Participants used “moral fables” or “moral tales” to construct their own success stories and situate themselves within cultural worlds congruent with an American Dream Discourse. Amanda Coffey and Paul Atkinson (1996) write that moral fables are stories used to tell a tale of success or failure. Often they are told as a "collective reminder of what not to do or how not to be" (p. 63). They provide a way of looking at how people frame and make sense of their own experiences. In their analysis of moral tales, Coffey and Atkinson (1996) look at narratives as vignettes, or moral tales, that serve a purpose and which can be analyzed for common themes. In looking at narratives as moral tales, the researcher places emphasis on the judgments that participants make about both themselves and others.

One way of analyzing moral tales is to look at the key incidents which participants link with growing up. Key incidents are in-the-field events that stimulate the researcher’s analysis. Key incidents do not have to be life shattering events to be studied; often they
are the taken-for-granted part of everyday experience (Emerson, 2004, pp. 457-460). One theme that stood out in the analysis of the key incidents was that participants often assembled their situated identities in *contrastive terms*; constructing their own situated identities in contrast to the prototypical cast of characters they cast in the traditional cultural models of their community. When asked to describe their growing up years, participants often spoke of “being different” from other women and girls in their community.

Dorothy E. Smith (2003) applies the term “contrast structure” to describe how an individual contrasts her own behavior with that of another individual, to show that her own behavior is anomalous (or not like everyone else’s around her.) An example of a contrast structure is a participant describing a normative key incident in her community, such as having children at a young age, and subsequently stating that she, herself, had her first child when she was in her late twenties. The participant positions herself with a situated identity that meshes with the American Dream Discourse; distancing herself from the cultural model of “teenaged pregnancy” traditionally found in the Black, rural South (see Dougherty, 1978). Using contrast structures, participants construct themselves as different from other women in the community, while also assembling a moral tale of which they are a part. Within these contrast structures, they define socially-situated identities for themselves which fall in line with an American Dream story.

The analytic concern of the second part of the dissertation lies in using the exemplar cases of *being spoiled* and *being responsible* as prototypes of the successful southern, rural, African-American woman framed through the American Dream Discourse. At the same time, while the way that participants construct themselves as a
part of this Discourse is discussed, the ways in which they may depart from this
Discourse in their conversations of growing up are also taken into account. In
considering these departures, I look at how situated identities of *being spoiled* and *being
responsible* intersect with traditional gender roles.

Essentially, both Afrocentric and American Dream Discourses may be thought of
as moral stories used in guiding participants’ growing-up stories, where knowledge is
discursively produced and shaped by the discursive moment. The crucial difference
between these two Discourses is that an Afrocentric Discourse holds a communal ethic
based on interconnection, while an American Dream Discourse is constructed through a
valuation of individual achievement and based on being different, or standing out, from
the rest of the community.

**Situated Identities and Cultural Worlds**

The chapters of this dissertation refer to the ways that categories or themes of
Black, rural life are dealt with by the participants in relation to growing-up or gender
socialization. Participants situate themselves with particular identity types through the
linkages they make between significant events in their lives and their participation in a
variety of cultural worlds. Each section title for each part begins with a verb (referring to
participants “applying” or “contrasting” traditional categories) so as to flag participants’
active construction of their identities. The section titles reference traditional categories,
in order to highlight the constant categories that all participants are up against when
assembling meanings of growing up. In other words, participants construct their
growing-up stories in the interpretive niche between active construction and constant
themes.
The Discourses taken up by participants in the first and second part of the
dissertation, Afrocentric Discourse and American Dream Discourse, respectively, may be
thought of as cultural scripts that they are following in making meaning of their growing-
up experiences. A narrative approach is useful in understanding participant experiences
from a local, cultural context, in that their growing-up stories tell about whom they are
and shine light upon common cultural explanations, or frameworks, that are used in
making meaning of experience:

Critically, our stories are not and can never be wholly personal. Rather, we
perceive reality in terms of stories, and ultimately how we construct, interpret,
digest and recount for others our own experiences bears a strong relationship to the
story-lines that are already “out there”… The pattern types found in stories, such
as the survivor story, or the I'm different than others story, tell of the kinds of
"selves" being claimed in those stories. Personal narratives often rely on cultural
scripts and discourses. (Andrews et al, 2004, pp. 112-114)

Participants’ narratives could be categorized in a myriad of ways, with chapters
organized chronologically, by significant event highlighted within the narrative, or by
identity type. The choice that I made, in constructing chapters according to identity type,
reflects my analytical concern of conducting research on the ways that identities are
constructed through the foregrounding of particular experiences. Meanings of growing
up are constructed through the linkages that participants make between significant event
experiences and their participation in a variety of cultural worlds.

Participants describe themselves as participating in cultural worlds through two
discursive frameworks (cultural scripts). They assemble growing-up narratives in which
they have participated in cultural worlds congruent with particular situated identities, and
discursively framed through enacted cultural scripts. In chapter 4, participants situate
themselves with “being spiritual” identities. They construct themselves with these
identities through their participation in cultural worlds of “being blessed,” “learning
patience,” and “gaining wisdom.” Participants link these cultural worlds to significant events in their lives through which they have formed an intimate relationship with God as an adaptive or coping mechanism; as a way to deal with the cards that they have been dealt in life, so to speak. Participants also situate themselves with “being spiritual” identities in which they construct their spirituality as a part of their worldview. Through a spiritual worldview perspective, participants assemble cultural worlds of “growing up in the church,” “being able to be themselves,” “doing the right thing,” and “being part of a larger plan.” All of these cultural worlds are framed through an Afrocentric Discourse which highlights inter-communal connection in the Black community and centers God as a father-figure who provides moral strength within the community.

In chapter 5, participants situate themselves with “being a good woman” identities. Participants construct themselves with these identities through cultural worlds in which older women are situated as “rocks” in their lives, through their participation in “worlds of caretaking,” by maintaining both their own self presentation and inter-community relations in “staying inside and keeping quiet,” and by “honoring their fathers.” However, several participants assemble growing-up stories in which they are not able to fully participate in cultural worlds of “being a good woman.” These participants describe themselves as “needing someone to take care of them.” Often, participants who claim themselves to be in need of caretaking are named as mentally ill. Some participants also describe themselves as participating in a cultural world of tomboyism. However, participation in this cultural world is cast as a transition, as “a phase” the participant goes through on the way to becoming a “good woman.” Cultural worlds of “being a good woman” are framed through an Afrocentric Discourse, which holds expectations that
Black women be strong, self-reliant, and self-sacrificing, and serve dual roles as family and community caretaker.

In chapter 6, participants situate themselves with “being spoiled” identities. They construct themselves with these identities through their participation in cultural worlds of “being spoiled materially,” “being all that,” and “being able to do whatever they wanted to do.” Often, these cultural worlds are linked with significant events that revolve around participants’ conception of themselves as only children within their families, and thus as the figurative apple of their family members’ eyes. Participants frame their growing-up experiences through an American Dream Discourse, in which they contrast their own experiences with those of others around them. In claiming themselves as different from the status quo within their rural community, they situate themselves as being able to achieve the American Dream by constructing themselves as actors within success stories centering upon individuality and material accomplishment.

Finally, in chapter 7 we see how participants situate themselves with “being responsible” identities. Identities of responsibility are also framed through an American Dream Discourse, in which participants contrast their own responsible ways with the lack of responsibility or laziness that they perceive to be inherent in other women within their community. Situated identities of responsibility are established by participants through their participation in cultural worlds of “being mature at a young age,” “having respect for themselves,” “not having too many kids or sleeping around,” “doing right,” and “having a strong work ethic.” While “being spoiled” and “being responsible” may appear as contrastive identities, both thrive on individual pursuits of accomplishment and achievement. In situating themselves with these identities, participants accomplish two
goals: they assemble success stories used to construct themselves as attaining the halcyon goals of the American Dream, and in so doing, narratively distance themselves from the rest of the women in their community. These situated identities of difference are telling in that they elucidate participant conceptions of what it means to be a “typical woman” in their community.

All four of these identities, then, are representative of various cultural types that participants speak of in elaborating their stories of growing-up in the rural South. These types may be thought of as a cast of characters of sorts that participants work with in making sense of their own experiences and may also be used in forming understandings about broader gender socialization processes. These characters are enacted by participants according to the various significant events they face in their lives—and are at the center of the way that participants make sense of these meaningful events.

In the following chapter, a review of the literature on various life course perspectives is presented. The perspective on socialization taken up in this dissertation reflects the more participant-as-voiced approaches, while challenging earlier approaches to socialization that set the life course as a series of normative stages of development. At the same time, however, the more conventional approaches are referred to throughout this dissertation, as they are often used as practical resources for talking about the life course and are discursively applied by participants in narratively accomplishing a variety of identities.
CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

I begin this literature review by briefly outlining several familiar, conventional approaches to gender socialization. I continue by reviewing feminist, Black Feminist, and post-structural approaches to the life course and gender socialization, which have brought awareness of the need to include the participant’s voice in one’s research. All of these approaches are treated as resources in participants’ constructions of growing up. The development perspectives reviewed in this chapter include psychoanalytic approaches, cognitive-development approaches, and behaviorist approaches. I will also contrast the notions of primary and secondary socialization, with primary socialization as the central socialization process in development approaches. Finally, life span approaches to development are compared with the more recent life course models of development. Life course models have bridged socialization perspectives into more participant-oriented approaches, including the feminist, Black Feminist, and post-structural approaches.

Developmental Perspectives

In human development perspectives of gender socialization, human behavior is said to be about growth in stages and meeting the challenges of those stages. These perspectives see stages as building one upon another. All of these perspectives view development as occurring in clearly defined stages or periods, in which individuals are concerned with facing challenges or resolving crises. The stages of development are set forth so as to be universally relevant for all individuals. Some perspectives allow that an
individual’s inner-wiring will affect the individual’s abilities to pass through the different stages of life, while others view the society in which the individual lives as heavily influencing one’s progress in development. Most of these developmental theories also focus on the childhood period for development or do not specify post-childhood maturation (Pettit, 1992).

These approaches differ, however, in the degree to which they allow the individual to actively pursue social interaction. Freudian theories see the individual as passive and directed by instinctual drives. Neo-psychoanalytical theories allow the individual greater control in development, but social development is still based on the individual’s innate biological drives. Cognitive-development theories are more interactionist in perspective; the individual is cast as actively seeking environmental input and is transformed by this input. However, the individual is still responding to an inner need to adapt to his/her environment (Pettit, 1992).

**Psychoanalytic Approaches**

Psychoanalytic perspectives on development emphasize the unconscious dimensions of socialization, in which children are internally socialized through psychosexual connections with their parents (Putney and Bengtson, 2002). Psychoanalytic theory focuses on the early childhood years as the decisive years in the formation of personality and interpersonal style. Once an individual’s personality is developed in early childhood, it remains stable throughout life. The pattern of social behavior is learned in childhood and is mostly irreversible.

Sigmund Freud is said to be the “father” of psychoanalytic theories and it is from his work that many of the neo-psychoanalytic approaches have received their inspiration. Freud (1964) writes of an individual’s progress through various psychosexual stages;
stages which are integrally linked with the individual’s progress of development. Each psychosexual stage is associated with a region of the body and is said to be enacted when the individual’s energy is focused upon this body part.

Freud centers his psychosexual stages primarily upon childhood development. During each psychosexual stage, the child faces a conflict of how to expend this energy in a socially appropriate manner. Children may develop fixations if they expend too much energy during a particular stage of development. The psychosexual stages begin with the oral stage of infants, the anal stage at age two, and the phallic stage at age three. During this phallic stage, boys are said to identify with their fathers, as they both possess penises. Due to their noted lack of a penis, girls are only able to seek out the desired attachment to their fathers through the emulation of their mothers’ social roles: roles which are based primarily on emotional attachment. It is during this stage that girls are said by Freud to take on their sex-role identities. Following this crucial stage in development, he conceives of two more rather cursory psychosexual stages of development: the latency stage from ages 6-12 and the genital stage, which takes place from adolescence to old age. As one can see from a review of these stages, Freud constructs the crux of socialization as taking place in early childhood, with the second half of an individual’s life, from adolescence to old age, pushed into one developmental stage.

Freud casts social interests arising due to biological forces, writ-small as expenditures of energy, within a person. The development process occurs from innate tensions produced within an individual when he or she must meet certain social crises, with the individual naturally producing biological coping mechanisms in order to meet
these tensions. It is through these coping mechanisms, in which the individual focuses
his or her energy on a particular area of the body to overcome a social tension, that
development is spurred on.

However, development does not always occur steadily, as some individuals may
not be able to overcome a particular social tension. Consequently, this individual may
develop a fixation, said by Freud (1964) to occur when the individual invests too much
bodily energy striving to cope with this social tension. An over-expenditure of energy
during one stage of development may lead to scarring in later personality development.

Freud's work has been influential because it has "...spurred students of social
development to consider intra-psychic aspects of human social behavior (e.g., anxiety,
conflict, and tension reduction) and to examine childhood experiences for the origins of
adult personality and social style" (Pettit, 1992, pp. 6-7). However, a number of critiques
have been launched against Freud's work. Pettit (1992) writes of a lack of objectivity and
testability in the psychosexual stages of development. Freud did not develop any
theoretical rules in which to predict an individual's development or behavior.

Freud has also been criticized for viewing much of his developmental theory
through an androcentric lens, ignoring the development of girls. A noted exception is in
his phallic stage, in which girls are said to progress through development due to a lack of
a penis (O’Brien, 1992). Freud’s work on gender identity development places
identification with the same-sex parent as the primary mechanism of gender-role
learning, thereby forcing the dualistic notion that girls will develop a gender identity
similar to that of their mothers and boys will develop a gender identity similar to that of
their fathers (O’Brien, 1992).
Furthermore, Freud has been critiqued for constructing too static a human development model. Graham White (1977) critiques Freud’s internalization model of human development for not allowing possible contradictions between the child’s and parent’s needs in socialization, nor between the individual’s needs and societal needs. White takes a more sociological perspective to socialization in suggesting that rather than looking at the individual as being developmentally shaped by internal/biological drives, the individual should be seen as an agent, active in shaping social experience.

Erik Erikson, a neo-psychoanalytical researcher influenced by Freud, takes a more socially-oriented approach to development. However, like Freud, he also constructs the individual as a passive participant in the socialization process. Erikson (1968) theorizes eight stages of psychosocial development, which develop as a result of interpersonal crises emerging at different points in the lifecycle. During the first stage, the infant is in a care-receiving atmosphere. In the second stage, the infant grows into a young child and realizes crises of autonomy. In the third stage, the child expands his/her autonomy and tries to act grown up. Congruent with Freudian theory, Erikson’s third phase states that the child becomes attracted to the opposite-sex parent, in order to gain this parent’s affection. The fourth developmental stage occurs during middle childhood. During this stage the child faces a social crisis centered on expectations of achievement in the learning environment (around teachers and peers). In a subsequent stage of adolescence, the individual faces a crisis between wanting to be mature and wanting to stay in childhood. Social experience is said to be especially important in this stage and a successful social experience creates a strong sense of identity. The remainder of Erikson's stages relate to the various conflicts an individual faces in adulthood. His
stages hold a functionalist appeal in that they are primarily concerned with productivity, setting norms for future generations, and with the ability to look back on a fulfilled life. However, while Erikson’s approach is more socially-focused than is Freud’s, in terms of impetus behind the human development process, it does not allow for much individual choice in the matter. Rather, an individual’s development is spurred on by his/her rote reactions to social experiences. In summary, Erikson’s approach to socialization looks at the development of identity over the entire lifespan, with development linked to the individual’s ability to meet certain life stage crises.

Harry Stack Sullivan (1953) moves one step further toward the social end of the human development spectrum by proposing stages of development in which the nature of one’s relationships with family and peers is a critical factor in both one’s personality development and one’s social abilities. Similar to Freud and Erikson, however, Sullivan allows internal/biological forces to come creeping back into his development perspective when he plants these forces as the root of one’s personality and social style. Where he differs from Freud and Erikson is that he allows for individuals’ varied social interactions to account for variations in these styles.

Sullivan constructs six stages of development, which are quite similar to those of Freud and Erikson. Stage one occurs in infancy, where nursing is seen as the individual’s first social experience. Stage two, in childhood, is where the child acquires language and receives societal proscriptions. In stage three, the juvenile stage, the child moves beyond the bonds of the family to the extra-familial social settings of school and peers, developing social goals and orientations. Sullivan calls stage four “preadolescence,” in which the individual establishes intimate same-sex friendships. Development during this
stage is related to an individual’s ability to follow certain social rules. Stage five occurs in early adolescence, where biological changes trigger an interest in sexuality and heterosexual relationships. Stage six takes place in late adolescence, where individuals become more socially aware and socialized—they begin to realize the societal expectations of establishing families and making contributions to their communities.

As one can see from reviewing Sullivan’s stages, though development occurs through social relations with others, such as parents, teachers, peers, same-sex friends, intimate partners and the community, it is still driven by the biological need within the individual to carry out these social functions. Traditional psychological approaches to socialization focus on the individual’s ability to biologically adapt in order to form social connections and a social identity, with psychoanalytical theorists focusing on the “mental map” of the life course (Settersten, 2002).

There are noted similarities and differences between Erikson’s and Sullivan’s approaches to human development. Erikson has identity formation as the basis for forming socially intimate relationships. For Sullivan, on the other hand, socially intimate relationships are the precursors to the development of identity; the formation of intimate relationships directly impinges upon one's identity development (Pettit, 1992). Erikson and Sullivan's approaches to development are similar, however, in that they both see biological forces as triggering developmental change, while also allowing for social and cultural forces to affect development. While they allow for social relations to play a role in an individual’s development, both theorists emphasize the determining role of the individual mind in processing these social experiences.
Cognitive-Development Approaches

The works of Jean Piaget (1983) and Lawrence Kohlberg (1969) are most often linked with cognitive-development approaches to socialization. Piaget (1983) focuses on the developmental aspects of cognition; early life changes in intelligence are given stages, with movement from one stage of intelligence to another a matter of the individual adapting to his or her environment. Kohlberg’s work is heavily influenced by Piagetian logic, although his development approach expands the individual’s moral development further into the lifespan (Holstein and Gubrium, 2000).

Similar to the psychoanalytic takes on development, Piaget (1983) sees cognitive development as naturally unfolding from a pre-scripted process. The child is shown as developing through a "need" to engage and master the environment through reasoning. The motivation for cognitive development is related to the individual's biologically-based need to engage with the environment. Piaget writes of stages of cognitive development, beginning with the infant who is dependent on immediate sensory perceptions, to the adolescent who is able to conceptualize abstractly and is able to be independent. His development theory is individually focused, with the individual's cognitions as the primary determinants of social behavior. For Piaget, social development follows from cognitive development, which is spurred on through a biological need to engage with the environment. He reduces all learning to this process of cognitive development and is famous for saying: “As for teaching children concepts that they have not already acquired in their spontaneous development, it is completely useless” (Bringuier, 1980).

Piaget influences much of Kohlberg's work on cognitive development, in that Kohlberg (1969) views early gender socialization as occurring from within the self, assuming that development occurs as the child's self-concept changes in relation to the
information he gains about himself from others. The information that the child gathers is
directly related to the roles she takes up in childhood, with the assumption of a
reciprocity developing between the child's actions and the actions of others toward the
child. The main influencing factor in identity development is the individual's self-
knowledge, in which gender is firmly established during early childhood.

Like Piaget, Kohlberg views an individual's cognitive structures as innate at birth,
with cognitive-development following a normative, pre-scripted sequence. Gender
identity is constructed as naturally occurring within the self, with the adoption of gender
roles taking place only after this internally constructed gender identity is formed:
"Kohlberg viewed the adoption of conventional gender roles as occurring after the
acquisition of gender constancy, when a child becomes motivated to value attributes that
are similar to the self and to behave in ways that are consistent with one's own gender-

In her review of cognitive-development approaches to human development, Marion
O'Brien (1992) concurs with these perspectives in writing that children do make a
number of gender-related associations prior to the age in which they can gender label
something. She outlines the gender-role acquisition process throughout childhood,
marking gender-role acquisition by age. The phases of gender role development follow
the normative phases of human development: from birth to age three, the infant acquires
gender-based categories; from ages three through six, these gender roles categories are
elaborated upon and strengthened. Within a cognitive-development perspective, an
individual’s primary gender socialization is said to take place during childhood, with
gender roles developing from this core socialization. Kohlberg’s (1969) approach
focuses particularly on a child’s ability to model his or her own behavior upon the
gender-based categories that he or she learns in early childhood and to seek social
rewards as a result of appropriate modeling. However, a child’s ability to model these
gender categories hinges upon her own self-knowledge. By self-knowledge, Kohlberg
means the child’s knowledge of her own defining characteristics. This self-knowledge
allows the child to imitate those defining characteristics of others that she deems to be
most similar to her own.

**Behaviorist Approaches**

Behaviorists focus on outside stimuli and their influence on resulting behaviors. They see human development as progressing in a linear fashion, in which new behavioral patterns are produced in reaction to new stimuli. These stimuli, or "reinforcement contingencies," affect the life course, promoting certain behaviors. In contrast with psychoanalytic and cognitive-development theories on socialization, behaviorists do not focus on a normative life course or life cycle (Holstein and Gubrium, 2000) because development is a result of a reaction to stimuli and is not set forth from some innate, pre-determined drive. Behavioral approaches emphasize the influence of the external, social world, at the expense of internal, individual, drives (Levinson et al., 1979).

However, behaviorists do agree with psychoanalytic and cognitive-development approaches in seeing the individual as passive in the development process. Rather, the source of change is in reacting to reinforcement contingencies. Albert Bandura’s (1977) work on social learning theory is a well-known behaviorist approach to development. Social learning theory emphasizes that human behavior is learned through instruction, modeling, and imitation of other's behavior (Putney and Bengtson, 2002, p. 168). Bandura (1977) puts forth that gender identity is learned through reinforcers and
punishments provided to children and through observational learning, leading to imitation.

Social learning theorists believe that children learn about gender by participating in sex-typical activities. In contrast with the psychoanalytical approach to development, behaviorists focus on the learning that occurs in early childhood—learning results from frequent contacts with primary socializers (i.e., parents) and learning situations. In other words, development occurs through the individual’s interactions with others in childhood, placing parents (or caretakers) as the prime socializing agents in early childhood. Children are socialized through the rewards and punishments they receive from these primary socializers. Childhood socialization is thought to heavily influence the progression of adult socialization (Putney and Bengtson, 2002).

One critique of the social learning model of socialization is that children may not all respond to reinforcements or punishments in the same way. While reinforcement contingencies may be similar across children, children may hold more agency in response to different punishments or rewards than allowed in the social learning model (O’Brien, 1992).

**Primary versus Secondary Socialization**

Traditional approaches to gender socialization, especially the cognitive-development and behaviorist perspectives, see socialization as occurring within the family setting, concentrating on pre-school children (White, 1977). The family, particularly parents, is constructed as the primary socializing agent of children (Putney and Bengtson, 2002; White, 1977). Secondary socialization is cast as a time when the child is able to carry out the roles learned during primary socialization, and is not so concerned with a development, per se, which is said to have already occurred in
childhood. Human development approaches do not make much reference to adult socialization at all, with the secondary socialization phase mostly associated with the individual’s school environment (White, 1977).

Primary socialization occurs in early childhood and shapes the child's basic personality. It is said to endure through adulthood: "It is during early socialization that the bulk of the unconscious material of the personality is laid down and defense systems develop" (Putney and Bengtson, 2002, p. 182). From a psychoanalytical perspective these defense systems are what spur on the subsequent stages of human development, in which individuals develop in reaction to staged crises. Theorists who do include secondary socialization as a part of development see it as a stage of life in which more specialized roles are developed, geared to the institutional needs of society (Putney and Bengtson, 2002).

Focusing on childhood as the primary years of socialization, Molly Dougherty (1978) constructs primary socialization as the root of a girl’s development in her work on “becoming a woman” in Black, rural, Florida. She applies a sort of social-learning approach to development, stating that "socialization is the interplay of the child and his environment resulting in his learning behaviors acceptable to the group" (p. 59).

Dougherty (1978) reviews the various stages of childhood in the rural community, starting with the progress of development in infancy, and the ways that women in the community react to infants. She foregrounds adult-infant interactions as promoting gender socialization and sexual identification: "Praise and reinforcement of typically male or female behavior is common during the first fifteen months of life and is increasingly evident with the passing of time" (p. 61). Dougherty centers the initiation of
gender socialization upon these adult-infant interactions: female babies are ascribed 
womanly qualities and male babies are imbued with manly qualities by the adults 
interacting with them. Dougherty (1978) provides a social-learning explanation to infant 
development, saying that "[t]he distinctions between expected behaviors of males and 
females begin almost at birth and gain momentum as the baby learns to perfect behaviors 
that are encouraged and rewarded verbally and physically" [italics added] (p. 62). 
Through an ethnographic format, Dougherty brings to life the perspective of 
developmental theorists who specify primary socialization as the basis for gender role 
development.

**Life Span versus Life Course Models**

**The Life Span Approach**

One major contrast between developmental perspectives on socialization and other 
interpretations, such as feminist, Black Feminist, social constructionist, and post-
structural approaches, is the way that they conceptualize the life course. Developmental 
approaches tend to take a life-span perspective, in which human development is viewed 
as a series of stages or phases to follow, usually in a unilineal direction. Michael 
Stevenson et al. (1994) summarize three assumptions of the life-span perspective on 
gender socialization:

…that being female or male is important in the understanding of a person’s life 
experiences from birth to death[;] …that being female or male may influence 
people’s experience in different ways during different life stages, in different 
cultures, and during different historical periods[;] …and that the experience of 
being female or male during one life stage may have an effect on a person during a 
later life stage. (p. ix)

In other words, those taking a life-span perspective see individuals as following 
pre-determined (in some approaches, biologically determined; in others, culturally
determined) pathways of socialization, with an individual’s primary gender socialization
taking place early in childhood.

The definition of socialization from a human development perspective is typically
characterized by the life stages of childhood (Heinz, 2002). Developmental perspectives
hold a “demographic” notion of the life cycle, in which an orderly set of events cross a
person's life and assume a functional role in adaptation to societal norms (Heinz, 2002, p.
56).

**Life Course Approaches**

Life course approaches to socialization largely developed in the 1960s in response
to earlier socialization literature. In looking at the reason for the decline of socialization
studies from a life-span perspective in the 1960s, Glen Elder (1994) writes that a life span
perspective was not able to adequately address the variations and continuities of
socialization across the entire span of life. The diversity of socialization experiences
could not be explained using a pre-set model of development progression. Gradually,
researchers conducting work on socialization have become more focused on the idea of
human agency in the socialization process. In the 1970s, scholars shifted their
development frameworks from those of socialization to a focus on the life course. Within
this shift to a life course paradigm, researchers came to acknowledge human agency in
socialization. Individuals were conceived of as active agents in development, as actively
developing in interaction with family and environmental forces (Putney and Bengtson,

One critique launched against previous socialization theories, taken up by life
course theorists, is their failure to look at aspects of adult development (Elder, 1994).
Researchers taking a life-course approach see human development approaches that set
childhood as the lynchpin in the socialization process; as overly determined in individual
personality development. Primary socialization perspectives overestimate the effects of
early childhood socialization, at the expense of structural and socio-historical conditions
(Putney and Bengtson, 2002). Social/structural concerns, such as family and extra-social
relations, education, economic status, religion, etc., and one’s career, may come into play
in the development process, subjectively altering the course of development. These
“transitions” give life courses their distinctive forms and meanings (Elder, 1994;
Mahaffy, 2002; Putney and Bengtson, 2002).

One caveat should be made in regard to the differentiation between the life-span
and life-course approaches, however, which is an artificial division at best. Though
researchers have constructed a division between life-span perspectives and life-course
perspectives, they are also apt to methodologically blend the two terms when describing
their own approach to socialization. To say that one follows a “life course” perspective
has come into vogue since the late 1970s. While Glen H. Elder (1994) is critical of the
life-span perspective for failing to take account of adult socialization, in many ways he
stays true to this very perspective by sticking to “age-graded trajectories” of individual
development. He takes up the notion of a normative progression of development within
his life course perspective, writing of the taking up of particular roles related to structural
contexts. For instance, he links structural/historical contexts, such as severe income loss
in the 1940s United States, to mothers becoming authority figures within the household.
While he does provide a structural context to his analysis, he puts forth a generalized
cause-effect relationship on development, in presenting a chart of development
relationships that links family hardship to child outcomes. His chart includes structural
contingencies of development, but it does not take individual experience into account in the process of development, nor does he address questions of race, gender, or other variables that may come into play in an analysis of socialization.

The life course perspective sees individual’s lives as reflecting their historical times and as embedded within social relations. Individuals are portrayed as having agency in the socialization process, with people making choices over the course of their lives. However, individual agency is constrained by the social context of one’s life as well. Walter Heinz (2002) critiques the traditional human development perspective that sees socialization as occurring through family, school and work influences—through the internalization of social control. Rather, he sees socialization as a co-construction of practices and meanings deriving from negotiations of the self in social interactions. Rather than following a standardized trajectory of development, with development following life-course markers such as rites of passage, age, and seasons, Heinz writes that the life course is seen as following a series of episodes that contribute to a person's interpretation of their life history.

Heinz (2002) gives the individual a decided amount of agency in determining his/her life course: “The life course is less dependent on external reference and is becoming the person's more or less planful project instead of a sequence of normatively regulated status passages" (p. 52). There has been a shift in thinking on socialization to focus on the individual's construction of the life course. However, writes Heinz (2002), it has also been recognized that while the individual is an agent in his/her own construction of the life course, he/she meets social and structural forces that constrain these constructions. Heinz terms these social and structural forces on individual agency as
"constrained choices." Constrained choices inform how an individual comes to terms with the consequences of his/her life choices, and are linked to a possible unequal distribution of resources that an individual faces in life.

Lives are actively created by individuals and groups, but within the confines of the social worlds in which they exist (Settersten, 2002). However, social/structural influences are said to inform, but not determine, an individual’s socialization process (Heinz, 2002). In marking the importance of individualized agency in socialization, Heinz (2002) notes a shift from viewing the life course as a standardized, institutionalized pattern, marked by age and gender phases, to viewing the life course as an individualized biography which takes place as a lifelong learning process. The life course as written by Heinz (2002) is a biographical accomplishment:

. . . the concept of self-socialization recognizes that the life course is a biographical accomplishment which consists of a meaningful integration of events, pathways, transitions, memberships in organizations and networks across time… ‘Doing biography’…[is akin to] ‘doing gender’…[this] requires the person to act vis-à-vis developmental tasks and social expectations which are embedded in a complex of social practices. (p. 59)

The Social Construction of the Life Course

Heinz’s (2002) approach to the individualized biography of the life course holds tones of a social constructionist approach to the life course. In their classic tome on social constructionism, Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1966) define socialization as "the comprehensive and consistent induction of an individual into the objective world of a society or a sector of it" (p. 132). Heinz (2002) is critical of Berger and Luckmann's view of socialization in that it lacks an emphasis on individual agency. To Heinz, Berger and Luckmann present the self as a container, receiving social knowledge, rather than as an agent in socialization. The individualized biography of socialization just as much
prepares an individual for active self-reflection as it does to prepare an individual for meaningful social interaction and participation. Heinz also notes that Berger and Luckmann do not take structural contingencies (such as class, race, and gender) into account. Rather, they focus on conversation as the medium of socialization.

It is important to note, however, that Berger and Luckmann are writing more of a position on social construction than a methodological approach to socialization; arguing an approach to the study of experience. Berger and Luckmann do not set out to look at the conditions that construct socialization, nor do they advise the researcher to look at the voices of the socialized (Jaber F. Gubrium, 2004, personal communication). This dissertation takes a social constructionist approach to the life course, in that it focuses on the stories that participants tell to give shape to their processes of growing up. The interview schedule is organized around how participants might take account of these varying structures in reflecting on their own socialization. In essence, the dissertation takes into consideration Heinz's criticisms of Berger and Luckmann, by building these processes of self-reflection and structural contingencies into the interview questions.

Heinz (2002) constructs the self as an agent in the life course. In his framework of individualized biography, narratives take on a primary role in the construction of the self: "as a way of establishing a time-related self-portrait in terms of one's biography" (p. 55). Heinz constructs a framework of self-socialization which runs contrary to a human development framework, focusing particularly on the consequences of actions. In his framework of self-socialization, he takes on the air of a behaviorist, in that he focuses on the actions that derive from social contexts and the sense-making resulting from these actions. Contrary to Heinz’s approach, I am not interested in the actions that participants
take in their lives, so much as the meanings that participants derive from their experiences, and the linkages they make between experiences and meaning. Socialization is a continual process, each time that a person relates experiences they may tell a different story. The notion of “consequences from actions” is a rather static concept, as individuals may use and perceive of consequences in various manners, depending on how they frame their experiential stories.

In their work on the life course as an organizing principle and a socializing resource in modern medicine, Dana Rosenfeld and Eugene Gallagher (2002) give the individual agency in “life coursing” others, while also portraying the individual as powerfully controlled through a medicalized life course discourse. In traditional Western thought, the life course has been constructed as an entity composed of fixed stages from birth to death. Rosenfeld and Gallagher write that this fixed nature of the life course is used as a central interpretive mechanism for the naturalization of the social order. Individuals are medically controlled by this powerful discourse of the life course in two ways. In one way, the medical gaze socializes the actor into the life course, consisting of stages of medicalized characteristics. For example, at birth, babies are constructed as weak and dependent. In childhood and adolescence, individuals are usually constructed as hearty and full of life. In old age, they are once again constructed as weak and dependent. In turn, these medicalized characteristics of the life course are used to socialize actors into being "dependent and compliant patients" (Rosenfeld and Gallagher, 2002, p. 359).

Rosenfeld and Gallagher (2002) take a social constructionist approach to the life course in their work, stating: "...we view what is taken by everyday as well as scientific thinking to be 'objective facts'—for example, the effectiveness and superiority of modern
medicine, and...the differential distribution of competence across the life course—as the product of interpretive activity in specific contexts” (p. 359). They use the term “life coursing” to denote the interpretive resources that people use to make sense of human actions and states of being, so that one person may "life course" another. In life coursing, one makes senses of another’s actions in relation to the life course: "Life coursing is a sense-making activity which categorizes others' actions by comparing them to the idealized and practical actions of others in the same 'point' in the life course, and by interpreting them by reference to the typified future their life course location indicates" (Rosenfeld and Gallagher, 2002, p. 364).

In life coursing, an individual uses a human development perspective of stages and states of being and applies this to others' behaviors, as a way to make sense of another person’s behaviors. For instance, a mother may say about her daughter, "oh, she’s just a slow bloomer" as a way to mark her daughter’s halting progression to physical maturity. The authors apply the term life coursing to medical interactions, especially those regarding childhood and old age: through life coursing the medical institution is able to both socialize the actor into life course stages and socialize the actor into being a compliant patient. This dissertation takes up the notion of life coursing through the analysis of the stories that participants tell about growing up, in that it looks at how participants describe their “childhood,” their “adolescence,” their “becoming mature,” and their “adulthood.” These developmental phases are commonly applied to life story descriptions, with participants taking up a developmental discourse (life coursing) to describe their experiences.
Gender Studies Approaches

There are three major approaches that researchers conducting studies on follow in their work on gender difference (Freedman, 1990). The first approach accepts gender difference and tends to be held by empirical feminists, such as feminist developmental psychologists, who use the traditional scientific method to address and correct gender bias (Brewer, 2001). The second approach criticizes the notion of gender difference and questions the salience of gender in all contexts. This approach is exemplified by the work of feminist standpoint researchers who work from a political point of view to address inequalities of socialization processes (Brewer, 2001). These theorists call for the need to add other variables, such as race, class, and sexuality, into an analysis of gender socialization. Black Feminist theorists, such as Patricia Hill Collins and Multicultural Feminist theorists, such as Shirley Hill, fall within this approach. The third approach tries to go beyond gender difference. This approach challenges assumptions of the self made by scientists who portray themselves as value-neutral. Rather, feminists in this camp challenge the existence of an objective self, saying that the observer actively constructs the self through language and discourse (Brewer, 2001). Constructionist perspectives, such as that of Barrie Thorne, and post-structural perspectives, such as that of Margaret Gullette, fall within this approach.

Gender Difference as Central

Gendered approaches to the life course developed out of a critical eye cast on developmental theories, such as Freud’s and Erikson’s, which posited that female development was not complete or was somehow lacking in comparison to male development. Feminist developmental psychologists, such as Carol Gilligan and Nancy Chodorow, focus more on the social environment and the connections formed between
mother and daughter in development, placing less emphasis on biological drives. These approaches note that, in terms of an ability to develop, girls and boys do not differ much: it is the socialization that they receive from others that causes varied outcomes in development. Due to differential socialization, girls and boys develop differently from each other. However, female development may be viewed as the norm in studies of socialization, with a positive value placed on girls’ behaviors.

**Chodorow.** Nancy Chodorow (1990) writes that feminist psychoanalysts have been challenged by other feminists, due to their link with psychoanalysis. On the contrary, she writes, feminist psychoanalysis takes a new and different perspective on sexual differences than traditional psychoanalytic approaches. She and other feminist psychoanalysts begin from a liberated position: "We take gender and sexuality to be socially, culturally, and psychologically problematic and wish to understand how they develop and are reproduced in the individual and in society" (p. 115). This places psychoanalytic feminism in a more socially focused camp than the traditional psychological development perspectives.

Chodorow (1990) writes that psychoanalytic feminists are against overly biological psychoanalytic interpretations that claim genital difference to be at the core of gender differences, and claims of a value-free study of gender. Instead, she sees gender identity as part of a larger set of social, cultural, and psychological relations. Chodorow constructs a division between male and female development, with male and female gender development as complementary, but different.

Chodorow (1990) takes an object-relations perspective on gender socialization, in which the self develops in conscious or unconscious experienced relations with others.
Her work focuses on the strong connections that girls form early in life with their mothers. Girls develop a connected sense of self with other women through this early relationship with their mothers, with mothering feelings reproduced within girls through this connection. Boys, on the other hand, develop selves in denial of the relational, as they are cut off from their mothers in identity development during early childhood. This separation from their mothers creates an arelational sense of self for men. Chodorow (1990) writes that an arelational masculinity has been institutionalized in society, such as through notions of scientific objectivity and the technical rationality of advanced capitalism. A lack of connection in identity formation fuels male dominance in culture and society and creates tensions within their relationships (p. 119).

Chodorow’s (1990) feminist psychoanalytic perspective sees the construction of femininity and masculinity as connected, critiquing the supposed superiority of male development and asking for a reformulation of the female self within development theory: "It stands the traditional Freudian understanding on its head, for it to some extent valorizes women's construction of self and makes normal masculinity problematic" (p. 120). Chodorow casts male and female development as essentially different due to the female experience of mothering, in which the mother-daughter relationship is foundational in female identity formation. Gendered personality differences arise from the different relational experiences of females and males as they are growing up. It is these interpersonally connected relationships, or lack thereof, that give meaning to socialization behaviors in childhood and create differing personalities for men and women (Chodorow, 1993).
In her critique of Freud, Chodorow (1993) writes that a feminine personality does not develop out of the realization of a lack of a penis. On the contrary, she places a female's connection with her mother as the root of her personality development. Chodorow's perspective reworks Freudian concepts in order to value girls' differences from boys. She constructs girls' attachments with their mothers to be a positive relation. As a result of this strong attachment to their mothers, girls are considered to be more empathetic and relationship-oriented than boys (Jacklin and McBride-Chang, 1991). In essence, she reduces the psychological differences between males and females to the fact that women mother. Women's personality attributes of caring and connection with others are explained as a gendered imbalance in parenting, in which mothers are able to maintain connections with their daughters (Okin, 1990).

Gilligan. Feminists critical of the human development perspective began by pointing out that it followed a male norm. Carol Gilligan (1982) wrote *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* as a corrective measure, to reveal and remedy the omission of women's lives from the human development literature on socialization. The need to include women in literature that traditionally focused solely on men was a common theme of early feminist works of the 1970s and 80s. Her study of college students aimed to explore the identity and moral development of males and females in their early adult years. Included in this aim was her wish to include female development in the literature on human development. In traditional human development literature, men have been the models of proper life course development: "the 'models for a healthy life cycle' are men who seem distant in their relationships, finding it difficult to
describe their wives, whose importance in their lives they nevertheless acknowledge" (Gilligan, 1982, p. 154).

Gilligan (1982) casts socialization as a general process that all women, and all men, go through. While there are differences between the socialization processes of men and women, one may deduce generalities for women's gendered development. Women need to be added to the human development picture, otherwise the focus of the picture, the stages and sequences of the life cycle, become distorted. In placing a corrective lens over human development, Gilligan constructs a differing world of moral development for men and women.

Within her study, Gilligan looked at college students' responses to a number of morally-compromising situations, interpreting the female participants’ responses to be much more relationship focused in terms of the actions they would take in regard to the situations offered. On the other hand, the men's responses to these situations were interpreted by Gilligan as being much more "math-problem" (solving a problem) focused. Through an analysis of responses to morally-loaded situations, Gilligan concludes that women derive their identity through connections to others, while men develop more independently. In writing about the participants' gender socialization processes, Gilligan (1982) states that "the women describe a relationship, depicting their identity in the connection of future mother, present wife, adopted child, or past lover. Similarly, the standard of moral judgment that informs their assessment of self is a standard of relationship, an ethic of nurturance, responsibility, and care" (p. 159). A woman’s moral development, then, is said to derive from her relationship with others, based on an ethics of care and responsibility.
A woman’s different moral world begins with her relationships with others. Gilligan (1982) notes that female participants’ life stories are marked by relationships of caretaking. The fact that a woman lives within a different moral world means that she perceives of social reality in a different way than that of men; known as a “different worlds” approach for men and women. Gilligan writes that women are socialized through their caretaking senses of self: when they realize their role as caretakers then they have developed a grounded, full, sense of self. She generalizes for all women in the assertion that women reach maturity and make sense of their growing up experiences through caretaking.

In essence, Gilligan takes up a “men are from Mars, women from Venus” perspective in constructing separate worlds of moral development and experienced reality for men and women. In these separate worlds, men and women speak different languages which are used to interpret their own identities and their social experiences. Women take up a “different voice” from that of men, in which an ethic of care prompts a personality based on connection with others. There are two different modes of experience and interpretation—the male, individualized, mode and the female ethic-of-care mode.

Both Chodorow and Gilligan focus on the early childhood years as crucial to gender development, especially focusing on an individual’s relations with mothering figures. Unlike traditional psychoanalysts, they do not see genital differences as causal in gender identity formation. Both Chodorow’s and Gilligan’s perspectives on gender socialization move the centering of the gendered psyche from the body and its drives toward the self, to the connections of the self with others; questioning whether female
development is really defined by sexual difference, so much as it is defined by the self’s relation with others (Chodorow, 1990, p. 128).

Chodorow and Gilligan both focus on the centrality of relationships to one’s path through the lifespan. Differentiation is seen not as separation, but as developing a whole self, connected to others. Their work is "corrective" in addressing women's development (Fischer, 1992), as it challenges the traditional picture of human development by addressing a second-wave of feminism concern in adding women's voices to the picture. However, it still maintains a connection to the traditional human development perspective, in setting this approach as a point of departure. Loretta Brewer (2001) critiques Chodorow’s and Gilligan’s perspectives on gender socialization in that they both fail to address the variabilities of experience found within each gender group. While the emergence of the feminine voice is significant for bringing women's voices to light in the human development literature, constructing only one voice for women contributes to further essentialism. This essentialism serves to shift the human development discourse from a phallocentric to a gynocentric perspective, further perpetuating the dangerous dualism of male and female personality development (Freedman, 1990).

Susan Okin (1990) critiques moral development theories (particularly Gilligan’s) that propose that women's moral development is different from that of men. She questions whether these constructed voices are really representative of all men and women, suggesting that researchers take a more contextual approach to moral development in attempting to address the variability that may occur within men’s and women’s moral voices.
Deborah Rhode (1990) is also critical of Gilligan’s tendency to homogenize the experiences of all women, while failing to consider the differences between women. Rhode writes of the dangers of "women's difference discourse," in which an emphasis on difference tends to oversimplify a complicated reality. In allowing complexity back into the picture, feminist standpoint theory may serve as a bridge between earlier feminist theories of development and a second framework of feminist approaches, which questions gender’s salience in socialization.

**Feminist standpoint theory.** Standpoint theorists share the belief that women's differences have been devalued or ignored in the face of dominant knowledge claims. They use women's lives and personal experiences to dispute dominant knowledge claims. Harding (2001) writes that a standpoint starts from an objective location, the empirical reality of women’s lived experiences, and that this is where all feminist research should begin. The fact that women have been excluded from the basic design of the social order and production of knowledge casts them as "strangers" and "outsiders," giving them a better standpoint from which to analyze the dominant perspective (Harding, 2001, p. 148).

Standpoint theorists assert that women's oppression has led to their possessing greater critical faculties than those of the dominant group (men), as they have less to lose by remaining outside of the dominant group. Due to their experiences, they are better at identifying oppression than those within the dominant social order. Women's stories of oppression are seen as less biased, as their knowledge derives from their direct experiences of oppression, derived from their lived experiences. Harding (2001) writes that a standpoint is different from a perspective, in that to work from a standpoint, one
must struggle against the dominant social order. The emphasis in a standpoint perspective is on women’s experiences in everyday life. A perspective from everyday life is said to provide a clearer view of reality.

**Questioning Gender's Salience**

A second approach to gender development questions the salience of gender difference as an approach in socialization (Freedman, 1990). Scholars using this approach question gender's salience on its own, arguing that race, class, sexuality, age, and physical ability should be taken into account, in addition to gender. This approach is espoused in Black Feminist and Multiracial Feminist perspectives.

**Black Feminist approaches.** Stevenson et al. (1994) critique the idea of gender as the primary determinant of one’s identity. Instead, they say that one’s identity is affected by other variables, in addition to gender. A Black Feminist approach seeks to correct the oft-sought notion of feminist theorists that all women face a certain type of socialization, for the mere fact that they are women. Rather, Black Feminist theorists call for a race and class analysis of socialization, focusing particularly on Black women, in order to address the differences that women of color face in their socialization experiences.

In the early 1980s, bell hooks (1984) wrote that the personal experiences of Black women could not take the place of theory. Instead, she put forth that Black women needed to develop a theoretical framework for analyzing their own oppression. Black Feminist approaches developed out of this need to analyze oppression. In her pithy review of Black Feminist thought, Patricia Hill Collins (1993) clearly outlines the main concepts of a Black Feminist theoretical approach. Collins writes that Black women share a standpoint on oppression, that their social and economic status provides them with a distinctive set of experiences from which to view reality. Black women’s
experiences stimulate a distinct Black Feminist consciousness, with "... Black women hav[ing] a self-defined standpoint on their own oppression" (p. 527).

In some ways, Collins emulates the “different worlds” perspective of Gilligan, in that she presents Black women (rather than women-at-large) as experiencing a different world from those who are not Black women; writing that they experience and interpret a different reality than that of the dominant group. Black Feminist thought offers Black women a different view of themselves than that of the dominant society, in that it values Black women's subjective knowledge and gives them a rearticulated consciousness with which to resist their own subordination (Collins, 1993). While Collins allows for individual experiences of oppression, she states that there are some commonalities of oppression which all subordinate groups (i.e., Black women) face. It is from this common experience of oppression that Black women can form a standpoint.

Collins (1993) writes of a type of knowing that emphasizes the experiences of the subordinate, known as wisdom. Wisdom derives from lived experiences and is essential for the survival of the subordinate. In Black communities, concrete experiences are valued; they shape what it means to be a Black woman. In analyzing the growing-up stories of rural Black women, this dissertation looks at the ways that the participants link their lived experiences with their situated realities—what wisdom do they say they derive out of the situations (at various times termed as oppressive, while at other times conceptualized as “just a part of life”) that they face in life?

Collins (1993) writes of several themes that are present in the Black community in relation to knowledge and the way it is expressed communally. First, she writes of the use of dialogue in assessing knowledge. Knowledge claims are worked out through
dialogue with others, through relationship and connectedness. She provides the example of call-and-response systems of knowledge transfer within Black churches and links this dialoguing and connectedness in knowledge transfer to feminine ways of knowing, which are also based on connectedness with others. Essentially, she is writing up another “difference” story, similar to that of Gilligan (1982), but this time for the Black woman.

Similar to feminist perspectives on identity development, Collins writes of an ethics of caring within the Black community, which involves valuing the uniqueness of each individual, the emotional in the expression of an argument, and a capacity for empathy that should be developed between individuals. She casts this as part of Black experience and part of women's experience. Within the Black community, knowledge claims are all personal and those who make knowledge claims are held accountable for what they say. Personal knowledge claims are made from concrete experiences, and are used as a criterion in meaning making.

Collins links her own perspective as a Black Feminist to Gilligan’s work on the female ethic of morality tied to responsibility and social ties. An ethic of morality based on connections is not just part of a female ethic, but an Afrocentric ethic: "In an Afrocentric feminist epistemology, values lie at the heart of the knowledge-validation process such that inquiry always has an ethical aim" (Collins, 1993, p. 539). While Collins links other feminist perspectives with a Black Feminist perspective, she says that there are certain characteristics that preclude non-Black women from taking a Black Feminist standpoint. The most important, perhaps, is that one must live life as a Black woman, as taking a standpoint requires lived experiences, in which thought is produced in relation to a number of conditions (such as being Black, being a part of a Black
community, and being a woman). The basis for a Black Feminist perspective is the lived experiences of Black women and the ways that they make sense of these experiences.

**A Multiracial Feminist approach.** In addition to race and gender, Collins says that standpoints are also rooted in socio-economic class situations. However, she has been criticized for focusing too much on the experiences of Black women-at-large, without recognizing the class differences that exist among Black women. Shirley Hill (2002) addresses these concerns from a Multiracial Feminist perspective, which focuses on the varied situations of women of color. Hill writes that Black feminists use a race-class-gender dynamic to theorize on the gender roles of Black women, but that they tend to weigh heavily upon the racial part of the equation in their analysis of socialization. She questions whether the historic experiences of Black families still inform gender practices today. Rather than focusing on the history of Black oppression that Black Feminist theorists tend to emphasize, Hill (2002) asks: "... how have growing class diversity and social mobility among African Americans affected their gender views and practices?" (p. 495).

Hill reviews Black Feminist perspectives on female socialization, which tend to emphasize notions of strength among Black women. While admitting that she is attracted to a Black Feminist perspective that constructs Black women as uniting based on their common strengths and capabilities, Hill comments that it is difficult to cast Black women’s experiences as a monolithic construction, due to the range of social class statuses that they find themselves in presently. A Multiracial Feminist perspective claims that race and social class are key factors in gender constructions. In this perspective, racial inequality is dependent upon one's position within a class structure. Hill’s (2002)
work focuses on how class status affects gender identities within Black families; she is particularly interested in the impact of class on the gender and racial ideologies of Blacks.

