WOMEN’S NARRATIVES ABOUT GOD
AND GENDER: AGENCY, TENSION,
AND CHANGE

JAN EWING, PH.D.
San Diego State University

KATHERINE R. ALLEN, PH.D.
Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University

Guided by feminist theories, social constructionism, and narrative approaches to therapy, we conducted an ethnographic study with women members of a conservative Christian church to examine women’s personal and relational narratives. Data analysis revealed the tensions women experienced when complexities and contradictions existed, and how these tensions shaped identities and influenced strategies of empowerment. Major themes included:
(a) Women’s beliefs about God and gender; (b) Being in a bind: When lived experience contradicts spiritual beliefs; and (c) Managing tension between gendered beliefs and experiences around gender. Findings are discussed in terms of narrative research as a conversation of women’s agency.

The social structure of a conservative Christian church and its ability to have both liberating and limiting effects on person’s identity is well documented (Ruether, 1993). Religion is one of the major social forces to preserve traditions, conserve established social order, stabilize worldviews, transmit values, and shape identities, especially in regard to gender (Billson, 1995). Religion also offers a framework for social and personal transformations by providing new human potential, political energy, and empowered ideologies when women clarify their values. Billson (1995)

Jan Ewing, Ph.D., is Visiting Professor of Marital and Family Therapy, San Diego State University, and Founder, Director of the San Diego Center for Therapeutic Collaboration, San Diego, CA.

Katherine R. Allen, Ph.D., is Professor of Family Studies, Department of Human Development, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, Blacksburg, VA.

Address correspondence to Jan Ewing, Ph.D., Visiting Professor of Marital and Family Therapy, San Diego State University, San Diego, CA 92105; E-mail: janewing@worldnet.att.net.

This work is dedicated to Michael White—With gratitude for his presence and influence in our world and my life, for transporting me toward more preferred ways of living, with hope that we will continue our local and global community conversations sparked by him, and with a fantasy that he can ‘over hear’ what he meant to us. With great fondness, Jan
suggests that in all cultures, women establish, maintain, and change cultural norms, and that religion is a primary avenue of this cultural transmission process.

If multiple opportunities exist to shape lives, expand identities, and assist in more preferred ways of living, how do women navigate the structures that invite only certain aspects of lived experience to emerge? How do women think about and live with the contradictions of being both spiritually traditional and having gender equality in their intimate relationships? If women’s lives are rich, how do they make sense of placing themselves in contexts in which certain identities are more privileged than others, or are ignored, forbidden, or rejected? How can these contradictions be understood in terms of well-being? If there are parts of their preferred identities that cannot be contained in this contradictory space, how do they manage and remain there? When is change likely to occur? This article addresses these issues from an integrative theoretical lens of feminist, constructionist, and narrative approaches in order to understand women’s sense of agency and identity.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Narrative Inquiry

Narrative therapy proposes that lives are experientially rich and that no single story can hold all aspects of lived experience (White & Epston, 1990). Multiple and even contradictory experiences are contained within a person’s existence. This richness is the thickening that is valued in qualitative inquiries and in relational narrative therapy practices. Because life is not static, alternative stories are always possible for the past, present, and potential of re-storying that allows for change in personal and relational identities. Stories present opportunities to become the people we prefer to be. White (2001) focuses on “intentional states of identity” in contrast to “internal” states to reveal how one’s hopes, values, and commitments shape a person’s actions and affirm agency in his or her preferred ways of being (p. 11). A tension arises in the multiple experiences that cannot be contained in one story, and the possibility of expanded narratives for personal and relational identities.

Tensions are important because they provide moments of possibility in which to examine, re-create, and expand personal and relational identity. Narrative therapy ideas allude to the changes and movement in life by proposing that stories and identities are in motion and are not predetermined. White (1995) highlights the change and movement of identity using the metaphor of “migration of identity” (p. 99). In his work consulting women who are separating themselves from abusive relationships, he suggests that mapping and graphing the migration of their journey from their place of departure to their arrival at another place can help them appreciate the agency they have in shaping their preferred ways of being.

