


2012

# The Origin of a Sense of Self in Women

Kimberly Dewing Robbins  
*Antioch University - Santa Barbara*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://aura.antioch.edu/etds>

 Part of the [Clinical Psychology Commons](#), [Developmental Psychology Commons](#), [Esthetics Commons](#), [Ethics and Political Philosophy Commons](#), [Family, Life Course, and Society Commons](#), [Gender and Sexuality Commons](#), and the [Gerontology Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Robbins, Kimberly Dewing, "The Origin of a Sense of Self in Women" (2012). *Dissertations & Theses*. 99.  
<http://aura.antioch.edu/etds/99>

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Student & Alumni Scholarship, including Dissertations & Theses at AURA - Antioch University Repository and Archive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Dissertations & Theses by an authorized administrator of AURA - Antioch University Repository and Archive. For more information, please contact [dpenrose@antioch.edu](mailto:dpenrose@antioch.edu), [wmcgrath@antioch.edu](mailto:wmcgrath@antioch.edu).

THE ORIGIN OF A SENSE OF SELF IN WOMEN

A dissertation submitted

by

KIMBERLY DEWING ROBBINS

to

ANTIOCH UNIVERSITY SANTA BARBARA

In partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the  
degree of

DOCTOR OF PSYCHOLOGY

in

CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGY

---

Barbara Lipinski, Ph.D., J.D., Chair

---

Salvador D. Trevino, Ph.D., Faculty

---

Garret Wyner, Ph.D., Student Reader

---

Roberta L. Nutt, Ph.D., ABPP, External Expert

## ABSTRACT

This phenomenological study focuses on how a strong sense of self in women changes social precepts and gender stereotypes empowering women to define themselves instead of being defined by society. A sense of self may be defined as the ability to distinguish one's own values from those of any outside persuasions, and to do so well enough to be able to protect those ideals from unwanted external influence. Is a sense of self, realized at a young age, an innate feeling or developed over time through adversity and the maturation process? This study will specifically look at what influences can be attributed to gaining a strong sense of self. For women in the twenty-first century, the barrage of multiple directives can mean the difference between success and failure. American culture sends strong messages about *who* women should be, *what* women should be, and *how* they are supposed to look and behave. Eight women between the ages of 55-70 were nominated for having a strong sense of self. Mental health professionals, university professors, and colleagues were contacted with the criteria for the nomination process. These criteria included women whom they considered as having a strong sense of self, emotional stability, and the ability to maintain boundaries. The eight women nominated described their lived experience of having a strong sense of self over the course of approximately eleven hours of audio-recorded interviews. Using a phenomenological analysis a sense of self was interpreted to observe common themes.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to the eight beautiful, courageous, and strong women who graciously gave their story, with the hope of helping all women gain a stronger sense of self.

To my dissertation committee, Barbara Lipinski, Ph.D., J.D., Salvador D. Trevino, Ph.D., Garret Wyner, Ph.D., and Roberta L. Nutt, Ph.D., ABPP, thank you for your dedication and support throughout this process.

Dr. Barbara Lipinski, thank you for always believing in me and holding a tangible vision that helped me to fulfill my pursuit towards my personal calling in the field of psychology. Thank you for your constant encouragement.

To my Antioch cohort thank you for your encouragement and support.

Thank you to Dr. Julie Pearce for always lending your support, encouragement, and belief in me to reach my goals. To Amy and Sara, thank you for your loving support and camaraderie.

To Clay, my husband, who is my constant and dearest friend, thank you for your endless support, love, and belief in me. To Aimee and Adam, thank you for reading and rereading papers, for the countless hours of pep talks, and most of all your love and belief in me. Etta, thank you for your faith and commitment to prayer. To Christy, Jonathan, and Clay, thank you for your support, love, and encouragement. To my parents thank you for joining me in pressing toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God.

## Table of Contents

ABSTRACT.....	ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iii
Chapter I: Introduction.....	1
Chapter II: Review of the Literature.....	5
Stages of Development.....	5
Social Stereotypes and Social Conditioning.....	16
Society and Female Stereotypes.....	18
Current Trends and Appearance Expectations On Women.....	21
Chapter III: Methodology.....	31
Main Research Question.....	34
Research Methods.....	34
Chapter IV: Results.....	35
Data.....	35
Taylor.....	35
Summary.....	39
Jennifer.....	39
Summary.....	43
Catherine.....	44
Summary.....	47
Leslie.....	47
Summary.....	50
Robyn.....	51
Summary.....	54
Sabrina.....	54
Summary.....	58
Susan.....	58
Summary.....	62
Madeline.....	63
Summary.....	66
Findings.....	67
Summary of Findings.....	68
Chapter V: Discussion and Implications.....	71
Overview.....	71
The Common Themes.....	71
Parenting according to gender stereotypes and the derived qualities of self-worth.....	71
Body Image.....	73
Self-efficacy through family status.....	74
Morality and work ethics were indicative of a strong sense of self.....	76
Inner voice.....	76
Boundaries.....	77
The significance of relationships and collaboration.....	77

