

**AT-HOME MOMS GO BACK TO SCHOOL:  
A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF THE ROLE EXIT PROCESS**

**By**

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of the requirements for the degree**

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**At-Home Moms Go Back to School: A Qualitative Study of the Role Exit Process**

**BY**

**Joni Helen Lien**

**A Thesis/Practicum submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies of The University  
of Manitoba in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree**

**of**

**Master of Social Work**

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### Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore women's experience of the transition from full-time mother to post-secondary student. Existing research typically does not distinguish between women who have been at home full-time from women who have been employed in the labor force prior to school reentry. The present study used Ebaugh's model of role exit to examine how the salience and centrality of the mothering identity affects women as they enter college or university. Study participants were ten women who had been stay-at-home mothers for at least three years. Data were gathered in semi-structured interviews. Results showed differences in the degree of centrality of "mothering" in the women's identities. Results also showed how specific "gains" associated with school reentry outweighed specific "losses" and led to successful transitions into the student role. Practice and policy implications and directions for future research are discussed.

**KEY WORDS:** reentry women; mother-students; role exit.

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

### **1.1 Background**

In the 40s and 50s, societal expectations of middle class women were relatively clear; they were expected to find happiness at home as wives and mothers. With the glorification of the housewife role so prevalent, many young, intelligent, college-educated women were unable to envision their futures beyond marriage and childrearing (Tittle & Denker, 1980; Friedan, 1963). During the 60s and 70s, a rapid growth of the traditionally female service sector and changes in public attitude regarding women's roles combined to open new employment opportunities for women. Other societal changes in recent decades include reduced fertility, increased longevity, the industrialization of housework (i.e. the availability and increased use of both household services for purchase and technology within individual homes such as stoves, fridges, etc.), a dramatic increase in divorce rates and a rapid increase in the number of single-parent households (Eichler, 1988). According to Eichler (1988), in 1979, for the first time, the majority of wives of working age (20-64) were employed in the paid labor force. She wrote: "Never before have we lived in a society in which the majority of wives earn an income independent from their husbands" (Eichler, 1988, p.33). Statistics show that married women's participation in the Canadian labor force increased steadily, from 5% in 1941 to 61% in 1991. In 1977, only 38% of women with children under the age of 6 were labor-force participants, compared to 63% in 1992 (The Vanier Institute, 1994). By 1999, 61% of women with children under the age of 3 were employed, more than double the figure in 1976 (Statistics Canada, 2000).

The above-noted changes in the home, the workforce, and society at large, combined with increased labor market demands for a skilled work force, have been leading increasing numbers of adult women into post-secondary educational institutions (The Vanier Institute, 1998). In the late 70s and early 80s, the population of women reentering the formal education system constituted the fastest growing segment of

students attending college (Heyns & Bird, 1979), with the number of women over 35 enrolled in college doubling (Tittle & Denker, 1977, 1980). In Canada during the 1992-1993 academic year, women's participation in higher education reached 52% of full-time enrollment and 62% of part-time enrollment (Human Resources Development Canada, 1994). Recent statistics show that women continue to comprise more than half of community college and university enrolments (Statistics Canada, 1998a, 1998b). At the university level, the median age of undergraduate students is 21 years, and the median age of graduate students is 28; part-time university students tend to be older, with the median age of undergraduate students being 30 years, and the median age of graduate students being 34 years (Human Resources Development Canada, 1994).

As the student population in our colleges and universities becomes increasingly diversified, so, too, must the range of services and supports which ease the transition into the post-secondary system and help ensure academic success. This diversity continues to challenge educators, policy-makers, administrators, and social workers, for the research is only beginning to indicate which "life situations and institutional supports make a difference" (Home & Hinds, 2000).

### **1.2 Reentry Women: Definition**

In the literature, reentry women are those who enter university, college, or adult education after an absence from formal education. Across studies, their reasons for leaving, past educational attainment, activities in the interim, marital status, presence or absence of children, ages of children, length of interim, and age at reentry vary considerably. Reentry women have been described as "pioneers seeking to combine both traditional and current conceptions of women's roles (Leavitt, 1989, p. 301) and as being "inspired to reach toward new (for women) levels of achievement in a society that fails to provide the means necessary to the realization of these goals" (Komarovsky, 1985, p. 4).

### **1.3 Postsecondary Education: Equality of Access, Outcome, and Experience?**

In theory, a post-secondary education is the "great equalizer", providing equality

of opportunity to all. Within this context, "equality" can be measured in terms of access, outcome, or experience.

### Access

If we accept the conventional definition of accessibility to postsecondary education as the numbers of students who enroll in institutions of higher learning, then, at least at the undergraduate level, women's and men's participation rates seem to show that there exists equal accessibility for both genders (Bischoping & Bell, 1998). Statistics, however show clear under-representation of native and black people, of the socio-economically disadvantaged, and of disabled people in postsecondary institutions, and of women in such fields as engineering, in graduate studies, and in senior administrative positions (Rodebaugh, 1999; Stalker & Prentice, 1998; Scott, 1993; Smith, 1991).

### Outcome

Grades. In terms of grades, reentry women often outperform younger students (Leavitt, 1989; Badenhoop & Johansen, 1980).

Attrition. Rates of attrition among reentry women vary widely across individual studies. Some work shows dropout rates over 40% (Harrington, 1993; Scott, 1980). In response to this increased risk of attrition, a growing body of research is focusing upon the specific factors associated with persistence and non-persistence (e.g. age of children, coping styles) among various subpopulations of reentry women (Thacker & Novak, 1991; Pirnot, 1987).

Employment and Earnings. With regard to reentry women, completion of a post-secondary program has been shown to increase both wages and occupational prestige (Campione & Jerrell, 1997; Femlee, 1988). Novack and Novack (1996) report, however, that there is controversy as to the degree of actual penetration that women have achieved in positions traditionally associated with men. For example, the number of women on corporate boards has increased, but the number of female CEO's has decreased. Most women are still employed in low-wage service and domestic jobs. In general, additional

schooling benefits women's occupational attainment, but there are limitations to these benefits (Campione & Jerrell, 1997; Novack & Novack, 1996; Femlee, 1988).

### **Experience**

The literature on higher education presents a complex picture, wherein post-secondary accessibility and experience can differ dramatically across students (e.g. Stalker & Prentice, 1998). For example, Terenzini and his colleagues describe the transition into college as "a highly interrelated, web-like series of family, interpersonal, academic, and organizational pulls and pushes that shape student learning...and persistence" (Terenzini, Rendon, Upcraft, Millar, Allison, Gregg & Jalomo, 1994, p.61). Too, Mason (1997) describes returning to college as a consciousness-raising transition, and includes it in the same category as divorce, menopause, and adjustment to unemployment.

The literature shows numerous examples of "difference of experience" across college and university students. For example, in a study of women, education and disability, Scott (1993) identified numerous barriers to disabled women in their pursuit of a university education. These included fatigue associated with the disability, health complications, finances, avoidance behaviors or offers of excessive help from other students, and high shelves and narrow rows between shelves in the library. Terenzini et al (1994) found that, compared to "traditional" students, nontraditional, primarily first-generation, college students found "the adaptation to college was far more difficult. Indeed, for many, going to college constituted a major *disjunction* in their life course" (p.63), a painful breaking of family, social, and academic traditions.

In the reentry literature, numerous studies identify factors that can hinder mature women students in their pursuit of higher education. For example, Leavitt (1989) found that following a woman's return to school, there were few changes in the management of household responsibilities. Many women identified this lack of change as their source of greatest stress, but often seemed reluctant to place additional burdens on their husbands; 54% of the reentry women in her sample reported that everyone in the family was doing

more to help out, but only 20% of husbands spent more time caring for the children, and 34% were cooking more.

During the admissions process, reentry women may encounter problems with admissions standards because of outdated transcripts and work experience (e.g. Pitts, 1992; Sperling, 1991). Further, entrance examinations such as the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT), which continue to be used although outcome is not necessarily linked to post-secondary success or failure, may actually discriminate against returning women students, particularly where there is a gap in time between past academic experience and post-secondary application (Nelson, Aron, & Poole, 1999; Brooks 1976). Also, compared with the "traditional aged student" who enters the post-secondary system directly after graduating from high school, the reentry student may experience difficulty with note taking, remembering material, library use, writing papers and exams, competition from younger students, and time management (Wilkie & Thompson, 1993; Novak & Thacker, 1991; Tittle & Denker, 1980; Astin 1976; Brooks 1976). The severity of these problems will likely vary according to the individual's length of time away from school and activities during the interim.

We do not know how many women do not enter, or drop out of higher education because of lack of funding, though two recent studies on the persistence of adult women in higher education show that persisters are more likely to receive financial aid than are nonpersisters (Goldsmith, 1995/1996; Calloway, 1990/1991). Another investigation found a strong socioeconomic class influence among mature women who discontinued their university studies; poor women tended to leave because of a combination of lack of money, lack of family support, lack of knowledge or skills, and weighty domestic responsibilities (Scott, Burns, Cooney, 1996).

Scholarships and allowances often exclude mature women because of specific stipulations. For example, recipients must often be full-time students of certain (typically younger) ages. Further, women may not qualify for financial aid because of the

husband's income, whether or not the wife has access to it (Brooks, 1976). Adnett and Coates (2000) suggest that women may defer their own studies in order to finance the higher education of their children. Conway (1996) describes having to choose between buying shoes for her children and buying university textbooks.

Not every student will be successful in completing the transition into college or university. These few examples clearly show how erroneous is the notion of a unified "student body" in terms of access, outcome, and experience in the post-secondary system. Nevertheless, the majority of studies I have surveyed treat "reentry women" as a homogeneous group without examining their past histories and present realities. Will the reentry needs of a homemaker with preschool children, a mid-life childless business executive, a single mother living below the poverty line, a disabled woman, a recent immigrant whose educational qualifications are not recognized in Canada, and a retirement-aged displaced homemaker be the same? Likely not. Further, most studies do not discuss why the women initially left school. Was it for a job? To parent? Because of negative experiences at school? Graduation? In studying the labor force reentry of mid-life homemakers, Moen, Downey and Bolger (1990) concluded that

Women do not constitute a monolithic population; rather, there are distinct subpopulations of women, including full-time homemakers at different stages of the life cycle, who have different dispositions and options regarding labor-market participation and who consequently require distinctive models of labor-force dynamics (p. 237).

This statement seems equally applicable to the study of women reentering the formal educational system.

#### **1.4 Reentry Women: Helps and Hindrances**

Studies have shown that, on campus, male-oriented curricula, biases in hiring, tenure, and promotion of women faculty, and acts of outright degradation and violence toward women can make educational institutions not only chilly, but threatening to women students (Stalker & Prentice, 1998; Osborne, 1995; Barr & Birke, 1994; Sperling,

1991; Sandler, 1986). With specific reference to reentry women, the literature shows a wide array of factors associated with educational persistence including: availability of child care, flexibility of class scheduling, having children older than six years, support of family, friends, and campus personnel, academic and social involvement on campus, having clear educational and career goals, having adequate finances, possessing a wide variety of coping skills, and possessing strong self-esteem (Tinto, 1998; Miller, 1997/1998; Johnson-Bailey & Humphrey Brown, 1997; Goldsmith, 1995/1996; Harrington, 1993; Pitts, 1992; Fleishman, 1992; Novak & Thacker, 1991; Calloway, 1990/1991; Beutell & Greenhaus, 1983). For other women, difficulty adjusting to the student role and high attrition have been attributed to lack of finances, inconvenient scheduling of classes, family responsibilities, lack of support from friends and family or campus personnel, competing life events such as impending divorce or poor health, indecision regarding educational and career goals, difficulty managing multiple roles, inadequate study time, distance from campus, fear of change, lack of self-discipline, having children younger than six, low self-esteem, fear of success, and lack of child care (Home & Hinds, 2000; Stalker & Prentice, 1998; Goldsmith, 1995/1996; Harrington, 1993; Pitts, 1992; Novak & Thacker 1991; Sperling, 1991; Calloway, 1990/1991; Altamaier & McNabb, 1984; Reimal, 1976; Astin, 1976). Other barriers encountered by reentry women may include problems with admissions standards, attitudes of instructors and younger students, ineligibility for some scholarships and allowances (many of which require full-time status), insufficient financial assistance (and the large investment of time and energy required to procure that assistance), and lack of proximity to post-secondary institutions (see Stalker & Prentice, 1998 for a full discussion of these barriers).

### **1.5 The Homemakers**

As outlined above, mature women may exhibit a wide range of reentry needs. While a handful of studies focus on the ways in which being a mother affects women in their roles as students, (e.g. Fisher Lavell, 1998; Whitaker, 1998; Conway, 1996; Wiebe,

1993), most of the recent studies group together reentry women who have been employed with reentry women who have been full-time mothers. In contrast, more specific attention to the “reentry homemaker” tends to be confined to older studies, conducted when the “working mother” was a relatively “new” phenomenon. The lack of attention devoted to the reentry homemaker in recent work may be a reflection of changing societal norms; the full-time mother is no longer the norm, and may therefore be viewed as “less interesting” or “less current” than the “working mother”. Alternatively, other researchers may view their work on “mothering” per se as reflecting the experiences and needs of both employed and at-home mothers. A third possible explanation for the general lack of attention is that full-time homemaking is often viewed as a luxury of white, relatively wealthy women, and much of the recent work has been examining reentry women in terms of race and class issues (e.g. Rodebaugh, 1999; Hall & Donaldson, 1997; Johnson-Bailey & Humphrey Brown, 1997; Lawson, 1994) in a much-needed effort to break down the myth that “reentry women” are a homogenous group.

Astin (1976) notes that lack of confidence is an issue when one has been out of school for a number of years, “particularly if she has been a homemaker in the interim” (pp.56-57). The conflicts a reentry homemaker may experience include feeling overwhelmed by attempting to pile the responsibilities of school onto an already full schedule of academic and social activities and guilt for being unable to attend fully to family needs (Brooks, 1976). Ballmer and Cozby (1981) write that returning women must reevaluate their priorities in order to survive academically, and that the new priorities will necessarily take some commitment away from the home. For many women, the return “requires an investment of time, energy, and ego into school which previously had been spent nurturing a family” (Ballmer & Cozby 1981, p. 1019). A returning woman may also be:

torn between her desire to fulfill her own potential and her desire to be loved by the man in her life. The two aims appear mutually exclusive to many women

raised in the old tradition, in which intellectual achievement precludes femininity and attractiveness to the male (Ballmer & Cozby, 1981, p.1019).

### **1.6 Programs for Reentry Women**

Across North American post-secondary institutions, there exists a wide array of programs and services intended to ease the transition into higher education and to enhance academic outcome. The availability of such supports will, of course, vary from institution to institution. In the past, post-secondary facilities have geared these programs toward traditional-aged students. In more recent years, however, there has been a shift towards increased programming for non-traditional students, including reentry women (Thacker & Novak, 1991). Both existing programs and program recommendations vary dramatically according to their focus, length, and comprehensiveness (see, for example, Barr & Birke, 1994; Fleishman, 1992; Sperling, 1991; McElhiney 1990; Leavitt 1989; Beutell & O'Hare, 1987; Altamaier & McNabb, 1984; Christian & Wilson, 1985). Thacker and Novak (1991) conceptualize the supports most suited to reentry women as belonging to three different categories. These are motivation supports, coping supports, and adaptation supports.

Motivation supports include pre-admission outreach, assistance with course selection, program choice, career counseling, and advice regarding financial assistance.

Coping supports include disseminating information regarding on-campus services, promotion of basic skills workshops (e.g. to enhance library skills, writing skills), flexible course scheduling, information and orientation sessions for spouses and/or older children, personal counseling which includes strategies for coping with stress, ongoing counseling, and, of course, child care.

Adaptation supports include a woman-friendly curriculum (which, for example

recognizes the contributions of women in the arts, sciences, and humanities), role modeling and mentorship by women faculty, and social functions or spaces geared towards adult women.

### **1.7 Help-Seeking Behaviors**

Despite recent advances in programming for both traditional and nontraditional students, the literature shows that reentry women may be unlikely to seek help in their adjustment to the student role (Breese & O'Toole, 1994; Leavitt, 1989; Campbell, Wilson & Hanson, 1980). Leavitt (1989) found that although 40% of the returning women in her sample reported clear signs of physical distress, including frequent headaches, difficulty sleeping, and weight gain, not one of these women sought assistance at the college counseling centre. In another study, those who reported the greatest difficulty adjusting were the least likely to use campus services (Campbell, Wilson & Hanson, 1980).

Some women apparently believe that being "mature" students, they should not need assistance from others and perceive on-campus services as being geared towards younger students. Other women are unwilling to place additional burdens upon their families (Astin, 1976). Breese and O'Toole (1994) explored the reasons behind reentry women's lack of use of on-campus services. They found that the reentry women in their sample tended to seek out only the necessary assistance for practical concerns and issues, and that any help or assistance they needed was usually found within their internal support network. While approximately one third of the 221 women they studied actively sought the assistance of a social service agency or university program or service since becoming a student, these women were more likely to turn to off-campus social service

agencies or private therapists or counselors than to seek assistance on campus.

### **1.8 Reentry Women: My Direction**

It was with the above issues and research findings in mind that I continued my study of reentry women and began to formulate the direction of my thesis project. I thought about the young, intelligent, college-educated women of the 40s and 50s for whom marriage and childrearing were central, often life-long goals (Tittle & Denker, 1980; Friedan, 1963), and about the confusion, discomfort, boredom, and depression that Brooks (1976) describes as often accompanying the reentry process among women who have been at home raising families. I also considered my own experiences in resuming the MSW program after being a full-time mother for several years. Particularly during the early stages of my transition from full-time mother to mother-student, I felt fear and self-doubt (“maybe I just can’t do it any more”), guilt (“no dear, I don’t have time to volunteer in your classroom this term”), and, at times, frustration (“the kids have no clean clothes to wear, we have a dinner tonight with my husband’s coworkers, and the paper that’s due tomorrow just isn’t up to my usual standards”).

I also thought about how, in our society, external contradictions may contribute to the internal contradictions women feel about their roles as women. In a recent study, Novack and Novack (1996) asked young undergrads about their futures. When asked about the care of future children, 67% of women and 84% of men believed that women should stay at home with a newborn for the first few months. Almost 80% of both males and females planned to eventually attend graduate school, 97% planned to marry, and 72% intended to have children. The researchers asked the students whether they would choose career or marriage if the two were mutually exclusive. Interestingly, 65% of

women who would choose marriage also believed strongly that they should stay home with a newborn, while 45% of women who would prefer a career also believed that they should be at home. It would be interesting to see the students' answers had they been asked how long the mother should remain at home. A few months? Until children are in preschool? Grade one? High school? Novack and Novack (1996) concluded, "in general, the results reveal a set of images for young women that offer both great promise and possible frustration" (p. 71).

In another study, male and female students under age 24 rated continuously employed mothers of infants more negatively than those who interrupted or discontinued their employment to care for their babies. "This preference for interrupted employment may not reflect social reality" (Bridges & Etaugh, 1995 p.376).

Kaplan and Granrose (1993) studied the factors influencing women's decisions to leave an organization following childbirth. When they compared mothers who chose to stay home with mothers who returned to work after childbirth, they found that:

when women's jobs were not challenging, income was adequate and their spouse gave them limited support for working, withdrawing from the work force seemed the preferable choice [but, for career mothers] a more interesting, more demanding job coupled with a supportive husband with a lower income kept them in the work force after having a baby (p. 51).

In view of this literature, I wanted to examine the decision making processes of reentry women who have been full-time, at-home mothers, in order to further understanding of the conflicts, pressures, and supports they encounter, and the ways in which they expand their identities as wives and mothers to "achieve personal growth within the context of their families" (Leavitt, 1989, p. 301).

## **Chapter 2: Reentry Women: Theoretical Perspectives**

In order to study at-home moms who go back to school, I was looking for a framework that could both accommodate my own feminist stance, with an emphasis on gender inequality and women's roles as nurturers, and be useful as a theoretical approach and a practical tool.

Over the past few decades, theoretical discussion on reentry women has been focused in four major areas. These are: (1) "differences" among women; (2) developmental factors (i.e. theories of women's development); (3) role theory; and (4) social/institutional factors, as identified in feminist theory (e.g. barriers to full-participation in the educational system). In this section, I examine some of the theoretical literature relevant to women's reentry into post-secondary education. I include a brief overview of the literatures on reentry and "difference", reentry and role theory, developmental approaches, and feminist approaches. This is followed by an account of Ebaugh's model of role exit.

### **2.1 Reentry and "Difference"**

In the early 70s the outflow of women from the home and into the educational system and the labor market was a relatively new phenomenon. Early explorations of this exodus included efforts to distinguish different "types" of women (e.g. Tinsley & Faunce, 1978; Gysbers, Johnston & Gust, 1968). Such studies contrasted "career types" and "homemaker types". Findings showed that, relative to homemaker types, career oriented women tended to earn significantly higher college GPAs, were more likely to have graduated from college, preferred that their daughters engage in a career or some combination of career and homemaking activities, and tended to have family backgrounds where higher education for both parents was the norm. In contrast, homemaker oriented women tended to describe themselves as patient when personal needs conflicted with the needs of others, showed preference for women's magazines as opposed to news magazines, and recalled having consistently helped with household

chores, usually from an early age. In the “homemaker type” work pattern, employment was considered secondary while in the “career-type”, employment was considered primary.

Similarly, O’Connell (1977) differentiated reentry college women from wives/mothers in terms of life style, personality, goals, attitudes and general approach to life. Her intent was to explain why some married women resume their post-secondary educations whereas others do not. She found, for example, that homemaking was significantly more satisfying to housewives than to college women. O’Connell also found that the college women had more self-actualizing, achievement-oriented, and dominant personalities than the housewives. She didn’t ask what her participants’ plans had been prior to childrearing, or what events or combination of events had propelled the women back into higher education.

The reentry literature shows that any of these “types” of women could eventually enter or return to the post-secondary system. Further, such differences may reflect innate differences among women, social conditioning, current lifestyle, or some combination of the three. For example, it is equally possible that the homemaker types remembered helping around the house from an early age because they enjoyed it or because a girl’s homemaking skills were highly valued in the parental home. This type of approach carries both potential help and potential harm for reentry women; while these studies do underscore the wide variability among women, they may also point towards the erroneous conclusion that only the career oriented types (those most closely resembling the young men for whom post-secondary education was originally intended) are likely to appear as reentry students, and thus lead to programming that ignores the needs of nontraditional students. This type of study also raises numerous questions relevant to an understanding of reentry women. For example, what happens if a “stable career type” winds up as a homemaker, or an at-home-parent? How does this affect her self-esteem, sense of well-being, and educational and career goals?

Much of the remaining theoretical work on reentry women can be loosely divided into two major approaches, those that emphasize a stage, or developmental approach, and those that emphasize roles.

## **2.2 Reentry Within Adult Development**

Much of our knowledge of adult development has been drawn from research with all male subjects, or written solely from the perspective of male authors, including Kohlberg, Erikson, Levinson and Freud (Caffarella & Olson, 1993). Leavitt (1989) writes that early stage theories followed the lives of men and described normal adult development as a striving for independence and autonomy. In contrast, more recent work focuses upon women's patterns of development. For example, Caffarella and Olson (1993) found personal relationships, a sense of connectedness, and a search for identity, and not the "male" pattern of a quest for independence and autonomy, to be key issues throughout women's development.

In addition to concerns with the male bias inherent in many of the developmental approaches, others have criticized stage theories for their emphasis on orderly and sequential progression through the life cycle. Yet, just as many women do not fit into the traditional male model of adult development, given births to unmarried people, divorce, remarriage, blending of families, delayed childbearing and new reproductive technologies, so, too, do a growing number of families not fit the traditional, sequential model of adult development (Eichler, 1988). Further:

some women have firm occupational dreams as young adults, while others develop major career aspirations at mid-life or beyond, and still others choose to invest their life dreams in home and family life. Who is to say which pattern is right or more correct because it fits or does not fit into a preconceived theory about how adults should be developing? (Caffarella & Olson, 1993, pp. 146-147).

According to Breese and Felty (1996), stage theories are attempts to provide a comforting structure to adult uncertainties, but physical maturity "is no longer (or perhaps never was) the period of social age marked off by relatively clear cut, tranquil

events in the life-cycle”(p. 68).

Rather than try to mask the varied courses of women’s development, or to denigrate women for “failing” to comply to (more typically male) patterns of sequential, age-linked development, it makes more sense to try to *understand* women’s choices and patterns of development (Gilligan, 1982). Indeed, several of the developmentally oriented studies on reentry women that I have reviewed provide important insights into women’s life journeys. Across these studies, there is general agreement that women resume their educations because of a combination of societal forces and life transitions (Scheifele, 1995/1996; Pitts, 1992). The goals of reentry women include: becoming “educated”; present or potential status; an opportunity to prove themselves, to “become somebody”; the development of a new identity; financial gain or economic self-sufficiency; and, career advancement (Luttrell, 1997; Scheifele, 1995/1996; Conway, 1996; Edwards, 1993a, 1993c; Wiebe, 1993;).

Astin (1976) suggests school reentry is part of a redefinition of the self in terms of new roles and experiences, a search for identity and integrity. Often occurring at a time when family demands decrease, the reentry process often begins with a need for redirection, accomplishment, and new work orientation. Similarly, Brandenburg (1974) recognizes the “middle motherhood” years as a critical period for women, a time of career exploration and identity crisis. She defines this time as typically, though not always, occurring between the ages of 35 and 40 when the demands on a mother’s time and energy decrease as her children enter school. For some, identity issues and feelings of boredom or failure motivate the return to school, while others are motivated by specific occupational goals. Brooks (1976) comments, “many women begin the reentry process feeling a confusing discomfort about their present life. They may feel bored and depressed but unable to pinpoint the difficulty” (p. 33).

Leavitt (1989) writes that reentry women differ from younger students in terms of their developmental tasks. The goal of the younger student is to find herself whereas

reentry women, "having already formed their identities as wives and mothers" must "expand this identity and achieve personal growth within the context of their families" (p.301). She looked beyond the individual, and studied reentry women using family systems theories, change theories and developmental theory of adult women. Within family systems theory, a change in one member results in a "ripple effect" of changes for each family member and the family unit as a whole as the family norms, the rules and patterns that define behaviors and expectations, shift to accommodate the changes.