Narrative metaphor and constructionist ideas propose that a person’s sense of reality and self are maintained through stories by which he or she circulates knowledge about self and the world. The self does not exist in a static or singular way
within the individual, but “is the process of developing a story about one’s life that becomes the basis of all identity and thus challenges any underlying concept of a unified or stable self” (Lax, 1994, p. 71). This framework situates the present research on women in the cultural and historical contexts in which they are embedded. Like Cushman (1995), our methodological goal was to “look over the shoulder of female participants to read the cultural text from which they themselves are reading” (p. 23). This contextualizing was especially important in understanding women’s preferred identity as being a source of agency as they made choices about their spiritual identities.

Foucault (1979) proposed that people come to regulate themselves through the internalization of cultural prescriptions. What might seem to be freedom on the surface may be a form of acquiescence whereby citizens restrict their life choices to fit socially sanctioned options. Defining the self, and identity, therefore, is a political act, as in the politics of social location (Hill Collins, 1998). Language assumes standards of behavior, and people evaluate self and others based on those standards (Gergen, 1999). Transformations occur when people are reflective of what is being told to them about self and others (hooks, 1989). Being defined by someone as “other” than they deem accurate or congruent with their own narrative is a violation.

The collision of different value systems and representations can create tensions, making politics more transparent and contributing to acts of agency and transformation. Feminist research supports that women often live with contradictions and paradoxes in families (Baber & Allen, 1992) and institutions with liberatory aims (Ruether, 1993). Tensions become meaningful spaces where the potential to manifest preferred personal and relational identities exists. Spaces of self-reflection and dialogue are knowledge generating and can be action based when alternatives are realized.

The cultural context of a conservative Christian church structures a hierarchical belief system that promotes certain political stances about identity, gender, spirituality, family, and well-being. Groups that are constructed as other (i.e., women) within the hierarchy of the church may feel stirred to examine more fully the cultural perspectives about them both within and outside the church. Critical thinking about the politics of identities is connected to notions of justice, oppression, liberation, freedom, and protest. For women who feel caught between these two pressures, critical thinking is a process where they critique representations of identity and create new representations that are more congruent with their desires and values. It is also an opportunity to challenge internalized sexist ideas about their gendered identities.

Critical Feminist Perspective

A critical feminist perspective acknowledges that women have agency (Haraway, 1989). By integrating social justice values with a critical feminist theoretical ori-
entation, we recognize that multiple truths exist, and that people make sense of their lives. Individuals move toward protesting that which is confining and diminishing to their personhood. Without recognition of women’s agency, Haraway suggests scholars are in danger of reifying existing social constructs, which suggest that women are under the trance of hegemony, ignorant, naive, suffering from false consciousness, or diagnostically pathological. In order to better understand women’s lives, researchers and clinicians must “intend” to hear their voices.

Ethnographic research with groups who may not share a similar worldview as the researcher can be challenging. A central goal and ethical principle in research for women, regardless of their commonalities with the researcher, is to stay connected even when their respective ways of making sense of their lives has led them to seemingly different conclusions and representations. Difficult issues arise, such as how to practice a feminist credo of doing no harm to self or other through interactions and representations, and how to hear participants’ desire for voice and representation without being dismissed or violated. Being involved in conversation and dialogue when difference exists is difficult (Gergen, 1999), but researchers can manage their own limitations with humility. To fully respect difference in women, it is necessary to respect those who may not embrace feminist ideas, thereby challenging universal assumptions made by feminists, including ourselves. This ethnographic study describes how women discussed their experiences of being active members in a conservative church culture, captures the process of identity transformation and expansion, and analyzes, through narrative processes, the tensions involved in holding multiple perspectives.

**RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

Three research questions framed the study: (a) How do women narrate their experience in a conservative Christian environment? (b) What are ways in which women live with the tension of a social structure that promotes both liberation and limitation? (c) What are the implications of this tension for women’s personal, relational, and community identities and well-being?

**METHOD**

In this year-long ethnographic study, I (the first author), became immersed in the cultural context of a conservative Christian church, and conducted individual and group interviews in order to learn what participants thought and experienced as meaningful (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995). Prior to beginning the study, I secured approval through the university’s Institutional Review Board for Human Subjects Protection. I attended participants’ weekly worship services, women’s groups, bible studies, and social events, and I spent time in their homes. I recorded
field notes in systematic ways that included my observations, conversations, and experiences, kept a personal journal recording my responses to these experiences, and discussed my notes with my research advisor and a group of colleagues who met regularly to support and guide the research process.