Summary .....	81
Implications.....	81
Strengths and Weakness of the Study.....	86
Recommendations for Future Studies.....	86
Conclusion .....	89
References.....	91
Appendix A.....	95
Consent Form.....	95
Appendix B.....	97
Form B .....	97
Participants.....	97
APPENDIX C .....	101
Demographic Questionnaire .....	101
APPENDIX D.....	104
Interview Questionnaire.....	104

## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

The focus of this study is on women with a strong sense of self. The focus of the research is to learn how a sense of self is developed, and asks several related questions including is the sense of self realized at a certain age of development? Is the sense of self an innate feeling known from a young age, was it developed over time through life's adversities, or simply through the maturation process? What influences can be attributed to gaining a strong sense of self? How does a strong sense of self influence a woman's life? Having a strong sense of self is important for women; especially in our society today because of the bombardment of multiple implicit and explicit messages women receive. Society sends strong messages about *who* women should be, *what* women should be, and *how* they are supposed to look and behave. Are women so deeply rooted in the social conditioning of our patriarchal directive that we cannot define who we want to be ourselves?

In studies we see girls following stereotypical cues. Eleanor E. Maccoby (1998) when explaining parenting styles in regards to gender socialization wrote:

Fathers, at least under some circumstances, are more power-assertive with sons than with daughters—the implication being that they are 'softer' with daughters. This may mean that they think boys are inherently tougher—better able to withstand pain and harshness—or that they need to be treated as though they were tough in order to make them so (pp. 143-144).

A father's differential treatment of sons and daughters could easily communicate to a young girl that she is the weaker sex. A strong sense of self helps us to differentiate ourselves from others, enabling the preservation of the individual. A strong sense of self is the ability to preserve one's own uniqueness by not being afraid of what others think. A strong sense of self allows an individual to think critically about simply abiding by

majority thinking. It is the ability to sustain individual plans even if it results in being seen as odd, or as an outcast. Differentiation is the knowledge of being separate from another—in knowing personal boundaries as separate from exterior influences—and not locked to the trend or majority. When a person has a strong sense of self it allows him or her to maintain personal beliefs, likes, and dislikes even if the majority or the popular social influence is against those beliefs, likes, and dislikes.

Bowen (1985) defined self-differentiation as the ability of an individual to balance her emotion and intellect in the midst of anxiety and proceed according to her own thoughts, beliefs, and opinions regardless of the emotional pull, or coercion, or influence from others. Bowen is distinguished for his development of family systems theory. His theory examined generational patterns within the family unit, placing significance on an individual's level of differentiation within the "natural system," or family unit (Gilbert, 2006). Looking at the family unit Bowen (1985) found that when couples experience distress or anxiety they bring a third person into the marriage, forming a triangle to decrease tension and reestablish equilibrium within the system. Bowen's theory of differentiation of self explains an individual's ability to respond within the family of origin with a sense of wholeness (versus enmeshment), allowing a foundational stability that can tolerate anxiety.

For the purpose of this research, a sense of self may be defined as the ability to distinguish one's own values from those of any outside persuasions, and to do so well enough to be able to protect those ideals from unwanted external influence. This definition is based on critical analysis from the literature of Bowen (1985), Maccoby (1998), Mahler, Pine, and Bergman (2000), Bowlby (1982), Fonagy (2001), and other



experts in the field of clinical psychology, who have specifically focused on psychoanalysis, family systems, and attachment theory. This definition of the sense of self has developed from extensive research of these authors, and informs the conclusions drawn in this study. By documenting and exploring this area of psychoanalysis, these authors have developed theories about individual development and models about how the self evolves.

This study is relevant because learning how women develop a strong sense of self will help young women live their lives according to their own construct versus the historical social constructs placed on females by dominant social groups. Studying the dynamics of a sense of self has been a personal interest for this researcher. This researcher's interest is to empower young women, to use their voice, be heard, and respected. As an up-and-coming psychologist, this researcher has had the opportunity to see many young women who believe they are at the mercy of their boyfriends, husbands, partners, or feel as though they are defeated because they are not in a relationship, or who struggle with body image issues and battle eating disorders. After seeing women feel as though they must compromise their core beliefs and their personal integrity to secure a partner or change their body, this researcher was motivated to discover the difference between women who hold themselves separate from the imposed ideas and demands of society. My research has allowed me to explore the differences between women who realize their own value, independent of external influences, and do not allow others to violate their personal boundaries, in contrast to the women who feel their fate is at the whim of another. This researcher's interest in learning about the attributes and origin of a strong sense of self is to help young women who might be struggling to find their voice,

and benefit from the wisdom of the women in this study who have a strong sense of self so they might define their identity and hold on to it with dignity.