Hill’s (2002) study is based on in-depth interviews with 35 Black parents, to examine the extent to which they felt that gender influenced the way that they socialized their children. She found that most parents claimed a gender-equal treatment of socialization among their children. However, social class came into play, in that securely middle-class parents were found to most often promote gender equality in their socialization practices and in their goals for their children. Hill divides her middle-class participants into those who have just arrived in the middle class (in their generation) and those more firmly established in the middle class (having a preceding generation of family in the middle class). She found that those more established in the middle class are more likely to promote gender equality. Those "transitioning" into the middle class are more likely to both enforce traditional gender roles and promote gender equality, while those in the lower classes are more likely to enforce traditional gender roles. Hill interprets this finding to be a result of lower-class and newly-arrived, middle-class participants still downtrodden by the dominant system, striving for acceptance within this system.

Hill’s (2002) work questions both gender and racial salience in the socialization process and calls for class differences to be brought into the picture. However, she does not consider the everyday, contextual differences which may affect individual experiences of socialization. Rather than adding more layers to the picture, one may
instead peel away these layers, or deconstruct the picture, to get at new understandings of gender socialization.

**Going Beyond Gender**

A third approach to socialization focuses on the varied contexts of socialization. Rather than focusing on predetermined variables (i.e., gender, race, or class) which may be affecting the socialization process, scholars working within this approach are interested in the ways that meanings shift according to the situations an individual faces. Although an individual may be a woman, or a woman of color, or even a poor woman of color, she may construct her socialization process (or growing up) in ways different from another (poor) woman (of color).

Theorists falling into this camp tend toward a more post-modern, deconstructionist bent. They are more interested in looking at the ways that socialization is constructed, especially in relation to dominant discourses, than in pinpointing variables that influence one’s socialization process. Instead of forcing gender differences (or racial/class differences), researchers need to look at human experiences as they relate to socialization. Barrie Thorne’s (1990) work on the socialization of children challenges traditional frameworks of gender socialization: "... frameworks, which emphasize oppositional dichotomies, [which] neatly fit situation[s] in which boys and girls are organized as separate, bounded groups, and [which]...obscure more relaxed, mixed-gender encounters” (p. 101). Instead, she calls for a different perspective to be applied to the analysis of children’s socialization, one which is not fixed on set variables.

Thorne (1990) writes that gender tends to be conceptualized in terms of dualisms. Feminist sex difference approaches result in the same types of essentialisms as the traditional human development approaches, as they are still working within the dualistic
categories of female versus male socialization. In particular, Thorne critiques the "separate worlds" perspective applied to boys' and girls' socialization, present in the work of Carol Gilligan. This critique might also be broadened to include Black Standpoint perspectives on socialization which value a Black woman’s perspective on socialization apart from the contexts in which socialization takes place and the meanings that are derived from these varied contexts. A separate worlds perspective exaggerates the similarities of experience within each world.

Instead, Thorne (1990) asks how social contexts affect the "doing" of gender. Rather than just focusing on the three variables of race, class, and gender as causal factors, Thorne focuses on the ways that these variables (if they are even perceived as such within individual experience) are used as resources in the construction of one’s identity. Rather than constructing a particular standpoint, such as a feminist or Black Feminist standpoint, Thorne sees social contexts as providing sources of multiplicity. One does not just have one identity; identities are relevant according to varying contexts.

Thorne (2003) introduces the idea of borderwork within her own approach to gender development. In borderwork, interaction may reduce an active sense of difference, but at the same time, serve to strengthen the borders of difference. Gender differences are strong in some instances; Thorne gives the example of contests within the classroom in which a teacher divides students up in “girls against the boys” fashion. However, gender differences may be in negotiation or even absent in other situations, such as on the playground when both boys and girls are engaged in the defense of a mutual classmate before a teacher. A border-working perspective focuses on the boundaries that define the borders of difference. However, these boundaries are not
always so clear, as there are deeply rooted cultural discourses of gender that may hide some of this borderworking: "These stylized moments evoke recurring themes that are deeply rooted in our cultural conceptions of gender, and they suppress awareness of patterns that contradict and qualify them" (Thorne, 2003, p. 388). An analysis of borderworking, then, gets at the interactions of boys and girls that may or may not be rooted in gender identity, but which are nevertheless often masked by a dominant discourse of different worlds for boys and girls.

Thorne (2003) writes that one’s construction of gender socialization is affected by the level of analysis which one takes. From an individual level, gender is seen as more fixed: "As individuals, we are...each assigned to a fixed gender category, and by age three we develop relatively firm individual identities as either girls or boys" (p. 398). From a group level, however, gender is more fluid, as other social contexts come into play to affect gender constructions—such as one’s age, ethnicity and social class. In other words, gender's salience varies from one situation to another, according to social context. The dominant discourses on gender tend to emphasize gender as an oppositional dualism and exaggerate gender differences, without paying attention to variations and commonalities that may be present across the gendered groups (Thorne, 2003).

Margaret Gullette (2003) also addresses the way that dominant discourses affect one’s construction of socialization. In looking at the construction of life-course narratives, Gullette focuses on the already-written narratives that individuals use to make their stories comprehensible. Gullette (2003) writes that stories of the life course are tied to dominant models of understanding the life course: "These stories have intensely personal aspects, but the narratives are comprehensible because they are tied to shared—
dominant—models of the way aging really goes. [She] call[s] these naturalized narratives the *life-course imaginaries*...." (p. 102). Individual life storytelling is influenced by these life-course imaginaries, which may “naturally frame” a life course narrative.

Gullette (2003) presents the American Dream narrative as a framing mechanism for many people’s life course stories. The American Dream narrative is a life-course story told by ordinary people in reflecting on the incremental progress of their lives. Not only does this life-course imaginary frame individual life stories; it is a national biography—an economic life-course story of the West. "Whether as spur, delusion, or reward, the so-called American dream is a model national biography that shapes subjectivity and autobiography. It is the Pilgrim's Progress of our secular, capitalist world" (Gullette, 2003, p. 104). Similar to what Rosenfeld and Gallagher (2002) write about medicalized narratives of the life course, the American Dream story casts childhood and old age as unproductive, dependent stages of life.

In response to the life-course imaginaries which dominate our life course storytelling, Gullette presents a critical age autobiography perspective which can work as a form of cultural critique against these dominating tales. Through the telling of our life stories we may hope to realize the dominant life-course narratives that affect our constructions and, thus, may allow for the altering of these life course narratives so as to "permit many alternative...stories and weaken [dominant discourse stories], thus putting [naturalized narratives, such as the decline ideology] out in the open and on the defensive" (p. 110). Life storytelling is a way to understand, challenge, and transform the
cultural constructions of a life in progress, in order to get at the more ordinary meanings that our lives hold for us.

However, while Gullette writes of a critical age autobiography serving to deconstruct confining life-course imaginaries in order to liberate an individual’s experienced lived stories, she admits that she cannot help but construct her own experiences as a progress story. She too falls prey to the life-course imaginary of the American Dream narrative. In this progress story, writes Gullette, "[e]ach autobiographer chooses one or more younger selves to contrast with, in order to tell a progress or decline story" (p. 106). These contrast structures (see Smith, 2003) provide a framing mechanism from which to measure the progress of our own lives.

Rather than unrealistically trying to cast off the shackles of the life-course imaginaries, Gullette writes that her goal is to analyze the process through which age autobiographies (or biographies) are told. She calls for textual sensitivity in analysis of life course narratives, asking how our own life-course narratives work with or against ready-made stories of the life course. Gullette’s aim is similar to that of this dissertation in analyzing both the process through which participants construct their stories of growing up, and with which dominant narratives of the life course they link their stories.

The various perspectives of identity development/socialization, from psychoanalytical perspectives to post-structural perspectives, are presented as a way to review the life course “imaginaries” that may come into play in participants’ growing-up stories. While critiques may be cast against any of these perspectives, they are critical to the conceptualization of participants’ stories of growing up. When participants talk about growing up, they frame their stories in reference to a discourse of the life course. In her
review of the various approaches to gender difference, Estelle B. Freedman (1990) writes that "... we should not imagine that one framework clearly improves upon or replaces an earlier one. Rather, they may be simultaneously and continually useful ways of thinking about gender that need not compete for intellectual dominance" (p. 257). While one perspective may ring true, in this case in the analysis of gender socialization, what is even more important is how the perspective is relevant to the participants involved in this study of socialization: how do the participants frame their growing-up stories, what do they take from the various discourses of gender socialization, and how do they apply these resources to their own growing-up story in conjunction with their situated realities?

Summary

Within their growing-up narratives, participants’ invocations of different discourses of human development are telling of the way that they consider themselves as actors within their social worlds, both as individuals progressing through the life course, and as social agents within their communities. The literature review details and describes some of the discursive resources available to the participants in framing their growing-up stories.

Developmental approaches to gender socialization share a number of common threads. These approaches see various life stages as landmarks, or ways to measure, the progress of the life course. Human behavior is said to be about growth within these life stages and the individual’s ability to meet the challenges of each life stage. Developmental approaches see life stages as building one upon another linearly, with development occurring in clearly defined stages or periods. The stages of development are set forth so as to be universally relevant for all individuals. Finally, within these approaches, childhood is said to be at the crux of development. Developmental
approaches are presented through the aegis of psychoanalytical and cognitive-development approaches within this literature review.

Psychoanalytical perspectives emphasize the unconscious dimensions of socialization, in which children are internally socialized through psychosexual connections with their parents. Psychoanalytical theorists, such as Freud, Erikson, and Sullivan, focus on the early childhood years as determinants in the formation of an individual’s personality and social interactions. With this perspective, individual development is broken up into phases or stages, in which through an individual’s inner drives, he or she is said adapt to chronologically occurring social crises. By adapting to these crises, the individual forms social connections and a resulting social identity.

Cognitive development theorists, such as Piaget and Kohlberg, see development as naturally unfolding from a pre-scripted process. The child is shown as developing through a need to engage and master the environment through reasoning. The motivation for cognitive development is again related to an individual’s inner drives and need to engage with the environment. Cognitive development theorists view an individual’s cognitive structures as innate at birth, with gender identity constructed as naturally occurring within the self. Individuals adopt gender roles only after an internal gender identity is formed. In particular, a cognitive-development perspective is focused on the child’s ability to model his or her own behavior upon the gender-based categories that he or she learns in early childhood and to seek social rewards as a result of appropriate modeling.

A behaviorist perspective is similar to other developmental perspectives in viewing the individual as passive in development process, reacting to reinforcement contingencies
rather than actively constructing the life course. Behaviorists, such as Bandura, see human development as spurred on by outside stimuli. These social stimuli affect the life course, promoting certain behaviors. In contrast to psychoanalytical and cognitive-development perspectives, behaviorists do not conceive of a pre-scripted, normative life course, due to the fact that development is said to be a result of reaction to stimuli and not set forth from some innate, pre-determined drive. Behavioral approaches emphasize the influence of the external, social world, at the expense of internal, individual, drives. Human behavior is said to be learned through instruction, modeling, and imitation of other’s behaviors. The focus in a behaviorist perspective is on the learning that occurs in early childhood—resulting from frequent contacts with primary socializers. Development occurs through the individual’s interactions with these socializing agents.

In contrast to developmental approaches, some researchers have shifted to a life course approach, which acknowledges human agency in socialization, with the individual conceived of as actively developing in interaction with family and environmental forces. Life course approaches take structural and socio-historical conditions into account, in allowing these variables some play within the development process. Rather than following a standardized trajectory of development, life course approaches see human development as marked by a series of episodes or significant events that contribute to a person’s interpretation of his or her life history.

A social constructionist approach to the life course views what is taken as everyday, as well as scientific, thinking to be the product of interpretive activity in specific contexts. The “hows” of meaning making in relation to experience become the objective facts of socialization. Social constructionists, such as Rosenfeld and Gallagher,
use the term “life coursing” to denote the interpretive resources that people use to make sense of human actions and states of being. In life coursing, an individual uses a human development perspective of stages and states of being and applies this to others’ behaviors, as a way to make sense of another person’s behaviors.

This literature review also takes a look at gendered approaches to human development, running the gamut from developmental to life course approaches. Feminist developmental psychologists, such as Chodorow and Gilligan, fall into a “gender difference as central” category, casting the social environment and connections formed between mother and daughter as the root of female gender socialization. Female gender socialization, then, is said to derive from a woman’s relationship with others, based on an ethics of care and responsibility. Standpoint theorists, such as Harding, also exemplify this approach, in which they use women’s lives and personal experiences as a form of truth in disputing dominant knowledge claims about human development.

Black Feminist approaches, such as those of hooks and Collins, and Multiracial Feminist Approaches, such as that of Hill, fall into a category of “questioning gender’s salience” in calling for the addition of other variables to the gender socialization picture. Aside from gender differences, researchers are exhorted to include race and class as variables in analysis. This approach focuses especially on the “whys” of gender socialization, looking at how demographic variables come into play as causational factors in the gender socialization process.

Finally, within a “going beyond gender” approach to gender socialization, feminist theorists Thorne and Gulllette are both interested in the ways that gendered meanings shift according to circumstance, rather than in focusing on predetermined variables such as
gender, race, and class as affecting the socialization process. Gender’s salience is said to vary from one situation to another, according to social context and analytical level. Within this approach, the “hows” of socialized identity construction are emphasized, especially in relation to dominant discourses of human development. The “doing” of gender, particularly on how race, class, and gender as variables are used as resources in constructing one’s gendered identity, is at the center of analysis.
CHAPTER 3
METHODOLOGY AND METHODS OF PROCEDURE

The approach taken in this dissertation is inspired by James P. Gee’s (1999) work on discourse analysis. In particular, it focuses on the intersecting relationships between social identity construction, cultural “worlding,” and the participants’ situated realities within their growing-up stories. By asking participants to talk about their growing-up stories, this research aims to get at how the participants, themselves, construct their own senses of socialization.

Research Agenda

The central purpose of this dissertation is to understand how growing-up stories are brought into being by participants as a way of making meaning through time. Three research questions arose from this purpose: (1) what are the discourses participants use in telling their growing up stories?; (2) how do these discourses relate to discourses of human development?; and (3) how do these discourses relate to the cultural worlds and situated identities constructed by participants in telling their growing-up stories?

A discursive approach to narrative derives from analyzing the linkages that participants’ make in their growing up stories: with what or whom does the participant link to “growing up”? Participants were asked open-ended questions concerning a number of topics, including life events, the present, life review, identity, and growing up, to get at these narrative linkages. Narrative linkages are the meanings that participants’ make of the growing-up stories that they tell, based on the perspective that socialization experiences are subjectively embedded in accounts of growing up. This puts the subject,
not socialization agents, in the driver’s (interpretive) seat. The accounts or narratives tell us the subject’s side of the story. Further to this point, participants use the social circumstances of their lives to make sense of what they’ve experienced through time. Social circumstances, such as living in a rural area and being African American, female, poor, and/or a drug user, are just a few of the narrative resources that the participants may use to give substantiation to their growing up stories.

**Theoretical Orientation**

The theoretical orientation of this dissertation is informed by a social constructionist perspective. In their classic book, *The Social Construction of Reality* (1966), Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann write that reality is socially constituted. In reviewing their work, E.D. McCarthy (1996) explains: “This proposition asserts that social reality is not a social fact in its own right, but is something produced and communicated, its meaning derived in and through these systems of communication” (p. 20).

It is difficult to generalize for this theoretical perspective, ontologically speaking; as there may be varying levels of realism and idealism within this perspective, depending on whether one is taking an objective or subjective stance to idealism. Elaborating upon a social constructionist perspective, Michael. Crotty (1998) writes that "there is no meaning without a mind…Truth or meaning comes into existence in and out of our engagement with the realities in our world. Meaning is not discovered, but constructed." (p. 9). In focusing on gender socialization as the central social “problem” within this dissertation, I take a stance against purely objective approaches that would see gender socialization as a problem with objective conditions that are there to be discovered. However, at the same time, I recognize that this social problem is based on an empirical
reality, upon activities and identities that participants construct so as to claim this social problem as their own. Therefore, this dissertation is ontologically informed by objective idealism, which accepts that there is a world of collectively shared understandings to be used in the meaning-making process (Salner, 1989).

Writing about the social constructionist perspective to social problems, Malcolm Spector and John I. Kitsuse (1987) state that "... the activities through which definitions of social problems are constructed are as observable through [social science] research techniques as are any of the phenomena that occupy the attention of social scientists" (pp. 21-22). Social constructionism takes up “what” and “how” questions, focusing on participant activity, in asking what resources participants use to interpret their experiences and how the resources are used to make sense of experience. A social constructionist considers interpretation to be a reflexive process, in which individual interpretation and social realities are mutually influential—they are in “dialogue” with one another (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000).

Reflecting on the epistemological stance of constructionism, Thomas A. Schwandt (2000) writes: “We invent concepts, models, and schemes to make sense of experience....We do not construct our interpretations in isolation but against a backdrop of shared understandings, practices, language, and so forth” (p. 197). Further to this point, I am taking a context-specific approach to gender socialization, in that social constructionism is sensitive to circumstance. Within the context of this research, social circumstances construct particular gender socializations. As an anthropologist, I am interested in examining how social circumstances mediate the gender socialization process. A constructionist perspective on narratives addresses the changing meanings of
events for participants. The leading question in this dissertation is how are "growing up" stories brought into being as a way of making meaning through time? The “hows” of participants’ meaning constructions, or the resources for their interpretations, are located in their lived historical, cultural, and social circumstances.

Chapters 4 through 7 of this dissertation present the various situated identities and related cultural worlds that participants assemble when relaying their growing-up stories. Each chapter is informed by a situated identity that participants build in making meaning of their growing-up experiences. These situated identities are built using the interpretive resources of both situated contingencies, or the everyday realities of the participants, as well as the cultural discourses “out there” which are variously taken up by participants to explicate their growing-up stories. Cultural discourses and locally situated contexts are both considered as “stocks of knowledge” that participants incorporate in making meaning of their growing-up experiences.

The dissertation is broken down into parts, according to cultural discourse, in looking at how participants interpret their growing up experiences, or make meaning of them, in relation to societal norms, values, and expectations. A Millsian approach to constructionism is used, in focusing on participants’ ways of collectively representing their personal experiences through locally informed discourses (Mills, 1959). Cultural discourses, in this case Afrocentric and American Dream Discourses, frame participants’ growing-up narratives. However, these discourses are not applied with a blind eye to local, situated contexts. Arguing that “knowledge is always ineluctably local,” Clifford Geertz (1983) writes that while meaning structures, such as dominant discourses, are public, they are also locally circumscribed (p. 4). Chapters 4 through 7 are built upon
two public discourses taken up by the research participants, with the understanding that these discourses are not static interpretations or explanations for the “way things are.” Rather, these public discourses are taken up by participants and shaded with local colors in depicting their portrait of growing up.

**Narrative Approach**

Both in academic and popular literature, a narrative approach is said to be key to analyzing experience. In a recent Sunday New York Times “On language” edition, entitled “Narrative: The new story of story,” William Safire (2004) reviews the various conceptions of narrative. Narratives can be political, for instance, says Stanley Greenberg, a pollster for Senator John Kerry, whom Safire quotes as saying “a narrative is the key to everything” (p. 34). Greenberg explains George W. Bush’s recent election as president to the fact that Republicans had a coherent and cohesive narrative that attracted voters. Narratives may be approached from a more structural-linguistic perspective as well. Safire quotes Jim Phelan, journal editor of *Narrative*, who defines the word narrative as “the representation of events and characters in some causal or at least noncoincidental sequence” (p. 34). Within the academy, the Personal Narratives Group (1989) writes that "... personal narratives are particularly rich sources because, attentively interpreted, they illuminate both the logic of individual courses of action and the effects of system-level constraints within which those courses evolve" (p. 6).

This narrative approach reflects back on an earlier time in anthropology, when anthropologists took the time to speak with their “informants,” recording their stories or statements about their lives and analyzing this data so as to provide a rich description of the researched culture (see for example, Malinowski, 1961; Geertz, 1973). This dissertation takes a similar qualitative perspective. However, the way in which it differs
from these earlier perspectives is that it foregrounds the participants’ own voices, by presenting a wide array of interview excerpts and, thus, giving the participants a more active role in their representation. In particular, I focus on how meanings of growing up are articulated through the linkages that participants create.

D. Jean Clandinin and F. Michael Connelly (1998) write that stories are the closest thing that we have to actual experience: ". . . people by nature lead storied lives and tell stories of those lives, whereas narrative researchers describe such lives, collect and tell stories of them, and write narratives of experience" (p. 155). A “storied” approach gives voice to those individuals who have traditionally been silenced, whose experiences through time can be developmentally framed in their own terms—if we take the opportunity to listen carefully.

Situated realities are the different orientations and special circumstances of the participants’ lives (Gubrium, 1993). The situated realities of the participants’ lives affect the positions they take within interviews. In Interpreting Women’s Lives (1989), the Personal Narratives Group link positionality with situated reality: "The process of self-interpretation, the most salient aspect of the personal narrative, is partially revealed through the choice of narrative form. The form of the narrative is shaped most importantly by cultural and historical contexts, which make available a striking range of possibilities relative to one's gender and status in society" (p. 100). Thus, the position(s) that a participant takes within her interview affects the stories that she tells.

A narrative approach to understanding rural, African-American women’s gender socialization process is important in that it gets at the subjective meanings of growing up, from the participant’s perspective. In her review of a narrative approach to interviewing,
Catherine Riessman (2002) states that "it is a useful addition to the stockpot of social research methods, bringing critical flavors to the surface that otherwise get lost in the brew, [and] allow[ing] for the systematic study of personal experience and meaning" (p. 706). This approach works from the position of the participant, valuing the subjectivity of the storyteller.

This dissertation research considers how African-American women assemble stories of “growing up” in rural, southern, Port Charles. “Growing up” is used as a metaphor for gender socialization. The analysis works against theories of gender socialization that focus on women’s experience through time from a human development perspective, which socially decontextualizes the maturation process. The perspective taken in this dissertation, in contrast, bring into view respondents’ varied lived experiences and situated realities, realities mediated by race, locality, socio-economic class, family relations, and culture. In a human development perspective, images of “normal” life course development frame experience through time (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000). Rather than looking at gender socialization as a series of phases of development, it is viewed as a storied process, in which participants themselves construct who and what they have become through time. Growing-up stories make meaning out of these experiences.

To get at gender socialization one cannot just ask a participant how they were socialized into particular gender roles, as that is a rather abstract way to think about one’s experiences and an awfully obtuse way to get at a participant to talk about her life. Rather, by asking participants to speak of their growing-up stories, I am able to get at accounts that may be telling of participants’ gender socialization experiences, without
forcing them to respond to a topic that they just may not have thought much about in the past. Accordingly, I focus on the participants’ growing-up narratives, on the explanations they provide for their behaviors and decisions over time, reflecting their constructions of the social and political world around them (James, 2002).

**Methods of Procedure**

**Setting**

Port Charles was chosen as the site for this study as I was familiar with the town and several of its community members after assisting in a research project conducted within the same vicinity. Port Charles is a rural community located in Florida. The town of Port Charles is located within a county which contains a population size of less than 15,000 individuals, and thus may be defined as rural (U.S. Census, 2000). The nearest city to Port Charles, with a population of over 200,000, is University Town; located about 25 miles due southwest (U.S. Census, 2000). Demographic statistics by race or gender are not available for Port Charles, specifically. However, it is located within a county in which 35.3% of the population is female; in comparison to the county in which University Town is located, in which the population is 51.2% female.

Statistics covering the entire population of Port Charles show that 23.2% of the people live below the poverty level; compared to 14.4% statewide in Florida; with a median household income of $25,347 and 8.6% of individuals aged twenty-five or older unemployed (U.S. Census, 2000). A significant minority of the population (31.8%) in Port Charles is Black, with the majority being White, Non-Hispanic (62.6%). Industries providing employment in Port Charles are educational, health, and social services (26.9%); public administration (19.9%); and retail trade (14.0%). Many of the jobs within the educational, health, and social services sector are associated with a state
prison, located on the outskirts of town. In terms of educational level, for a population twenty-five years and over, 72.7% have a high school education or higher, while only 9.8% hold a bachelor’s degree or higher, and an even fewer 5.0% hold a graduate or professional degree. In terms of marital status, 26.4% of individuals aged 15 and older have never been married, 46.3% are currently married, 4.0% are separated, 8.7% are widowed, and 14.6% are divorced. University Town is also a source of jobs for participants, as a state university and a number of assisted-living and mental health institutions provide service-sector jobs.

**Participants**

Interviews were conducted with 20 Southern, rural, African American, women, between the ages of 18 and 65 (see Appendix A, Table A-1, for further participant demographic information). Participants were chosen using a modified snowball-sampling technique. Snowball sampling is an oft-used technique in accessing difficult-to-find populations to participate in research studies (Bernard, 2000, p.179).

The difficulty in accessing rural populations to participate in research on sensitive topics; such as relationship experiences, family matters, and one’s sexuality; is well noted by other researchers (Brown, 2003; Watters & Biernacki, 1989; Wiebel, 1990). Researchers working in rural areas note that guarding one’s reputation is very important to participants in the interview process (Brown, 2003; Shenk, 1998; Warr & Hillier, 1997). In writing of her experience conducting research on older women living in rural communities, Dena Shenk (1998) noted: "Living in small communities where everyone knows everyone else, [the participants] are very concerned about public opinion and the impressions of their neighbors and friends" (p. 22).
While participants all share the characteristics of being rural African-American women living in the south, their situated realities differ in terms of socio-economic status, drug use history, social support networks, religiosity, family background, social problems background, and a myriad of other circumstances.

**The Role of Key Informant.**

A key informant (Quanda), who was also a participant in the study, was chosen due to my prior acquaintance with her and my knowledge of her previous work with individuals within the targeted community. Quanda worked as a rural health outreach worker for a community-based organization operating within the same office complex where I worked during the data collection phase. Prior to the interview process I was in touch with Quanda on an almost daily basis, as she provided me with names and contact information of women within the community whom she felt might be willing to participate in hour-long interviews with me. Many of the participants, then, were women with whom Quanda was friendly, were her relatives, or were individuals whom she had previously worked with in providing health outreach services while on the job.

Through Quanda I had an “in” on accessing participants from a rural community. She was able to provide me with a list of women whom she thought might be both interested in participating in this project and might provide a good interview, in which the participant was able to elaborate upon her growing-up experiences. In explaining her participant selection strategy when collecting elderly women’s life stories in rural Minnesota, Shenk (1998) writes that she chose to focus on participants who were able to provide a “…clear sense of [their] own values and provide consistent descriptions of [their] life stor[ies] and adaptations to life's challenges” (p. 10). Shenk chose participants who were able to provide rich descriptions of their memories and experiences.
Quanda provided me with an initial list of possible participants for the study and I contacted these women, first by letter and then by phone, to see if they would be interested in participating in an interview. Upon contact with a potential participant I arranged an interview appointment with her and wrote down her contact information and house address, as most interviews were conducted within participants’ homes. Several participants also provided me with the names of friends or relatives whom they felt might also be interested in participating in the project. I subsequently contacted these women about participating in an interview.

**Human Subjects Approval**

An IRB form was approved by the University of Florida in January 2004. Upon approval, beginning in February 2004, and over the course of five months, I met with each participant on a one-on-one basis to conduct a semi-structured, informal interview. At the beginning of the interview process I discussed the informed consent form with the participants. Information about the purpose and goal of the research, participant selection process, anonymity of participants’ interview data, audio taping of the interview, the voluntary nature of the study, length of the study, and monetary incentive for completing the interview were provided. Participants were remunerated $20 for completing an interview. The confidentiality of the interviews was emphasized to the participants. I answered any questions posed by the participant, collected her signed informed consent form, and provided her with a copy of the signed form. I explained to the participant that, as an anthropologist, I was interested in gender socialization and that I wanted to learn about her past, how she described her life and herself, and what life events and experiences were meaningful to her. I also explained to the participant that I was going to fully transcribe her interview and that some of her growing-up experiences might
appear in print, in this dissertation or in a published article or book. Once again, I emphasized that all interview data was confidential and that participant and place names would all receive pseudonyms within the text.

**Interview Guide**

The interview was semi-structured in nature: as only one interview was conducted with each participant, a written list of questions was needed so as to elicit information on a variety of topics related to growing-up which might not be gathered using a more free-wheeling, unstructured approach (Bernard, 2000). The interview was conducted with an interview guide in mind so as to collect data that was both reliable and comparative in nature, as one goal of this dissertation is to get at the broad cultural discourses that participants use in describing their growing-up experiences (Bernard, 2000). Interview questions were designed to prompt participants to talk about what was meaningful to them, in terms of growing up, rather than to force them to answer with canned responses. In trying to elicit what was meaningful to the participants, interviews took on more of a conversational format than a question/response format. Sharon Kaufman’s work, *The Ageless Self: Sources of Meaning in Late Life* (1986), and Jaber F. Gubrium’s work, *Speaking of Life: Horizons of Meaning for Nursing Home Residents* (1993), both guided the construction of the interview guide, both in terms of questions used and in terms of the way that the interview guide was structured by section (to refer to the interview guide, see Appendix B).

In discussing her method for constructing an interview guide in her research on the collective meanings of aging for older individuals, Kaufman writes that she wrote up questions that could be broadly interpreted, so as to avoid forcing participants to answer detailed questions that may have influenced preordained responses. The purpose of her
interviews was to gather stories in which she learned experiential details that were pertinent to the participants. The questions in this dissertation’s interview guide are constructed with similar aims in mind: I was interested in gathering stories from participants and learning about how their life experiences inform their growing-up stories. The guiding principle of the interview guide was to get participants to talk about what was meaningful to them in terms of growing up, and how they described their lives in the present in relation to their growing-up stories. In particular, the interview guide contained questions chosen to inform the three analytical questions: first, what cultural worlds and related identities were expressed as participants told their growing-up stories; second, what were the sources of these worlds and identities, and third, how did these (re)sources (discourses) operate in shaping the identities of the participants?

The interview guide was structured into five sections; focusing on life events, the present, a life review, the participant’s identity, and growing up (see Appendix B for a copy of the interview guide). Each of these sections contains specific questions. However, probes—or questions formed off of participant responses—were used to get a more in-depth response from participants. The interview guide was designed to elicit narratives from participants that span the range of their life course experiences, linking these life course experiences with stories of growing up.

The “life events” section contained questions on experiences, events, and people who were deemed as influential throughout the participant’s life. These questions served to get at both “connection building” and “socioculturally-situated identity and relationship building” tasks informed by Gee (1999), as participants were asked questions
which focused on both past and present experiences, their experiences with others, and the variety of roles that they have taken over the course of their lives.

The “present” section contained questions about the circumstances of the participant’s everyday life. In one question participants were asked to describe their typical day so as to get at the situated contingencies that they face in their everyday realities. This question, in particular, gets at the ways that participants build particular cultural worlds for themselves. The “life review” section related to the “present” section in that it contained questions that prompted the participant to make connections between her present circumstances, her past experiences, and a potential future. In this section, the participant was asked to discuss her varied experiences while growing up, so as to break down her growing-up story into chapters of influential experiences. For example, in one question the participant was asked to describe her most important successes while growing up. In another question she was asked to describe any disappointments that she experienced while growing up. Both questions served to get at influential experiences that were taken up by the participant in shaping her growing-up story, as well as to elicit a discussion of the situated contingencies that the participant faced in making meaning of her growing-up experiences.

In the “identity” section, participants were asked to reflect on their self perceptions and what they feel have been others’ perceptions of them. For instance, in one question they were asked to reflect upon their high school experiences and talk about how they felt about themselves when they were in high school. After this question they were asked how they thought other people felt about them in high school. These questions served to get at participant identity construction, both reflecting the cultural worlds and identities
that they claimed for themselves, as well as the identities with which others may have situated them.

While the other sections of the interview guide ask the participant to reflect on their life experiences, the “growing up” section of the interview guide gets at growing-up stories more explicitly; containing questions that ask the participant to story her own growing-up experiences and to discuss the meaning of growing up. A number of the questions in this section related to participant conceptions of what it means to be an adult, and what are the related responsibilities that one incurs in becoming an adult. The “growing up” questions were particularly illuminative of the expectations that participants face within their families, communities, and social networks.

**Interview Process**

Between one and four participants were interviewed per week, depending both on the participant’s schedule, as well as my own work schedule. I wrote out some field notes during the interview, including questions that I felt that I should ask the participant during the interview, prompted from what was said earlier in the interview. After the interview was completed I wrote out more detailed field notes, which consisted of my impressions of the participant and the interview event. Interview locales were chosen by participants so as to provide them with a comfortable and secure location to talk about their growing-up experiences. The hour-long interviews were primarily conducted in participants’ homes, although several interviews were conducted in a park nearby to participants’ homes, one was conducted in the participants’ mother’s home, and one interview was conducted in my work office, as it was conveniently located to the participant’s place of work.
Interviews were audio-taped and both interviews and field notes were transcribed in order to analyze both the participants’ life course perspectives and the use of cultural discourses within their narratives (see Bernard, 2000 about various transcription requirements per research method). They were not transcribed according to all of the standards as set out by Gee (1999), in which stress and intonation, lines, stanzas, macro-structures (the structure of the story) or micro-lines (the sentences of speech) are identified. Regarding the rhetoric of transcription, Elliot Mischler (2003) writes:

There is no one standard, ideal, and comprehensive mode of transcription—a singular and true re-presentation of spoken discourse. Transcriptions of speech, like other forms of representation in science, reflexively document and affirm theoretical positions about relations between language and meaning. Different transcripts are constructions of different worlds, each designed to fit our particular theoretical assumptions and to allow us to explore their implications. (p. 310)

The interviews in this project were transcribed paying attention to words and their function, one standard as set forth by Gee (1999), as the aim of this research is not so much a micro-linguistic discourse analysis which gets at the varied ways that participants and researchers construct discourse according to sentence structure, turn taking, and pauses, as it was to get at the ways that participants utilize various discourses in constructing and making meaning of their gender socialization processes. Transcribed interviews and field notes were preliminarily coded to get at key words and phrases in the data. This helped pinpoint the situated meanings that these words and phrases might hold within the data (Gee, 1999).

**Data Analysis Methods**

**Discourse Analysis**

Discourse analysis focuses on both the organization of talk-in-practice and the discursive resources that these practices draw upon (Potter, 1996, p. 3). Teun van Dijk
(1990) writes of discourse as “both a specific form of language use, and as a specific form of social interaction, interpreted as a complete communicative event in a social situation” (p. 164). In his use of discourse analysis, van Dijk (1990, 1993, 2001) focuses on both the shared social representations (SRs) of a groups’ members, which might include elements such as stereotypes and prejudices, and the more cognitive representations of individuals, called situation models, which are produced through personal experiences and interpretations. Van Dijk (1990) suggests that models connect more generalized social representations to individual uses of the social representations “in social perception, interaction, and discourse….models play a central role, at the interpersonal communicative level, in the group-based reproduction of SRs through discourse” (p. 167).

The approach taken in this data analysis is guided by Gee’s (1999) illustrative work detailing suggestions for conducting a discourse analysis. He writes that the purpose of a discourse analysis “…involves asking questions about how language, at a given time and place, is used to construe the aspects of the situation network as realized at that time and place and how the aspects of the situation network simultaneously give meaning to that language…” (p. 92). Discourse has two levels of meaning in the context of this analysis. Gee (1999) differentiates between discourse, with a small “d” and Discourse, with a big “D” in his illustrative text on discourse analysis.

Discourse (with a small “d”) means language in use, or the conversations and stories that individuals assemble to describe their individual experiences, and the context of that language-in-practice. Discourses (with a big “D”) are socially accepted ways of using language, in which an individual enacts specific identities and activities. A
socially-situated identity (henceforth referred to as a “situated identity”) is the type of person one is seeking to enact (Gee, 1999). These situated identities are constructed as cultural models thought to be found in the community. "One way to look at cultural models is as images or storylines or descriptions of simplified worlds in which prototypical events unfold. They are our 'first thoughts' or taken-for-granted assumptions about what is 'typical' or 'normal'" (Gee, 1999, p. 59).

Three of Gee’s (1999) building tasks were taken into consideration in drawing conclusions from these narrative accounts and to narrow down cultural worlds and related situated identities into several data chapters, as well as to analyze cultural discourses reproduced within the narratives. Through these three building tasks this dissertation looks at the linkages that participants make in order to build worlds, construct identities and relationships, and make connections between their varied life experiences. Gee constructs several questions to go along with each building task. Questions from each of these three building tasks have been chosen to inform the data analysis. Gee’s (1999) world-building questions, cited verbatim (p. 93), are:

What are the situated meanings of some of the words and phrases that seem important in the situation?

What situated meanings and values seem to be attached to places, times, bodies, objects, artifacts, and institutions relevant in this situation?

What cultural models and networks of models (master models) seem to be at play in connecting and integrating these situated meanings to each other?

What institutions and/or Discourses are being (re-)produced in this situation and how are they being stabilized or transformed in the act?

His “world building” task was chosen as it gets at the ways that language is worked by participants so as to place themselves within certain cultural worlds.
Gee’s (1999) socio-culturally-situated identity and relationship building questions, cited verbatim (p. 94) are:

What relationships and identities (roles, positions), with their concomitant personal, social, and cultural knowledge and beliefs (cognition), feelings (affect), and values, seem to be relevant to the situation?

In terms of identities, activities, and relationships, what Discourses are relevant (and irrelevant) in the situation? How are they made relevant (and irrelevant), and in what ways?

His “socio-culturally-situated identity and relationship building” task was chosen as it gets at how participants situate themselves with social identities related to the worlds within which they place themselves.

Gee’s (1999) connection building questions, cited verbatim (p. 94) are:

What sorts of connections — looking backward and/or forward — are made within and across utterances and large stretches of the interaction?

What sorts of connections are made to previous or future interactions, to other people, ideas, texts, things, institutions, and Discourses outside the current situation?

How do connections of both [preceding building questions] help (together with situated meanings and cultural models) to constitute ‘coherence’ — and what sort of ‘coherence’ in the situation?

His “connection building” task was chosen so as to get at the ways that participants assemble linkages or relationships, both in the past and in the present, used in making meaning of their growing-up experiences. In other words, the focus of the data analysis was to get at what the participants’ growing-up stories told about how they conceive of their social identities and relationships, the worlds they live in, and the connections that they build between the worlds they live in and the way that they conceive of themselves in these worlds.
In world building, the researcher analyzes her data to get at the situated meanings that the participant uses to construct her social reality and the “worlds” with which she identifies. For instance, one participant constructed a separation between her drug-using world and her mothering world. She presented herself as an independent character, “not giving a damn” about what others thought about her drug use. However, when it came to her own children, the participant feared that her children knew about her drug use, or that the community was biased against her children due to her drug use. In other words, the world in which the participant was enacting her story affected the characters, plot, and themes of this story.

In socio-culturally-situated identity and relationship building, the researcher analyzes her data to get at the situated meanings that the participant uses to construct her identity and relevant relationships. This task also gets at the participant’s values, beliefs, and ways of knowing that impinge on the participant’s behaviors and interactions with others. For example, from data analysis one could interpret that many of the participants do not form close relationships with other women. Participants often state that they don’t trust other women; that “they’ll stab you in the back,” and that friendship with other women “means trouble.” One might then ask, in relation to this building task, how is the participant’s lack of a female social support network (this situated reality) linked to her social identity?

In connection building, the researcher analyzes her data to better understand how the participant’s narratives on past and possible future experiences are linked to her present, situated reality. This part of the analysis focuses on the linkages the participant makes between her past, present, and her perceived future experiences. For instance, it
was noted that several of the participants discussed past sexual abuse experiences which occurred during their childhoods. One question to be asked might be: how does the participant link this childhood sexual abuse with her present reality? How does she link this past sexual abuse to her future endeavors? Or does she even foreground her past sexual abuse experiences in constructing her present reality or future possibilities?

In analyzing the data, I looked for particular Discourses that participants used to situate themselves within particular cultural worlds. Participants “worlded” themselves so as to situate themselves with a variety of identities. In responding to the first analytical question, which focuses on the discourses of participants’ growing-up stories, this dissertation looks at how participants’ stories or accounts reflect certain ways of speaking about growing up. For example, do some of the women narratively “anchor” their growing-up stories in relation to living in small towns or rural areas? Do some anchor their accounts more in terms of being African American? Are there some accounts that don’t make use of their “objective” circumstances at all? What resources are used in participants’ accounts of gender socialization? These discourses, or patterns of accounts, are used to organize the empirical material.

The procedure that was used in responding to these building task questions is informed by Gee’s (1999) “process of discourse analysis.” Interviews and field notes were transcribed as closely as possible to what I heard on the tape recording. In step one of the analysis, I reviewed the entire collection of interview transcripts and field notes and arrived at two cultural discourses that participants used in assembling their growing-up stories. Participants used Afrocentric and American Dream Discourses to situate themselves within a number of cultural worlds. I conducted a thematic analysis of the
data with these two Discourses in mind, breaking down participant growing-up stories according to Discourse.

In step two of the analysis, I used Gee’s building-task questions as guiding lights in getting at the cultural resources that participants used to fulfill these Discourses. In particular, I focused on the way that these resources, or cultural discourses, were used by participants situate themselves with a variety of identities and cultural worlds. In terms of cultural resources used by participants to “world” themselves and situate themselves with particular identities, I picked out key words or phrases in the data that got at situated, “on-the-spot,” meanings of the data. The data analysis process is reflected in the organization of this dissertation.

Both parts of this dissertation speak to the cultural discourses derived from step one of data analysis, with chapters 4 through 7 divided according to situated identities and related cultural worlds identified in step two of the analysis. The four chapters are laid out with an “exemplar story” presented in the beginning of each chapter, followed by comparative data which takes the exemplar into account in the remainder of the chapter. Exemplar stories are used to analyze narratives in the context of whole interviews. In this regard, the researcher can present a more holistic picture or context behind how the participant situates herself within particular cultural worlds. A central reason behind presenting an exemplar story is to illuminate key incidents within a narrative that may be used in further comparative analysis of the data. The exemplar story provides an in-depth focus on one participant’s narrative at the beginning of each chapter, allowing for a more accurate “voice” in the representation of a situated identity (Gee, 1999). Mutually supporting data is provided by providing both an exemplar story and linking it to
comparative data. This helps to achieve a degree of validity in the data analysis (Gee, 1999; Emerson, 2004; Flyvbjerg, 2004).

Exemplar stories are useful in presenting a more nuanced view of reality than may be provided through thematic comparisons of data, as it serves as a model for a particular situated identity and may be linked, through comparative analysis, to other interview data. Thus, an in-depth (locally unfolding) analysis of situated identity construction is first provided for the reader, with a zoomed out, broader comparative perspective subsequently presented in order to showcase the cultural model. Exemplars, or paradigmatic cases, are those that serve as prototypes or reference points in analysis, providing a guiding point in comparative analysis (Flyvbjerg, 2004).

**Limitations of the Study**

One limitation of this study is that interviews were not transcribed taking into account the micro-evidence, including pauses, interruptions, and narrative stanzas, of interview text as suggested by Gee (1999) in his introduction to discourse analysis methods. However, as might be pointed out, my intention in this study was not to analyze the micro-evidence of narrative construction to get at microstructures of power present in discourse. Rather, my approach is to look at the macrostructures, or larger Discourses, out there which hold power in themselves, in shaping the form that participants’ narratives take. Gee (1999) concludes his suggestions for transcript detail, suggesting that “ultimately it is the purposes of the analyst that determine how narrow or broad the transcript must be. The validity of the analysis is not a matter of how detailed one's transcript is. It is a matter of how the transcript works together with all the other elements of the analysis to create a 'trustworthy' analysis" (p. 88-89).
Another limitation of this study is my admitted subjectivity during the research process. Kirin Narayan and Kenneth M. George (2002) write of personal narratives as being culturally “storyworthy”: "By looking at the subjects that people choose to dwell on in narrating their lives, we are in a position to see what most matters to them, from their point of view" (p. 817). Within a narrative approach, not only is the participant providing interpretations of her own experiences; the researcher’s position, in particular her methodological interests, guides the whole narrative interview process. This dissertation is subjective in regard to the larger matters of research agenda and epistemological stance of the study, in terms of data collection, such as choice of participants included in the study (per Quanda’s suggestion) and the questions included in the interview guide, and in terms of the data analysis procedure. Reviewing the methods used in collecting personal narratives, the researcher has input on the entire interview process by designing the format of the interview and the interview questions, choosing study participants, and shaping the analysis of the interviews (Narayan & George, 2002). Thus, the interviewer shapes the stories that are told by the participants. Both the interviewer and the participant, then, are actively involved in constructing meaning in the interview process (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995).

**Summary**

This dissertation takes a social constructionist theoretical orientation, focusing on participant activity in asking what resources participants use to interpret their experiences and how these resources are used to make sense of their experiences. The dissertation is ontologically informed by objective idealism, which accepts that there is a world of collectively shared understandings to be used in the meaning-making process. These shared understandings, or Discourses, are used as resources in participant narratives. By
asking participants to speak of their growing-up stories, I take a narrative approach to gender socialization, asking the participants to tell me *in their own words* about their gender socialization experiences. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with twenty, Southern, rural, African-American women. Accordingly, I focus on the participants’ growing-up narratives, on the explanations they provide for their behaviors and decisions over time, reflecting their constructions of the world around them.

The analysis approach taken in this dissertation is guided by Gee’s (1999) work detailing suggestions for conducting a discourse analysis. Discourses (with a big “D”) are socially accepted ways of using language, in which an individual enacts specific identities and activities. Three of Gee’s building tasks were taken into consideration to analyze cultural Discourses reproduced within participant narratives. Through these three building tasks, this dissertation looks at the linkages that participants make in order to build worlds, construct identities and relationships, and form connections between their varied life experiences. Through a world building task, the researcher analyzes her data to get at the situated meanings that the participant uses to construct her social reality and the “worlds” with which she identifies. In socio-culturally-situated identity and relationship building, the researcher analyzes her data to get at the situated meanings that the participant uses to construct her identity and relevant relationships. Finally, in the connection building task, the researcher analyzes her data to better understand how the participants’ narratives on past and possible future experiences are linked to her present, situated, reality.

In step one of the analysis, I reviewed the entire collection of interview transcripts and field notes and arrived at two cultural Discourses that participants used in assembling
their growing-up stories. In step two, I conducted a thematic analysis of the data with these two discourses in mind, breaking down participant growing-up stories according to Discourse. In step three of the analysis, I used Gee’s (1999) building-task questions to highlight the cultural models found in these Discourses. In particular, I focused on the way that these models guided participant stories in terms of situating themselves with various identities and placing themselves within corresponding cultural worlds.
In 2003, the Black Eyed Peas, an alternative hip hop band, released a hit song called “Where is the love.” The lyrics comments on the gradual separation of the African-American community from traditional values of love, communal linkages, spirituality, and unity. It talks about people within African American communities losing their connections with one another: “I feel the weight of the world on my shoulder. As I’m gettin’ older, y’all people gets colder. Most of us only care about money-makin’. Selfishness got us followin’ our own direction.” The song continues by questioning the loss of the core values of the community: “Yo’, whatever happened to the values of humanity. Whatever happened to the fairness in equality. Instead of spreading love we spreading animosity. Lack of understanding, leading lives away from unity” (Black Eyed Peas, 2003).

“Where is the love” promotes an Afrocentric vision’ focused on community, humanity, and equality; at the expense of material greed. The lyrics call out to a father figure, God, to provide guidance and to bring back the love within the community: “Father, Father, Father help us. Send us some guidance from above. ‘Cause people got me, got me questionin’. Where is the love (Love)” (Black Eyed Peas, 2003). The message from this song is similar to the themes of spirituality and connectedness that pervade participants’ narratives of growing up in the rural South. A situated identity of being spiritual was assembled by participants using several plotlines, both focusing on spirituality as an adaptive mechanism, as well as on spirituality as being a part of one’s
worldview. In conceiving of one’s spirituality and participation in religion as an adaptive mechanism, participants situated themselves within cultural worlds of “learning patience,” “being blessed,” and “gaining wisdom.” In constructing particular worldviews through a being spiritual situated identity, participants situated themselves within cultural worlds of “growing up in the church” and “being themselves.” They also constructed cultural worldviews which recognize that through an intimate relationship with God one is able to “do the right thing” and cultural worldviews that focus on the “larger plan” of interconnection between all community members, in which participants construct the church as a central social scene.

In the next section I focus on Luella Mae’s story of being spiritual. Her story of spirituality is an exemplar of many of the attributes of being spiritual from an Afrocentric perspective. She constructs a being spiritual situated identity primarily through a discussion of the health problems that she has suffered from for the last twenty years. Stories of being spiritual will be further elaborated through other participants’ related comments in subsequent sections.

“I Don’t Ask God to Move the Mountain, Just Give Me the Strength to Climb It”: Luella Mae

Luella Mae is a sixty-one year old woman who has two sons and two daughters, all of whom are grown. Her two daughters, Karen and Corentine, as well as her niece, Quanda, were also participants in this study. Luella Mae has lived in the same double-wide trailer since 1966. She currently lives with her daughter Karen; her daughter Corentine lives nearby in an apartment next door to Quanda. Luella Mae has had three husbands, has been married to two of them, but they have all passed away. Her last “husband” (to whom she was not married), passed away about two years ago.
Luella Mae links her own spiritual trajectory to significant events in her life surrounding either her own illnesses and related health problems or those of other close relatives. By accepting the word of God, she is able to interpret his messages (when she or others become ill) and transcend these health obstacles so as to write a positive outcome story. Jacqueline Mattis (2002) writes of women being able to transcend their own desperate life circumstances through their relationship with a higher power—they are able to re-envision and recreate their own destiny, as well as the destiny of their loved ones through their intimate relationship with God (p. 314).

Luella Mae began her growing-up story by describing a childhood in which her mother died when she was two-years old and her father died when she was nine. She was forced to move around during these early years, to stay with relatives who could take care of her. Eventually, she ended up in a small town just outside of Port Charles, where she lived with her aunt and her other siblings. She went on to trace her work history, in which she spent much of her life working at a garment factory in Port Charles, sewing and pressing pants, but also worked off-and-on as a nursing attendant and as a custodian at the nearby state mental hospital. She is now retired, due to the debilitating arthritis from which she suffers as a result of a life of hard work, which keeps her in a wheelchair and makes it difficult for her to move around or take care of herself on her own.

Luella Mae began her spirituality narrative by describing the heart attack that she suffered back in 1995, saying that she did not feel that it was important enough an event to stop her from performing her ritual obligations of attending church and preparing the Sunday dinner. In doing so, she places herself firmly within a cultural world of spirituality, and with a role of being the religious leader of her family. She reasons that
to forego these ritual obligations and seek immediate treatment at a hospital would be to “give in.”

However, she speaks of seeking treatment for her heart attack the following Monday, after God gave her the message that she needed to go to the hospital:

On Monday morning I got up early, about…four o’clock. And I came in here [to the kitchen] and sat around, drinkin’ my coffee and smoking. (Chuckles) And smoking! And so the Lord, he just, he in my mind, about 5:30, “you better put them cigarettes down, leave your coffee alone! And you better get up, get a bath. Put on some clothes and get to University Town Hospital!”