Two to three hour in-depth individual interviews were conducted with 11 women, and a second individual interview was conducted with 6 of these women. Two group interviews with 7 participants were also conducted. These 7 women were in both group interviews. The first group interview involved a discussion about their experience of the study and solicited their additional ideas about gender in the church. The second group interview was a discussion of their feedback about the first draft of this research write-up, which they had received prior to the group interview. Participants’ names were changed during the write-up of this research.

Description of Participants

Participants were recruited through purposive sampling and were required to meet certain criteria (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), which specified that they were women, were involved members of this church, and wished to participate. All 11 women were White, raised in the U.S., and were U.S. citizens. Eight women were married, and one was in her second marriage. Two were never married, and one woman was currently divorced and single. Their ages ranged between 24 and 64. With the exception of the 24-year-old who relied on her parents’ income, the recently divorced woman, and a never married woman, 8 participants relied on husbands’ incomes and were not “employed” outside the home, but described the home as their place of work. Their income ranged from $38,000 to $84,000.

Gaining Access

I first gained access to this group by attending the church to evaluate whether it could provide a research context, both physically as a cultural setting and relationally with the members. At a Sunday morning service I introduced myself to a few women and said I wanted to conduct a research project to learn about the lives of the women in the church. They introduced me to the women’s leader who invited me to attend a meeting of all the women leaders at her home. This group of women said they were interested in being involved, but recommended that I ask permission of the elders (all male) to do the research. I followed their protocol and sought permission through a letter.

Data Analysis

The interviews were initiated, developed, recorded, managed, and examined through a set of systematic procedures informed by the research questions and the integrative theoretical framework (social constructionism, feminism, and narrative ap-
proaches to therapy). The data included research questions, field notes, participant responses, my experience in the interviews, my life experiences, and reflexive conversations with participants, the second author, and a group of colleagues. Both authors read the transcripts and coded for themes regarding the content and processes of how women described their experiences. Global sorting (Lofland & Lofland, 1984) was used to establish general clusters. From these clusters, coding schemes and coding families were developed. After multiple readings of the transcripts, noticing repetition, relevance, and the relationship of the themes, a final analysis outline was established and applied to the data. The major themes and subthemes from this analysis are reported below, substantiated with quotations in the women’s own voices.

RESULTS

Women’s Beliefs About God and Gender

God’s Universal Design of Hierarchy

The women shared a common life narrative that gave structure and meaning to their lives. This narrative was informed by a belief system about God’s presence in their lives and how God designed men and women. All the women believed that God existed and that He had a plan for the universe. This plan involved the concepts of the sacred and the secular. In other words, the universe is currently set up according to two polarities—the things that are of God and the people who align themselves with God (sacred/spiritual), and the things that are “of the world” and the people who align themselves with the world against God and His design (secular).

God’s plan also included a divine order or design for husbands and wives. “Obedience” meant to live according to God’s hierarchical design, within which was a descending order of authority. God was the ultimate ruler of the universe. Men were second in command; men had authority over church and home. Women were third; their primary responsibilities were to nurture children and care for their husbands. Children were not in authority. Men and women were created with certain capacities that enabled them to function within the hierarchy. The women referred to their understanding of this order and hierarchy when describing their concept of gender identity. Participants also believed that God was personally involved in their lives and had given each of them a specific purpose. Their purpose was referred to as a “calling” from God. God gave them gifts, and these gifts were abilities to carry out their calling.

Women’s Talk about Gender

In the first personal interview most of the women said that gender “just is,” suggesting that they had neither contemplated nor questioned gender. In contrast, they
talked about patriarchy as though it was a given—a universal—and assumed that “it works.” Some women said gender was not an issue but feared that it might become one if they started talking about it. Beth shared, “There doesn’t seem to be a controversy. There are other real issues in life.” Kelly said, “I don’t think it’s an issue for women, or they wouldn’t be here.” On the other hand, Dee said gender was a “hot topic”:

Capable, able, confident women in the church challenging the leadership: Why is it that women don’t do such and such? Why is it women are never invited to do such and such? Why is it that women don’t have a role in such and such? And I think what that would do is that, being a hot topic, I think, would threaten the leadership and cause a lot of controversy and unrest and lack of peace among the community and that sort of thing. And I think at that point, I would see it as a hot topic. It could become a heated issue.