If feminism has truly liberated women from discriminatory treatment, is the newly achieved equality still governed by patriarchal society because it is formed out of a reaction to the male stereotype? Lorber (1994) wrote, “The continuing purpose of gender as a modern social institution is to construct women as a group to be the subordinates of men as a group” (p. 35). Lorber believed that women must keep a subordinate role in society to protect the male status as the dominant group and adds, “Gender inequality—the devaluation of ‘women’ and the social domination of ‘men’ has social functions and a social history” (p. 35). It would seem, then, women’s equality is still based on, and gauged by, the male standard.

## **CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

The review of the literature will illustrate multiple perspectives from leading theorists in the field of psychology on the formation of a sense of self. Throughout this review I will outline the origin of a sense of self. Using current literature and studies in the field of psychology I hope to illuminate the main components that significantly influence a sense of self throughout a lifetime.

A sense of self, as used in this dissertation, may be defined as the ability to distinguish one's own values from those of any outside forces, and to do so well enough to be able to protect those ideals from unwanted external influence. Bowen (1985) defined a differentiated self as, "those whose intellectual functioning can retain relative autonomy in periods of stress are more flexible, more adaptable, and more independent of the emotionality about them" (p. 362). Self-differentiation is the ability of an individual to balance her emotion and intellect in the midst of anxiety and proceed according to her own thoughts, beliefs, and opinions regardless of the emotional pull, or coercion, or influence from others (Bowen, 1985). Bowen's definition of differentiation of self provides the foundation in this study for the understanding of a sense of self. Through differentiation of self an individual can create personal boundaries that are impervious to external influences, and thereby maintain an environment in which she is able to foster the virtues of her own identity.

### **Stages of Development**

As the human brain progresses during various stages of development, individuals come to understand that their gender impacts not only the environment, but also how they internalize messages from society (Fonagy, Gergely, Jurist, & Target, 2002). Exploring

these stages of development is important because we learn to understand the intrapsychic formation of the mind and the accumulation of our own identity. Through the study of attachment theory, supported by several renowned psychoanalysts and researchers, we observe the hypothesis that a sense of self is obtained through relationship (Bowlby, 1982; Fonagy, 2001; Schore, 2003). Relating to the other, through the process of mirroring and the experience of omnipotence, the infant progressively develops a sense of self. Mahler, Pine, and Bergman (2000) suggested:

The development of the sense of self is the prototype of an eminently personal, internal experience that is difficult, if not impossible, to trace in observational studies, as well as in the reconstructive psychoanalytic situation. It reveals itself by its failures much more readily than by its normal variations.... (p. 224)

According to Mahler, Pine, and Bergman, even under direct surveillance of an infant we would not be able to detect the actual formation of the infants “core identity.” Instead, they suggested the formation of a sense of self develops through the separation-individuation process. The separation-individuation process in child development is an actual realization of separateness between infant and primary caregiver, which results in the infant forming images of the self, and subsequently a sense of identity. Mahler, Pine, and Bergman wrote, “It is not a sense of *who* I am but *that* I am; as such, this is the earliest step in the process of the unfolding of individuality” (p. 8). The authors propose the imitation and mirroring exchange between infant and caregiver is the beginning of self-awareness. Offering an example, the authors described the game of peek-a-boo between mother and baby as a means for the baby to be found by mother, a mirroring process in which the baby is seen and thereby sees “self.”

Through mirroring the baby learns to self regulate affect by examining and sensing the caregiver’s emotional state, and learns to distinguish between safety and

danger (Bowlby, 1982). Bowlby posits that the infant seems to be naturally oriented to human attachment saying, “a baby arrives in this world with certain in-built biases, one of which is a bias to look at a human face in preference to other objects. Another appears to be to smile at a human face more readily” (p. 285). Similarly Schore (2003) emphasizes the infant’s innate orientation is organized to interact with her caregiver: “the mother’s emotionally expressive face is, by far, the most potent visual stimulus in the infant’s environment, and the child’s intense interest in her face, especially in her eyes, leads him/her to track it in space” (p. 7). Schore explains the facial attunement between the mother and infant is a significant stimulus for the infant, which facilitates affect regulation. The infant senses the mother’s emotional state through the process of mirroring.

Through the mother’s play and eye contact, the baby internalizes messages, resulting in the formation of the self. In this process the toddler starts to realize her autonomy through her ability to distinguish her feelings from her mother’s. Through the development of her physical ability, the baby learns the methods to turn over, stand, and crawl; this ability provides freedom for the baby to persist in her autonomy, for example by arching her back, leaning away, or indicating she does not want to be picked up (Mahler, Pine, & Bergman, 2000).