In framing their work with reentry women, Thacker and Novak (1991) draw upon a life event approach. Within this framework, "life events" are defined as stresses from the environment or life crises. These life events create individual strain, which leads to adaptation or change. They build upon the work of Hultsch and Deutsch (as cited in Thacker & Novak, 1991), who describe three types of life events. These are: (1) normative age-graded events (e.g. the launching of the last child); (2) non-normative events (e.g. a sudden illness); and (3) historical events (e.g. an economic depression). Thacker and Novak expand upon this model by focusing on the individual as an active agent in the change process, rather than as a passive object. They add to the model self-initiated life events, which are spawned by an inner desire to change. This drive for change is often seen in mid-life, when people look for variety, new challenges, and opportunities for personal growth. Although changes associated with a woman's mid-life return to school or work are self-initiated, these types of life events can "create stress as great or greater than the other types of life events" (p. 15). Within their approach, a life event creates stress. Coping is defined as the way a person responds to a life event. Individual patterns of coping vary according to types of stress and in terms of coping success. The success of coping can depend upon the range of resources available to the individual. These may include health, finances, social supports, occupation, and socialization experiences. Adaptation is the outcome, the individual's response to the life event. Thacker and Novak's work expands upon the more traditional life-cycle

approaches in that it defines the life-cycle stage in terms of a person's social roles, emphasizes the individual's feelings of commitment and responsibility to those roles, and recognizes that role strain may occur when the individual faces competing role demands.

These studies suggest that, when viewed within a developmental perspective, school reentry represents a challenge for growth for both the individual and her family. As reentry women search for independence, identity, autonomy, new challenges, or career advancement, life-cycle stage may affect the type and amount of strain they feel, the types of resources they can use to cope with stress, and the degree and kind of additional assistance required for successful reentry adjustment.

### **2.3 Reentry and Roles**

Numerous studies have examined reentry women within a role perspective, often in conjunction with a developmental approach. It is generally acknowledged that school reentry represents a role transition and presents the risk of role strain or role conflict. Caffarella and Olson (1993) suggest that women have little clear direction about how to reconcile the roles of mother, spouse, and worker. Not surprisingly, women students who are juggling family and paid work responsibilities may experience chronic role strain, and this likelihood increases with increased work and family demands; women students who are working long hours each week and/or caring for young or special needs children are particularly at-risk (Ortiz, 1995; Home, 1993). Home and Hinds (2000) show how inadequate finances can increase role conflict in reentry women; without enough income, these women may decrease such expenses as child care and day camps, or they may increase the time spent in paid employment. Either option reduces the time available for studies.

Leavitt (1989) describes reentry women as being caught in a temporary state of turmoil as they try both to redefine themselves and to maintain stability by relying upon their former meanings. These women must resolve how to integrate modern and traditional views of women's roles and how to balance personal needs with family needs.

Although the women seem clear about how to meet the demands of each role separately, when these roles compete for her energies and attention her loyalties become divided (p. 320).

This uncertain, transitional process may account for some of the feelings of inadequacy and low self-esteem reported by many reentry women. These stresses “need to be viewed as largely normative, the outgrowths of transition rather than symptoms of individual disturbance” (Leavitt, 1989, p. 312).

According to Menaghan (1989), research must move beyond mere addition and subtraction of roles to a consideration of how specific role gains and losses affect specific individuals. In a study of urban adults, she found that the likelihood of psychological distress increases not merely as role counts increase or decrease, but “when one’s role repertoire departs from the normal, expectable situation for one’s age and gender” (p. 111).

Weil (1986) interviewed reentry women in the final year of post-secondary studies. She expands upon the concept of “role” and describes the development of a “learner identity” among her participants. Learner identity “incorporates personal, social, sociopolitical, experiential and intellectual dimensions of learning, as integrated over time” (p. 223) and refers to the way in which people experience learning as facilitating or inhibiting, constructive or destructive. Weil further suggests that the construct “learner identity” relates to the situations that promote conflict, crisis, alienation, or coherence. Recent work shows that “although more people of color are enrolling in higher education, graduation rates remain dismal” (Rodebaugh, 1999, p. 1), and that feeling of belonging or of exclusion within the educational system can be powerful determinants of success and failure within that system (Rodebaugh, 1999; Johnson-Bailey & Humphrey Brown,

1997).

**Social class, gender and racial dimensions of identity seem to enhance the potential for more serious alienation and conflict...When one is forced to learn and be a learner within a framework which is permeated by the dominant value system, one's identity as a learner, and one's capacity to learn within that system, may be put at risk (Weil, 1986, p. 232).**

Among Weil's participants, a number showed that past, negative experiences in the educational system could reactivate previous anxieties, memories, and feelings of inadequacy. Weil found that after one or two years of success within the educational system, a stronger sense of the self, within the role of "learner" seems to emerge.

Beutell and Greenhaus (1983) also investigated role conflicts among reentry women. They found that, as role pressures and conflict intensify, women adhering to traditional sex-role attitudes are more likely than less traditionally-oriented women to use emotional or defensive coping strategies, and may feel the need to comply with all of the demands placed upon them rather than rearranging priorities or negotiating compromises. Some recommend programming for reentry women which focuses upon role conflicts and specific coping strategies (Robertson, 1996/1997; Beutell & O'Hare, 1987; Beutell & Greenhaus, 1983).

This brief review shows how the concept of "role" is commonly used as a frame of reference in the study of reentry women. It suggests that we go beyond the mere addition and subtraction of roles and include issues of gender, class, race, individual beliefs about age appropriate behavior, and the interplay of past and present. Though some regard the strains and conflicts associated with reentry as normative or temporary, it must be noted that not every student "adjusts", and, for others, the adjustment period is a prolonged and painful process (Leavitt, 1989). Future research needs to further address

the factors that help or hinder adjustment to the student role. In the study of reentry women who have been full-time mothers, it might be helpful to examine the ways in which the salience and centrality of the mothering role affect the salience and centrality of the student role.

#### **2.4 Feminist Theory**

Within our educational system, feminists have been analyzing gender issues with respect to the multitude of barriers that prevent the full participation of girls and women. Such barriers include: discriminatory admissions standards, discriminatory hiring practices, gender-biased course content, and lack of affordable, accessible child care (Stalker & Prentice, 1998; Sperling, 1991; Rothblum, 1988; Arnot, 1985). For many feminists, such barriers stem from sexual inequalities that are rooted in the biological family (Wilson, 1991). Within this perspective, it is assumed that the consequences of work and family life are different for women and men. While the home can be a place of warmth, security, intimacy, affection, belonging, and shelter from the pressures of public life, too often it is a place of unhappiness, loneliness, frustration, and violence (Bowlby, Gregory & McKie 1997; Armstrong & Armstrong, 1988; Mandell & Duffy, 1988).

#### **Feminism and Mothering**

The literature shows a recent increase in feminist theorizing about mothering and women's caring work (e.g. Bains, Evans & Neysmith, 1998; Thurer, 1994; Schwartz, 1993). But in a 1998 editorial in *Affilia*, Gross comments that feminist theorizing about motherhood is still too low-profile these days, and that one reason for this low visibility is that the early feminist writings on mothers and mothering, "although often thoughtful, were intensely gloomy and painfully critical of women's choices" (1998 p. 269).

Recent feminist accounts of mothering show how women themselves are often “painfully critical” of their choices regarding their public and private lives, as they attempt to reconcile their high expectations for both motherhood and their lives apart from motherhood (Thurer, 1994; Schwartz, 1993). The popular media both reflect and perpetuate this conflict by presenting “cultural images which support new career-related options while also emphasizing traditional expressions of femininity, especially marriage and motherhood” (Novack & Novack, 1996, p.62).

Hays (as cited in Gross, 1998) and Schwartz (1993) have written about the historical construction of motherhood with the intent of making explicit the beliefs and assumptions that underlie our collective vision of what mothering “ought” to be. This ideology is based on the assumptions that mothers are the ideal, preferred caretakers of children, that maternal behaviors are innate, instinctive, and personally fulfilling, that expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labor-intensive child rearing is best, and that self-sacrifice is a maternal duty. Within this ideology, maternal behavior is assumed to be inborn:

Just as trees produce oxygen effortlessly, women are purported to produce the energy necessary to maintain supportive relationships with children with relative ease (Whitaker, 1998, p. 226).

Thus, any woman is thought able to mother, yet “bad mothering” has been blamed for everything from homosexuality to delinquency to overeating (Schwartz, 1993).

In 1988, Eichler wrote:

as far as family sociology is concerned, the greatest and most important difference between the sexes is [still] in the identification of women with the family and housework and of men with paid labour (p.94).

Although many men have been increasing their participation in the private world

of nurturing, diapering, and laundering, women continue to retain the primary responsibility for house work and child rearing despite their increased participation in both the paid labor force and the educational system (The Vanier Institute, 1998; Wilson, 1991). Further, many women continue to locate their gender identity through household tasks before any “additional” activities they may undertake (e.g. DeVault as cited in Bowlby, Gregory, and McKie, 1997). In Wilson’s (1991) words:

In the twentieth century, despite longer life expectancy, smaller families, increased labour force participation, and the instability of marriage, the ideology of motherhood has been remarkably resistant to change (p. 13).

### **The Good Mother: Benign Effects?**

Recent feminist analyses of mothering and women’s caring work have presented “The Good Mother” as a culturally constructed white, middle-class phenomenon, which remains prominent in the popular media, educational system, and political and legal arenas despite the ever-increasing social and economic imperative that women also “perform” outside the home (Glenn, 1994; Whitaker, 1998). While this ideology of motherhood does concede that some mothers have to work outside the home, it classifies such an endeavor as a necessary evil (Thurer, 1994, pp. xvi, xvii). As such, the ideology of The Good Mother exacerbates differences among women - mothers, non-mothers, employed mothers, and at-home mothers, and too often is the basis of critical finger-pointing among women. This construct also excludes alternative mothering practices and beliefs and issues of race, class, and sexual orientation (Graham, 1991).

For the majority of working-class families and women - Native, whites, immigrants, African-Americans and other racial ethnic minorities, the separation between private and public spheres, between love and labor, and between full-time motherhood for women and full-time employment for men, even if desired, could not be maintained (Glenn, 1994, p. 14).

In presenting mothering as “natural” the ideology supports mother-blaming, trivializes the concerns and experiences of women, and absolves society from taking measures to enhance or support women’s lives (Schwartz, 1993). It ignores the social context of mothering, “yet poverty, sexism, racism, or war can undo any mother’s best efforts” (Thurer, 1994, p. xxii). Further, women’s withdrawals from paid labor and from school can serve as a justification for limiting women’s employment and educational opportunities. The longer hours women work in the home, and their generally smaller contribution to family income, justify their domestic responsibilities and perpetuate the ideology that defines homemaking and childrearing as uniquely “feminine” tasks (Armstrong & Armstrong, 1988).

### **The “Good Mother” and School Reentry**

In our achievement-driven society, “work” is typically defined as something for which we get paid. Work also confers status. “To work-and earn money-is also to gain status as an adult” and thus is an important way to develop both a sense of identity and a sense of self-esteem (Kaplan Daniels, 1987, p. 404). Because of the lesser value placed on work in the private realm, women themselves often devalue their own caring work; “I’m just a housewife”. In The Feminine Mystique, Friedan (1963) vividly describes the housewife as one who is “somebody’s wife” and “somebody’s mother”, who lives vicariously through others, has not developed her own interests and goals, and is irritable and constantly dissatisfied despite the beautiful home in suburbia and the two cars in the garage. Friedan writes:

A baked potato is not as big as the world, and vacuuming the living room floor-with or without makeup-is not work that takes enough thought or energy to challenge any woman’s full capacity (p. 67).

Kaplan Daniels (1987) similarly describes the day of the homemaker as one of “mindless routine” which leads to boredom, resentment, narrowing of vision and ambition, and a sense of incompetence.

How might having been a full-time, at-home mother, or having subscribed to the ideology of the “Good Mother” affect a woman’s entry and experience in college or university? Surprisingly, the substantial literature on reentry women only partially illuminates the subject. Wiebe (1993), Conway (1993), Edwards (1993a, 1993c), and Whitaker (1998) have recently explored, and provide a host of insights into, the relationship between mothering and the post-secondary experience. In these studies, however, at-home mothers are included with “working” mothers as participants, and this may cloud the overall results with respect to the experiences of full-time mothers/homemakers. This essentially opens the field for an analysis of the experiences, compromises, and needs of reentry, former at-home mothers, for it can be argued that:

Mothering is *not* a ‘role’ on a par with being a file clerk, a scientist, or a member of the Air Force. Mothering is a complicated, rich, ambivalent, vexing, joyous activity which is biological, natural, social, symbolic, and emotional. It carries profoundly resonant emotional and sexual imperatives. A tendency to downplay the differences that pertain between, say, mothering and holding down a job, not only drains our private relations of most of their significance, but also oversimplifies what can or should be done to alter things for women, who are frequently urged to change roles in order to solve their problems (Elshtain, 1981 as cited in Ribbens, 1993, pp. 11-12).

Astin (1976) found apprehension, lack of self-confidence, and guilt to be common among reentry women. “Because of an internalized concept of their primary role as wife and mother, they feel guilty about leaving their homes and families to undertake a time-consuming venture so personally fulfilling” (p. 57). Gross (1998) maintains that those mothers who attempt to engage in what she refers to as “intensive mothering” are frequently overwhelmed by the stressful and overwhelming demands on

their time, emotions, and finances and also feel intense guilt when they relinquish part of that care to others. Wiebe (1993) found that university reentry mothers were worried about how others would see them as mothers, but, that when they were satisfied with their child care arrangements, they allowed the student role to gain more strength.

Conflicting ideologies of womanhood and of motherhood - as advanced by feminist theory, psychoanalytic theory, and developmental theory - together with economic, social, and political tides, leave many women feeling confused and guilty (Schwartz, 1993). Roiphe (1996) writes that while the social scientists tell us that it is OK for mothers to work and pursue interests beyond the home, the psychiatrists remind us of the importance of a child's formative years; "How could we not be guilty, how could we not feel guilty no matter what we do. Someone is getting short shrift; most often that someone is ourselves" (p. 110).

### **2.5 Ebaugh's Model of Role Exit**

Approximately one third of Canadian women are full-time homemakers. Given our society's marital instability, inflation, and male employment instability, however, few women can afford to make full-time homemaking a long-term commitment (Wilson, 1991). My review of the literature has shown that women's career development is seldom orderly and sequential; women tend to drop in and out of the labor force and the educational system in an effort to accommodate their families' needs. Women do this despite the lifelong effects of such absences on seniority, benefits, pension entitlement, and the increased risk of poverty in the case of marital break-up and in old age (Eichler, 1988). In a critical review of the literature on the psychosocial development of women, Caffarella and Olson (1993) found that "diverse and non-linear patterns of development

characterized by discontinuities and periods of stability and transition are the norm for women” (p. 125). Conway (1993) refers to this relatively new kind of family arrangement, in which the mother leaves the labor force during the pre-school years and then returns to paid employment as the “transitional family”. Despite the guilt, the uncertainties, and the personal sacrifices, by becoming increasingly visible in the public world, women have been challenging the ideology of the Good Mother. “Although women’s identities as mothers may still be primary, they are no longer the only ones” (Glenn, 1994, p. 11).

During my literature review, I read Becoming an Ex: The Process of Role Exit, written by Helen Rose Fuchs Ebaugh (1988). Though the work did not deal with reentry women, I was immediately impressed by the applicability of Ebaugh’s approach to my own journey in the worlds of employment, motherhood and education, and by its seeming compatibility with much of the reentry literature. I found Ebaugh’s analysis of the role exit process both intriguing and illuminating, and began to wonder how it might shed light on the struggles, compromises, disappointments, and triumphs of other reentry mother-students.

Ebaugh defines role exit as “the process of disengagement from a role that is central to one’s self-identity and the reestablishment of an identity in a new role that takes into account one’s ex-role” (p. 1). She contends that one of the main reasons the concept of role exit has not gained prominence in the social science literature is that its widespread occurrence is a characteristic of only the past thirty years or so. Other than in times of war or political upheaval, in earlier periods of history, people were much less mobile in terms of role changes. Role exit was largely limited to widowhood,

unemployment, or ostracism from a group. People who lived in earlier times usually spent their entire lives in one marriage, one career, one religion, and one geographical location. Today, however, most of us make at least one major shift in some area of our lives that we consider central to who we are. Some will make several major role changes during their lifetimes, sometimes simultaneously (Ebaugh, 1988).

What characterizes the ex is the fact that the new identity incorporates vestiges and residuals of the previous role. To be a nonmember of a group is essentially different from being an ex-member, in that nonmembers have never been part of the group. An individual has a self-identity that is formed as a result of numerous life experiences. For the ex-member a central experience is having been part of a previous group or social category (p. 4).

The process of role exit, with its focus on the tensions between past, present, and future, seems particularly appropriate for women who are asking themselves who they are other than wife and mother, women who are in and out of school, the labor force, marriages, fulltime parenting, and also dealing with the role exits of significant others, such as a spouse's job loss.

The lives of mother-students can never be understood in isolation from the historical and contemporary social relations that shape their personal and school related possibilities (Whitaker, 1998, p. 17).

Ebaugh's model of role exit was based upon interviews with individuals who had made a voluntary exit from a role that s/he considered central to her/his identity. Her sample included ex-nuns, ex-convicts, ex-alcoholics, mothers without custody, divorced men and women, ex-prostitutes, ex-doctors, retirees, and transsexuals. On the basis of these interviews, Ebaugh found that the process of voluntarily exiting a central role followed a sequential pattern across individuals. Her model of role exit can be summarized as follows:

(1) First Doubts - beginning to question or doubt one's role commitment and redefining one's situation;

(2) Seeking Alternatives - evaluating the costs and benefits associated with an alternative role;

(3) Turning Points - events that force one to consider doing something different. Astin (1976) identified a decrease in family demands as a turning point for the largest proportion of women in continuing education. Wiebe (1993) also found that the women in her study had delayed entrance into university because of the demands of family roles. In addition to caring for young children, these family demands included family health issues, interpersonal problems, and the educational demands of a husband's job where he was given the first opportunity to take postsecondary schooling.

Breese and O'Toole (1995) asked (male and female) reentry students if they enrolled in university due to a life transition, and if so, what transitions? While the majority indicated transitions such as job loss, relocation, divorce, wanting a career, children growing, injury, or illness, even those who identified themselves as not having undergone a transition indicated wanting a better job, completing or upgrading education, fulfilling personal goals, boredom, or aging. Each of these transitions, or a desire for transition, could be viewed as a turning point in the role exit process. In Wiebe's (1993) study of reentry university women, participants generally identified a particular trigger event that preceded their reentry decision. These triggers included the youngest child entering school, the need for personal and intellectual stimulation, dissatisfaction with employment, marriage break-up, learning information about a particular program of study, or self-discovery through counseling or personal crisis.

(4) Creating the Ex Role - becoming removed from the past role while experiencing the social expectations of the new role. Whitaker (1998) describes the early stages of this transitional process as experienced by the mother-students in her study:

The identity of motherhood seemed to be so integral to the way these women thought about themselves that their willingness to gradually adjust their domestic responsibilities as they became more involved in the public sphere required a shift in personal identity as well as a practical change in routine (p. 161).

How do the women in the present study leave behind the role of “full-time mother” and build an identity beyond home and family? While doing so, how do they reconcile the ongoing family demands and attachments with the ongoing demands of academia?

### **Role Exit: Additional Variables**

What breathes life into the model and makes it exciting as a framework for examining women’s lives within a feminist orientation, is Ebaugh’s identification and descriptions of the variables that can help, hinder or halt the role exit process. Ebaugh states that some of these characteristics or variables will be more salient than others in each particular stage of the process, and that they also crisscross each other and become mutually interdependent in terms of the outcome of the exit process. These variables include:

(1) Voluntariness. The degree of choice an individual has in making an exit. In their study of reentry women and role exit, Breese and O’Toole (1995) added to Ebaugh’s concept of “voluntariness”. They added the concept “type of transition”. In their analysis, the transition may be initiated by an external event (e.g. divorce, last child entering school, or a job layoff), or by an internal nonevent (e.g. boredom, stagnation, a rethinking of personal identity). They found that both voluntary and involuntary elements were typically present within individual reentry women, but that some women emphasized personal autonomy, while others felt powerless.

Within a feminist perspective, the notion of “voluntariness” is inextricably linked to two of Ebaugh’s other variables, Degree of Control and Social Desirability. “Degree

of control” refers to the relative influence or power of the individual, institutions, and other individuals. “Social desirability” refers to the importance of societal expectations in the role exit process. Given our society’s conflicting ideologies, “at-home mother” is both an idealized and a stigmatized role. A woman’s caring work may give her an overall sense of well-being and satisfaction. On the other hand, because the at-home mother is no longer the norm, her work may be increasingly devalued. She may even be regarded as deviant (Secret & Green, 1998). Further, Luxton (1982) describes a strong current of “scorn and contempt” for housewives which stems, in part, from the belief that motherwork isn’t really “work” (p. 119). Depending upon one’s ideological perspective, the reentry woman may be seen as exiting her rightful role (The Good Mother) or a stigmatized role (Hausfrau), and as entering a stigmatized role (Neglectful Mother), or an idealized role (Woman of the New Millennium).

(2) Centrality of the role. The degree to which a given role is central to one’s identity. This can also be viewed as the degree of emotional intensity that an individual invests in a specific role. Not all roles a person holds during a lifetime will be equally important to that individual’s personal identity. At the low end of the continuum are behaviors involving little effort and little engagement of the “self”. At the opposite end of the continuum there is a high degree of effort in the role and a high degree of involvement.

Of her first year as a reentry student, Ribbens (1993) writes:

[...] my life seemed to become split into two; doing the course and being a wife and this was not merely a matter of having two different roles in my life. I had previously done this without any problems when in paid work. Family and education both seemed to require me to play not a role, but to be wholeheartedly involved in each to the exclusion of the other (p. 13).

One of the major goals of this study is to establish how the salience and centrality

of the mothering role affect the salience and centrality of the student role. For Ribbens, “mother/wife” and “student” are central roles that vie for attention. In contrast, Breese and O’Toole (1994) found that few of the reentry women in their study had what they considered a strong connection with the student role. They conceptualize the role of student not as a central role, but as a marginal role, a bridge leading to a completed role exit.

The centrality of mothering will also vary across women. For example, among the mother-students in Whitaker’s (1998) sample of reentry women, mothering was a top priority in their lives:

They viewed the anxieties associated with mothering as chosen and rarely thought of these activities as “work”. Thinking of mothering this way rationalized their heavy workloads and helped to assure that mothering remained central to their lives (p. 159).

In the present study, I began with the premise that having been stay-at-home mothers for an extended period was an indication that “mother” was a central role, one involving a high degree of effort and involvement. On the other hand, there might also be women in the sample who were at home, but who would have preferred to remain in the workforce or the educational system. Moen (as cited in Secret & Green, 1998) defines “captives” as mothers who prefer full-time homemaking but enter and remain in the workforce because of economic necessity. These conflicted mothers, being ambivalent about their worker-mother role are especially vulnerable to the stresses and pressures that are common in managing work-family demands. We could extend the notion of “captive” or conflicted mother to include women who have been at home but who would have preferred remaining in the workforce or the educational system. In today’s society, increasing numbers of women desire personal and professional autonomy

(Kaufman, 1999). In the having and care taking of children, women may fear becoming “50s throwbacks” (Schwartz, 1993). How might a period of at-home mothering affect the educational and career goals of these women?

(3) Reversibility. Is the role exit permanent (e.g. a sex-change) or can the individual reverse the decision? (e.g. drop out of school). Rates of attrition show that, for many women, school reentry is a reversible decision. In a 1993 study on the persistence of reentry women, Harrington began her study during the spring semester with a sample of 150 undergraduate college women aged 24 and older; by the fall session, 41% of the women had dropped out of the college. In her interviews with both persisters and nonpersisters, Harrington found that persisters showed more specificity of educational goals, more spousal support, and a stronger sense of commitment to or focus on their educational experience.

Breese and O’Toole (1995) discuss school reentry in terms of Ebaugh’s model. They argue that school reentry is an inherently reversible situation, but that school persistence is most likely when there is a “recrystallization” of self-concept. Wilkie and Thompson (1993) further illuminate this notion of “recrystallization”. They found that, compared to their peers, first-year reentry women reported feeling more inadequate, self-conscious, voiceless, and stupid. The authors also found that there was a major shift in these negative perceptions between reentry women’s first and second years; compared to other college seniors, reentry women reported the most positive perceptions of their classroom experiences. The authors acknowledge that the women with the most negative experiences may have withdrawn from the college, thereby contributing to the overall increases in positive perceptions by the second year. They also surmise that some of the

change is attributable to a combination of factors including adaptation to the college environment, experiencing increased drive to achieve goals, coming to terms with subtle sexist classroom practices, and experiencing support from faculty, peers, and significant others.

Reframing such findings within Ebaugh's model, it would appear that the salience and centrality of the student role are strongly connected with persistence among reentry women, and that numerous variables, including the influence of others, and degree of perceived control, might determine the extent to which "student" becomes, or does not become, a central role.

(4) Individual versus group exit. Is the individual exiting in isolation or as part of some aggregate of individuals? According to Ebaugh, the simple awareness that others are exiting/entering similar roles can expedite the role exit process. Recognition of group exit was a major factor in creating a sense of control and choice among her interviewees. If, for example, a full-time mother's peer group is composed solely of full-time mothers, she might find the transition to post-secondary education more challenging than might a woman whose peers were making, or had made, the transition from full-time mother to mother-student, or to "working-mother". In her study of the social support systems of reentry community college women, Abbott (1995/1996) found that her participants felt that their social contacts were often a greater hindrance than help. In her study of mature women students, Edwards (1993a) found that a majority of the black and white working-class women in their study (whose friends usually did not have any experience with higher or post-secondary education) were concerned that their peer group might ostracize them or regard them as snobbish or stuck-up. In contrast, only a third of the white

middle-class women expressed similar concerns. All of the women, however, (black, white, working-class, middle-class) felt that they were doing something unusual, perhaps even deviant. Further, among reentry women, a sense of isolation, of not fitting in with other, younger students can contribute to feelings of marginality, of being left out. This lack of connection with others can impede the transition into post-secondary education (Fleishman, 1992).

(5) Single versus multiple exits. People often go through more than one exit at a time. Some exits are relatively independent of each other while others compete for time and energy (e.g. the full-time mother who simultaneously gets a job and goes back to school). As has been shown, personal factors such as divorce or separation may serve as turning points in the decision to reenter school, yet, depending upon the individual, may also result in educational postponement, or attrition, or may increase the degree of difficulty associated with transition into the post-secondary system (Wiebe, 1993; Harrington, 1993).

(6) Degree of awareness. This refers to the degree to which an individual proceeds through the process with deliberation and awareness. In their study of self-definition among women students, Breese and O'Toole (1995) found that:

for all of the women in the sample, there was an undertaking of the deliberate act of enrolling and coming to assume the identity of student. Thus, each woman noted some dysfunction or unhappiness in their present situation, and deliberately did something to alter their identity trajectory (p. 36).

Pre-admission outreach, assistance with course selection and program choice, and career counseling are measures intended to increase the degree of deliberation and awareness among students as they enter post-secondary education.