The women were very concerned about the potential negative impact that surfacing the issue could have for the entire congregation. Ellen commented, “It would cause unrest to talk about it. There would be discomfort. Women might become angry.” Nell proposed, “I’m afraid it would pull me off course.” Beth agreed, “It takes a huge amount of openness and flexibility so it doesn’t become an issue. It could divide people up.” Women described their spirituality in gendered terms, however. They characterized themselves as being involved in the church: “helping,” “serving,” “extending care,” and “giving,” in contrast to merely attending church. Attendees did not contribute with the same aspects of identity; they were not workers, doers, or people who were developing their faith.

The women talked about their beliefs, experiences, and identity through their frequent use of metaphor. The most commonly used metaphors implied that gender dynamics were temporarily calm; however, perpetual disturbance seemed to threaten this pseudo-settled state. When referring to men, Ellen said, “We try not to ruffle their feathers.” Dee stated, “I don’t want to stir things up.” Doris asked, “Why muddy the waters?” Bonnie remarked, “I don’t want to cause waves.” Ginger commented, “You may touch a nerve if you say something.” Lisa expressed, “I don’t want to rattle their cages.” Beth noted, “He’d turn over in his grave if he knew I thought that.” These metaphors reflected tenuousness, reluctance, holding back, and carefulness. The women framed gender in certain ways that seemed acceptable in the present, but one needed to be careful not to say or do anything that might cause a future disturbance.

**Being in a Bind: When Lived Experience Contradicts Spiritual Beliefs**

Initially, the women expressed satisfaction with their church experience and implied that they agreed with their mutual understanding of the church’s beliefs about gender. They spoke of their church experience endearingly and in ways that
highlighted their contentment. Along with this surface level contentment, all the women expressed exceptions to their narrative in the form of “an experience.” These exceptions were prefaced by minimizing statements such as Beth’s, “it’s a small issue,” or Dee’s, “There is a teeny bit of gender when I am up front.” Such comments indicated that the women were not completely satisfied, but they were concerned about voicing dissatisfaction. They felt caught in a bind between their spiritual beliefs and their treatment as women in the church.

We Can Never Be Up Front in the Church: Gender Distinctions

All 11 participants stated that they were not aware of anything written in the church by-laws or statement of faith that described the elders’ beliefs about men’s or women’s proper roles, yet certain social rules were understood. They agreed that women were not permitted to preach, teach with men present, be elders, or hold a position of authority. The women referred to this gendered role as not being “up front.” This is defined as a place of authority held only by men, during worship services and implied that they were not to be the focal point on the central stage (traditionally know as an altar) in leading activities when men were present. They did not perform any service in front of the congregation, with the exception of a woman who assisted with singing. She was never introduced and did not speak during the year of data collection.

Dee described a time when she was single when an elder announced from “up front,” that Sunday school teachers were needed. She was excited about volunteering because she had taught in a public school and had been looking for a way to contribute her time and energy to the church. The elder responded to her offer to teach by telling her that couples were the best models for children. As an unmarried woman, she was not permitted to teach without a man accompanying her:

I didn’t think that I was in a position, especially as a newcomer, to argue the point, but I was angry and very, very hurt. It occurs to me that some of the things that have hurt me are not resolved emotionally for me. I just felt like, good grief, here I am moving out and stepping forward, and I was being told that I was not valuable because I wasn’t married.

Another participant discussed how she had spent several years serving on a committee whose chairperson was resigning. She had been interested in possibly filling that position, but one of the committee members said she felt strongly that the new chairperson needed to be a man because it would look better. The participant reported that she felt sad and angry because neither she nor another woman would be considered for that position. Thus, the women were in a bind between experiencing the tensions about their spiritual beliefs and their beliefs on behalf of their gender. The message was clear that in comparison to men and especially in the presence of men, women were inadequate and devalued.
The women felt caught between doing what seemed to be in line with the church’s belief system and doing what they needed or wanted. If they spoke out, they went against the beliefs of their faith community and could be labeled or ostracized. If they did not speak out, they went against their own belief that they had a voice, “a call,” and something to offer. They often felt at odds with themselves and/or with others, as Lucy explains:

You don’t want to be seen as somebody who, you know, ruffles the feathers. You just want to be seen as somebody who does what’s right, so I think it can be stifling, or it can just be awkward, I guess. If you do share, you take a risk of, “Gee I wonder if people are going to look at me this way and criticize?” But we are hindered a bit. It makes it hard. I just think the silence, to me, over time causes women to take less risks, cause you’re not sure where you stand, but then another thing is you’re not able to express the gifts God has given you, so you are not using your potential that God’s given you to minister, to lead, to lead others, to share.