Luella Mae’s intimate relationship with God provides her with the guidance she needs in facing this significant health event.

Luella Mae continues her story, saying that she drove herself to the hospital that day, because there was no one around to drive her. She was so ill that when she got to the emergency room that the doctor immediately put her in a room and ordered her to chew some aspirin, realizing that she was in deep trouble. She relays the words of her doctor, who told her, “there’s most definitely something wrong with your heart” and that “you better be glad…that you came in today too.” Not only does she affirm that God was wise in telling her to get to the hospital after her heart attack, but another father-like figure, the doctor serving the role as God’s messenger, reaffirms this sage advice.

Luella Mae concludes her narrative on this significant event by providing an epilogue of sorts. In 1997, she went back to the same hospital for another health-related problem. When she arrived at the hospital, the staff who had worked with her before were surprised that she was still alive. She colorfully relives this reencounter with the hospital staff:

I went back in ’97 and I heard the doctors out there, they were. And one of them say, “Luella Mae! Boy I thought she was dead, dear God!” I said, “Well, no. Here I am! Come over here so you can help me, please!” So they came on in and they
moved me in. So that’s when they said, (with a whisper) “Gee, I don’t know why she’s still here!” They told me in ’95 there wasn’t nothing they could do for my heart. “Yeah, cause you got a heart attack, that was the problem.” And…they said the arteries, which was all plugged up. And they couldn’t do the balloon thing. And they couldn’t transfer it in a…artery from the leg to the heart, because the heart is too weak. Oh thank you Lord! Thank you Lord! Thank you Lord! (Laughs). Well in ’97, see I heard ‘em say I was supposed to have been dead again.

Luella Mae narrates this scene from the past by applying various voices to the different characters (staff members) who she encountered on her return to the hospital. She constructs her survival as a miracle in the eyes of the hospital staff members. She concludes her story by thanking God for her survival—*he* is the reason that she has survived, and not necessarily the care that she received at the hospital—and reemphasizes the miracle of her survival in saying that she was supposed to have been dead a long time ago.

In 1999, Luella Mae’s leg developed a blood clot. She introduces the notion of the “power of God to work miracles” in this next significant health care event, describing how her daughter prayed through the night while staying with her in the Intensive Care Unit, and asked God to save her mother so that she would not have to be alone: “Seem like it was yesterday or this morning. And then [Karen] say, she stayed all night one night. And…read the Bible and prayed and she say, ‘Mom, I don’t have nobody. I don’t have no husband. I don’t have any kids! Please don’t go momma!’” Not only is prayer important to Luella Mae: through this example, Luella Mae shows that her daughter is ingrained with the same *being spiritual* mentality as herself. Karen prays all night long so as to work a miracle for her mother, demonstrating the notion of interconnected spirituality within the family. As a result, Luella Mae is still around to tell her story.

Luella Mae continues this theme of the “power of God to work miracles” by presenting a new health event story, this time about an asthma attack that her grandson
had a couple of years ago while working at a nearby feed mill. When she found out
about her grandson’s condition she rushed over to the Port Charles Hospital emergency
room, where she met up with her grandson’s mother, and her daughter and son.
Eventually, the problem was so serious that her grandson was airlifted to the University
Town hospital so that he could receive better treatment. She begins her story of miracles
by speaking of her grandson’s hospital room:

The helicopter came. And they worked on him for a while. And guess what, when
they took him to University Town Hospital, they went to direct to the fifth floor!
The fifth floor! That’s where I was! And the bed was in the same place. I, I want
to say same bed, you know, because it’s the same place where I was. Same
room…same place, bed turned the same. Cause, you know, they all told me that
same. And so…he wasn’t even breathin’ on his own!

Luella Mae sets the scene for a miracle about to happen, in that her grandson has been
delivered to the very same bed that she was in when her own health miracle took place
just a short time before. Just as she does in her own significant health event narrative,
she emphasizes the severity of her grandson’s attack through her description of his state-
of-well-being upon arrival at the hospital. Luella Mae continues her narrative, describing
a scene later that night, when her family and their pastor gathered in the hospital waiting
room and prayed for her grandson’s survival:

[The pastor] prayed. And so one of the doctors came by as [the pastor] was
prayin’. And [the doctor] said, “I’ve heard lots of prayers.” He said, “but I never
heard one like that one before!” He said, “that was an awesome prayer!” And he
say, he stood there, you know, for…a few seconds and listened. And say then,
when he left there, he went to the patient’s room, to check him. The vital signs had
started going. (Knocks the table with her hand a couple of times for good luck).
Somebody’s watchin’ out for us!

Luella Mae constructs a story of miracles for her grandson, in which he regained his
health due to his family’s powerful appeal to God. Situating herself and her family as an
entity of spiritual strength, she notes that even a (busy) doctor was struck by the power of
their prayer. Luella Mae invokes an aura of power in this scene by applying a medicalized discourse in her narrative, giving her grandson the identity of “patient,” and casting the doctor once again as God’s messenger. She concludes this significant-health-event story by claiming that God watches out for not only her, but her whole family. Through prayer, whether it is communally or individually voiced, a whole family may be blessed.

Luella Mae provides an epilogue to her story, linking her ability to “be blessed,” health-wise, with her attention to ritual obligation and belief in God’s power. After her grandson’s asthma attack, she emphasized the importance of going to church to her whole family. As the ritual head of her family, Luella Mae constructs a spiritual identity for herself in which not only does she hold responsibility for the sanctity of her own soul, but also for the salvation of her entire family:

I tried to explain to my daughter that they go to church and…and serve the Lord, and this one [Karen] knows…how crucial it is that we all…be serious about serving God. Because the end of time is not far. They say that they’ve already started building for the Anti-Christ. And that means Jesus is coming again. And I believe if you don’t believe, it’s time to start thinkin’ about believin’! Because it’s crucial for everybody, and the Bible says we gonna burn in hell. And the Bible tells us so. In the Revelations. And I don’t wanna burn in hell! I done caught enough hell right here! (Knocks the table with her hands three times).

Luella Mae constructs her grandson’s health crisis as a wake-up call for the rest of her family. God was sending her family a message to go to church through the miracled survival that he cast upon her grandson. She speaks of her daughter, Karen, as an example of someone who is already on the right track—as she was saved a number of years ago and lives a sanctified life in which her daily actions are guided by her religious principles and convictions. She contrasts her daughter’s spirituality with her sons’ relative aspirituality, linking their lifestyles (in which they are both known crack cocaine
users) to their lack of spirituality and faith in God. Applying an Afrocentric framework, she links her sons’ lifestyle, in which they pursue an individually-oriented activity at the expense of the communal health of their families, to their aspirituality.

I told my boys, I say, “ya’ll need to get ya’ll self right.” Because I know they not right, they using drugs! I said, because the Lord...(Chuckles) So I just told them, I say, “now see, I almost died. And [my grandson] almost died.” “Ya’ll need to get yourself together to come to church and serve the Lord.” So, my one son says, “oh, that’s just a coincidence of some kind!” And I said, “God can do things on, to get your attention!”

God is calling out to Luella Mae’s sons to “get on track,” spiritually speaking.

Luella Mae continues with this theme of family connection through spirituality, invoking an image similar to the saying “the family that prays together stays together.” She begins a new story, casting herself once again as the spiritual leader within her family and intimate relationships. This story centers on her attempts to get her third “husband” to join her church. She begins a story exemplifying her spiritual leadership, relaying how she helped guide her husband to the church:

[God] had been talking to me about going to church! And I had me a man at the time. Honey, I wanted my man! (Knocks table with fist.) I wanted to go to church. But I wanted him to go too! And I wanted us to join this church together, the Holiness Church. But! God let me see! That I could die and leave the man to do what he wanted to do! And I’ll be dead! (Chuckles) So, when I got back [from the hospital] and was able to get up and, and could, I went to church!

God has told Luella Mae, through her health crises, that she needs to go to church and she has taken up this message in earnest. She constructs a story of righteous independence, in which she will not allow herself to be damned due to her husband’s own spiritual negligence. While she would like for him to attend church with her, her spiritual obligations come before her obligations to her primary partner.

Luella Mae continues this story by constructing a similar cause-and-effect framework for her husband’s spiritual conversion to the one that she, herself, experienced
through her significant health events. She sets a scene on a Sunday morning, in which her husband is lazily sprawled on their floor, wallowing in his lack of faith in God, and she is setting off to go to church services:

Whooo! [My husband], he stretched out in the middle of the floor, right there... He landed in the middle of the floor, I be stepping across, I say, “you’re not going?” “No, I’m sick, I don’t feel like it.” I said, “I’ll be back. Going to church, I’ll, I’ll be-right-straight-back! I’m not gonna stay in town and I’m not going to the store, I’m coming straight home!” And guess what, as time went on...he used to curse about the preacher, “the preacher ain’t no so-and-so and good.” I said, “And you ain’t either!” (Laughs) And uh, [my husband] was kind of skittish and scary man, I...uh, like I’m a gonna hit him or somethin’. (Laughs) Heh, so finally...he started to get sick. I didn’t really know it then either. But then he started going to church!

Luella Mae assembles a story of spiritual salvation for her husband in which he, too, receives a message from God that in order to be physically healthy he must also be spiritually healthy. She constructs her husband as being afraid of her strong spirituality, assembling an identity of such spiritual strength that he sees her as a potential abuser—one who might literally hit him over the head with religion.

Luella Mae provides a context for her characterization of her husband as “spiritually lazy,” telling of a time when her church pastor came around to her house and her husband was drunk and acted particularly disrespectful toward him. Acting out this scene, she constructs a sort of before-and-after character for husband. Before her husband became ill and realized the importance of going to church, he was so devoid of spirituality that he would actually go so far as to create a scene in front of the pastor. However, after becoming ill and through Luella Mae’s spiritual leadership, he realized the error of his ways and began going to church.

However, Luella Mae points out that her husband claimed self inspiration in his decision to go back to church:
[My husband] finally went up one...we kept going to church, kept going. And I didn’t want to be the first one to go up and join. And then he say, “I didn’t join cause you join! I know you wanted me to join!” I says, “no, I’m going lay here in this shade here. And I’ll walk.” So, he went up one Sunday, and I let him stood there, ‘bout ten minutes, and then I went up. And so, see, God gave me the desire of my heart! But he didn’t do it in my time, he did it in his. So, you gotta learn to wait on him and do what he tell you to do. “You were tellin’ me to go to church?!” He was tellin’ me! I knew that I need to go to church!

Luella Mae constructs herself both as a guide in her husband’s spirituality, while at the same time subservient to God. Through this subservience she has learned to be patient. By “learning patience,” Luella Mae is able to receive a gift from God—that her husband regularly attend church and receive salvation. She speaks of God as having a father-like role in her life by telling her to go to church. Because she obeys his word, she is blessed with her own good health and the spiritual health of her husband.

When probed for more details about her decision to become “more spiritual” after her stays in the hospital, Luella Mae likened her past errant spiritual ways to being those of her own fault. In other words, she did not place the blame for her lack of spirituality or religious attention on her husband or anyone else. She constructs an Afrocentric form of sinful behavior, that she was a sinner because she was too self-focused and did not attend to her own spiritual health, much less to the spiritual health of her loved ones: “I should’ve...been a woman and, uh, initiated and went-ta-church! And God showed me that.”

Following an Afrocentric Discourse of what it means to be a “proper woman” in her community, Luella Mae places the blame for her poor spiritual health firmly on her own shoulders—she is expected to be a spiritual leader, guiding herself and her family to lead lives “on the right track.” Luella Mae interprets the significant health events that she has faced as being messages from God. In effect, he has scolded her, by bestowing ill
health upon her, for her past sinful behavior of not sticking to the path of a righteous woman. Characterizing God as her father and herself as his daughter, she claims that she deserved his beatings: “God showed me [the righteous path] too. When he got threw beatin’ my behind. I have no problem ‘bout getting outta here and goin’ to church.”

From an Afrocentric perspective, Luella Mae has gained the wisdom to attend to her own spiritual health, as well as that of others, and has been blessed by God in her continued good health. During a conversation about race relations in Port Charles, Luella Mae constructed an Afrocentric picture of unified spirituality among all of “God’s creatures.” Towards the end of our interview, however, she spoke of her experiences with segregation in Port Charles in the 1950s and 60s. She linked her previous experiences with racism to her present spiritual identity, foregrounding the Afrocentric attributes of patience and wisdom to describe her reactions to racism:

I don’t…hate white people, but…sometime, you know, when white people come around that are prejudiced, you know, it, it do, do something to ya in your heart. But I, I, I try to get away from hatin’ people, because God made us all! And he made us all different colors for his reasons. You know? But he say “one is no more than the next.”

Through a biblical proverb, Luella Mae constructs a benevolent God in which all individuals are to be treasured as his creation. In turn, those who are prejudiced and sinful are those who do not have the wisdom to understand the sacred interconnection between all people.

Luella Mae concludes her story of spirituality by emphasizing this interconnection between all individuals. She constructs a sort of doomsday story of the present, in which “the world is in a serious state,” gloomily predicting that if “God does not come back, not only in Port Charles…but the whooole Earth” that “the end will be near.” Invoking a similar message to that of the Black Eyed Peas (2003), she says that community members
need to learn to join together and lead lives guided by moral principles which value humanity, equality, the community; and perhaps most importantly, value the word of God.

**Spirituality as Adaptive Mechanism**

Similar to Luella Mae’s story of spirituality as a mechanism for survival, spirituality is constructed by a number of other participants as an adaptive mechanism. Participants invoke it as a mechanism to be used in facing the situated realities of their everyday lives, such as dealing with health problems or with the drug-abuse related problems ever present within their community. Participants construct themselves with spiritual identities in which they are “blessed” by God to overcome their problems, or at least to learn how to deal with them. They also speak of learning patience, through their active religious participation, so that they may overcome the obstacles presented in their jobs and in their relationships with others. Finally, through this active participation, they “gain wisdom” and are able to carry on in life with their heads held high.

**“Being Blessed” as an Adaptive Mechanism**

Participants speak of “being blessed” when referring to their God-given ability to adapt to difficult life events and take them in stride. In constructing a cultural world in which one is blessed, participants speak of receiving a gift from God. Wanda, a thirty-nine year old single mother of a fifteen-year old daughter, speaks of being blessed by God in only having one child, saying “at the age I am now and…things that I see people go through and…having more than one child to worry about—I say I am blessed. I am.” She places herself within a cultural world of being blessed, in which God has given her the gift of having only one child to rear: as a single mother, she could have had a number
of children by now and have had to face the costs of raising these children. As a gift from God, she can truly cherish her one child.

Roxanne, a forty-two year old single mother of five children (including her daughter, Quanda, also a participant in this study) and four stepchildren, speaks of being blessed from a similar perspective to that of Wanda. However, she counts each of her children a gift from God. Having come from a large family, and raising her own large family, has allowed her to be constantly surrounded by love; blessing her with a good life:

It was so much love in my family...‘till...having children wasn’t, like, “don’t have that baby, you can’t afford it!” Or “it's gonna be miserable,” it wasn’t that. It was always...welcome and it was always love and...everybody took care of it, and everybody bought for it and everybody did for it until...it wasn’t no burden on you. Cause it was a big family that’s over, once the baby got here it was, it belongs to everybody. So I guess that’s why the family was so big. And I look at people nowadays, they be saying they only wanna have one child, I’m like...if you only knew. If you have a big, huge family, you’re much happier. You’re much happier. And you have so much love around you just, it’s pathetic...So...I recommend that people have a big family and all that.

Roxanne has gotten her wish from God, being blessed with nine children (five biological children and four step children) of her own. Using an Afrocentric Discourse which links love to a valuation of the family and community, Roxanne works against a social problems discourse which constructs her and other poor Black women as perpetuating a “culture of poverty” by having children when they cannot economically support them. Roxanne turns this discourse on its head: rather than seeing her children as a “miserable burden,” she assembles an Afrocentric story of family, in which her children are everyone’s responsibility and, thus, provide for much happiness.

Roxanne continues her re-working of a social problems discourse on large, poor, Black families, linking the largess of her family (both in terms of its generosity to her and
in terms of its actual size) to her ability to survive in the world. She questions the reasoning behind the notion that larger families make poor people poorer:

You don’t starve because you have a big family. You really don’t starve. You may not eat lobsters and shrimps! But you don’t starve. I mean…God’s made…a way for everybody to make a living and… I think about it now. Even with me, like, being raised on the farm, we had plenty to eat. And now that I’m in University Town…and I had my children and they all, my stepchildren, we never suffered and went to bed hungry. But even at…this rate…where they saying, things cost so much…the county, the city, the state is all…start providing stuff for people, like a family. So it…people shouldn’t starve. I don’t think people have no reason…to find someone starving is because they was just too lazy to ask for it. You know what I’m saying because…even the county have where…they give out food. [The soup kitchen] give out place to stay and you can go to the welfare office…if you’re short of food, and they give you so much groceries per month. You know what I’m saying? So…I don’t think people in…University Town area…should be starving. Because they have so much they offer here in University Town. So…it’s like a big family here. And…and even…Thank God that I’m, I’m able to work and get my own, have my own. But, I’ve even see what program they got where, if you can’t pay your rent, they got money to help you do that. They got plan with the light people…so people that should…you know what I’m saying? So it’s like a big family…right here in University Town. The bigger the family, the better it is. I’ll put it that way. Cause it’s…(whispers emphatically) lots of love!

Roxanne constructs a cultural world for herself, as well as other poorer people in University Town, of being blessed with large families to take care of them. She reworks the notion of “family” to include not only actual family members, but also other vital community institutions, such as welfare agencies which help to serve the poor people in her community. She assembles a story in which all community members are part of one big family—if they do not take advantage of the beneficial aspects of being a part of this large family, then that it is their own, individual, fault. In other words, if an individual does not value being a part of this big family than he/she does not recognize the gift received from God to be a part of such a giving community. “God has made a way for everyone to make a living,” and for an individual not to seek help from these agencies means that they are lacking in spiritual awareness. Applying an Afrocentric Discourse,
which says that individual strength comes from communal and familial cohesion, Roxanne assembles a cultural world in which she is “blessed” to have the gift of a large family and is spiritually aware enough to put this gift to good use.

Simone, a thirty-six year old single mother of a baby boy, also constructs herself within a cultural world of being blessed, in which she has received the gift of a child so late in life. She constructs a story which runs parallel to an Afrocentric Discourse that values motherhood, saying that women are blessed by being able to have children. Her narrative of being blessed centers on the ritual ministrations that she has performed to have a child: “I prayed for him, I ain’t supposed to be able to, they told me I couldn’t have kids. And I prayed.” God answered Simone’s prayers by giving her the gift of a child when she was thirty-five years old, a rather late age to have one’s first child within Port Charles tradition.

Simone links her ability to have a child with God bestowing his love upon her in allowing her this one gift. She constructs her son as a miracle, as she was told by doctors that she would not be able to have children, and was treated as something of a pariah in a community in which motherhood is a measure of womanhood: “There’s like, a lot of ‘em, like, maybe think like…lot of used to say, ‘Simone can’t have no kids,’ you know, and then when I got pregnant…you know, God made him out of love.” Through an appeal to God, Simone is able to overcome the negative thinking of her community (arising from an Afrocentric perspective, in which her infertility means that she has not able to attain the status of a successful woman), and become pregnant. Simone reiterates her story of being blessed, concluding: “I just kept prayin’ it’d be all right. And God…he was alright.” God was good to Simone in answering her prayers for a child.
In Muncell’s case, God’s message, itself, is part and parcel of the gift that she has received in order to be blessed and overcome a difficult life circumstance. Similar to Luella Mae; Muncell, a forty-three year old single woman who has one adult son and two teenaged daughters, situates herself with a spiritual identity that results from her correct interpretation of God’s message to her. Muncell’s growing-up story centers upon her past addiction to crack cocaine. She was a crack user for almost twenty years and frames much of her growing-up story in a before-, during-, and-after drug use format. When asked about her religious background, Muncell says that she talks to God a lot and that she thanks him for keeping her alive through all that she has been through. She credits God with helping her to stop using drugs and to reclaim her life. Muncell’s story of being blessed centers on her interpretation of a message that she says she received from God to stop using crack.

Three years ago, on Mother’s Day, she says that she had finally hit “rock bottom”—she looked at herself in the mirror and asked God: “if I got to live like this, why don’t you just…take me away? Please take me out of this world, so I won’t have to live like this.” Muncell goes on to say that she pleaded with God to either “take her away from this life” or to help her to see that she needed to stop using drugs. She assembles a story in which she was mindful enough of God to ask for his help, but that she did not have the spirituality needed to correctly interpret his message of action:

And I was like…you know, I asked the Lord that, deliver me and help me…and…when I asked him this before and I go right back and do the same thing! And that only made it harder, because I’m praying and asking this man up here, but all the time, he know. God knows ya*, cause he made us. But all the time I’m asking, asking, until I really got, I mean, I hit rock bottom.

Muncell assembles a during-drug use story, in which the denouement of the narrative occurs when she hits “rock bottom.” Up to this point in the story, she has been unable to
correctly interpret God’s message and, thus, receive the gift of sobriety. Finally though, on the following Monday, when she really “listened” to the truth of what God was telling her. By being able to hear the “truth” and correctly interpret God’s message, Muncell says that she was blessed by the gift of sobriety. She speaks of God “keeping [her] here for something,” as reason enough for why she needed to overcome her addiction to crack.

At long last she has heard his message to go back to church, to read her Bible, and to get her life back on track. Describing herself as “clean” again, she relays that she feels great and “feel[s] like [herself] again.”

Muncell gives God the role of deciding whether or not she will be saved, both spiritually and literally in terms of her drug addiction. She casts her friends, Mr. and Mrs. Jennings, as God’s messengers who tell her that she needs to go to church and to read her Bible regularly, in addition to helping her with a job. As a result of a divinely inspired awareness, she has “been blessed” with the gift of sobriety and a new life.

Similar to the way that Luella Mae says that she was blessed by God in being able to survive two significant health events, Muncell also assembles a story in which she has been blessed by God in that, through twenty years of intense crack use, neither she, nor her children, were infected with HIV. She speaks of using drugs during her pregnancies with both of her daughters—that she got high up until the time that she went into the hospital to give birth. However, the Lord shined a light upon her; Muncell’s story of being blessed reaches a climax of sorts in her narrative on the birth of her second daughter. In her concluding remarks on being blessed, she discusses the outcome of her second daughter’s birth: “And then…she came out okay and beautiful, and beautiful
today, and then thank God we don’t, we didn’t, thank God, you know, she didn’t have HIV or nothing."

“Learning Patience” as an Adaptive Mechanism

Participants also spoke of learning patience in constructing situated identities of being spiritual. In particular, they linked learning patience with a process of becoming mature, learned through the teachings of the church. Participants, then, learned patience in order to adapt to difficult life circumstances. Janice is a forty-six year old woman who is currently separated from her husband, and has a thirty-two year old daughter and one granddaughter. In reviewing her difficult life circumstances, Janice outlined her definition of patience:

You know [patience is] to be able to see, to forgive, uh, the mistakes. You learn from other people…It’s to be more thoughtful, open up, you know, and being told that…things that you may desire or want may not be the best thing for you. And if it doesn’t work out, there’s something better…that will come along. It may not come right then, I mean, when I want it, but, it’ll be there in the most needed time.

Janice spoke of her teenage years, in which she became pregnant, had a daughter, and learned patience in dealing with these difficult life events. While she may have wanted certain things in life, she said that she learned through her increasing maturity and the teachings of the church to be patient. Her burgeoning patience was a result of learning from the church’s teachings that she was to practice forgiveness and acceptance, and be open enough to learn from other people. Through spiritually divined patience, Janice has learned to face difficult life circumstance, such as being a mother at such a young age, as well as to emotionally deal with her separation from her husband.

Janice links her cultural world of learning patience to her intimate connection with God. When asked what sort of advice she would give to young people on growing up in
Port Charles, Janice said that first and foremost, she would tell them to put their faith and trust in God:

I would tell them praise…the Lord as head of your life… It’s that…putting your faith and your trust in the Lord. Be able to accomplish and treat people the way that you want to be treated. You know, you want someone to respect you…and, and…be supportive of you, give that in return. Um…and then, listen, you know…. But first of all, put God as head of your life. Put your trust in him. And do all things with him in mind, even without the word, or even how hard or dark the way may be…make use of him. You know. And, seek the Lord in careful guidance. To be able to do the right thing, you know. And be slow, don’t be rushing into things. A lot of our mistakes are made by the…rushing into…things and not being patient.

In a sermon-like tone, Janice relays the advice that she would give to the young people in her community. In one way, she reflects upon what she calls the “current condition” in Port Charles, in which she describes community members as not being very nice to each other, getting into fights, and generally not respecting each other. Taking up an Afrocentric Discourse, Janice recalls an earlier time in Port Charles in which everyone may not have liked each other, but people all treated each other with respect. In particular, she says, children were raised to treat elders with respect, saying “yes ma’am/sir” and “no ma’am/sir” when speaking to someone older than themselves. She concludes her lesson on patience by telling young people to heed the word of God. By learning patience an individual may follow the right path in life.

Roxanne’s narrative takes a different turn on the notion of spiritually-derived patience. She constructs a situated identity of being spiritual that forgoes the tendency to see one’s spirituality as linked to one’s direct participation in a physical church. Rather, in her construction of a being spiritual situated identity, the church-as-building is a profane entity. It is through the sacredness of “holding the church in her heart” that she places herself on a higher spiritual plane—her spirituality derives from the inner well-
springs of her heart. Through her day-to-day practices of keeping God as close as possible, Roxanne says that she is able to maintain a spiritual self that patiently values each and every day that he has provided for her. In reflecting on her philosophy of life, Roxanne advises others to “live life one day at a time. And enjoy each day of it.”

Through an Afrocentric Discourse of valuing God in “loving thy neighbor” (read: the community), Roxanne expands on her philosophy of life:

If you do, if you live one day at a time…serve the Lord and get as close to him and get an understanding and get the best understanding you could of him…everything else in the world will fall in place. Everything else will come to you. Regardless of what it is you want…what it is you think you want…or what it is you need, or what it is you think you need. If you get close to God…and…you serve and do, try to be the perfect person that God would want you to be. All this other stuff will fall in place.

Invoking the Golden Rule, Roxanne constructs a narrative of “learned patience” in which she advises others within the community to love each other as they love themselves. She says that one must be patient with God, as he has a plan for everyone. If a person patiently serves God every day, by loving all of his creations (members of the community/neighbors) then “good things” will come to him or her. Through her intimate relationship with God she is able to successfully navigate an Afrocentric success story where upon good things come to those who learn the emotional patience required to serve both God and one’s community.

Other participants constructed themselves as being in the process of learning patience. Often, these stories centered on a participant shifting her perspective from one of individual, inner turmoil, to one of achieving patience through more peaceful social interactions. Shateque, a twenty-nine year old woman single woman who suffers from bipolar disorder, centered her story of learning patience on her addiction to crack cocaine.
Through “the Lord’s teachings,” she is learning to be more patient and thus, does not need to use crack to cope with her life problems anymore.

Shateque describes a growing-up story in which she was abandoned as a baby and never knew her biological parents or siblings. Her story centers on an identity of impatience and frustration, particularly linked to her social interactions. She was placed in Special Education classes as a child, describing herself as being the clown of her class. She reasons this clown-like identity to be a result of the alienation that she felt from being separated from the “regular” kids at school and the frustration she felt from not being able to keep up when she was eventually placed in a “regular” class.

Shateque links her adoptive mother’s death with an eventual downfall in her life, in which she began to use crack cocaine; speaking of crack use as a way for her to cope with her mother’s death. Like Muncell, Shateque constructs a cycle of drug use in which she eventually “hit rock bottom,” realizing that crack was just making her depression worse. At the time of our interview, Shateque said that she had been off of crack for the past couple of months. When asked what kind of advice she would give to other young people growing up in her community, Shateque linked her advice to the lessons that she, herself, learned through crack addiction: “I would tell them to just take it day-by-day. Pray. I pray. And…take it a little bit at a time. I set goals for myself. All that, if my goal is to not get angry today…I just let things override. And at the end of the day I write in my journal. Yes, I did this or…if I messed up I can write about that too.” Shateque constructs the practice of prayer as integral to her everyday ability to learn patience and, thus, receive the daily gift of sobriety.
Similar to Shateque, Wanda also constructs herself as one who is in the process of learning patience. She links her more recent participation in a cultural world of patience to her year-long membership in her brother’s church. One particular arena in which she feels that she has needed to learn patience is in interaction with staff members at the institution for the developmentally disabled where she works. Wanda speaks of the difficulties that she has faced in being the manager of an unsupportive staff, describing how these staff members constantly undermine her workplace efforts. She relates that they do not respect the clients, nor do they show respect to those above them (the management). Wanda constructs herself as being able to participate in a world of patience through her religious participation. Her learned patience, in turn, has helped her to cope with these workplace difficulties:

I’ve learned to; even though [a staff member] really, really just be ugly and talk ugly to me; not to talk ugly back to them because I’m in a certain position where I can’t do that. Because if I do, I’m just as wrong as they are. I’ve learned to walk away. And come back and try to do it again and...just the way, some of the things people do. Like yesterday, I went through that experience yesterday and I just thank God, for being who I am now!

Wanda constructs a direct link between her renewed spirituality through participation in her brother’s church and her ability to cope with a difficult work situation. Applying an Afrocentric Discourse which constructs one’s self worth as integrally connected to the respect and service one holds for the community, Wanda assembles a narrative of learning patience in which her increased participation in the church has renewed not only her religious spirit, but also her work spirit:

I remember the time I would have really, really had...um...been very angry. And um...I woulda just got into their flesh and they would’ve got back into my flesh. But I stayed in a good spirit. Where they would have their head down, I would be able to hold mine up. And still go to them in, like I say, in a decent way and speak to them about it.
Wanda is able to respect herself by learning the patience to deal with her co-workers.

She casts her co-workers as immature, aspiritual children who can do nothing but fight, to solve their problems. On the other hand, through her spiritual maturation, Wanda constructs herself as a wizened woman who has learned to patiently deal with a difficult situation, accepting her circumstances as being “just the way things are.”

“Gaining Wisdom” as an Adaptive Mechanism

Black Feminist theorists define “wisdom” as knowledge gained through experience (Collins, 1993; hooks, 1990). In particular, Patricia Hill Collins (1993) writes that wisdom derives from lived experiences and is essential for the survival of subordinated peoples (p. 532). In African-American communities, in which concrete experiences are said to be valued, these lived experiences shape what it means to be an African-American woman. Collins (ibid.) cites the church as one institution within the African-American community from which women are able to gain, as well as share with other women, their wisdom. Thus, in wisdom gained through spiritual practice, participants find yet another mechanism with which to cope with difficult life circumstances.

Wanda speaks of “gaining the wisdom” to face her difficult life circumstances, particularly those that she faces in her workplace. She links her recently increased participation in her brother’s church not only to her new patience in workplace social interactions, but also to the strength she has gained in applying the word of God to these difficult experiences. She has gained wisdom through her interweaving of lived experiences with a spiritual identity. In discussing her participation in her brother’s church, Wanda constructs a before-and-after spiritual identity for herself:

I enjoy church but…my favorite part of, of um, church service is the message. Because …listening to [my brother] speak and teach us from the Bible and then, and talking over things, it, it give you great strength. And courage…to deal with
people, ‘specially in the, um, job that I have, being in management. It help you
grow…a lot. And become a stronger person where, when I was a child…or coming
up, there’s something that I disagreed or didn’t like, or something like that, I would
probably go word for word. But now I won’t…be quick to talk. And then, when I
speak, say it in a decent way where I won’t put more, more fuel on the fire. And if
a person don’t like to hear it, no matter how I try to keep that conversation or the
discussion in a dignified manner, or carry it out in decent type, you know, do
something correct. Correctly. I’ll walk away. It’s just in the last year that I would
go but just really, I’m actually just get into learning and um, trying to get more
wisdom about it.

Through her religious participation, Wanda claims that she now has the strength to walk
away from a difficult situation. She constructs a before-spiritual identity for herself as an
immature child in which she was always quick to speak, without thinking of possible
negative ramifications. Through her religious practices and a gained spiritual awareness,
however, she has become a more proper woman. Wanda links these new roles—of being
dignified, quiet, and passive—to her spiritual growth. She has become this wise, mature
woman through the enactment of a spiritual identity in her workplace, and in turn, has
been socialized to enact a traditional gender role within her community.

Wanda’s constructed identity as a woman-empowered-by-wisdom contrasts
markedly with the idea individual empowerment found in more traditional feminist
approaches. Her approach to empowerment takes on more of a Black Feminist tone of
what it means to be empowered within the community. Collins (1993) conceives of
African-American women as empowered in their communities through their roles as
“wise women.” Wanda’s own construction of “gaining wisdom” places her within a
cultural world in which she is empowered within her workplace, as she is able to walk
away from a difficult situation and/or have the knowledge to deal with it in a patient
manner. At the same time, she fulfills the Afrocentric notion of what it means to be a
successful woman in extolling her ability to “hold her tongue,” and thus, keep quiet. She
places herself within a cultural world of “wisdom,” which does not succeed the feminist ideal of “talking back” (see hooks, 1989).

**Spirituality as a Worldview**

As well as constructing spiritual identities for themselves that are used as adaptive mechanisms in relation to a variety of lived experiences, participants also assemble spirituality narratives that are linked to their worldviews—in describing the way that they have been told to live their lives, as well as the way that they feel they should live their own lives. They speak of “growing up in the church” as a way to describe the role of religion and spirituality in their everyday lives and relate how their spirituality grants them a sense of self worth, in that it allows them to “be themselves.” Participants also construct a worldview for themselves in which, through an intimate relationship with God, they are able to “do the right thing.” In this sense, doing the right thing means acting within one’s moral principles by using the word of God to guide one’s own behaviors. Finally, in taking up an Afrocentric Discourse, participants focus on the interconnectedness between individuals within the community. In particular, participants talk about their spirituality in terms of being part of a “larger plan,” in which their own spiritual growth is linked to the spirituality of those around them.

**“Growing Up in the Church” as Worldview**

Most of the participants in this study spoke of being “raised in the church,” or growing up in the church. Regular church attendance is constructed as part of their everyday reality while young, often as something that they “just did” because it was what their family members (particularly their mothers and grandmothers) were doing. However, being raised in the church did not necessarily mean that the participant was spiritually inclined or particularly devoted to her religion. Some participants went so far
as to say that they “burnt out” on going to church when young and, consequently, though they may have situated themselves with spiritual identities, they did not regularly attend church services. Roxanne’s previous comment on having the “church in her heart” illustrates this rationality.

While Priscilla, a twenty-seven year old single woman with two daughters, spoke of regularly attending church on Sundays, she discounted herself as a particularly religious person. At the time of our interview, she was living with her mother and stepfather in a house in Oakdale, an even smaller rural town located about five minutes outside of Port Charles. Priscilla’s stepfather is a pastor at her church and she describes her other family members as quite attendant to their religious obligations: they go to church multiple times a week and lead lives “on the straight and narrow” in following the word of God. On the other hand, she describes herself as something of a “black sheep” in her family, in that she does not like to participate in family gatherings and, while she regularly attends church, claims that she does not consider herself to be a very religious person: “I mean, no [I don’t consider myself a religious person], cause I hang out, I’m, you know, I go to church still, but I don’t. ‘Cause I’ve grown up going to church. I still go to church.”

Despite her claims of areligiosity, Priscilla did mention the role that God or spirits have played in her life, at one point speaking of a time that God saved her as a young child from being attacked by a dog, and at another point describing how the spirits of her dead grandmother and dead friend visited her and tried to speak with her. Interestingly, both times that she was “visited” by these dead spirits she said that she was so scared that
she told them to “go away” and that she did not want to see or hear from them—only later regretting that she had turned them away.

Priscilla’s talk about turning these spirits away in many ways mimics her ideas about religion: while she is reluctant to identify herself as a religious person, she evokes a spirituality of sorts through her constant referral back to experiences in which God has helped her out in some way. Priscilla uses elements of spirituality to talk about her life, such as “growing up in the church,” “seeing spirits,” and being blessed by God, which runs concurrent with an Afrocentric Discourse that constructs the church as an all-pervasive entity within the African-American community. However, in constructing a black-sheep identity for herself, who likes to hang out, and admittedly use marijuana and cocaine on a regular basis, she does not “do the right thing” according to the religious script as written by the Church of God and Christ in Oakdale.

Several participants used a sort of before-and-after framework in their stories of “growing up in the church.” Karen, Luella Mae’s forty-year old daughter who has never been married and has no children, constructs a cultural world of growing up in the church, but says that she did not really pay attention to the word of God until she was saved at the age of nineteen. Karen likens her church attendance as a younger woman to that of participating in a social event, the purpose of which was to show off her “little new outfit” or to socialize with others in town. She went to church because “that was the thing to do,” not out of any moral conviction on her part. Growing up in the church is constructed as an integral part of social interaction within her community. Karen spoke of church going as a part of her socialization process:

At Christmastime, we went to church, ‘cause we always had to do a Christmas speech. Uh…my mom, she made us go to Sunday school and day, every fourth day
too. So it was kind of instilled in me at a young age about, you know, the importance of going to church. But I never really took it serious…until…I got saved in ’93.

Like many a young person, Karen attended church services because that was what was expected of her.

Shantell, a twenty-five year old single mother of three daughters, was particularly expressive in her description of enforced church going. In discussing her increasing spirituality, Shantell contrasted the previous Baptist church that she attended while young with the Pentecostal churches that she has attended more recently:

I’m gonna tell you, I ain’t really learnt religion until…a year ago. Cause every, every, when I was going to the Baptist Church…it was saaaaame routine every Sunday. So by the time I turnt thirteen…I was just…knew what the, uh, man was going to pray about…and I knew his whole prayer! And…it was the same songs…pretty much the same sermon…. And when I went to church, I didn’t know, you know, I went to sleep when the preacher started preaching, ain’t no lie. I’m nodding, sleeping. So I didn’t know religion until…about…how many years I said? I don’t want to lie now! [AG: You said about a year ago.] Ummm hmm. And, but see I was going to another church and this lady, she was a white lady and it was [a Pentecostal church] in Port Charles. And she really broke it down to me, the pastor, she really broke it down to me.

Shantell evokes images of restless church attendance while young, in which she did what was expected of her in going to church every Sunday, but was not enthusiastic about listening to the same sermon time and again. She links a recent pique in her spiritual interest to her participation in a Pentecostal church, in which the pastor knows how to reach her, spiritually speaking, such that she can apply these teachings as a moral guide to her own life.

Similar to Shantell, Harriet, a fifty-eight year old woman with six grown children, who is currently living with her male partner, also constructs dichotomous experiences of her childhood attendance at a Baptist church and her later participation in a Pentecostal church. When asked to speak of her religious experiences while growing up, Harriet
assembled a spiritual story in two parts. In the first part, which takes place when she was younger, she attended a Baptist church every Sunday with her mother. In the second part of her spiritual story, she switched over to a Pentecostal church after being introduced to this church by a friend of hers. In this story of religious conversion, Harriet expounds on the merits of attending a Pentecostal church. In a Pentecostal church, she said, “you can get up and testify and sing your own songs.” Harriet situates herself with a spiritual identity through her participation in a Pentecostal cultural world that allows her to have more freedom to express herself. In contrast to the Baptist church, which places more restraint upon one’s outward display of receiving the word of God, she speaks of a Pentecostal church that encourages one to receive the word of God through physical demonstration of song, testimony and dance. In the Pentecostal church you do not just “sit and listen to a preacher,” you get up and participate in the church, learning a spiritual identity rather than passively acquiring one.

Harriet continues her narrative of spirituality, speaking of her spiritual growth as a never-ending process. While she “was raised” in the Baptist church, she says that she did not really “grow spiritually” until she began attending a Pentecostal church. She has grown spiritually through her adherence to the moral guide as taught in her church. Being something that she must practice every day, she said that one does not acquire a spiritual identity merely by attending church services.

Harriet constructs the Pentecostal church as following much more along the lines of an Afrocentric Discourse than does the Baptist church. While the Baptist church holds a more passive view of spiritual development, the Pentecostal church holds that the individual, herself, be actively involved in her own spiritual development through moral
praxis. Over concerns with “saving her soul,” Harriet situates herself with a spiritual identity in which she must actively follow the word of God.

Harriet also follows those ideals present in an Afrocentric Discourse which value communal relations over individual promotion. She speaks of “being taught about love” through her participation in the Pentecostal church. Harriet’s words serve as a kind of response to the call in “Where is the love” (Black Eyed Peas, 2003) about searching for the lost love within the community. Her response links one’s participation in a church that actively nurtures one’s spiritual growth to the possibility of regaining a core value of interconnection within the African-American community.

“Being Yourself” as Worldview

Participants also spoke of “being themselves” when asked about their worldviews, linking their ability to “be themselves” to having a spiritual identity. In some respects, being able to “be herself” meant that a participant did not care what others thought about her. While this may seem a rather individualistic notion of identity, in that the participant is willing to overlook communal opinion in order to construct an identity of independence and self reliance, participants often linked their disregard for what others thought about them to living in a small town, in which they said gossip is rampant and “even if you’re not doing something, they’ll find something to say about you.”

Harriet, for one, positively attested to her ability to be herself; claiming this to be a result of her participation in the Pentecostal church. Due to her religious participation, she said that she has gained feelings of self worth and independence, linking the daily moral guide that the Pentecostal church provides her with her ability to be herself:

The Bible…tells me, you know…use your own mind, don’t get to fret about someone else’s mind, but you should fret about your own mind. Do your own thinking…don’t let…other people lead you, you know…lead yourself. And
uh…don’t do things just to be part of a crowd, you know, do your own thinking. And that you don’t need to do wrong to…please someone else, and just do right by yourself and…be all right.

Through her participation in a church that encourages her to be herself, Harriet is able to stick by her guns and lead a good and moral life. The Pentecostal moral code tells her to live her life “as Jesus would have.” Through adherence to these spiritual lessons, she has learned to do her own thinking. Harriet sets a trajectory for her spirituality in which she is learning to “do the right thing” in life by being herself and not letting herself be swayed by others within the community to do wrong. She links her feelings of self worth to her daily ministrations of “doing the right thing” according to the word of God.

Relatedly, Shateque constructs herself as one who is learning how to be herself. She compares her self in the past, in which she fell in with a “bad crowd” and started using crack cocaine, to a present self in which, through her participation in religious activities, she is learning how to be herself: “I was taught…when you’re raised up in the church, how…you get that positive release, you get extra, your mind, they have other things for us young people to do. I gotta go [to church] for myself.” Responding directly about her ability to overcome her addition to crack, Shateque describes the feelings of self worth and independence that she both experienced by participating in church activities when younger and that she experiences in the present through a renewed participation.

When asked what kind of advice she would give other young people in her community about growing up, Shateque admitted that she was still “growing up” herself—trying to get over her addiction to crack and to reacquire this “extra mind” that she linked with her spiritual identity. However, she did provide one caveat to the younger people within her community, in saying that the most important thing in living a
good life is to be yourself. Shateque referred to her past addiction to crack cocaine in parlaying her advice to younger people, constructing a world full of consequences:

“Even the easiest thing,” such as buying crack, is rife with consequences. Instead of falling prey to the temptation of being lead into the “easy life,” she advises young people to get to “know themselves.” Through self knowledge a person is able to follow his/her own righteous path through a world in which things may not be easy, but the consequences are ones of fulfillment and feelings of self worth.

Roxanne, who places herself firmly within a world of knowing herself, constructs an exemplar narrative of learning self worth through one’s spirituality. She likens the reason for her lack of participation in the formal church (which she casts as “only a building”) to the superficiality of other community members’ church participation. Instead, she constructs a spiritual identity for herself in which she has “the church in her heart,” in contrast to other community members who may attend church every Sunday but use their attendance as a way to show off their clothes or for others to see them and think that they are spiritually well-endowed. Roxanne spells out a story of “conspicuous spirituality,” in which community members “talk the talk” but do not necessarily “walk the walk.”

Relaying this story of conspicuous spirituality, Roxanne spoke of attending church in Port Charles. Elaborating upon her belief that she can only be herself through her inner spirituality, she spoke of other church members’ reluctance to allow a developmentally disabled man to be himself:

I keep saying that church is just a building. Church is in your heart. So it’s like I am in church. It’s just that I don’t get up every Sunday morning, go in to church. And I think that’s mainly come from…I see where…one church really turned me against, my, I don’t want to call no names…but there was this…guy that was a
little slow. You’d say a little retarded. I think…if he could praise God and…appreciate God, let him do it. And the church would tell him to sit down. And I thought that was so wrong. And I really, that really pushed me out a little bit. I’m like…even if you did go and do church around him, don’t stop him from thanking God! Don’t stop him from putting God on this high pedestal! Let him do it! And we could still have church around what he’s…doing. Instead, they were making him just be quiet. They didn’t give him…this chance to say… I know he was getting something out of it. And…you don’t never know where God sits, you know what I’m saying? Say that was God doing that, that was God work for him to be saying what he saying. And they telling him to…be quiet! Shh! Sit down a minute. It got to the point where they told him, if he didn’t be quiet, they were gonna make him leave. And I don’t think that was right.

Roxanne constructs a narrative in this man is striving to attain a spiritual identity through his active participation in the church service. She is disdainful of the other church members who do not allow him to be himself and actively construct a spiritual identity for himself. In being herself, Roxanne assembles a cultural world in which she has the wisdom to know that God works in small places. For the other church participants to shush this man means that they are effectively silencing his spirit, while also ignoring the fact of God’s omnipresence.

In contrast with others in her community who call themselves religious, Roxanne distances herself from the physical building of the church, claiming that she knows herself and has an intimate relationship with God through her personal spiritual ministrations. She constructs an identity of spirituality which is true to herself and to God in linking her spirituality with the sacred study of the Bible and God’s word, rather than with the profane activity of “dressing up for church” and letting everyone see that she is there every Sunday.

Roxanne constructs a spiritual identity for herself which follows the moral praxis of Afrocentric Discourse, in which one’s self worth in measured in relation to one’s adherence to a moral guide that values all of the individuals in a community. This moral
praxis centers on the Golden Rule of doing unto others as you would have done unto yourself. She chastises other church members who do not follow this rule, constructing herself as one who does the right thing in following a moral guide that sees worthiness in every individual, whether they are “slow” or not.

“Doing the Right Thing” as Worldview

“Doing the right thing” is a worldview-in-practice held by participants in relation to achieving a spiritual identity. This worldview is often spoken of as being divinely inspired, in which the individual is able to do the right thing by following a moral guide as derived from church teachings. Early on in this chapter Janice was presented as participating in a learning patience cultural world. Situating herself with a spiritual identity, Janice centers herself within a cultural world of patience, in which she does the right thing in workplace interactions, by learning to follow a moral guide inspired by the church.

Timberly, a twenty-five year old single woman, with three daughters, presents a similar linkage between doing the right thing and following a moral guide in her narrative description of her relationship with her biological mother. Timberly became friendly with her biological mother after the birth of her first daughter, after being estranged from her during her teenaged years. Similar to Luella Mae, Timberly links her mother’s spiritual identity to a significant health event that her mother experienced while in her early thirties. After her mother suffered a brain aneurysm, Timberly says that she handed her mother an ultimatum—to “get her life straight with God”—or risk not knowing her granddaughter. She reasons that she and her mother grew closer due to her own, and her mother’s, increasing spirituality. Applying an Afrocentric discourse that values the word of God as a strong moral guide in life, Timberly relates that as her mother began to attend
church services and work on building her spiritual identity, she was able to do right in other areas of her life, such as in building a stronger relationship with her daughter. Timberly constructs a contingency story for her own ability to do right, saying that she has been able to do right by her own children because she has had her mother as a role model to follow.

Serena, a twenty-one year old, single woman, constructs herself with a spiritual identity in which, though she has reached a sanctified level of experience, she must still work at doing the right thing through her daily moral praxis. Serena spoke of being “saved by the Lord” when she was nine years old. Throughout her interview, she consistently linked “being grounded in the Church” with the ability to do the right thing, at one point saying: “I feel like if most [people are] not really, really rooted and grounded in the church…that…they ain’t gonna do right.” Serena has learned to “walk the walk” of the “saved” cultural world. She constructs a spiritual identity for herself that is enacted daily through the “type of person” that she is. In response to a question about what she considers to be the appropriate behaviors of a “saved” individual, Serena replied: “I’m not the type, I don’t curse, I don’t do that other st-, drinking and different stuff like that. I try to do right, I really truly do try to do right. Because one day, when I leave this Earth, I want to be with my maker. So…that’s what you learn…in my church. Do right.” She has taken her church lessons to heart and applies these to her daily practices, such that she is able to construct herself as a certain “type” of person, one living in a sanctified world.

Serena later admitted that while she was “saved” when she was nine years old, her participation in a sanctified cultural world has waned as of late. She spoke of nights in
which she may “get caught up with the girls” rather than attend Bible study or church services, linking the frequency of her church attendance to her “spiritual depth.” She constructs her participation in a sanctified world as integrally connected with her daily religious ministrations, in which her religious praxis serves as her moral guide in life.

Serena links her religious praxis, of reading her Bible, going to church, and “taking heed to what the Pastor says,” to her ability to do the right thing. She admits that, as of late, she has not been as devout about her religious obligations as she once was, and thus feels the pull of those forces within her community which might steer her off of her sanctified life path. Likening this life path to a “slippery slope,” Serena constructs a metaphor in which her performance of daily religious rituals, or lack thereof, determines whether or not she will “slip up” or whether she will be given the “strength to climb the mountain” towards a sanctified life.

While Quanda, a twenty-six year old woman with two daughters, also linked her ability to do the right thing to religious practices and participation, she does not link this ability to whether or not she participated in a sanctified cultural world. Rather, she works more at the level of an Afrocentric Discourse which values communally-focused religious participation over that of individual participation. In other words, religious ritual and spirituality are said to center on the interconnection between members of the whole community. Rather than linking her ability to do the right thing to leading a sanctified life, Quanda professed being more concerned with the religious participation of those closest to her than with her own religious participation. She claimed to be trying to do right by making sure that her two daughters go to church every Sunday, just as her grandmother did the right thing in making sure that she, too, went to church. Put in terms
of the grim situated reality for many African Americans in Port Charles, Quanda reasoned that her daughters’ future ability to stay out of jail is integrally related to their having “a little bit of God” in their lives.

“Being Part of a Larger Plan” as Worldview

Larger plan stories center upon the church as being at the center of the community’s social world. Often, stories of the church as primary social setting are constructed using a “back then things were different” framework, in which participants compare a present, in which young people do not center their social interactions upon the church, to a past, in which the church was seen as a focal point of social interaction. Within this framework, participants place themselves as still firmly entrenched within the church and community social scene, but see younger people within the community as not so interested in participating in church activities. Consequently, these youngsters are portrayed as devoid of love and respect for their community—a theme echoed in the song, “Where is the love” (Black Eyed Peas, 2003).