(7) A critical variable is the influence of other people. At any stage, the reactions of

others can delay, abort, encourage, or discourage the role exit process. In Ebaugh's sample, a negative reaction from a significant other often interrupted the exiting process and caused the individual to reevaluate his or her role situation. In five instances, negative responses on the part of spouses or close friends retarded the process for five or more years.

The "influence of others" can be both overt and covert. Either way, its effects can be powerful. A sample of black women who dropped out of a university nursing program felt that their earlier education had not provided them with the requisite information for success in higher education, in that that they had received no guidance regarding college preparation courses or financial assistance (Rodebaugh, 1999). "In sum, the implication from society [...] was that they could not be a part of higher education" (Rodebaugh, 1999, p. 3). Johnson-Baily and Brown (1997) found the presence of black peers and faculty and the supportive attitudes and behaviors of college staff to be major factors in the participation and retention of black reentry college women. Two of the women in this study described how graduate coordinators had actively discouraged their application to graduate school. One woman was told that she was not graduate school material, and the other was told that she was not a serious student because she wanted to attend part time. One woman delayed her reentry for two years, the other for 18 years.

In the literature, the academic climate has been described as "chilly" for women in general, and for reentry mother-students in particular (Stalker & Prentice, 1989; Edwards, 1993a, 1993b; Sandler, 1986). Edwards (1993b) found that reentry women in her study felt that their private world experiences as mothers were rarely valued in the public world of education or employment. "There was a feeling that family life

experiences were somehow inferior even where they might have been relevant” (p. 165).

One thing sticks in my mind that one particular person said...I happened to go along to his room when he was marking one of my essays and he said, this is really good, you write really well, and he sounded so surprised! And I said, what did you expect then! So I think maybe sometimes people, if you are a mother, people define you as that and they don't really consider that you can do anything else! And that wasn't because he's a particularly insensitive person or whatever. But I do remember the note of surprise and I've never forgiven him for that! (Edwards, 1993b, p. 166-167).

A number of studies show the importance of faculty and staff attitudes and behaviors in the reentry process (e.g. Johnson-Bailey & Humphrey Brown, 1997; Edwards, 1993a; Fleishman, 1992; Novak & Thacker, 1991). Other work stresses the attitudes and behavior of family and friends. Novak and Thacker (1991) found that spouses, children, and fellow students offered the strongest psychological support to reentry women. Older children were identified as a strong source of emotional support while younger children tended to be associated with the greatest role strain. Psychological support from children best predicted a woman's satisfaction in school.

Though mother-students typically worry about short-changing their children, and feelings of guilt form a common theme in the accounts of reentry mothers (Edwards, 1993a; Wiebe, 1993; Leavitt, 1989), the literature shows that a mother's return to school generally benefits the children. The children of reentry women will reap any economic/material benefits that accrue from their mothers' school achievements. Aside from this, reentry mothers have reported that their children show: increased independence; increased respect for the mother; increases in sharing behaviors; improved school performance; increased performance of household chores; increased interest in books; and pride in their mother's accomplishments (Whitaker, 1998; Leavitt, 1989; Brandenburg, 1974).

A smaller proportion of mothers (or their children) indicate that the children show: increased feelings of competition (especially in older children); resentment and regressive behavior; concerns about spending less time with their mothers; and, an unwillingness to discuss the mothers' school life (Edwards, 1993a; Astin, 1976; Brandenberg, 1974).

Some mothers describe their own feelings of frustration, fatigue, and anger, particularly during times of heavy coursework, and resent school's impingement on family time (Whitaker, 1998). On the other hand, mothers have reported personal pride in their ability to serve as positive role models for their children, to offer their children a better way of life, and to develop and maintain special family times (Whitaker, 1998; Luttrell, 1997; Redding & Dowling, 1992).

Wiebe (1993) found that reentry women placed greater emphasis on the interactions with their children than they did on interactions with their spouses or partners. Nevertheless, reentry women often identify their spouses as important sources of support. This support may, for example, be financial, verbal (talking, listening, reading or revising essays, offering encouragement, expressing pride in their accomplishments), or concrete (performing household duties or providing child care) (Edwards, 1993a; Novak and Thacker, 1991; Brandenberg, 1974). Whitaker (1998) found that married women described their husbands as generally supportive, but "spoke with resignation about their relatively unchanged level of responsibility as wives and mothers" (p. 125). Some partners of women who return to school express concerns, and, sometimes hostility, about: spending less time together; strain on the relationship; their wives becoming restless; their partners' increased independence; and school reentry

being part of a plan to end the relationship (Edwards, 1993a; Astin, 1976; Brooks, 1976).

Resistance from husbands can take many forms, from overt hostility to subtle behaviors, such as asking for affection when their wife is studying. Some husbands feel quite supportive until they realize their wife views school more seriously than bridge club and is not as readily available as before (Brooks, 1976, p. 36).

Edwards (1993a) found that, where there was evidence of preexisting problems in a relationship, that a woman's entry into the educational system can exacerbate these problems, and that women's status as students can threaten their partners in various ways. In these cases, some women attempted to remedy marital problems by strengthening the connection between their public and private lives, for example, by discussing school work at home, or by bringing the spouse or children to the campus. Others tried to minimize these problems by physically and mentally separating their education from family life, leaving them with the uncomfortable sense of having two different lives.

Edwards (1993a) found that although school reentry tended to have little effect on the practical division of household labor, that many of the women in her sample apparently valued the emotional/psychological support they received from their partners more than concrete support. Partners' lack of interest or refusal to discuss the women's educational experiences "was linked in these women's minds with their partners not really caring about them" (p. 109).

Parents and partners were likely to believe that education should not enter the home and affect relationships within it, interfering with the women's domestic and emotional commitments, or lead the women to 'get above themselves'; or perhaps more accurately, to 'get above' partners and maybe also parents, by displaying their knowledge to them. Where the women's views on the way to have family and education coexisting in their lives concurred with these definitions then power battles, particularly with partners, were much less in evidence" (Edwards, 1993, p. 126).

Edwards (1993a) also found that some of the reentry women in her sample had been censured by their parents, usually by mothers or mothers-in-law, because of their studies. These mother-students were told how lucky they were because their partners put up with so much due to their studying. Parents could also withdraw, or not offer, practical support (e.g. childcare) because of their disapproval. In contrast, half of the women interviewed said that their parents were supportive of their decision, would proudly tell people about their daughters' achievements, and offer concrete support.

From this discussion, it appears that other people can both mitigate and exacerbate the stresses associated with reentry. We do need further research, however on the degree to which the disapproval or support of others affects enrolment, achievement, and persistence among reentry women.

#### **Additional Variables In The Role Exit Process**

Ebaugh identifies several additional factors that may influence the duration and degree of difficulty an individual experiences in the role exit process and in creating an ex identity. These are:

- (1) **Role Commitment**. This is the probability that the individual will remain in the role.
- (2) **Side Bets**. Side bets are incentives to remain in a given role that may enhance role commitment and decrease the likelihood of role exit. Side bets might include security, status, friendships, and emotional attachment. Leavitt (1989) found that reentry women who lost or relinquished old friends tended to do much better academically than those who maintained old friendships. Half of those women who gave up friendships formed new ones with other returning women. They identified these new friends as their most important stress reduction resource.

Side bets are particularly important in cases where an individual had always wanted a particular role and was socialized to identify with this role from early childhood:

In all these cases, prolonged identification with a specific role became a side bet over time and resulted in a sense of loss when the individual considered giving up this long-standing aspect of self-identity (Ebaugh, 1988, p. 95).

(3) Role Residual. This is the identification that an individual maintains with a prior role such that the individual experiences certain aspects of the role after he or she has exited from it (Ebaugh, 1988, p. 175). This is also referred to as a “hangover identity”. The more personal involvement and commitment an individual had in a former role, that is, the more self-identity was equated with role definitions, the more role residual tended to manifest itself after the exit (Ebaugh, 1988, p.178).

When a full-time mother returns to school, she exits the “full-time mother” role. She is not relinquishing the “mother” role. For these women, then, one might expect powerful role residual. When women enter the public sphere, their sense of accomplishment “is often undermined by chronic ambivalence about the morality of their choices and the adequacy of their mothering” (Thurer, 1994, p. 270). With regard to reentry women, Edwards (1993a) found that an overwhelming majority of mature women students she interviewed held themselves responsible for the happiness and contentment of the other members of their families, particularly their children and partners.

(4) Dissonance. Dissonance may result from two or more incompatible beliefs such as “women should stay home and raise children” and “I ought to work because we need the money” or it may result from a conflict between one’s attitudes and behavior.

### **2.6 Role Exit Revisited: Role, Stage, and Feminist Perspectives**

When viewed in context of the “role” and “developmental” literatures, it would

seem that Ebaugh's model has the potential to mitigate the weaknesses inherent in both. Ebaugh's model of role exit, like role theory itself, has been criticized for failing to address "the dynamics of the production and institutionalization of roles", thus introducing "a bias toward normative consensus in social analysis" (Wacquant, 1990, p. 400). Ebaugh, however, launches similar criticisms against stage theories for focusing on individual development apart from the social factors that influence it and for assuming that there is harmony between the social environment and the individual. She describes role exit as being a social process that is determined and shaped by various sociohistorical factors.

Feminist scholars have criticized role theory for its failure to "acknowledge gender as a fundamental organizing principle of human affairs which cannot be compartmentalized into a particular role" and for failing to consider how race and gender "intersect to produce different realities across social groups" (Anderson & Rondi, 1998, p. 156). While the model does not specifically examine the effects of gender or race on role exit, by presenting variables such as "degree of control" (which includes the relative power/influence of the individual, institutions, and other individuals), "voluntariness", and "social desirability", the model seems to invite an analysis that could include issues of gender, culture, and socialization.

Edwards (1993a) writes that role theory perpetuates "victim-blaming" by presenting the view that if women would decrease the number of their roles, or juggle roles more skillfully, that the associated role conflict or role strain would cease. In her analysis, however, Ebaugh goes beyond the mere addition and subtraction of various roles and offers a means of examining how the salience and centrality of various roles

and the meanings that various roles hold for the individual affect the role exit process and subsequent adjustment. Also important is that, unlike many of the “stage approaches”, Ebaugh’s framework is not tied to any particular age, stage of development, or family form.

Wacquant (1990) contends that the model lacks a means of accounting for the practical strategies, the reasoning behind decisions to enter and exit roles. According to Ebaugh, however, the fact that the process takes shape and is patterned by a more or less predictable sequence of events does not assume that this sequence is either inevitable or necessary. What events happen and how long each phase lasts are empirical questions. In Ebaugh’s words, “occurrence of the event as well as timing and duration of the process are characteristics of the role-exit process that vary and need explanation” (p. 23).

Ebaugh maintains that she does not “pretend to develop a full-blown theory of role exit but rather to take a few first steps by suggesting issues and variables involved in conceptualizing the sociological meaning of an ex-role as well as the process of becoming an ex. “Much more research, especially utilizing types of control variables, is needed before we can comfortably claim a “theory” of role exit” (p. 15).

### **2.7 Role Exit: Applications**

In response to this directive, Ebaugh’s model has been applied in a variety of research settings. Recent works have used role exit in studies of divorce and post-divorce interaction (Duran-Aydintug, 1995), recovery from drug addiction (Anderson & Rondi, 1996), and teacher attrition (Crick, 1998). Such applications raise interesting questions regarding the applicability of the model to the study of reentry women. For example, Breese and Feltey (1996) examined homelessness as an involuntary type of role

exit, as experienced by women residing in emergency shelters or in transitional housing. They extend Ebaugh's analysis in a number of respects. For example, they further explore the concept of "voluntariness". "While previous work on exit types emphasizes aspects of autonomy, self-direction, and controllability of the situation, this research deals with powerlessness, helplessness, and uncontrollability" (p. 67). In this study, leaving an intolerable situation (e.g. overcrowded conditions or drug or alcohol abuse by others in the home), was defined as an involuntary exit. "Even though these respondents made this "choice", it could easily be asserted that due to the oppressive situation there was no alternative option" (p. 70). How might perceptions of "voluntariness" with regard to entering or exiting full-time mothering and entering the educational system affect the reentry process?

Brown (1991) explored the careers of people who have exited their deviant identities, including drug, alcohol and eating disorder problems, by replacing them with occupations in professional counseling. During their transformation, these exes utilize vestiges of their deviant identity to generate new careers as counselors. This is essentially a positive aspect of the "hangover identity", or, stated in more positive terms, of role residual. Before reading this, I had focused my attention on the negative residual effects of having been an at-home parent, to the neglect of the positive strengths, skills or insights that may have developed during this role. For example, although many of the mothers in Edwards (1993b) study felt that their experiences as mothers were devalued in the educational system, some women used these experiences to challenge the teachings and attitudes in their classes.

Drahota and Eitzen (1998) applied Ebaugh's model in a study of retirement

among professional athletes. They found that some of the athletes experienced “first doubts” (the first stage in Ebaugh’s model) before becoming professional athletes. They began planning for another career *before* entering what they recognized was a temporary role. Amongst these individuals, each is successful in his post-athletic career. As one of the ex-athletes said:

the thing about my whole football career...I felt like I was a scientist that played football. I wasn’t a football player that was a scientist (p.271).

Drahota and Eitzen describe the seeking of alternatives to one’s role before the termination of the role, as a critical stage for adjusting successfully to life after the exit. Other athletes in their sample thought about the future, but never got around to planning for life after their sports career:

Unless they were stars and opportunities came to them, this choice tended to lead to unfortunate consequences (pp. 271-272).

Drahota and Eitzen also found that while professionals in other roles acquire their central identity after a long apprenticeship (e.g. physicians acquire their identity as doctors after medical school), athletes acquire that central identity at a very young age (from about the fifth grade), and that this early acquisition makes the exit and establishing the ex identity more challenging. Further, athletes are forced to retire at a relatively young age, and then must start a new life and career, and create a new self-identity. While others in their mid-thirties have already established themselves in careers, many retired professional athletes find themselves as beginners competing in an occupational world with people much younger than themselves. There are obvious parallels to the developmental paths of women, which can include early socialization into the mothering role, and mid-life seeking of identity.

Breese and O’Toole (1994) used “role exit” to examine reentry women’s use of

student services. For many of their participants, the role of reentry student appeared as a marginal role, a bridge leading to a completed role-exit, a means to bring closure and to deal with life transition. Few had what they considered a strong connection with other students or with the student role itself, for their priorities continued to lay elsewhere. Within this view, the role of student is considered a means to deal with changing identity; the process of adjusting and establishing a social identity is easier and occurs more rapidly when women are able to build bridges from their previous roles to new ones. Breese and O'Toole used this "marginality" to account for the women's under use of student services and programs.

## **2.8 Research Questions**

Wacquant (1990) contends that "role exit" lacks a means of accounting for the practical strategies, the reasoning behind decisions to enter and exit roles. Given this contention and the dearth of information regarding the post-secondary experiences of "ex" full-time, at-home mothers, what is clearly needed is an analysis of their "practical strategies" and "reasoning" during the reentry process. Therefore, the central theoretical questions that I address in this research project are: (1) How do women experience the transition from full-time motherhood to the mother-student role? (2) Does Ebaugh's model provide insight or enhance knowledge regarding reentry women? (3) How do the data expand or qualify Ebaugh's model? From a practical perspective, I asked: (4) What are the women's sources of support and frustration as full-time mothers and in their transitions into post-secondary education? and (5) What could have made things better or easier for them?

## **Chapter 3: Methodology**

### **3.1 Issues in Design Selection and Evaluation**

I wanted my research design to be rich yet rigorous, suitable both in social work research and practice, and consistent with feminist principles. In 1993, David, Edwards, Hughes, and Ribbens wrote that there were very few experiential accounts of motherhood that include reference to the mothering-education relationship. Largely missing in the reentry literature are women's voices, and the specific impact of at-home parenting on their post-secondary experiences. Studying the lived experiences of women, through qualitative methodologies, might help us understand "more about the contemporary challenges that face today's generation of boundary-crossing mothers" (Whitaker, 1998, p. 30). In the following section, I briefly present the issues and orientations that guided me in developing my research design.

#### **Qualitative vs. Quantitative: The Quest for Knowledge**

Heineman (1981) notes how the pressure on social scientists to meet the demands of scientific rigor has pushed towards the use of statistics and extreme behaviorism and attempted to leave out the human factor in a quest to produce data which is "objective, free of distortion, value-neutral, truthful" (p. 373). Further, the "scientific" requirement that concepts be defined by quantitative measurement operations has significantly restricted the scope and nature of the questions studied in current social work research. For example, broad treatment and program goals have been criticized as hard to define operationally and, therefore, deemed inferior or unacceptable (Heineman, 1981, p. 373). Social work's infamous practice-research gap is, in part, a product of the demand for "scientific rigor".

Haworth (1984) writes that there is an implicit hierarchy in the literature: “The case study is treated as “exploratory” or “hypothesis generating,” whereas “real knowledge” can only be legitimized through the rigorous control and quantification of the experiment” (p. 345). Since World War II, however, increasing numbers have been “warning humankind that the scientific method is not morally neutral in its application” (Haworth, 1984, pp. 345-346), that the methodologies and results in quantitative research are not necessarily objective or value-neutral. In his discussion of general criticisms of quantitative methodologies, Silverman (2000) identifies the limited contact with participants, arbitrary definition of variables, and researcher bias as potentially problematic in quantitative endeavors.

Qualitative methodologies are gaining recognition “after a long history of being squeezed between the “tough-minded” empiricism of the behaviorists and the clinically inspired symbolism of the psychoanalysts”(Haworth, 1984, p. 349). Whereas the traditional “scientific” research models see the influence of the subjects as contamination, which must be controlled or eliminated, newer models view researcher-subject interaction as “human behavior to be understood, rather than as an annoying distraction” (Haworth, 1984, p. 348). Although advocates of “particular methodological styles of research ... are frequently more concerned with asserting or defending their techniques than with indicating alternative ways of approaching the study subject” (Berg, 1998, p. 4), there does seem to be an increasing acceptance in the social sciences that the types of questions being asked dictate the methods of research – whether quantitative, qualitative, or some combination of the two (Silverman, 2000; Berg, 1998).

### **Social Work's Practice-Research Gap**

The discontinuity between practice and research is a recurrent theme in the social work literature.

This gap can leave social work practice without sufficient information regarding the effectiveness of its interventions, and social work research without knowledge of critical, client-based issues from the profession's many practice settings (Harold, Palmiter, Lynch & Freedman-Doan, 1995, p. 23).

Too, a recent task force report on social work research identified both the gap between practice and research, and the inadequacy of the amount and quality of research in the profession as critical issues in what was termed the "crisis in social work research" (NASW, 1991, p. 1).

### **Considerations from a Feminist Perspective**

Over the years, many have enumerated the characteristics that they consider to define and inform feminist research (e.g. Cook and Fonow, 1990; Stanley, 1990; Harding, 1987; Acker, Barry & Esseveld, 1983). Some of these central tenets are that feminist research:

- (1) Derives issues from women's experiences in order to provide women with explanations of social phenomena that they want and need and thus shows how people come to understand what they do;
- (2) Must recognize that gender and gender inequality are basic features of all social life, and show how women's "trials and troubles...are generated by the larger social structure" (Acker, Barry, & Esseveld, 1983 p. 24);
- (3) Recognizes and challenges any oppressive scientific norms (including separation of subject and object of research, the labeling of personal or grounded experiences as

“unscientific”, and ignoring or distorting women’s voices);

(4) Incorporates consciousness-raising as a central methodological tool; and

(5) Empowers women

According to Mason (1997), feminist researchers generally agree on these principles, which guide research but do not dictate the use of specific methods; sexism and oppression stem from researcher bias, and are not inherent in any particular method. She argues that researchers need a wide range of methods in order study the complexities of women’s lives and the social and political forces that shape them. “Almost every method has been used in the service of feminist values in social work research, just as every method has been used toward antifeminist ends in traditional research” (p. 12). “Feminist social work researchers should be critical and intelligent users of all methods and acknowledge the weaknesses of the methods they use” (Mason, 1997, p. 27).

### **3.2 Methodological Rigor in Qualitative Research**

There is debate within the literature about whether qualitative data are truthful and factual or flawed by errors, fabrication and concealment (Ingram, 1979). According to Bono (1995) there is instability of the descriptive and analytical categories in women’s biographies and autobiographies. Further, “because mainstream social scientists find little value in studies of individuals that draw on subjectivity, there is little discussion of and training in this method” (Reinharz, 1992, p. 132).

The two main research criteria traditionally used to assess the rigor of “scientific” research endeavors are validity and reliability. Reliability is the extent to which a measurement procedure yields the same answer however and whenever it is carried out, that is, the extent to which a result is independent of accidental circumstances of the

research (Kirk & Miller, 1986). Validity is a measure of “truth-value”, the extent to which the measurement procedure accurately represents the social phenomena to which it refers (Hammersley as cited in Silverman, 2000). Given the complexity of human thought, action and interaction, the quest for stability and for exact reconstruction of individuals’ experiences and meanings appear difficult, if not impossible:

the description of reliability and validity ordinarily provided by nonqualitative social scientists rarely seems appropriate or relevant to the way in which qualitative researchers conduct their work (Kirk & Miller, 1986, p. 14).

When the aim of research is to “grasp the ways in which a particular person constructs and makes sense of his or her life at a given moment” the findings in a study will be an element in an ever-changing scene, an interpretation at one moment in time of an ongoing, dynamic experience (Plummer, 1983, p. 105).

Thus, within qualitative approaches, “reliability” is seldom used as a criterion of methodological soundness. Researchers have, however, been analyzing and developing their work so as to increase validity within the qualitative context (Kirk & Miller, 1986). Validity can be elusive, though, for any qualitative endeavor will typically be subject to the intentional and unintentional omissions of participants (Acker, Barry, & Esseveld, 1983). Further,

at the best of times, it is difficult to know if the person you are talking to really has the same understanding of the topic as you do or, indeed, if the researcher has an accurate understanding of what the subject is expressing (Alty & Rodham, 1998, p. 277).

Acker, Barry and Esseveld (1983) describe the qualitative research process as a dialogue between the researcher and researched, and as an effort to explore, clarify, and expand understandings. Commonality of experience between researcher and participant can increase validity in that the researcher might be sensitive to problems and issues that she might not have otherwise noticed. This commonality, or assumed knowledge, can also create certain kinds of blindness (Acker, Barry & Esseveld, 1983).

In any research, there is room for researcher-participant misunderstandings, but, within qualitative research, “there is scope for both parties to question one another about the meaning of the terms employed and so reduce the chances of confusion and misunderstanding” (Alty & Rodham, 1998, p. 278). Measures to increase validity include the development of a relationship of trust and prolonged engagement (Acker, Barry, & Esseveld, 1983).

**Evaluating Trustworthiness.** Given these issues, qualitative researchers including Lincoln and Guba (1985), Riessman, (1993), Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach and Zilber (1998), Marshall & Rossman (1999), and Lofland and Lofland (1995) have been developing and delineating a variety of measures with which to evaluate the quality/truth value/believability/soundness of qualitative research. Though the terminology and focus of these evaluative constructs varies across the literature, these measures can be summarized as follows:

- (1) **Credibility.** Are the findings and their presentation believable and authentic? Were the participants in the project accurately identified and described? Procedures that can be incorporated to enhance the credibility of a project include delineating the research processes and interactions, prolonged engagement, peer debriefing, triangulation, and member checking.
- (2) **Transferability.** Although replication of a qualitative project is not possible in a strict sense, does the researcher provide sufficient description and analysis of the events, processes, and her personal assumptions and values to be useful in guiding future researchers in similar projects?
- (3) **Coherence.** How are the parts of the account connected so as to make a meaningful story? How does the account measure up against existing theories and previous research?
- (4) **Confirmability.** Is the interpretation of the findings believable, reasonable, convincing? Do the data support theoretical claims? How else might the data be interpreted?

### **3.3 Qualitative Approaches**

Informed by the above issues, I began reviewing the qualitative literature in search of an appropriate design for my own research. Despite the vast array of qualitative research applications, there are four basic approaches in qualitative methodology. These are: (1) participation in the setting; (2) direct observation; (3) analyzing documents; and (4) in-depth interviewing (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). Within a given research project, these methods can be used singly, or in varying combinations.

The in-depth interview basically consists of research-driven conversation and is used extensively within qualitative research. In the qualitative in-depth interview, the researcher “explores a few general topics to help uncover the participant’s views but otherwise respects how the participant frames and structures the responses” (Marshall & Rossman, 1999, p. 108). I decided to make the interview my primary research tool for a variety of reasons. First, within the reentry literature, there is heavy reliance on questionnaires; hearing and analyzing the lived realities of full-time mothers who have entered the post-secondary system seemed an appropriate vehicle to augment the existing literature. I also selected the interview because I am interested in hearing how women make sense of their life decisions, and because the feminist interview begins with the premise that “the participant’s views are valuable and useful” (Marshall & Rossman, 1999, p. 108) a viewpoint consistent with my own feminist framework.

In the semi-structured qualitative interview, the researcher typically asks a series of predetermined questions, yet is expected to respond to and probe beyond the answers given (Berg, 1998). Because I began the study with a clear theoretical framework (feminist/role exit), I viewed the semi-structured qualitative interview as a means of balancing my own theoretical perspective with what the women in the study considered to be important. My list of predetermined questions ensured that certain subject areas would be discussed (e.g. supports and barriers, the experience of the transition from at-home mother to mother-student), while, at the same time, my responses and probes would

allow me to gain an understanding of what factors/issues are most relevant to the participants with regard to school reentry.

### **Limitations and Strengths of the Qualitative Interview**

Marshall and Rossman (1999) outline the limitations of the qualitative interview. Its usefulness as a research tool is largely dependent upon the memory and cooperation of the participants and the skill, knowledge base, and biases of the interviewer. According to these same authors, the particular strength of the interview is its ability to obtain large amounts of data quickly, without the researcher's long-term participation in the life of the interviewee (Reinharz, 1992). When there are multiple participants in a project, this data may produce a rich, varied body of data. Further strengths include the opportunity for immediate clarification and discussion between researchers and participants and the ability to examine and analyze the meanings that individuals ascribe to their everyday lives. In the qualitative interview, the researcher typically explores a few general areas "to help uncover the participant's views but otherwise respects how the participant frames and structures the responses" (Marshall & Rossman, 1999, p. 108). The qualitative interview has been used extensively within feminist research because it:

offers researchers access to people's ideas, thoughts, and memories in their own words rather than in the words of the researcher. This asset is particularly important for the study of women because in this way learning from women is an antidote to centuries of ignoring women's ideas altogether or having men speak for women (Reinharz, 1992, p.19).

I used the semi-structured interview as a means of uncovering women's "truths", validating their individual experiences, and sharing their experiences in academia and beyond (Baker, 1998; Cotterill & Letherby, 1993; Geiger, 1986).