The unspoken yet known rules maintained the women’s sense of confusion in several ways. Beth said, “every situation seems to be so different, so it doesn’t seem to be clear.” When trying to describe existing beliefs about gender, Ellen explained, “It’s an elusive sort of thing.” Being in a bind was manifested in several distinct styles. First, women stated that addressing a group with men present was difficult and uncomfortable. Dee revealed, “I felt awkward and found myself choosing my words very carefully. I experienced discomfort, like I was foreign.” The women interpreted their discomfort as an indicator that being in a position of leadership was improper for women. Nell said, “Discomfort tells me it’s not right, it’s all wrong.”

Four of the women reported that they felt pressure to communicate well, as if they needed to say something profound, especially around men. As Nell explained,

Women’s voices are weaker in projection. Sometimes men talk right over me, so I must come across with wisdom and weight and significance in order to be heard. I need to get all my ducks in a row before I speak.

Others felt they needed to prepare for possible questions. Lucy commented, “I definitely feel like I’m being grilled a bit more.” Others stopped attempting to speak up. Lisa explained, “I can’t always argue verse per verse, so I don’t even try. When men speak it’s kind of a monologue anyway.” Dee stated, “Some men say something strongly, they quote a verse and I can’t think of a counter so I don’t say anything.”

Nine women reported another effect, saying they felt inhibited or limited in the church in regards to what they were able to do. As Ellen described, “I pull back; I keep a low profile. It hinders me terribly . . . I get into trouble when I express myself so I try to keep my mouth shut.” Two women, however, said they did not
feel limited. They stated that opportunities to lead existed upon which they acted. They led by “influencing the husbands” and “meeting any needs we see.” Even though these women said they felt like they were not limited in what they wanted to do, it was not clear how they concluded what they wanted to do. They may have been encouraged and socialized to think in certain ways about what would be appropriate for them to want to do—especially what a “spiritual” woman would want to do. When they functioned in their given roles, they felt positive in this demonstration of “obedience”; thus, they did not feel oppressed. These women stated, however, that they could see how others might feel limited.

Finally, some women attempted to talk with others about the tensions they felt between their beliefs and their experiences. At times, they found conversation with each other difficult. Alice said, “I have approached other women, but we don’t really talk about it.” Sometimes they joked about it and said, “We really know who runs the church anyway.” They described the church as a difficult context in which to raise questions or have dialogue about gender. They wanted to talk with others but fear kept them from doing so, especially if it meant losing relationships or being labeled as unspiritual. Ellen said, “I don’t want to look like I’m at odds with the philosophy, and risk losing relationships . . . I’m afraid people will be turned off by me.” Lucy revealed her fear, concluding with a biblical allusion:

I’m afraid people will label me. Well, you know if I did something that someone thought I was out of line, they might say, “No, we don’t think that should happen, and no female would ask anyway because they’d know the answer is, No! You’re not gonna teach.” But there’s freedom in other areas. It’s, “what would the men think?” I don’t think it’s a question that women couldn’t speak out or couldn’t pray or couldn’t share; it’s just that it doesn’t happen. It’s not the real issue behind this stuff though. People might say I’m coming too close. It reminds me of Eve, who the serpent said, “Don’t touch the tree.” I’m scared to get too close to the tree. Maybe if you don’t even talk, I certainly won’t get into trouble you know? Maybe we tend to stay back more, and part of our thoughts is that we just, you know, we’re afraid . . . of getting too close to the tree.

**Managing Tensions Between Gendered Beliefs and Experiences**

All of the women used a combination of behaviors to live with the incongruence they encountered and to maintain a sense of their own spiritual identity.

**Self-Questioning and Social Surveillance**

The participants often responded to confusion about their experiences of gender and spirituality by questioning themselves and giving alternative explanations for their behavior, tied to emotional defects or sinfulness. After doing something up front in the church and feeling like she had received nonverbal messages from members in
the congregation that she was breaking an appropriate gender role expectation, Ellen said, “I end up questioning myself. Why do I have to be different, or be in the spotlight? This must be my own personal hang-up.” Many women expressed concern that their desire to lead might stem from “the wrong reasons,” such as wanting to be in the “spotlight” or “wanting power.” Acting with “false motives” would violate their values regarding their wanting to maintain spiritual identities and behavior. Lucy talked about how she questioned herself when she felt uncomfortable, explaining, “You know, I think to myself, I probably imagined 95% of it.” Lisa commented, “It’s my insecurity, and these things aren’t really happening.”