Winnicott (2002) posited the awareness of separateness from the mother initiates the “self-experiencing being” of the infant (p. 14). According to Winnicott assimilation of activity and consciousness come together, thereby forming the individual. Winnicott (1965) proposed that when the infant begins to experience the external world, the influences outside of her internal world, she becomes aware of her separateness, which

then forms her identity. He stated, "...the mother's ego support facilitates the ego organization of the baby. Eventually the baby becomes able to assert his or her own individuality and even to feel a sense of identity" (2002, p. 16). Physical ability or "will," combined with the child's inner world, formulate the self.

Elisha's (2011) object relations theory speaks to the internal and external world we live in, and the relationship between them. Elisha described the traditional psychoanalytic theories as emphasizing the "instinctual drive theory as the essential accounting for motivation" (p. 101). Elisha stated, "Drive-structural models follow Freud's basic supposition that bodily needs exert a pressure on the mind from which flows the basics of mental life," while in contrast, object relations theory claims that motivation is achieved in the origination of relationship or "relatedness" (p. 101).

The relationship between the infant and the primary caregiver, combined with the infant's physical ability, which lend autonomy to the infant, is the foundation for the development of the self. Elisha (2011) focused on Winnicott's perspective of the physical/soma relationship with the psyche, being the inner and outer and "The boundary between the two: the body" (p. 118). Describing the phenomenon between body and mind Elisha wrote, "The psyche/soma, a collaborative experience of embodied and enlivened experience, constitutes the essential going-on-being of the individual" (p. 118). Furthermore, Elisha described Winnicott's viewpoint by suggesting that the sense of self is rooted in the "psyche/soma" relation and when these two—the mind and body—are separated, pathology ensues. Elisha's research and review of psychological theorists and their theories paved the way for the understanding of the development of the relationship to the psyche and body which she argued has been overlooked in the psychoanalytic

field. Moreover she has studied the ways in which psychoanalysis links the body to somatization, revealing those cases in which an individual is not able to express experienced emotion and, unable to speak, can only find expression in the form of physical pain.

Elisha (2011) described Winnicott's theory of aggression as being the catalyst of "selfhood" and that aggression is "the result of the somatically impulsive gesture to reach out into the external world and to be met" (pp. 120-121). She further explained that the meeting of this impulsive gesture to reach out to the external world, such as a baby instinctively grasping for its caregiver, is an "affirmation of the reality of both the internal sense of agency and the external world" (p. 120). Thus bodily urges and actions in the form of active aggression serve to define the self by distinguishing it from the outer world. Aggression is the movement that begins from an interior impulse, due to an inner need or desire, and manifests as bodily interaction with external influences, thereby introducing the inner self to the outer world and forming individuality.

Similarly, Fonagy, Gergely, Jurist, and Target (2002) explained Winnicott's theory of self-development in the following way:

The psychological self develops through the perception of oneself in another person's mind as thinking and feeling. Parents who cannot reflect with understanding on their children's inner experiences and respond accordingly deprive their children of a core psychological structure, which they need to build a viable sense of self (p. 28).

One might ask if the parent cannot reflect affect regulation or handle anxiety (the infant's or their own) accurately, does the child internalize a disordered self; and, further, must the parent have a differentiated sense of self in order for the child to develop her sense of self? A lack of capacity to mirror the infant can result in the infant misinterpreting her

environment and her internal self. Similarly, in a disruption of relatedness (e.g., in the mirroring process), the individual can form a defensive posture, dividing the mind and body (Elisha, 2011).

Piaget and Inhelder (1969) recognized that the stage between seven to nine months is the period in which the toddler begins to become goal orientated, and develops the capacity to make attempts at “obtaining an object that is out of reach...” (p. 10). At this stage the child becomes intentional, and Fonagy et al. (2002) argued that the seven to nine month stage is the social-cognitive revolution where “infants attend to the adult’s facial and vocal attitude expressions about unfamiliar objects or situations to modify their own behavior (social referencing)” (p. 222). This modification process of imitating the adult introduces the infant to social thought.

Further, Fonagy et al. (2002) suggested that the child starts to recognize herself in the mirror between eighteen and twenty-four months. At approximately age four, the child can hold multiple concepts and images of the world concurrently, such that, “The ability to relate multiple representations underlies, therefore, the establishment of an abstract historical-causal self-concept (the ‘autobiographical stance’), which integrates memories of previously unrelated states of the self into an organized, coherent, and unified autobiographical self-representation” (p. 247).

In addition to the emergence of goal orientation and social cognition, Damasio (1999) explained the three “kinds of self”—the proto-self, the core self, and the autobiographical self—that emerge in a child’s development. The proto-self consists of “neural patterns, which represent the state of the organism” (p. 174), with respect to which we are not conscious. The core self “inheres in the second-order nonverbal account



that occurs whenever an object modifies the proto-self...we are conscious of the core self” (p. 174). The autobiographical self “is based on the autobiographical memory which is constituted by implicit memories of multiple instances of individual experience of the past and of the anticipated future” (p. 174).