## **3.4 Participant Recruitment and Selection**

### **Participant Recruitment**

I began my research after receiving approval from the research ethics committee

of the Faculty of Social Work at the University of Manitoba (see Appendix 1). I enlisted participants in several different ways. First, I advertised the research project in Calgary's Child, (a free, bimonthly, family-oriented newspaper that is available at over 600 locations throughout Calgary including restaurants, schools, and museums). I also posted ads (see Appendix 2) in my children's school newsletter and in both Northwest and Northeast Calgary on community mailboxes and in grocery stores and community centres. I placed ads on several bulletin boards and bus shelters, in the counseling centres at the University of Calgary and Mount Royal College (Calgary), in the daycare centres at the University of Calgary, Mount Royal College, the University of Manitoba, and Red River Community College. Office staff at the University of Calgary's Faculty of Social Work agreed to distribute my ad to course instructors for possible discussion/distribution in their spring session classes. I placed an ad in the classified section of the Winnipeg Free Press in two consecutive Saturday editions. I also used a snowball technique; I asked friends, acquaintances, and study participants in both Winnipeg and Calgary if they knew anyone who would qualify for the study. In Winnipeg, I spoke about the project and distributed ads in one social work graduate class, and a U of M professor did the same in another graduate class. I discussed the project with a staff member at the Winnipeg Education Centre, a satellite of the University of Manitoba, who agreed to phone some of the students who might be eligible candidates.

I attempted to increase diversity among participants in a number of ways, for example, by recruiting both university and college students, and by advertising in two widely accessible publications. I attempted to reach the population of "distressed" reentry women by placing ads in counseling departments. Further, I selected the locations for my ads so as to reach a wide population of busy women with varied backgrounds (Northwest Calgary is primarily middle-class while the Northeast is primarily working class). In the ads, I made no comments regarding assumed marital status, sexual orientation, or ethnicity.

I found participant recruitment to be both a challenging and exciting part of the research project. In the past, I have conducted research at the U of M Campus Daycare, and the St. Amant Centre. In both locations, my participant pool was more or less waiting for me. In the current project, I learned much about the actual process of enlisting participants. For example, although I had planned to post ads in Calgary's Central library and in the 6 branch libraries in Northwest and Northeast Calgary, I discovered that library policy prohibits the posting of any notices that solicit volunteers. I also discovered that the city transit authorities take a dim view of advertising on bus shelters; all of my ads were removed within a day of posting. Also, I spoke to the editor of a bimonthly magazine that is distributed to school children by the Calgary Board of Education who voiced interest in the project. Unfortunately, my ad was not printed in the year-end issue because of space limitations.

In terms of the "success" of the various approaches, of the 10 participants, 4 responded to ads printed in various publications, 2 were identified by acquaintances of mine, 1 was identified by a study participant, 1 is a personal friend, 1 responded to solicitation by a staff member at a post-secondary institution, and 1 heard about the project through a friend who had seen one of my posted ads.

### **Participant Selection**

In selecting participants, I used a telephone screening questionnaire (see Appendix 3). I employed the following criteria to ensure both the salience of the student role and the existence of a clear transition from full-time mother to mother-student. Participants had been self-defined, full-time, at-home mothers for a period of at least 3 years. Although Ebaugh suggests a 5-year time span within a given role helps ensure role salience, a 5-year requirement would have increased the difficulty in recruiting a sufficient number of participants. In order to clarify the definition of "at-home mother", I added the stipulation that, on average, the participants not have used more than one day per week of child-care (for employment, volunteer, or other activities) during their years

at home. Further, if a woman was employed within her home, for example, by providing home daycare, she must have identified herself as a full-time mother rather than as a professional daycare provider.

The women were at various stages in degree or certificate programs in college or university. Unlike many previous studies with reentry women, I did not restrict my sample to full-time students, as enrolling in a part-time course of study is one of the many ways in which mothers attempt to meet the demands of both higher education and their families. In order to be eligible for inclusion in the study, a potential participant had to be, at minimum, a half-time student, or, if taking fewer courses, must have, during the initial telephone screening, self-identified as both a student and a mother, rather than as a full-time mother.

### **The Participants**

In this study, I interviewed 10 women. To protect their anonymity and confidentiality, I have omitted obvious identifiers, such as the name of the college or university attended, names of children and spouse, and city of residence. At the end of each interview, I asked each participant to select a name that I would use in place of her own in any written or oral reports.

The following is a brief description of each of the 10 participants.

**Amanda** is a 29 year old, single mother of three. Her children range in age from 2 to 7. Widowed 3 years ago, she has two high-needs children. She is a full-time student and is in the third year of a 4-year university program. Amanda is financing her education through loans. She was at home for 5 years before returning to school. She is also employed on a casual basis, averaging approximately 2 hours per week. In the years before becoming an at-home parent, Amanda was employed in two part-time jobs, and,

having not completed high school, challenged for credit for her outstanding high school courses.

**MJ** is a 40 year old, married mother of 4. Her children range in age from 2 to 8. She is just beginning a full-time, 2-year University program. She completed a number of courses this year in order to improve her chances of being accepted into the program. Her husband is financing her education. She completed a Bachelor's degree and worked in a related field for over 2 years before becoming an at-home mother. She was at home full-time for 4 years before resuming her studies.

**Sally** is a 35 year old, married mother of 3. Her children range in age from 4 to 8. She is in the third year of a 5-year, part-time degree program. Her husband is financing her education. She had completed a Bachelor's degree and a college certificate program and was employed full-time for approximately 3 years before having children. She was at home with her children for 7 years, though she took some classes and did volunteer work relevant to her current university program during those years.

**Joanne** is a 35-year-old married mother of 2 elementary school children. At the time of the interview, she had just finished a college certificate program. She completed her studies at home, as a distance student. Her part-time program took 5 years to complete. Her husband financed her education. She has been at home for 7 1/2 years. Before having children, Joanne had completed a Bachelor's degree and had worked for 3 years in a related field. She is planning to seek part-time employment when her children return to school in the fall.

**Rebecca** is a 39-year-old married mother of 3. Her children range in age from 9 to 13. She has been a part-time university student for 2 years, and hopes to graduate in 2005.

She is financing her education with savings. Before becoming a full-time parent, Rebecca completed a college certificate program and was employed for approximately 5 years. She has been at home for 9 years.

**Petunia** is a 31-year-old single mother of 2 pre-teen children. She is a full-time university student, entering her final year of study. She is financing her education through student loans, grants, and a personal line of credit. A stay at home mom for 4 years, Petunia supplemented her income through employment in which she could include her children, including terms as a day home operator and as a school bus driver. Having not graduated from high school before becoming a parent, Petunia met the university entrance requirements after taking academic upgrading. She is currently employed on a casual basis (less than 10 hours weekly).

**Jane** is a 39-year-old divorced mother of 4 (including one foster child). Her children range from elementary school to university. A full-time student, Jane is entering her second year of a 4-year program. She is financing her education through a combination of student loans and grants from the ACCESS program. She had completed high school and worked for several years as a waitress before becoming an at home mother. She was at home for 17 years. During much of this time, she provided childcare in her home so that she could earn an income while remaining home with her children.

**Lynne** is a 25-year-old divorced mother of 1 elementary school child. A full-time student, she has completed half of a 2-year diploma. She is financing her education through student loans. During the past year, Lynne was also employed full time in a position related to her field of study. Lynne completed high school shortly before her child's birth. During her 5 years at home, Lynne occasionally tried to supplement her

income through part-time employment, but these stints were short-lived, as she was unable to reconcile the demands of mothering with the demands of employment.

**Pauline** is a 33-year-old married mother of 2 elementary school children. She is a full-time student and has completed 1 year of a 4-year university degree. Her husband is financing her education. She had completed high school and was employed for approximately 5 years before having children. She has been at home for 9 years. For the last 5 years, Pauline has been employed, on an occasional basis, in a position related to her field of study.

**Cathy** is a 36-year-old married mother of 3. Her children are in elementary and junior high school. She is in her first year of a part-time university degree program, and expects to graduate in 2003. She is financing her education through a line of credit. She had completed a bachelor's degree and had worked for approximately 1 1/2 years before becoming an at-home mother. She was a stay at home parent for 12 years. During these years, she occasionally did freelance writing and market research from her home, in order to supplement the family income. She held a job for 2 years before becoming a student.

### **Issues in Participant Selection**

One of the study participants is a personal friend; she is married to a long-term friend of my husband. Because we do not live in the same city, and because we communicate infrequently (once or twice yearly), before the interview, I knew very little about her experiences at home and about her return to school. When I reviewed the transcripts, I looked for ways in which her data may have differed from the data in the other interviews. While there certainly existed the potential that she might have "glossed over" certain details because of our husbands' long-standing relationship, I found her to

be surprisingly frank, particularly in regard to her perceptions of her husband's lack of support in a number of arenas. I therefore decided to include her interview in the analysis.

Another issue that emerged in participant selection concerned self-definition of at-home mothering. Although each participant indicated that she had been a stay-at-home mother for at least 3 years before entering a degree or certificate program, there emerged different personal definitions of at-home mothering. For example, Joanne, who completed her university certificate program as a distance student, continued to self-identify as a full-time mother during her years as a student. She commented that she had been able to complete her studies at home, with relatively little "family juggling". I was initially concerned that there was not a clear enough transition between her life as a full-time mother and her life as a mother-student. When, however, Joanne began to describe how she taught her children to respect her study time, how she relinquished a substantial amount of childcare to her husband and a preschool, and how she gave up hobbies and personal time in order to accommodate her studies, I decided that Joanne's experiences as a distance student could only increase the breadth of the data.

Cathy continued to self-define as a full-time mother of her school-aged children during the 2-year period of employment that intervened between her years at home and her return to school. This 2-year period of employment would technically exclude Cathy from participating in the study. During the telephone screening, I was about to tell her that she was not eligible when she said that she would have preferred to remain at home, but her husband insisted that she go back to work and earn an income. Further, throughout her 2 years of employment, Cathy experienced daily friction with her boss.

She regularly arrived late so that she could get her children off to school, missed days because her children were sick, and felt compelled to leave slightly early so that she could be at home soon after her children's return from school. Having been a full-time mother for so many years, Cathy found reconciling the needs of her children and the duties of the home with the demands of her employer and her husband highly stressful, and reported feeling sick every Saturday night and all day Sunday, knowing that she had to go to work on Monday.

I did not disqualify Cathy as a participant because I felt that her story added richness and depth to the data: She was the only woman in the study who unwillingly left the role of stay at home mother (an involuntary role exit) and, judging from the accounts of all participants, experienced the greatest degree of personal distress (marital and psychological) as a result of her decision to remain home with her children. The implications of these two factors with regard to school reentry are discussed in a later section.

### **3.5 The Engagement Process**

In each case, the engagement process began during the telephone screening interview. Whether the women initially phoned me or I made the first contact, in each telephone screening, the potential participant provided me with a brief outline of her time at home and her return to school. I also described the purpose of the study (to look at how women who have been at-home moms experience the return to post-secondary education). I provided each woman with a short description of my history, i.e. that I am in the final stages of my MSW, having been at home for several years raising my 2 daughters. In my synopsis, I humorously mentioned some of the twists and turns, stops

and starts in my educational process (e.g. my 2 inter-provincial moves and a third pending) and referred to my MSW as “the longest. most expensive degree in history”.

The initial, face-to face contact typically began with situation-specific small talk, including, for example, discussion about pets, children, the neighborhood, the weather. To my surprise, none of the participants (either on the phone or in person) objected to my audiotaping the interviews. I presented the tape recorder as a “necessary evil” and always placed it in full view of the interviewee. Further, whenever a participant expressed concern about background noise “spoiling your tape” (e.g. a child talking, noisy toys, a dog barking) I always dispelled the worry (e.g. “oh, don’t worry about that”). I never asked a participant to quiet a child or pet, though, admittedly, I did lose the occasional word or phrase on the tapes because of background noise.

### **3.6 The Interviews**

**In-person Interviews.** I conducted eight interviews in the participants’ homes. These varied in duration from 1 hour to 1 hour and 45 minutes.

**Telephone Interviews.** I conducted two long-distance telephone interviews with women who had, during face-to-face conversations, agreed to be interviewed, but who were unavailable when I was in their cities. Because of the differences between personal and telephone contact, I considered not including the phone interviews. In reviewing the transcripts, I noted two major differences between the two types of interviews. First, although I attended carefully to auditory cues during the phone interviews, I necessarily lost physical cues, such as facial expressions. Also, I noticed that I tended to adhere more closely to the structure of the research guide on the phone than in person, resulting in somewhat shorter interviews. There were, however, times during the in-person

interviews, for example, when a participant's attention was divided (as when her young children were present, or when it was nearing the time for her to pick up children at school) that spontaneous discussion waned and I relied more heavily on the research guide. Therefore, the most important factor in my decision to include data from the two long-distance interviews was that they both revealed interesting, informative content, which I felt added to the richness of the data. One phone interview lasted 55 minutes, the other, 1 hour.

**Informed Consent.** In both telephone and in-person interviews, I proceeded only after the participant had provided informed consent (see Appendix 4).

**Background Questionnaire.** The process continued with a short series of closed-ended questions concerning the participants' current family situation (e.g. number and ages of children, marital status), educational history, and work history (see Appendix 5).

**Research Guide.** The second part of the interview consisted of a series of open-ended questions (see Appendix 6). I developed the research guide by combining issues shown in the literature to be relevant to the study of reentry women (e.g. role of friends and family, barriers, sources of support and frustration) with a questionnaire used by Breese and O'Toole (1994) in their study of reentry women's use of student services. Breese and O'Toole based their questionnaire on the instruments used by Ebaugh (1988) in her study of role exit, and by Felty (1989) (as cited in Breese & O'Toole, 1994) in a study of homeless women in shelters. I asked each participant to tell me about her life before becoming an at-home mother, during her decision to stay at home with her child(ren), during her years at home, in her decision to return to school, and as a mother-student. I also asked each woman to comment on changes in relationships, changes in personal

identity, surprises, joys, disappointments, decision-making processes, turning points, barriers, challenges and supports in her journey.

My research guide and interview process differed from those of Breese and O'Toole in several respects. First, their respondents completed the questionnaire in written rather than oral form. I intended my research instrument to be used as a *guide* rather than as a rigidly structured schedule or questionnaire (Lofland & Lofland, 1995). Also, I replaced their series of questions about specific use of student services and other personal and social supports with more general, open-ended questions regarding sources of support. Further, like Breese and O'Toole, I asked about participants' lives before school reentry, but I added questions regarding at-home mothering and its influence on the reentry process. Finally, in order to clarify the questions and to avoid "steering" responses toward my theoretical orientation, I did not use "role exit jargon" during the interview. For example, rather than asking, "Tell me about your role as a full-time mother", I asked, "Tell me about your life as a stay-at-home mom".

I provided appropriate prompts or clarification as required. Although I ensured that each broad subject area was discussed within each interview, I did not specifically ask each of the questions on the research guide in each interview, preferring, instead, that each participant, to a large extent, control the direction and flow of the conversation.

In reviewing the first two interviews, I noticed that neither participant had specifically mentioned the reactions of her children to her becoming a student. Because the literature has shown the importance of children in helping or hindering their mothers' transition into the post-secondary system, I added a question about children's reactions in subsequent interviews.

**Use of Narrative.** Within each broad subject area, I attempted to encourage the women to verbalize what was most important to them. An important consideration in the development of my methodology, research guide, and analysis of data was my recent foray into the study of narrative within the qualitative interview. Riessman (1993) defines the personal narrative as “talk organized around consequential events” in which the teller in a conversation “takes a listener into a past time...and recapitulates what happened then to make a point” (p. 6). Riessman thus distinguishes between the narrative and other elements of interviews or conversations including question-and-answer exchanges and arguments. Using different terminology but conveying essentially the same meaning, Chase (1995) writes that people make sense of their experiences and communicate meaning through narration, and that these narrations include life experiences that are of “deep and abiding interest to the interviewee” (p. 2).

In helping participants communicate their life experiences, I admit to sometimes feeling anxious, to having a sense that I was no longer in control of the direction and content of the research. I had to silently remind myself that:

provided investigators can give up control over the research process and approach interviews as conversations, almost any question can generate a narrative (Riessman, 1993, p. 56).

For example, in one interview, the participant discussed at length the ways in which she incorporated exercise into her daily routine. Rather than try to get her “back on track”, I encouraged her in this direction. As it turned out, this woman’s exercise routine was vital to her body image, which developed into an important theme in the interview. For example, being fat and “out to there” was instrumental in her decision not to seek employment during her pregnancy, and being fit and trim was crucial to her self-confidence, and was an important factor in her feeling that she “fit in” with her much younger peers as a reentry student.

Throughout the entire process, to increase the trustworthiness of the study and to maximize the possibility of the women benefiting in some way through their participation, I attempted to do the following:

- (1) Minimize Anxiety. In any instance where the participant expressed anxiety regarding, for example, her messy home, her noisy children, enthusiastic dog, or her personal appearance (dress, make up, weight), I made an effort to dispel that anxiety through an appropriate, light-hearted comment (e.g. “yeah, you should see **my** kitchen” or “this is the first day all week I’ve had time to comb my hair”).
- (2) Minimize Researcher-Participant Distance. As much as possible, I tried to approach the interview as I would going to a friend’s house for coffee. I wore casual clothing. We sat wherever the “hostess” was most comfortable. I petted dogs, played peek-a-boo with small children, commiserated about interrupted sleep and all of the hours moms spend chauffeuring their children. Perhaps because of the numerous similarities between the interviewees and me in terms of age and experience, these interactions felt easy and natural. None felt “forced”.
- (3) Identify and Praise Participants’ Strengths. Throughout the interview, I actively sought out instances of participants’ personal strengths. I often found myself saying things like “good for you”, or “that took a lot”, or “I don’t think I would have been able to do that”, or simply, “wow”.
- (4) Convey Interest and Respect. Maintaining eye contact, providing appropriate prompts, asking for clarification where necessary, minimizing interruptions, following the participants’ ideas of what is important rather than strictly adhering to the research protocol are all included in this category.

### **3.7 Dissemination of Findings**

One of the tenets of feminist research is that the researcher must give something back to participants to show appreciation for the “valuable gift of their time and their stories” (Massat & Lundy, 1997, p. 47). As research has shown that having positive

support is a critical element in moving successfully through the role exit process (Ebaugh, 1988), and that positive peer support can be critical in helping a woman adjust as a reentry student (Komarovsky, 1985), I decided to try to link reentry women. Ebaugh (1988) found that even the awareness that there are others in similar circumstances could aid individuals in their role exits.

Before moving away from Calgary, I phoned each of the 5 women I had interviewed there in order to arrange a group meeting. Three of the participants and I met for coffee at Starbucks one evening. The meeting lasted approximately 2 1/2 hours. During this time, each of the 3 women read a summary of my preliminary results and analysis. I invited questions, comments, and objections. Aside from 2 minor typographical issues, none of the women suggested any changes.

Although the women all lived within a few kilometers of each other, were attending the same university, and were taking social sciences courses, none had previously met. During the meeting, the women shared many of the stories they had told me during the interviews. They also helped each other regarding fall course selection (good classes/good instructors). The two women who had had difficulties financing their educations shared ideas about obtaining funding.

I have given (in person or by mail) 7 of the women I interviewed a package containing: a summary of preliminary results; a form which invites any questions, comments, concerns, or objections about the study or my preliminary analysis; and a stamped, self-addressed envelope. In each of the packages I mailed, I included a handwritten note of thanks and encouragement. The 3 remaining participants, who were among the final few interviewees, said they did not need to see a summary of results, but asked for a verbal summary following our interview. I discussed with them some of my preliminary findings.

### **Trustworthiness: My Own Methodology**

Rose and Webb (1998) defend the rigor of their data analysis by arguing that:

I am clear as to the academic traditions that have influenced me, that I attempt honestly to represent the process of data analysis, and that I admit that some of this process took place at a creative level that I am not able to translate entirely in terms of concrete language simply because it takes place at a level that is too abstract to be represented concretely (p.561).

They further caution that the reconstruction of the exact experience or state of mind of another, is an impossible undertaking:

In analyzing the data gained from my informants, I do not, therefore, claim that I represent their experiences completely, or as the informants themselves or other researchers would interpret them (p. 562).

Nevertheless, given the criteria for evaluating qualitative research, I incorporated a variety of measures into my project in an effort to enhance its trustworthiness. I phrased the interview questions in straightforward language, free of unnecessary jargon. Before beginning each interview, I told participants that I was not looking for any specific answers, but for *their* ideas and experiences. During the interviews, I encouraged participants to ask questions and I also asked for clarification if I felt doubtful as to a participant's meaning. At the end of each interview, I asked participants if there was anything else they wanted to add, and I asked them to contact me if they wished to add anything to their stories following the interview.

In an effort to preserve the participants' words and meanings, I transcribed the interviews faithfully, for example, by coding silences, evidence of discomfort, etc. I, via my research journal, attempted to provide an honest and thorough account of the engagement process, main themes and ideas that emerged, any ethical problems that arose, any blunders I committed, methodological difficulties or successes, and emotional experiences (mine or participants'), and included this journal in the analysis. In order to consciously separate my experiences from those of my participants, I wrote a personal account which chronicles my decision to remain at home with my children, my life as an at-home mother, and my experience of the transition from at-home mother to mother student. In my analysis of the data, I occasionally include these personal experiences -

clearly labeled as such - and therefore not intended to reflect the lives of the study participants. In any research, there exists the danger that researchers will give more authority to their own orientations than to those of their participants (Bono, 1995; Reinharz, 1992). Although I come armed with a wealth of research studies and my own personal experiences as an at-home mother and a reentry woman, I cannot assume that my own experiences, those of women in my acquaintance, or those of women I have read about will match those of my study participants. Therefore, a major part of my endeavor involved looking for surprises and negative instances, and looking for alternative explanations of the data (Marshall & Rossman, 1999).

At the end of the project, I arranged an opportunity for "member checking" via an informal group meeting with the Calgary participants; we discussed the study, the preliminary results, and our experiences as mother-students. I also provided each participant with a short written or oral summary of the process and results.

## **Chapter 4: Results and Discussion**

### **4.1 Data Analysis**

Because of the open-ended and creative dimensions of the analytic process in qualitative research, descriptions of the concrete operations composing it do not entirely capture what goes on; analytic strategies must be used selectively, adaptively, and creatively according to the interests of the researcher and the particular research project (Lofland & Lofland, 1995). Rose and Webb (1998) provide a general outline of the analysis process. They describe their analysis of qualitative data as follows:

- (1) Being present at the interview
- (2) Listening to the tape
- (3) Transcribing
- (4) Reading the transcription
- (5) Repeating step 2 to ensure familiarity
- (6) Thinking/assimilating/intuiting
- (7) Interpretation and understanding.

They thus present qualitative analysis as an ongoing, active process. Indeed, my analysis of data began during my initial contact with each participant, and continued until the preparation of my final draft. I maintained a research logbook as recommended by Lofland and Lofland (1995). This logbook consisted of short notes made immediately following each interview, and throughout the analysis process. These notes provided a record of my impressions and speculations regarding main themes, directions for future interviews, and new ways of looking at previous interviews (Miles & Huberman, 1984; Kirk & Miller, 1986; both cited in Silverman, 2000).

**Transcribing and Coding.** As soon as possible after each interview, I listened to the tape, transcribed each tape, proofread each transcription while listening to the tape, and made any necessary corrections to the transcripts. The transcribing and coding were influenced by my readings of qualitative methodologies in general, and narrative

methodologies in particular. In analyzing my data, it was my task to generate ideas and themes using my participants' words in the context of the existing literature on reentry mother-students. As previously described, this process involved repeated examination of the interviews in search of both dissimilarities and common themes. In performing this analysis, my work was guided by Riessman (1993), who cautions:

Traditional approaches to qualitative analysis often fracture these texts in the service of interpretation and generalizations by taking bits and pieces, snippets of a response edited out of context. They eliminate the sequential and structural features that characterize narrative accounts (p. 3)

and

Precisely because they are essential meaning-making structures, narratives must be preserved, not fractured, by investigators, who must respect respondents' ways of constructing meaning and analyze how it is accomplished (p. 4).

Given these cautions, I attempted to look at each interview from a holistic perspective so as to respect each woman's way of constructing meaning. For example, I considered emotional tone, emphasis, repetition of ideas, facetiousness, evidence of discomfort. In terms of units of analysis, I leaned away from small units (e.g. individual words or phrases) and towards larger units (e.g. sentences, groups of sentences, paragraphs).

**Coding Scheme.** I triple spaced each transcript, and coded as follows:

-a pause ... with the number of dots roughly corresponding to the length of the pause.

A short pause ..

A long pause .....

-laughter (L)

-facetiousness ("")

-(the interviewer's statements)

-*emphasis.* I occasionally used **bold type** to indicate greater emphasis

-I used parentheses to enclose any additional notes that would help the reader understand the transcripts e.g. [whispered words] [overlapping words] [noisy toy] [missed words].

### **Data Reduction**

Data reduction is an ongoing process wherein the qualitative researcher begins with reams of data and makes decisions about selecting, focusing, simplifying, and abstracting that data (Miles & Huberman, 1984, as cited in Silverman, 2000). Such decisions typically incorporate elements of several analysis techniques, and consist of an interplay between experience, academic training, induction, and deduction (Lofland & Lofland, 1995; Harold, Palmiter, Lynch, & Freedman-Doan, 1995; Rose & Webb, 1998).

Within this orientation, I used an interactive approach to the data, combining deductive meanings derived from the reentry and role exit literatures with meanings inductively derived from the participants' statements. As shown in my Research Guide, there were six major topic areas in each interview. These were: (1) Life before at-home parenting; (2) The decision to become a stay-at-home parent; (3) Life as a stay-at-home mother; (4) The decision to return to school; (5) Life as a mother-student; and (6) Future plans.

As previously discussed, the ideas and questions in the Research Guide were formed on the basis of: (1) the reentry literature (2) Breese and O'Toole's measurement instrument in their study of reentry women; and (3) Ebaugh's model of role exit. As such, the guide provided a starting point for my analysis of the data, as I looked for individual and general themes.

Throughout the process of coding and analyzing the data, I continually asked myself the following kinds of questions:

-What is this? What does it represent? What is this an example of?

-What do I see going on here?

-What are people doing?

-What is happening? (Lofland & Lofland, 1995, p. 192; Cuba, 1988; Charmaz, 1983). I also examined each transcript with reference to the background questionnaires, which included, for example, details regarding marital status, socioeconomic status, and

numbers and ages of children.