The women not only watched themselves, but they also closely monitored how other people responded to them. They were concerned with behaving in socially appropriate ways and getting feedback about their behavior from others. Nell said:

I need to make sure I don’t offend someone. I don’t know what the best word is, not to be too something so they’re receptive. If I’m too preachy, others would be uncomfortable. There is a concern at our church that in no way would I want to be a stumbling block toward anyone not coming to Christ.

She later said that she looked to the congregation to help her know if she was offending anyone: “I depend on them as my meter to tell me how I’m doing.”

**Obedience and Accommodation to Church Authority**

Another way women dealt with the tensions was to accept the views of the church and the Bible. Lucy talked about her acceptance in this way:

I’ve given you [person in authority] the power to make those decisions in my life. It’s almost like authority has to be accepted before it’s real. We have God as an authority, but he’s not the authority in my life until I say, “You are the Lord of my life, and I’m inviting you to do that,” and there’s a sense of, I’ve accepted authority. I accept that he’s the one in control, and when I get married, I accept the husband’s headship. I’m saying, “You’ve listened to me, I’ve listened to you, and if we still can’t agree on something, then I will just trust God that you think about it, and you can decide. That’s okay. I accepted your leadership. I might not agree with it but I’ve accepted that you had authority over me.”

Acceptance or obedience was an aspect of identity that was valued by their God and their church. If they were accommodating or compliant, they were applauded and viewed as being deeply godly or spiritual, but if they did not possess them, they gave up a sense of their individuality and spirituality by not being accepting, compliant, or obedient to some established way of being. Accepting things “the way they are” was an important virtue tied to their ideas of obedience. In response to a question about how women dealt with these tensions, Dee responded:
Well, I don’t know. I could talk about how I think I deal with it or don’t deal with it. One word that has really come to my mind recently is compliance. If I respect the environment that I’m in, the family, the church structure, the work structure, perhaps it’s easy for me to comply with the rules, the expectations, the standards. I comply. I respect the institution or the organization or whatever, and I’m comfortable with that; then I resign myself to certain things. You know, I find I’m accommodating. Bad news or things that otherwise upset other people don’t . . . I also sometimes think, “I can’t change things. Will what I say make a difference?” I have a more peaceful life this way.

The women also wanted to emphasize the good and ensure that they presented “the whole picture,” not just troublesome issues. They wanted to question and still feel integrity about their beliefs. They were concerned that the final research report would “get the right emphasis.” One woman stated she wanted to “choose the right words” when discussing her experiences. They wanted to represent the elders well without “betraying” or “disrespecting” them by questioning the church. A few stated they hoped they did not come across as being “critical.”

**DISCUSSION**

**Expanding Identities When Tensions Exist**

The tension of conflicting ideologies highlighted by the narrative interviews evoked multiple aspects of women’s experiences. Narrative interviews emphasize expansion of identities and thickening of story by noticing and naming dilemmas about the multiplicity of identity. Conversations about the ways the women prefer to live brought attention to their desire for more agency. They created ways to build on their preferred spiritual identities as women who took action against injustices and action toward enacting their faith through their call.

White (1990) described how dominant narratives carry a certain ability to determine one’s personhood. Yet, according to White, they do not always handle the “other” pieces, or contingencies, that arise to expand identity. He noted that patriarchal narratives that oppress women are never totally effective in eclipsing their lives, as the women resist and protest this injustice through their less dominant stories. hooks (1989) describes this as a process of talking back and proposes having a resistance strategy to oppression, something she learned growing up in a Black family dealing with the complexities of gender and racial discrimination.

The women in this study simultaneously authored an accentuated set of beliefs that supported patriarchy, while also narrating another, less dominant belief system, which supported gender equality. Their marginal belief system suggested feminist values, which reflect a commitment to the idea that women are equal in value to men and their experiences and ways of knowing are as valid as men’s. Feminism rests on ideas of faith in justice, fairness, equality for all people, and liberating those who are oppressed (Baber & Allen, 1992; Freedman, 2002; Harding, 1986; Oakley, 1981). These values are also hallmarks of the Christian faith.
Women's Narratives About God and Gender

(Bounds, 1996; Fiorenza, 1983). Other feminist values include: (a) the desire to question the status quo of the social structures that privilege men and are harmful to women, (b) the ability to acknowledge power and its affects, and (c) the willingness to work to create change on behalf of women. Through the narrative conversation—the noticing and conversing about their multiple experiences—the women were able to voice and expand less dominant identities.