Damasio (1999) posited that an individual’s sense of self comes from the autobiographical self. This autobiographical self consists of memories (past, present, and future), and has the capacity to give order to the here and now, placing the self in time. Damasio holds that the autobiographical self is an extended consciousness, one capable of having a sense of self through possession of memories, emotions, and language. Damasio wrote, “...working memory, the ability to hold active, over a substantial amount of time, the many ‘objects’ of the moment: the object being known and the objects whose display constitutes our autobiographical self” (p. 197). Damasio explained all memories are coded in the brain as objects; this complex system allows the human being to possess objects from the past, present, and anticipated future, to formulate the internal knowledge of the self in relation to its environment and the other. Similarly, Siegel (1999) stated, “Behavior, emotion, perceptions, sensations, and models of others are engrained by experiences that occur before children have autobiographical memory processes available to them. These implicit elements of memory also later influence the structure of autobiographical narratives” (p. 5). Siegel suggested the engrained experiences form the autobiographical narrative, which influences a sense of self.

Watson (1979) wrote that, “...perceived contingency might function in determining social responsiveness.” In his study of contingent control, Watson revealed that infants can solicit responses from the exterior world through their movements and

can thus garner responses, as a perceived reward, directly related to their behavior. In the chapter written for *Origins of the Infant Social Responsiveness* (1979), Watson described the relationship between infant and caregiver as one that elicits responses as a reward and reaction contingent upon action. He asserted that humans are innately oriented towards contingent responses.

Generally, the infant learns and internalizes her identity through mirroring with the primary caregiver. Fonagy et al. (2002) spoke about Watson's concept of contingent control stating, "it is positively arousing for infants—resulting in positive social responses such as smiling—and that they are motivated to modify their behavior in order to discover the actual degree of their contingent control" (p. 173). Infants learn that their actions can illicit responses from others; they learn their own level of self-agency as they receive immediate confirmation, whether it is positive or negative, and then adjust accordingly.

Erikson also made important contributions to the study of self-formation. In *Identity and the Life Cycle* (1980), Erikson commented on Freud's concept of the super ego and wrote:

The internalization of all the restrictions to which the ego must bow. It is forced upon the child...by the critical influence of the parents, and later, by that of professional educators, and of what to the early Freud was a vague multitude of fellow men...making up the 'milieu' and public opinion. (p. 19)

Freud acknowledged the effects of social roles and expectations on the formation of the child's personality. Erikson advanced this point by acknowledging, from a psychoanalytic perspective, that social organization has a negative impact on the child's development, thereby imposing limiting role expectations; however, Erikson also pointed

out that the organized social life of the infant can just as well have a positive effect in meeting the basic needs of the child's development.

Erikson (1980) explained how a child seeks out models to gauge her own identity, and is gratified when her imitation is successful; Erikson believed this happiness is the origination of self-esteem. Mirroring and imitation of the primary caregiver are essential elements for constructing a personal identity and formulating societal norms for the infant. In defining ego identity, Erikson stated the following, "The conscious feeling of having a personal identity is based on two simultaneous observations: the immediate perception of one's selfsameness and continuity in time; and the simultaneous perceptions of the fact that others recognize one's sameness and continuity" (p. 22).

Through the images and objects in one's life an individual assimilates information to formulate her identity. Social interrelatedness influences the ways in which an individual internalizes and forms the self. This maturation process is an indication of our accumulated understanding of our environment. Maccoby (2000) explained how children develop gender concepts by the socialization of the culture they are born into. Children internalize and distinguish the cultural beliefs from their environment and then formulate and define their own definition of gender roles. Maccoby stated, "...when children draw on these to construct their gender schemas, it can reasonably be said that they are being socialized by the surrounding culture into becoming co-practitioners of these cultural forms" (p. 401).

Masculinity and femininity are reinforced in children from an early age by the withdrawal and acceptance of appropriate sex-typed behaviors (Maccoby, 2000). Both boys and girls quickly learn that, in order to be accepted and gain affection from parents,

teachers, peers, and society, they need first to conform to specific gender expectations. Maccoby (1980) delved extensively into the shaping of gender sex-typing, and explained the positive feedback, both verbal and physical, that little girls receive when exerting feminine behaviors contrasted with the negative feedback they receive when exerting more tomboyish behavior. The opposite applies to little boys who, while acting out or playing rough, may be lauded for their behavior, while comparable acts of rebelliousness or rough play from a little girl would be chastised. Maccoby asserted, “A child’s sex identity is almost always well established by the age of three” (p. 230). In other words, by the age of three parents have already reinforced many stereotypical constructs for which their children must adopt.