While narrating their growing-up stories, several participants constructed their spiritual identities as something that has culminated from a worldview of the past, in which the community was conceived of as a more close-knit entity and community members were more respectful of each other. Janice’s construction of a past cultural world of mutual respectability is an exemplar narrative in an Afrocentric Discourse on the value of communality. When asked to discuss particular memories that stuck out from her childhood, Janice evoked a past where children were taught to be respectful of those around them, particularly to elders. Janice uses her present-day community as a straw man to assemble this narrative past of respect and positive communal relations:
Well, [there’s] something in the way society has changed in itself. And, um, the way that children are raised nowadays. Parents are…um…don’t teach children the values that…when my mom, or, when I was growing up…that we were taught, you know. Be close knit, you know…and be friendly, you know. Um, and respectful. I see that a lot, a lot of disrespect in the younger generations than from when I grew up. Kids talking back or…um…even today, you know, if I disagree with an older person or there’s a disagreement, I’ll just…shy away or back off from the conversation and just let them have their say. But now these kids, cursing older people. Um, arguing, uh, even see kids that try fighting older people. At some point, you know, being very disrespectful. Foul language and stuff, and that’s something that if you were disrespectful when I was growing up… And parents upholding their children, my mom wouldn’t do that. You know. “Honor thy mother and thy father”—that’s biblical and that means anyone of a mature or older than you, that I was to give them the respect that they deserved.

Janice speaks of her community in the present, in which children are not taught to respect each other, much less to respect their elders. She links the lack of discipline that parents expend on their children to the fights that pervade the social interactions in her community. At the center of this parable is the “larger plan,” in which positive community interrelationships are the core strength of the community. In contrast to a past, when people could get along, Janice constructs her present community as one in which “[there is] a lot of, uh…even though it’s small, as Port Charles is, like every place there’s the drug problem. You know, and like I said people don’t get along or acknowledge being friendly.” Her concluding remarks in this parable of moral behavior, based on positive communal relations, link the drug problem in her community to the inability of people to get along and be friendly with each other. Janice is not judging an individual’s drug use as “sinful” so much as she sees the individual’s lack of contribution to the community as the problem.

While Wanda did not grow up in the same household as her sister Janice, she uses a story from her childhood to construct a similar sort of straw man community in the present. She compares a past community, in which love and affection were both enforced
and abounded in her community, to today’s community, in which social relations are
described as being more antagonistic than communally oriented:

My momma, if we had our little disagreements, when we was growing up and we
got in a fight...with each other or between each other, you had to hug and kiss each
other. And make up, back in those days you, momma made you hug and kiss each
other. And tell your sisters and brothers, don’t do that. You go to love one
another. These days, you beat somebody else about the other one! (Laughs)

However, she still allows for some remnant of this “larger plan” perspective in her
small community today. While she says that problems, such as child molestation and
abuse, may have increased in other areas, she does not feel that they are so prevalent in
her community, for the mere fact that the community is always watching what people are
doing. Noting the benefits of living in a rural community, she says: “The good thing
about [living in a small community], everybody know everybody around here.
Everybody know everybody name. Um hmm! And if something happen, we’ll know!”

Bestowing her community with “panoptical” qualities (see Foucault, 1977), Wanda
assembles an Afrocentric cultural world in which community members are all looking
after each other.

Living in a rural town like Port Charles, if someone does something wrong the
rumors and speculation will travel fast. In another sense, however, the larger plan
perspective that she constructs is not necessarily all positive. While gossip and rumors
may serve as a positive control in relation to the unmasking of particular social problems,
they may also hold negative consequences in terms of an individual’s ability to “come
clean” about a problem that she does not want the whole community to find out about.

A larger plan cultural world takes on another meaning as well, in which a
participant’s religious activities may be constructed as her main social activities within
the community. Several participants spoke of attending church services two or three
times a week, describing their attendance at “Bible Study” on Tuesdays, a “Prayer and Deliverance” session on Thursdays, and regular church services on Sundays. Shateque works the construct of the church as the main social scene into her spirituality narrative; like sisters Janice and Wanda, also constructing a straw man of the present. She describes the present social scene of Port Charles to be one in which young people no longer consider the church to be a place to “see and be seen,” explaining that this is most likely due to the fact that there are fewer church activities in which they may participate.

While still a young woman herself, Shateque presents herself as different from other young people, in that she realizes the importance of the church in her life and has built a spiritual identity for herself focusing on her religion as salvation. She speaks of a glowing past, in which young people were involved in church activities, and compares this past to a present, in which her church choir is mostly filled with older people. She sets a social scene of the past in which the church was a place for young people to socialize and participate in singing, dancing, and other group activities. In contrast, she constructs a similar present social scene to that of Janice, in which the pull of drugs has taken over the lure of the church in young people’s lives. Shateque boils this down to a lack of encouragement for young people to participate in church activities. She links the increase in drug use among young people in her community to a lack of support from other community, particularly church, members. The present atmosphere of the community is such that no one is asking these young people to “come in and do a skit for us,” or to participate in church activities. Consequently, young people are replacing this spiritual void in their lives, that there is nothing to do in Port Charles, with drugs.
Shateque and Janice both link the social problem of drug use within their community to the spiritual heart of the community. Without the vital life force of the church in their lives, young people in Port Charles are becoming alienated from the Afrocentric ideals that pump strength into their community—the ideals of a mutual love and respect for all members of the community, an awareness of the interconnectedness of all individuals within the community, and an intimate relationship with God, who can serve as a moral guide for doing the right thing in life.

Situating a “Being Spiritual” Identity through Traditional Structures in the Active Construction of Linked Cultural Worlds

Participants constructed a spiritual identity for themselves that often ran parallel to an Afrocentric Discourse emphasizing communality, an ethic of respect for all community members, the central role that the church plays in an individual’s life, and the ability to maintain a strong identity through one’s intimate connection with a higher being. In particular, through cultural worlds of “being blessed,” “learning patience,” and “gaining wisdom,” participants situate themselves with spiritual identities, in which their spirituality serves as a way to cope with the often difficult circumstances that they face in their everyday lives.

World Building

Participants, such as Luella Mae, Simone, Wanda, and Roxanne construct being blessed cultural worlds in which their spirituality, in the main, derives from the perceived miracles they have been fortunate enough to receive from God. Blessed cultural worlds are primarily constructed through participants’ use of the word “gifts” to describe the blessings that they have received from God. For instance, Luella Mae speaks of the gifts that she has received from God to describe her recovery from several serious health
ailments. In describing her recovery from these health ailments as a gift from God, she emphasizes the outcome value of her spiritual identity.

Other participants also place a positive value upon the gifts that they have received from God. In the context of motherhood and its positive implications within an Afrocentric Discourse, three participants speak of their children as gifts from God. These gifts, then, not only serve to establish their place within a cultural world of being blessed, they also work to situate the participants with identities of successfully accomplished womanhood. While each of these participants works within an Afrocentric Discourse that emphasizes the virtues of motherhood in becoming successful women, they apply their own situated contingencies to their stories in various interpretations of how they have been blessed by God through the gift of fertility.

For example, Simone situates herself as one who has been blessed by God in that he allowed her the birth of her one child at such a late age in life. She works with the situated contingency of being barren while young to situate herself with both a spiritual identity, achieved through her participation in a blessed cultural world, and a good woman identity, which is integrally linked to her ability to have a child. Thus, as is demonstrated in this chapter and will be seen in the next chapter, situated identities of spirituality and good womanhood are usually constructed in tandem, as the cultural values of one identity are usually implicated in the construction of the other.

Using another situated contingency oft found in the lives of the participants, Wanda emphasizes her single motherhood to construct herself as a spiritual woman. However, she turns Simone’s notion of a child as a gift on its head. She speaks of having only one child as a gift from God, as she has been saved the possible misery she feels may result
from having multiple children as a single parent. In other words, Wanda places a positive value upon her gift from God, but this valuation takes a new twist on an Afrocentric Discourse emphasizing the importance of motherhood. She has been blessed because God has allowed her the good fortune of only having one child. She is thus able to be a *better* mother because she may lavish attention upon her daughter. The situated reality that she faces in life, of being a single parent, overrides possible concerns for the community’s perceptions of her fertility. Thus, while she takes up an Afrocentric Discourse in speaking of herself as being blessed in motherhood, she does not subscribe wholly to this Discourse, as she also invokes an American Dream Discourse (see chapter 7) to construct herself as a successful woman who is responsible for her fertility.

Roxanne puts yet another spin on children as gifts from God, constructing herself as part of a blessed cultural world in which the large family that God has bestowed upon her is really a gift in disguise. Taking up an Afrocentric Discourse which values African-American women as mothers, Roxanne situates herself with both spiritual and good woman identities centering upon her ability to reproduce and maintain a large family. While researchers working on social problems issues might see her large family as a “problem,” Roxanne sees having a large family as a solution on two levels. On a smaller scale, a large family provides a large network of possible caretakers for children, in which one’s mothering responsibilities may be diffused through a distribution of responsibility to one’s many family members. On a larger scale, a large family may serve as a metaphor for the community; wherein thinking of oneself as part of a large community family, in which everyone takes care of each other, means that no one within the community should suffer from losses. Within this “community family” a number of
institutions (social services) exist which are willing to help those “less fortunate” family members. If one appreciates community resources for what they are, to be used by any “family member,” one may receive help from the community and reap the benefits of its rewards. Thus, both at a small, personal, scale and at a large, community/public, scale, a large family is a blessing as it provides its members with a strong socio-economic support network.

Still other participants referred to their participation in a blessed cultural world in which they received a gift from God to help themselves or other to overcome a difficult situation. Both Luella Mae and Muncell speak of receiving a gift from God only after they were able to correctly interpret his message to them. Muncell situates herself with a spiritual identity in which she has received the gift of sobriety through her correct interpretations of God’s message for her to stop using drugs.

While she speaks of being blessed in her ability to realize God’s message, she is also aware that for her continued participation in a blessed cultural world, she must also practice her spirituality in terms of regular church going and through prayer. Participants, then, not only speak of passively accepting the word of God to situate themselves with spiritual identities; they also realize that a moral praxis is needed to firmly establish themselves with these identities.

In Luella Mae’s case, she speaks of being able to overcome her health ailments only after realizing that she needed to start going to church and provide supplication to God. Applying an Afrocentric Discourse to her discussion of being blessed, she speaks of being responsible for not only her own well-being, but also for that of her family’s. She introduces the story of her grandson’s asthma attack to illustrate the need for her
whole family, particularly her two spiritually errant sons, to get back on the path toward salvation. Her two sons, both of whom have been in jail and abuse crack cocaine, need to “realize” and “gain awareness” of their spiritual identities. She uses these two words to convey the idea that there is a spiritual message out there for her sons to interpret. Only through their correct interpretation of God’s message will her sons be able to mend their broken lives. Working within an Afrocentric Discourse emphasizing the value of a communal ethic, some participants establish themselves within blessed cultural worlds in which they have gained spiritual identities through the gifts they have received, but perhaps more importantly, due to the concern that they hold for the spiritual well-being of those around them.

**Socioculturally-Situated Identity and Relationship Building**

Participants also construct a spiritual identity situated in a cultural world of learning patience. Within this cultural world, participants learn to accept the teachings of the church and their proper roles within their community in order to situate themselves with spiritual identities. Often, these roles involve a woman’s ability to “forgive and forget,” or at least to overlook the disappointments she has experienced in life. For example, Janice talks about becoming a single mother while a teenager and describes herself as learning the patience to accept this reality. However, central to learning patience is a participant’s faith in God. Through this faith, a participant may receive some of her needs and desires. Faith is thus built upon a participant’s construction of God as a father-like figure: if honored and obeyed, he will bestow her with his gifts. Following an Afrocentric Discourse that values the strength of the family, participants imbue God with the role of “the head of the household”—as a strong father figure who may either punish them or support them, depending on their strength of faith in him. In
other words, the strength of a participant’s relationship with God is constructed as a
determinant in her life outcomes.

One proverbial phrase often invoked within a discourse of learning patience is that
a participant has learned to “live day by day.” Roxanne and Shateque both work this
phrase into their descriptions of learning patience. Roxanne links her praxis of living day
by day to an intimate relationship with God, in which she values each and every day as a
gift that she has received from him. On the other hand, while Shateque is still learning to
be patient, she builds the possibility of spiritual identity through her reliance on living
each day “as it comes” to her. Both participants emphasize the importance of their
relationship with God in determining positive outcomes for their life stories. Through
their everyday, practiced, relationships with God they are able to learn patience to accept
the difficult circumstances they face in life.

Wanda foregrounds her work experiences, circumstances central to her everyday
reality, when situating herself with a spiritual identity. Through her practiced
participation in a cultural world of learning patience she has learned her proper role,
Afrocentrically speaking; that as a good woman, she should not talk back. Rather, she
should “turn the other cheek” and “walk away” from the difficult situations she faces at
work. Wanda has gained wisdom through her experiences at work—she has learned how
to enact a role of respect in her workplace. She situates herself with a spiritual identity
primarily through the role of wise woman that she enacts in her workplace, in which she
maintains patient social relations with both her co-workers and clients. Wanda centers
these social relationships as both impeding her in the past, in terms of her inability to
maintain a sense of respectability, and helping to remind her of her own spirituality in the
present (in which these social relations are presented as a sort of hair shirt, serving to remind her of her intimate relationship with God).

Not only do participants construct particular cultural worlds of spirituality, they also link themselves with several worldviews imbued with spirituality. They speak of worldviews in which they have “grown up in the church,” been able to “be themselves,” been able to “do the right thing,” and been a part of a “larger plan” in their growing-up narratives as a way to contextualize their spiritual identities. All of the participants spoke of being “raised up in the church.” However, a number of them also said that they were “burnt out” on the church when they were younger and, consequently, did not attend church services much anymore. While these participants may not have publicly conducted their religious ministrations, they said that they still prayed, thus performing their religious rituals in private. Roxanne assembles a spirituality narrative in which she recognizes the difference between public religious participation, which may not always be performed with the “Lord in mind,” and private religious ministration, in which the “Lord is in your heart.” She assembles a growing-up narrative in which public religious participation (in a church setting) is connected to a sort of “conspicuous” religiosity: church going is more of a fashion show within her community, for “people to be seen,” than it is a demonstration of one’s spirituality.

Roxanne links her private spirituality to her ability to be herself. Due to the strength of character that she gains from her spirituality, she does not care what other people in the community think about her. On the other hand, Harriet speaks gaining her strength in character through her participation in a public/religious institution. She constructs her spiritual identity in connection with her church participation: through her
active participation in the church she is able to better divine the “word of God” and to live her life in accordance with his proscriptions. She can thus claim to live life the way that she would like to live it, doing the right thing” rather than allow herself to be swayed by other people.

Serena also connects her ability to do the right thing to her church participation. She says that she is “grounded in the church,” meaning that she constructs her spiritual identity through an active application of God’s message to her daily life. However, she speaks of wavering in her spiritual identity recently, in that her spiritual strength derives from her daily religious practices. Serena’s spiritual identity contrasts sharply with that of Roxanne, who constructs her identity on a much more personal, spiritual, rather than religious, institutional, basis. Serena’s spiritual identity is constructed through a more public method of service, falling more in line with an Afrocentric Discourse which valorizes community members serving the Lord through their service to each other. By doing the right thing, in attending church services three to four times a week and through her service to other people, she publicly demonstrates her spiritual identity to fellow community members.

Connection Building

The public demonstration of spirituality echoes a central theme of Afrocentric Discourse—that of the larger plan of interconnection between all members of the African-American community. This larger plan is referred to by participants in the comparisons they build between a past and present community social scene. This past community ethic is said to have centered upon a mutual love and caring for all members of the community. In contrast, the present social scene is one in which members of the community cannot get along, are “always fighting,” and constantly disrespect each other.
Sisters Wanda and Janice both speak glowingly of a past in which they were taught to respect their family and community members.

Janice takes the notion of intercommunity respect one step farther, linking the dissolution of respect within her community to an increase in drug use and related social problems. She speaks of community members replacing wholesome communal activities, such as church participation and family reunions, with individually-oriented activities, such as drug use and violence. Essentially, she constructs a functionalist, medicalized, assessment of her community. Her community has grown sick because the individual elements within it, the members themselves, are not taking care of each other. In Afrocentric terms, which emphasize the whole over the sum of its parts, the community is disintegrating. Due to individual community members’ current apathy in forging connections with each other through a social resource (the church) which has traditionally provided its “lifeblood,” the community, as a whole, is now suffering from a virtual social anemia.

In chapter 5 we will see another situated identity—that of being a good woman—as mediated through an Afrocentric Discourse.

**Summary**

A being spiritual identity is broken up into two categories within this chapter, as an adaptive mechanism and as a worldview. Spirituality is spoken of as an adaptive mechanism, in which participants situate themselves within cultural worlds of being blessed, learning patience, and gaining wisdom. Within a being blessed cultural world, participants speak of their spirituality as a mechanism for facing the situated realities of their everyday lives, such as in dealing with health problems or with the drug-abuse related problems present in their community. Participants situate themselves within a
cultural world of learning patience through their active church participation, so that they may overcome obstacles presented in their jobs and in their relationships with others. They also speak of day-to-day spiritual practices which allow them the patience to enact the Golden Rule, centering on an inter-communal ethic. Finally, participants speak of their active church participation, in which through religiously gained, experiential, knowledge, they have gained the wisdom to accept life’s difficulties.

Spirituality is spoken of as a worldview, in which participants situate themselves within cultural worlds of growing up in the church, being themselves, doing the right thing, and being part of a larger plan. Situating themselves within a cultural world of growing up in the church, participants describe the role of religion and spirituality in their everyday lives. They speak of being raised in the church, linking their individual spirituality to a core value of interconnection with the African-American community rooted through the church. Participants also situate themselves within a cultural world in which they are able to be themselves, speaking of their spirituality as something which grants them a sense of self worth. Spirituality and self worth are spoken of in a dialectical fashion, in which one’s self worth is measured in relation to one’s adherence to a moral guide that values all of the individuals in a community. A cultural world of doing the right thing is a worldview-in-practice held by participants in relation to achieving a spiritual identity. One’s ability to do the right thing is often spoken of as being divinely inspired, in which an individual is able to do the right thing by following a moral guide as derived from church teachings. Finally, participants also situated themselves in a world of communal interconnection. Speaking of themselves as being part of a larger plan, they linked their own spiritual growth to the spirituality of those
around them. Religious activities, with the church as social focal point, are cast as crucial in the maintenance of the community’s good health.

In terms of world building, participants construct blessed cultural worlds primarily through their use of the word “gifts” to describe the blessings that they have received from God. For some participants, gifts refer to physical accomplishments achieved, most notably associated with reproduction and motherhood. For other participants, gifts refer to correct interpretations of messages from God, usually linked to a positive turn in the participant’s life course.

Through socio-culturally situated identity and relationship building, participants speak of learning to accept their lot in life, both in terms of their own roles within the community and in terms of their relationship expectations. Central to learning patience is a participant’s faith in God. Faith is built upon a participant’s construction of God as a father-like figure. If the participant obeys God’s rules, then some of her needs and desires may be fulfilled. Participants also speak of learning to live day by day as praxis for learning patience. This praxis is linked to a social problems discourse, as it is enacted as an intervention method-of-sorts in gaining a positive outcome in life.

Finally, through connection building participants build a comparison between past and present spiritual worlds to construct a present world devoid of interconnection and forged upon individual pursuits. Participants construct the root of the community’s social problems, notably an increase in crime and drug use, as based on the valuation of an individualistic, over a communal, ethic.

In *Mules and men*, African-American anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston (1935) provides an ethnographic description of her own rural Southern community by presenting the folk stories that community members tell about the origin of various social and cultural characteristics of their community. She tells one folk story, entitled “Why women always take advantage of men,” which provides an explanation for the gendered division of labor within southern, African-American rural communities, as well as provides an anecdotal explanation for the way that African-American women achieve power within their communities. The story begins with “man” and “woman” starting out with equal power. One day, man gets sick of sharing power, so he goes up to God and asks him for more physical strength than woman. When he comes home and starts to physically control his wife, by beating her, the woman decides that she will also ask God for physical strength, so that things may be like they were before. God tells the woman that he is unable to give her the same physical power as man. So the woman goes to the Devil, who tells her to ask God for his set of three keys and to bring them back to him. The woman does so and the Devil bestows these keys upon the woman, telling her that God’s set of keys has more power in them than the strength of man could ever handle. This set of keys holds the key to the kitchen, the key to the bedroom, and the key to the cradle. In other words, women gain power in the caretaking realms—in cooking, in regard to sex, and in terms to producing and sustaining future generations. The moral of
the story is that men may be physically stronger, but that women maintain power within the family and the community through their caretaking roles.

Lorraine Johnson-Coleman (1998) begins her book, *Just plain folks: Original tales of living, loving, and learning, as told by a perfectly ordinary, quite commonly sensible, and absolutely awe-inspiring Colored woman* with a poem told to her by her own mother. This poem aptly describes the traditional roles of women in a southern African-American community. The poem is told from her mother’s standpoint, and describes the responsibility that she has for raising her own children and other children in the community. The point made is that mothering is a job that is never finished. As her mother puts it, she has been “a grandmother to her children, a mother to her own children, a mother to ‘the motherless,’ and also a wife to her husband” (which incidentally, is lumped together in the mothering stanza, implying that she may have been a mother to her husband as well) (Johnson-Coleman, 1998, p. viii).

Johnson-Coleman (1998) also writes her mother as saying that other women, “the aunties, the sisters, the grannies and the nannies,” may have “mothered” her as well (p. viii). Mothering, a major theme within an Afrocentric Discourse, is not just restricted to biological motherhood. Patricia Hill Collins (2000a) describes “other mothering” as a central theme of the African-American mothering experience: "In many African-American communities, fluid and changing boundaries often distinguish biological mothers from other women who care for children" (p. 178). Other mothers are those who assist in mothering responsibilities. Collins (ibid.) writes that other mothers may be kin-related or they may be fictive kin, related through their caretaking roles, and points social support networks in the rural South as particularly illustrative of the idea of fictive kin:
"Children in Southern rural communities were not solely the responsibility of their biological mothers. Aunts, grandmothers, and others who had time to supervise children served as othermothers" (ibid., p. 181).

Young women are often groomed for the role of being an other mother by caring for other people's children. Molly Dougherty (1978) discusses the responsibilities that girls learn at a young age, in which they care for their younger siblings, thus taking on the responsibility of an apprentice mother. Mothering, whether it is mothering one’s own children or mothering other people’s children, is an important role in being a good woman for the participants in this study.

Participants speak of the importance of older women in their lives. These older women are given almost superwomen like qualities, in that they serve as the “rock” in participants’ lives—anchoring participants’ early family experiences and serving as the main conduit in the kinship system. Black Feminist theorist bell hooks (1990) writes of her own experiences growing up in rural Southern Kentucky and the importance of these women in younger women’s lives:

In our young minds houses belonged to women, were their special domain, not as property, but as places where all that truly mattered in life took place—the warmth and comfort of shelter, the feeding of our bodies, the nurturing of our souls. There we learned dignity, integrity of being; there we learned to have faith. The folks who made this life possible, who were our primary guides and teachers, were black women...it was there on the inside, in that 'homeplace,' most often created and kept by black women, that we had the opportunity to grow and develop, to nurture our spirits. (p. 41-42)

Similar to hook’s growing-up story, the participants in this study describe older women as important figures in teaching them how to respect themselves and others, guiding them in the development of their spiritual identities, and creating a home for them in which they felt loved and were taught the proper ways for becoming a good woman in their
community. Older women serve as the rock in participants’ lives with regard to the connection that they maintain throughout the kinship system. They maintain these connections through family gatherings in which cooking and eating figure prominently, through sexual ties with primary partners, and through caretaking of their own family members, as well as those needing care within the community.

Another featured theme within an Afrocentric Discourse centers on good women “keeping quiet,” “being respectable,” and “staying inside.” Good women do not “run the streets,” as a number of the participants in this study pointed out. Rather, they “keep to themselves,” and do not create problems for others. One may wonder; is the same phrase, “running the streets,” applied to men? If men are out and about with their friends, laughing and having a carefree, good time, are they said to be “running the streets?” Or is this somehow a gendered phrase, something only applied to an improper woman? Perhaps this is a subject for a future study.

In a personal “life note,” Deborah E. McDowell (1994), a professor of African-American literature, writes about her memories of returning to her childhood home in rural Alabama for a family reunion. She writes of her reluctance to return home, due to her misgivings on the “proper” role of women in her home community, in which one is “good” if one keeps quiet. In going back home she describes forcing herself to revert to the womanly ideals of her community: "I laugh and indulge them. Ever the 'good' girl, even if a childhood tattletale, I am not dismissive, defensive. I smile, knowing that I will never reveal what I truly think about the idea of moving back home" (p. 352). McDowell links being a "good girl" in this rural town to being quiet, knowing one's place, not talking back, and presenting a good face to the public.
A situated identity of being a good woman was assembled by participants through their participation in several cultural worlds. Participants spoke of older, influential women as the “rock” in their lives.” They also spoke of their own roles as “caretakers and mothers,” and the respectability attained in “staying inside and keeping quiet.” However, at the same time, they spoke of “being tomboys” while growing up, perhaps as a way to subvert the gendered expectations of their community while young. Some also spoke of “needing someone to take care of them” and help them with their difficult life circumstances. In other words, the ideal of being a strong, independent, superwoman, who takes care of everyone else in the community and is self-sufficient in facing her own difficult life circumstances, is not the situated reality of the participants in this study.

While participants incorporate some of the appropriate gendered images from an Afrocentric Discourse, they also diverge from these “standards” in discussing significant life events.

Finally, in narrating their growing-up stories, participants often provided glowing stories of the father-figures in their lives. Several participants relate the happy times they spent with their fathers when they were young, even if their fathers held a scant presence in their everyday lives. Many of the participants take the Biblical proverb to “honor thy father and mother” to heart, extolling the virtues of these father figures. Fathers are constructed as “the spice of life” in participants’ memories of growing up.

The following section focuses on Roxanne’s story of being a good woman. Her’s is an exemplar story of the many attributes of a good woman identity from an Afrocentric perspective. This identity is constructed primarily through her discussion of the importance of having a big family and the multiple caretaking roles that she takes on
within the Port Charles community. Stories of being a good woman will be further elaborated through other participants’ related comments in subsequent sections.

“I Don’t Play That”: Roxanne

Roxanne lives in a trailer park on the east side of University Town, but was born and raised in Port Charles and makes weekly, if not daily, trips back to her home town to visit with family and friends. Her youngest daughter, who is eighteen years old and a senior in high school, still lives with her. Her four other children and four other step children live in nearby communities. Roxanne’s primary partner, who is the father of her youngest daughter, died last year of stomach cancer.

Roxanne’s good woman identity is built in two parts. In part one of her story, she focuses on her mother as a model of good womanhood. Her story centers on the importance of her mother as a role model in her identity construction, focusing particularly on the role her mother played as rock in her life, and in the lives of her family and friends as well:

[AG: So tell me more about your mom.] Sweetheart. Everybody loved her. She had the house that sit in the middle of…the world, I guess, this thing. Cause everybody children come to her house…because they just loved, “Auntie,” and everybody called her Auntie. Even if, it wasn’t even their auntie. Auntie, or either mom.

Roxanne speaks of her mother’s house as being at the center of everyone’s social world and imbues her mother with a persona in which she forms the foundation of the community’s social interactions. As the mother to all within the community, her mother is the rock of the community’s social support (kin) network.

Roxanne develops this theme, in which her mother was “loved by all,” by describing in further detail the social linkages that her mother forged with the rest of the
community. Her mother was mother to the whole community in that the neighborhood children could always be found at her mother’s house:

Everybody just loved her. Children that wasn’t even under her still called her mom and auntie. And…grandchildren was there and then…grandchildren, friends, and cousins…everybody just, it was just my momma home was home. Everybody just felt at home, to get there. And…the adults that knew her all liked her and they just…kids. If you’re missing your child, call Auntie house and they’re somewhere laying around Auntie’s house. And it, do, like at night…they’ll call, mom’ll say, “call your momma, let your momma know you gonna stay if you gonna stay all night.” So they did that, but it’s like, it be a night that…somebody didn’t call they momma that…nobody did worry about it cause…go down the dirt road, there’s Auntie’s house, I bet you’ll find ‘em. And, cause my momma had a big family to all the other kids that was gathered around us…and just, it was just the place to be. And…no drinking and smoking though. So…my mom was just that type of person. Shoulda had a daycare.

Roxanne constructs a glowing picture of the past, similar to the one that Janice and Wanda present in the previous chapter, in which the rural community-of-old was a safe one; everyone knew where to find their children. They knew that they could be found with a woman who was not only a structural rock, in providing a safe space for their children, but was also a moral rock, in not allowing smoking or drinking on the premises.

Similar to hooks’ (1990) writing about the importance of older African-American women in her own growing-up story, Roxanne situates her mother with an identity in which she was responsible for taking care of, and serving as a socializing agent for, the community’s children.

Roxanne continues her rock story by talking about a significant event in her life, when her mother died of cancer at the age of fifty:

Boy, she was missed, you know, but… And that’s why I moved there [to a big city down south], because after she died it was like…things just wasn’t the same. We, she the one that kept the family together. She the one that kept the family reunion worth being to. And we have family reunion, after she died, like, it just wasn’t the same when she wasn’t there. And it wasn’t just for me, it was like…everybody around was like “Auntie this,” and they just, “Auntie that.” And it just wasn’t the same. She just held it together. And then…you know, we still get together and we
Roxanne links the significant event of her mother’s death to the falling apart of her childhood home. Evoking the saying that “home is where the heart is,” her mother’s home became just a dwelling place after she died. Instead of the reunions-of-old, which were family gatherings grounded on an interconnection between family members, get-togethers now are more like informal meetings. As the rock of her family, Roxanne’s mother was responsible the preservation and maintenance of her large kin network.

Roxanne’s mother was married two times. Her first husband left her when she was pregnant with her third child. Eventually, her mother met another man, with whom she proceeded to have ten more children (including Roxanne). Beginning a sub-story on the power of big families, Roxanne constructs her mother as a superwoman who was able to raise a big family through the comings and goings of two husbands. Despite her father leaving her mother when she fell ill with cancer, Roxanne constructs her mother’s role in her family’s life as so strong that she did not allow a deteriorating relationship with her husband to affect the loving atmosphere within her family. Roxanne takes up an Afrocentric Discourse in telling her growing-up story, focusing on the strength of African-American women within the community to forge and maintain interconnections between family and community members. Within this Discourse, African-American women are denoted with a superwoman like role, in which they form the bedrock of a family and community social support network.
More than just superwomen, African-American women are also ascribed as self-sacrificing within an Afrocentric Discourse. Roxanne constructs her mother as self-sacrificing superwoman through her description of the hard work that her mother performed in order to provide a nice home for her family:

It’s like she really didn’t have a fair chance. She worked all her life in the fields and she built this home out there, four bedrooms on three acres of land. And like she, by the time she got all that built, she lived in her house after…working on the farms and be in it, she lived in it maybe two years before she died. So it’s like…she worked real hard and didn’t get to enjoy it.

Superwomanhood and self-sacrifice are, thus, integrally linked, as participation in a superwoman cultural world is linked with a woman’s ability to sacrifice herself for the sake of her family and community. Roxanne’s mother fulfills her role as superwoman in the conclusion to an almost operatic story plot: her mother toils away for her family, both through her own physical exertions and through the social labors of maintaining strong interconnections within the community. In the end, she dies a tragic death felt by all, leaving the legacy of a superwoman role for future generations of young women to follow.

In part two of her good womanhood story, Roxanne links her mother’s superwoman role to the role that she, herself, plays in the lives of her children, primary partners, and fellow community members. Roxanne’s story, in which she learns how to be a strong woman, centers on the farm work that she performed as a child. At the time of our interview, Roxanne was working as a certified nursing assistant (CNA) at a nursing home in University Town. She had worked in this capacity for the past thirteen years. Other than this type of work, Roxanne mentioned farm work as the only job that she has had in her life. When asked to describe her past farming life, Roxanne told of a
childhood in which she learned a strong work ethic, as well as strength in personality, by working on a variety of farms with her family:

I did farm work out in the…I call it country, out in Port Charles country area. I did some farm work. Crops are out, pick the cucumbers, pick the peas, pick the peppers. Hold the gas…I even drove the tractor, did the lawn. And…I helped pen pigs. Did it all! My mom…raised us doing that kind of work. That’s what she did. And…my dad, they all, we used to actually own our own farm, like…for vegetables. We had pigs and we had horses and chickens but…that more or less how we made our living, just worked there on the farm. And that’s how we grew up living!

Essentially, Roxanne constructs farm work as a central socializing agent in her youth:

She describes this time in her childhood with glowing words, in which she realized the strength of a family who works together and to value the fruits of one’s own labors.

Beginning her story of modeled identity development, Roxanne compares the way that she raised her own children with the way that her mother raised her and her siblings:

I wish I could raise all of my kids doing that. Cause it make ‘em have a…strong mind. It make ‘em have a strong body. It make ‘em be independent ‘till whenever they do their regular job…it’s easy work to ‘em then. You, you know what I’m saying cause…farm work, people, what people think is really really hard… And it is hard if you’re not used to it. But when you grow up doing it, it’s hard work, but it’s honest and it’s fair and you get…good pay from it. And…it just…it, it did me, it made me to whenever I did start working as a CNA…it was like a…vacation. You know what I’m saying? So I did it for thirteen years and I worked two full-time jobs for like twelve of those years. And people like, “how could you do that?” I’m look at them like, “it’s really like a vacation.” Because I was used to the farm work from…sun up to sun down.

Roxanne constructs a past farm life for herself through which she learned how to be a hard worker, to have a strong mind and body, and to be self-sufficient. She takes up Afrocentric notions of African-American women as strong and self-sufficient, applying these gender roles to both her mother, in the past, and to herself, presently. She constructs a possible future for her children, in which they might have learned these characteristics, as well, had they done this type of work while growing up.
Roxanne constructs this way of life in the past as not only providing her with valued Afrocentric characteristics of strength and self-reliance; she also links this way of life with giving people something to do in a rural area. In the previous chapter, both Janice and Shateque link a lack of something to do to the increase in drug use among young people in their community. Accordingly, a past farming life gave young people something to do in their spare time and may have worked as a preventative mechanism against the vices that come along with having too much time on one’s hands. Roxanne describes the farm work she did while growing up as quite time consuming:

You would get up around 6:00… Where you done got your breakfast, got yourself set up, got all the equipment you need… so you could be in the field by… 7:00. By that time… daylight break through. You would get in the field and you’d try to get all the, what you could get done… in the early part of the morning, while it’s cool. Cause like around… 12:30, 1:00, when it go to be getting hot… that’s when you really, like, take a lunch break. Probably about 1:00, cause you know, it’s getting hot now, so you gonna take that lunch break during the time that it’s really, really hot. And after you eat… you go back to work and oh you, between 2:00 and… 4:00, 2:00 and 4:30, when the sun is hot, you, you still be working, but you’re not working as hard, you just more or less go along, just a way to keep busy. Then after 4:00 it’s when it’s cooled down and then, you know, can really work again. Cause it’s not… so hot. And… you just… (claps her hands) do that every day. You’d do that until dark fall… If you got um… I guess around six, seven, whatever time it get night, then you can’t see. Well… you could see… but enough to be able to put your hand in a bush that you can’t see the snake in there. … [A]t that time you’re loading and… packing up stuff on the truck. When it’s dark. And you go in, take your shower. Then you have to house work. Cook and clean, do what you go to do at home. Then go to bed, so it was a… it more or less did, you did that every summer. And, like, during the winter time… we would, um… do winter work. So it was something to do year round.

Roxanne assembles a world of growing up that was filled with the hard labors of farm work; this was a day-in, day-out activity. She constructs this farm work as an honest living, in which individuals were remunerated directly according to the labor they expended. Her discourse evokes Marxist images of the peasant being rooted to her land; not yet alienated by a work experience that is divorced from her own production.
Roxanne continues with this image, linking a rising crime rate in her community to the lack of discipline that young people receive from their parents in this present day and age:

And it was, to me I would rather have raised all my kids that way. Actually I did raise my kids up on the farm. But they just didn’t have to do it...everyday that I did. When I was coming up, we had to do it every day. It was going to be, it’s a must, that’s a living. And with my kids...if I’da had...it was only in the summertime, when they wasn’t at school. Like, we used to have to stay, we didn’t have to stay out of school that often...but, every now and then we would have to leave, actually, one of us had to stay home to help out. But...it was...honest, it was fair. It wasn’t at all, it wasn’t no...crime rate so high. You know, we had things to do that kept us busy, keep us out of trouble.

Roxanne begins by saying that she wishes that she could have raised her children the same way that she was raised. However, she then rewinds her story, reconstructing how she has actually raised her own children, to create a narrative in which she has given her children a similar opportunity to develop a strong character to the one that she was provided by her own mother. She continues with a Marxist-like image, linking a present higher crime rate to the alienation of the worker (young people) within the community. These young people do not have honest livelihoods. Instead, due to the constraints of a modern society in which young people have other obligations to fulfill, namely their schooling, they have become divorced from their roots and are seeking other things, such as crime, to cope with these feelings of alienation. She shifts her story regarding the way that she has raised her children to better fit with an Afrocentric Discourse of the African-American supermother who raises her children to be strong and self-reliant.

Roxanne continues her narrative construction of good womanhood, casting herself with a strong mothering role. She relates that when they lived with her, her children never got in trouble with the law:
I did raise them on the farm to a certain point, over the summertime. But I didn’t ever make ‘em stay out of school to do farm work. And the reason being that is, the reason I let them work on the farm is...while they’re in school, I didn’t allow them to have jobs. Cause I wanted them to focus on school first. So they could get a...good education. But they know about the farm work... So...my kids, I think they do, like, none of ‘em got into trouble. And they all finished, well they, no, no, no I had one drop out. But the rest ‘em all finished school so far. And...one of them, I’d say none of...have ever been in trouble with the law. ...It’s, I think they did, I think I did pretty good with ‘em, with, with doing just a...summer work in the farm. They know the value of...hard work. And they know when they...get that education and they want to be laid back, a little, get that education, get you a good job. And it’s not as hard. So...I think that what really made ‘em all really value it.

Roxanne works within an Afrocentric Discourse that constructs one’s education as a form of liberation within the confines of a difficult world. She links her strong mothering abilities to her children’s success in not falling into crime and to their educational attainment. The root of this linkage is the farm work that both she and her children performed while young. They have all learned the value of a strong work ethic—which has translated into their being able to work hard in all realms of life.

Working within an Afrocentric Discourse that constructs large families as potential survival mechanisms, Roxanne constructs her family-members-of-origin, as well as her own family members, as all looking after each other and taking care of each other. She evokes a cultural world of other mothering, for herself, and through the example of her daughter and son-in-law, who often look after another daughter, Quanda’s, two children:

Quanda kids be with them all the time. So he may have just claimed them as his children. And when they take pictures, where is the picture, I had one. [Describing the photo] Where he, her, their kid a little, and Quanda got a girl on each side of ‘em. But, but they all close so. So it just... “that’s my baby.” They claim them like that. I guess, you know, in writing, they don’t say it like that. You know what I’m saying? They don’t sign papers saying it’s their baby.

Roxanne describes a close-knit family, in which biological parenthood does not necessarily translate into being one’s sole parenting responsibility. Her daughter and
son-in-law look after Quanda’s children enough so that they make claims to these
children as their own. Part of this claims-making process is linked to being able show
possession for a child through naming. That they are able to say that “this baby is mine,”
casts them with parenting roles in the children’s lives. Roxanne contrasts this
Afrocentric, other-mothering, sensibility with a legalistic perspective, which constructs a
child’s biological parents as being the “true” parents of the child.

Roxanne includes herself within this other-mothering cultural world as well:

But you know that, I, like, me, myself, I claim couple of my nieces. And I’m like,
“those are my babies!” Cause those are the ones I’m closest to and…those are
mine. But if you didn’t know it you would really think they were mine but…by
birth, no, they’re not mine. So...“that’s my baby there.” Like, my baby sister have
a little girl that I really love to death. She’s about thirteen or fourteen now. And
everybody be saying, “that’s Roxanne baby.” “Yeah, that’s my baby.” But
they...know her mom is Darlene [Roxanne’s sister]. But...they just say “it’s
Roxanne baby.” They say [to Roxanne’s niece], “I’m call your auntie on you!”
You know what I’m saying? But, but yeah, I guess the family member, we all
know who’s the baby’s owner but...I control her better than her mom. She
wouldn’t do things that I’m sure that she would do if her mom was there. I don’t
play that. So, therefore, it always be, “that Roxanne baby, she gonna do it for me,”
so yeah. That type of thing. So...that’s how we get to claim all these babies.

Roxanne is able to make claims to several of her nieces due to the disciplinarian role she
plays in their lives. In applying an Afrocentric Discourse, which tends to hold a more
fluid perspective on parenting roles, she says that through her role as disciplinarian, and
consequently with the respect she receives from her nieces, she is able to make claims to
these girls as being her own daughters.

Not only does Roxanne construct herself as a superwoman mother with respect to
her own family. She also holds a role as community mother:

About a year and a half ago I opened a club out in Port Charles and...I kept it for
about a year and a half. And...it was nice and all the family came. So, therefore,
we met each other there a lot. It was just...a disco club. We just...on Friday
nights, when we had our biggest disco. Other than that we just...chilled around,
through the week and...every little thing. I played softball on Sundays out there,
every Sunday. I would let them get together and we would play softball out there in the parking lot. Cause it was a big parking area. An open field. And...you know it...it was nice!

Similar to the way that she constructs her mother’s house as the center of her family’s social world previously, Roxanne sets a social scene in which her club is the center of her family’s interactions. Not only did this club provide a draw to her own family members, it also served as a place for community members to come together. Eventually, however, Roxanne says that she got “burnt out” from the responsibility that she took on in running this club:

I just got tired of going out there and doing it. Cause I had to go out there all the time and I had to be responsible for everything out there. (Sneezes) Which was okay and it made me money. It’s just that...I had to be out there every day...because...the people in the country have nowhere to go. So they wanted me to open it everyday so they could come play pool. Or look at TV, cause I had TVs out there. And I was cooking chicken wings and French fries. It was a place that they could get away from. They can go and play pool and drink a beer and...eat a chicken wing or two and...fries and...on Sundays, like I said, we’d play on Sundays, we played softball...and ate...fried chicken wings and barbeque and stuff like that.

Constructing herself as responsible for providing social activities for her rural community, Roxanne assembles an identity in which she is being a good woman by sacrificing her own well-being in order to bolster the social ties of her community.

While she had shut down her club by the time of our interview, she did not allow herself the image of a negligent mother:

Since I haven’t been out there they’ve been bugging me about coming back. And I keep telling them, eventually I will come back. It’s just that I got kinda tired of doing it. It was everyday I had to drive all the way out there an be there so when the people come, they had somewhere to go. And on a Friday night...I got there around...Friday daylight, around 2:00pm...the afternoon. Saturday morning...5:00 in the morning I could tell everybody, “ya’ll got to go home! I got to go home and get me some rest.” It was hard for me. Then I had to be right back out there Sunday morning to play softball. And...eventually it was worse. ...So I had to learn from my mistakes. Yeah, before I was just trying to learn and feel what the...people wanted. So I was doing it seven days a week. Twenty-four hours a
day if they wanted it. So sometimes I just had to run ‘em home. So…it was really nice, I would have to say it was really nice. …like mom house was the place to be. Got that place where it was the place to be. Cause everybody, friends, family, relatives, everybody just gathered there. And we danced and laughed and had fun. But…it was bringing the whole…when I say family and friends, the whole neighborhood out there. You know what I’m saying? And other than that there, we all just…enjoy our life there. So I do miss that though.

Roxanne situates herself with the role of community mother, much the same way that she ascribes her mother with a similar role in the past. Working with an image similar to the sitcom Cheers, but adjusted for a rural, African-American audience, Roxanne constructs a place for her club within the community—as somewhere to go where “everyone knows your name.” Her club provides a social venue within a rural community in which there are not many public places to gather. She admits to a certain weariness from carrying on this self-sacrificing role of club owner, as she was working day and night to forge social interconnections within her community. However, at the same time, she says that she really enjoyed her responsibility and misses the role of seeming beatitude that she once held within her community.

Not only does Roxanne construct herself as mother to her many children and to her community. She also assumes a protector-like, mothering, role with her siblings, in saying that she physically defended her other siblings against other children while growing up. The first thing that came to Roxanne’s mind when describing herself as a child was that she was a “tomboy.” However, contrary to traditional conceptions of tomboyism, which focus on a girl subverting the gendered expectations of society (Carr, 1998), Roxanne’s descriptions of being a tomboy fall well within the boundaries of an Afrocentric Discourse that valorizes the strength, self-reliance, and protectiveness of African-American women as mothers:
Me, I was tomboyish. There wasn’t nothing out there I couldn’t do. Wasn’t nobody out there I couldn’t beat. And it wasn’t out there I didn’t, there wasn’t nothing out there I didn’t do. You know what I mean? I mean, you know, it wasn’t in, I didn’t get in trouble or anything and drink and smoke. It’s just that if the boys played football, I was with the boys. I didn’t stay in the house and put on make-up, put on lipstick, like the girls did. I was a tomboy and...(snaps her fingers) when it came down to housework, “ya’ll do it.” I’m in the fields with the boys. So...I was just...a wild child! I just...wasn’t no feminist about me, I just was out there!

Roxanne works with traditional notions of gender roles within her community to describe herself as a tomboy, describing her own behavior as something of an antithesis to the way that other girls behaved. The meaning that she conveys in her narrative on her past tomboyism is telling of the gendered expectations within her culture. She proceeds to describe herself as a tomboy, in which she was responsible for the defense of others:

I could fight real good and...always everybody had to be my friend...or they’d get beat up (laughs). Or I, you know, if they was getting in a fight with somebody, they’d call up Roxanne. And if they found out Roxanne coming to there fighting...or...say...my sister was fitting to fight somebody. They found out...she gonna get with her sister Roxanne. Oh, they didn’t want to fight then. The fight was over. If I get there and I’m like, “I know you ain’t messing with my sister!” You know, stuff like that. So it was all over.

Roxanne assembles a growing-up narrative in which she felt responsible for physically defending her sisters and others within the community. While relegating her tomboyism to a thing of the past, she speaks of being a tomboy up until she got married when she was eighteen years old. However, while she is reluctant to label herself as such presently, she constructs herself as still carrying on in much the same way that she did when she was younger. Saying that she “lives life to the fullest,” “does what she wants to do,” and “does not care what others think about her,” she falls on both sides of a constructed gender dichotomy in fulfilling the expectations of both women and men.

However, a more complex analysis of gendered expectations is illustrative here. Roxanne turns the notion of feminist subversion on its head, undermining what it means
to be a feminist. In introducing the subject of being a tomboy, she translates the meaning of “feminist” to be one who fulfills the roles of traditional gendered expectations. Roxanne’s feminism is anathema to the idea of feminism writ-large within the academy. While Roxanne builds a younger role for herself in which she does not fulfill the gendered expectations of being a good girl in describing herself as a “wild child,” she performs a role consistent with Afrocentric gendered expectations in defending others within her community and, consequently, acquiring a reputation of strength, both in body and spirit. Essentially, she accepts the dichotomy of gender roles within her community, which tends to place women in a proverbial bind. They are faced with the double burden of having to be respectable, by keeping quiet and clean—roles that are usually associated with the private (female) realm. However, they are also expected to exude an aura of strength and self-reliance in forging connections with other community members through their caretaking capacities, and willing to sacrifice themselves for the sake of community preservation—roles typically associated with the public (male) realm of this dichotomy.

**Older Women as Moral “Rocks” in the Lives of Younger Women**

Like Roxanne, a number of participants spoke of the importance of an older woman in their growing-up stories. “Rocks” are often kin-relations to the participants, many being grandmothers, mothers, or aunts. They are often portrayed as a link between the participant and her other relatives and as an emotional stalwart in the participant’s life. The plotline of a participant’s growing-up narrative often reaches a pinnacle when her “rock” dies or otherwise shifts positions within her life. This shifting of position is cast as a significant event in the participant’s life and serves as a sort of deus ex machina in her growing up story: it is constructed by the participant as changing or “resolving” a
subplot of her growing up narrative. Essentially, this significant event is linked to a change in the progression of the participant’s life course.

Participants who mention this character within their growing-up story, particularly with regard to the way that their story has progressed (or with the way their lives have fallen apart), use her as a sort of straw-woman in the process of making meaning of how and why their lives have fallen apart. For example, in speaking of the death of the rock in their lives, several participants said that if this important person had not passed away, their lives would have been different than the way they were now. Participants constructed plots in which the significant event of the transition of the rock in their lives was linked to their not going to college, their continued residence in Port Charles, the type of job that they had or did not have, and the dissolution of a closely knit kin network.

Timberly’s growing-up story exemplifies the important role that an older woman may play in one’s life. Timberly was raised by her grandmother, in an other mothering sort of relationship in which her grandmother took on full responsibility for her upbringing. Throughout our interview she referred to her grandmother as her mother, alluding to the importance of this woman in her life. Her story does not take on the tragic tones of some of the other participants’ stories about their rocks, in that her grandmother is still alive and well, and remains a vital force in her life. Timberly tells a story about her grandmother that is quite similar in construction to the story that Roxanne tells about her own mother, building a character for her grandmother in which she is seen as the center of her social group’s universe.
She sets a scene in which her grandmother’s house served as a “safe space” for many of her young friends when they got into trouble with their parents. Her grandmother took care of the community’s children, feeding them, talking to them, and helping them to negotiate their troubles with their parents. She constructs an identity for her grandmother of being a good woman in her ability to help others within the community. Her grandmother is recognized as such by others, in that her friends’ parents allow their children to stay over at her grandmother’s house until they “cooled off” from a family squabble.

Timberly continues a construction of her grandmother as a community mother in describing her grandmother’s care of those less fortunate children in town:

Well, I thought…most, well, from what I seen, most people that had that many kids, they were struggling…theys, all, half of the kids were running over to my granny’s. If we go shopping, she tried to get something for somebody else’s child. Like for Christmas and stuff. She’ll try to buy something for that, other people’s kids.

Timberly ascribes her grandmother with superwoman-like characteristics, in which not only does she serves as a rock in Timberly’s life; she is also responsible for maintaining a support network for all of the community children so that they, too, can have “normal” growing-up experiences.

Timberly foregrounds the impact her grandmother has made in her own life, linking her grandmother’s presence to her own sexual morality. She relates that she felt blessed to have her grandmother around, as she could talk to her about anything. She recalled a conversation between herself and her grandmother in which her grandmother provided her with the moral lesson of what could happen (teenaged pregnancy) if she did not communicate openly with her about her sexual experiences.
In addition to her grandmother being a moral rock in her life, Timberly constructs her biological mother as a rock in her life as well. This time, her narrative is more consistent with the plotline of the typical rock story. Within this plotline, a rock in the participant’s life dies and the participant views her life course as shifting or changing as a result. Timberly’s mother died from a brain aneurysm about a year before our interview. She describes her change in personality resulting from her mother’s death:

I was telling people, “you stay outta my face, get out my face.” And I, I felt myself doing this and I knew I was doing it, so I like…one night I just rode and rode and rode. Until…I was probably ‘bout outta gas. It was ‘bout one, two o’clock I came home. I laid on the chair. And I was saying to myself, how…in the hell do you think, ain’t nobody gonna tell me what to do, how to do it, they never don’t know. It was like…I…basically, like, wanted to shut everybody out. Because, I still say, you can’t…tell me what to do and how to do it when you ain’t never been through it. So…I felt myself backlashing, again. Okay…every time somebody’s saying it I was, “get out my face. Don’t say nothing to me, I don’t got nothing to say to you.” And…at all of the time, they was trying to help me get through what I was going through. But they didn’t…understand what I was going through.