## **4.2 Findings**

### **(1) Life before at-home parenting**

In this part of the interview, I asked each participant to describe what she was doing in the years before she decided to be an at-home mom. I also asked each woman to describe her identity then. In this stage, as in all stages in the study, there was a fair degree of diversity across participants. Sally, and Joanne both completed university degrees, married, and were working full-time. Rebecca, Cathy, and MJ completed their post-secondary programs, were married, and returned to work part-time following the birth of their first child. Petunia, who had not completed high school, married and worked outside the home until her youngest child was 2. Amanda married and was working at two part-time jobs. She completed her high school requirements (as an adult), and began her post-secondary education. Jane had completed high school and was employed as a waitress. Lynn graduated from high school, married, had a child, and divorced. Pauline completed high school, worked full-time, and married.

Identity. Though the exact wording differed across interviews, I asked the participants: “So in the time you were working, before your at-home mom years, if you had to describe your identity, who were you?” Several of the women seemed confused by the question, paused, and asked me to clarify the question. Whether this was because of lack of clarity in the question, because of the number of years that have elapsed, or because the women seldom pondered their personal identities is unclear. Across participants, questions regarding identity revealed two major themes. These were Freedom and Searching/Striving.

#### **(1) Freedom. One woman said:**

Before kids..I was definitely a very artsy sort of free-spirit type person [...] hung out with a very, alternative sort of crowd (Uhhuh) and, spent a lot of time watching foreign cinema and, going to strange gallery exhibits, doing odd things.

Another woman remarked:

I was just a carefree thing, and once I was, I had the freedom to go on the road, and my, you know, I had my *car*, I could be *anywhere* and have, didn't have to be home and make dinner, I didn't have to, you know, worry about, babysitting or, so I'd say I was enjoying life [...] you know, in *love* [...]

For some of the women, employment was a major contributor to this sense of freedom.

For example, MJ said:

Oh, it was great (L) you know, I did a job I *loved*, loved doing. Met tons of people, had lots of friends. *Loved* the selling business, it was good. Good customers, they liked me, had an excellent boss [...]

Another woman described herself by saying:

Who I was then? I was a lot of people then, yeah, it was, yeah, much different, I mean I had my, my identity with co-workers and, uh, my other interests and that sort of thing for sure (Uhhuh)..much more varied [...]

(2) Searching/Striving. In the years before full-time parenting, nine of the 10 women were employed, though few had a clear sense of what they wanted to do with the rest of their lives. Several remembered these years as a time of searching or striving, often through the worlds of work and post-secondary education. One participant dreamed of fame as a singer, but recognized that her chances of success were slim and returned to school. Some of the women were employed in what they considered careers and relished the personal and intellectual growth associated with their work. For example, Joanne described herself as:

ambitious, um, wanting to learn, wanting to share, um, I was very happy in [my field] and, uh, I had only worked 3 years before, uh, before I decided to become a stay at home mom, so I didn't have a lot of experience time but I was very motivated and, happy with the career choice I'd made.

Pauline was one of the few women in the study who had definite, long-term career goals:

I was um, trying to aim for something higher in those years, you know, going to university part-time, and working (Uhhuh) and, I always wanted to be a doctor at that point (Uhhuh) so I was working towards that.

Sally, who had a wide range of post-secondary, vocational, and travel experiences,

expressed a more indefinite type of searching when she said:

I think looking for something, looking for something. But, yeah, I was always looking for something that I wanted to do with the rest of my life.

In general, among the study participants there was a sense of freedom, a feeling that these years were for searching, for growth and development. In contrast, consider Lynne, who gave birth only days after high school graduation, and Jane who had been employed for several years in what she considered a dead-end job as opposed to a career. Unlike the other women in the study, neither Lynne nor Jane searched for personal identity in the post-secondary system or through employment. Lynne, whose friends went on to post-secondary education while she remained at home with her son, commented:

I mean, obviously some of me does wanna be out with my friends, doing what they're doing, you know, discovering, that part, of your life, of what you want [...]

When I asked Jane about her identity during these years she hesitantly replied:

As an identity? (Yeah) Um..I don't know..I was more of just a, figment (L) nothing of very much value.

For the majority of these women, then, the pre-parenting years were a time of relative freedom, a time of personal growth and development, a time of searching for a personal identity in the worlds of employment and education.

## **(2) The decision to stay at home**

In this part of the interview, we discussed the processes through which these 10 women decided to stay at home to rear their children. We typically discussed life changes that had precipitated the decision, any other options considered, and the influence of family and friends. Each woman in the study stated that she willingly became a stay at home mother, without being pressured by her spouse, friends, or other family members. When asked about who or what had influenced them in deciding to remain at home, only one woman identified an influence beyond herself or her immediate

circle of friends and kin. She said:

When [my daughter] was born, the doctor handed her to me and said 'well, you're now a mother, it's like having a computer, and you can program her' and, oh my god, he said 'it's just a, it's a *empty* computer', he said, 'and you can program her' (Wow) and I'll *never* forget that moment. And I thought, 'you know, he's right, you know' [...] (L) I don't want this job ("") (It's scary) Yeah.

This was the closest that any woman came to verbalizing the pressures inherent in the "ideology of the good mother". Each woman stated that staying at home was a decision made either individually, or made together with her spouse. In no instance did a woman indicate that she had been pressured into remaining at home, by husbands, family, or friends. For example, when asked if friends or family had influenced her decision to remain at home, Sally simply replied, "No, it was my own decision."

In fact, two of the women decided to remain at home despite opposition from significant other people. MJ's friends often asked her why she wasn't working, why she was "just" staying at home. Also, when I asked Cathy if family or friends had influenced her decision to stay at home, she answered:

It was very much my call (Uhhuh) in fact, there was a lot of pressure to, you know, get a job. My husband in particular (Uhhuh) was fond of commenting that he wasn't about to support any freeloaders.

For many of the women, there were powerful family precedents that supported at home mothering. MJ said:

and my *sisters* were home, stay at home moms, and my *mom* was a stay at home mom (Uhhuh), and I think that had a lot to do with me [...] but I just remember that nice feeling of having somebody home for me (Uhhuh) and I think, because I saw as my kids were growing, that I, that's what I'd want to do for them, too.

Rebecca said this of her sister, who has combined motherhood with full-time employment:

I mean, she's done a good job raising her children, but it isn't a life I wanted, it was just always, um, flying by the seat of your pants (mmm) 365 days a year, [...] but no, I didn't want that life, I'd had, my *mum* was a stay at home mum and I liked that.

In a small number of cases, though, the desire to remain at home was essentially a surprise. Cathy returned to her job when her maternity leave ended. She had planned to be a “working mom”, but on her return to work, she found that:

I was so miserable during that time. I just didn't wanna be there, I wanted to be at home with her. So, I just never, sought another contract (Uhhuh. Hm. So, miserable how?) Oh, I missed her, I didn't wanna be at work, I wasn't, couldn't concentrate on my work. All I was thinking about is 'what's she doing now?' And I left her with grandma (Uhhuh), my mother-in-law and I knew she was being very well taken care of, but, no, I just didn't want (L) to be there. My heart was not in my job (Uhhuh. It was something that you'd really enjoyed doing before?) Um, most of the time, it was very interesting, getting to meet all these people and uh, do this research, but (Hm) uh, no, I just, felt, I didn't feel right, leaving her with anyone and going back to work.

For Petunia, too, the desire to stay at home with her children was unexpected. She experienced a turning point when she was on a vacation with her children. She suddenly realized:

They were, 2 and 4 and I had no clue who these little creatures were that were grabbing at my legs every day (L) around dinnertime. They had been in daycare before that (Uhhuh) [...] they'd spend most of their day at daycare and then came home and I fed them and put them to bed kind of thing, and uh, just really felt that's not the way I wanted to, wanted them to be raised, so, I decided to stay home (hmm) until they were in school (yeah, that's kind of a big realization, isn't it?) It was huge.

In Kaplan and Granrose's 1993 study, the factors influencing women's decisions to leave an organization following childbirth included having jobs that were not challenging, an adequate family income, and a spouse who gave them limited support for working. In the present study, the decision to remain at home full-time also resulted from an interplay of factors. As in Kaplan and Granrose (1993), dissatisfaction with previous employment and wages was a commonly occurring theme. According to Sally,

If I had had a really good job, that I really enjoyed I think the decision might have been different.

Rebecca said:

I did not want to go back to the hospital [...] setting especially with all the cutbacks that were going on here.

And in Lynne's words,

Well, I considered getting another job, but I had been through the rigmarole of 7 dollars an hour jobs [...] cause, you know, it's uh, it's about the same, you make about the same amount of money to stay at home than to work (Uhhuh). It costs money to go to work when you have kids.

MJ showed the interplay of family finances, spouse's attitude, and a cross-country move when she commented:

If I said 'I wanna work full-time', he would have said 'fine'. He wanted me to do what I wanted to do (Uhhuh) and he was happy that I stayed home, but he wasn't pushing it. (Uhhuh, so you feel like it was your choice) Yeah. (Good) Yeah. Because when we bought this house, the fact that we were moving and I was losing my job, we made plans so we would be on one salary, so the question of my working wasn't, didn't really come into play, wasn't like *counting* on me going back to work [...]

In 5 of the 10 interviews, there was a move (either within a given province or to another province in Canada), made in support of the husband's career that occurred shortly before the decision to remain at home. For these women, who had left their jobs to follow their husbands, remaining at home to parent seemed a natural progression. In another interview:

(Um, ok. So then you made the big decision to stay home...) I don't know if it was a big decision though, it just kind of happened, cause like I said, I came [here] without a job (Uhhuh) so, and I wasn't feeling all that well, so I didn't really feel like going out with my *belly* and trying to get a job, you know what I mean? (L).

Every woman in the sample expressed a preference for parental care for her children:

We really felt that we brought these children into the world, it was, *one* of us had to stay home and look after them.

Some of the couples attempted to juggle their work schedules so that one parent could be at home while the other was out working, but found this to be too hectic to justify scrambling for the "second income". In only one case did the husband leave his job to

care for the children but when this arrangement proved untenable for the couple, the wife left her job. In all other cases, it was the woman who opted to stay at home with the children.

Common to many of the accounts was an unwillingness to use daycare:

I didn't have kids to put them in daycare.

And:

It was just, there was too many kids. I didn't like, I didn't like one caregiver to, to even more than one child. It was just a funny thing. It wasn't kids she knew, it wasn't caregivers she knew, um, [...] and it wasn't a bad daycare, it was a very *good* one, but is just wasn't what we wanted.

And:

We, both didn't want our kids in daycare (Uhhuh) that's about it [...] actually, my coworkers um, they all had their kids in daycare and I just didn't like uh, the stories that, you know, they would talk about, uh, and it, just didn't seem like a nice place to put my kids, that's my opinion though [...] I wanted to actually watch my kids grow up, so (Uhhuh) I just felt they were more important than, a lot more money.

Jane, who had commented that she didn't have a strong identity in the pre-parenting years and who had worked at a non-fulfilling job for several years:

well, at that time, my husband was gainfully employed, too, and I, the, primary reason why I chose to stay at home is cause I couldn't see leaving the children, so (Uhhuh) that was the biggest, factor.

Another factor that influenced the decision in some cases was the high cost of childcare compared to actual or potential income. In Amanda's words:

You're not going to go to work and have this brand new baby at home and make a buck an hour [...] Cause if I could have afforded a nanny back then, I probably would have not been a stay home mom.

For each woman, the decision to remain at home represented an interplay of factors and events including: childhood experiences, family finances, beliefs about mothering, beliefs and attitudes of significant others, moving to benefit the spouse's career, dissatisfaction with employment and wages, and experiences with and attitudes

about other-than-parental childcare. In the majority of cases, the women indicated that they wanted to “be there” in their children’s early years, and that the importance of mothering essentially outweighed the importance of education or career-building, financial independence, or relative freedom. For example, Pauline willingly put on hold her lifelong dream of becoming a doctor:

(Of course you could have been a doctor by now) That’s true (L) yeah, but then I would have had regrets, so (Yeah) I didn’t want to have any regrets.

### **(3) Life as a Stay-at-Home Mom**

During this part of the interview, we discussed the stay-at-home years. The areas discussed included: changes in relationships with other people; sources of support and frustration; surprises, joys, challenges; what could have made these years better or easier; personal identity; and whether or not past identity had affected each woman in her years at home. After the first interview, in an attempt to more clearly examine the strength of the “motherhood identity”, I began asking each woman whether or not she had ever considered staying at home on a permanent basis.

**Joys.** In every home I visited, there was evidence of good family times - photos, toys, crafts, etc. The women’s stories also told of the importance of “being there” for their children’s daily activities and for the special times, of giving their children the security they need to go confidently into the world, and of the joy of getting to do “kid things”.

As stated previously, all of the women stated that remaining home with their children had been their decision; they had not been pressured by husbands, family, or any one else.

Indeed, all of the women in the sample (with the exception, perhaps, of Amanda) indicated that they felt lucky to have been able to be at home with their children.

**What could have made things better or easier for you?** I asked each woman what

might have made things better or easier for her during her years at home. The women answered as follows:

Cathy: "I should have really demanded a lot more from my husband";

Amanda: "Um, probably like, an hour break a day just for *me*";

MJ: "It *would* be having a, a parent, or a relative";

Sally: "Respect for being at home and the work that was done", relatives who lived closer, and respite child care;

Petunia: "Having enough money";

Lynne: "I guess having more people that understood, what I was going through [...] you know, *people* my own age, to talk to";

Pauline: "Having more money would have been nice"

Jane: more respect for mothering

Joanne: "Family, yup, close friends, um, other friends who had kids"

Rebecca: "I don't know, Joni, I mean I really had good, good experiences as a mom"

By looking at these comments in the context of the women's descriptions of their years of full-time mothering, I constructed four categories for describing the negative aspects of full-time mothering. These are: Social isolation, lack of concrete support, inadequate finances, and lack of respect for mothering.

### **Social Isolation.**

I found people my own age just, really, weren't in the same, life point so, they couldn't relate to what I was going through. I couldn't drop everything and go out with them on the spur of the moment [...]

In describing their at-home years, social isolation was the most frequently voiced frustration among study participants. In fact, every woman interviewed described

feelings of isolation, particularly during the early stages of at-home mothering. This was, in part, due to the demands of parenting infants:

I mean, other than other moms, I don't remember talking to anybody or doing anything much, like that, because you just, little babies need so much time and attention [...]

Numerous other factors also contributed to this sense of isolation. Among study participants, these factors included: loss of a spouse through death or divorce, recent relocation, loss of regular contact with coworkers, having friends at different life stages, having family or friends who were not supportive of parenting, spouses' long work days, and lack of contact with extended family, particularly parents. Amanda expressed several of these factors in the following statement:

So my husband was commuting but, he couldn't take much time off work, so after my son was born, he would come for a week and then he went up, and I was left with this kid. (Uhhuh) You know, all my friends were university students who didn't have kids, and my family was everywhere *but* [here].

Across the group, the women generally valued their pre-mothering experiences and relative independence as vital to their personal growth. For several women, however, these experiences also exacerbated their feelings of isolation. For example, Joanne, who had been used to daily contact with coworkers, commented:

I found it *really* hard to make new friends and so on. We were renting a house at the time that my husband was uh, at the time that my son was born, and it was an older community, there weren't a lot of kids (mmm) and so on. I found it *very* hard to, to get used to a, being alone, but really feeling alone while my husband was at work.

Cathy, who represents the extreme end of social isolation in this study, said:

My relationship with my friends pretty much ceased, cause, I was 22 (Uhhuh) and none of my friends had the least bit of interest in children (Uhhuh) in fact, they seemed to regard it as some kind of contagious disease, and, stopped coming around [...] So, it was very, very isolated and certainly, my relationship with my husband, suffered dismally, you know cause he, he, I guess, wasn't really ready to be a parent to begin with (Uhhuh) and uh, he just didn't know what to do with these little screaming beings (L) that were suddenly in the house (L) he just wanted to be away from there as much as possible.

**Lack of Concrete Support.** Closely linked to social isolation and also a cause of frustration for many of the participants in the study was the lack of help with childcare or housework. For example, MJ said:

Well I remember my neighbor [...] her mother looked after her two daughters while she went back to work the first year [...] and I could see, cause if you go on the deck you can kind of see in their kitchen and see the mom feeding the kids at 5, and you know, my place is a mess, that's, I'm *jealous*, you know, I go, 'how come she gets that?' (L) And she'd come home from work and everything's clean and the kids have been fed ("")

Amanda, whose child was later diagnosed with autism said:

I remember my husband coming home one weekend. I hadn't showered all week. Like, no kidding. Because I couldn't put this kid down and I hadn't eaten, all I was doing was like putting my hand in a Fruit Loops box...and I was like, 'Thank God for dry cereal' [...] and I just said to him, you know, he walked in the door, not 2 minutes, and I was like '*take the baby*' [...] Like I was at my wits end. I was sleep deprived. It was, it was crazy.

At the end of a day, they often felt that they had accomplished nothing:

And uh, you know, what I found hard [...] not getting anything done, and your husband coming home and saying, 'oh, guess you were busy today' ("") (L)

Though the women accepted the responsibility for the bulk And uh, you know, what I found hard [...] not getting anything done, and your husband coming home and saying of housework and childcare, when there was limited concrete assistance, they performed these duties at the expense of "personal time". Several of the participants, both married and single, wished that they had had a parent or close relative nearby, for social contact, childcare, and help around the house. Sally, who is a self-identified feminist who has studied women's issues at the post-secondary level, is one of the few women who expressed resentment about the inequities she perceived in her marital relationship. She described her husband thus:

The frustration part of it is that he wants his cake and to eat it too. He wants...to have someone at home, he wants to have his supper cooked...but, gee it would be nice to have a wife who is also a professional and bringing in an income.

**Inadequate Finances.** Lack of money was often a problem, particularly for the single moms. To make ends meet, 3 of the 4 single mothers sought ways to generate income that would interfere as little as possible with their desire to mother full-time. Driving a school bus, providing at-home childcare, and performing short-term, part-time stints in restaurants and in retail sales generated some income for these mothers.

Across the group, living on one income necessitated a general “belt-tightening”.

As one woman said:

Having more money would have been nice (uhhuh) so, obviously you can't go out for dinner all the time, and, especially when you're, you know, *young* parents, we weren't very old, really (uhhuh) so, it's not like you're making, six figures a year or anything (L) (yeah, rats) (L) I guess, uh, you know, trying to budget is the hardest thing.

Another participant commented:

we lived in a very, you know, *mediocre* house and we lived a very *mediocre* life, and we didn't have holidays and things like that and, it was a choice you made on one income.

Although the degree of budget restricting varied widely across the sample, economic constraint often had far-reaching consequences. For example, Pauline largely attributed her feelings of social isolation and boredom to a lack of money; staying at home meant not being able to afford her own car. This left her feeling tied down and trapped. Rebecca described feeling out of place amongst her husband's coworkers and their “professional” wives, saying that she and her husband were not in the same “snack bracket”. Although Sally and Cathy occasionally worked at home in order to boost their families' finances, both women felt that their not earning an outside income lowered them in their husbands' esteem. Cathy commented:

I was trying, as I said, to make some money, and I was doing not too bad the last, couple of years I was doing it I was getting some decent-sized projects and making some money, but, it didn't seem to matter, it wasn't a real job in his eyes [...]

**Lack of Respect for Mothering.** Although each woman indicated that she considered

her work at home beneficial to the development and well-being of her children, several of the women also indicated that they perceived in other people a lack of respect for mothering. When I probed further about this disrespect, the women responded in different ways. For example, Rebecca was able to laugh:

Back in the days when you had to write checks and sometimes [...] you had to put your occupation it, it was like *homemaker* [...] you could see some people's eyes would just glaze over (L).

Sally showed irritation when she said:

I've always been able to see that what I do is important for our family. One frustration is that other people might not see that. You know, that 'oh, Mom's at home', you know, 'she's got all the time in the world to, to do things', and uh, which just isn't true.

Jane admitted that the disrespect affected her self-esteem, and that she resented the injustice. She said:

I found uh, the title of M-O-M just didn't cut it, so, and that's from women, banking institutions, it's from every avenue of life (Uhhuh) [...] and it's not really *comforting* to be, stepped on, or, looked upon as if you're not doing a good enough thing in life, not contributing adequately.

For Cathy, her husband's lack of respect for her motherwork contributed to her own feelings of inadequacy:

[...] the higher up my husband got in his work, you know, he has alphabet soup after his name. He's been taking courses for the last 10 years [...] and, it's kind of like the bigger he got the smaller I got (hm) um, and that was a very negative thing, because, it was reflected in, his attitude towards me, too, cause he was out working with all these professional high-power women and then he'd come home and there's me..little nobody.

### **Saliency/Centrality of the Mothering Role**

One of the purposes of this endeavor was to determine how the saliency and centrality of the mothering role might affect a woman's transition into and adjustment in the student role. I wanted to examine women's conflicts and pressures. What are the compromises they make in a society that continues to perpetuate the ideology of the good

mother while increasing numbers of young women are rejecting the traditional female role of caretaker in their desire for personal and professional autonomy (Kaufman, 1999; Schwartz, 1993)? In evaluating the centrality of mothering to each woman's identity, I looked at: (1) Life Before At-Home Parenting; (2) The Decision to Stay at Home; and (3) Life as a Stay-at-Home Mom. Though a necessary beginning, I did not consider voluntariness to be a sufficient measure of centrality, for it is certainly possible that a woman might become and remain a full-time mother yet feel ambivalence or distaste for that role (Moen as cited in Secret & Green, 1998). In reviewing the transcripts for this phase of the analysis, I looked at the broader picture. I asked myself: did this woman's pre-mothering goals and identity affect her in her time at home? Was this woman happy as a full-time mother? Had she considered staying at home on a permanent basis? How did other people influence this process? Were her decisions made voluntarily? Would she have liked to stay at home longer? What kind of conflicts did she experience? and, Is there something else she would rather have been doing?

Using the answers to these questions, I constructed a continuum (see Figure 1) that illustrates the extent to which mothering was central to each woman's identity. Miles and Huberman (as cited in Silverman, 2000) describe such data display as an integral part of qualitative data analysis. Data display is an organized assembly and presentation of information; it helps clarify the main direction and missing links in the analysis. I used this continuum as a foundation for further analysis, to help clarify the women's experience of the transition into postsecondary education.

### **The Continuum**

I placed Amanda on the far left of the continuum, indicating that, within this

group of women, mothering was least central to her identity. For Amanda, who had just moved with her husband to a remote northern community, the decision to remain at home was based more on circumstance and practicality than on ideological beliefs about mothering:

So, we just, you know, he worked and brought home the paycheck and I just stayed home and it was just kind of, it wasn't really up for discussion, it was just kind of, you know, we just, it just made sense. It's just what we did, you know. It's not like I thought, 'hmm, do I want to be a stay home mom?'

Further, when I asked Amanda how she identified herself during her years at home, she answered:

Not a stay at home mom. I was staying at home, but I didn't identify myself as one. I was probably a student on hiatus [...] I don't really think I've ever, really identified with any role (Uhhuh) but I definitely have disowned the stay at home mother role. You know, not that it's a bad thing, I just, it creeps me out, you know? (Because?) I think it's because of the connotation behind it. Like, obviously if you're a stay at home mom you don't have a brain and obviously you know, you just bake cookies and, you know what I mean? Like there's a real stigma attached to it [...] So, I think, if anything, it scares me that I'll be swallowed up by being a mother and nothing else.

I placed Amanda on the left side of the continuum because she did not embrace the at-home mother identity; she would have preferred to have been doing something else.

In the extent to which they viewed motherhood and homemaking as integral to their personal identities, Cathy and Amanda were at the opposite ends of the continuum. Unlike Amanda, Cathy stated that she would have preferred to remain at home on a permanent basis. After her maternity leave ended, Cathy quit the job she had formerly enjoyed because of an overwhelming desire to be at home with her baby. In her 12 years at home, running a home and rearing children gave Cathy a sense of achievement and control and protected her from the outside world:

[...] and um, I think I've always had a lot of self-doubt, and a lot of anxiety about my own abilities (Uhhuh) [...] so really kind of being at home was very easy, very, comfortable, you know, it was *lonely*, um, but it wasn't frightening [...] and I was on my own basically, at home I was the decision maker.

Sadly, Cathy's husband viewed her motherwork with contempt, and this contempt further undermined Cathy's already low self-esteem:

The longer I was out of the workforce, um, the less qualified I felt to do anything (Uhhuh) and, the higher up my husband got in his work...like the bigger he got the smaller I got [...]

Because Cathy embraced the motherhood identity to the extent that she damaged both her self-esteem and her relationship with her husband, I placed her on the extreme right of the continuum.

I placed Petunia in the centre of the continuum. She was rather surprised by her desire to stay at home with her children. However, in the years that she was at home with her children, Petunia saw herself thus:

I was a mother (L) only. Definitely, that's a huge, huge thing to become a mom and that, that's your identity, you know? [...]

She described herself as not having a particularly strong pre-parenting identity, and, as such, the past did not compete for identity during the mothering years. Although Petunia identified the "neediness" of young children as a frustration, she spoke wistfully of her sons' early years:

I think just being a parent, 24-7 as the expression goes. That's pretty shocking to the system...I miss those days...they grow up too fast.

Petunia occasionally worked part-time, as a school bus driver and as a home daycare provider. These jobs allowed her to remain at home with her children while providing her with a small income. When asked if she had ever considered staying at home on a permanent basis, however, Petunia said:

No, I knew it was just till they were in school (Uhhuh) and once they were in school then I would go out and, do something again, but, still always trying to fit it in so that somebody was home when they got home from school and somebody to send them off in the morning.

Petunia, then, viewed full-time mothering as a central, but temporary role.

On this continuum, Amanda, Petunia, and Cathy were the three reference points.

I placed Pauline next to Amanda. Like Petunia, Pauline viewed at-home mothering as an important, but temporary role. Although she became a stay-at-home mother voluntarily, Pauline also describes feeling lonely and trapped during her time at home. Further, she saw at-home mothering as conflicting with her long-term career goals, and with her personal sense of identity:

so, I guess you kind of lose your identity in that way, cause you're not, you can't do what *you* want [...] but um, I don't regret staying at home with them, I, I just regret not starting school earlier.

I placed Lynne, MJ, and Sally in a cluster, between Pauline and Petunia. All three of these women expressed both a strong desire to stay at home with their children and personal satisfaction with their motherwork. They identified motherhood as a central part of their identities. In Lynne's words:

it doesn't matter where you are, what you're doing, or who's looking after him, you, always, are thinking about that other person [...]

Yet all three also described experiencing fairly intense conflict during their years at home. MJ, elucidates the conflict expressed by all of the women in this group - of pride and shame, of wanting to both distance themselves from and embrace the role, of conflict between the stay-at-home mom and the independent student/career woman:

I always thought, gee, I, even if I had kids I'd work part-time, just to keep that, that going, that identity, that uh, feeling of belonging to something, and then having conversations with my husband (L) having, you know, instead of poopy diapers, gee 7 poopy diapers in a day [...] I had 3 in diapers at once (L)

But

I think I've, I've lived more of my life, taken more time to live it, and to enjoy the little things, and (Uhhuh) and, having kids, you do *kid* things, and it keeps you young, you know?