Maccoby (1980) proceeded to explain that children do not understand the intricacies of biology or criteria that determine sex, but they know they are either a girl or a boy because others tell them. Commonly, modest, “lady like,” and submissive behaviors are positively reinforced for little girls, whereas independence and rough play are encouraged for little boys. This sets a strong disposition for little girls that can significantly predetermine their role as a female in the world. Authors Bates, Denmark, Held, Helly, Hune, Lees, et al. stated, “As children, we learn to view ourselves and to behave according to others’ perceptions and expectations of us. Cultures vary widely in their attribution of characteristics to femininity and masculinity” (2005, p. 21). While enacting gender specific behaviors may go against a child’s own instinct, the children quickly learn what is acceptable and what is not based on the social reinforcement they receive from parents and society, “In some cultures,” the authors wrote, “women are thought to be naturally strong and hardy, while in others they are thought to be delicate

and in need of remaining indoors and being protected” (p. 21). Cultural variation in gender roles underscores Maccoby’s (1980) suggestion that children understand their identity because they are told who they are, either a boy or a girl, and not because of the innate differences between either. Maccoby stated, “Children use their observations of the behavior of the two sexes as the raw material for their concepts and as the basis for inferences about social rules” (p. 246). Through observation, these social constructs shape our collective understanding of gender. By mirroring adults and adjusting their own actions to seek approval and acceptance in society, children perpetuate the status quo and stereotypes of gender roles.

Gender is solidified early on in a child’s understanding of the environment and her own identity (Maccoby, 2000). As young girls begin to comprehend the categorizations that place them in the female role, along with the acknowledgment of the category itself, implicit messages inherently accompany this understanding. As parents and as a society, when the assumption of gender is understood, we automatically teach, mirror, transfer, and interact according to those stereotypical traits we attribute to that gender. In doing so, we are in turn teaching girls to be ladylike and submissive in order to seek approval and please others, while boys are being taught to be autonomous, carefree with play, and competitive. How does this affect a sense of self? The idea that a girl grows up feeling she needs to conform to society in order to gain validation as a female, whereas a male may have more freedom to be as individualistic as he wishes (without the fear of disturbing social norms), has a profound affect on the formation of that woman’s sense of self.

Eagly, Wood, and Johannesen-Schmidt (2004) explained that societal gender roles have aided not only the survival of the human being but society as a whole. Due to the biological differences between men and women they become orientated to specific roles within society for the purpose of the work force. For example, women biologically give birth and lactate, which results in time away from the work force, whereas men can provide for the family. Eagly, Wood, and Johannesen-Schmidt stated, “Biological processes, including hormonal changes, orient men and women to certain social roles and facilitate role performance” (p. 270). Social theories based on biological and hormonal differences—which then enforce a particular division of labor—produce social gender constructs. The division of labor in some cultures may cause more men than women to be out of the home, which may lend itself to a position of power. Through this lens a young girl may receive significant messages of her role as a mother and caregiver, which lends her a lesser status in society.

### **Social Stereotypes and Social Conditioning**

In social learning theory children are seen as having been shaped by the social groups they are a part of with gender development first starting during the socialization phase that later cognitive structuring is based upon. Indeed, studies have shown that as children move into social settings interaction with their own peers also influences and solidifies their understanding of their own gender. Grace, David, and Ryan pointed out, “at around 30-36 months of age, children display a marked preference for same-sex peers with these preferences increasing throughout childhood” (2008, p. 1928).

As humans, we naturally categorize the components of our understanding to build cognitive structures. Grace, David, and Ryan stated, “Being male or female, however, is

not only about the individual; it implies membership of one category or another” (2008, p. 1928). Girls, as members of a non-dominant category in the United States, are given implicit information about how to behave; young boys quickly learn they do not want to be a “sissy,” so they do not associate with the girls’ playgroups, which to boys carries negative connotations. Grace, David, and Ryan found, “Learning about gender involves an understanding of the categorical nature of gender... Learning about gender involves an integration of social categorical information into one’s personal self-definition. These processes are complex, yet they are utilized from an early age” (p. 1939). Through the maturation process, children learn that they are either one or the other of two genders. Learning that one falls into the classification of either girl or boy results in automatic categorization, which then further influences one’s self-image, based upon the personal definition of said category. In women, this self-identification is one of a lesser status, since we live in a male dominant society.

Furthermore, it’s not just the initial categorization of gender within playgroups that ultimately affects self identity; as boys and girls gravitate to their preference of same-sex play groups, the experiences they have within them are so markedly different that they reinforce the initial division. As Grace, David, and Ryan (2008) pointed out, “...the different experiences that boys and girls have in their same-sex groups may actually reinforce the importance of gender as an organizing property of these peer groups and may supersede innate differences or preference for play styles that may have prompted the sex segregation” (p. 1928). Psychologists and social theorists have explored the reasons why gender divisions become so engrained and suggest that, “this gender divide

is, first, partially due to the important role that gender is given by others and, second, that your children are sensitive, and responsive, to this” (p. 1938).