Timberly constructs a plot in her second rock story in which she faces the significant event of her mother’s death and is overcome by the enormity of losing her. As a result, she describes herself as becoming something of another person in response to others in the community who were trying to help her to cope with this loss. Linking this significant event to her change in character, Timberly contrasts her behavior after her mother’s death, in which she began to run the streets, with her previous behavior, in which she stayed inside and quietly looked after her two children. She links her “wild” behavior to the significant event of her mother’s passing. In other words, she construes this altered behavior to be a result of her mother's death:

Once I was out with [my friends]…it was like, okay, they’re, everything was like, from now, I just allow you to live, I was hopping around, cutting the fool, it was like, it was taking a lot off of my mind. So I thought being…like this, was what I needed to be doing…was what I should’ve been doing. And a lot of imm-, I mean, a lot of…childish ways came out. Okay, I be going for a ride for the weekend, and
I’m fine, I don’t…think about momma no more. You know what I’m sayin’? It’s, it’s like, ease your mind. So…basically, after momma left, my mom died it was like…this. So…that’s where a lot of my immaturity, now, comes from.

In a way, the significant event of her mother’s death makes Timberly’s transition from housewife and “good” mother to “wild child” more acceptable, as she constructs this new identity according to a plotline which is quite acceptable within her community. A rock in her life has passed away and she is reacting to this significant event according to a script which dictates that she is allowed a transition period, or change in character, to adjust to this development. However, this change in character is not expected to be a permanent one. In fulfilling a good woman identity, Timberly constructs her recent behavior as self-indulgent and immature, as it does not fulfill the gendered expectations of her community. She claims that she is trying to get “back to the place” where she was before, in which her two children were the center of her life and she was content to stay at home taking care of them, and be engaged to her longtime boyfriend.

Priscilla also assembles a story of a rock in her life, assembling a plot that focuses on her rock as both influential and as affecting the trajectory of her life course. Priscilla speaks of her great aunt as being instrumental in her spiritual development, as well as in teaching her how to perform the necessary chores of daily life; teaching her how to do “basically everything” expected of her. In other words, her great aunt-as-rock was instrumental in teaching her how to be a good woman. Reflecting upon this woman’s death, she remembers being “really sad” and at a loss for emotional support. Priscilla explained her pregnancy at the age of thirteen to be a result of this turning point in her life, saying: “I got pregnant right after my nanny got, after my nanny died. I wish that…would never have happened. I wish I could’ve turned that around. I think it was connected.” She links the relationship she formed with a man six years her senior to the
emotional void left by in the wake of her great aunt’s death. This turning point, then, serves an anchor in the continuing plot of Priscilla’s growing-up story.

Like Priscilla, Shateque also foregrounds the trajectory of her growing-up story upon a rock in her life. In chapter 4 Shateque was presented as being blessed in realizing the power of prayer to overcome her addiction to crack cocaine. She links her initiation into this drug use to the death of her mother. She speaks of this mothering figure, actually her great-aunt, as someone who provided stability for her in life, as her rock in life. With the death of this rock, Shateque lost her grounding in life: “When my mother died, that’s when everything went downhill. I didn’t know what I was going through…I felt like killing myself…and…I got mixed up with the wrong crowd…and…I was already in that state and I lost my home, whatever, I gave up on life.” She explained that she started using crack to “cover up the hurt” of her mother’s death.

Shateque also links the death of her mother to a decrease in her church attendance: “When my momma died, I just left [church] there. When she died, I just…I ain’t never go back. It’s just that, momma was my guide, and every time I do go to church I think about her and can’t be in the church.” Shateque constructs her mother as her spiritual guide in life, a role congruent with Afrocentric notions of women as moral and spiritual guides within the community. She is hesitant to participate in church services because she is painfully reminded of her mother’s absence.

Serena develops a rock story in which older women rocks serve to fuse her large kin network together. She describes her grandmother’s house as the center of her family’s holiday-social universe. Serena speaks of memories of holiday get-togethers that her family used to have back when she was a child: “When I was younger, we used
to always go to my grandmother’s house…I mean when I say the whole family, I mean the *whole* family would go there, in Oakdale. I mean like forty, fifty people…I mean…what you see on TV nowadays, it just be no more in 2004. You don’t see people getting together like they used to.” Evoking an image similar to a Hallmark Holiday Special, Serena describes a past in which her family gathered around a brightly lit table, basking in the glow of each others’ company.

When asked why fewer family members gathered at her grandmother’s house nowadays, Serena linked this decrease in attendance to the death of her great-grandmother, who she constructs as the moral rock of her family. By telling family members when they were “out of line,” her great-grandmother maintained an interconnection among her many family members. Essentially, she preached a strong family morale to the rest of her family members, in which she was responsible for teaching her family members what was “right and wrong.” Serena constructs this woman as a central socializing agent in the lives of her family members:

She was like…she was a really old, spiritual woman really. So I mean, she had no problems telling you when you were wrong. She would speak her mind. Yeah, I guess that’s where I get it from. Telling you how, how she feels about a situation and go on with how you felt about it. I mean, and she wouldn’t be nasty about it, like most people would, if they felt a certain way about it. They just, you know, tell you how it felt and…be nasty about…my great-grandma, she was the type of person, she was…keep God first but she’ll put, put you in your place. She don’t have no problem putting you in place. And everybody looked up to her, so therefore, when she said something, you took heed to it. Be like, sometimes you got, they talking about each other instead of being a family. If some people do wrong, they take it outside the family. She made sure we didn’t take it outside the family. We kept it as a family. And so…with that, when she did die, maybe, something happened inside the family, it was…taken out of the family…that broke up the family a little bit, something like that.

Serena inscribes this moral rock in her life with qualities congruent with proper womanhood within an Afrocentric Discourse. While her great-grandmother spoke her
mind, “putting you in your place,” she was first and foremost aware of her obligations to God and disseminated her own life lessons in a respectable way. Serena models her own identity of being a good woman much on the identity that she constructs for her great-grandmother: “I mean…if I’m telling you something, I’ll be honest with you, if it hurts you or not. And I guess do get that from my grandma and great-grandmother. Be honest.” She, too, is steeped in a life of spirituality, but also constructs herself as a straightforward, honest, person, who “isn’t afraid to tell you like it is.”

Perhaps most importantly within an Afrocentric Discourse, her great-grandmother served as a rock in the life of her family, emphasizing characteristics of love, mutual affection, and respect for each other; characteristics important in building a strong kin network. Serena speaks of a turning point in the plotline of her family’s development, in which, through the death of her didactic great-grandmother, values of mutual concern and respect were diminished; thus harkening a breakdown in cohesiveness.

**Women as Caretakers**

Within participants’ growing-up narratives, multiple conceptions exist on what it means to be a good mother. A number of participants spoke of “being prepared” while young to be mothers, namely through the chores they were responsible for within their homes. They spoke of these growing-up responsibilities as eventually translating into the roles that they now fulfill as adults. Participants spoke of taking on mothering roles, within their own families and/or in relation to someone else’s family. Some also spoke of taking on an elder caretaking role, in which they are responsible for taking care of a parent or older relative. Finally, several participants spoke of taking on mothering, or caretaking, roles within their present or past workplaces; as nurses’ aides and assistants,
through their work in daycare settings, or through their role as support staff in institutional settings.

“Being Prepared” for Caretaking Roles

In being prepared for motherhood, Collins (2000a) writes that one theme of African-American motherhood is of young African-American women being groomed or prepared for their caretaking roles through other-mothering responsibilities. Janice’s narrative exemplifies this notion, through the linkage she draws between taking care of her younger brothers and keeping up her family’s household while young to her ability to mother her own child at such a young age.

In describing her growing-up years within her father’s household, Janice said that she was responsible for carrying out the daily chores, as her father worked full time in the pulpwood business, was gone much of the day, and was often tired upon returning home at the end of the day. Janice’s parents split up when she was a young girl and she chose to live with her father following the breakup. Her sister, Wanda, and other brothers lived with her mother. However, both households were located nearby to each other, and as the oldest child, Janice was expected to take care of the younger children. When she was fourteen, she became pregnant. She relates that while this was an unexpected pregnancy, she was more able to handle this responsibility because she was prepared for this role as a young girl. Likening herself to a “mother’s sister,” she carried out many of the duties expected of a mother; cooking, cleaning, and taking care of her brothers, while young. Similar to Janice, Priscilla was also the oldest daughter in her family and was expected to look after her three younger sisters when her mother was too tired after a long day’s work. She describes helping around the house by cooking, cleaning, and looking after her sisters while her mother was working. She relates feeling responsible for this other-
mothering role, at one point even referring to her young sisters as “my children,” then correcting herself and referring to them as her mother’s children. As the oldest daughter, she was expected to take on these roles if her mother was not up to performing them herself. She does not speak of her role as other-mother as a burden, so much as she constructs this role as naturally arising due to her status as oldest daughter.

Priscilla subsequently constructs a definition of good womanhood integrally related to the fulfillment of a caretaking role:

Being a good woman, and all, mothers here, have kids. Just go about day-to-day with it. You know, just go the way, like, the Bible, you know, like the Bible tell you a woman should be. A vicious woman. You just…be a good woman. You know, I take care of my children. You know, me and my boyfriend will stay together. So, so, I just feel like being a good…wife, or however you say it…and a good mother to your kids.

Priscilla injects biblical overtones into her definition of good womanhood, which run parallel to Afrocentric norms that say that a good woman is someone who takes care of others. She bases her ability to be a good woman upon the caretaking preparation she received from her mother while growing up. For instance, when asked to describe how she is similar to her mother, who she names as a “really good woman,” Priscilla says that she and her mother both really enjoy cooking for others. Priscilla describes herself and her mother as both liking to “cook big,” in that they enjoy cooking for others more than just for themselves. Her mother has prepared her for her role of caretaker and mother, and through her early apprenticeship in the ways of mothering she has learned a vital role necessary for being a good woman.

Other-Mothering Roles

Participants also spoke of the other-mothering roles of their own mothers and older relatives, saying that they learned their own other-mothering roles through the examples
of elder women in their lives. For instance, Priscilla is not the only other-mother in her family. Rather, she constructs her own mother as performing a reciprocal other-mothering role for her, as her mother helps to take care of her oldest daughter. Priscilla had her first daughter (her first pregnancy ended in miscarriage) when she was twenty years old and admitted that, at that point in her life, she did not feel mentally prepared to settle down and take care of a baby. Instead, her mother took on much of the responsibility for taking care of this daughter.

Priscilla constructs mothering roles for herself and her mother: her mother “raised” her oldest daughter, as at the time of this daughter’s birth Priscilla did not expect to become a mother. However, she says that she was ready for the responsibility of motherhood when she gave birth to her younger daughter three years ago, at the age of twenty-four. While speaking of her mother as her oldest daughter’s “momma,” Priscilla constructs a contrast between the roles of “birth mother” and “mother who raises a child.”

Interestingly, another participant constructed a similar contrasting role for fathers. Simone succinctly put it like this: “Anybody can say they a father…anybody, but it take a real man to be a daddy. Because the simple fact they do all the things for they child.” In other words, any man can father a child, but it takes a man taking on the responsibilities associated with fatherhood to be a “daddy” in a child’s life. Priscilla casts herself as the biological mother of her oldest daughter, but as the “momma” in her younger daughter’s life. Instead, her own mother has taken on the role of “momma” in her older daughter’s life. However, working against a social problems literature that may conceive of other-mothering as a deviant form of parenthood, Priscilla is careful to circumscribe connotations of neglect that might be perceived in her statement that her
mother “raised” her eldest daughter in saying that she was still “there for” her older daughter.

Karen provides an exemplar narrative of the multiple mothering roles a woman may take on; in other-mothering her fifteen year old niece; in taking care of her sickly mother, Luella Mae; and in the caretaking role she takes as a psychiatric aide at the state mental hospital. In describing her relationship with her sister Corentine, Karen said that she finds it difficult to get along with her sister, due to her sister’s depression. Karen spoke of Corentine’s depression as not only influencing her (poor) social skills, but also affecting her (in)ability to fully perform her mothering obligations. Consequently, Karen relates, she has had to take on some of Corentine’s mothering responsibilities:

Karen assembles an other-mothering role for herself, in which she “makes up” for her sister’s lack of mothering ability. Congruent with an Afrocentric Discourse that valorizes the maintenance of interconnection within the African-American community, Karen situates herself with a good woman identity in that she (and her mother) strive to keep the family going through the holidays, as well as on a daily basis. In other words, Karen is taking on a mothering role for which she feels Corentine should be held responsible.

Within this other-mothering capacity, Karen also makes sure to teach her niece about the importance of keeping a clean home and taking care of the household for her mentally ill mother. Much as Karen has learned from a young age to take care of her
own household and to take care of her ailing mother, she expects for her niece to do the same. Through a cyclical metaphor of responsibility, Karen inscribes her niece with the same gendered expectations that she herself has had to carry out within her own household. Karen’s mother, Luella Mae, has experienced health problems through much of her life. Consequently, as the eldest daughter Karen has been expected to clean and do the cooking, taking care of the upkeep of the household. As her sister is ill as well, and is unable to maintain the upkeep of her own household, Karen expects her niece to fulfill similar obligations.

**Elder Caretaking Roles**

In constructing herself within a cultural world of “elder caretaking,” Karen spoke of her responsibility of taking care of her mother while growing up and the way that this role altered her life course. She links her elder caretaking role both to her past, in which she did not participate in many activities while in school or go out a lot, and her present, in which she remains single, childless, and conceives of her mother as her closest friend. Her elder caretaking role, in part, replaces the possibility of a rich social life. In one example, Karen spoke of a time when her mother was on the brink of death: “Like I say, when she was in the hospital that last time, you know, I was talking to her, over her bed, you know, and I said, ‘don’t go, I’m not ready for you to go because I don’t have any, no children, nor no husband,’ that I would be alone.” Karen links the possible death of her mother to “being alone”; not only would she lose an important friend, but she would feel a void in her life, as this elder caretaking role has been a central activity in her life.

Karen links her elder caretaking role to the progress of her life course, in which she chose to remain in Port Charles, though she admits that she would have liked to have gone to college. She traces this choice back to an earlier time, in which it was instilled in
her at a young age that she prioritize her responsibilities at home before participating in any extracurricular activities:

I was a homebody! I was, I started cooking at a young age, ‘cause mom was sick a lot, when I was coming up. Um, they had put a little crate at the stove. Then whatever she want me to do, she would always tell me what to do and how to do. So I basically learned how to run a household at a early age. I did the cooking, I did the cleaning. …I learned how to run a household at a young age, because my mom was a sick lady. Even now, she’s sick, there’s a lot that I have to do for her. And so, far as now, I basic, did my work in school. I was really taking no activities. Never played any sports. I got in band, at one point. But I’m like, “gosh momma, I can’t do band and keep up with my homework and do my housework!” So I say, “I’m gonna let the band go.”

Similar to the story that Janice tells of being prepared for her role as a young mother, Karen constructs a narrative in which she has been prepared for motherhood through her role as elder caretaker. Essentially, she, too, has learned how to mother, though the traditional conception of a mother as being someone who is older taking care of someone who is younger is turned on its head.

Based on this role as elder caretaker, Karen constructs a good woman identity for herself, who participates in a world of self-sacrifice in order to adequately take care of her mother. While Karen admits to regretting her choice of not going to college, she constructs her options as “limited” in that she was expected to maintain her mother’s household. In order to situate herself with a good woman identity, she has had to take on this responsibility, rather than shirk it for her own individual, intellectual, development. Karen constructs herself with a good woman identity through her application of an Afrocentric Discourse to her growing-up experiences; emphasizing her responsibility towards others, her self-sacrifice, and her prioritization of her family’s well-being above her own, individual well-being.
Caretaking Roles in the Workplace

A number of participants held jobs that were related in some way to caretaking or mothering (see Appendix A for a list of participant jobs). Several of the participants worked as certified nursing assistants (CNAs) in nursing homes or institutional facilities located in towns and cities surrounding Port Charles. Some participants, such as Karen and Wanda, work in mental health institutions, serving to care for “those less fortunate” and to help them to function in their daily lives. A number of currently disabled participants, notably Luella Mae, Corentine, and Priscilla, had worked in a caretaking capacity in the past, but were disabled as a result of these jobs. One participant, Latoya, aspired to have a career in daycare work.

Latoya is a twenty-two year old single woman with no children. She lives next door to Serena in an apartment in the Port Charles projects. While interviewing Serena, I heard a lot of commotion going on next door, with children yelling and screaming and what sounded like objects being thrown against the wall. I assumed that Latoya, who was next on my interview docket, had several unruly children and wondered if I was going to be able to get a good tape recording of her interview. However, I was unable to conduct an interview with her on this day, and had to reschedule our interview appointment.

Arriving at Latoya’s apartment the following week, I was prepared for possible mayhem. I was surprised to see that her apartment was both quiet and childfree. When asked her children, Latoya revealed that they were her sister’s and that she just helped to look after them. She revealed that she did not want any children of her own right now because she had spent much of her life taking care of her nieces and nephews and was “burnt out” on all of this child care. Latoya also reported feeling “taken advantage of” by
her sisters, who she said rely on her to take care of their children, but then treat her “in a nasty way.”

Interestingly however, when asked about her future career, Latoya said that she would like to have a permanent job at a daycare facility. Although she would like to relegate her own biological mothering to a “thing of the future,” Latoya spoke of working in a daycare as a “natural” thing for her to do, as something that she would enjoy doing, and as something that she has “been prepared” to do through the other-mothering roles she has taken on with her nieces and nephews.

In contrast to Latoya, who links her other-mothering abilities to a future job possibility, Corentine links her past job to her present inability to mother. Ironically, it is her past caretaking role at an institution for the developmentally disabled in University Town that Corentine links with her development of depression and consequent reduced ability to take care of herself and her daughter. Corentine worked at this facility for a number of years before being involved in an accident at work, which led to her eventual disability and depression. She assembles a plotline in which she was able to take on a mothering role up until the time that she was incapacitated by a freak accident at work. She is unable to fully mother her daughter due to this significant event, which took away some of her functional capabilities, including being able to “make ends meet” so that she could provide for her daughter.

Rather than being able to participate in a cultural world of caretaking, which is linked to an identity of good womanhood, “it has been downhill” for Corentine ever since. She has not been able to look after her daughter, she has had to go on welfare, and she has lost her stable job. Essentially, she has been stripped of the ability to fulfill the
role of successful woman within an Afrocentric Discourse that values a woman’s ability

to be self-reliant, strong, and to take care of others. Perhaps somewhat ironically,
Corentine says that she does “a little childcare,” nowadays, to make ends meet. While
her sister Karen expounds on her inability to properly provide for her own daughter,
Corentine is still able to perform a job conducive with the gendered expectations of her
community.

I Need Someone to Care for Me: Roles of Dependency

While participants constructed themselves as participating in a caretaking world, in
that they fulfilled the gendered expectation of taking care of an ailing parent, their
children, or someone else’s children; some also spoke of needing someone to take care of
them. In other words, participant identities are not formed merely around the gendered
expectations of their society. Rather, they tend to story their identities around the
significant events that they experience in their lives, incorporating some of the
Afrocentric cultural worlds (such as those of caretaking) into their stories, while also
speaking of their own needs, wants, and desires. Timberly’s story of her mother’s death,
and the emotional crisis resulted from this significant event, provides an exemplar story
of this cultural world of neediness.

Timberly constructs her biological mother’s death as a turning point in her
growing-up story, in that previous to her mother’s death she had been happy to fulfill a
housewife role, in which she stayed at home, took care of her children and household,
and participated in a monogamous relationship with her longtime boyfriend. In turn, her
boyfriend held a job in the public sector, financially supporting the family. “It was
like…[my boyfriend is] working, he was like, ‘come Thursday, you come pick up my
check, you gonna do what you need to do and whatever happens you have the rest.’ I was
just like, hey. I was like, okay, this is...gonna work pretty good!” While Timberly was cognizant of her financial dependence upon her boyfriend, she spoke of this financial dependence in an authoritative way, saying that she had “chosen” this way of life because her first priority is raising her children.

Timberly contrasts her identity before her mother’s death, in which she places herself in a caretaking world, to her identity after her mother’s death; in which she says that she did not want to be around other people, constructing herself as “backsliding” into an immature role of teenage rebellion. Introducing the character of her best friend, a man who lives in a nearby town, she begins her story of “needing someone to take care of her.” While she presents herself as strong-willed and self-reliant, especially in regard to her interactions with others around her, as well as in her determination that her children are raised in a two-person household; when she speaks of her best friend she takes on tones of emotional neediness and helplessness. She mentions the significance of her best friend in her life in connection to the death of her mother—he is the person to whom she turned during this significant event.

Timberly constructs her identity after this significant event as “broken.” Her strength and self-reliance went by the wayside, and she speaks of depending on her best friend to help her get her life back together. Timberly’s construction of herself as “falling apart” during this significant event runs parallel with Van Gennep’s (1960) rite de passage process. When she constructs an identity of “falling apart” she could be said to be placing herself within his liminal phase, in that she is participating in a cultural world that is different from that expected of her. She “falls out of” her everyday world of caretaking in facing this transition of her mother’s death, participating in a more self-
focused and needy cultural world, one in which she depends on another man (and not her fiancé) to help her to reincorporate herself into a new world.

Timberly concludes her significant event story, saying that she feels like she is finally getting “back to her old self,” in that she has decided that she needs to settle back down and focus on her relationship with her boyfriend. While she concludes with a “reincorporation” sequence, in which she agrees to get married to her boyfriend and settle back down with her two children, she continues to construct an identity for herself in which she participates in a cultural world of “needing someone to take care of me.” She describes a relationship with her fiancé in which he is the “breadwinner,” “working to make ends meet,” and is “going to do everything for her,” and she is the “homemaker.” However, she boils this “neediness” down to a choice she has made, in prioritizing the well-being of her family above a possible career for herself.

While Timberly constructs herself as being in a “phase” of dependence and neediness—related to the death of her mother—Flossie and Claire construct themselves as “mentally ill” in relation to their identities of neediness. They both speak of the sexual abuse that they suffered at the hands of relatives when younger, linking this sexual abuse to their current suffering from depression and anxiety. Finally, both also speak of needing someone in their lives to take care of them.

Flossie, a thirty-four year old woman with three children, who is separated from her husband, linked her need for a caretaker to what she considered to be a lack of care or mothering in her life when younger. Describing her experiences of sexual abuse, she relayed that she had only realized in the last couple of years that she had suffered this abuse. She realized that she had been sexually abused in the past when she began to
suffer anxiety attacks and have flashbacks of these repressed memories. Flossie repeated over and over again that she could not understand why her aunts and grandmother did nothing to stop this abuse—questioning why they did not “protect” her from this abuse.

Flossie’s description of her present and past relationships echoes her cry for someone to care for her. Her goal in establishing intimate relationships is to have a partner to fill the void left by growing up in an environment devoid of a caring mother figure. She has been married twice and is currently separated from her second husband. Flossie links her attraction to her second husband to his ability to take care of her: he was “good to her” in that he provided for her financially and fulfilled a number of caretaking responsibilities within the household.

However, after a while, Flossie said she realized she was more interested in forming a sexual relationship with a woman. These feelings eventually led to her separation from her husband. She related that she was hoping to meet a woman with whom she could have a relationship: “I want a girlfriend that gonna be there for me. Gonna love me for Flossie, and not for nothin’ else. You know, and be truthful with me. You know and, and love my kids and all that kinda stuff. I, I think that’s what…gonna make me…happy or whatever.” Flossie states her need for a relationship in which, no matter if it is with a man or a woman, she would like to someone to look after her and be there for her.

Claire is a thirty-year old married woman who has three children of her own, but also had temporary custody over her younger siblings at the time of her interview. She described a childhood of sexual abuse at the hands of her stepfather, as well as physical and emotional abuse from her mother. Due to this abuse, Claire ran away from home.
when she was around thirteen and has been virtually on the road ever since, moving from state to state in order to escape the abuse of her stepfather, while being drawn back into this household in order to appease her mother. Claire has used crack cocaine, as well as marijuana, tobacco, and alcohol, since she was a young woman as a way to cope with the depression and anxiety attacks she has experienced throughout her life. Like Flossie, she assembled a relationship story of needing someone to care for her.

In my field notes from the day of our interview I wrote: “I had heard that Claire’s husband sells drugs, or at least, has done so in the past. She presented him in only glowing terms during this interview. She portrays him as almost a savior figure, someone who saved her from her terrible childhood.” Claire described her husband as a man who has been there for her during all of the ups and downs that she has faced with her mother and her stepfather, and that he is “there for her” now to help her to “get by” in dealing with her anxiety attacks and depression.

While Claire stays at home and takes care of her children, her husband works full-time in the construction business as a day laborer. She relayed that she is unable to work, due to almost daily anxiety attacks. Describing her husband, Claire said: “He’s just understanding. He’s real nice and all. Sweet and kind and all that good stuff (smiles). He’s um, he know, he understands me and…he knows how to deal with me, with my problems, or whatever. What I’m going through, he know what I’m going through.”

Similar to the way that Flossie talks about what she is looking for in a relationship, Claire constructs her relationship with her husband as defined by his caretaking role in her life.

What becomes apparent from all three participants who were identified as suffering from mental illnesses during their interviews (Corentine, Flossie, and Claire) is that these
three women have also been constructed, either in their own narratives, or through the narratives of others, as unable to fulfill a good woman role. They are constructed in such a way because they admit to needing someone to take care of them or needing someone to help them with their mothering responsibilities. Karen speaks of her sister, Corentine, as being an unfit mother, in that she suffers from depression and, thus, is unable to provide for and fully mother her teenaged daughter. Flossie defines herself as a depressed woman, constructing her relationship wants and needs according to who can fill in the void left by uncaring mothering figures in her childhood. She does not focus much on her three children during her interview, only acknowledging that she cannot adequately take care of them. Thus, not only does she define herself as needy in terms of forming her own relationships, she also constructs herself as unable to participate in a “caretaking” cultural world. Rather, it is she who needs the caretaking. Finally, Claire constructs herself as needy in relation to her husband’s caretaking capacity within her life.

In contrast to Timberly, who constructs herself as “just going through a phase” of neediness, something that she has mostly gotten over; Corentine, Flossie, and Claire construct themselves (or are constructed by others) as permanently fixed in a phase of “needing someone to take care of them.” They are not able to fulfill a good woman role because they cannot fully participate in the cultural worlds used in building this situated identity. This situated identity is fulfilled by participating in worlds of self-sufficiency, strength, and caretaking. By the same token, if a woman is not able to participate in all of these cultural worlds then, perhaps, she may be labeled as mentally ill.
Participants spoke of learning through their past experiences living in a small town that thrives on gossip that they should “keep to themselves,” and that the best way to “stay out of trouble” is to stay inside and mind their own business. Two participants, Brianna and Simone, describe their distrust of other people within their community, linking the strong chain of gossip in their community with their decision to “stay inside.” Brianna’s narrative is particular evocative of a phenomenon that I saw among many of the participant’s in this study—that they did not have many, or any, close female friendships because they did not trust other women with “their business.”

Brianna, a twenty-one year old single woman with no children, spoke of her early growing-up years as one’s of happily self-enforced solitude. Describing her early childhood as one in which she stayed inside, Brianna said that she could not come up with a memory of past childhood friendships: “I didn’t have friends. Like, when people sit down and talk about…‘ohhh, when we was younger, we used to do this, we used to do that.’ All I can do is sit there and listen to them ‘cause (laughs) I ain’t no, you know, memories of none of that.” She describes a childhood in which she kept to herself, linking her participation in this solitary cultural world to an identity of self-reliance, independence, and self-sufficiency. Rather than depend on someone else to do something and “mess things up” for her, she said that she would rather do things by herself.

A number of participants spoke of other women “running the streets” and Brianna provided her own definition of a woman who runs the streets as someone who is not able to keep to themselves, someone who does not know how to “keep her mouth shut,” and consequently, someone who “gets into trouble” by gossiping about other people. Elaborating upon her reason for keeping to herself and not running the streets, she
described her past experiences with town gossip. Brianna describes a time when she conducted an experiment-of sorts in testing her other community members’ proclivity for gossip. Although she stayed inside, she was still talked about—community members “put her name in stuff” in which she had not participated. She theorizes that community members make up stories about people mostly for entertainment’s sake.

Within her narrative on keeping to herself, Brianna equates “the street” with being the community; so that “running the streets” is constructed as community gossip. While admitting that her “experiment” failed, since she kept to herself and was still talked about, Brianna said that she still prefers to keep to herself because she gets into “less trouble” that way.

Along with keeping to herself in order to stay out of trouble, Brianna situates herself with a good woman identity in that she is able to “keep quiet,” and not speak her mind to other people. When asked how she is different from her mother, Brianna spoke of her mother’s outspokenness as craziness: “And me, I like to keep stuff inside, she’ll let hers out, you know. That’s crazy. Crazy.” She constructs her mother as deviating from traditional gender norms that hold that a good woman keeps her ideas to herself and does not speak out. Namely, a good woman does not talk back, argue with other people, or cause trouble. Women who deviate from these gendered expectations may variously be labeled as mentally ill.

Simone also linked an identity of being a good woman with her ability to stay out of trouble by keeping to herself. When asked about her daily activities, Simone described the rigors that she goes through in taking care of her son, who has asthma. She relayed
that she can no longer work outside of her home, due to a lack of facilities in her area to look after her son, noting that most consider her son to be an “insurance liability.”

Besides placing her son as her first priority in her life, with her daily activities consumed in this caretaking role, Simone said that she also tries to stay out of trouble by keeping out of “he say, she say” arguments. Simone described her daily activities as rife with the constant temptation to participate in the chatter going on around her. Living in an apartment in the Projects, her life is one of continual intrusion, as neighbors always “knock[s] on her door” wanting to involve her in a network of gossip. Simone situates herself with a good woman identity in that she has mostly been able to resist this temptation to talk by keeping inside.

However, she tells a story alluding to the fact that she is not always able to keep away from these calamitous conversations. When asked to elaborate on what she meant by “he say, she say” conversations, Simone described a past negative experience:

This why I try to stay out [of it]. I hear other people tell me, “such and such told me that about the whole thing…” “Yeah, um hmm.” I just cut, just cut ‘em short. [Because if not], you be in stuff you don’t know nothing about. But then, there’s a big expression, “don’t know nothing about it.” And I’m not planning on being there. Cause every time I turn around, one neighbor come by, “don’t you know so and so person got in trouble?” Um, I don’t want to be in that. “But that’s what such and such told me.” And then, you know, and then you try not to, somebody say, “don’t you know that person…lie…and talk to you?” I learned the hard way. “No,” I said… Because I had, uh, because one time they asked me something [about someone] and I’m like, “okay,” and I went and talked about her; it was changed all the way around. I don’t want my name to be in nothing. So, I learned the hard way.

Through her past experiences of participating in neighborhood gossip, Simone has learned that nothing good comes of it. She constructs herself as actually trying to help someone out, in discussing this person’s problems with another person. Simone succinctly describes the lesson she learned regarding town gossip by relaying a phrase
her mother often told her as a child: “Short visit is the best visit.” Like mother, like daughter, Simone says that she has learned that staying inside and keeping to herself are ways of maintaining a good woman identity.

Simone constructs a good woman as one who prioritizes her children, instead of running the streets and being concerned with her own self satisfaction. As a role model to her children, a woman should keep inside and keep to herself. As mothers, women are to be models of responsibility for their children, and their children will only turn out as well as the way that they were raised. Simone sets up a cyclical metaphor for child outcomes, by saying that children who are not provided with a good mothering image are not to blame—it is the mother who is to blame for her child’s poor outcome in life. In other words, “you reap what you sow.” Applying an Afrocentric conception of women as the guardians of morality within the community, Simone constructs a good woman as one who is able to be a paragon of virtue, in terms of fulfilling the gendered expectations of keeping inside and keeping quiet.

A Role on the Border of Proper Decorum?: “Being a Tomboy”

In her article on tomboy resistance and authority, C. Lynn Carr (1998) writes about women actively constructing tomboy roles within existing social discourses. She notes that the notion of tomboyism depends on stereotypical notions of femininity and masculinity, so that by looking at how participants construct the identity of tomboy, one may be able to get at traditional gender roles within a community (p. 531). Carr (1998) calls for the need for research on tomboy heterosexuals and minority-group tomboys: "as the meanings of tomboy vary along with gender expectation in different (sub)cultures, it is possible that recalled motivations for childhood tomboyism and degrees of gender conformity and resistance may vary as well" (p. 550). Participants in this study
contribute to new meanings on tomboyism, in presenting what it means to be a tomboy in the rural African-American south. Participant motivations for claiming childhood tomboyism is linked to their traditional gender role expectations.

Carr (1998) reviews what she and the participants in her study consider to be “tomboy attributes,” or behaviors associated with tomboyism: “rough-and-tumble play or intense energy expenditure; preference for stereotypical boys' toys and male playmates; lack of interest in clothing and adornment; lack of interest in infants, motherhood, and marriage; and an interest in career for later life” (p. 531). Several of these attributes are also employed by participants in this study, in their constructions of cultural worlds of “tomboyism.” Notably, however, participants do not speak of a lack of interest in infants, motherhood, and marriage; nor do they associate their being tomboys when young to their interest in a career later in life. Rather, constructions of career mindedness are often linked to participation in worlds of responsibility (see chapter 7 for further elaboration). As Carr points out, the definition of tomboyism may vary by ethnicity, sexual orientation, or proposed here as well, by geographical location.

However, participant constructions of tomboyism do concur with several of the attributes that Carr mentions. They do link their participation in a tomboy world to playing outside, to preferring boys over girls in forming friendships, and to a lack of interest in typically female adornment, such as wearing dresses, skirts, or makeup. For instance, when asked to describe experiences that she found particularly frustrating while growing up, Wanda relayed her annoyance at having to wear dresses as a girl:

I had to wear a dress instead of pants. That was frustrating to me! (Laughs). Cause I was a tomboy in my own way. That was frustrating. I liked to get out there and play with the boys. Um…they would play football, I would play football. Ummm hmmm. I would want to run and play. …[A]nd if I played hopscotch with the other
Wanda links her annoyance with having to wear dresses and skirts to her desire to participate in male activities, such as football. She notes that even the pursuit of girlish sports, such as hopscotch, were hindered by having to wear a skirt. Wanda primarily links her tomboyism to her participation in team sports, noting that she participated on the track and basketball teams while in high school.

In constructing herself as a tomboy at this time, she is able to skirt Afrocentric expectations of womanhood holding that a woman should keep quiet, stay inside, and care about one’s reputation within the community. Instead, she describes herself as playing outside, being able to “keep up with the boys,” and not giving much thought to the way that others thought about her. Wanda’s tomboyism was a “phase” that she went through, which allowed her to subvert the gendered expectations of her community for a time. She constructs herself having moved beyond this phase in the present: in “becoming mature” she realizes the importance of motherhood and responsibility. At the same time, however, she works with a “cycle of tomboyism” framework, connoting her daughter with much the same tendency that she had when she was young: “My daughter is outgoing, yeah, she’s a outgoing young lady. She’s very competitive. She’s my past and I’m her future. And what I mean about that, I was her size and um…I told her when she get my age, she’s gonna be my size (laughs).” While her daughter is allowed her “tomboy” phase while still young, just as Wanda was allowed hers, she predicts that her daughter will be just like her in the future in fulfilling similar gendered expectations.

Similar to Wanda, Shantell also constructs her “tomboyism” as a phase now passed. Shantell also links her past tomboyism to her participation in sports while in her
first two years in high school, in which she threw shot put and discus on the track team and played on the softball team: “Um…you know, when I was in, when I was playing sports it was, like, um…you know, dressing wasn’t really an issue because I was really…I used to wear things, you know, be like sweat pants, t-shirts…you know. I mean, I was getting my hair done every week, just, maybe washed and, but you know, playing sports I’ll put it back in a ponytail.” Shantell provides an excuse for a disinterest in her self-presentation while in early high school, by constructing herself as an “athlete” at this time. She, therefore, did not need to focus on dress or adornment. However, she says, later on in high school she became more interested in boys and started to change her appearance, transitioning out of her tomboy phase:

When I really started, I guess, looking at boys…you know, it’s just the…dressing and every, all that good stuff, it changed. You know, so that’s just with, uh, I guess that’s one thing. I…just started changing my appearance. (Laughs) I wore make up and…when I got into boys, it’s like I…got the little curls and, you know, back then you wore like this little thing, a wave, and hair hanging down or…and make up and I started wearing dresses. And skirts, I ain’t gonna say dresses, [I wore] skirts. And I ain’t stopped wearing them, cause I really don’t wear pants anymore, I…wear skirts.

Shantell links her participation in a tomboy world to superficial aspects, such as not caring about the clothes she wore, not wearing makeup, and not getting her hair done in a fancy way. While she constructs herself as past this phase, she continues to play on a softball league, ranking her participation in this activity as one of her top three priorities in life, aside from her children and her participation in church activities.

While Shantell and Wanda constructed their participation in a tomboy world as a thing of the past or as being a phase that they were going through, other participants linked their tomboyism to their displeasure with the gendered expectations of their community. Both Shateque and Brianna construct themselves with identities that in some
ways fit with the gendered norms of their community, in that both identify with a
caretaking world, in which they are responsible for the well-being of others. However,
when discussing their childhood activities, in particular, they situate themselves within
tomboy worlds in which they preferred to participate in “boys’ activities,” carrying this
preference over to their present worldviews.

In reviewing the activities that she participated in, in high school, Shateque
constructs herself as having participated in a “boy’s world,” in which she was interested
in rougher play and was not interested in participating in female social networks
centering on clothes, competition for boys, or gossip. Shateque situates herself as
participating in a tomboy world, both in the past and in the present. She reverts back to
the past to describe the rough and tumble activities that she preferred as a youth,
constructing tree climbing and “jumping around” as male activities. Contrary to Wanda
and Shantell’s assertions that they were tomboys because they participated in sports while
in high school, Shateque constructs participation in organized sports, such as volleyball,
as a venue through which girls can legitimately participate in a similar form of rough and
tumble play. In other words, she links organized sports with something that girls are
allowed to do, and works against the construction of tomboyism assembled by Wanda
and Shantell.

When asked to talk about her social interactions with other children as a youth,
Shateque said that she preferred playing alone. However, as indicated in surrounding
comments, by “alone” she means that she did not involve other girls in her play. While it
is expected that girls will form social networks during childhood and adolescence,
Shateque constructs herself as something of an outcast, stating that she did not like to
hang around with girls and that she had more fun “on her own.” Employing a framework of gendered social expectations, Shateque says that she preferred to be alone because she mostly got along with boys:

I got mostly along with boys. Because with boys…they don’t sit there and talk, they talk about cars, they talk about different things. When you are going to hang around a bunch of girls…all they got to do is, is gossip. “Who are we going to talk about today?” It’s always something about another female. But when you up with guys…they, they mind be on rims and…you know what I’m saying. They don’t be sittin’ there talking about all, all people all day! That’s why I get along…with guys.

Shateque works with both past and present identity constructions in discussing her preferred social network. She contrasts women with men, saying that girls are only concerned with what is going on with others. Men, on the other hand, focus on more fun and interesting things; developing their own hobbies and not giving much attention to what is going on around them. Casting aspersions on the female tendency to be concerned about others, Shateque valorizes the male role of self-focus and self-indulgence. Men are not so concerned with what is going on around them and, consequently, she deems their activities as more enjoyable and possibly more useful.

Shateque’s construction of a tomboy cultural world runs in sync with Carr’s (1998) assertion that while tomboyism is traditionally thought of as a form of gender subversion, on the contrary, one may be able to elucidate traditional gender roles within a community through the deconstruction of this cultural world. Shateque’s tomboy cultural world also runs parallel to an Afrocentric Discourse on gendered expectations, which holds women to be responsible for the outcome of others and to be concerned about their own place within the community. Her construction of women as gossips, who concern themselves with the business of others, may be linked to a community expectation that they be concerned about others at the expense of their own self-preservation.
Similar to Shateque, Brianna also assembles a childhood narrative in which she preferred to be alone rather than participate in activities with other girls. She links her antisocial behavior (where girls were concerned) with trying to stay out of trouble, assembling a story in which she preferred to hang out with the boys as a tomboy:

I have mostly boy friends, I would guess. Male friends. I guess cause I was always laid back, you know, and I…always acted like a boy. Like a tom-, I was a tomboy I guess you could say. Like whenever I did…get in a group with somebody, you know, stuff like that, I was always, I just take, you know, more to a boy than…a girl. You know what I’m sayin’? I’d rather be around boys. It’s like they have more fun than girls. Girls don’t want to do nothing but sit around and talk about…kissin’ and all that kind of stuff like that. You know when you was younger. And boys, they all, they was out playin’, wrestlin’, and, you know, I wrestle with them. You know, my little cousin, we used to do that all the time there. Now that’s what I remember. Me and my little cousin used to wrestle. Friendly. Me and uh, his older brother…. We used to do that.

Brianna links her participation in a tomboy world with being able to participate in rough and tumble play and, thus, having more fun than other girls. She constructs girls as being concerned about others, through their proclivity towards gossip. In other words, boys have more fun because they are active by playing hard. Girls, on the other hand, are so focused on what is going on around them that they spend all of their time passively talking about something, rather than doing something. In essence, Brianna constructs girls as talkers not doers, and boys as doers but not necessarily thinkers.

When asked to further elaborate on her choice to socialize with boys over girls, Brianna related: “I don’t know why. ‘Cause it’s, that’s just how I’ve always been. I don’t…I just choose not to have [female friends]. They’re a problem. You know…I rather be with someone who’s playing, trying to have fun, you know what I’m saying?”

Continuing with her narrative of trying to “keep out of trouble,” Brianna constructs female friendships as potentially problematic. Females are always “into each other’s business,” an activity which she does not consider to be fun at all. On the contrary, she
aligns herself more with a male perspective, constructing herself as laid back; thus, not caring about what is going on around her. Due to a lack of concern with regard to their surroundings, males are able self focus and actively participate in fun activities. In contrast, girls are just watching from the sidelines.

Congruent with Carr’s (1998) assertion that an analysis of tomboyism may foreground the traditional gender roles of a community, what becomes apparent through this analysis is that participants valorize the participation of male figures in their lives. While they respect and honor the contributions that their “hardworking” and “responsible” mothers, and mothering figures, have made in their lives; participants speak of male figures in their lives as providing the fun-filled times in their growing-up stories. Often these male figures are transitional in participants’ lives, but are valued all the same, as they provide an escape from the mundane of everyday lives suffused with the responsibility of fulfilling good woman roles.

**Honor Thy Father: The Double Standard of Gendered Expectations**

Participants often link a growing-up memory of “having a fun time” to an important male figure in their lives. Father figures, in particular, are constructed as the fun ones in participants’ lives, in contrast to mother figures, who are described as “hard workers,” “responsible,” and “caring.” In stories constructed around these father figures, participants construct the father character in opposition to the mother figure. Fathers are fun, laid back, and will do things on the spur of the moment. Mothers, on the other hand, have work to do, are always busy, and are more guarded in their exuberance for life.

Particularly illuminating, in light of this dichotomous construction, are the descriptions that sisters Janice and Wanda provide about the role of their father in their lives. During her interview, Janice relayed that she had chosen to live with her father
after the divorce of her parents, while her other brothers and sister, Wanda, choose to stay with their mother. However, despite differences in parenting experiences, both Janice and Wanda used quite similar words to describe their father. The way that Wanda described her father as a friendly man was striking, as she used almost the exact same words to describe her father as did her sister Janice: “Oh, I can say this one, my daddy can make a friend of anyone. Where I would just have to sit back and let them go. Uh huh, uh huh. Daddy’ll make a friend with anybody. Where I did have to grow on me.” Wanda contrasts her own limited ability to form friendships with her father’s easy ability to do so. She constructs her father as a laid back man who is so easy going that anyone can be his friend, whereas she is wearier of forming friendships. She constructs herself as becoming friends with someone through their shared experiences, in that a friend is someone who she knows through experience that she can trust.

Janice presented a similar description of her father as a friendly man. However, she built a contrast between her mother’s and father’s personalities to establish her father as a friendly and fun-to-be-with man:

My daddy’s um…it’s…not that my mother’s not friendly, but he’s really, he can makes friends really…really easy. You know, no one’s a stranger to him. Um…but my mother’s more slow, a little more hesitant, you know, um, about befriending…befriending people. But my dad is not. He’s just…you know, um..gets along. And everybody that, you know, he can joke, he can make you laugh, you know. The more, little, little thing, he can make a joke out of it, you know.

Similar to Wanda’s construction of herself as more hesitant in choosing her friends, Janice constructs her mother with an attitude much the same. Janice reasons that her father is able to form friendships more easily due to his laid back, clownish personality, in which he can make anyone feel at ease. She constructs her mother as more uptight, and like Wanda, more hesitant in forming friendships.
These male personality characteristics, of being clownish, jokers, and laid back, run parallel with traditional African-American folk narratives that construct a trickster character with similar characteristics. The trickster is so valued because he is able to get by based on his ability to be clever, cunning, and independent (Leslie, 1998). The same traits valued in the trickster are also mentioned in participant narratives, in which male figures are revered due to their ability to joke, charm, and not care so much about what others are thinking about them. In contrast to the female figures in participants’ lives, who have taken care of them, instilled them with a morale and ethic to live by, and taught them about responsibility towards others, these male figures are presented as adding a fun, here and now, element to their lives.

Janice also works these gendered valuations into a narrative about her grandparents, contrasting her grandfather’s fun-loving nature to the more dour personality of her grandmother:

My granddad was a very, um…he was a good granddad. You know, he’d spend a lot of time with us. You know. I got to know my grandparents real well and obviously spent a lot of time with them. And they were good grandparents, very. Very good. And granddad, you know…grandma was a little more strict, I think, than granddaddy. But…she was um… Well, he was a lot of fun. If we would like to go to a baseball game, or football game, or games or something. We wanted to go, we could be ten or fifteen of us there, and we would say, “Granddaddy, you gotta take us to the game man.” You know, he and grandma would get in an argument, she’s like “You can’t take all them children, you ain’t got nowhere to take all them children.” [And he would say,] “Why I can’t? The big ones can hold the little ones!” You know, that type of something. And he would. He’d pack us all of us in this car and…take us in the car. You know, it was interesting.

Janice constructs her grandfather as fun loving in that he was willing to do something on the spur of the moment if it was what his grandchildren wanted to do. On the other hand, she constructs her grandmother as more strict in being concerned for the safety of all of her grandchildren being piled into one car.
In assembling this narrative, in which her grandfather gets his way in an argument with his wife, Janice constructs her grandfather as a fun-loving man who was not necessarily thinking about the consequences of his actions. Instead, he was more concerned with the here and now. In contrast, Janice constructs her grandmother as a mothering figure who is effused with a sense of responsibility towards her grandchildren. It is a construction similar to that of her own mother, in which she is depicted as being more world weary and serious than her father.

Karen constructs her father as a fun-loving man, similar to the way that Wanda and Janice describe their father and grandfather. The man whom she describes is actually her stepfather, as her real father left her mother when she was two years old. However, harkening back to Simone’s statement contrasting fathers and daddy’s, Karen situates this stepfather as her “daddy,” as he was the man who raised her. While Karen’s daddy died when she was twelve years old, leaving her mother to raise the children alone, he still holds a happy place in her heart:

Dad died when I was twelve. But I’ve got a lot of fond memories of my father. He was the type that would always want us to laugh. Yeah, he always had the type of laughter going with the kids. He had a garage out here. He used to work on cars, um…after school a lot. And he had, like, the drink machine out here and he had cookies and snacks and stuff. That would be something that we would do when coming from school. We would go out there and, and get us a soda and a snack. Uh, he would take time to come from underneath the car. Just stay with us for a little while. He used to run us around the house, um…just tickling us and we’d just laugh, just around the feet. He played Santa Claus for every year. We’ve got pictures of him in Santa Claus suits. Where he would actually play Santa Claus, um… My first pair of high heels, he was out in the garage working. And I stepped out that back door and tripped and by the time I stepped that door, out to him, he got from under the car, was just laughing, just laughing.

Karen describes several memories of her father, which present him as a man who enjoyed life and was fun to be around. In contrast, she constructs her mother as one who has had to face difficult life events, such as her many health problems and having to raise her
children on her own. While Karen assembles a growing-up story filled with respect and love for her mother, as she provided a good home for her children in her single-parent household, it is her father to whom she turns when she expresses memories of merriment while growing up.

When fathers are mentioned as taking care of their children, participants tend to link father figures with memories of having fun, as making them laugh, and as always wearing a smile on their faces. In contrast to the fun loving personality that is cast upon father figures, participants construct mother figures as serious, responsible, and more hesitant in their decision-making processes. This construction takes up an Afrocentric Discourse that imbues African-American womanhood with notions of responsibility, communal care, and motherhood. With gendered expectations that construct women as always working, whether they are indeed in the workplace or in their own homes, it is no wonder that these female figures are just too tired to take on jovial tones within participants’ growing up stories.

**Situating a “Being a Good Woman” Identity through Traditional Structures in the Active Construction of Linked Cultural Worlds**

Participants constructed being a good woman situated identities by taking up an Afrocentric Discourse holding gendered expectations of women as caretakers of their own families and of the community. In particular, through participation in cultural worlds which construct older women as rocks in their lives, center themselves as caretakers, describe their staying inside and keeping quiet, and honor their fathers, participants situate themselves with good women identities.
Connection Building

Participants assemble growing up narratives in which older women serve as the anchors of their kinship and social networks in childhood. These older women rocks are constructed as the virtual life force in family and community gatherings. Roxanne describes the role that her mother played in her life, in which her mother’s home was the center of social life for herself and many of her childhood friends. She constructs her mother with a character of strength in her growing-up story. Roxanne’s mother exemplifies Afrocentric characteristics of good womanhood, as she is portrayed as self-sacrificing in raising her own children and building a house for her family, to her own physical detriment. In turn, Roxanne constructs herself with an identity of good womanhood modeled upon her mother’s character. She assembles a story of self-sacrifice for herself, in which she opened a club in Port Charles that served similar functions to that of her mother’s home. While she constructs herself with an image of self-sacrifice, she does derive one benefit from running this club: she acquires the image of “community caretaker” in the present, who like her mother in the past, is looking after the best interests of the community.