All three women felt that their staying home had been the right thing for their children. They also considered the at-home mom role as temporary. They all experienced intense conflict as the motherhood identity conflicted with other identities and personal beliefs. For example, Sally angrily remarked:

because I've done a lot of women's studies and stuff like that, I quite often get *angry* with, uh, you know, the nonrespect of it and, you know, why am I doing this, um, and always second-questioning myself, well maybe I should go to work, you know, I, I, I have a degree, I was raised with the idea that I would be working and in a career, you know, have it all kind of syndrome [...] Hopefully, by the time I'm finished this, *this* schooling, and get a job and they'll, they'll still see mom working in a profession.

I placed Jane and Rebecca on the right side of the continuum, midway between Cathy and Petunia. Both Jane and Rebecca described themselves as not having strong pre-parenting identities:

and I think maybe because I didn't have a strong sense of identity I think having children helped solidify my identity there [...]

In different ways, both women viewed mothering as a career. Jane ran a home daycare so that she could afford to be at home with her children. And Rebecca said:

I took a lot of parenting classes [...] I guess I took mothering, being a mother as a career [...] I had to make sure that what I was doing was the best I could do.

Both acknowledged the difficulties inherent in the role; Rebecca laughingly talked about being in "survival mode" and as not having time to worry about personal gratification or personal accomplishment. Both women felt strongly, however, that they belonged at home with their children:

[...] I thought it was very important for me to be at home, you know, it wouldn't have been a good fit if that wasn't my value, but my values were, um, I wanted to be at home.

Unlike Lynne, MJ, and Sally, they also believed that it was important for them to remain at home beyond their children's early years and entry into elementary school. Both were long-term, stay-at-home moms. Jane was at home for 17 years, Rebecca for 9 years.

Jane and Rebecca both clearly expressed their identity:

(In your time at home, you thought of yourself as a..) Mother. (Mother) Yup, yup, mother, female (L).

Finally, passing over Petunia at the center, and moving towards the right of the

continuum, is Joanne. She identified strongly with the at-home mother role:

(Who did you consider yourself to be when you were a full time at home mom?)  
Um, that's all I could see..mom and *then* wife (Uhhuh) but mom primarily [...] ..um, and then individual, in that order..mom, wife, individual..and, it was, tough, um, very hard, you know, it's a very selfless thing to be a mom (Uhhuh) you might sacrifice everything about yourself because, you know, because the little ones need you and they need uh, they need to have somebody who is there for them all the time.

Though she valued her pre-parenting identity and looked forward to a future identity apart from motherhood, she expressed very little conflict regarding her time at home:

When I do wanna go back I will be able to go back and if it means that much to me when I do decide to go back then things will work out, I'll find a way to make them work out, so, I really I really felt that my job at home was more important, with my young kids.

### **The Decision to Return to School**

Having constructed this continuum, which illustrates and helps clarify the relative centrality of the motherhood identity among the study participants, I was able to continue with the second major portion of the data, which concerns the transition and adjustment into the post-secondary system. As in the first major portion of the analysis, I used an interactive approach to the data. I combined meanings inductively derived from the participants' statements with deductive meanings derived from the reentry literature. In this phase, I also looked at the data in light of Ebaugh's model of role exit to determine whether or not the model provided any insight in the analysis. For example, I asked, Does Ebaugh's model help me understand what is happening here? I also asked myself in what ways the data might qualify or broaden the model. In order to help clarify the analysis, I initially organized the data according to Ebaugh's 4 major steps in the role exit process. These are, First Doubts, Seeking Alternatives, Turning Points, and Creating the Ex Role.

**First Doubts** is the first step in Ebaugh's conceptualization of the role exit process. In this stage, the individual begins to question or doubt her commitment to a given role and begins to redefine her situation. When I reviewed the transcripts, I discovered that 9 of the 10 women, regardless of the centrality of the mothering role, had experienced "First Doubts" before becoming full-time mothers. In other words, each of these women saw full-time mothering/homemaking as a time-limited endeavor:

So, as far as post-secondary education, it's *always* been part of the long-term, plan in our family, it was just *when* it was going to happen.

And:

(Was there ever a time when you thought you might stay home on a permanent basis)? No, I knew it was just till they were in school [...]

Cathy was the exception to this finding. She entered the role of at-home mother/homemaker with the hope that it would be a permanent situation. Unlike the other women in the study, her 'doubts' about the permanency of the role occurred not as a result of personal desire, but as a result of pressure from her husband.

**Seeking Alternatives** is the second stage in Ebaugh's analysis of role exit, in which the individual evaluates the costs and benefits associated with an alternative role. In this phase, the centrality of mothering was often the primary consideration as the women evaluated their options. All of the women perceived the educational system as being more flexible than the world of work, thereby allowing them to continue to meet their family obligations. For example, I asked Petunia how she decided to go back to school.

She answered:

Well, it fit in with that whole thing about being there when they go to school and being there when they get home. If I'm a student, with student hours, that fits right in there.

Cathy, who began a university degree after a 2-year period of employment, expressed

similar ideas:

Hopefully, unless there's a big deadline [...] I should have my evenings, my other three evenings in a week, and my weekends pretty much free, for family stuff, which is really, really important. I found that when I was working full-time, I was so wrung out [...] there's no, rest time. It was all, go, go, go, go, go, go, and the kids were 'how come you never have time to play with us?' [mm] 'Why don't we bake cookies any more?'

Within the group, the women offered a variety of reasons for choosing education instead of employment, and for choosing a specific program of studies. These included: flexibility, the ability to build on past education and/or past work experience, wanting to delay the transition into employment, wanting a career rather than a job, wanting a change. The single mothers in particular valued a post-secondary education as a means of ensuring economic self-sufficiency.

One factor that was common to all participants was the desire to learn. As Rebecca said:

I'm ready to do, something else (Uhhuh) and I, you know I was thinking, is it because I want to be *out* of the house? But if it *was* I could get a *job* that would fill the, but it's not that, it's the *learning*. I just, um, my brain is searching for *knowledge* that's out there.

**Turning Points** are events that force one to consider doing something different. All of the women had reached a point where, for a variety of reasons, the role of full-time mother no longer seemed viable, though the actual timing of the turning points varied from woman to woman. In all cases, personal readiness was an important element. In Joanne's words:

when my daughter was almost a year old, my son was, almost four, it's at that time that I started to think that, ok, you know, what should I be thinking about here?

Similarly, MJ said:

I don't call it a *crisis* but I, I find I have more *power*, more .. you know, I wanna do something, gonna *do* it (Uhhuh. Just, new phase in life, or what?) Yeah, yeah, like I realized I'm not getting younger, um, not, not an obsession that I'm 40, I think 40's ok, you know, but I just, find, um, it's time.

There is a wide range in the length of time the women I interviewed were at-home moms, and in the ages of their children at the time of school reentry. Some children were in diapers, others were in junior high. One was in university. For each woman, though, feelings of personal readiness and family readiness preceded her return to school. For Rebecca, the turning point was the youngest child entering school:

I know that, once the kids went to school I was not very happy at home. *My life*, my, everything that filled up my life was gone. It's a lot of hours between 8:30, 8:15 and 3:30 to fill up (Uhhuh) just being Dottie Domestic ("") didn't work for me (Waiting for someone to come home) yeah. [...] a couple of years ago, I thought, 'we're ready'. It was more 'we're ready' not just 'I'm ready'.

Lynne's turning point was a combination of events. She discovered that she could get funding if she attended college, her child started elementary school, and she got laid off from a low-paying job shortly after being hired. For Amanda, too, receiving funding was crucial. Equally important was the support staff she had assembled to care for her high needs children, and finally settling her deceased husband's affairs. She said:

It was like yeah, good, everything's kind of settled...I feared I'd never go back. So, it's like do it as soon as the opportunity came...about.

In some cases, a particular experience that occurred during the mothering years provided a "turning point" that determined the women's academic determination and direction. For example, MJ, a Francophone woman, decided to become a teacher when she discovered that there was such a shortage of French teachers that her children's Francophone school was hiring English-speaking substitute teachers. Similarly, Sally decided that she wanted to become a midwife after her own positive birthing experiences with midwives.

[Um, so how did you decide to return to school?] Oh, I was floundering around looking for something, cause I knew I couldn't stay home all the time, and uh, and, then I found, what I found, I had babies with midwives, and I knew, that's it, that's what I want to be.

For Jane, a combination of events and awarenesses converged, providing a turning point. These were, pressure from a friend to enter school, desire to work outside of the home, recognition that she would be losing both her foster son and the associated income, wanting a pension, and wanting to have a "real job" by the time her youngest graduated from high school. She said:

so I thought, yeah, this is something I know about, and, and uh, let's get some initials behind my name and start working with what I know.

For each woman, then, the turning point was some combination of awareness and events that translated into a sense of personal and family readiness.

#### **Individual vs. Group Exit: Fitting In**

The literature shows that mature students often feel that they do not fit in with younger students and that this feeling out of place (feeling like an anachronism) may hinder women in their adjustment into higher education. Other literature has shown that making new friends while relinquishing old friends can help ease the transitional process for reentry women. In Ebaugh's terminology, even the awareness that others are experiencing a similar transition can ease adjustment. Although Joanne's distance education program permitted her to balance the demands of her family and studies, she commented:

I had wished that I could have gone to a 3-hour course a week [...] just have a bit of contact with the other people in my program, cause it's not till graduation that I met everybody else [...] it was really neat to hear how everybody came about uh, finding [...] the same sort of things, fulfilling the same needs that the program was able to offer [...]

The three women who met with me to discuss the preliminary results of the study seemed to thoroughly enjoy meeting each other and sharing ideas and experiences. What I thought might be an awkward 30-minute meeting turned into a 2 ½ hour "coffee party".

For the most part, the study participants who felt they “fit in” at college or university were those who had high proportions of mature women students in their programs. For example, in Lynne’s program:

(So, you said there were a lot of other adult students?) Yeah, like there’s only 1, there’s 2 people I think that came right out of high school in that course. Everyone else was like 24, 25, my age, coming back after working for a while, or being at home (Hmm. That’s neat. So, you feel like you fit in?) Yeah, like there was 15 of us, and it was totally, our class was really, really good.

Sally, Jane, and Cathy were also in programs that were largely or entirely composed of adult students, and none mentioned any difficulty in “fitting in”, although none regularly engaged in extracurricular activities with other students.

MJ and Rebecca, though significantly older than the majority of their peers, also said that they had no problems fitting in:

I had my backpack, and walked to school with my books and, (Uhhuh) so, yeah, I felt like, part of that (So you feel like you fit it?) Yeah, yeah, no problem [...] actually, somebody told me, uh, I looked pretty good to have had four kids [...] (Do you feel like people reacted differently to you because you were a mom?) [...] I think they, uh, I think they had *respect* for me and, uh, I think, probably *didn’t* want to be in my shoes, and that’s fine, there cause, you know, I know when I was that age, ‘Four kids. Kids, aaahhh’ (“”) (L)

In contrast, some of the women who had large proportions of teenagers or young adults in their programs described feelings of awkwardness. For example, even though Amanda is the undergraduate representative for her faculty and employs several of the students in her program, she said:

I totally don’t fit in at school. Honestly. (No body piercings and belly tops and that kind of stuff?) Exactly. And my ass is way too fat (L) for those, young girls, you know? It’s like, I go to classes and I just feel really weird. Even though there is other older people in my classes, I don’t know, its like I, I don’t really identify with them and I don’t really identify with the young ones. It’s like, just give me my “A” and let me leave.

Pauline, too, found:

I don’t like the fact that I’m the oldest person, I am, you know, that sort of bugs me (Uhhuh) [...] and they’re just so different [...].

Although a handful of study participants shared these types of feelings, in no case did anyone consider dropping out because of not fitting in. Pauline is, however, in the process of changing her course of studies, in part, because she feels that she does not want to work with the “type” of students who are in her faculty, either at the university or in future employment.

It is important to note that, in this sample, feelings of fitting in or of not fitting in were unrelated to degree of involvement with peers. I specifically asked some of the women whether or not they socialized with their peers beyond class time and course requirements. None did. Rebecca’s comments seemed to reflect the general feelings in the group. She said:

I’m not out there looking for a mate, which a lot of kids are (uhhuh) I’m not there for the social life, like the social activities [...] I love talking to the people when I’m there, but my, my purpose is very different there than the average student (uhhuh) so it’s um, it’s, it’s an odd thing (so do you do any of the social, stuff at the university?) No, no. My social life is here [...]

### **Voluntariness and Degree of Control**

In the literature, school reentry typically involves some combination of voluntary and involuntary elements. For example, although Petunia is wholeheartedly immersed in her university program and feels that she is happier than she has ever been in her life, at one point in the interview, she sighed wistfully and said “they grow up too fast”. Beyond issues associated with the inevitable growth and development of children, each woman voluntarily, and excitedly entered her post-secondary program. In fact, problematic for four of the women in the study were involuntary elements that delayed their entrance. Amanda was delayed by family obligations:

So, you know, here I was, wanting to go back to school, but with the death of my husband and my son’s diagnosis I needed to stay home, because I had to, get stuff in order.

Three other women were not accepted into their programs because they did not initially

meet the entrance requirements. In each case, these women persevered through academic upgrading, repeated conversations with college/university officials, and volunteer work and were eventually accepted.

### **Life as a Mother-Student: Creating the Ex-Role**

In analyzing how the participants created their new identities as “mother-students”, I looked at the transcripts from a variety of perspectives. I asked myself to what extent the data “fit” within Ebaugh’s conceptualization of the role exit process. I looked at the transcripts in light of the existing reentry literature. I also looked at the participants’ statements in their own right, as I tried to evaluate what was most important to each woman individually, and to the women as a group. Using these different frames of reference, I generated 6 categories for analysis. These were: 1) Influence of other people; 2) Role residual; 3) Personal development in the at-home years; 4) The home-school balance; 5) The student identity; and 6) Gains and losses associated with school reentry.

#### **(1) Influence of Other People**

In Ebaugh’s model, the influence of other people can encourage, delay, or abort one’s transition into a new role. The reentry literature shows that a woman’s transition into college/university can be strongly influenced by a variety of people, including spouse, children, other family members, friends, and college/university personnel. The following is a summary of the results regarding the influence of others on the participants’ transition into post-secondary education.

Overall, the women felt that the decision to return to school had been theirs, and that this decision was generally supported by their spouses and friends. Although several

of the women, including Rebecca and Joanne, carefully tailored their programs so as not to interfere with their family responsibilities, in no case did a woman indicate that she had been pressured by a spouse to remain at home when she wanted to return to school.

**Children.** In the reentry literature, studies show that the influence of children is one of the most important determiners of successful transition. Several of the women mentioned that, by going to school, by reading, writing, studying, and using the computer, they had become positive role models for their children. Pauline expressed the general feeling of the group when she said:

I think, um, I'm setting a good example for my kids.

Some women also mentioned that the similarity of experience was creating a new kind of bond between themselves and their children:

and my kids [...] they think it's pretty neat, mom's doing homework (L).

Another woman said:

Oh, it's been very good because, you know, he, you come home from school and like 'What did you learn in school today?', 'Well, what did *you* learn in school today?' so, kids can just totally relate [...]

When I asked the participants how their children had reacted to their going to school, I got the following kinds of answers:

Um, they have time where, uh, I'm doing, you know, a lot of studying, and they, kind of get bummed out about it, um, you know, they wish that I would spend more time with them, but, they've been fine, like, they're happy kids.

Joanne specifically mentioned her children as a source of support throughout her program:

they were so used to seeing a book in, a book or, seeing me at the computer, you know, it means that when I was doing my studies that that was time to play or that was time to do other things [...] and they helped me so much through the whole process because if they hadn't been cooperative throughout the whole program I

couldn't have done it or I would have had to have waited until they were older.

In contrast, Jane's older children, who might have been strong sources of support and assistance, appeared rather resistant to the process, particularly in the beginning:

like they [4 children living at home] just saw how hard I was working, you know, um, I can't say they were any additionally supportive, nobody really picked up any slack (L) (Uhhuh) so basically, if I couldn't do it, nobody else would pitch in, you know [...] (Are they helping out more now? Or is it still pretty much) Uh, it goes in spurts (Uhhuh) (L) 'If I get paid I'll do work' ("") that type of thing, yeah (Ooh. Uhhuh) Yeah, so, yeah, very typical teenage garbage stuff.

Jane also made the following comment:

Right when I had started school, I had said something to one of my kids and my daughter said 'quit trying to be a social worker. You're not one yet'

In contrast, none of the mothers of younger children mentioned any particularly negative reactions from their children. Both Cathy and Lynne commented that their going to school was easier on their children than their going to work:

And, so they weren't, it wasn't too much of a shock, like going back to work was a *terrible*, terrible shock (Uhhuh) *really* upset, especially my son, he was, out of sorts for about six months.

Cathy, in particular, commented that her children and their father were benefiting from her having returned to school:

and you know, he's also being richly rewarded by spending more time with the kids. They, they run out into the driveway when he comes home calling 'Daddy's home, daddy's home' (L) you know, 2, 3 years ago, they wouldn't even answer when he spoke to them (L) like, 'Who is this guy? Why is he talkin' to me?'

**Spouse.** Amongst the married women, all acknowledged the financial support of their husbands, and each stated that her husband had supported her in her decision to return to school:

When I found out how much daycare would cost, I'm like going to the bank, and I thought 'oh well, it was a dream, it would have been nice', honest, cause I said 'oh, I can't tell my husband, he'll flip.' And he, well, he went 'ahahah' then he said, 'well, if that's what it takes to, for you to be happy, and then do something

after with it, then do it'.

Joanne and Rebecca describe their husbands as strong sources of emotional support.

Joanne said:

My husband, very much so, um, he often pulled me through those low periods (L) where I was, couldn't quite get through the one last assignment or couldn't quite motivate myself to, to, uh, study a little bit more for an exam.

Their spouses also proofread assignments and offered their services as "sounding boards".

In terms of concrete support, Sally, Cathy, Pauline, and Joanne specifically mentioned that their husbands helping with childcare so that they could complete assignments, attend class, or study. Lynne's ex-husband provides regular weekend childcare. Pauline is the only woman in the sample who specifically mentioned her husband as providing additional instrumental support:

my husband does *all* the housework and, laundry, and everything, [...] I mean I try to do something here and there, but, when I am very busy, (Uhhuh) he does *absolutely everything* and he cooks *every* night (Wow)

In the literature, Edwards (1993a) has shown that reentry women typically value emotional support from their spouses more than they value concrete support. It may be, particularly among women who have been homemakers, that they *expect* to receive emotional, but not instrumental support. It is not surprising that Sally, the self-proclaimed feminist in the group, is the sole married woman in the study to mention any conflict between herself and her husband regarding her university work. She described the frustration of laboring to complete her assignments using an obsolete computer and of having to share the kitchen table with her family rather than having her own, private workspace. She said:

and um, my spouse, has been a wonderful spouse in the school part (Uhhuh)

absolutely. (Uhhuh) Financially, of course, and, time wise [...] he's very good about ensuring that I have time to study but I, I wonder if, we, if roles were reversed, if, if my spouse wouldn't have his own office with his own equipment [...] my gut feeling is [...] he would have all the equipment he needs to, to do a good job.

**Friends.** Not surprisingly, the support of friends was somewhat more important to the single mothers than to the married mothers in this sample; for Lynne and Jane, friends were a major determinant in the initial decision to go to school. Jane said:

I had thought, just a bit about it [...] you know, I didn't look into it or anything, [...] but um, I know a woman, um, her partner's actually the director of where I go to and [she] had been after me for quite some time, 'why don't you go back to school?' (mm) 'You have this knowledge, put it in practice' [...]and I thought yeah, it probably would be a good idea [...]

Friends were likely part of the reason for Lynne's perseverance when she failed her first year of studies. In becoming a mother immediately after high school graduation, Lynne had felt left behind as her friends completed degrees and began careers. Since returning to school, she felt more connection with these friends:

Um, well, I can relate to them a lot more, cause I've gone back to school now (Uhhuh) so I can relate to that part of their life, you know, and now, they're done and they're starting their careers and they're getting married and starting to have kids, you know so, (they're slowing down a little and you're picking up steam?) Yeah (L) that's about it, yeah.

For the other three single mothers, their fierce independence rendered the influence of friends more marginal. Both single and married mothers usually described friends as providing emotional support and, occasionally, childcare.

Um, friends, when I say, when I told them that I was interested in doing this, they were, they were *really*, yeah, you know, very supportive in, in their encouragement [...]

On the negative side, friends were sometimes mentioned as a source of irritation. Again, this finding was more pronounced for the single mothers. For example, in order to focus on her studies, Jane has had to curtail her interactions with friends:

I've stepped back a bit and I've got a few complaints about that too, but I don't have time to have long conversations on the phone about nothing (L)

Amanda, too, has had to limit her social interactions. She described the following incident:

my best friend, who I've been best friends with since I was like, 15 [...] her and I just had a **major** falling out [...] I just told her [...] 'You have a husband, you also have a job, you both have two incomes, I don't even have one'. And I said, 'look, I've got to be able to raise my kids, too', you know [...] I told her, I said 'spend a day in the life of *me* and then tell me that you don't understand why I don't make more time for you.

In retrospect, it appears that the effect of friends, both positive and negative, were the most intense among the single mothers in this study.

**University/College Personnel and Programs.** A number of the mother-students said that most of their professors were willing to grant time extensions. Joanne, for example, never had to use an extension, but knowing that she could, if she needed to, was an important support. Two of the single mothers, Amanda and Petunia, both mentioned having used time extensions in order to help balance the demands of home and school. The single mothers also seemed to benefit from adult-oriented classes. Both Jane and Lynne have occasionally brought their sons to school with them; children's illnesses and school holidays do not always coincide with the post-secondary timetable.

In terms of the attitudes of professors and instructors, the women's reports were generally favorable. For example, Rebecca felt that, being a mature student, she was treated with increased respect. MJ frames her opinion about her teachers in terms of a mutual respect:

*loved* the teacher [...] can't say enough of, about the teachers at the university (Uhhuh) Amazing (mm) Knowledgeable, warm, nice, and, maybe cause I'm *older* I, I, have more respect in terms of what they've gone through, the time and effort they put in to prepare the course, the, the knowledge they have [...]

In contrast, Pauline, found that:

the TA's were *exceptionally* respectful, like when you're older (Uhhuh) they uh, treat you much better, but I think the profs, some of them have a real soft spot for, the younger, kids.

Jane and Lynne both described their assigned advisors/counselors as being helpful.

**Other People.** In this study, some of the participants described the influence of additional people. Lynne's parents will help with childcare, particularly when her son is sick. Pauline's mother-in-law will take her children for sleepovers, allowing her time to study and complete assignments. Petunia's mother has helped financially. Sally regularly relies upon her in-laws for transportation and accommodation as a part of her lengthy commute to university. Jane receives once-weekly respite care for her high-needs foster son. Amanda couldn't find enough praise for her nanny:

and the nanny, who is, like my wife, my juggler, my circus ringleader, I mean, honestly, I would not be able to do school if it wasn't for her. That's a *fact*.

There were very few comments regarding opposition from any of these "other people".

Rebecca did, however, relate the following:

I can remember my *mom* said to me, 'why are you going to school during the day?' You know, 'That, that's hard on you, that makes your life busy' and I thought, well, mom, because everything else you can take through continuing education is all evening and weekend courses. Well, I wanna be home in the evening (Uhhuh) and I wanna be home on the weekend, and I wanna take more than basket weaving and painting and stuff, I want to *learn* more about the *world*.

Notice how Rebecca used her mother's opposition to help clarify her course of studies.

## **(2) Role Residual**

In Ebaugh's terminology, role residual is the identification with a prior role, such that the individual experiences certain aspects of the role after the exit. Not surprisingly, these ex-fulltime moms experienced powerful role residual as they tried to reconcile

mothering and schooling. Sally describes this conflict in the following narrative:

and its not so much the school, it's the schooling life stuff together, the schooling family stuff together, you know. Um, but being a student, you have less energy and time to deal with anything else that might come up in the family. Um, for instance, you know, if, we, we had um, my husband changed jobs and that, that was a *huge* stressor on this family, and because I had work that I had to do. And, and, to get done, and exams coming up. I, I *tried* to be there for him as much as possible, but um, for him to, had had to take extra time for his work and I had to take extra time for school. And, um, the frustrating part was who's going to cut back? Right? Well, it always ends up being me cutting back on my school, or (uhhuh) my study, or anything else that I, I might be able to cut back in order to support him with his work, because, I mean, because that comes first.

I asked Joanne:

(Do you think that being a student this time, the second time around was more stressful or less stressful than the first time around?) I would probably say more stressful just because of everything else that, um, I had to look after in my life, mom, wife, home, health..you know, every, everything in general, um, the studies, studies were not first and foremost [...] I didn't want to impact the rest of my family to the extent that they were suffering because of my wanting to go back to school so I think I worked that much harder to try to make up, you know, family time in other ways.

Lynne had decided to begin her studies and begin a new job when her son turned 5, thinking that "it would be OK because then he would be in school". She admits to being surprised by the extent to which the demands associated with mothering - she mentioned soccer, school projects, and volunteer work at her son's school - prevented her from focusing on her schoolwork. She took a summer course during which her son lived with his father. Lynne was amazed at how much easier things were when the demands of mothering were removed:

and, he stayed with his dad, like it was 5 weeks long, and, I've never been able to come, I've never, I went to class, and I can home and I'd do my homework and I'd study and I had never had that before, because when you come home and you have kids, you have like snacks, and people needing you to do things (uhhuh) and other things to plan so you have to kind of work around their time, it's like very, very different (A lot easier) I couldn't believe how easy it was, I was like 'this is how students who, who get good grades (L), this is how they do it, when it's fresh

in your brain and you can come home and do it right away'

### **(3) Personal Development In the At-Home Years**

Many of the women felt that at-home mothering had helped them grow as individuals. Analysis of the transcripts reveals numerous ways in which this growth may have helped the women adjust in their new lives as mother-students. In the interviews, study participants described several areas of personal growth and development. For example, several of the women, the single mothers in particular, had to hone their ability to generate income and manage scarce resources. Some other areas of growth identified by the women include: clarification of goals, persistence, time management, studying and learning skills (gained by helping children with schoolwork), and organizational skills.

The most commonly reported problem associated with at-home parenting was social isolation. Not surprisingly, the most commonly reported area of growth was in the ability to generate social support. Every woman interviewed described how she built a social support network of friends, neighbors, or relatives. In their efforts to meet other mothers, these women joined playgroups, went to the playground, went to the gym, or simply talked to other parents at their children's activities. For example, Amanda developed a support network of other mothers of high-needs children whom she met at the Children's Hospital and Petunia built a network of friends among other mothers she met at her children's recreational activities. Rebecca said:

I [...] developed a really good *network* of people, otherwise I think I would have *died*. You know, it would have been just *so* lonely.