Bandura’s (2001) Social Cognitive Theory suggested one method to attain self-efficacy is through social modeling. Bandura explained, “Human self-development, adaptation, and change are embedded in social systems. Therefore, personal agency operates within a broad network of sociostructural influences” (p. 266). Self-agency is defined as confidence in the self to accomplish and achieve tasks, goals, and dreams. Additionally, Miller (2002) states, “beginning in infancy, humans gradually develop a sense of personal agency, a sense that they can cause effects in their environment, which is essential for self-efficacy” (p. 190). The social constructs children are taught to function may directly influence their sense of self and define their identity. Similarly, self-agency appears in Erikson’s psychosocial stages of development, and he defines the second stage of development as initiative versus guilt. At ages 3-5 years old, “Children are asked to assume responsibility for their bodies, their behavior, their toys and their pets. Developing a sense of responsibility increases initiative” (Santrock, 2006, p. 44). This stage occurs because of the increased autonomy and mobility of the child in her social world (Santrock, 2006; Bandura 2001). Bandura’s definition of self-agency, to believe in one’s own ability to accomplish tasks, and Erikson’s perspective of increased responsibilities imply a sense of self is developed during these stages.

### **Society and Female Stereotypes**

Having a prevailing male dominance in most public spheres of significance is an imposing threat to individual differences, especially to those of an inferred “inferior” group, such as females. In a meta-analysis of gender differences in grant peer review,



Bornmann, Mutz, and Daniel (2007) highlighted, “Among grant applicants men have statistically significant greater odds of receiving grants than women by 7%” (p. 226). Similarly, the U.S. Department of Labor (2010) reports, “In 2009 women who were full-time wage and salary workers had median weekly earnings of \$657, or about 80 percent of the \$819 median for their male counterparts.” These findings help to illustrate the hierarchy placed on gender in our society. Historically, the normal model for the male-dominant sphere of political scientists didn’t even consider women as significant participants in the function of the political landscape until the women’s movement of the late twentieth century. As Bates et al. (2005) stated, “This view lingers in the ideology of political science: ‘politics’ is what takes place in the ‘public’ sphere of life, and women are identified with the ‘private’ sphere” (pp. 415-416). Women have historically been confined to the private sphere due to their biological ability to bear children, while men have gravitated towards the public sphere, closing the door behind them and excluding female participation. If women are considered the lesser sex, confined to the private sphere, their sense of self may be affected.

Gilligan (1982) wrote about the conflict between a woman’s inner voice and her public voice. In terms of morality women struggle with the dilemma of justifying their inner voice, unless it can be masked in the guise of doing social good. For example, if a moral stand is taken by a woman—and is portrayed as solving someone else’s problem—then it becomes acceptable and the woman maintains her feminine societal acceptance. Alternately, if a stand is taken—and it is a moral decision made at the expense of someone else—then the woman is seen as offensive, an aberration of women in general. Gilligan illustrated, “The ‘good woman’ masks assertion in evasion, denying

responsibility by claiming only to meet the needs of others, while the ‘bad woman’ forgoes or renounces the commitments that bind her in self-deception and betrayal” (p. 71). Women are faced with a profound moral dilemma: to think always of others, the directive placed on the feminine social category—also referred to as an underdeveloped sense of morality by Erikson (1980)—or think of themselves in a masculine social category.

As a society with a propensity to ensure male dominance, it is easy to see the indoctrination of this legacy to young girls. Lorber (1994) wrote, “The devalued genders have less power, prestige, and economic rewards than the valued genders” (p. 34). This fact is generally unspoken but undeniably implied. In the public sphere, we see this in the objectification of women on a daily basis through our media. In the private sphere, specifically in minority families, females are still held in the “traditional” female role of gaining their significance predominantly from bearing and rearing children. The problem here lies in the implicit messages young girls receive from media, school, and society. Although Western society might claim equal rights for all by telling our youth that they can accomplish anything they set their mind to, young girls are also simultaneously hearing an implicitly objectifying message—that they are the devalued gender.

The feeling of being devalued as a result of the social stratification of gender can imply to women that there is something inherently wrong with them. Levant and Silverstein (2005) discussed, “the gender strain paradigm” in which they said, “Role strain refers to the process whereby social roles, imbedded in power hierarchies and communicated by ideologies, create stress and strain for oppressed and marginalized

groups within our society” (p. 339). Role strain could be the fallout or consequences a young girl might deal with because she is not a member of the dominant group.