Other participants inject their growing-up stories with similar characters: older women who have served as rocks in their lives, as well as in the lives of other family and community members. Serena, Timberly, Priscilla, and Shateque all construct rock stories in which, due to a significant event linked to the death of a rock in their lives, their kinship network has fallen apart or they have suffered a downfall in their own life course. Serena links the death of her great-grandmother to the dissolution of a tight family network. Like Roxanne, Serena constructs her great-grandmother as a rock in the kinship network, forging the social connections throughout her family. Additionally, through her
role as religious leader within the family, Serena’s great-grandmother was responsible for the moral development of her family. Her great-grandmother-as-rock served as the family’s social glue; through her passing, inter-familial obligations have become unhinged. Timberly links the death of her mother to a phase she was going through, in which she felt that she was falling back into a role of immaturity. Priscilla links the death of her great aunt to becoming pregnant at the age of thirteen, assembling a story in which she formed a sexual relationship with an older man in order to fill the void left by her great aunt’s death. While an honor roll student in high school, and constructed by others within the community as being a “very clever” young woman, Priscilla continues to be financially supported by her mother and has never gone on to college. She is also known as a fairly avid drug user, and constructs her life course as going downhill since her great aunt’s death. Shateque also constructs her life as falling apart or going downhill since the death of her great aunt. She constructs a story similar to Priscilla’s, in which she has replaced the missing void caused by the absence of the rock in her life, with a literal rock. She links the death of her great aunt with her initiation into a world of crack addiction, describing her life as being on hold since she became addicted to crack.

Other connections are made by participants who link a (possible) past, capable self with a present, incapable self. In forging a connection between her past and present selves, Corentine draws out further implications of the Afrocentric notion of self-sacrificing mother. She situates herself with a being a good woman identity in the past, in which she worked full time, was married, and owned her own trailer. However, her workplace mothering role came back to “bite her in the back.” Corentine links a significant event, in which she was literally kicked down by a man for whom she was
caring, to a major downfall in her life. She fulfills the role of self-sacrificing mother, in that she has suffered through the caretaking of others. However, while others, such as Roxanne and Karen, succeed in being good women through their participation in a world of self-sacrifice, Corentine is not able to build a linkage between self sacrifice and good womanhood. Instead, her past role of self-sacrifice has propelled her into a present world of needing someone to care for her.

Corentine, Claire and Flossie are all women who, through their participation in a world of reliance upon others, are constructed as mentally ill in their own self descriptions or through the descriptions of others. All three of these women talk of their growing-up experiences through a haze of depression and/or anxiety. They are denied the identity of good women, as they are unable to properly take care of others. In the cases of Corentine and Flossie, both rely on other women to mother their children. In Claire’s case, she relies upon her husband to both mother her children and to take care of her when she suffers an anxiety attack. These participants construct themselves as mentally ill in connection to their past negative experiences. As a result of these experiences, they are unable to fulfill good women roles as conceived through an Afrocentric Discourse which holds that they should be self-reliant and able to care for others at the expense of their own personal well-beings.

Socioculturally-Situated Identity and Relationship Building

Participants construct themselves with mothering roles that, like stories of the rocks in their lives, fall outside the lines of biological motherhood. Instead, these caretaking roles are forged through relationships with other family and community members. Janice, Priscilla and Karen all mention the “other mothering” roles that they have held in the lives of their brothers, sisters, and niece, respectively. They speak of “being
prepared” for motherhood through the responsibilities that they have fulfilled in childhood. Janice describes the responsibilities that she took on while living in her father’s household. As he was at work all day long, the responsibility fell to her to cook, clean, and take care of the household. Priscilla tells a similar story about her responsibilities while growing up: her mother worked all day long and often came home tired. As the oldest daughter, the responsibility fell on Priscilla to cook, clean, and look after her younger sisters. Both participants link their childhood responsibilities to their current mothering abilities: they have learned how to mother while young and are thus able to fulfill the difficult role of single motherhood now that they are older.

Karen also constructs an other-mothering role for herself, describing the concern she holds for her sister’s daughter. However, perhaps more emphasized by Karen is the caretaking role that she has taken on with regard to her mother, Luella Mae. Karen describes a childhood in which she stayed at home and took care of the household because her mother was often too sick to do so. Although Karen has never had children of her own, she is able to situate herself with a good woman identity through her role of self-sacrifice she takes on in mothering her own mother.

While women such as Corentine, Claire, and Flossie are situated with mentally ill identities, other women turn the tables on what may be perceived as a non-fulfillment of gendered roles and expectations. Brianna and Simone usurp an Afrocentric Discourse valorizing women who keep quiet and stay inside, to discuss their proclivities toward what may be perceived by others as antisocial behavior. However, while Simone disregards any notions of communal mothering, she is still able to construct herself with a mothering identity, as she situates herself as a woman whose main priority in life has
been to get pregnant and to be a mother. While fulfilling her caretaking expectations, she links the concept of communal caretaking with the possibility of getting into trouble.

Participants are thus placed into a bind in terms of expectations for mothering—they’re damned if they do, damned if they don’t. Working within an Afrocentric Discourse, they are expected to be the caretakers of their community. However, placed within a rural context, community caretaking may be linked to a network of gossip said to pervade small communities. Brianna and Simone both construct women as gossips, who run the streets and spread trouble through their discussions focused on other people’s business. They contrast themselves with other women, in claiming to have learned that by keeping to themselves they are able to stay out of trouble.

Perhaps ironically, while Brianna and Simone are both able to avoid the sometimes violent entanglements that are said to be a result of town gossip, others may perceive them as “loners” who do not care about others within the community. Working within an Afrocentric Discourse centered on a woman’s connection to her community, they may be constructed by others as bad women due to their lack of interest in others within the community. They are more interested in their own self preservation than in the goings on within their community. However, they also work with Afrocentric notions that expect a woman to keep quiet, and to stay inside, and thus, maintain an air of respectability. Rather than talk backing or running the streets, characteristics of being a (bad) “wild woman,” Brianna and Simone situate themselves with good women identities in fulfilling the gendered expectation of maintaining proper decorum, but which are at odds with the role of community caretaker.
One cultural world which may seem to be at odds with Afrocentric gendered expectations is that of tomboyism. Being a tomboy is often linked to playing rough games and sports outside; a preference for boys; escaping one’s gendered responsibilities, such as cooking and cleaning; and being able to avoid the encumbrance of female décor, such as dresses, skirts, makeup, and intricate hairdos. However, while being a tomboy is constructed by participants as a form of subverted gender expectations, it is almost always a temporary subversion, or just a phase the participant was going through.

Wanda and Shantell both describe how they wore pants when they were younger and eschewed the makeup and hairstyles that other girls wore in going for a simpler style that could accommodate their active, athletic lifestyles. However, they construct this tomboyism as a phase that they eventually outgrew. On the other hand, Shateque and Brianna continue to situate themselves within a tomboy world. Their participation in a tomboy cultural world is not build so much on the notion of going through a phase as it is on valorizing the gendered expectations for men within an Afrocentric Discourse. They both express their displeasure with gendered expectations that hold that women should be concerned about others at the expense of their own personal enjoyment. Both participants link male activities with having fun, serving to reinforce an Afrocentric gendered dichotomy that expects women to sacrifice themselves for the sake of others, while allowing men the role of merrymakers within the community.

This gendered dichotomy is further exemplified in the stories that participants tell about their fathers. Most participants speak of mothers as being rock solid throughout their lives, painting fathers with transient roles in their lives. While fathers are not always present, their portraits are painted with vibrant colors. Honor thy father stories
are told in which fathers are depicted as fun, friendly, and creating joy, if only temporarily, in the lives of the participants. They are cast as trickster-like characters; through their wily abilities they are able to get what they want, such as the love and affection of their wives and children, even while sometimes abandoning their families or having an affair with another woman.

Within participant’s stories, a man’s irresponsibility is constructed as a gendered expectation. As Harriet put it in discussing her experiences with a husband who cheated on her: “men will be what they will be.” Participants, whether they speak of themselves as wives or as their father’s children, situate themselves with identities of being good women in which they have come to expect this behavior from the men in their lives. They remain steadfast, good women, in that “no matter how tough things get—and they gonna get mighty tough” they are still able to “kick up the dust, walk a mean high-heel strut, and cross [their] legs with the uppitiest of women on a first Sunday morn” (Johnson-Coleman, 1998, p. viii). Being a good woman, then, means accepting these gendered expectations, gaining wisdom and strength through experience, and imparting the knowledge gained from these experiences to other women within the community.

In the next part of the dissertation we’ll see additional active articulations of gender socialization, in relation to the American Dream Discourse as a mediating resource in participants growing-up stories. Gender socialization is not just a matter of internalizing common experiences and becoming a particular type of individual, or constructing an identity with those experiences. It is a matter of using various Discourses; whether through traditional Discourses, such as an Afrocentric Discourse, or through a media-saturated Discourse, such as the American Dream Discourse; to story one’s life and to
situate oneself with particular identities. It is a process of telling one’s growing-up story in relationship, and sometimes in contrast, to a set of shared cultural categories.

**Summary**

Participants speak of a number of cultural worlds associated with being good women identities. They speak of older women, such as grandmothers, mothers, or aunts, as rocks in their lives. These older women are constructed both as community mothers and as moral role models for the participants to follow in leading their own lives. Within the plot of participants’ growing-up stories, the shifting of the rock’s position in the participant’s life is constructed as changing or “resolving” a subplot of her narrative. It is cast as a significant event, and is linked to a (usually downward) turn in the participant’s life course.

Participants constructed cultural worlds centering on women’s roles as caretakers. They spoke of being prepared for caretaking through their childhood responsibilities, in which their responsibilities while growing up have translated into the roles that they fulfill as adults. Participants also spoke of other-mothering roles, in which they learned to other-mother through the presence of older women as other mothers in their own lives. Other-mothering is constructed as the fulfillment of a gendered expectation of responsibility, in which the individual makes up for another’s lack of mothering. Elder caretaking is another form of other-mothering discussed by participants, in which they fulfill the gendered expectation that women take care of everyone around them, both the young and the old. This form of other-mothering, in particular, revolves around Afrocentric conceptions of self-sacrifice, and a communal ethic of responsibility. Finally, participants also spoke of their caretaking roles within the workplace, in which they take on mother roles while working in daycares, as nursing assistants, and as
managers/teachers within healthcare settings. Related to caretaking as a mechanism for being a good woman, some participants spoke of their need for someone to take care of them. By enacting roles of dependency, participants could be said to be going against gendered expectation. Participants falling within a cultural world of dependency are said to be unable to participate in cultural worlds associated with being a good woman and thus are labeled as mentally ill.

Participants also constructed their participation in a world of staying inside and keeping quiet in association with their good women identities. They spoke of keeping out of trouble versus running the streets as a passive way for them to maintain a good woman identity. This cultural world of proper decorum is linked to an Afrocentric notion of women as the guardians of morality within the community. As moral guardians, women who stay inside and keep quiet serve as behavioral role models for younger community members. However, in relation to roles of proper decorum, participants also spoke of being tomboys. They discursively construct tomboy narratives as underscored by traditional gender role expectations. While they are able to skirt Afrocentric expectations of womanhood during this phase on the margins between childhood and adulthood, participants construct their tomboyism as fleeting or temporary. Also within tomboy narratives, participants continue a valuation of traditional gender roles, in which women are constructed as responsible, communal mothers and men are constructed as fun loving individuals.

Finally, participants construct a cultural world of honoring their fathers, in which they work with the double standard of gendered expectations within their community. While women are cast as responsible, self-sacrificing, and mothering—thus valued within
an Afrocentric Discourse—they are also spoken of by participants as not being particularly fun, as being strict, and as being unfriendly. While a male presence within participants’ lives may be fleeting, male character development within growing-up stories centers on their roles as merrymakers, jokers, and charmers.

Through connection building, participants speak of older women as kinship and social network anchors within their community. Older women serve as social glue, binding together the family and the community. They also serve as moral agents who maintain inter-communal connections through their moral teachings. Several participants also connect their past and present selves, linking past significant events to a present identity mental illness.

In socio-culturally situated identity and relationship building, participants construct caretaking roles as forged upon their relationships with other family and community members. Good womanhood places women in a proverbial double bind, in which they are expected to be communal caretakers, but are also cast as gossips and troublemakers when attempting to perform their community’s gendered expectations. Thus, women are told that to maintain roles of proper decorum they should stay inside, keep quiet, and thus keep out of trouble; while they are valued through their roles in the public/community as mothers, responsible for the well-being of all members.
CHAPTER 6
“\textit{I WAS MY MOMMA BABY. I WAS MY DADDY GAL}”: BEING SPOILED

In contrast to traditional depictions of growing-up, participants constructed themselves as participating in worlds of difference from the status quo. In particular, as a way to establish contrast structures differentiating themselves from other women in their community, participants spoke of being spoiled as children. Talk of being spoiled arose especially when participants were asked about their interactions with family members and their early memories of childhood. The notion of being spoiled is usually linked to having had certain material possessions that other young girls from the community did not have, being able to maintain one’s appearance on a regular basis, being able to spend money at will, and having had the free time to do whatever one wanted to do. In the following section Lakeesha’s story of being spoiled is presented. Her story focuses on being spoiled, both in her youth and, in some ways, still today. Cultural worlds of being spoiled will be further elaborated through other participants’ related comments.

\textbf{“I Just Used to Have My Way”: Lakeesha}

Lakeesha is a twenty-two year old woman, who has a seven-year old daughter and a two-year old son and is currently separated from her husband. She was born in a hospital in University City (as were most of the participants), but has lived throughout her life in Pine Valley, about forty-five miles south of University City and seventy miles away from Port Charles. Her mother and father were divorced when she was young; so young, in fact, that she says that she cannot remember a time when they were together. Her mother and other siblings “stayed” together in Port Charles, while she spent most of
her youth growing up in Pine Valley with her father. She was raised by her father and grew up in an only-child like situation.

Lakeesha began her story describing her experiences growing up in Pine Valley. She characterizes her growing-up story of living “out in the country” with her father as idyllic. Living out in the country, she says, allowed her the freedom to run around outside, climb trees, and ride her bicycle, her four-wheeler, and her go-cart. Lakeesha describes a childhood home where she played in her little clubhouse out in back of the house and had a duck pond by the side of the house where she could go and look at the “fishies,” anchoring her childhood memories with her status as an only child in a single-parent household. The following is illustrative of similar comments that appear throughout her interview: “I have two brothers and one sister. My brother here in Port Charles, all three of them here in Port Charles with my momma, I was the only one child with my daddy, I was staying with my daddy.”

Lakeesha spoke of her interactions with her brothers and sister while growing up, presenting her only-child status as a cultural world of being spoiled. She relates that she saw her brothers and sister often while she was growing up, even though they lived about an hour away from her. Rather than traveling to see her siblings in Port Charles, she says that “they used to come up there and play with me, ‘bout…Cause I was a little spoiled child.” She was spoiled, she claims, because she received material possessions not privy to most children (including her siblings): “Oh man, I had everything…from…the games that came out, swimming pool, trampoline, swing…sets, all types. Motorcyc-, I mean those little dirt bikes, the go carts. I had it all and my daddy kept candy and movies and all types of stuff for me.” Lakeesha casts her relationship with her father as the impetus
behind her being spoiled, in that he provided her with all of her wants and needs. Not only did she get everything that she wanted when she was younger, she was the only child living in the household. Thus, all material attention was showered solely on her. Lakeesha provides a contrast between her only childhood status and that of her siblings, who grew up in her mother’s household. She was spoiled and had loads of toys and games, so her siblings came out to visit her, rather than her going to visit them, where resources (and toys) were harder to come by.

Lakeesha continues her narrative of being spoiled by presenting another story in her being-spoiled narrative, telling of a trip that she took with her father to Sea World when she was younger. She describes this trip as fun, particularly so at the expense of her father who seems to have been rather uncomfortable during one of the main events of the outing:

And I remember once…we went to uh…Sea World. And he wanted to stick to the top, and I want to stick to the bottom of the ship cause I knew that, what the whale was gonna do. So we, I talked him into sitting down there and…the whale came by and he…the whale splashed like soooo much water and my dad, my daddy is a very clean person, so he, like, jumped up and he trying to find a towel and everybody, like, looking at him and looking at me and it was just, like, soooo funny. Cause he got soooo wet, his pants and everything was just, like, soaked. So it was, like, so funny. I thought that was real fun.

Lakeesha describes this event as being especially fun because she got a good laugh from her father, who preferred to retain some sense of decorum by staying dry, but became a laughing stock when he was splashed by a big wave of water. No mention of brothers or sisters coming along on this trip is made. She constructs the scene as being just “her and her dad,” using several “I-statements” in assembling her memory of this event, in which her father capitulated to her demand of where to sit during this whale of a performance.
Lakeesha links this significant event with a cultural world of her being spoiled identity, in which her father worked hard to provide for her, give her a good childhood, and still to this day works hard to help her out with her children. Her father is an integral character in her being spoiled story, allowing her to participate in a cultural world of relative freedom to do what she wants to do. When asked what her father does for a living, Lakeesha constructed her father’s present livelihood as one of helping her out with her children:

My daddy was working as a custodian for a while…Now he’s retired, he has had two heart attacks and he retired now. He worked at the university…for a while [in University City] and then he came…Then he went to, um…he was working at my school for a while, Pine Valley Elementary. And uh, and then, when he, just retired from um…um, what college…Oh! Anyway he was working at the college in Llanview and that’s when, he just retired from. He had two heart attacks. He’s doing better…now he’s just like, he’s catching, like, a lot of headaches and whatever, and, but he’s doing better. Now that he’s retired…Oh man, he keeps my kids. So basically that’s what he do.

Although he has had two heart attacks, has worked a number of jobs through Lakeesha’s life, and currently suffers from headaches, his main role in her life is as a caretaker for her children.

Lakeesha’s father has worked labor-intensive jobs that are often linked with future health problems, such as back pain and arthritis. When probed to further discuss the difficulties that her father may have faced by working so many tiring jobs and taking care of a daughter on his own, Lakeesha constructs her father as a man who never complained and has only shown her his happy, positive face.

He always told me that that was great work, that was the neat, well, meeting people and he told me…that…he’ll miss his job…I guess, because he knew a lot of people and…he got along with everybody and…that’s basically it. He didn’t seem tired to me, he still came home and played with me and…did whatever. We supposed to went to the movies that night after he got off or somethin’, he still did it all. So if he was tired, he didn’t let me know he was tired. I ain’t never heard my daddy complain about working.
Lakeesha constructs her father as always willing to entertain her: no matter the work that he did during the day, he was willing to come home take her out at night. Not only was she pampered by her father when she was younger; Lakeesha says that her father still helps take care of her today, at least indirectly, by taking care of her children. In describing the activities that she does with her children, Lakeesha constructs her father as the caretaker of her children: “They usually be with my dad. My little girl stay with my daddy. My little boy…he don’t go to school, he’s too young. Next year he will go to Early Head Start in Llanview. [AG: Oh, okay, so you’ll have him out by your Dad?] Yeesss, yes. (Laughs).”

At the time of our interview, Lakeesha had recently moved from Port Charles, where she was living near her mom and working with her at the Association of Retarded Citizens (ARC), to Pine Valley, where she was living with her best friend’s sister and close by to her father. Lakeesha links her return to Pine Valley to her need for more freedom from her children, who make her feel tied down and impatient:

Yeah, my daddy like…twenty-five minutes down the road from me. If he have my kids, I might see him one time [a week]. But if he don’t have my kids…I talk to him on the phone every day. [AG: And…how do you, like, what determines if he’s going to have your kids or not?] I know, it should be the other way around, when I’m gonna have ‘em (laughs). Uh…I, he’ll end up calling me, telling me to bring the kids to him. Like, he kept ‘em all last week so…I supposed to…keep ‘em all this week and I ain’t had to…so far I’m lasting. [AG: Okay, so why does your dad take care of your kids?] I just get tired! (Laughs). I do, uh, I don’t know…they aggravate me. See! I guess cause, with my little girl, my aunt and my momma kept her a lots but, and then I had my little boy…and it’s like, I’m keeping him. So I ain’t know what I was going to be going through all this, getting him up, getting him something to eat, like he love to eat…all this whining cause he’s spoiled, he want this, he want that…cause I didn’t go through it…with my little girl cause my momma and my auntie got her. And then I was a teenager too, young!

Interestingly enough, Lakeesha also constructs her young son as being spoiled, as she describes him as always wanting something. She explains her lack of motivation in
taking care of her daughter and son by saying that she was too young to have the patience
to take care of her daughter when she had her and that, due to her inexperience with
mothering, she has not yet learned how to deal with the needs and wants of her young
son. She uses this explanation to provide a justification for the parenting role that both
her mother and father have had in the lives of her children.

Lakeesha’s story takes a new turn following the story of her father as her (and her
children’s) caretaker. She constructs another story in her being spoiled narrative that
describes an inability in her childhood to be friends with girls outside of her kin network,
linking a lack of female friendships to other girls’ perceptions that she was selfish and
self-centered:

I loved my childhood years because…I used to go shopping every Friday
(laughs)…and I just used to have my way (laughs). I wish I was back…to them
days. (Laughs). Life was easier back then. [In describing my life back then] I
probably was real selfish and…(laughs) I always thought I was all that too, that,
you know. Probably why I didn’t have really good friends, just my cousins.
Basically it...[In my high school years]…Oh man. Um…I did think I was all that
in my high school years.

Lakeesha constructs a cultural world of “being all that” in which she could go shopping
when she wanted to, was taken care of and pampered by her father, and did not have to
compete for the attentions of a parent with other siblings.

This cultural world contrasts with her perceptions of life in Port Charles, in which it
is commonly conceived that most children grow up in a household with a single mother
who toils all day long at a hard-labor job and has to come home and provide for her
children at night. Children in this cultural world do not go shopping every Friday.
Rather, they are lucky if they get any new clothes at the beginning of the school year.
Lakeesha describes her mother’s worklife:
My momma worked with the disabled...was working at ARC. Okay. It’s in University City. And she also work at the City Hall with my older brother...and she also do private duty. [AG: What’s that, private duty?] Where...that’s where you have someone to prepare...you work, working with the disabled. She still do it all.

While she constructs her mother and her father both as hard workers, she does not link her mother with providing her with good times or experiences of having fun. She contrasts her lifestyle, in which she grew up with her father, to the lifestyle that her brothers and sister must have had while growing up with a mother who worked all of the time and did it all.

When asked to elaborate upon being all that, Lakeesha began by linking her participation in this cultural world to her accomplishment of graduating from high school while pregnant: “I got pregnant in my high school years too. I was fifteen. And...I went to teen parenting...for...for a good little minute...I dropped out of school my twelfth-grade year...And I went back and I graduated from North County High School.”

Lakeesha said that she dropped out of high school due to the morning sickness that she suffered throughout her pregnancy, explaining that she “couldn’t do anything” while she was sick like this. However, she received home schooling and, thus, was still able to graduate from high school on time: “I did that and then...I had my baby. No. I walked across the stage pregnant. I came back just for that one day, to graduate (laughs).”

Lakeesha proceeds with her story, saying that she had her first baby when she was fifteen years old. However, the fact that Lakeesha was fifteen when she had her daughter and she says that she graduated from high school while pregnant with this daughter do not mesh, as she would have graduated from high school when she was 18, not 15 years old. This is telling, in that Lakeesha focuses more attention on her accomplishment of graduating from high school while pregnant, emphasizing that she was spoiled during her
Lakeesha also links being all that to being on the track team in school:

I got ribbons for first place, running the mile. And...what else I did? I did a lot of stuff, I did, um, the hurdle jump...and I was second or third with that a couple of times and...I got a lot of rewards for that type of stuff, I always came in like second or third in whatever I did. But it was basically, like, I ran the mile then...the long jump, jumping the hurdles, and that type of thing. [AG: And how long were you on that team?] Oh man, I used to run track for, I started running track in elementary school. Running around and they'd give us the meets and we'll get rewarded for it in the, um, the [school] assembly. Then I got to middle school and I did it. Then I got to high school and did it for like...I did it for...all my eighth grade year, got on track season and then I end up being pregnant my ninth grade year.

Being an athlete as a way to achieve status is congruent with one African-American Dream cultural world, as athletic accomplishment is one way that an individual can leave town and move on to something bigger and better. However, Lakeesha works against this cultural model, subsequently stating that although she was on the track team through her ninth grade year, she preferred the “good life” at home: “We had a lot of [track] practice. It just took away from the things that I wanted to do at home, like...ride the dirt bike...get in the pool, or something like that.”

Not only does Lakeesha describe a cushy life for herself at home, she assembles a situated identity of being spoiled through her description of activities that she carried on outside of her household. Lakeesha did not have to work while in high school. Instead, she was free to go out to eat, and to go to movies and amusement parks with her best girlfriend:

Oh, man, [my best friend’s] mom used to come pick me up and we used to go to the park...and um...we used to go out to the movies and, like, when we was in high school and stuff. In Llanview. She, we um...we was in high school, we used to always get...out of school early, or whatever, cause we was just, like, up-to-date on
Lakeesha contrasts a happy, carefree, life growing up in a rural Pine Valley with how she might have fared growing up in an urban area. This contrast relies heavily on her notions of being spoiled when young and getting to do whatever she wanted to do. When asked to compare growing up in a rural area with what she felt it would be like to grow up in an urban area, Lakeesha said: “I probably would’ve got beat up a lot, cause um...(laughs) I don’t think I would’ve made it in the city. Because I was a little spoiled brat. [AG: Can you give me some examples of how you were spoiled? Tell me about that.] For one, I went shopping every Friday.”

Not only does she construct her childhood as a time of carefree fun, Lakeesha also constructs her present attitude as one of **joie de vivre**, in which she does not have time to deal with a job that provides her with no benefits or in which clients show her “attitude.” In tracing her job history, Lakeesha relates that while she should have a job right now, due to the fact that her father has been forced to retire because of a disabling physical condition, she is no longer employed and has had to challenge herself in the past to see if she could stay at one job for a whole year. In describing her lack of motivation in the workplace, Lakeesha describes her first job, working at fast-food, as a job that was “not for her”:

I was working at Wendy’s…um um. I worked at Wendy’s in…Laketown…I was in Laketown for, like, a couple of months. And I worked at Wendy’s…fast food is not for me. Fast food isn’t fun. You get some people come in there with the attitudes and…I have a…temper outta this world and…me, them people will come in there with the attitudes, we just don’t mix. I was at the register and I was taking…these older peoples’ orders. The wife was saying one thing, and the husband was saying one thing, and I was, like, “okay, can you just…talk one at a time so I can get it right, cause I have to call it in,” or whatever, over the microphone. And…the lady looked at me and she just took a trip. And my boss was, like, “okay Lakeesha, just come to the back, come to the back.” Cause I was
about to flip on her, I just looked at her (laughs). She was like, um, she, how did she, she just, she just went off, she just went, “well, we don’t have to eat here really, we don’t have to do this, but, we can go somewhere else” and blah this, blah that. I’m, like, just looking at the lady, I’m about to tell her to go somewhere else, I was just looking at her. So, it was, like, I can’t do that kind of work (laughs).

Lakeesha was looking for a job at the time of our interview. However, she said that she wanted a job with benefits and was currently living at her friend’s house and receiving support from both her mother and her father. Her mother was driving her to various appointments in University Town, as well as also helping to take care of her daughter. Her father, as mentioned earlier, was the primary caretaker for both of her children. His role in her children’s lives is so important that Lakeesha has moved out near Pine Valley, so that her children may go to school/daycare close to where he lives. She relates that mostly nowadays she is sitting in the house, waiting for “whoever” to come by so that she “get in the car with them and go.”

**Being Spoiled Materially**

Lakeesha’s story of being spoiled begins with her descriptions of the fun things that she did with her father as a child, and continues on throughout her story of her growing-up years, manifesting itself in her ability to go out and go shopping, see movies, and get her hair and nails done whenever she wanted. Other participants also link their being spoiled identities to obtaining material possessions, in which they construct themselves in contrast to the other women in their community who have not been able to have these things. Speaking of her childhood, Timberly relates a story of being spoiled by her grandparents, who were her primary caretakers while growing up:

…[L]ike me and my aunt, if we going to play, we wanted something, my granny tried her best to, to make sure we got it. Half of the…girls round here…it was like…okay, you got to wait, we got a few months on going on, you got to wait. And see by my granddaddy being gone all the time, he was like, we gonna go head, cause I’ll, you never never know…what’s gonna happen down the road. So
he...made sure that we had...nice shoes, nice clothes...and we...did things that we wanted to do...for sports, field trips and all that. But it’s, it’s a lot of people that couldn’t do it. Which, now I see...I ain’t gonna raise my kids like that. Just...issuing ’em everything. They [other women in the community] still say I’m spoiled. I, I...I basically like, if I want something, I go ahead and get it...and a lot of people like, why you don’t make payments on this, why you just go, why you going to just spend all your money on this...at one time? You should make payments and I won’t...do the payment thing. Cause I got it, so I’m going to get it. And...it...cause a lot of confusion in the long run, because people be like...uh, she’s just doing this for this and this...

Timberly contrasts herself with the other young women in her community in stating that she was able to get whatever she wanted, whenever she wanted it, while growing up; whereas other girls had to be patient and wait for things that they wanted. Carrying this contrast into the present day, she presents herself through the eyes of other women in the community who complain that she spends money wantonly. She also links her inability to have many close female friendships to other young women’s common perception that she is spoiled.

In addition to buying things when she needs them and receiving things from her grandparents while she was growing up, Timberly situates herself as being spoiled in terms of her standard of living. In describing her teenaged years, she said that she got her first house, a trailer, from her mother when she was eighteen years old. She contrasts her ownership of this trailer with the rental status of most other women in her community. Her comments are congruent with an American Dream Discourse that constructs home ownership as a true achievement in the path of a successful life course. During her interview, Timberly was no longer living in this trailer; instead living in the Port Charles projects. However, she continued her contrast structure in housing situation, saying of her apartment: “It’s just, this the only separate house...in the complex.” Whereas others are situated within a cultural world of crowded, impoverished projects, in which people
are living on top of each other, Timberly constructs herself as literally separated from others within this cultural world.

Harriet also spoke of being spoiled while growing up. She presents herself as an oddity within her rural African-American community, in being an only child. Describing her childhood, Harriet says that she often “stayed up under [her] mother’s skirt,” mostly doing things with her mother while she was younger. As an only child, she held certain expectations of her mother. When asked what kinds of things she did with her mother, Harriet spoke of weekend shopping trips, in which she expected to get something new on every trip. With tongue in cheek, Harriet humorously relates that she really was not spoiled, even as she situates herself within a discourse of being spoiled. In claiming herself as the “apple of her mother’s eye,” she contrasts herself with other young women in the community who, as children in large families, may not have been so doted upon by their mothers.

While Wanda was not an only child in her household growing up, she situates herself as being spoiled with a discourse of only childhood similar to that of Harriet. Wanda grew up in a household in which she and her three brothers lived with their mother, whereas her older sister, Janice, lived with their father. Despite the fact that there were three other siblings living in the household, Wanda places herself within a cultural world of only childhood, in that she was the only girl living in the household and was spoiled by her mother and brothers, who she says were very protective of her. She first introduces the idea of being spoiled when asked about the familial relations in her household while growing up: “I would say I was spoiled. I was a spoiled brat. Because...if I didn’t, if I wanted something and I didn’t get it, I would pout and pout and
Wanda links being an only girl to being especially spoiled by her three brothers. She continues this linkage when asked to talk about how she felt when she learned that she was pregnant with her daughter: “Oh! I was very happy! I was very excited, very excited. I, uh, I had a good pregnancy. I was actually spoiled rotten…by my mom and brothers.” Wanda is spoiled rotten being the only girl in a household full of boys, whose role it is to be protective of their sister. Being the only girl in the household also means that Wanda did not have to wear hand-me-downs from her other siblings. Like Harriet, Wanda links a situated identity of being spoiled to the expectation of receiving new clothes, and similar to Timberly, says that she was not one to be patient in obtaining these clothes:

I can remember growing up…in grade school, elementary school…they used to have the Sears Catalogs. And they used to be out there on the highway (laughs), in University Town. You could get five dresses…though, it was five or six…and then have you five or six dresses…at discount offer, twenty dollars. And that was a buy! That was my, that was my um…that was my school clothes. And…that was a dress for every day. And, and as things got older, I couldn’t get as much…and, as um…for school. I would have to get some for now and some later. I wouldn’t get it all at one time. Cause my brothers, they were costing…my brothers’ clothes and my clothes, all that, all that, the price of it was more. And when you…want something you want it right then. You was impatient about it.

Wanda situates herself as being spoiled within a household of boys, while at the same time linking her mother’s circumstances of being a single parent to her present understanding of being a single mother in a world in which clothes are becoming more and more expensive to buy. While Wanda is spoiled by being the only girl in her household, she is also rooted in her present circumstance as a single mother striving to bring up her own daughter.
Shantell also situates herself with an identity of being spoiled, contrasting her own circumstances while growing up to those of her kin-related friends (cousins):

I was one of the fewer Black girls in, you know, in the county that had my own car when I turned sixteen. I mean, uh, I can say, the people that I did hang around with, they were mostly my relatives. And um...like, I had the car, um...and they were like, from big families, so it's like...my relatives, they mostly had seven, seven kids in their families. So it's like...I could, I had to, you know, I could go get my hair done every week, you know, she would get my hair done every week and...um...you know, when I had, I had money, you know, I, I could have money pretty much every day when I went to school, and have money pretty much every day when I went to school, I had money. Cause I used to have to share with them, not have to, but I didn't, I just did it, whatever. Um...I guess it's a, um, my own, I had my own phone line, I had, you know...um...they shared one, I had my own...

Shantell begins her contrast structure by comparing her circumstances growing up as an only child to those of her cousins, whom she states, all came from big families. Her cultural world of being spoiled materially is rooted in this only-child status. She assembles a story of envy, in which her other cousins were actively jealous of the possessions that she had while growing up.

In assembling this story, Shantell spoke of one experience, more recently, in which her female cousin finally admitted that she had been quite envious of her material possessions back in high school:

[T]he subject of my car, the cars that I had in high school was brought up and [my cousin] was like, “yeah we used to catch the bus some mornings when you didn’t pick us up.” And I was like, “yeah...but...pretty much I picked ya’ll up every morning.” She was like, “yeah. And it used to make us mad too cause you ain’t, you know, you had it,” and I’m like, “why you felt like that? Because, you know, what I had, you know, I...pretty much shared with ya’ll, we went, you know, we went pretty much everywhere together.” And she was like, “yeah, but you still used to make us mad. I used to be jealous when you had, you know, you had a car and you know, we didn’t.” And I was like, you know, I couldn’t believe, you know, she’s finally telling me after all these years....

Shantell places herself within this story as an innocent bystander, who is unaware that her cousin held such feelings of disempowerment revolving around her lack of private
transportation to school: Admittedly, however, she links her happiness while in high school to having her own car. When asked what made her happy when she was younger, Shantell spoke of the various cars that she has owned since high school. Shantell reviewed the types of cars, and the nicknames she had given each of them, focusing particularly on the Nissan Sentra that she owned as a junior in high school as being especially “right.” In carefully tracing her history of car ownership, she constructs a contrast between herself and her other cousins. She is different from her cousins, due to her only child status, in these multiple car ownerships. Not only has she been spoiled by being given a variety of cars since she was sixteen years old; she also speaks of receiving a pager, the ultimate accessory of conspicuous consumption, from her mother while in high school.

Similar to Shantell, Simone also links her being spoiled identity to having a car. Unlike Shantell, she is not an only child, although she is older than the other six children in her family and spent the beginning part of her life as an only child. Simone discusses the significant event of when she received her first car: “I got a car when I was…what, I don’t know. Daddy bought me a…Nissan. I was one of the Black female that, the only person in Port Charles that had a brand new truck. I had a Nissan.” Simone emphasizes the contrast between herself and other young African-American women in her community, claiming herself as the only one to have a new truck. Having a truck is, perhaps, one step further up the ladder of a conspicuous being spoiled status.

Through the contrast structure that she builds of other young African-American women in her community, in their common lack of a material possession, Simone situates herself with a being spoiled identity within the American Dream Discourse. Her
comments on owning a truck evoke memories of the Ford truck ad jingle, sung by country music star Toby Keith, in which he sings about “Ford trucks, your old American friend.” While Ford truck ownership may be constructed as a part of the white, rural American Dream, perhaps Nissan (truck) ownership may be one form of cultural capital in achieving a southern, rural African-American Dream (refer to the note at the end of this chapter for further elaboration).

**Being “All That”**

Participants also spoke of being thought of as “all that” in relation to being spoiled materially, or in relation to the way that they were treated by other people due to their own physical attractiveness and/or participation in activities deemed as particularly attractive. Not only did Simone situate herself in an American Dream Discourse through the material possessions that she had as a child, she also assembled an identity of being all that, in which she attended a private school as a child and was envied by “all the other girls” because of her shapely figure. In her construction of being spoiled as a child, Simone first mentions her schooling. Unlike other children, who attended the local public school in Port Charles, Simone attended a private school in University City. She links her schooling with being different from the other kids: “When I was small, basically, everybody’d say I was real spoiled…mostly, a lot of kids didn’t go to a…a school, like I went to, the private school.” Attending a private school as a youth sets the tone for her tale of being all that.

Simone also links her participation in a being all that cultural world with other women’s common perceptions of her. Related to her participation in this cultural world, she links her lack of female friendships while growing up to the jealous feelings of other young women with regard to her physical endowments. More precisely, she describes a
significant event in her life, when she got together with her baby’s father, and links this event to the envy that she feels to be emanating from other women regarding her aptitude for attracting male attention: “I basically was always mostly to myself. Cause I had a lot of girls used to be jealous of me. We used to go places together, like, it’d just be guys. Just with guys at a club. And the guys, when you see one of ‘em, they wanna talk to you…Yeah, [the girls] get mad. So…So I say, I got associates.”

Simone goes on to further scrutinize the envious feelings that other women hold towards her, giving these women a influential role in her participation in a world of being all that: “I was always mostly by myself cause they…get jealous. Say I was like, ‘Simone with big breasts, Simone with the big titties,’ cause you know, ‘ghetto bootie’…Then they were jealous ‘cause guys want to say something to me.” Simone assembles her participation in a world of being all that through the contrast structure that she builds of her other female associates. Other young women are not all that, as they are not particularly attractive and have to chase after men. She is different, however, in that she deems herself as physically attractive and does not even have to approach a man to get his attention.

Similar to Simone, Timberly also links her inability to get along with other women with their common perception that she thinks that she is all that. When asked about her friendships with other young women in high school, she noted: “As I got older, like 16, 17…I couldn’t, I didn’t hardly get along with other females, period, because they thought I was, thought I was better than them.” Her story on her lack of female friendships becomes more complex with the introduction of her biological mother to the narrative. Timberly’s grandparents raised her from the time she was a baby until she was about
sixteen years old. During that time, she thought that her grandmother was actually her mother, and that her biological mother was an older sister.

When she was sixteen or seventeen, Timberly’s biological mother finally told her that she was actually her mother, not her sister. Eventually, she came to terms with her true parentage, and became quite close with her biological mother. However, she explains that upon her mother’s untimely death from a brain aneurysm she did not feel that she could trust other women to form any more friendships: “After my mom died everybody was like, I, I was trying, they were more trying to gain friendship, try to feel, they were going to use the hell out of me. But, it wasn’t gonna work. So I withdraw from all the people. So…it was like, ‘okay, she’s stuck up, she this, she this.’” Timberly links her mother’s death to her own desire to keep to herself, situating herself in the eyes of others as someone who is stuck up. She also says that she felt like other women were trying to use her, linking this perception to a possible inheritance that she may have gained through her mother’s death. Focusing on communal perceptions, she constructs herself as participating in a cultural world of being all that. She distances herself from other young women in the community, constructing herself as a desired woman and other young women in her community as her pursuers.

Roxanne’s story provides an exemplar construction of a being all that cultural world. She foregrounds her entire growing-up narrative around the adoration that she has received from her parents, especially her mother while growing up, and the continued adulation that she receives from her brothers, sisters, and community members today. Also using other people’s stories as a way to situate herself within a world of being all
that, she assembles an identity for herself in which her mother’s favoritism toward her as a child is linked to her sisters’ and brothers’ common need to “have her around” today:

I loved [my childhood]. To this day I always thought I was the…spoiled one, from my mom. But…guess what? Obviously [my sisters and brothers] musta…thought I was special too because I’m the one they all come to now. You know what I’m saying, they’ll come…if I don’t…I’ll go and visit a lot. But…they always go, “when you coming down here? We want to see you!” You just saw me the other…“We want to see you again today!” So it’s like they want me around. And all the events they do, they want me to be there. Like this, like they have a birthday party or…cookout or something…if I tell them I’m not coming, “what! Why you ain’t coming?! You know you the life of the party!

Through the dialogue that she presents as occurring between herself and her siblings, Roxanne centers herself in a being all that cultural world in which she is the star of her social world. Through the connections she builds between a past, in which she was treated differently by her mother, and the present, in which she is treated as a desired sibling, Roxanne assembles dialectical contrast structures to situate herself within an all that cultural world.

**Being Able to Do “Whatever I Wanted to Do”**

Participants also situate themselves as being spoiled in terms of being allowed the freedom to do whatever activities they wanted to do while young. Similar to Roxanne, Shantell focuses her identity of being spoiled on her relations with her mother. However, she holds a more negative meaning for being spoiled. In contrast to Roxanne, she links her mother’s laxness in discipline with her own resultant passivity in life. Shantell constructs her relationship with her mother as one of co-dependency, in which her mother has spoiled her throughout her life. In turn, she relies heavily upon her mother, which she says holds her back in becoming an independently achieving adult. Shantell contrasts the way that her mother spoiled her with the expectations that her step father held of her. Through the voice of her step father, she constructs herself as being allowed to do
whatever she wanted to do while a teenager. “[My stepfather] used to say, ‘let her work for it,’ whatever, but…and I used to get mad with him. I used to be like, ‘you ain’t my daddy, that’s my momma, I don’t have to do that.’” Shantell weaves her story of growing up with the threads of dependency she placed upon her mother. She was spoiled in that her mother did not really expect much of her when she was growing up. Shantell continues to contrast the expectations of her mother with those of her stepfather, saying that her stepfather “knew better” than to spoil her in this way and that he was trying to teach her about being responsible.

When asked what her responsibilities were while growing up, Shantell related: “I ain’t gonna…lie…uh, just cleaning my room. That’s all she asked of me. That’s why I wish she would’ve been a little…more harder.” In contrast to the happy-go-lucky stories that other participants may place on the relative freedom they had to have fun during their childhood years, Shantell constructs a moral tale of the way that she should have been disciplined as a youth. She links a lack of discipline on her mother’s part to her own inability to take full responsibility for the upbringing of her three daughters, as well as for her lack of motivation in pursuing a better job for herself or in going to college.

Roxanne’s growing-up narrative builds upon two cultural worlds of being spoiled, in that her being all that is integrally related to being able to do whatever she has wanted to do. Roxanne is a lively woman, describing herself as a forty-two year old woman, but twenty-two years at heart. She smiled and laughed a lot during her interview, describing her life as a good one, with not much hardship, except for the death of her mother when Roxanne was in her early twenties. When asked to describe a memory that she had of
childhood, Roxanne did not speak of a specific event. Rather, she focused on the ways that others perceived her in childhood:

I was the spoiled one in the family. Cause I was my momma baby. I was my daddy gal. Um…my momma had younger kids that was…younger than me. I guess you could say I’m the black sheep of the family. I was the one that…. Back then…what they call a breech baby…feet first. I think back then they thought you would be…weak and die. And I didn’t. But you know, they thought you was special…Yeah, so they treated me different. So, therefore…I get to go, when my mom and them go somewhere, I get to go. But if I didn’t go…the whole family, all the rest of the brothers and sisters would beat me up. Cause I was so spoiled, and they was…mad about it. So then it got to the point, she just started taking me wherever she went. And they really hated that. So I was like, spoiled. Got my way.

Roxanne uses a black sheep metaphor of being different from the rest of her siblings to explain why she was treated differently by her parents. Constructing herself as a special child, in being born a breech birth and surviving, she links this biologically significant event with the favoritism that she received from her mother.

Roxanne was asked to elaborate upon what she meant when she spoke of being the black sheep of her family, in that she did not seem to be using this expression according to the common definition of a black sheep being “a disgraceful member of a family or group” (Morehead, 1995). In contrast to this definition, she was asserting a much more positive identity for herself, in which being different resulted in her leading a good life.

When asked what she meant by being the black sheep of the family, Roxanne explained: “Cause I was spoiled, the rest of the kids mad because mom gave me and did for me more than them. [T]hey felt like I was getting more because, while I’m gone I get to get me a soda and a pie (laughs). And they at home, they had to…cook and clean up and…get, fix food, what, you know what I’m saying? I’ve always had a good life, I would say, always had a good life.” Roxanne contrasts the expectations that her mother held for her with those that her mother held for her siblings. Roxanne’s situated identity
of being spoiled involves a fun-filled, carefree existence in which she places herself at the center of her family’s social world.

**Situating a “Being Spoiled” Identity through Contrast Structures and World Building**

Participants constructed a being spoiled identity for themselves that often ran parallel with an American Dream Discourse emphasizing capitalist notions of individualism and accomplishment, and constructing one’s social value based on one’s physical possessions (both in terms of materials owned and physical embodiment) and achievements. In particular, through cultural worlds of being spoiled materially, being all that, and being able to do whatever they wanted to do, participants construct being spoiled identities for themselves which serve as contrast structures to what they perceive to be the typical cultural worlds of women in their community.

Essentially, the ways that participants contrast themselves with others within their community is both telling of the way that they, themselves, view “traditional” gender socialization within their community, as well as the way that they story their own gender socialization through their personal growing-up stories. As a situated identity, being spoiled serves as a prototype for a successful woman in their community, framed through an American Dream Discourse.

In revisiting the backgrounds and ideas that Dougherty (1978) discussed twenty-five ago, it is now evident that the participants are not simply reliving in their accounts stories of growing up “rural,” “southern,” and/or “African-American.” Rather, they are conscious and aware of these traditional cultural worlds and use them as contrast structures in explaining their more complicated experiences. In essence, participants stories are rural, African-American, and southern, and not rural, African-American, and
southern at the same time; as participants use a now well-known story to contrast who and what they are as women growing up in the rural South.

The broader implication of these narratives is that the participants are culturally much more active. They just do not become cultural creatures or cultural entities, but rather use culture to story their growing-up experiences in various ways. In this chapter participants are presented as using three cultural worlds that work within an American Dream Discourse to story their growing-up experiences. Participants are neither “cultural dopes” (Garfinkel, 1967) within a traditional cultural world or within the cultural worlds in sync with an American Dream Discourse. Rather, they take up elements from a traditional Discourse to construct growing-up stories of success. Through world-building tasks (Gee, 1999), participants assemble growing-up narratives that are both locally grounded and informed by an overarching Discourse that reaches most people in today’s media-saturated society.

Participants imbue certain words and phrases with meanings to build cultural worlds of being spoiled that are congruent with an American Dream growing-up story. In their success stories, they cast themselves with identities that are said to be different from those of other women in Port Charles. For instance, working within a being spoiled materially cultural world, participants weave growing-up stories in which they have been the recipients of social goods, connoting themselves with a higher status than that of their peers. Within these stories, they describe themselves as only children, one criteria for establishing oneself as being spoiled materially. While technically not only children, Lakeesha, Wanda, and Roxanne all use this construct to contrast themselves as different from their other siblings or relatives.
Lakeesha describes her growing-up circumstances, in which she was raised in a separate household from her other siblings. She assembles a contrast structure in terms of her growing-up experiences in her father’s household, contrasting her own experiences with those of her siblings of growing up in her mother’s household. She was allowed the freedom to do what she wanted to do and was given all the toys and games that she could have wanted. On the other hand, her siblings grew up in a household with their single mother, in which they did not receive this bounty of material goods, nor did they receive the lavish of attention from their mother that she did from their father.

Lakeesha’s contrast structure takes up both American Dream and Afrocentric Discourses. Through a more Afrocentric construction, she portrays her mother as hardworking and responsible, while her father is depicted as being fun and full of merriment. She introduces a contrast structure through an American Dream Discourse focusing on her participation in being spoiled cultural worlds; comparing her own growing-up experiences to what she imagines were the experiences of her other siblings.

Wanda constructs herself as participating in a being spoiled materially cultural world, who as the only girl in a house full of boys, was spoiled rotten and protected by her brothers. Roxanne also assembles a growing-up story in which she was treated differently than the rest of the children in her large family. Speaking of her breech birth status when born, she constructs a cause-and-effect relationship behind her being spoiled identity. It has been biologically (reproductively) predetermined that she will be treated differently than the rest of her siblings. She assembles a story of being spoiled in which she participates in all three cultural worlds—being spoiled materially, being all that, and
being able to do whatever she wanted to do—due to the liminal position that she held within her family at birth.

Roxanne dialectically builds three cultural worlds off of one another to situate herself with a being spoiled identity. She has been spoiled materially and has been able to do whatever she wanted to do as a child. Thus, she constructs herself as the black sheep in the family through the differential treatment she received from her mother while young. This black sheep identity, thus, sets her apart early on as being all that. In being all that she constructs herself as the being at the center of her siblings’ social worlds, both in the past and in the present.

In contrast to others within their communities, and due to their “only child” status within their families, participants are able to fulfill an American Dream growing-up story that focuses on their acquisition of material possessions and being at the center of their family member’s social worlds. They contrast themselves with other women in their community, who may have grown up in households with many siblings competing for the attention of their parents. Their perception of what it must be like to grow up in a typical Port Charles household, in which a single mother is raising many children and is unable to completely provide for her children, much less spoil them, is used as a contrast structure in constructing themselves as “different” than the other women in their community.

However, being part of an all that cultural world may also hold negative implications, in that it is linked by a number of participants with their inability to form friendships with other women. Lakeesha, Timberly, and Simone all construct stories of being all that through the stories of other women. In narrating their growing-up stories,
they provide dialogue for other young women who speak of them as being spoiled.

Contrary to common perceptions of rural social worlds containing strong intercommunity networks, often forged by women within the community, these participants construct themselves as successful in life through avoidance in forming female friendships. Instead, they construct themselves with being spoiled identities, in which they single themselves out from the other women in their community—constructing themselves as objects of envy. They are envied in terms of their physical endowments and adornment, in terms of their athletic prowess, and in terms of the social goods that they have possessed.