She told the following story:

I was going around the block one day and the house just behind us had their garbage out for garbage day and there was a disposable diaper box [...] sitting there, and I looked at the size, and thought, 'oh my God, it's a newborn' (L) and I wasn't a very outgoing person 13 years ago and it was *so* out of character for me [...] and I went and knocked on her door and introduced myself [...] and we became very good friends [...] and that was a *lifesaver* for me.

In contrast, both Cathy and Pauline as felt that they had little in common with

either “working” women or with other stay-at-home mothers. Instead, they both found companionship and support among a small number of older women.

Some of the women commented that their “real-life” experiences as full-time mothers gave them an advantage over younger students. For example, one mother described the “easy A” she earned in her child development class. In contrast to many younger students, these mothers realize that their education is a conscious choice, and feel that this realization makes them better students. For example, Pauline describes herself now as being more grounded, more focused on her personal goals than in her earlier years:

I wasn't a good student, as far as being focused on, on anything, like I just had no, no real goals during that time, except for to, get a job and move out of my house [...] and then as you grow up, you realize that there's more to life than having, you know, a crappy job (L) [...] I don't know, just feeling like, more, grounded, sort of more of a reason, for, I don't know, goals and stuff, I guess [...] like things became more, uh, important [...] I guess my identity now is that, that, anything I attempt, you know, I'm gonna try my *best*, you know, whereas that never used to be my identity (uhhuh) it used to be just, you know, get by, that's good enough.

Amanda started at in-home therapy program for her autistic son and began helping families of other handicapped children access services. Cathy used her spare time writing magazine articles, researching her genealogy, and beginning correspondence with distant relatives. During the at-home years, MJ's and Petunia's volunteer work helped them develop career and educational goals. Jane's educational focus arose from her experiences as a foster mother of a high needs child.

The ability to generate and manage scarce resources, time management, persistence, goal clarification, study skills, and the ability to generate social support are some of the many personal resources that might ease one's adjustment into the post-secondary system. They are also personal resources that this group of women developed in their years at home.

#### **(4) The Home-School Balance**

According to Wilson (1991), it is difficult to balance the demands of family life and paid employment because the two are so incompatible. In order to cope, some women reduce family responsibilities while others reduce work responsibilities. Others try to “do it all”. In the reentry literature, the family and higher education are often described as “greedy institutions”, which vie for full attention. We can extend Wilson’s (1991) perspective to include women who attempt to balance the demands of family life and education. In this study, Amanda was able to achieve success as a full-time student by (frequently) negotiating with her professors for time extensions on assignments, and by drastically reducing her extremely heavy family demands; she hired a staff of 19 to care for her two high-needs children. Sally, MJ, and Pauline reduced family demands by relegating a portion of the childcare responsibilities to others (e.g. spouse, neighbor, daycare, sitter). Although the participants’ children’s ages varied widely, each woman perceived a reduction in family responsibilities as being crucial both in her decision to reenter school, and in her ability to balance home life and school; all of the women had at least one child in the school system. Rebecca, Cathy, Sally, and Joanne reduced the demands of education by pursuing a part-time course of studies. Finally, Lynne tried to “do it all”, to parent, to study full-time, and to work full-time. In her words:

How do you give 100% in your home with your children? How do you give 100% at work? How do you give 100% at school? Like, there’s only so much of you.

Not surprisingly, Lynne found herself overwhelmed, and she had to repeat her first year courses. She commented that she had quit her job, and was going to have to rely more on her family for childcare.

The women often commented that they sometimes had to compromise their schoolwork in order to meet family needs. At the same time, however, 9 of the 10

women, through careful planning, were able to achieve a home-school balance and thus meet the demands of both family and school, without seriously compromising their commitment to either.

### **(5) Student Identity**

“I, I’m sorry, I will *never* apologize for putting my family first.”

If one evaluates the existence of a “student identity” by the strength of the mothering identity, by time spent on campus, by participation in campus activities, or by social contact with other students, then “student” would appear as a marginal role among study participants. Petunia had started a mature students’ club, but found that, once the club was in existence, that no one had time to plan or attend events. Amanda was the undergraduate representative for her faculty. No one else had any significant interaction with other students beyond classes and group assignments.

In contrast, if educational persistence and self-identification are the criteria used to evaluate the existence of a student identity, the picture changes. On the “centrality of motherhood continuum”, Cathy, Jane, and Rebecca were the participants for whom the “motherhood” identity was strongest. Based on this finding, one might expect that these women would experience difficulties in making the transition into post-secondary education. In Ebaugh’s terminology, powerful role residual and side bets might hinder or prevent the role exit process. Side Bets are incentives to remain in a given role; they enhance role commitment. Consider, however, the following exchanges. Rebecca was a judge at a fair. She introduced herself to the other two judges. They asked her about her background.

And I thought, ‘oh, I’m so glad to say that I’m a university student’ (Uhhuh) instead of saying ‘I’m a stay at home mom’. Isn’t that awful? [...] I was really

*surprised* when I said it and thought, ‘no, cause you’re really a mom first, M., (Uhhuh) the university thing is, is *second*. And I thought, ‘no, I said I’m a university student *first*, so (Hmm. Kind of a little slip that makes you think, hmm) *Uhhuh* (L) *I wonder* (L).

I asked Jane about her current identity. She replied:

I’m a student, (Uhhuh) mother (L) S’s mother. Right now I’m relaxing (L) (Student mother on holidays) (L) Focused, motivated (Uhhuh) Yup.

I asked Cathy, “What do you think about identity now? Who are you now? She replied:

I’m, I’m well, I’m, a student. It *does* feel good. In fact, the day I went and paid my fees (L) and got my picture taken for my card, I came home and, started, hopping around the house, ‘Woo hoo! **I am a student**’ (L) ‘**I am doing something. I am moving forward. I am taking control of my life**’ (L) So yeah, it feels really good.

On the continuum, Rebecca, Jane, and Cathy are the women for whom mothering was most central to personal identity. As shown in the above excerpts, each of these mothers views “student” as part of a new, reordered identity, and as an exciting new focus and direction in life.

At the center of the continuum is Petunia. Petunia sees being a student in her chosen field of study as an identity in and of itself, and as a means to a new identity as a paid professional. Despite severe financial restrictions and uncertainty about how she will fund her studies next year, Petunia commented:

I don’t think I’ve ever been happier...because now, I am who I wanna be...and that’s really neat.

Lynne, MJ, and Sally, for whom mothering had been somewhat less central to personal identity expressed similar views.

Moving further to the left of the continuum are Pauline and Amanda, both of whom had had strong pre-parenting educational and career goals, and who had felt that they put their lives “on hold” during their mothering years. Like Petunia, Sally, Lynne,

and MJ, these two women view “student” as a means to new identities as paid professionals. In contrast to these women, however, Amanda expresses impatience with the educational process:

“Just give me my “A” and let me leave.”

More than the other women in this study, Amanda resembles the reentry women in Breese and O’Toole’s 1994 study; few of these women had what they considered a strong connection with the student role. Instead, they considered “student” a marginal role, a bridge leading to a completed role exit. Amanda had delayed her educational aspirations, first because of her husband’s career, then as she settled his affairs following his death. Now, though university study brings her closer to her goals, she impatiently awaits graduation, career, financial independence, and the ability to fund programs for her high-needs children.

Pauline is also impatient with the educational process, but for different reasons.

Consider the following:

I just love learning new things, that’s a joy (uhhuh) ..I like the university. I like the campus, you know, I like it there. It feels comfortable being there [...]

But later, Pauline said:

Maybe it’s just because it’s nursing, I don’t know. Maybe that’s why I dislike it so much, but, a lot of the girls are uh, you know, just like the high school, cliquey, sort of, cheerleader type, girls (uhhuh) and they just, uh, drive me crazy, like I just don’t have any respect for them.

I felt that Pauline wanted to embrace the “student identity”, but that, having put her dreams of becoming a doctor “on hold” she was again delaying her dream by entering nursing. I discuss this further, under “Social Work Practice Considerations”.

## (6) Gains and Losses Associated with School Reentry

In Ebaugh's model, there is much attention given the variables that might impede an individual's transition into a new role. As I reviewed the transcripts, however, I found that the participants in the present study were telling more often of gains associated with school entry than with losses associated with the end of full-time mothering. I then recalled Menaghan's (1989) work, which suggested the importance of evaluating how specific gains and losses affect specific individuals. In so doing, I discovered five major categories of "gains". These were: intellectual challenge; prestige; sense of achievement; establishing distance from children; and future gains. Each of these five gains was associated with a regaining and development of personal identity. The major "loss" associated with school entry was the loss of personal time.

**Intellectual Challenge.** Both Sally and Rebecca described parenting as being intellectually challenging. They approached motherhood as a short-term career, read books about parenting and took parenting classes in order to be the best parents they could be. On the other hand, several of the women described as monotonous the actual mechanics of at-home mothering. For all of the participants, however, becoming a student was more than a means to a degree/certificate or employment, it was a valued opportunity to learn. For example, Pauline said:

"I just love learning, new things, that's a joy."

MJ found it difficult to contain her enthusiasm:

(Was it hard to find the discipline to do that at first?) I was [...] so motivated (Uhhuh) just, really, really wanted to do it (Uhhuh) yeah, no, I was no trouble. I reread some of my books twice for my exam, and, yeah, wrote my essays before the *deadline*.

For Cathy, this enthusiasm for learning even extended through a required math course:

I find math really, frightening (Uhhuh). I'm actually enjoying this class [...] I really enjoy learning.

For Sally, academic work in a field in which she is intensely interested is simply "brain candy."

Among these women, the opportunity to learn also provided a means of regaining the sense of self that had been lost through at-home mothering:

And I felt like I, had given so much of myself, especially in the early years with the kids that I felt like I had to do something to keep my mind active and, uh, studying a new program was really, uh, really, um, met that need that I had to sort of remind myself who I was at the same time.

**Prestige.** Ebaugh identifies the social desirability of a given role as an important variable in the role exit process. As has been discussed, a number of the women in this study described ways in which other people had denigrated the role of stay-at-home mom. In this study, each woman identified some way in which becoming a student increased her prestige. Joanne's face glowed when she described having her children at her graduation ceremony. MJ enjoys impressing her friends with her newfound status:

(You said you have a bunch of friends who are at home moms [...] has your, your change, your becoming a student affected those friendships much?) No, no, no, they all, I think they all think 'wow', you know? [...] and, uh, so it makes me feel good that they think 'wow'.

Jane and Rebecca, for whom mothering had been a central role, are also enjoying this new status. Although Rebecca said that she wears the title "mom" as a "badge of honor", she recently surprised herself by introducing herself to someone as a "student" rather than as a "mother". Jane commented that her foster son's teachers and caseworkers are taking her ideas more seriously now. For Cathy, who was at the extreme right of the continuum, the prestige associated with the student role seems to have restored her worth in her own and in her husband's eyes:

My husband was very excited. *He* wants to get his MBA (mm). I'm, 'Nope. It's *my* turn' (L) (Uhhuh) so, and yeah, it's, I hope it'll kind of close the gap, too, in terms, of...it's not an intelligence thing, I'm every bit as intelligent as he is [...] but there's a certain, *élan*, in having all these professional designations (The prestige factor) Yeah, and I think this will kind of close the gap (Uhhuh) and, uh, and I feel that I got really left behind. While I don't regret being at home with my children, I think that's the very best thing I could have done for them [...] and it really wasn't a matter of, personal self-sacrifice, you know, I didn't *look* at it that way at the time. I see now that I did, lose out in a lot of ways during that time, in terms of my relationship with my husband, my relationships with other people, just my, and *my* personal self-esteem (Uhhuh) and confidence and development and so on. But, um, I think it was a very important thing to have done.

**Achievement.** Some of the participants said that they were beginning to see the results of the time they had invested in their children. For example, Jane noted with pride how she had nurtured her children's budding artistic talents and love of reading, and Rebecca credited herself, to a degree, with her eldest daughter's relatively easy transition through puberty and into the teenage years.

In the literature, however, feminist writers have suggested that at-home mothers tend to lose the yardsticks by which society measures worth, and that this loss of a sense of achievement can negatively impact self-esteem (Kaplan Daniels, 1987). In the current study, several mothers discussed feelings of frustration at having accomplished nothing all day. What the educational system offered each of these women was an increase in concrete measures of success. Meeting these challenges was linked to reported increases in self-esteem:

And, uh, happily, I did very, very well in my program (good) and it was a real sort of, uh..boost to the ego, you know, that I could go back and study and, and achieve and, and uh, be happy with my progress [...] I sometimes wonder, you know, if I could have put more time in assignments and so on, but my, like the comments that I got back from, from professors were always very positive, and very constructive.

Similarly:

during your peak stress times you feel like throwing in the towel [...] and then

when you get your marks back [...] it's, it's very rewarding, when you realize that all the hard work you are doing (Uhhuh) is actually, paying off.

In addition to grades, *per se*, school reentry offered these women new ways to taste success, as they stretched their personal limits. For example, although MJ had completed a university degree, her grades had been marginal. This sense of failure had bothered her for years. She saw school reentry as a means of redeeming her past, of proving to herself that she is not stupid. She described the intense anxiety she felt when she first spoke with the university admissions officer:

(That must have been a hard phone call to make) Oh, it was *horrible*. I mean, oh, yeahhhh, and *butterflies* and *sweaty* (L) [...] and it's just that, woah, you know in life, you gotta face the music and (Uhhuh) that was my first step.

Jane, too, who had been at home for the longest period found that she enjoyed stretching her limits:

I had a hard time retaining at first (Uhhuh) because I used, you know I didn't have to read, retain and write, uh, so now I find that I am exercising my brain more, I'm not just talking to little kids anymore and it's actually, my brain is sharpening up again.

For each woman, school offered a means of personal validation and pride. Joanne succinctly describes this process:

so, oh, boy, it's been a *heck* of an 8 years, uh..really..by far the most *moving* and most, uh, *eye opening* years of my life (Eye opening how?) Um, in part realizing that..there's a lot more to you that you can do if you really want to, that there's a lot that you can offer if you really want to [...]

**Creating Distance/Personal Identity.** Every woman in this study indicated that she valued her school experience, in part, because it allowed her to distance herself from the mothering role. While the women regularly sacrifice their sleep in order to study and write papers so that they won't disrupt family time, a number of women also commented that it was important that their children begin to learn that there is more to Mommy's life

than meeting their needs.

it's really neat to have other deadlines in your life [...]. It is interesting that, [...] I, I felt like it's taught them to..appreciate that mommy had other things to my life besides just them and daddy [...]

When I returned to the "mothering continuum" and then to the transcripts, I found that creating this distance was seen as an important gain, regardless of the degree of centrality of mothering. For example, Jane had been at home for 17 years. It would have been difficult not to notice her smug expression when she commented:

Well, my kids had a hard time adjusting, um, before it would be 'Oh, I forgot my lunch, phone mom, she'll bring it' (Uhhuh) now it's 'well, guys, you're basically on your own. You forget your lunch, don't call me' (L) 'I won't *be* here' (L)

Joanne, for whom mothering was a fairly central identity, described a similarity of experience between her mother's return to the labor force and her own return to school:

I know that when my mom went back to work I was in grade 3 and I'm the youngest, I saw a difference in her you know it was just that whole self-respect, not being, taken advantage of, or, or *felt* like you were being taken advantage of. It's *often*, just it's well, sometimes it's just a feeling and sometimes it's the truth, right?

Amanda had identified herself as a "student on hiatus" during her years at home. She made clear her desire for distance from the image of the full-time mother early in the interview when she said "I never baked cookies". In becoming a student, and having developed a wide network of care for her children, Amanda discovered a newfound freedom. She said:

If I'd known how cool it was to be a Dad, I would have done it long ago. I love my kids, but, *God*, love em when they're gone. You know what I mean? [...] Good, let somebody else do the toileting and the meals and stuff and I get to have all the fun times.

This sense of distance allowed her to develop a sense of peace regarding mothering:

I don't really dismiss the mom role like I used to, (Uhhuh) maybe it's because I don't feel threatened because I'm at home, or I'm not at home, I mean.

**Future Gains.** Each woman in this study has definite educational and/or career goals.

In electing to stay at home with her child, Lynne had put on hold any career aspirations, and had experienced a number of short-term, low-paying, dead-end jobs.

I watched all the rest of my friends and people around me kinda go get educated and get careers and then I was looking 'oh, this would be good.' I would like to have a career. I would like to, you know, have, somewhere, and you know, go to work every day and know that that job's gonna be there for a while.

Amanda commented during the interview that her life would be much easier if she quit school and continued in her part-time job, which she described as "a job that any monkey could do". For her, however, a future career means both the ability to support herself and her children and the ability to fund therapy programs for her children, thereby maximizing their continued growth and adjustment:

But um, I definitely want to aspire to more than that and, um, yeah,...I really don't know.....you know, just, basically just have my kids grow up to be the best kids they can possibly be. You know, um, I really want to see , you know, my son especially, because he's had the most challenges, I really want to see him just kind of grow up and just um, have like normal relationships [...]

**Losses.** From the women's transcripts, it appears that, for the most part, they were able to balance school time and family time without seriously compromising their commitment to either. In addition to reducing the demands of school or family (through part-time programs, relinquishing a portion of child care, etc.) the women typically sacrificed personal time. This loss manifested itself in many ways, including lack of sleep.

Time, lack of time (Uhhuh) and again, putting demands on yourself that maybe, are too high, and sometimes disciplining yourself because you're not able to do it all even though you think you *should* be able to do it all [...] you're *sleep deprived* (L) and you wonder why.

Jane commented that, since entering school, she had had to give up workouts at the gym, and had gained 20 pounds. Joanne reported feeling that every moment of the day had to be used constructively or she was "wasting time":

I think I worked that much harder to try to make up, you know, family time in other ways [...] And that was one of the comments my parents had made at one uh, one time that they came to visit, '*my gosh, you don't stop. Sit down*', you know, it was almost like a *hyper* sort of, um, feeling [...] I put a lot of demands on myself, and I feel like I've aged over the last five years (L).

For each woman in this study, the gains associated with studenthood clearly outweighed any associated losses. In other words, current and future payoffs including intellectual challenge, prestige, sense of accomplishment, and economic self-sufficiency kept the women in school, despite loss of personal time. For these women, the role of student is both a means to an end and rewarding in and of itself.

**What's Best For Me is Best for My Kids.** In every interview, participants identified going to school as being good for them personally; becoming a student was a means to achieve intellectual stimulation, prestige, a sense of accomplishment, distance from children, and future goals. Rather than feeling selfish for pursuing personal gratification, these women, regardless of their "place on the mothering continuum" recognize that what is good for them is also good for their children. Lynne said:

you have to show your kids what, live by example (uhhuh) so I realized I was gonna have to go back to school, I was gonna do all these things, and, that it, as long as it was good for me it was gonna be good for [J] too.

In Joanne's words:

So there's a little bit of the individuality that I'd, uh, that I had sacrificed, but I feel like I'm fully getting that back now, and I think it's only helping the kids to realize that, that um, you know, you're important enough to be who *you* are even though your role may change in life, you know, if you try to remember who you are and try to look after who that person is too.

Perhaps Cathy put it most succinctly when she said:

I think there's already been a huge change in the, the atmosphere in the house (Hm) so, it was that expression, 'if Mommy ain't happy ain't nobody happy (L) (Uhhuh) and it certainly seems to be true.

## **Chapter 5: Conclusions, Implications, and Directions for Future Research**

### **5.1 Research Questions and Methodology**

The central questions that I addressed in this research project were: (1) How do women experience the transition from at-home mothering into post-secondary education? (2) Does Ebaugh's model provide insight or enhance knowledge regarding reentry women? (3) How do the data expand or qualify Ebaugh's model? From a practical perspective, I asked (4) What are the women's sources of support and frustration as full-time mothers and in their transitions into post-secondary education and, (5) What could have made things better or easier for them?

I used the semi-structured interview as a means of uncovering women's lived realities; in my literature review, for I had found a heavy reliance on pen-and-paper tests and a lack of information of the specific impact of at-home parenting on women's post-secondary experiences. Though I was interested in exploring school reentry within Ebaugh's framework, I was more interested in understanding how each participant viewed this personal transition. In my construction of the research guide and during the interviews, I carefully avoided using "role exit" jargon. In keeping with a narrative approach, I attempted to move beyond mere question and answer exchanges. As previously discussed, I sometimes felt anxious during the process and sensed that I was no longer in control of the direction and content of the interview. I often had to remind myself that approaching research as conversation and largely giving up control of the research process are precisely what is required in generating narrative (Riessman, 1993). I also admit to feeling somewhat foolish as I repeated "uhhuh" over and over throughout the interviews. Such prompts and displays of interest and encouragement did, however,

seem to help keep the narratives flowing, and also prevented me from taking too active a role; given the numerous similarities between my experiences and those of the study participants, I could easily have focused the interviews upon these similarities, thus limiting the breadth and depth of the data.

According to advocates of qualitative research, the particular strengths of the qualitative interview lie in its ability to: obtain large amounts of data quickly; produce a rich and varied body of data; examine and analyze the meanings that individuals ascribe to their everyday lives; and provide opportunities for immediate clarification (Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Reinharz, 1992). The duration of the interviews ranged from 55 minutes to 1 hour and 45 minutes. Within this timeframe, the interviews yielded a wealth of information regarding the participants' experiences and identities before parenting, as full-time mothers, and as mother-students. The richness of the participants' words yielded a richness of data that would be difficult to find in a more structured approach. For example, Cathy's observation that "the bigger he [her husband] got, the smaller I got" poignantly illustrates and illuminates her low sense of self-esteem during her years at home and the reasons for her determination to succeed in the MBA program. Similarly, without a qualitative/narrative approach, could we really understand Amanda's feelings of desperation and isolation as she parented a high-needs baby?

I phoned the Children's Hospital a couple of times in the middle of the night saying somebody's got to help me because, I'm afraid what I'm going to do to this kid. Like I was at my wits end. I was sleep deprived. It was, it was crazy.

I also found that the process did indeed offer opportunities for clarification of meanings – both the participants' and mine. In reviewing the transcripts, I noticed that I often made statements tentatively, and that the participants felt free to agree or disagree

with those statements. This process is illustrated in the following exchange:

(Hmm, ok. So then you made the big decision to stay home, um..) I don't know if it was a big decision though, it just kind of happened [...]

Alternatively, the qualitative interview gave me the means of knowing when I "got it", that I understood a participant's meaning. In the following exchange, Jane was explaining why she had not returned to school sooner:

I thought about school at that time [...] but no, no, I felt my life was just so full with what I had [...] I don't think I would have been able to do it anyways (A few years ago, I would just kind of look through the university and college catalogues) yeah (and look through and think about it, and 'no') yeah, yeah, exactly (L)

Through such verbal give and take, combined with a cautious use of self, I felt that the participants and I were largely able to arrive at shared understandings. The process also allowed me, albeit in a time-limited fashion, to offer support, encouragement, and validation to these women in their quest for personal growth.

## **5.2 Experiences of Transition**

Friedan (1963) and Tittle and Denker (1980) described young women of the 40s and 50s as being unable to envision their futures beyond marriage and childrearing. Indeed, this study showed that the ideology of the good mother is alive and well. Aside from Amanda, who became an at-home mother more through circumstance than through personal ideology, the women accepted self-sacrifice as a maternal duty and saw mothers as the ideal, preferred caretakers of children. In the present study, however, each of the ten women interviewed had goals and aspirations beyond motherhood, which evolved either before or during the time at home. Although the number of years at home varied considerably, nine of the ten women entered the at-home mother/homemaker role knowing that it was a temporary role. Only one woman in the group had hoped to remain

home permanently. Among study participants then, “although women’s identities as mothers may still be primary, they are no longer the only ones” (Glenn, 1994, p. 11).

Feminist authors describes the day of the homemaker as one of mindless routine that leads to boredom, resentment, narrowing of vision and ambition, a sense of incompetence, apprehension, lack of self-confidence (e.g. Roiphe, 1996; Schwartz, 1993; Kaplan Daniels, 1987; Astin, 1976). In this study, some of the women identified feelings of boredom, of having accomplished nothing all day, and of feeling trapped during their years at home. These feelings were particularly pronounced among the women for whom “mothering” was not a central identity. One woman identified low self-esteem as a serious problem. In contrast, several of the women showed evidence of personal growth and development, which aided them in their later school entry. Signs of growth included increases in: the ability to generate personal support; the ability to generate income and manage scarce financial resources; patience; resilience; focus and determination; and, time management skills. Participants said they had learned to take things in perspective, that they no longer “sweat the small stuff.”

When I began the interview process, I had expected to hear stories of screaming children and angry husbands. I didn’t hear them. I was also expecting more expressions of guilt, as women who have subscribed to the ideology of the good mother often feel intense guilt when they relinquish part of that care to others (Gross, 1998). While it is true that many of the women scheduled their classes and sacrificed their personal time in order to preserve family time and prevent disruption at home, in all cases, the women had relegated a portion of childcare to their spouses or to other individuals or institutions. All of the women, including the one mother who reported feeling guilty about sending her

preschoolers to daycare, felt that their children were being adequately cared for. These results are in accord with Wiebe (1993), who found that when mothers were satisfied with their childcare arrangements, that they allowed the student role to gain more strength.

### **5.3 Does Ebaugh's Model Provide Insight or Enhance Knowledge?**

In this study, I wanted to examine the struggles, disappointments, compromises and triumphs of women as they left behind the role of "fulltime mother" and assumed the role of "mother student". I selected Ebaugh's model of role exit as a framework for my investigation because of its seeming compatibility with my own journey in the worlds of employment, motherhood and education, and with much of the reentry literature. My review of the data shows that Ebaugh's major contributions to the present study lie in her presentation of role exit as a process rather than as an event, and in inviting an examination of the meanings that various roles hold among different individuals.

**Role exit as a process.** In analyzing the data, I found that the process through which the women made their transition generally followed Ebaugh's stages. These were: (1) First doubts; (2) Seeking Alternatives; (3) Turning Points; and (4) Creating the Ex-Role. Ebaugh's stages, and her recognition of role exit as being shaped by an individual's past experiences and present realities, led me to examine the study participants' lives both before and during at-home parenting. This broad scope of analysis helps sort out the interplay and relative influence of the various factors which have been shown to affect school persistence and success among reentry women. For example, when a full-time mother returns to school, she exits the "full-time mother" role. She is not relinquishing the "mother" role. One might expect powerful role residual (the identification that an

individual maintains with a prior role such that the individual experiences certain aspects of the role after he or she has exited from it) that could potentially interfere with her adjustment as a student. Such role residual might produce feelings of guilt regarding the adequacy of her mothering, undermine her sense of accomplishment, and lead to attrition. By examining the wider scope, however, one can take into account not only the centrality of mothering, but also the strength of other variables including satisfaction with childcare arrangements, personal goals and aspirations, strengths developed during the at-home years, and attitudes of significant others.