Preferred Identities of Agency

All 11 participants talked about God’s involvement in what they were doing. They frequently referred to God’s leading as a motivation and spiritual explanation for their actions. The women used the term “God’s call” to define themselves apart from the church’s position on gender. Spiritual phrases like, “God gifted me,” “God led me,” and “God called me,” were ways of defining themselves. These three phrases helped describe and justify what they perceived to be God’s purpose for their lives. “Call” alluded to their destiny as agents of change.

Some women acted to change their culture about gendered identities when they believed an injustice was occurring for them or others. They found ways to speak up for themselves and talk about their needs using spiritual language that still honored their faith. Although many expressed reservations and feared reprisals for discussing forbidden topics like “gender,” they still wanted to have their beliefs challenged. They said that the conversation generated through the interviews helped them clarify their own and learn about others’ beliefs.

The women’s thoughts in anticipation of the interview also served as a change agent. Several women wondered beforehand what questions would be asked during the interview. Several women also said that they asked themselves what they really believed about gender because they had not thought about it much. Gergen (1989) observed that talking with oneself or others is a way of self-defining. Thus, when the women asked themselves questions about what they believed, they began a process of defining themselves more clearly.

From Personal Conversations to Relational Action

Narrative interview research is utilized not only to thicken participant identities and develop preferred identities but also as a way to encourage change. The process elicited change in these women from the clarification of their preferred identity to the strengthening of their relationships with others, and the action they took in their community.

Women’s Conversational Voices

Conversation amplified the marginal narrative, previously described as being less dominant and peripheral. If language provides the basis for human understand-
ing, then conversation plays a key role in developing and changing narratives. In narrative therapy, psychotherapy is construed as a linguistic activity in which conversation about a problem generates the development of new meaning.

Any conversation in which collaboration and participation is required, regardless of the naming of a problem, can identify narratives and generate new narrative possibilities. This recursive process involves two or more persons’ words and experiences shaping the conversation. The second person’s (either the researcher, other women, or a therapist) questions and comments based on their life experience may open up a discursive space for multiple meanings or interpretations. For example, several women described their anxiety and discomfort when speaking in a group where men were present. They interpreted their anxiety as being caused by their behaviors that were contrary to their God given gender role. When the researcher shared similar experiences with different interpretations, in which she believed her discomfort was due to receiving nonverbal feedback from men about not being up front in church, rather than violating a given gender role, the discussion opened up about the possibility that social control may influence one’s behaviors. The women also stated they had experienced nonverbal cues from some men. This discussion presented another possible explanation for their discomfort demonstrating to the women that they were no longer locked into believing they were doing something wrong or that something was wrong with them. Considering that many reasons may explain women’s unease with speaking in front of men can amplify a feminist narrative of choice rather than the patriarchal narrative that women must not speak from a position of authority when men are present.

The women also amplified their marginal narrative by telling their stories, acknowledging that they had experiences that were not congruent with their beliefs, and by feeling the tensions this incongruence created. Acknowledging how their contrasting beliefs and experiences affected them also created change by shifting the patriarchal narrative. Most of the women said that they had thought about these things before but had never spoken to anyone about them. Giving voice to their concerns, questions, and experiences served to emphasize the less dominant discourse.

The transformational power of narrative rests in its capacity to re-relate the events of one’s life in the context of new and different meaning (Anderson & Goolishian, 1994). The women had difficulty acknowledging the effects of the patriarchal narrative. Initially, they were likely to dismiss negative affects by using their management skills. They had to first notice the tension in their narrative before it could be worthy of discussion.

The women began the reflexive process with other women in a context where equity in dialogue already existed. Conversing reflexively in an equitable setting may be one reason why the women said the interviews and conversations generated by the research process impacted and benefited them. Given their interest in wanting conversation but having not had opportunity to do so meant that the dis-
cussions generated by the research process reinforced a dialogical transition, allowing them to constitute other narratives.