Finally, participants assemble growing up stories in which they were able to do whatever they wanted to do and, thus, were different from other girls in their community who had to attend to responsibilities and chores associated with traditional gender expectations. Lakeesha evokes a carefree existence in her childhood, in being allowed to run around outside and play all day. She continues this construction into the present, describing her father as the primary caretaker of her children and describing her daily activities as those of relative freedom. Shantell constructs a similar cultural world of freedom from responsibility while young. However, she counterpoises her American Dream story of growing up spoiled with her present inability to fulfill an Afrocentric story holding expectations that she be responsible for her children and self-reliant. Whimsically wishing for more responsibility while growing up, she links her freedom from responsibility in the past to her lack of self-sufficiency and dependency on her mother in the present.
While participants assemble contrastive identities for themselves, they do incorporate elements of more traditional, or Afrocentric, cultural worlds in recognizing the circumstances of their situated realities. In other words, they construct themselves as participating in cultural worlds that fulfill aspects of the American Dream Discourse, while also taking into consideration a more traditional, Afrocentric Discourse to story their growing up experiences. Participants situate themselves with being spoiled identities that are in contrast with what they conceive to be the “prototypical” character of a woman growing up in their community. This prototype is telling in that participants link it to their various conceptions of what it means to be a typical woman in their community. The prototype is incorporated by participants in their growing-up narratives, and is used as a springboard to situate themselves as exemplars in what they perceive to be the rare American Dream success story in their community. However, while participants situate themselves as characters within this success story, elements of an Afrocentric success story also creep back into their narratives. As demonstrated in chapter 7, a being responsible identity may also include elements of an Afrocentric Discourse, which holds women as agents of responsibility within their communities, and elements of an American Dream Discourse, which frames a woman’s success story around her individual achievements.

**Summary**

In situating themselves with being spoiled identities, participants constructed their participation in cultural worlds of being spoiled materially, being all that, and being able to do whatever they wanted to do while growing up. Within a cultural world of being spoiled materially, participants spoke of being only children to contrast their growing-up world with the world of other children who had to compete for the attention of their
participants and family members. Whether or not participants were literally only children, or thought of themselves as only children because they were the only daughter in their families or were distant in age, social, or geographical space from their other siblings, participant conceptions of only childhood are linked to their future successes in lives, in which they construct themselves as being at the center of their family’s social world, attaining valued material goods, or maintaining a career.

Participants also constructed an all that cultural world, attained either through their own attractive physical attributes or through material accomplishments. They contrast their own route to being all that with the prototypical route to achievement in their community, centering on gendered expectations of hard work and responsibility. Linked to a being all that trajectory, participants construct cultural worlds of being able to do whatever they wanted to do while growing up. They contrast their own relative freedom and independence from communal constraints while growing up with the typical experience of other young women in their community, who must fulfill gendered expectations which hold them as responsible for the well-being of those around them.

Through world building, participants construct a prototypical (traditional) picture of gender socialization within their community. They then contrast their own stories with this picture, to build an alternate type for a successful woman as framed through the American Dream Discourse. Thus, participants do not simply present a traditional picture of growing up in the rural South. They are conscious and aware of traditional cultural worlds and use them as contrast structures in elaborating richer socialization experiences.
Note

The idea of Nissan cars or trucks being a part of the African-American Dream first came to me when I was in my office with a student and Quanda came in one day to complete some paper work in the same room. In the introductions that I made between Quanda and the student, Quanda asked her if she was “the one” who had the Black Nissan Sentra parked out front. The student responded “yes,” which led Quanda to expound on the virtues of owning a Nissan Sentra, gushing to the student that this was her “dream car.”
Participants also assembled stories of growing up which centered on their participation in cultural worlds of being responsible. Contrast structures, tending to hold moral overtones in these stories, are also present. Participants’ stories of responsibility work against the traditional portrait of growing up in the rural, African-American South, in that participants construct a prototype of the typical woman in their community, then contrast themselves with this prototype. Serena’s growing-up story focuses upon her constructed identity of being responsible, serving as an exemplar narrative for yet another prototype in an American Dream Discourse. Cultural worlds of being responsible will be further elaborated through other participants’ related comments.

“Me Being the Person that I Am”: Serena

Before being introduced to Serena, I was told by Quanda that Serena was different than the other young women who might be interviewed. When asked what she meant by “being different,” Quanda explained that Serena is a very independent person, who thinks for herself and is determined to get what she wants. Quanda’s comments provoked me to think about what it means to “be different” in Port Charles. Serena’s story centers upon the perceived difference that she sees between herself and the other young women in her community. Her situated identity of responsibility informs yet another facet of what it means to be a successful African-American woman in Port Charles.

Serena was raised by her mother, in a household with three older sisters. Currently, her mother and one other sister live in Port Charles, with one of her sisters living in
Georgia and the other living in Laketown, a small city about twenty miles north of Port Charles. Serena began her growing-up story speaking of the importance of her mother in her life, saying that she felt it her responsibility to honor and obey her mother early in life. In describing her relationship with her mother, Serena spoke of treating her mother as one would a best friend:

From birth until the age of, like, maybe…sixteen, seventeen…me and momma were like…the tightest. You couldn’t separate me from momma. I mean…I was momma’s girl, I wouldn’t be able to go nowhere. I guess it was about from birth to sixteen, now that I can actually go saying, I mean…everything was told to my momma, different little stuff, I mean…like a best friend, like you would tell your best friend, any and everything. Not that after the age of sixteen I wouldn’t tell her everything, cause, me being the person that I am…I felt like she still should know, even though we weren’t the closest, whether it hurts you or not, I feel like you should know because you’re my mother.

Serena describes the responsibility that she felt for treating her mother with respect to construct herself as an upstanding woman. Even in her teenage years, when there was tension between her and her mother in regard to town gossip, Serena says that she felt responsible to always tell her mother the truth:

When me and my mom was [in tension] it was like, I don’t want to be talk with anybody…I felt like, you know, I felt like, me, I know what the Bible says “honor thy father and thy mother.” And I felt like when she was saying that I was doing stuff, that Port Charles was saying that I was doing…with me sticking up for myself, I felt like, okay, that’s a sin right there. You got to do right by your mother, so therefore I felt like, okay, you slipped…and I was, always thinking about my mother, thinking, “ain’t gonna be able to do right before I get out of her house. I’m not gonna be able to do right ‘till I get out of her house.” And so, that was the first step. Yeah. That was the first step to me saying, “don’t listen to what Port Charles saying.” That was me talking back. You know, that’s a sin.

Serena speaks of herself as committing a sin by talking back. She talks back in two ways, both in her heart and with her voice. In the first instance, she says that she committed a sin in thinking that she would not be able to lead a righteous life until she got out of her mother’s house. To Serena, sinful thoughts are just as bad as sinful
behavior. Her statement on sinful thoughts, which do not honor her mother, are akin to former President Jimmy Carter’s statement of having an “adulterous lust in his heart” in that thoughts as well as actions may be construed as sinful. This statement meshes with an Afrocentric Discourse that prioritizes one’s communal ethic over one’s individual behavior.

However, her statement may also be analyzed through a Black Feminist perspective, which serves to undermine an oppressive discourse of “keeping quiet,” both in one’s thoughts, as well as in one’s behaviors. Bell hooks (1989) speaks of talking back as a way of working for gender and racial equality. Serena’s reference to talking back may be construed as a sin against her mother in an Afrocentric Discourse, which holds that one should respect one’s elders by keeping silent. However, through an American Dream Discourse, her desire to speak out may be thought of as a crucial first step in establishing a being responsible identity.

Serena focuses on the key events surrounding her first romantic relationship to launch her story of responsibility. When she was sixteen years old, she began a relationship with a boy in town. Serena uses the words “young man,” rather than boy or guy, to describe her past boyfriend, thus casting him with a mature/responsible role in her life. She says that she routinely confided in her mother, even while she was dating her boyfriend. However, to Serena, living in a small town means that one is constantly fending off gossip, or “lies,” about one’s daily activities. Though she wanted to tell her mother the truth at all times, Serena admits that she felt conflicted about this responsibility when her mother began to believe the town’s gossip about her having a sexual relationship with her boyfriend.
They made things up, “oh, she’s been pregnant two, three times over.” No. Never been pregnant, not even sexually active, and stuff like that. But they make you out something you’re not around here. So…It hurted me…Cause I was with the same young man since I was about sixteen to nineteen. And then, they just assumed that we were having sex. You know, I guess [my mother] went along with what they were saying….I felt like a mother should…listen to what I have to say. I mean, of course…listen to what they say, but don’t…I guess, I don’t know. Don’t judge it from what they’re saying because everything people say, it’s not the truth. You know. Some people talk because…there is nothing else to do. Instead of talking about what they know and stuff. And judging people from what they don’t know.

Serena describes significant event in her life, when she realized that her mother was not really the friend she thought her to be. At the same time, she presents a moral story of how a mother ought to be. Through her story of chastity, she relays that she did not have sex with her boyfriend, despite having dated him for three years. Thus begins her story of sexual and reproductive responsibility. Serena uses small town speculation about her love life to contrast herself with other young women. It is to be expected that after three years a young woman might have sexual relations with her boyfriend. She contrasts herself with this speculation in pointing out that she does not fall into this status quo. While it might be assumed that she was having sex, she is different from the other women in her small town—she does not believe in sex before marriage and emphasizes that she still has not had sexual relations to this day.

Serena’s story prompted more questions on her relationship with her mother, as she presented a plotline of her relationship with her mother in which she was quite close to her from birth until age sixteen, but then faced a disruption in this relationship. Serena brings up the notion of trust to explain her ensuing emotional distance from her mother and to situate herself as a trustful woman:

I feel…trust is the main key in any kind of relationship. So, me being the person I am, I think I’m a lot different from among my sisters. And I always that person that they could trust. And if I’m telling you something, believe what I say, because I have no reason to lie to you. And so…with [my mother] not trusting me, I guess
it was pulling me away a little bit. Cause I’m different than my sisters. I mean…if I’m telling you something, I’ll be honest with you, if it hurts you or not. And I guess I do get that from my grandma and great-grandmother. Be honest. Because I see it with her, so, with her not trusting me I guess that did cause me to take a step back a little bit more…

In contrast to her sisters, Serena says that she is trustworthy: she has taken her grandmother and great-grandmother’s teachings to heart in trying to lead an honest and forthright life. She also constructs a contrast between herself and her mother, in which she positions herself as both trustworthy and trustful.

Serena builds a contrast structure between herself and her three sisters. When asked what she means by “being different” from her sisters, Serena continues to situate herself within a cultural world of sexual and reproductive responsibility. She contrasts herself with her sisters and her mother in that, contrary to the typical adolescent girl in her community, she had neither slept around, nor had a child, by the time she was seventeen years old:

When I say I’m different from my sisters, like, I guess, I mean, Port Charles was saying I was pregnant and…gonna be pregnant and different stuff. I was like, noooo, no. I guarantee you I’m not gonna be pregnant at a young age, and different stuff like that. Cause my, all my sisters did get pregnant at age seventeen. My mom got pregnant at the age of seventeen. So, with me growing up, I seen that, I was, like, I’m gonna break that cycle.

Serena contrasts herself with the other young women in the community, both past and present, who have fallen prey to a cycle of teenaged pregnancy and single motherhood. She incorporates social problems jargon used in describing “at-risk” women to contrast her own attitude towards premarital sex with that of other young women in Port Charles; situating herself as a responsible woman. Serena described her approach to breaking this cycle, which she constructs as pre-ordained for most young women in her community:

I’m gonna do stuff with my life. I’m gonna be somebody. Not saying that my sisters are, are not somebody cause they have more than the average…person
around her, I’m gonna be honest, I mean, so. Round here most people are staying in apartments, which I’m young, and I’m in an apartment. But…[my sisters] have homes and different stuff, so, I do, I mean, that’s good, I think that’s real good. So…not trying to put my sisters down at all, cause I think they’re doing pretty good…for being their age and different stuff. With me saying I’m different…I guess it would be with…[them] getting pregnant at a young age…and [me] graduating with honors and different stuff, you know. So…

Serena’s determined claims follow an American Dream Discourse, but one tailored to her circumstances living as an African-American woman in the rural South. She assembles a success story for herself in which she graduates with honors, does not get pregnant while a teenager, and, thus, is able to strive toward an enlightened work ethic model in which she is able to get a good job, a nice home, and succeed in life. Her success story depends upon individual aspirations and a determined activism in her well-being.

Serena also constructs herself as “having respect for herself,” in contrast to the other young women in her community. She builds this contrast structure by assembling a rather emphatic case for being different from other women in Port Charles: “Oh…I think I’m very different from…women in Port Charles! I think…‘round here, there’s a lack of respect, being a female, cause you listen at…I guess they listen at the men tellin’ ‘em ‘I’ll give you this and I’ll give you that.’” To Serena, being responsible not only means controlling her fertility and sexual relationships, it also means respecting herself.

Building upon this contrast structure of self respect, she speaks of the irresponsible woman in her community, who sleeps around, gets pregnant, and thus suffers from a low self esteem. Due to the respect that she holds for herself, Serena speaks of not selling herself short in terms of her relationships or her lifetime aspirations. She is especially not willing to “flaunt her wares” in order to attract a man or to maintain a higher standard of living.
Serena elaborates upon her contrast structure of self respect, describing the other young women in her community, whom she feels debase themselves in order to economically support themselves:

[Men] can talk about cars and stuff, [but] how many females have you seen with a car from a man, saying he’ll give them a car? A man can tell…a female around here they’ll give ‘em money and…they seem like, okay, it’s okay to spread your legs for money. I think that’s a lack of respect for yourself. And it’s a lack of respect for me, that [a guy is] coming up to me, even implying that I would have sex for money. And different stuff like that. Oh yeah, guys say it all the time. It’s guys that you know. Not a lot but…but even when I had the [boy]friend, understand me, “girl, I like the way you handle yourself, I’ll do this and I’ll do that.” “If you like the way I handle myself…you should know how I am so…you should know not to come to me, with that mess.” That’s how I feel. Like I tell people, you don’t have to have sex with somebody. If he for really wants to take, uh, look out for you and do stuff for you, they don’t mind doing it for you. I mean, it shouldn’t be about you, what you gonna do for them. Like I tell…young girls around here, they’ll do stuff for money and…different stuff. I’m not saying we have prostitutes, which I guess you would call them a certain form…

Serena assembles a story in which she is a moral crusader, teaching other women that they do not need to prostitute themselves in order to achieve their dreams. She situates herself within this story as one who is self-reliant and does not need to have sexual relationships with men in order to achieve the things that she wants in life. In contrast, she speaks of other women in her community as dependent upon men and lacking in self respect. Serena sets herself apart from these other women: as a strong and self-reliant (active) woman, she has the moral fiber to accomplish her goals independently. In contrast, she sets up other women in her community as only able to passively accomplish their goals through sexual relationships.

Serena continued her moral story of sexual responsibility, contrasting herself with the example of a “weak-minded” friend:

For instance, last week I had a friend of mine, she’s young, she’s seventeen. And she, she was like “Serena, I’m weak.” She said she’s weak. She said, “I’m weak. And I can’t help it.” And I guess, with her situation…she learned from her
mother’s mistakes. Cause her mother w-, was in prison, while she was young. So she was like, “I’m weak. I can’t help it.” She was like, “pray for me, pray for me Serena.” And I was like, okay, I’ll see what I can do... But even those that…call out for help and reach out for help, they say it, but I don’t know if they really want help. You know. But... we got a lot of them round here…where they won’t admit it or not. They might say, “well, no, I’m not doing it for the money,” or whatever. But soon as the money ends, other stuff ends too so, therefore, I feel like no one relationship should be based on funds, money, or anything like that.

In situating herself as a responsible woman, Serena casts herself as the character of religious, moral crusader. Other women aspire to be just as determined as she, but can not help how they are, due to the poor environment in which they were raised.

Continuing with a breaking-the-cycle metaphor, Serena links her friend’s weak-mindedness to her precarious growing-up experiences. Her friend has learned from her mother’s mistakes... all too well, and, therefore, does not have the current disposition to be a self-reliant woman. Interestingly, Serena speaks of her mothers and sisters in much the same light as she does her friend’s mother: all of these women have fallen prey to a cycle of irresponsibility. However, Serena casts herself as different from her friend based upon the fact that she has had other strong role models in her life. She has had a grandmother and great grandmother as role models of which to model her responsible behavior upon.

Serena claims responsibility for herself through a narrative detailing the important roles that both women have played in her life. Both her grandmother and her great-grandmother have taught her the importance in leading a religious life in which she is respectful of herself and holds herself responsible for her own life outcomes. Serena explains why other young women in her community are not so responsible, linking their lack of respect for themselves to a lack of role models in the community:

[R]ound here, with young ladies...[they] don’t have enough people...to look up to, because instead of the grown...folks in Port Charles being...adults about
situations...they tend to...talk about things that they don’t know also. So, therefore, when...young people hear...adults talking like young kids talk, they say, “Well, what’s the point of listening to what they got to say? When they doing just as much as I’m doing, talking just as much as I’m talking.” So...who can you look up to? You know?

In contrast to other young women in Port Charles, Serena constructs a story in which her grandmother and great-grandmother serve as particularly strong role models in her growing-up narrative. Through their moral instruction, she has grounded herself in the church. Her religious convictions have led her to do right, in being a woman who takes responsibility for herself, is able to maintain herself in a respectful way, and strives for life achievements on her own.

In doing right, Serena says that she also does not drink, smoke, or take drugs. She links her teetotaler attitude to her immersion in the church. She has learned from her church that one does not do these things if one wants to be saved. Providing a background context for doing right, Serena told her story of being saved while still a girl:

I really got into church when I was nine-years old and I’ll never forget it. Cause I, it’s a story behind mine. But I remember, I was nine years old. I was trying to do right and, different stuff, but I was bad, I was bad when I was younger. I’m gonna say, I was bad. Like, I used to get in fights and all that, at elementary school. Then when I got in the fifth grade...I tried to do better and be different...stuff like that. I think I was trying to mature a little faster than the average, you know, young person my age. But I was in the fifth grade and this girl, she had been talking all day, she was like, um, “I beat up Serena, I beat her up in the, in kindergarten.” I was like, “kindergarten, what does it matter, it’s kindergarten?!” And she had been saying this all day, I was like, okay, don’t matter to me, don’t matter to me. So...my girlfriend said to me, “Jawanah said she beat your behind in kindergarten.” And I was like, “it’s kindergarten! What does it matter?!” So after school, she comes up, she was like, “I heard you said you beat me up in kindergarten.” I said, “no, I didn’t say it...but I did beat you up, if you want to go there.” And so, we fought. No, we didn’t fight right then. But she went cursing and stuff like that. Um, but anyhow, I cursed. So, I cursed her out, she cursed me, I cursed her out. And I told her, “well, I really don’t want to fight you, I really don’t want to fight you.” So she’s like “nooo, b- [bitch] or whatever.” And so I was, “I’m not gonna fight you.” She’s like, “you come fight me. You’re done telling people you gonna beat me up.” So, we fought. And the whole time I’m fighting, I’m talking to her. I’m telling her, “I told you I didn’t want to fight you.” I mean, “I told you to leave me
alone. I don’t like to fight, I’m trying to do right,” and I’m talking to her and it’s like, she just can’t let me leave it and telling me what I said. And from that next…I guess maybe it was…in the middle of the week, that same Friday, when I was nine-years old, I got saved. Giving my life to the Lord, from that day on, I said I’m not turning back…It’s just like, I don’t know, cause, like I said, I been trying from…day one. Trying to do right.

Serena evokes a cultural world of doing right in her story of being saved. Not only does she participate in this world by avoiding fights at school, an individually-oriented goal, she also speaks of trying to please her mother in making her proud that her daughter was not a troublemaker. In constructing herself as being responsible, both for herself and to her mother, Serena bends the traditional American Dream Discourse of individual motivation, molding the Discourse to a more Afrocentric ideal of being both personally and communally aware and responsible. She has learned in her church that, to be responsible, one does not just focus on one’s own moral development; one also is aware and concerned about the moral progress of others within the community.

In the preceding narrative, Serena relates that she was trying to do right by trying to talk her antagonist out of a fight. Although she inevitably involved herself in this fight, she constructs herself as morally aware enough to question her participation in this event in which she does wrong—even to the extent that she questions her actions out loud during the altercation. Serena constructs a path for herself on the right track, which rests on her ability to successfully navigate a being responsible identity. She does right by helping others with their problems, imbuing this role with a martyr-like quality in which she holds herself responsible for other people, sometimes to the detriment of her own well-being.

When asked about her friendships, Serena said that she has one good, close, friend, but that she is also friends with a number of cousins. She relegated other possible friends
to an “associate” status, meaning that she does not necessarily feel obligated to help take
care of them. Serena explained that she tries not to be friends with too many people
because, in the end, they will disappoint you.

I have one…really…close, that’s my best friend. She’s…but I have cousins that
I’m close with, like, we were best friends when kids, I don’t know. I have a lot of
associates, I really try not to have friends, to be honest, because…I feel like the
closer I get with people, the more they disappoint me, I’ll have you know. Cause
that’s the type of person I am and…at the same time I feel that it’s a blessing that
the Lord made me where I have no problem helping people. Cause…when you
help people the most and you feel like one hurts you and…even sometimes they’re
family, friends, or associates. You be so quick to forgive, that’s all you got. And
when you need it the most, there’s no one there for you. And that’s why.

Serena proceeded to speak of the numerous times that she has lent various friends and
relatives money; that she has a problem saying no to people she cares about. She
emphasized the fact that this was “no five dollar amount,” sometimes being in the
hundreds of dollars, and that the money was not always returned to her. Contrasting her
own generosity with that of her friends and relatives, she related that the one time when
she needed to borrow only five dollars, she could not find one person to lend her this
money. Serena linked her generosity with family and friends to her strong work ethic;
saying, “I have always been working! Stay[ed] on my toes!” She is, therefore, able to
lend help or economic support to friends and family in need.

Although Serena did not have a job at the time of our interview, she described
spending her days filling out applications for jobs. Throughout her growing-up story, she
emphasized her strong work ethic; in which she started working at age nine—often
helping out relatives and friends. Serena describes her childhood activities as those
involving service to others. She traces her job history, which runs the gamut from
helping out relatives at a young age to working at a grocery store, to her current
aspiration of working at a nearby prison facility. Serena constructs herself as a work-oriented person, falling in line with an American Dream Discourse.

However, her work ethic is also situated within the contingencies of her everyday life. Port Charles is a rural community in which the availability of jobs with full benefits, especially for African American women, is quite limited. Those who want full-time work, including benefits, tend to strive for jobs from one of two sectors: in the prison system, or in the healthcare system; as a certified nursing assistant, a mental-health assistant, or nursing home attendant. To get a “state job” working for a state mental hospital or state prison is an achieved dream, in that the work is full-time, contractual, and provides a benefits package.

Not only does Serena construct herself as a responsible person in terms of being a moral teacher and having a strong work-ethic, she also describes herself as an educated person who graduated from high school with honors and is currently on leave from attending a local community college. Besides having worked most of her life at a variety of jobs, Serena links her strong work-ethic to her pursuit of an advanced education. She speaks of attending a community college in University City in the past, but being forced to take a leave-of-absence due to a health problem. Serena was taking classes in Criminal Justice in order to pursue a higher level job in the prison system. The pursuit of an advanced education in order to acquire an upper-level job follows the trajectory of the American Dream, in which one’s job status is often integrally related to one’s educational attainment.

However, Serena was faced with the reality of having to rely on financial aid to pay for her college education, not having healthcare coverage to pay for her health condition,
and having to face both white male school and medical administrators in negotiating her absence from school due to this health problem. In the end, she states, they were unable to make a compromise for her. While others may have been deterred by these circumstances, Serena used these difficulties to construct her participation within worlds of self-reliance and personal responsibility. She describes her reaction to the increasing financial obstacles that she faced in attending college: “When they cut back on my financial aid…I was like, I can’t do this. ‘Cause…me being who I am…and that’s when I say that I wasn’t ready to find my momma. She can’t provide, like most parents do for a student to survive. So therefore, I was doing everything on my own. I pay medical bills out of pocket. And…so…at the end I was just doing the basics.” The American Dream permeates Serena’s construction of her position within her community. In contrast to other students at college, who could go crying to mommy and daddy, Serena situates herself as a self-reliant individual responsible for her own survival. There are a variety of obstacles that she must face, based on her low socio-economic level, her gender, and her race, that come into conflict with her ability to achieve the American Dream. However, she does not let these circumstances get in the way of her construction of a being responsible identity.

Serena’s growing-up story centers upon her situated identity of being responsible, in which she describes various cultural worlds of responsibility, in terms of having respect for herself, doing right, being sexually responsible, and pursuing a job and having a good education. These worlds of responsibility are a part of a locally-constructed discourse of the American Dream. Other participants also constructed stories of
responsibility imbued with an American Dream-type quality, while also affected by local contingencies of race, gender, locality, religion, and socio-economic circumstance.

**Being Responsible at a Young Age**

Participants spoke of being mature at a young age as a way to situate themselves with identities of responsibility. For instance, Janice constructs a situated identity of responsibility for herself in her growing-up story, in which she was forced to be mature and take responsibility for her actions at a young age, due to the fact that she got pregnant and had her daughter when she was fourteen-years old. Similar to what Dougherty (1978) writes about attaining womanhood in the rural African-American south, Janice links her mature, adult, status to the significant event of the birth of her daughter.

To Janice, being mature at a young age not only meant taking on the primary responsibility for her daughter’s upbringing. It also meant being mature enough to deal with the father of her child, who did not provide full support for their daughter, in an amicable fashion. Janice contrasts herself with other women, who may not have handled the situation with such aplomb:

I…didn’t deprive her of, hold…that against him and deprive her of knowing her father. Because, I tell her, that was important…in being, her becoming a, a, a mature and responsible adult. To know her father. And not show anger and hatred, you know, um…towards him. Cause that has an effect, you know. When parents don’t get along and they fuss and fight and bicker, it has an effect on the children. Yeah, I seen it a lot in…friends and their parents, you know. And stuff, and I didn’t want that…for my daughter. Um…and, um…I think that made her a better person, a better mother, you know, to her own little daughter.

Janice links her own good mothering and maturity to the mothering ability of her daughter. Being mature means accepting that not everything in life proceeds as one might wish and, perhaps even more so, that some things in life, such as not having the help of a male partner to raise one’s child, are just to be both expected and accepted.
Furthermore, she links her early maturity to learning from the experiences of others, especially from the older relatives and friends around her:

It’s being close, it’s related to the fact that my family, my parents [were close] and um…I was more mature, I don’t know if I wanted to be more mature because I had a child, but I had…more to do with older women, with them, because they were um…and then listening to their experiences and good advice, you know. Um…they always had good advice for me. That type of stuff. You know, to be able to see, to forgive, uh, the mistakes. You learn from other people, um…and…it’s…not, not, not good enough, you know. It’s…be more thoughtful, open up, and being told that…although there are things that you may desire or want, they may not be the best thing for you. And if it doesn’t work out, there’s something better…that will come along. It may not come right then, I mean, when I want it, but, it’ll be there in the most needed time.

Again, Janice links her own maturity to her acceptance and patience in facing difficult life circumstances. Like Serena, she presents the origins of her young maturity as springing from the teachings of older women in her life. She does not present her social circumstances to be so much of her own choosing, as that she was treated differently by others after she had a child. Through her interactions with older women, she was imbued with a sense of responsibility and “not treated as a child anymore.” After the birth of her daughter she was expected to behave like an adult: to stay at home and take care of her child, rather than “run the streets” as other young women may have done.

However, Janice is careful not to circumscribe her notion of maturity with an age limit. While she does construct herself as one who was forced to be mature at a young age, she concludes this talk with a more open-ended construction of maturity:

Becoming an adult…is…being responsible. A responsible person. Um…a person who accepts responsibility for their actions. How they treat other people. Um…to be supportive of themselves, um, self supportive. Not dependent on other people, taking care of you, and also a willingness to learn. You know. And it’s a continuous thing, it’s not just…well, “now that I’m 18 or 21 or 46 I know all there is to know,” you know? It’s a willingness to continue to learn. Um…for change or better, to better oneself.
Being mature, then, is something one learns and continues to learn throughout one’s life. Maturity is linked with taking responsibility for one’s actions, while also cast with more experiential tones. In other words, while Janice links her burgeoning maturity to a significant event in her life (the birth of her daughter), she concludes that one is always learning responsibility through the experiences one faces in life.

Janice’s links her situated identity of responsibility to multiple discourses. Through an American Dream Discourse, she describes her individual pursuit of a higher education and a good job due to the responsible role that she was cast early in life. However, through an Afrocentric Discourse focusing on the idea of accepting life as it comes, she casts her maturity as a never-ending learning process of gaining the wisdom to face life’s difficulties.

Like Janice, Brianna also links her early maturity to the caretaking role that she took on while young. When asked to whom she was closest while growing up, like Serena, Brianna told me about her mother. In terms of her relationship with her mother, Brianna assembles a story in which she and her mother were more like friends than mother and daughter: “I was always grown where I didn’t, when I wasn’t supposed to be, I would reckon. Like…my mom, she could, if she had a problem that (sniffles), she could sit down and talk to me or whatever, you know. Like I knew. So, if anything happened I was always ready for it, you know.” She elaborated that her mother told her about “stuff that she wasn’t supposed to talk about”; or adult topics that, within a traditional timeline of human development, she should not have been mature enough to know about.
However, Brianna clearly values the role of confidante that she held for her mother and speaks of her relationship with her mother as contributing to her maturation process, in that through her mother’s mistakes she learned about right and wrong behaviors in life. Contrary to Serena’s theory that having poor role models may lead to one’s weak mindedness, Brianna stories her maturation process through a framework in which having a proper role model is not necessarily a determinant in becoming strong minded or being mature. Instead, she claims that she learned from her mother’s mistakes, constructing her mother as a teacher-like figure from whom she has learned important lessons in life. In taking on a mothering role, Brianna’s early maturity story is similar to Janice’s: in realizing a caretaking role while young, she constructs her early maturity as not so much a choice, as it is a fulfillment of societal expectations.

Timberly links her early maturity to several significant events in her life and, similar to Janice, presents becoming mature as a dynamic process. She constructs waves of maturity for herself, which have ebbed and flowed throughout her life. Each of these waves may be linked to specific significant events within her growing-up story. Timberly met her boyfriend, who is the father of her two children, when she was thirteen-years old and had her first child when she was twenty. She constructs a first wave of maturity around being in a serious relationship at a young age, which resulted in the birth of her first child.

Timberly describes this time in her life as one in which she stayed inside, did not run the streets, and generally fulfilled the obligations of the traditional housewife. The death of her mother two years ago sent Timberly into a tailspin, causing her to withdraw from the people closest to her, including her boyfriend, and to pursue the life that she felt
she had missed out on as a teenager: “The older I get, the more mature I get…the more *immature*, I’m gonna put it that way. ‘Cause it’s like, from 17 to 22, it was like, I was more mature then than I am now. I was…basically in the house all the time. I was…somebody come say something, like ‘let’s go out,’ and I look over it.” Timberly constructs a fluid world of being mature, in which maturity is seen as conditional—linked to experience—rather than an ephemeral process. In contrast to the traditional construction of maturity as a process that increases as one gets older, she links her own maturity to significant events in her life which have caused her to change her tune in terms of what she perceives are her responsibilities and proper place in life.

**Being Responsible by Respecting Yourself**

As well as constructing themselves as being mature early in life, participants also spoke of worlds of respect in order to situate themselves with being responsible identities. In self-respect stories, participants tend to contrast their own high self-esteem and self respect with the lack of respect that other women have for themselves in their community. In being asked to describe something that frustrated her while growing up, Karen spoke of the times when her mother, Luella Mae, made her come inside early in the evening:

> My mom wouldn’t want us out late. Like, sometimes when you’re out playin’, or havin’ a good time with your friends and it’s time to go. Yet they can hang out, but *you* gotta go in. And, and that really frustrated me. But, I know now what she was doin’. It was important. She was preparing me for a life where I wouldn’t be…trashy. That I would be a respectable woman. With the age that I am now. So, I, I thank her for that, cause lot of things that she did and, and still I didn’t understand being. But being an adult now, I knew where she was coming from. That was for, to build character in me.

Karen contrasts the upbringing that she and her siblings received from her mother with the way that her other friends in the neighborhood were raised. What she considered to
be frustrating while young she now considers to be a blessing in disguise, in that she was taught how to be a respectable woman who did not run the streets at night. While Karen is forty years old and has never been married or had any children, she forgoes a traditional cultural world which might see her as aberrant or deviant due to her single and childless status, using these very circumstances to situate herself within a cultural world of high self-esteem.

When asked to elaborate upon what she meant by “being trashy,” Karen turned her unmarried and childless status into positive attributes, by which trashy women are those who are continually sleeping around and having children. She participates in a cultural world of having respect for herself through her constructed contrast structure of being trashy. In assembling a cultural world of having self respect, her definition of trashiness is linked to having a lack of respect for oneself:

AG: Describe what “trashy” is to you.

Luella Mae: (She has come back into the room, and is preparing to leave for the community center) Someone who do anything and everything.

Karen: This is my interview!

Aline: (Laughs)

Karen: (Laughs) Like to be someone that, probably sleeping around with a lot of different guys. Multiple sex partners. Probably doing drugs…Not able to hold down a job. Just, just someone who wouldn’t have…good respect for themselves. I have a lot of respect for myself.

What is evident from this passage is just how much influence Luella Mae still holds on her daughter’s conception of trashiness, as she interjects during her daughter’s interview to provide her own definition. Karen’s cultural world of self respect is mired in an American Dream Discourse of controlled fertility and sexuality, not doing drugs, and having a good job. She situates herself within this Discourse in saying that she has a lot
of respect for herself, that she does not sleep around or use drugs and that she has a
stable, full-time job working for the state mental hospital. Her definition of respectability
is similar to that of Serena: both use a contrast structure of other women in the
community to world themselves with respectability.

In contrast to Karen, who constructs herself as being respectful and having a lot of
respect for herself through a contrast structure of not being trashy, Muncell works against
the stereotypical notion that drug users and women who sleep around have no respect for
themselves. In her descriptions of life on the streets, she relates that while she was a
heavy drug user and often did sex work in order to acquire crack, there were certain
things that she would not do because she had too much respect for herself:

You know, I never was a woman that would...have sex with another woman, even
though, guys wanted to, me to do that. I don't care how high, how...high I got, I
haven’t done that today. Cause that’s not...me. Or guys be wanting to have sex
with you all kind of ways. In your rectum and all that. Well, I haven’t got thata
way today! I’m not, you know, no! Baby done wanna get high. You know, I go
find another one, I’m not doing that. Them two things I would...you know, I, I
couldn’t, couldn’t do. Ummm ummm! And it was a pretty good way and good
drugs, but, no I, I never did that. I never did it.

In the past, Muncell may have experienced cravings for crack, going so far as to sell her
body in order to acquire it. However, she held herself up to certain standards, in never
stooping “so low” as to have anal sex or to have sex with another woman. In contrast
with her past identity as a drug user, Muncell constructs a present in which she is still
self-respecting but no longer a drug user and, thus, is able to achieve the American
Dream:

Like, like I say [now] I [am], like working, raising my kids...paying my
bills...keeping money, a little change in my pocket. Um...doing, how with me and
the kids get along and how, how I do things with the kids and how I like working.
And how I like my, you know, how I like taking care of elder people in nursing
homes and whatever. And I like working now. And I get...more respect. Even
though when I was out there in the streets, they respected me. But I get better and more respect now…since I’ve been off crack.

Muncell’s vivid descriptions of life on the streets during her drug-use years convey her desperation for crack cocaine, while also portray her as a woman who stood strong and would never sink below a certain level of self depredation, despite a craving. In constructing a former, drug-using self, she presents a contrast between herself-as-self-respecting (“I never was a woman” to perform certain sex acts) and other imagined drug-using women who may have faced similar cravings.

Muncell also employs an American Dream motif in contrasting her identity of self-respect during her drug-use years to the way that she is today. She takes a multi-layered approach in her use of contrast structures, in first contrasting herself with other drug-using women (in assembling her past identity) and then contrasting her “past self” with her “present self” to place herself within a cultural world of even greater self respect in the present. Concluding her narrative of self-respect, she says that while she received a lot of respect on the streets back when she was using drugs (that even the drug dealers respected her enough to tell her when they thought she should go home to her family), she can now maintain a steady income, have a functional family, and hold a respectable job. In other words, she may now frame her identity in terms of the American Dream.

**Breaking the Cycle: Being Sexually Responsible**

Participants also situated themselves with identities of responsibility in terms of going against what they conceived to be the normal reproductive cycle for women in their community. Serena speaks of “breaking the cycle” of teenage pregnancy when she speaks of her sisters and mother getting pregnant for the first time when they were seventeen and contrasts her own still intact virginity. Breaking the cycle as a contrastive
metaphor conjures up images of a social problems literature written as a mechanism for prevention. Several participants worked this metaphor into their growing-up stories to contrast their own sexual and reproductive behaviors with those of other women in the community, as well as with that of women in their own families.

I was first struck by a participant’s use of this social problems metaphor when I interviewed Quanda. Quanda works for a community-based organization, serving to provide health outreach and drug-use prevention to rural communities. Her growing-up story is telling on two levels: not only does she provide, like other participants, an African-American woman’s perspective on growing up in the rural South, she also is well versed in health and prevention literature targeted to her own community and other surrounding rural communities.

When asked to talk about the birth of her two daughters, Quanda related her story of running away from home when she was in high school and eventually becoming pregnant for the first time, saying that she was actually happy to get pregnant because she knew that her mother would not allow her to live at home if she got pregnant. When asked about the birth of her second daughter, four years later, Quanda stated:

She wasn’t expected. I am a statistic (smiles). I’m one of the ones that…in the town, you know, taking Depo since my oldest was…three days old. Every three months…and I missed my shot one time, when I first got my job at the hospital. I’ll never forget it. And then, so [the nurse] was like, “wait ‘till you come back. You gotta wait for your period come on before you can take another one.” First one I ever missed…and by the time I went back…she told me I had to wait ‘till my next period…and then I was pregnant. Cause if you is pregnant in between then, it’s only a 99 point percent time, but I’m one of them statistics…she got in wrote on my file!

Using a social problems discourse on teenaged motherhood to discuss her inaccurate use of birth control, Quanda situates herself within a cultural world of statistics, in which women who get pregnant while on birth control are reduced to percentile points. From a
social problems perspective, she is just one of many African-American women who are not able to properly keep track of their own birth control procedures.

However, when asked how she would describe her personality as an adolescent, Quanda constructs an identity contrary to a social problems discourse of deviant teenaged motherhood: “I was nice…Easy to get along with…I ain’t have no self est-, low self esteem about me having a baby, you know. Cause I put my baby pictures and stuff all over my locker. Everything.” Most likely, Quanda is responding to public health literature that tells of teenaged mothers suffering from low self-esteem. As she works in a community-based organization dealing with rural women's health issues, she has come into contact with many of the prevailing conceptions about the poor mental health of the teenaged mother.

Quanda works against these notions in constructing herself as a strong and determined mother who became more independent and assertive after the birth of her first daughter. She assembles a story of teenaged pregnancy in which the birth of her daughter when she was only eighteen was actually a blessing: “Even though I was young with a baby, I ain’t regret it. ‘Cause I was happy. I think that kept me out of a whole bunch of trouble too, having a baby. I don’t care what nobody say!” Once again, Quanda provides a contrast between the usual construction of a teenaged mother as "in trouble” or “at risk.” On the contrary, the birth of her first child actually turned her life around: she became more responsible and self-achieving. As an example of her burgeoning responsibility, Quanda went on talk about the leadership award that she received in her senior year of high school (after her daughter’s birth):

The State Troopers and stuff, gave me an award for, for like…outstanding, turning my life around. Like, they, something like, this for a teen who done had a baby,
ran away from home, had a baby, got her own place, still came to school everyday, 
this and that and then, so it’s the outstanding...from the Juvenile Justice System. 
Turned your life around where...I had got my senior, when they was giving awards 
out. I was determined to do, oh yes, I, my whole eleventh and twelfth grade year, I 
had my own apartment. I went to school everyday. I walked my baby to daycare, 
right there, and then walked on to school.

Quanda’s speaks of a changed identity, from being a “follower” and “runaway” to being 
a “leader” and a “mother,” linking this change in identity to the significant event of the 
birth of her first child. She applies another institutional discourse, that of the juvenile 
justice system, to describe her new identity—that of a self-reliant, determined young 
woman who is on a new and better path in life. Quanda works against a social problems 
discourse of deviancy to construct a cultural world that goes against the normative 
perception of world of the teenaged mother. Her comment on “being a statistic,” 
counterpoised with “being a leader,” helped me to develop my thoughts on a cultural 
world constructed by a number of participants of which claimed that they were not a part: 
the world of teenaged pregnancy and multiple sexual relationships.

Wanda’s narrative history of her sexual relationships is exemplary in constructing a 
cultural world of sexual responsibility. Participants construct this cultural world through 
a contrast structure, in which other women fall into the cycle of sexual irresponsibility by 
sleeping around, having too many children, and becoming teenaged mothers. Wanda 
contrasts her own sexual behavior with that of other young women in Port Charles:

The myth that I, the myth that you mostly hear uh...you’re, you understand what 
I’m trying to say uh...most, during back then you, at a certain age, most black 
teenagers are...not just black but teenagers in general. Um, the pregnancy rate was 
very high. But...I looked, like my momma, she um...always tell me, “you carry 
yourself in the way, as a lady would carry herself. Your body is your temple. You 
respect yourself and the way you respect yourself is you make someone else respect 
you...especially men.”
Wanda constructs herself as different from the other girls in town, in that she had a mother who taught her self respect and she actually paid attention to what her mother was telling her. From her mother’s lessons, she learned to respect herself and, therefore, did not sleep around. Wanda goes on to trace the history of her sexual relationships, emphasizing the fact that she did not sleep around by saying that she has only had two sexual relationships in her life and that she did not have her first, and only, daughter until she was twenty-four years old. She continues to link her participation in a cultural world of sexual self respect to her mother’s moral teachings:

This is the way my mom raised me and the way my mom did turn things. And that’s why I have respect for that. You don’t do things around your children. Even if it’s gonna, if you gonna be intimate or not. You don’t have any and everybody around your children. And...I have to get to know that person. I don’t, well, even if you’ve been with them a long time, you still don’t know ‘em. But you, you can pretty much predict things that they do and have a good...feeling at what they’ve, you know, well, know they heart...Me and my daughter, it’s just me and her. It’s been me and her for a long time. But I had one relationship...since her dad, and that didn’t last long because I got...morals and standards...that I had set.

Wanda has learned about sexual morality early on from her mother. As a sexually responsible woman, she both practices what she preaches, and preaches what she practices: she describes teaching her daughter the same lessons that her mother taught her. Through a moral story of chastity and self respect, Wanda constructs a contrast structure of sexual responsibility, in which she is one of a few women who did not get pregnant in high school and who has not had multiple pregnancies.

In contrast to Quanda’s story of teenaged pregnancy, in which she constructs her first pregnancy as a positive turning point in her life story, Wanda assembles a prototypical story of teenaged pregnancy, in which young women in her community are oppressed by a cycle of teenaged pregnancy. Wanda builds a success story for herself that breaks away from this cultural world of teenaged pregnancy:
[AG: What do you think were some of your most important successes while growing up?] My finishing high school. My, my not being a pregnant teenager. And…and, and by the time I had my daughter, they [the other girls] had done had three or four (laughs). Three and four! Some of ‘em was ‘bout grown! They children was about grown before I even had my first one! Ummm hmm. But that was a big accomplishment. And I, I’m proud of that. And um, because the teenage pregnancy rate back then was very, very high.

In distancing herself from a world of teenaged pregnancy, Wanda situates herself with a being responsible identity that fits well within the American Dream, in which she is able to finish high school and achieve a positive trajectory through life. In contrast, she describes other young women in town who were burdened by multiple pregnancies at an early age. Through details of her own achievements in graduating high school and having a steady “state” job, Wanda’s contrast structure serves to hint at the minimal progress these other women have made in life in comparison.

Like Wanda, Karen also links her positive life trajectory to being relatively chaste throughout her life, taking her narrative one step further in that she never had any children. She also assembles a moral story of chastity and virtue linked to her mother’s teachings:

I didn’t have sex at an early age, I was twenty-one. And I know a lot of girls, they get active in high school and I never did. I mean, I was twenty-one and when I actually did that. And, you know, everybody can’t get to say that. I, I wasn’t really dating or anything. And…I was always taught to keep still because, you know, (mimics a scolding mother) “don’t have no sex with these boys, you gonna get pregnant!” That always stuck in my mind.

Karen builds a contrast structure to contrast her world of chastity with a cultural world in which most girls were having sex in high school, if not earlier, and many were getting pregnant. She did not get pregnant because she listened to the wise words of her mother, whose moral-warning bells linking sex with teenaged pregnancy, and thus being trashy, virtually rung in her ears. Karen carries this moral lesson to the present in describing her
current friendships with other women: “One of ‘em, she, all my friends, as a matter of fact, they have children! All of ‘em do, except me. I think I’m the only one that doesn’t have any children. And um, if they’re not married, they’ve been married or living with some guy. I haven’t done that.”

Karen situates her friends in a world of multiple children and sexual relationships, a world in which she has not participated. In contrast, she has been “saved” in her church and leads a life in which her “body is her temple,” in which she respects herself and leads a virtuous life on the straight and narrow, and does not allow herself to have “free sex,” drink, smoke, or use drugs.

Being Responsible by “Doing Right”

Much as doing the right thing is a worldview-in-practice for participants situating themselves with being spiritual identities, “doing right” is constructed by participants as a practical method for achieving a being responsible identity. While telling her growing-up story, Karen contrasted herself with her other sister and brothers, all of whom have abused drugs or alcohol. She spoke of her sister, Corentine, who chews tobacco and may be abusing her depression medications. She also described her brothers, one who is in jail for selling crack cocaine, and the other who may be found hanging around the local juke joint, where drinking and drugging are said to be rampant. Karen builds a contrast structure based on a significant event in her life, when she was “saved by the Lord” at the age of twenty-nine. As a result, she does right by being sexually responsible and respecting herself: “I never would [try drugs], not with the mind that I have now, no. Uh…being that I am a Christian now…I’m taught that, you know, you don’t do anything to defile your temple, which is drugs, alcohol, and smoking. I haven’t had a cigarette, or any alcohol, since ’93.” Karen’s contrast structure is built on her own self respect and
practice of doing right, balanced against her siblings’ lack of respect for themselves and consequent “crooked path” in life.

Shantell also distances herself from the world of drug and alcohol use within her community, describing the pervasiveness of drug abuse in Port Charles:

I ain’t hung out to the juke, ummm ummm! If that tree could talk it’d tell you something. That tree up there…to the juke. If that tree could talk it’d tell you some things. And that don’t, you know, I just don’t… I speak to everybody now, and I get along with everybody in Port Charles, you know, pretty much everybody in Port Charles. But…I just, that’s not my cup of tea. I don’t get down like that. As far as hanging out like that. Drinking and all that good stuff. I don’t get down like that.

She personifies a tree that is located next to the local juke joint, an establishment often linked by participants to “wrong doing,” as a person who knows many of the town secrets. Her words evoke Twin Peaksian images of “owls and trees not being what they seem,” in which nature absorbs all of the nasty secrets of a small-town world. Through the voice of the tree, constructed as omnipresent, she constructs a contrast structure in which this tree knows of her own lack of interest in participating in the juke’s activities, in opposition to other community members, who view the juke as being at the center of their social world.

Both Roxanne and her daughter, Quanda, also construct a cultural world of doing right for themselves, relating that they are able to achieve “natural highs” and, thus, do not have any use for drugs and alcohol. Quanda builds on her construction of being a leader by contrasting herself with her friends:

All my friend, a lot of my friends, and stuff, do [drugs and alcohol]. But you, just cause that’s another way of my definition of being a leader. Just cause they do it, and we be out together, that don’t mean that I have to do it. Cause see, I have just as much as fun as them and they be drunk and can’t remember nothing the next day. So like, I be the main one driving. Cause…I watch too much Lifetime…and I ain’t trying to be a, one of the backseat drivers that die, getting in a car with your friends drunk.
Taking up a common theme from television programs depicted on the Lifetime channel, she describes the horror and tragedy involved in using alcohol and drugs to excess in order to detail what she sees as a possible outcome of these activities. Similar to the social problems discourse that she uses in describing herself as “a statistic,” she applies another social problems discourse—that of the MADD mother—to describe herself as a leader (sober driver) who does not follow the crowd. In contrast, her friends choose to be “backseat/drunk drivers,” or followers. Placing herself within a cultural world doing right, Quanda constructs a being responsible identity for herself that is firmly rooted in an American Dream Discourse encouraging leadership and individuality.

Like her daughter, Roxanne constructs herself as participating in a cultural world of leadership, in which she is not willing to follow the crooked path of others within her community. She likens the tendency to do right, in this respect, to her whole family:

Nobody likes to and they know I’m...we, my mom didn’t drink and smoke. But so...my nieces and nephews, don’t. Thank God, none of my children ever done any drinking or smoking. It’s just something we just don’t do. So...and I’m quick to tell ‘em, you can have just as much fun as a drunk man. You know, people think that when they get drunk, they have to get drunk to have fun. And...that’s when they...come around. But what I guess they told me, I got this natural high! So all my nieces and things, like, they want to have natural high like they auntie! And then my children say the same thing: “I wanna have natural high like my momma!” So...but I guess I got the natural high like my momma. We just...don’t do it.

Roxanne paints the picture of a person who drinks or uses drugs as ugly. Individuals who fall within a cultural world of drinking and drugging are portrayed as being unhealthy and innate social clods. In turn, she constructs her family in a world of “beautiful people,” in which they model their own teetotaler attitudes after her own. Through a lineal linkage to her mother in the past, and through herself to her daughter today, Roxanne works within an American Dream Discourse that valorizes achievement. All three of these women
achieve natural highs because they are leaders who are able to do right on their own terms. Similar to Serena in her moral crusader role, Roxanne assembles a role for herself in which she is responsible for the well-being of her whole family and is careful to lead them down the right path in life.

**Being Responsible by Having a Strong Work Ethic**

Participants not only construct themselves as leaders in terms of doing right by not falling prey to the world of drug and alcohol abuse that has been cast upon their community. They also situate themselves as achievement-oriented leaders through their career stories. In situating themselves as being both responsible and different from other women in their community, Wanda and Janice focus on their work-related experiences. Both have jobs within the healthcare sector; jobs which weigh heavily on the way they conceive of their interactions with other people, particularly on the way they feel that they are more responsible than their fellow co-workers. Wanda’s career story is illustrative, in which she describes the job that she has had for the past twenty-two years, working as a shift supervisor in a facility that serves the mentally challenged in University City.

Wanda’s personality is practically defined by her capacity as a worker within a healthcare institution in which, for a worker to be successful, she must be both patient and strong-willed. The details of my preliminary contact with Wanda foreshadow her situated identity as a hard worker. I was told by her sister, Janice, to get in touch with Wanda at her place of work, as that was the best place to reach her. When I spoke with Wanda on the phone for the first time, she told me that she was “really busy,” in a hurry to get to a meeting, and asked if we could talk the following week to set up an interview appointment. When we finally did get a chance to complete our interview, Wanda had
the day off and was busy cooking meals for a church fundraiser. She portrayed herself as constantly busy; even on her day off she was busy rushing around, trying to help other people. She linked her job choice to her need to help other people. Although her line of work is often literally backbreaking, she said that she likes her job because she is “doing a good deed,” in helping out other people who do not know how to care for themselves.