**Roles and Their Meanings.** In the reentry literature “mother” and “student” are often presented as warring roles, which battle for full attention (e.g. Whitaker, 1998; Ribbens, 1993). Alternatively, Breese and O’Toole (1994) present the role of student among reentry women as a marginal role, a means to an end, rather than as a central role. If reentry women don’t strongly identify with the student role, however, then why do women so often report feeling conflict between home and school, of feeling that it is so difficult to reconcile the two worlds? (e.g. Whitaker, 1998; Edwards, 1993a, 1993c; Conway, 1993).

Within Ebaugh’s framework, I expanded the existing literature by examining how the centrality of the mothering role affects the transition into post-secondary education, how specific role gains and losses affect specific individuals. Findings showed the clear existence of a “student identity” which was not defined by connections with other students or participation in extracurricular activities. Instead, this “student identity” was an outgrowth of specific gains associated with becoming a student. These gains were: intellectual challenge, prestige, achievement, creating distance from children, and future

gains (e.g. financial independence), which outweighed any associated losses, including loss of personal time. These gains also outweighed any “side bets” (incentives to remain in a given role) associated with fulltime mothering/homemaking including security, friendships, or emotional attachments. In other words, by assuming the “student identity”, these women were able to retain much of what they had enjoyed about mothering, and largely drop what they hadn’t. Further, among study participants, these gains also outweighed any additional barriers that might have prevented a successful transition.

#### **5.4 How Do the Data Expand or Qualify Ebaugh’s Model?**

The data qualified/expanded Ebaugh’s model in three major respects. These were: Timing of first doubts; issues of centrality; and practice considerations.

**Timing of First Doubts.** When conducting her research, Ebaugh found that the role exit process typically occurred in a 4-stage sequence, beginning with “first doubts”. In my work, the role exit process also began with first doubts, but, in contrast to Ebaugh’s findings, nine of the ten study participants experienced first doubts *before entering* the role of full-time mother. As in Drahota and Eitzen’s (1998) study of retirement among professional athletes, experiencing these doubts before entering what was recognized as a temporary role greatly eased the eventual role exit process. As study participants had already experienced these doubts, the process of school reentry was initiated by feelings of personal and family readiness and not by confusion, depression or personal crisis (as in Brooks, 1976).

**Issues of Centrality.** Ebaugh looked at voluntary exits from roles that were central to personal identity. The present study built on Ebaugh’s work, and on the existing reentry literature, by examining the construct “centrality” as it relates to mothering and how it

affects the transition into post-secondary education. Results showed wide variation in the extent to which the former at-home mothers had embraced “mothering” as a central identity. For the majority of participants, this role salience did not appear to be an important factor in several respects, including persistence in the student role and perception of gains and losses associated with school reentry. Role salience can, however, become a starting point by which one begins to account for the practical strategies and reasoning behind the women’s actions. For example, the salience of the mothering identity explains why many of the women in this sample chose to return to school instead of seeking employment; they viewed education as being more flexible than employment. This flexibility permitted them to continue to meet family demands while moving ahead with their lives. The concept of role salience can help explain why Rebecca, for whom mothering continues to be a central identity, has carefully tailored her part-time university program so as not to disrupt her children’s and husband’s lives, and has enrolled in a general interest rather than a career-related program of studies.

**Social Work Practice Considerations.** Given the sparseness of research on the process of role exit, it is certainly premature to suggest that it be adopted as a tool in interventions with distressed, reentry mother-students. Practical application of the model is, however, an intriguing prospect. If continued research warrants, Ebaugh’s model might be used to guide and assess social work interventions. Each of Ebaugh’s stages and variables could be used to generate specific questions regarding student adjustment and thus complement existing assessment tools.

In discussing her program of study, one participant said:

I mean I’d much rather, write the great Canadian novel or something, or write screenplays, but, I think there’s a better chance of having some kind of, financial

stability if I had some kind of business training.

Using Ebaugh's "seeking alternatives" stage as a starting point, we might ask: By what process did this woman decide to enter the post-secondary system? What other alternatives did she consider? How did she select her specific area of study? Adding the variable "centrality" to the analysis, we might ask: What was this woman doing before she returned to school? Is she exiting a central role (or roles?) What are this woman's goals? How important are these goals to her?

The model might also provide a means of assessing the sometimes complex "influence of others" in student adjustment/nonadjustment. We might assess the influence of friends, children, spouse, parents, professors, advisors, other students, admissions officers, and others. Do these people support or hinder the role exit process? Consider this participant's comment:

I didn't *want* to be a nurse ever, um, but I chose that sort of based on, my family [...] focused on my family instead of just *my* um, wants (uhhuh) you know, my interests, though I think I'd rather take something else [...]

Here, a social worker might examine this woman's views on motherhood (salience, centrality), help her to arrive at a more equitable balance between her needs and those of her children, and thus help her begin to make decisions that will not leave her feeling bored, trapped, or unfulfilled.

Within Ebaugh's framework, the central question becomes: "To what extent is this woman able to complete the role exit process and create the ex role". In other words, is this woman able to remove herself from her past roles/identities to the extent that she can begin to allow the student role/identity to gain strength?

### **5.5 Sources of Support and Frustration**

During the at-home years, personal supports included spouses, relatives, friends, and neighbors, and various children's playgroups and activities. Frustrations associated with at-home mothering included social isolation, lack of concrete support, inadequate finances, and lack of respect for mothering.

In terms of frustrations associated with school reentry, the women in this study mentioned loss of personal time (which included loss of sleep), difficulty meeting entrance requirements, difficulty obtaining adequate financing, problems with time management, having to work harder than younger students to obtain good grades, sacrificing studies to meet family demands, lack of connection with other students, and lack of support from friends. These findings support the existing reentry literature (e.g. Nelson, Aron & Poole, 1999; Home, 1997; Abbott, 1995/1996; Pitts, 1992; Astin, 1976). Although some previous studies show little change in household responsibilities following a woman's return to school, it appears that among the married women, spouses often assumed responsibility for childcare (usually on weekends), particularly during exams and when assignments were due. Personal sources of support included spouses, friends, children, parents, and in-laws. Institutional supports included availability of drop-in childcare, flexibility of class scheduling, financial assistance, program advisors, role modeling and mentoring by instructors/professors, and distance education. These findings are also in keeping with the existing reentry literature (e.g. Home & Hinds, 2000; Miller, 1997/1998; Thacker & Novak, 1991).

### **5.6 What Could Have Made Things Better or Easier? Recommendations**

I asked each participant about her supports and sources of frustration as a reentry student.

Based on the women's responses, I developed the following list of successes and shortcomings in existing college/university programming. In developing this list, I asked: How have existing programs helped this woman? How have existing programs hindered this woman? and, What changes might improve the post-secondary experience of these and other women? I also added a recommendation based on my own experiences as a reentry woman. Note that these women are attending several different academic institutions in three different provinces. I cannot, therefore, make specific recommendations based on individual institutions' current policies and services. Although 9 of the 10 women who participated are successful students, the issues they identified are well supported in the reentry literature (e.g. Stalker & Prentice 1989) and will be of concern to those who provide reentry women with counseling, academic, and administrative services.

**(1) Adult-oriented programming.** Flexible, adult-oriented programming was an important ingredient in Joanne and Jane's school success. Jane was attending an off-campus program for adult students. Compared to the on-campus program, Jane's program incorporated smaller class sizes, classes composed of adult students, and hours accommodating to parents, i.e. class times that coincide with children's school days. If necessary, she was able to bring her child to school with her on days that he was home from school.

Joanne's university outreach program provided "learning opportunities", (including access to the library and tutors) and "all the flexibility in the world". She was pleased because she had:

next to no, uh, family, um, juggling to do, because it was done on my own time while the kids were either sleeping or playing, or, or in the evenings when my

husband was home, or, on weekends when he could be with the kids and I could study.

Some of the services and policies from the outreach and off-campus program that might be incorporated into the wider system include: adding drop-in child care services, increasing the variety of class times and sessions available to students, and increasing the availability of distance education.

**(2) Schedule of grading.** In both the mainstream and the modified, adult-oriented programs, exams and assignments were concentrated at mid-term and end of term. Jane commented:

When you have 3 exams that week, you know, 3 exams that week and you have grad, my daughter's graduation, and, papers due, and, you know, it's either usually very easy or very stressful. And always, um, near then end of the term, very stressful (uhhuh) and that's the biggest complaint I have, you know, just the amount of stress, the anxiety for exams can be quite difficult.

Measures that might help in this regard include varying class times and sessions, advance planning and advising of summer schedules, and, of course, reexamining individual courses with respect to the timing of assignments and exams. Is it really necessary to concentrate the grading at mid-term and the end of classes?

**(3) Funding.** What would have made things easier, particularly for the single moms? In Amanda's words:

More scholarships, geared towards single moms. A lot of the scholarships don't apply to me, so then, and that's an added pressure, Ok, now I've got to borrow more money (uhhuh) and more money. And student loans, forget it. They don't cover, you know, if I didn't have my widow's pension, forget it. There's no way.

Alternatively, Jane said that in her off-campus, adult-oriented program, she was contacted by program personnel and told that she was eligible for funding. At our dissemination meeting, Amanda and Petunia traded creative ideas about obtaining funding.

Reexamination of funding policies, and increased dissemination of information regarding funding eligibility appear warranted.

**(4) Making connections: Other students.** Joanne's only regret about her outreach program was the lack of contact with other students. Because of her high level of determination, her clear educational and vocational goals, and the compatibility of her distance program with family responsibilities, Joanne persevered despite feelings of isolation. Other students might not have.

While Petunia started a mature student's club at her university, she found that no one really had time to plan or attend club events. Within Ebaugh's approach, even the awareness that others are experiencing the same transition can make the process easier. Minimal time expenditure being the primary consideration, the various outreach and distance education programs might attempt linking its students, perhaps via student e-mail or chat rooms limited to registered students. Another option might be to include an optional phone number exchange among people taking the same course, or a mature students' newsletter.

**(5) Making connections: Staff.** Among busy mother-students whose priorities lay beyond the post-secondary system, and who typically do not socialize with other students, the only real "human connection" these students may make is with their instructors. Without that "human connection", students may feel lost, or fall through the cracks. I asked Sally about her major sources of support as a student. She answered:

I'd like to say the school program, but not really (uhhuh) (L) Because I'm doing that from a distance too, you know. I think that the school probably would be supportive, I mean, they're very good about the distance stuff, but, uh, because it's a part time program, I'm only down there once or twice a week, its, I wouldn't say its supportive, no. I mean I wouldn't say it's *nonsupportive*, (L) is that a word?

This lack of connection does not seem to have affected Sally's determination or school success. For Lynne, however, program flexibility and her living far away from campus combined to form a serious lack of supervision.

I did talk to the counseling at the college, but, because I'm here and they're there, it was kind of like, there's not much I could have done (mm) but, I realized, now, that I need to go to them before anything starts, and that way, if you, need a tutor or something for support, it's easy just to get it right at the very beginning (uhhuh) you know, instead of halfway through.

Lynne credits some of her difficulty to not using available sources of support, including her parents and ex-husband for childcare, and for not talking to instructors or counselors earlier in the term. It is certainly unfair to place the entire responsibility upon the institution she was attending; there is, however, an existing literature which shows that reentry women are often unlikely to seek help, that, being mature students, they feel they should not need to ask for help (Breese & O'Toole, 1994; Leavitt, 1989). Why did her instructors not talk to her when they began to notice failing grades? Was there no one to help her plan her year, to tell her that parenting, working, and attending school full-time was an unrealistic goal? While Lynne was willing to repeat the courses she failed, other women might have dropped out. This suggests the importance of monitoring, advising, and mentoring relationships between teachers and reentry mother-students, though, admittedly, this places a heavy burden on already overtaxed individuals. Increasing the visibility and accessibility of counseling, orientation, and advising services is also vital.

**(6) Cooperation among post-secondary institutions.** I have lived in four different Canadian cities during the completion of this degree. Increased cooperation among Canadian academic institutions, would have greatly helped my progress. For example, as a University of Manitoba student wanting to use the library at the University of Toronto, I would have to pay \$60.00 for very basic borrowing privileges, while at the University of Calgary, because of the COPPUL agreement, I was able to enjoy full privileges, including interlibrary loans and document delivery

### **5.7 Limitations of the Study**

- (1) Given the small sample size and the often astounding resilience among study participants, it would be inappropriate to generalize the findings to the overall population of mother-students. Nevertheless, I hope that the present study adds to the existing literatures on feminist analysis, motherhood, role exit, qualitative methodologies in general and the use of the semi-structured in particular, and, of course, on reentry women.
- (2) This is a one-shot study. Data were collected only once with each participant. While it would likely prove interesting to examine women's adjustment/nonadjustment to their new roles over the course of their post-secondary studies, my own time constraints would not permit a longitudinal design. In the shorter term, additional interviews might have allowed participants to clarify, revise, or add more information to their stories; although I felt that the interviews yielded a wealth of data, I occasionally felt that the interviews were slightly "rushed", in order to fit into the lives of busy mother-students (the participants' and mine). I am uncertain, though, as to how many of the women in my sample would have consented to additional interviews.

In order to help compensate for this limitation, I did the following: I invited each participant to telephone me should she wish to add any information after the interview; I arranged a post-interview meeting with some of the participants; and I offered each woman the opportunity to provide written or oral feedback regarding my preliminary results and analysis. In one instance, while reading an interview transcript, I noticed that I had interrupted and redirected a participant when she began telling me about her university advisor, whom she had identified as a source of support. I telephoned her and she willingly supplied the additional information.

- (3) As I have noted, I entered the study with strong feminist leanings and with an emphasis on Ebaugh's model of role exit, both of which might have limited my range of vision with regard to data collection and analysis. I used the semi-structured interview to help offset these leanings. Further, though some of the questions and concepts related to

Ebaugh's model, I did not ask specific questions about the model or use Ebaugh's terminology in the interview, in hope that the women's own ideas of what is most important would emerge.

(4) My feminist values sometimes conflicted with my research methodology. Within my feminist orientation, I tried to convey interest, support, and encouragement to study participants, and tried to validate their experiences both as mothers and as mother-students. Participation in this project may have helped the women make sense of their lives, and may possibly have been an empowering experience. Because I was trying to uncover *their* personal truths, however, I did not feel that it was appropriate to inflict my personal values upon them. I did not, for example, discuss the "ideology of the good mother" or offer my judgments about fathers who spent little time with their children. I cannot, therefore, claim that study participation was a "consciousness-raising experience."

(5) Although revealing "the hidden underlying structure of oppression" (Gorelick, 1996, p. 29) is a central tenet of feminist research, many have criticized feminism for its white, Western, heterosexual bias, which often fails to recognize the differences among women (Reinharz, 1992; Cannon, Higginbotham, & Leung, 1988). I placed ads for recruiting participants in a variety of locations throughout Calgary, and at the University of Manitoba and at Red River Community College, and in the written media. The women in my sample represented a fairly wide range in terms of socioeconomic status, from struggling single mother to relatively affluent physician's wife. Nevertheless, none of the women appeared to be living in poverty. Further, all of the women were white, and, to my knowledge heterosexual. The literature shows that letters and media solicitation are most successful in recruiting white, middle class women, and that personal contact may be useful in recruiting a more varied sample (Cannon, Higginbotham, & Leung, 1988).

(6) In the recruiting phase of my research, I asked a friend to speak to women in her single mothers' group about my project. One woman, who clearly met the selection

criteria, said “I’m a single mom, I’m going to school full-time and working, and she wants how much of my time?”

In any study, who *does not* participate is equally as important as who *does* participate. In this project, all of the women have, with varying degrees of discomfort, been able to successfully make the transition from full-time mother to mother-student. All of these women were happy with their decision to become students, were generally enjoying the educational process, and had sufficient “leisure time” to grant me an interview. None could be described as being particularly “distressed”. The study results could have been vastly different among reentry mothers who were battling poverty, addictions, or abuse, whose decision to return to school was opposed or derided by friends or family, or who had been “forced” into the educational system by “back to work” welfare policies.

(7) In this research project, the researcher-participant interaction was not intended as a long-term association, or as a therapeutic relationship. In a small number of instances, I may have “sacrificed the data” i.e. resisted the temptation to probe too deeply in order to protect the participants. For example, in one interview, a recent divorce was a turning point in a woman’s entering university. Although I asked a probing question about the divorce-school relationship, the woman’s response and body language indicated that she did not wish to further discuss her divorce. I respected her wishes and moved in another direction.

### **5.8 Suggestions for Future Research**

(1) Future researchers might conduct similar studies, but recruiting more heavily through campus counseling centres, women’s self-help groups, etc. so as to further increase diversity among participants, and in order to access the population of “distressed” mother-students. A less time-consuming questionnaire format might be a “foot in the door” that could be followed by in-depth interviews with willing participants (as in Breese & O’Toole’s 1994 study of adult women students).

(2) Each of the women in this study completed the role exit process. An examination of college/university attrition among reentry mothers could shed further light upon the usefulness and generality of Ebaugh's model.

(3) I did not "test" Ebaugh's model in the present study. I did not ask specific questions regarding role exit, preferring, instead, to hear the women's ideas about what was most important in their transitions. Those wishing to further explore the model's applicability might use pen and paper tests, or structured interviews.

(4) In my literature review, I purposely included several "dated" studies, for the research that focuses on the reentry homemaker seems to be largely confined to the 70s and early 80s. Future research might further compare and contrast the motivations and experiences of past and present reentry homemakers.

### **5.9 Conclusion**

On a personal level, the chief contribution of this project was that it "bridged" my exit from the home to the outside world; I was able to conceptualize and carry out a major endeavor while supporting my family in yet another move across the country. This project also helped reestablish my confidence in my abilities beyond mothering such that I now feel ready to reach out and further my professional development.

On a more general level, this review showed that the concepts of role and personal growth are integral to the study of reentry women. Mothering also appears to be an important, though under-discussed, piece of the picture. Although Ebaugh's model of role exit has been described as a catchall that offers little in the way of analysis of life changes and transitions (Wacquant, 1990), I view the breadth of the model as a strength, in that it widens the window of analysis:

with each biographical phasing there is some continuation of the old as well as evolution of the new. This is the key to the entire approach, for the adults' reactions to transition depend on the type of transition, the context in which it occurs, and its impact on their lives (Breese & O'Toole, 1995, p. 32).

In this study, I examined the ways in which full-time mothering affects women in their role as students. I hope that by listening to, analyzing, and making public these women's stories, I am a part in the process of helping women to swim more freely in our cultural currents.

One day in the future, when sex-role stereotypes are minimal and both males and females are encouraged to think in terms of multiple roles, special counseling services and continuing education programs for re-entry women will no longer be necessary. Society will have accepted and will allow choices on the basis of individual interests and abilities, rather than sex (Brooks, 1976, p. 36).

In the meantime, those wanting to assist women in their journeys must: help women select from among the existing rules and ideologies so that they may develop their own philosophies of childrearing; research and publish the accounts of the diverse experiences and needs among post-secondary students, so as to inform university/college policy and practice; promote awareness among reentry mother-students that they are "not alone", that others share their experiences, joys and frustrations; actively promote the variety of existing programs and services, including funding, childcare, workshops, career counseling, etc.; and help ease the guilt as women strive to strike more equitable balances between family and personal needs (Roiphe, 1996; Thurer, 1994).

In my research, I examined the compromises and personal goals of at-home mothers returning to school. Social workers must continue to identify and make public the factors that promote, hinder, or prevent women's goal attainment and sense of well-being, both in the outside world and in the home. We must use this knowledge to develop interventions that can help women overcome these barriers and improve the quality of their lives.

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**RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE APPROVAL CERTIFICATE**

Appendix 1

**Faculty of Social Work  
University of Manitoba  
Winnipeg, Manitoba.**

**MAY 31, 2000.**

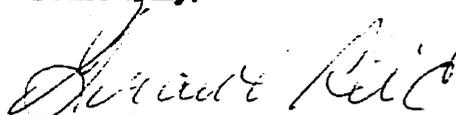
To: J. Lien.

**YOUR PROJECT ENTITLED *At-Home Moms Go Back to School: A Qualitative Study of the Role Exit Process* HAS BEEN APPROVED BY THE RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE.**

**CONDITIONS ATTACHED TO THE CERTIFICATE:**

- 1. You may be asked at intervals for a progress report.**
- 2. Any significant changes of the protocol should be reported to the Chairperson of this Committee so that the changes can be reviewed prior to their implementation.**

**Yours truly,**



**Grant Reid**

**Chair**

**Research Ethics Committee.**

**(204) (474-8455).**

Appendix 2

**CALL FOR RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS**

**Have you been a Full-Time, At-Home Mother for at least 3 years?  
Are you currently enrolled in a degree or certificate program in a post-secondary  
institution? (College or University)**

I am a graduate student from the University of Manitoba. I have been an "At-Home Mom" for several years and have recently resumed my University education. In this study, I am interested in gaining a better understanding of the reasons for and timing of some of the major transitions in a woman's life. For example, how did you decide to stay at home with your children? How did you decide to return to school? What are your future plans with regard to education, employment, and family? What are your sources of support and frustration?

I know you're busy!! I will interview each participant only once. Each interview will last approximately 1 1/2 hours. You determine the time and location.

If you have any questions or are interested in participating in the study, please call Joni at 241-3331.

If you know anyone who might be interested in participating, please pass this information along.

Thank you!

**Appendix 3**

**Telephone Screening Protocol**

Name of potential participant.

How did you hear about my project?

How long have (or had) you been a stay-at-home mother?

In what post-secondary institution are you currently enrolled?

Are you enrolled in a degree or certificate program?

Which one?

How many classes are you taking? What is your course load?

If less than half-time: Even with the classes you're taking, do you see yourself as a full-time, at-home mother? Has being a student changed the way you look after your children?

Would you be willing to meet for an interview?

When and where?

Phone number of participant.

## Appendix 4

### Consent Form

Student/Researcher: Joni Lien  
101 Hawkbury Cl. NW  
Calgary, AB  
241-3331

Supervisor: Lyn Ferguson  
University of Manitoba  
(204) 474-8273

### **Project**

I am a graduate student from the University of Manitoba. I have been an “At-Home Mom” for several years and have recently resumed my University education. In this study, I am interested in gaining a better understanding of the reasons for and timing of some of the major transitions in a woman’s life. How did you decide to stay at home with your children? How did you decide to return to school? What are your future plans with regard to education and employment and family? What are your sources of support and frustration?

In this study, you will be asked to complete a short questionnaire that will cover background information about you and your family. I will then ask you to tell me about your own experiences and decisions about education, employment and at-home parenting, and about your life now as a reentry student. This will take approximately 1 1/2 hours.

Your participation is entirely voluntary. You may refuse to answer any question and you may withdraw from the study at any time. You may take a break at any time.

I will tape record the interview. The tapes will be stored in a locked filing cabinet, and at the close of the study, I will remove any personal identifiers on the tapes (e.g. your name). I will protect your confidentiality and anonymity by changing your name in any written or oral report.

If you choose to participate, this study will give you the opportunity to teach others about your experiences as a woman, student, and mother. At the end of the study, I will give you a written summary of the results. I will also present the results at the University of Manitoba and will submit an article about this study for publication in a professional journal.

I, \_\_\_\_\_, agree to participate in this research study.

Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Research shows that having supportive peers can help ease tension and increase satisfaction with the educational process. At the end of the study, I am planning a small get-together for the women students who participate in this project. Would you be interested in attending?

YES      NO

Please feel free to phone me if you have any questions or concerns about the project, or if you want to add something to your story.

Thank you for your time!

Sincerely,

Joni H. Lien

## Appendix 5

**Background Questionnaire**

## A. CURRENT STATUS

- Age \_\_\_\_\_  
Number of children at home \_\_\_\_\_ Ages of children \_\_\_\_\_  
Marital Status: Married \_\_\_\_\_ Divorced \_\_\_\_\_ Common-law \_\_\_\_\_ Widowed \_\_\_\_\_  
Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_
- Primary source(s) of income \_\_\_\_\_  
Where were you born? \_\_\_\_\_  
Do you consider yourself part of an ethnic/cultural group? YES \_\_\_\_\_ NO \_\_\_\_\_  
If YES, which one(s)? \_\_\_\_\_

## B. EDUCATION

- In what post-secondary program are you currently enrolled? \_\_\_\_\_  
At what institution? \_\_\_\_\_  
Part-time \_\_\_\_\_ or full-time? \_\_\_\_\_ Number of credit hours each term? \_\_\_\_\_  
Start date \_\_\_\_\_ Expected graduation date \_\_\_\_\_  
How are you financing your education? \_\_\_\_\_  
Before entering this post-secondary program, what level of education had you completed?  
\_\_\_\_ Grade 12 diploma  
\_\_\_\_ Adult Basic Education or Upgrading \_\_\_\_\_ Some Post-Secondary. Please specify year and program \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_ Post-Secondary degree or Certificate. Please specify year and program \_\_\_\_\_

## B. EMPLOYMENT HISTORY

- Are you currently employed? Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_  
IF YES: Position \_\_\_\_\_  
Number of hours per week \_\_\_\_\_  
Length of employment \_\_\_\_\_
- For how long were you a full-time, Stay-At-Home Parent?  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Please provide a brief history of your employment.  
1. Position (most recent) \_\_\_\_\_  
Length of employment \_\_\_\_\_
- 2. Position \_\_\_\_\_  
Length of employment \_\_\_\_\_

**Appendix 6**

**Research Guide**

**What were you doing before you decided to be an at-home mom?**

Please describe your identity then. Who were you?

**How did you decide to become a stay-at-home parent?**

Were there any changes in your life that helped you make the decision?

Did you consider any other options?

Did your family or friends influence your decision?

**Can you tell me about your life as a stay-at-home mom?**

Have your relationships with other people changed? (e.g. friends, partner, parents)

Can you comment on surprises/joys/disappointments/challenges in your life as a full-time mother?

What or who were your sources of support?

What or who were your sources of frustration?

Was there anything that could have made things better for you during these years?

How did your past identity affect you in your years at home?

Please describe your identity during your years as a stay-at-home mom. Who were you?

Did you ever consider staying at home on a permanent basis?

**How did you decide to return to school?**

What else did you consider doing?

Were there any changes in your life that influenced your decision?

Did your family or friends influence your decision?

**Can you tell me about your life now, as a mother-student?**

Have your relationships with other people changed? (e.g. friends, partner, parents, children) How did your children react?

Can you comment on any surprises/joys/disappointments/challenges you have experienced?

What or who are your sources of support?

What or who are your sources of frustration?

How do you think that having been an at-home mom has affected you now, as a student? (e.g. choice of major)

Is there anything that could make (or could have made) things better or easier for you in your return to school?

What is your identity now? Who are you?

**What are you planning for your future with regard to family, education, and career?**

Figure 1