Women’s Collective Voices: Action in Community

A feminist narrative becomes more dominant when women speak their stories in community. According to Paget (1983), women are adept at helping each other develop ideas and cooperate in the project of constructing meaning together. Rich (1976) wrote that it is only the willingness of women to share their “private and often painful experience that will enable them to achieve a true description of the world, and to free and encourage one another” (p. 15). If meaning and understanding are socially constructed, engaging in conversation within a context that gives meaning relevance creates change, which is a feminist goal.

Members of society learn to interpret their experiences in terms of dominant language and meanings; therefore, women often struggle to have their own language, as opposed to male language, to describe their experiences. Hence, it seemed important that we listen to hear and take notice of words that supported other narratives than the dominant one. Paying attention to less obvious words and introducing those that were a bit unfamiliar with their context led to change because it made other explanations and meanings possible.

Change was an important element in the women’s interviews, especially the group interviews. The women talked about change in terms of the past, present, and future. They stated that things were no longer as bad as they used to be. They also talked about what they thought they were doing presently that did not fit with how things used to be. For example, one woman said she was becoming more comfortable sharing in a group of men and women, whereas before, she would have remained silent. Furthermore, because women had more opportunities and chose to work outside the home, several women offered specific suggestions of how the church might reflect those changes.

As the women conversed with one another, they came to feel more at ease and confident when discussing gender issues. Eventually, they organized a group that met without the researcher and decided to write a letter to the elders seeking information and clarification about what the church’s rules were about gender. Perhaps the women felt a new sense of community in which they could safely discuss beliefs, highlight additional values, take this action, and ultimately expand their identities.

Implications for Clinical Practice and Future Research

This research encourages therapists and researchers to consider how the larger sociocultural context influences identity, particularly for women (McGoldrick, 1996) and how language through conversation is transformative. Feminist scholars have noted that mental health practices and research can oppress and debili-
tate women. The history of psychotherapy is noted for the “deflections of social problems into individual maladjustments, together with an abuse of power by professionals” (Prilleltensky & Nelson, 2002, p. 1). If therapy and research focus on individual problems to the exclusion of the social context, professionals are at risk for supporting the patriarchal status quo.

Narrative therapy provides useful application in clinical work. When faith conversations are central to the problem being addressed in therapy, a tension may exist in the narrative between a belief and a person’s experience, or between competing beliefs. Since women’s lives are affected by their social context, one therapeutic application is to contextualize women’s narratives and take precautions against pathologizing women who are situated in conservative Christian cultures. Also, naming the tensions can help “externalize” (White, 1990), or place outside the person, possible explanations for the tensions.

Identifying dominant beliefs and how those beliefs affect the women may assist them to clarify their less dominant ideas and support additional aspects of their identities. Understanding women’s narratives can advance identities of agency, especially when considering that women’s alternative narratives reveal how they are already using their strengths to resist those structures. Since both therapy and research could influence identities, it is necessary to avoid constructing ideas and conversation with and about these women based on deficit models. It is vital to avoid criticizing women’s character, denoting them as passive, or unaware. Therapists are equally discouraged from advising women to “be less reactive” or “to differentiate” since these practices may encourage them to better adapt to a culture that is injurious to them. Likewise, giving them prescriptions to “be more assertive” before understanding their meaning systems, or the consequences of the power dynamics they experience, may fail to create their desired change.

Clinicians could utilize skills of ethnographers, or students of the culture (Laird, 2000). Assuming the posture of a learner rather than an expert about behavior gives therapists more perspective regarding clients’ worlds, narratives, and potential desires to develop new stories and greater agency (Anderson & Goolishian, 1994). Reading literature on feminism, critical social theory, and narrative therapy practice is an instructive way to acknowledge issues of power, social context, and maneuvering those difficulties. As therapists and researchers, an awareness and analysis of our own vocabularies, narratives, and assumptions about women could assist in more responsible practice.

Given the emphasis on conversation in this research, group discussions could be generative to women who are struggling with tension when faith ideology conflicts with lived experience. Women may be less likely to internalize their struggle as being due to identity flaws if they know others struggle with similar tensions.

Future research could examine the therapeutic implications when the boundaries between qualitative research and clinical work are blurred. A longitudinal study, revisiting these participants to focus on how individual, relational, and church environments change over time, thereby offering insight into processes
that foster or inhibit change could be considered. A study of church culture and
how language contributes to the reinforcement of beliefs could further elaborate
on the social construction of meaning for women and men in spiritual contexts.

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