Wanda traced her need to do good deeds to a significant event that occurred when she was in high school:

One night I was at a basketball game, when I was in high school. And…they used to call it Special Education back then, but now they call it ESP. And some of the kids that…I was sitting with, around some of the people, the ones, we had a, um, a pep rally or something. The ones that was in Special Education, some of the other kids…that I was sittin’ around was laughing and picking at the other, the other ones and I’m like, you know, I didn’t indulge in it and it really touched me and I…seen that some of them needed extra care and from that day on I always say, you know, I wouldn’t mind working with the developmentally disabled.

Wanda assembles a “birth-of-awareness” story out of her need to help others; contrasting herself with those less sensitive then she. She contrasts herself not only with the insensitive kids in high school, but also with those with whom she presently works. Although they are supposed to be assisting her in taking care of the developmentally disabled, she likens her work staff to “insensitive kids” who are uncaring, lazy, and insolent:

I’m a shift supervisor…um, I have seven staff. And my responsibility is to make sure that the staff, um, carry out the daily healthcare needs of the residents that we provide for. And I work with them, um, in a facility group…and it’s a behavior unit. And [the clients will] do, God knows, they have medical…problems and also behavioral problems…But my job is to make sure that staff sticking to [the clients’] appointments. I make sure [clients’] self care needs are um…taken care of and…I make sure that, um, any, you know like, to make their lives as normal as possible. As though me and you were there. I make sure they dressed nice, they look nice, and go out to eat, go to the parks and things like that.
While describing staff members’ responsibilities, she overrides her description of their tasks with her own activities. Many of her we-statement descriptions of job responsibilities become I-statements, such as “my job is to make sure” and “I make sure,” in constructing a work world in which she must take full responsibility for the goings-on in her facility unit.

Not only does she construct an identity for herself as a responsible caretaker who does a good job at her workplace, she sets a scene in which the clients at the healthcare facility also see her as a caring and responsible. When asked if she considers herself to be friends with any of her clients, Wanda replied:

Well of course, of course…. I mean, they, they, they know authority. The [clients] that I work with, they know authority and they know…if…someone, one of the staff…does, if they can’t get something from that person, that they want to know who to come to. And if they don’t want something [medication/treatment] then…they’ll look at me first. Especially if I’m around, and give it to me, specially. I got one that, he knows if he doesn’t like something, he’ll…give it to me. So he see me coming, he’ll give it to me and I…he doesn’t have to have it. Even though it’s someone else might want and try to encourage him, even though I know he doesn’t like it and he don’t want to go through that. He’ll just give it to me and I just take it from him and say, “well, okay.” And that’s the thing he wants then. [The clients] recognize, they know that everybody doesn’t treat them the same.

Wanda builds a role for herself within her workplace in contrast to the roles of other facility staff. Her contrast structure centers on her interactions with the client, in which she is viewed by the client as both caring and authoritative, and in return, she connotes this same respect upon him/her. Her contrast comes into play when she refers to her other staff members, who she says do not treat the clients with respect, and thus, have difficulties interacting with them.

Wanda spent much of her interview describing the problems that she has had with her staff, constructing a multi-layered contrast structure similar to the one used by
Muncell in her construction of a before-and-after identity of being responsible. Wanda first contrasts her past, impatient, self with a present, forgiving and willing-to-let-go self. She then contrasts her present, responsible, work self with the irresponsible work self of her co-workers. She constructs her past self as laden with negativity and feelings of inertia and powerlessness with regard to the supervisory role that she held over her co-workers. Through an increased religious participation, she speaks of learning to “let go” and “walk away” from the negative situations that seem to arise daily at work.

Wanda described several nasty encounters with her co-workers, in which they did not fulfill certain responsibilities and blamed their work-related failures upon her. While in the past she may have reacted with a nasty response to these situations, through the teachings of the church she has come to realize that with her position, in which she is to take on a role of responsibility and is to be a model to others, she should just walk away from these problems instead. In other words, by “turning the other cheek,” Wanda is able to situate herself with a being responsible identity and project a positive work ethic. She is both a role model to her co-workers and to her clients.

Janice, who has worked at a University City hospital for twenty-seven years, spending many of these years as a unit clerk in the neo-natal unit, also portrays herself as a workplace role model. Janice began her career story by saying that she always wanted to be a teacher. Although she did not pursue a teaching job within a school, she likened her current workplace role to that of a teacher: “On my job I do a lot of, like, all the new employees are oriented. I’ve had people request that [position]…for me. And one lady’s starting in a few days, next week, and she…requested that I be the one that train her. You know…because of the patience that…I take…with them…being uh, patient and
thorough…with them.” Like her sister, Janice constructs herself as a good worker through the eyes of others—she is requested by new workers to be the one who orients them to their job because she is known to be a patient, thorough, and hard-working individual. She goes on to describe the intricacies of her job, using the analogy of a spine supporting a body to describe her role and the role of other unit clerks within the hospital: “It’s a, it’s a, it’s a lot, you know! A lot to do and you know, you have a charge nurse, but they rely on you to keep them abreast of everything…that’s happened. Especially our unit, because we have two people to look out for—you got the mother and the baby.”

Janice’s responsibilities as a unit clerk run beyond those one might think is expected of her. She enumerates her daily tasks so as to emphasize the enormity of her position, connoting her position with just as much (if not more) importance than that of the charge nurse, who relies on her to take care of everything. Both she and Wanda construct themselves as participating in worlds with a strong work ethic, in which they hold themselves to a higher standard than they do their fellow co-workers. They situate themselves with identities of overwhelming responsibility, in which their own responsibility in the workplace is linked to life and death matters for their clients. They are both achieving the American Dream goal of having a meaningful career; while also maintaining a gendered role, that of caretaker, that meets the expectations of a traditional cultural world.

**Situating a “Being Responsible” Identity through Contrast Structures in the Active Construction of Linked Cultural Worlds**

While being spoiled and being responsible may appear to be contrasting metaphors of identity construction, in that the first could be said to be a more self-serving and individual-oriented identity, and the second could be said to be a more community-
oriented identity, both of these identities fit within an American Dream Discourse that centers on achievements, goals, and moral tales of progress. Participants center themselves in cultural worlds related to these identities through contrast structures, in which they contrast the cultural worlds that they participate in with what they conceive to be the prototypical cultural worlds of a traditional Southern, rural, African-American community.

Situating themselves with identities of responsibility, participants assemble growing-up narratives in which they were mature at a young age, have respect for themselves, are sexually responsible, do right, and have a strong work ethic. These cultural worlds are informed by a locally-constructed American Dream Discourse; in that participants’ growing-up stories hold characteristics of this meta-narrative, focused on individualism, achievement, and progress; while also taking into consideration the local contingencies of race, gender, locality, religion, and socio-economic circumstance.

**Socioculturally-Situated Identity and Relationship Building**

Identities are not built in isolation from one another. Often they are built upon each other, with participation in cultural worlds from one identity influencing the situation of another identity. For instance, being spoiled identities may touch upon being responsible social identities. Not only does having your own “wheels” connote a sense of status in a being spoiled framework, it may also touch upon an identity of having self respect, as well as holding practical implications in having a strong work ethic. Simone and Shantell both speak of “being one of the only black girls” in Port Charles to have their own vehicles in high school. In claiming ownership to these vehicles, they place themselves within a cultural world of high esteem and worthiness, of being all that, in contrast to a
traditional cultural world in which most girls either ride the bus to school or must depend on someone else for a ride.

However, in describing women who do not have respect for themselves, Serena speaks of women in her community who are willing to “spread their legs for men” who promise them a car. She contrasts herself with these women, in constructing herself as self-reliant and offended by men who make such a suggestion to her. Serena, who does have her own car, assembles a narrative in which she is a self-determined, moral crusader, who is responsible for both her own successful outcome, as well as the success of her friends and family. She also describes her daily activities, in which she focuses the first part of her day on driving around to different job sites, collecting applications for employment. As she has her own car, she does not face the structural contingency of a lack of transportation in a small town in which public transportation is scant and most people must travel at least ten miles to a facility in order to hold a decent wage-earning and benefit-providing job.

While Serena does not situate herself with a being spoiled identity, she does situate herself with a being responsible identity in which she must possess certain social goods in order to participate in the cultural worlds of having a strong work ethic, having respect for herself, and doing right that go along with the achievement of this identity.

Being all that, then, cannot just be reduced to the base pursuit and possession of certain social goods, as might be constructed by Serena in her contrastive narrative of the “other women” in her community who will virtually prostitute themselves to acquire an automobile. Participants link this identity with having a sense of self respect and doing right by themselves and others. For instance, Wanda assembles a growing-up story in
which she was spoiled by her brothers and mother as the only girl growing up in her household. She links her participation as a youth in a cultural world of being all that in her household to her present identity of having a lot of respect for herself, being able to do what’s right, and having a strong work ethic. Wanda links her past sense of being of all that to a present sense of having a lot of respect for herself—essentially she is all that in her workplace. She is able to do right by her developmentally-disabled clients because she respects both herself and others. She is all that, both today and in the past, because she is more sensitive to the needs of others than were her high school peers, and are her current co-workers.

Wanda and her sister, Janice, both assemble identities of self-respect for themselves in detailing sexual histories of monogamy, interspaced with periods of relative chastity. While Janice had her only child as a teenager, both she and Wanda construct themselves as falling outside of the myth of teenaged pregnancy, in which young women get pregnant over and over again early on in their lives and are, essentially, unable to make their way past reproduction to achieve other forms of success in life.

Dougherty (1978) details a rural cultural world which falls in line with the myth constructed by these participants; in which women accrue status through motherhood. In going beyond this myth, Wanda and Janice construct a successful gender socialization story for themselves akin to both an American Dream Discourse and an Afrocentric Discourse, in that their success as women is marked equally by the jobs they have and by their status as mothers within their community. They construct themselves as part of the American Dream Narrative as written by Gullette (2003), while also working in the locally-grounded contingencies that they face to construct a story that is both modeled on
progress and takes into account their own situated realities. In other words, they are actively aware of the culture that they live in, assembling situated identities that are culturally compatible with their own stories of success. These success stories, and the stories of other participants, are informed by both American Dream and Afrocentric Discourses, with various elements from both Discourses woven together so as to assemble locally relevant, but also globally cognizant, identities of womanhood.

(Dis)Connection Building

Gender socialization is not just a matter of internalizing normative cultural experiences, which would indicate that participants simply reproduce a particular background. Rather, it is part and parcel of participants’ use of, and narration, of certain cultural categories. The myth of gender socialization in a traditional cultural world holds that girls become women by becoming mothers, that women hold strong and extensive social bonds with other women within their communities, and that women maintain a modicum of socio-economic support through their sexual exchanges with a number of men. On the contrary, in this chapter we have seen that gender socialization stories center on the use of contrast structures, marked through a “disconnection” with this cultural myth; by “being different” from other women who live in the traditional cultural worlds depicted by Dougherty (1978). Participants imbue certain words and phrases with meanings to build these cultural worlds of difference.

In constructing herself as being mature at a young age, Janice contrasts herself with other young women in her community by saying that she took responsibility for her child as a teenaged parent, rather than “dumping” this child on her mother or on some other possible caretaker. Janice constructs herself as achieving both an American Dream identity of responsibility, in which she has taken it upon herself to independently raise
her child; as well as Afrocentric notions of being a good woman, in which she recognizes the importance of mothering and sacrificing her own well-being for that of her child.

Karen situates herself with a being responsible identity, placing herself firmly within a cultural world of self respect. She assembles a growing-up story in which she was taught by her mother not to be trashy. In explaining what it means to be trashy, Karen builds a contrast structure, in which she is not trashy because she was raised differently than other young women in her community, who were allowed to run the streets. While she expresses frustration at having to come home early while growing up, while these other young women were allowed to stay outside late and play in the streets, Karen relates that she learned self respect and how to do right by taking heed to her mother’s moral lessons.

Serena contrasts herself with other women in her community, describing herself as a saved individual who, like Karen, has learned self respect and sexual responsibility. She has been religiously inscribed with the belief that her “body is her temple,” and thus has embodied an American Dream Discourse that celebrates her individual personhood. Serena and other participants build several contrast structures which serve to elucidate the prototypical image of the “common woman” in their community. These contrast structures construct a “common woman” with characteristics akin to the popular media’s perpetuation of the “myth of the welfare mother” (see Collins 2000b). The welfare mother is constructed as being a teenaged mother, as maintaining sexual relationships with multiple partners in order to acquire material possessions, and as lacking in self-respect and self-esteem—often linked to not having a proper role model to follow, and as being lazy or reliant on the help of others to get by in life. Impinged upon by an
American Dream Discourse that valorizes achievement, individualism, and progress, a myth of the common woman is taken up by participants and elaborated through contrast structures in order to place themselves within cultural worlds of responsibility.

Summary

Participants constructed stories of responsibility which centered on cultural worlds of being responsible at a young age, being responsible by respecting themselves, breaking the cycle of teenaged motherhood, being responsible by doing right, and being responsible by having a strong work ethic. In a being responsible at a young age cultural world, participants spoke of gaining maturity through their acceptance of responsibilities. Noted is the way that participants speak of their maturity as a dynamic process which occurs in waves that ebb and flow. In other words, participants do not speak so much of “becoming mature” as they do of maturity as a continual learning process.

Participants spoke of being responsible by respecting themselves. Participants linked their own self esteem to their participation in this world of self respect. Within this cultural world, they contrasted their own high self esteem with other women in their community who they portray as lacking in self respect or as “being trashy.” Related to a cultural world of self respect is another cultural world, of breaking the cycle of teenaged pregnancy. Participants contrasted themselves with the prototypical woman in their community who becomes pregnant as a teenager, has many children throughout her lifetime, and maintains multiple sexual relationships out of a lack of self respect. Due to their participation in a world of self respect, participants situate themselves as either being able to break the cycle of sexual irresponsibility or being able to maintain a high self esteem despite their participation in this traditional cycle of womanhood.
Participants assemble a practical method for achieving a being responsible identity. Through their participation in a world of doing right they are able to lead their lives on the straight and narrow. In contrast, those who do not do right are depicted as leading lives on a crooked path. One cultural world particularly evocative of doing right praxis is a cultural world in which one is responsible by having a strong work ethic. Participants situate themselves within this cultural world by depicting themselves as achievement-oriented leaders in their career stories. Notably, participants tend to link their achievements within their careers to their caretaking roles within the workplace. Participants contrast themselves with other workers, inflecting these others with the status of “children” who may hold jobs, but who are not invested in their careers.

Through socio-culturally situated identity and relationship building, participants construct themselves as being all that through their participation in worlds of responsibility. They are actively aware of the culture they live in, assembling situated identities that are culturally compatible with stories of success for both American Dream and Afrocentric standards.

Rather than applying a connection building task as conceived within an Afrocentric Discourse, participants build contrast structures to disconnect themselves from the prototypical, every woman, of their community. Yet they work in dialogue with a myth of gender socialization which holds that girls become women through mothering and that women hold strong and extensive bonds with other women in the community, reshaping this myth so as to take both Afrocentric values and American Dream ideals into account in situating themselves as successful women within their growing-up narratives.
“Growing-up stories” are a way to talk about gender socialization, in that participants are said to be talking about the gender socialization “process” that they have experienced when they tell their growing-up stories. During semi-structured interviews, I asked participants to tell me about their growing-up stories as a narrative and constructionist method to get at their experiences of growing up in an African-American, southern, rural community. However, neatly constructed growing-up stories, with a beginning, middle, and end (in the present), were not as forthcoming as I may have thought. Many participants, instead, constructed narratives on growing-up that were related more to significant events that have occurred throughout their lives, than they did in relation to the various phases or growth stages (such as childhood, adolescence, adulthood) that they experienced while growing up. In other words, the stages of participants’ lives were not necessarily key themes, or narrative anchors, in their growing-up stories. Rather, significant events, some which may be conceived of as major life transitions, and others which occurred on a smaller, more day-to-day scale, are centered in these growing-up narratives.

If life stages, as conceived by some human development perspectives, were at the center of these narratives, one might expect participants to speak of these stages or phases within their narratives or to incorporate them into their stories as a way to generally explain transitions or shifts in their life courses. However, in participating in a study which takes a narrative approach, focusing on the participants’ own conceptions and
descriptions of growing up in the Black rural south, participants thought differently about their lives. While participants may have spoken of “going through a phase” or “growing up,” these phrases were not applied by participants with the same meaning in mind as constructed by human development theorists. Participants were not speaking of going through phases preordained for them through traditional conceptions of the progress of the life course. When they applied the term “growing” to their narratives, they usually referred to gaining knowledge or gaining wisdom through social experience, rather than to the human development concept of growth, which charts an individual’s development progress according to various biological and psychological markers along the lifespan.

I chose participants because they were rural, Black, Southern, women—those demographic variables are represented by the participants in this study. I was interested in targeting these women, in that gender socialization in a rural, African-American context has not been much written of for twenty-five odd years (see Dougherty, 1978). On the other hand, interest in the topic of rural African-American women’s health, especially in relation to the prevention of drug use, violence, and transmission of HIV, is burgeoning both in the social sciences literature, as well as in the fields of public health and medicine (see Brown, 2003; Crosby et al., 2002; McCoy & Wasserman, 2001; Stover, 2002; USCF Institute, 1998; and Williams et al., 2003). Gender socialization is an important topic to “uncover” in getting at the deeper meanings behind various aspects of these prevention topics, such as the relationship between gender socialization and a woman’s perceived power within her sexual relationships; the relationship between gender socialization and a woman’s social support network within her community; or the
relationship between gender socialization and a woman’s own self conception, as well as how she is conceived of by others, within her surrounding community.

However, participants’ stories were not necessarily anchored in the demographic “facts” of being rural, being southern, or being Black. Sharon Kaufman (1986) found similar results in her study on the “aging self”: participants do not center their stories of aging on their age (a demographic variable in her study) so much as they link their stories to their beliefs, values, and significant events that they have experienced in their lives. This dissertation work shows participants linking their growing-up stories to similar concepts. Participants’ stories are not constructed in a straightforward way, as products of their backgrounds. Rather, they narratively anchor their stories around significant events, linking these events to various situated identities that they construct for themselves.

The concept of “linkages” becomes important in the analysis of participants’ growing-up stories. When participants link something to something else they are said to be making meaning. In essence, the linkage that they construct between two events, beliefs, or values is the meaning that they produce from these elements. Linking these elements together is a meaning-making process. In order to study the meaning-making process of participants in relation to their gender socialization experiences I analyze how the participants link elements together—to get at how they make meaning of this “process.” This meaning-making process is elicited through a narrative approach in which participants are asked to provide accounts of their growing-up experiences.

What meanings have been gleaned from the participants’ stories? That is, if we think of gender socialization as a matter of how those under consideration convey their
sense of growing up, then what does this tell us about the socialization process?

Narratively conceived, or from the perspective of narrative or personal accounts of becoming a woman, four lessons have been learned in relation to the gender socialization process and the life course perspective.

**Four Lessons Learned**

**Lesson One: Questioning the Utility of the Life Course Perspective**

One of the lessons learned through analysis of the interview data is that the standard idea of a life course, beginning at birth and ending at death, is not very useful in understanding socialization. Participants assembled growing-up stories in relation to significant events, rather than working within a framework of the life course as set out before them and speaking of particular significant events as fitting in with predetermined phases of growing up, such as childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. The significance of events shapes the life course narrative, with participants building growing-up stories that were not necessarily in order, chronologically speaking, nor necessarily centered upon the life course as positive trajectory of development. Participant narratives of growing up were constructed in a dynamic sense; with particular significant events constructed as important “turning points” in participants’ lives, but not necessarily constructed as developmental turning points as conceived in more positivistic conceptions of human development. Growing-up narratives were focused on fluid and fluctuating experiences—they were not constructed using the linear model of human development.

In other words, participants did not all assume a common framework for their growing-up stories, working significant events into a parsed out framework of development so as to construct a socialization narrative. For instance, in presenting her
growing-up story, Luella Mae links her moral progress or development to the significant health ailments that she has experienced. She constructs a being spiritual identity, which may be interpreted as a euphemism for moral development, linked to these significant events. She does not follow the progress of moral development as written by Erikson or Sullivan, who would put forth that biological forces trigger developmental change (Pettit, 1992). Instead, she links her moral progress in reaction, rather than relation, to these health ailments—she conceives of her various health ailments as a sign from God that she should become more religious and spiritually involved. Admittedly, one may interpret the health ailments from which Luella Mae suffers as biological forces. However, Luella Mae interprets these health ailments not so much as biologically derived as ethereally determined, as a direct, message from God that she, and her family, be more attendant to their spiritual selves. Throughout her growing-up narrative, Luella Mae links her health experiences to her spirituality, situating herself with a being spiritual identity that is constructed through her conversations and intimacy with God more than it is related to her embodied experiences of illness and suffering.

Timberly works against notions of a linear plot in her path to moral development. While she invokes some of the terminology present in a human development discourse, in speaking of phases and stages that she has gone through, these terms are not applied using a building-upon metaphor as traditionally conceived in a human development project. Timberly situates herself with being responsible and caretaking identities that are constantly in flux. She speaks of herself as going in and out of phases of responsibility and caretaking; in a way, turning the positivistic notion of a phases or stage on its head in situating herself as being variously betwixt and between these phases in
connection to various significant events that she has experienced. Timberly’s relationship with her biological mother serves as the lynchpin in her construction of identities of responsibility and caretaking. She describes herself as fulfilling the obligations of motherhood and homemaking early on in her life, linking her mother’s death to a becoming immature construction. In other words, her progress towards responsibility, maturity, and becoming a good woman is not fulfilled through the human development expectation that the socialization process occur in a linear fashion. In a way, Timberly’s growing-up story is the antithesis to the story writ-large by Dougherty in her 1978 ethnography of becoming a woman in the rural Black south. Timberly assembles a growing-up narrative in which she fulfills the various socialization expectations as set forth by Dougherty—but these phases or stages occur sporadically and in disjunction with the time frame as established by Dougherty. Timberly’s growing-up trajectory slides backward into earlier developmental phases as determined by Dougherty, such as girlhood and adolescence, in connection with the death of her mother. Dougherty (1978) writes that young girls learn how to be mothers through the emulation of other women surrounding them, particularly through the other-mothering responsibilities that they are given as young girls. They learn how to be wives or partners to men through the dating patterns and intimate friendships established while they are teenagers. In other words, they learn the lessons of socialization early on in life and enact the gendered roles that they have learned over the span of their life courses. On the other hand, Timberly situates herself with identities of responsibility and motherhood which are directly tied to significant events that she experiences. She describes herself as “being wild” and “not caring what others think” after the death of her mother, after
constructing herself as participating in worlds traditionally linked with being an adult. The plot of Timberly’s growing-up narrative does not fulfill the linear trajectory as set forth by human development theorists; a plot holding that a female progresses through childhood, then adolescence, then adulthood, in a linear sequence of events.

Like Timberly, Corentine constructs a similar non-lineal plot in her growing-up story. However, in contrast to Timberly, Corentine does not apply the language of a human development discourse to her story. Timberly constructs her story as one in which significant events are linked to phases that she is going through, which allows for her to get back on track, developmentally speaking. Corentine, on the other hand, assembles a growing-up story centered upon a significant event which consumes the possibility of any notion of progress or development. She has fallen out of the human development pattern in experiencing a tragic accident at her previous workplace. While perhaps previously constructed with a good woman identity, Corentine, as well as her sister Karen, link her inability to continue to be a good woman to this significant event, which has taken place over ten years ago. She assembles a story in which she has become depressed and closed herself off from other people in connection to this accident. Corentine’s path to development has been neither steady, nor has it one of straightforward progress, as would be asserted by a human development perspective.

It may be pointed out, actually, that none of the participants construct growing-up stories that follow a linear or positive trajectory of development because they do not story their lives according to a human development framework. Rather, they assemble growing up stories that are based on linkages—they link situated identities of growing-up to a variety of significant events which they hold as particularly relevant to their identity
construction and place themselves within cultural worlds used in building these identities. Luella Mae links her health ailment experiences to a situated identity of being spiritual, Timberly links the death of her mother to other situated identities, such as being responsible and being a good woman, and Corentine links a freak accident that she experienced at work to her failure to accomplish a situated identity—her inability to be a good woman. All three of these women foreground and link significant event experiences with culturally relevant situated identities to construct meanings of growing up in their rural community.

**Lesson Two: Questioning the Concept of Socialization**

The concept of socialization assumes that one is socialized to something and that one can examine the structure of the socialization process. For instance, human development perspectives construct a socialization process in which individuals follow a particular pattern, described through linear stages or phases of development, towards becoming adults (Pettit, 1992). Feminist theorists, such as Chodorow (1993) and Gilligan (1982) critique the human development perspective of theorists such as Freud, Erikson, and Kohlberg, based on what they conceive to be a phallocentric construction of the stages of development. However, feminist perspectives fall prey to that which they critique, in perpetuating a gynocentric perspective for human development, which states that women develop according to their connection with others, that they are “natural” caretakers and that this innate role is what spurs them on in the socialization process. A second lesson learned from this project is that socialization is a process of constructing particular situated social identities linked to various cultural worlds. It is not conceived of as an object to be studied. Rather, it is seen as a constructed process that individuals use to make meaning of their growing-up experiences.
This dissertation looks at how this process is narratively constructed by participants through their growing-up stories. Each chapter refers to a different identity constructed by the participants in relation to their growing-up experiences. Chapter 4 discusses the way that participants situate themselves with being spiritual identities, chapter 5 discusses how participants conceive of themselves as being good women, chapter 6 relates how participants construct themselves as being spoiled, and chapter 7 looks at how participants assemble stories of being responsible.

Of course, not all of the participants situate themselves with these various identities, nor do they assemble these identities in the same way. Rather, they take up significant events in their lives and link these events to their participation in various cultural worlds associated with these identities. Through the narrative details of the significant events they have experienced, participants discern the socialization process. In other words, rather than being thought of as an object of discovery, socialization is conceived of as something in-practice by participants; assembled through the linkages that they make within their growing-up stories. Socialization, then, is what the participants set up to be as their goals in identity construction, worked out through a variety of situated identities and linked to their participation in a variety of cultural worlds. The socialization process is continuously accomplished in the way that participants draw linkages. However, I do not mean to suggest that socialization is a conscious project that participants are putting together for effect. Rather, it is a narrative by-product in response to questions and concerns about growing up.

While participants do not all situate themselves with the four identities or situate themselves in the same way within a particular identity, each individual also does not
construct unique situated identities. The four chapters describe four different types of situated identities which are to be found in participants’ narratives on growing up. These types provide the meaning-making context behind the socialization process. Some participants create certain types, others create other types—there is no one type that an individual is socialized to, one type of social experience, or one type of social framework. Participants are not being socialized to one type of culturally-ascribed process. Rather, they use these situated identity types as frameworks to make meaning of their growing-up experiences. They create meaning through the linkages they make between significant events and their participation in particular cultural worlds.

Within a being spiritual identity framework, for instance, participants construct a variety of cultural worlds, foregrounding significant events in their lives to build worlds associated with being spiritual. For instance, Luella Mae links the health ailments that she has experienced to being part of a blessed world. A blessed world is conceived of by participants as one in which they have received a gift from God that has in some way or another transformed their lives. Luella Mae links the gift of good health that she has received from God to a sort of birth of awareness that she should be a more regular church goer, as well as that she and her family should be more attendant to their spiritual obligations. In another case, Muncell links the significant event of bottoming out, due to her abuse of crack cocaine, to receiving a message, or gift, from God that she should cease using drugs and work more on forging a spiritual identity. In yet another example, Simone links the significant event of the birth of her son, when she was in her thirties, to receiving a “gift from God.” She participates in a being blessed cultural world, in which she has patiently waited to have children and was allowed this son due to God’s decision.
that she was finally ready for a child. She constructs a being spiritual identity through her participation in a being blessed cultural world in which she has been fortunate enough to receive this reproductive gift from God.

All three of these women assemble narratives that refer to their participation in a being blessed cultural world. They situate themselves with being spiritual identities through the linkages that they make between various significant events and their consequent participation in the cultural world of being blessed. While they are all participating in a cultural world of being blessed, they live in this cultural world through their varied experiences and come away from the cultural worlds with various takes on being spiritual. Luella Mae constructs herself as spiritual through a birth of awareness metaphor, in which she has realized the importance of being spiritual in the preservation of her good health. Muncell constructs herself as spiritual through a twelve-step-like metaphor, in which she has used her spirituality as a way to overcome her addiction to crack cocaine. Simone constructs her spirituality as a solution to her problem of childlessness.

All three participants have different goals in claiming themselves with spiritual identities and participate in being blessed cultural worlds in different ways. However, what they have in common is that they all describe themselves as participating in a cultural world of being blessed through adaptive mechanism metaphors built upon receiving a gift from God: in Luella Mae’s case, she has received her good health, in Muncell’s case, her sobriety, and in Simone’s case, a child. These three participants use the situated identity type of being spiritual to frame their meanings of significant event experiences of illness, addiction, and infertility, respectively. They make meaning
through the linkages they assemble between these significant events and their participation in a being blessed cultural world. None of these participants assemble their experiences in a stage-by-stage format, whereby they link particular significant events they have experienced to their physical/biological development, much less to an innate female need to forge connections with others which promotes their development. They do not take up the language of human development or feminist theorists which constructs the meaning of developmental stages as already out there, to be passively enacted by individuals going through the socialization process. Rather, they actively construct meanings through the linkages that they make between their significant event experiences and their participation in a variety of cultural worlds.

Lesson Three: Resources of the Socialization Process

While participants are active constructors of meaning in regard to the gender socialization process, they do not construct these meanings in a vacuum. A third lesson learned is that participant narratives are socio-culturally mediated through Discourse. Discourses are used as resources for participants to situate themselves with particular identities. James P. Gee (1999) writes that the notion of “discourse” has at least two levels of meaning in the context of analysis. Participants use discourse, with a small “d,” when they are telling their stories of growing up—these are the active ways that they assemble their individual experiences. Participant discourse is represented throughout this dissertation through numerous interview accounts, particularly within exemplar story sections, which present a more complete story of a participant so as to provide a more holistic picture of the way a participant situates herself with a particular identity. Participants also use Discourse, with a big “D,” when they tell their stories of growing up. Discourses are the socially accepted ways of using language, in which an individual
enacts specific identities and activities (Gee, 1999). Both parts of this dissertation are divided according to participants’ uses of Discourse. In the first part of the dissertation, the ways that participants situate themselves with identities of being spiritual and being a good woman through an Afrocentric Discourse are discussed. The second part of the dissertation presents two situated identities, being spoiled and being responsible, that participants enact through an American Dream Discourse. Discourses are used to specify participants’ experiences of these situated identities and to convey corresponding cultural worlds.

The first part of the dissertation focuses on the situated identities and cultural worlds that are constructed in participant narratives relevant to an Afrocentric Discourse in the rural South. An Afrocentric Discourse holds that a Black woman should be self-sufficient, strong, and resilient; and be responsible for the caretaking of her own family, as well as her surrounding community (Burgess, 1994). This Discourse also emphasizes the importance of divine realms in the lives of African Americans, focusing on spirituality and an especial commitment to common causes found within the community (Daly et al., 1995; Leslie, 1998). The use of an Afrocentric Discourse to story one’s growing-up experiences is exemplified in Roxanne and Serena’s narratives on the importance of an older woman “rock” in their lives.

Roxanne and Serena both situate themselves with good woman identities through the linkages that they assemble between these rocks and their own moral development. Roxanne applies an Afrocentric Discourse to describe the role of her mother in her life. She tells a story in which her mother’s house was the center of her and her childhood friends’ social interactions. Everyone wanted to hang out at her mother’s house and
everyone knew where to find their children if they were missing. They knew to call Roxanne’s mother’s house, as she was always looking after the children in her neighborhood, providing a safe place for them to go after a family argument. Her mother’s house was also the center of her family’s social world; it was the place where family reunions were held and where everyone loved to be. Roxanne links the significant event of her mother’s death to a change within her family and her community—people felt lost, socially speaking, after her mother passed away. While her family still held reunions, Roxanne says, they weren’t the same after her mother was gone.

Roxanne situates herself with a good woman identity through a narrative construction that is quite similar to that of her mother as rock in her life. She describes her status within her family and her community, situating herself as a rock within the lives of her family and community members. She assembles a narrative of being at the center of her family’s social world, in which she provides the voice of other family members, who tell her that she is the “life of the party.” She also situates herself as caretaker of the community through her narrative description of the club that she ran in Port Charles for a year, where everyone felt at home; linking the social arena she provides for her community, today, to the community home that her mother provided in the past. Roxanne invokes an Afrocentric Discourse, centering upon a woman’s role as caretaker of her family and community, to construct both her mother and herself as rocks in the lives of others. They both participate in cultural worlds of caretaking congruent with being a good woman identities as formulated within an Afrocentric Discourse.

Serena also uses an Afrocentric Discourse to describe the roles of her grandmother and great-grandmother in her life. She constructs these older women as both
spiritual/moral guides in her own life and as rocks within her family, holding the family together. Serena assembles a rock story that is similar to Roxanne’s, in describing her grandmother’s house as the center of her family’s social universe, and describing her great-grandmother as the moral teacher within her family; as keeping the family members in line when they did something against the grain of the group. As the rock in her family, her great-grandmother was responsible for teaching the family members what was right and wrong. Essentially, she is cast as the primary socializing agent in the lives of her family members. Serena elicits the significant event of the death of her great-grandmother to explain the loosening of ties within her family network. Working within an Afrocentric Discourse that holds women to be the moral backbone of their families, Serena constructs her great-grandmother as the moral force within her family, reminding family members of their familial obligations and keeping them in place when they step out of line.

In turn, Serena models her own identity of being a good woman much on the identity that she constructs for her great-grandmother. She casts herself as participating in similar cultural worlds of moral crusading and community caretaking, in presenting herself as a straightforward, honest person, who “isn’t afraid to tell you like it is.” Serena assembles a story in which her friends seek her in moral guidance; to keep them on the right track when they are feeling weak. She links the presence of strong rocks in her life to her own ability to do right and be strong, suggesting that she is capable of being a good woman because she has had such strong role models to follow.

Serena and Roxanne both invoke an Afrocentric Discourse to situate themselves within a variety of cultural worlds which are congruent with a good woman identity.
They link their own status as good women to the presence of strong women role models in the lives. These older women as rocks have provided them with a path on the right track to follow in life. The significant event of the death of these rocks has led both participants to realize their own importance as social agents within their families and communities. In a way, the death of these rocks has served as a wake-up call of responsibility, passing the buck, so to speak, on to the next generation. Both Serena and Roxanne apply an Afrocentric Discourse in describing themselves as taking up the moral responsibilities of these older women. They situate themselves as being good women through their participation in cultural worlds modeled upon their past experiences with these older women.

The second part of the dissertation focuses on the situated identities and cultural worlds that are constructed in participant narratives relevant to an American Dream Discourse. The American Dream Discourse can be thought of as a success story, in which participants, usually unconsciously, take up a particular storyline in assembling their own identities (Gullette, 2003). This Discourse is based on capitalist notions of individualism and accomplishment; tending to construct a positive development trajectory related to both one’s moral progress and the material gains made in one’s life. The cultural worlds congruent with an American Dream are constructed by participants to project a socially-positioned viewpoint or standpoint about what is right in their own world and what is wrong in the world of others, particularly other women within their own community (see Gee, 1999). In positioning themselves as successful women within an American Dream Discourse, participants situate themselves with identities that are in contrast to the prototypical, or even stereotypical, identities of other Black women within
their community. Through contrast structures (Smith, 2003), participants define socially-situated identities for themselves which fall in line with an American Dream Discourse centering on achievement and progress.

The use of an American Dream Discourse to situate oneself with a being spoiled identity, focusing on an individual’s material achievement, is exemplified in Lakeesha’s growing-up story. Lakeesha situates herself within two cultural worlds congruent with a being spoiled identity: she is spoiled materially through the toys and games that she has received growing up as an only child in her father’s household; and she is all that, because she is able to get her hair and nails done every week and go shopping with her friend on the weekends. Accordingly, Lakeesha constructs herself as being able to do whatever she wanted to do, both in the past and in the present, as her father has taken on much of the responsibility in terms of helping her with childcare and providing her with financial support.

Lakeesha builds a being spoiled identity through several contrast structures: she contrasts herself both with other young women (her sisters) within her family, as well as young women in her community. She situates herself within a cultural world of being spoiled materially in contrast to the world of her siblings, who grew up in a single-mothered household. She describes her mother as constantly working to support her siblings and not able to provide them with the vast array of toys and games that she, herself, was able to receive from her father growing up as the only child in his household. Lakeesha is all that in contrast to other young women in her community who cannot afford to get their hair and nails done every week, nor whom are afforded the luxury of “being able to do whatever they want to do,” as they must maintain jobs and take up the
responsibility of childcare to support themselves and their children. She links her participation in a “being all that” cultural world to her inability to form close relationships with other women, as she perceives most other young women to be jealous or envious of her material acquisitions.

Lakeesha invokes an American Dream Discourse to situate herself with a being spoiled identity that places her firmly within a success story writ-large in the popular media and locally lived within her rural community. She uses contrast structures, of not being in a single mothered household with a lot of children, of not being materially needy, of not being unkempt, and of not being forced to get a job and take care of her children, to situate herself with a being spoiled identity that fits within an African-American Dream success story. Through an analysis of the varied structures that Lakeesha invokes in contrasting herself with other young women within her community, a prototypical account of what it means to grow up as a Black woman within Port Charles comes into view. Contrary to a Human Development Discourse, in which socialization is said to be a general process experienced by all participants, American Dream and Afrocentric Discourses are resources mediating participants’ socialization narratives.

After reviewing this third lesson learned, one might rightly ask: are there contradictions between these Afrocentric and American Dream Discourses? For example, what happens when a participant applies the Afrocentric Discourse in describing her relations with her family and uses the American Dream Discourse to describe her successes in the work world? Or could it be said that the participant constructs her growing-up story through a hybridization of these two Discourses? Does the participant have to select between the two Discourses: does satisfying the
requirements of one Discourse imply that the participant is ignoring the other Discourse? While, ideologically, these two Discourses may appear to be contradictory; in practice, one may pick and choose which Discourses are reasonable according to the situation-at-hand. In one situation, one Discourse is useful; while in another situation, a completely different Discourse, or framework, may be useful. What makes these Discourses to be not contradictory is practice: one picks a Discourse to describe an experience from a particular context. The point is that Discourses are not all applied at the same time: in practice they are usually sorted out. At a conceptual level these Discourses may appear to be contradictory. However, practice does not occur at a conceptual level, it takes place on the ground: in this case, through actual storytelling.

**Lesson Four: Consequences for Gender Socialization**

What does all of this mean when talking about women and socialization and gender? Can we talk about women’s socialization in the context of being rural, being Southern, or being Black? Is there a woman’s experience of growing up in this context? The fourth lesson learned through analysis of participant interviews is that there is no one way, or process, of growing-up in Port Charles. When speaking of gender socialization, it is more meaningful to talk about gendered socialization, rather than gender socialization, given the data. Gender socialization comes to mean that a particular gender is socialized in a particular way. We need a more robust way of capturing the variety of participants’ growing-up stories as women. One method of doing so is to analyze participants’ growing-up narratives as meaning making in practice, in which they are actively making meaning of their growing-up experiences through the linkages they make between significant events that they have experienced and the identities with which they situate themselves. They tell stories of participating in cultural worlds that correspond
with these situated identities through the use of dominant discourses—as resources used to express their experiences in culturally relevant ways.

This dissertation takes off where Dougherty leaves the reader in her 1978 ethnography. Dougherty presents a picture of gender socialization similar to that of a human development perspective, in that each section of her book follows a stage of gender socialization. In describing her approach to analyzing gender socialization, Dougherty writes: "becoming a woman in any community involves acquiring certain emotions, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors similar to those displayed by other female adults. Certain sequences of maturational events and the development of attitudes, beliefs, and resultant behaviors distinguish the path toward womanhood in Edge Crossing" (p. 1). Employing a structural-functionalist perspective theoretically relevant at the time of her research, Dougherty writes that in order to understand social behavior one must understand the social organization that the individual lives within, as well as the social realities faced by the individual (p. 10). She examines the process by which girls become women and learn their proper gender roles. In understanding socialization as an objectified process to be observed, experienced, and learned, Dougherty takes on an approach to socialization that was popular in the time that she was writing. This approach sees socialization as a formula, or recipe, that one follows to achieve adulthood.

Dougherty’s research aim is to convey what gender socialization is like for young Black women in the rural community of Edge Crossing. This dissertation takes the concept of gender socialization in a rural area one step farther—that gender socialization is not just one story to be followed. Just as there are many recipes used in making a loaf of bread, there are many ways to construct and make meaning out of one’s growing-up
experiences. Individuals may be faced with similar cultural products; in this research, the Discourses that they use as resources to culturally convey their experiences. However, what ingredients (cultural worlds, situated identities, and significant events) and cultural leavening (linkages assembled) that they choose to include or foreground in their recipes (growing-up narratives), as well as the amounts and brand (Discourses used) of each ingredient, are telling in how their bread baking (the meaning-making process of gender socialization) comes out of the oven, figuratively speaking. The gender socialization process, then, is not just one recipe, one thing, one object. It is many different kinds of products as actively and discursively constructed by the participants. A narrative, constructionist approach has left me open to a virtual bakery of meaning-making processes.

A constructionist approach to gender socialization opens to view all kinds of possibilities for how one grows up or has grown up. The narratives reveal a much more complex sense of “becoming a rural Black woman in North Central Florida” than a simple idea of socialization of enculturation might suggest. Sharon Kaufman (1986) writes that a common method of analyzing human development, whether one is studying “becoming an adult” or “becoming older,” is to study individual development along a pattern or trajectory. "Much of adult-development theory conceives of the life course as a trajectory: a person 'rises' and develops by gaining knowledge, skills, roles, power, and self-esteem, and then 'declines' by losing some or all of these attributes" (p. 5). Writing against this approach, Kaufman looks at the meaning of aging to elderly people themselves, "as it emerges in their personal reflections of growing old" (p. 5). In a similar vein, this dissertation looks at the meaning of growing up to the rural Black
women who have participated in this project. As conveyed through the chapters of this dissertation, there is not just one meaning to growing up, or becoming a woman, in Port Charles. Participants create meaning through the linkages they forge between significant events in their lives and a variety of identity types they use to story their growing-up experiences. These identity types are narratively constructed by participants, as characters that they play in a variety of cultural world settings. While participants, as individuals, live their own unique experiences, they also participate in cultural worlds formed through their social interactions and informed through a variety of Discourses. The meaning-making process is individual for each participant with regard to her own lived experiences, but it is able to be typified according to the significant events that she highlights in her life, the identities with which she situates herself, and the Discourses she uses to frame the gender socialization process.

The policy implications of this research are significant. Gendered socialization as socially and subjectively constructed, rather than as objectively received, means that our lenses are not narrow when trying to understand these women’s experiences. A discursive analysis provides a richer picture of gendered socialization, which may avoid forcing participants’ experiences into a pre-structured process of development and lead to narrow policies or formulas for how to deal with social problems. One cannot boil the life course down into a simple recipe of human development. Instead, if we take a look at the ways that participants themselves make meaning out of their experiences, what they highlight in terms of experiences as significant events in their lives—and how they identify themselves in terms of these experiences—we may glean a more culturally nuanced understanding of “growing up.” Policy that does not take into account how
those concerned make meaning and organize their experiences through time, on their own terms, and in relation to what they are up against in everyday life, stands to fail time and again.

Participant narratives are also telling of who or what is not spoken. Future research might focus on the growing-up stories of rural, African-American men, to contribute to the scant literature on African-American male socialization and gendered meanings; forming an even richer picture to be used in the construction of prevention/intervention policies and programs.

**Summary**

The conclusion to this dissertation presents four lessons learned about gender socialization. In lesson one, I question the utility of a life course perspective, as the socialization process did not follow a linear trajectory with participant narratives. Participants assembled growing-up stories in relation to significant events, rather than working within a framework of the life course as set out before them and speaking of particular significant events as fitting in with predetermined stages or phases of growing up.

In lesson two, I question the concept of socialization. The concept of socialization assumes that one is socialized to something and that one can examine the structure of the socialization process. However, in this dissertation, socialization is not conceived of as an object to be studied. Rather, it is seen as a constructed process that individuals use in making meaning of their experiences. Through talk of significant life events, participants speak of their socialization experiences. Socialization, then, may be thought of as the participants’ goals in identity construction, worked out through a variety of situated identities and linked to participation in related cultural worlds.
In lesson three, I call for the need to study the resources of the socialization process. Growing-up stories are socio-culturally mediated through Discourse. Discourses are used as narrative resources, framing the way that participants situate themselves within their growing-up stories. While ideologically, Afrocentric and American Dream Discourses may appear to be contradictory; in practice, one may pick and choose which Discourse is reasonable according to the situation at hand. Discourses, then, are applied situationally—what makes them to be not contradictory is practice. One may choose to frame his or her narrative with a particular Discourse according to the discursive moment.

Finally, in lesson four, I speak to the consequences for gender socialization. Instead of talking about gender socialization, it may be more useful to speak of *gendered* socialization. Altered from a state of being, or an object, to one of activity, the idea of gendered socialization highlights the process of meaning making in relation to one’s growing-up experiences. The gendered socialization process does not just hold one meaning. Rather, it is many different kinds of meanings as actively and discursively constructed by the participants.
# APPENDIX A
## TABLE OF PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Job</th>
<th>#Biological Children</th>
<th>Marital Status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brianna</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Fast food</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Single</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Claire</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Disabled</td>
<td>3 Daughters</td>
<td>Married</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corentine</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>Disabled</td>
<td>1 Daughter</td>
<td>Divorced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flossie</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>Disabled</td>
<td>1 Daughter, 2 Sons</td>
<td>Separated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harriet</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>Unemployed</td>
<td>3 Daughters, 3 Sons</td>
<td>Common Law</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Janice</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>Hospital Clerk</td>
<td>1 Daughter</td>
<td>Separated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karen</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>Psychiatric Aide</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Single</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lakeesha</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Unemployed</td>
<td>1 Daughter, 1 Son</td>
<td>Separated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latoya</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Unemployed</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Single</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luella</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>Disabled</td>
<td>2 Daughters, 2 Sons</td>
<td>Widowed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mae</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muncell</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>Certified Nursing Assistant</td>
<td>2 Daughters, 1 Son</td>
<td>Single</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Priscilla</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Disabled</td>
<td>2 Daughters</td>
<td>Single</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quanda</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>CBO outreach worker</td>
<td>2 Daughters</td>
<td>Single</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roxanne</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>Certified Nursing Assistant</td>
<td>4 Daughters, 1 Son</td>
<td>Divorced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Serena</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Unemployed</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Single</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shantell</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>CBO outreach worker</td>
<td>3 Daughters</td>
<td>Single</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shateque</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Disabled</td>
<td>1 Son</td>
<td>Divorced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simone</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>Unemployed</td>
<td>1 Son</td>
<td>Single</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Timberly</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Unemployed</td>
<td>1 Daughter, 1 Son</td>
<td>Engaged</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wanda</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>Assisted-Living Shift Supervisor</td>
<td>1 Daughter</td>
<td>Single</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX B
INTERVIEW GUIDE

Questions are organized by topic. This interview guide is "guided" by Sharon Kaufman's interview guide in her "Ageless Self" work (1986) and Jaber Gubrium's interview guide in his "Speaking of Life" work (1993).

Life Events

1. When and where were you born?
2. What are your earliest memories? Probes
3. Did you have any brothers or sisters? Tell me about them.
4. What were your parents doing when you were young?
5. Tell me something else about your childhood. Probes.
6. How would you describe yourself during those years? How would others have described you?
7. Tell me about your adolescence/young adulthood.
8. What were you doing then? What were your concerns? What was that like for you?
9. What happened next?
10. When you think of that time, what stands out in your mind now?
11. How would you describe yourself then? How would others have described you?
12. Tell me about your religious background/training.
13. Tell me about your marriage or primary relationship; first job; leaving home. What were your concerns then? What was that like for you? Probes.
14. Tell me about raising your children (if have children).
15. Tell me about your career, occupation. What were you doing in your 20s, 30s, 40s, 50s (depending on the age of the participant)? How would you describe yourself then? How would others have described you?

16. Who have been the most influential people at various stages in your life? Why? When? What were you doing at that time?

**The Present**

17. Could you describe to me a typical day?

18. Who are the people you are closest to now? How often do you see them? How many friends would you say you have now?

19. Mutual aid/reciprocity: To whom would you go for help with: financial aid, housekeeping, transportation, emotional support?

**Life Review**

20. What do you feel were your most important successes while growing up? The frustrations?

21. I'm interested in what people see as important turning points/events in their lives. Could you describe any important turning points/events, for you, while growing up? What were you doing then? What were you like then?

22. What were the most influential experiences while you were growing up?

23. Who've been the most important people in your life?

24. Are there periods in your life that you remember more vividly than others? Which ones? Why? What were your concerns at that time?

25. If you were writing your growing up story, how would you divide it into chapters?

26. What would Chapter 1 be about, and so on?

27. What sorts of things frighten you now? When you were in your 50s, 40s, 30s, 20s, a child (depends on age of participant)? Probes.

28. What kinds of things give you the most pleasure now? When you were in your 50s, 40s, 30s, 20s, a child (depends on age of participant)? Probes.

29. If you could live your whole life over, what would you have done differently?

30. How do you explain what's happened to you over your life?
Identity

31. How are you like your mother? Unlike her? How are you like your father? Unlike him?

32. Do you feel differently about yourself now from how you felt when you were younger? How?

33. What is your best quality? Your worst quality?

34. What is your philosophy of life? Overall, what is the meaning of life to you?

35. If a young person came to you asking you what's the most important thing in living a good life, what would you say?

36. What do you think has stayed the same about you throughout life? What do you think has changed?

37. What does your life look like from where you're at now?

38. What do you look forward to now?

Growing Up

39. How can one prepare for growing up?

40. Did you have any expectations at various points in your life about what growing up would be like for you?

41. How do you feel about growing up, now?

42. What is the hardest thing about growing up? The best thing?

43. Tell me about the happiest points in your growing up.

44. What about the saddest points?

45. If you could change anything about your growing up years, what would it be?

46. Did you feel prepared (emotionally, mentally, physically) to enter adulthood?

47. What did your parents (also ask for other family members, friends, teachers, anyone else) tell you were your responsibilities while growing up?

48. What did they tell you that you were responsible for in adulthood?

49. What do you feel were your responsibilities while growing up? What about in adulthood?
LIST OF REFERENCES


BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Aline Gubrium was born in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and grew up in both Milwaukee and in Gainesville, Florida. She holds a B.A. degree in anthropology from Indiana University in Bloomington, Indiana, and a M.A. degree in anthropology from the University of Florida. Ms. Gubrium’s interest in gender socialization stems from her previous work on several ethnographic projects dealing with rural women’s sexuality and drug use issues in the southern U.S. In the past, she has worked on other projects dealing with institutional perspectives on violence against women in Java, Indonesia, and the social construction of victim and transmitter of HIV in a South African context. In the future, she would like to conduct a discourse analysis study focusing on the interaction among violence against women, HIV/AIDS, and drug use from a cross-cultural perspective.