The significance of the recognition and identification of gender stereotypes is to follow how women gain and maintain a sense of self within a categorical environment. When a girl is born into a social standing which is a minority status, with specific standards and behaviors that are imposed differently from the male-dominant norms, expectations, and imposed beliefs, it is vitally important for that girl’s sense of self to be as strong, and in many cases stronger than a male’s, in order to rebuff society’s influences and the demands of a specific gender type. The main concern is society valuing a woman’s appearance, weight, size, or sex appeal, over her strong sense of self. Observing media reflects how and what women are valued for, and leads to the question: how much significance towards teaching and instilling a strong sense of self is the core message communicated to young girls? Having a strong sense of self may enable a woman to reject the imposed standards of a male-oriented culture, and instead be impervious to its demands.

### **Current Trends and Appearance Expectations On Women**

Research from the extensive report made by the APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls (2010) illustrated the objectification of females and the effects it has on a woman’s self-esteem, mental and physical health, violence, exploitation, education, and the impact on society as a whole. The task force researched an array of topics within society, exploring how, why, and if, the sexualization of young girls exists. They summarized how the effects of media shape the conceptualization made by young girls “...leading them to accept more constrained and stereotypical notions about gender

roles and sexual roles (i.e., that women are sexual objects)” (p.26). Objectification theory posits the female is no longer human, no longer a being, or a soul, “it” is reduced to its parts, available for pleasure, merchandising, and sexuality. Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) theorized, “The common thread running through all forms of sexual objectification is the experience of being treated as a body (or collection of body parts) valued predominantly for its use to (or consumption by) others” (p. 174). Objectifying a human being is deflating to self-esteem, “Just at the time when girls begin to construct identity, they are more likely to suffer losses in self-esteem” (APA Task Force, 2010, p. 20). Gaining acceptance through appeals to attractiveness, thinness, popularity, or power leave out the component of the inner self. When the external body parts replace the identity of a young girl her sense of self is underdeveloped and undervalued.

Objectification theory is the internalization of measuring one’s identity according to the gaze of the other; how others perceive the female is how she perceives herself. As stated earlier objectification theory is based on women and how they internalize their sense of self, their self-image and self-worth according to how others perceive them physically. The women become so accustomed to the watchful eye of others that they too begin to measure their self according to how their body appears to others. Through intense body surveillance they become obsessed with their physical being and how it matches up with the social ideal (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997).

Goodin, Denburg, Murnen, and Smolak, (2011) researched clothing as a social influence of sexualization of adolescents, and look at the specific clothing marketed to pre-teen girls. In a content analysis of fifteen websites for popular national stores in the U.S., articles of clothing were coded into four categories: childlike, definitely

sexualizing, ambiguously sexualizing, and “adultlike” (p. 5). The clothing categorized as definitely sexualizing either shows body parts, or emphasizes body parts (e.g., breasts or buttocks), within the design of the clothing. The study found 29.4% of all the clothes examined and coded had sexualized features. The results of this study also showed that clothing with childlike features, which were ambiguously sexualizing, were prevalent such as leopard prints in pink, or short mini skirts with pink lace ruffle. The authors wrote, “Of all the clothing items coded as having sexualizing characteristics, the overwhelming majority (86.4%) had childlike characteristics as well...” (p. 6). The author’s conclusion suggested a strong message is presented to pre-teen girls through the clothing industry. Yet, even more significant is their conclusion that a covert message is communicated to young girls to encourage the social objectification of females. This means of communicating an image or physical ideal becomes self-objectification because when the girls are given a standard by which they should judge themselves they do so. The choices they make about the clothing they wear places special emphasis on their physical appearance, which results in a superficial foundation for their self-concept.

Clothing which appeases the male gaze (combined with adolescent traits like inexperience, girlishness, vulnerability, and naïveté) is another example of the social influence of sexual objectivity. Goodin et al. (2011) stated, “Simulated innocence, vulnerability, and an element of the forbidden are mixed with sexual availability and willingness to create a woman-girl hybrid that is intended to elicit a man’s gaze, fascination, and desire in order to sell a product” (p. 3). Similarly, pornography often presents women as a “woman-girl hybrid” displaying sexually objectified body parts, combined with innocence and vulnerability. Goodin et al. expressed how media has

normalized pornography such that, "...women are shown as adopting a 'pornified' sexuality. For example, beauty practices that used to be portrayed only in pornography are now appearing in popular culture, such as thong underwear and stiletto heels" (p. 2). One could argue this is the right of the liberated female to dress according to her "own" style, but is it a covertly manufactured promise of acceptance, popularity, and idolization, or a personal style? As young girls learn the seemingly accepted status quo of a sexualized society they begin to scrutinize their own body according to these constricted portrayals of femininity.

Self-objectification manifests as a hyper-vigilance in body surveillance (Augustus-Horvath & Tylka, 2009). In a study on self-objectification, specifically focused on body surveillance and its relationship to disordered eating, Augustus-Horvath and Tylka surveyed two groups of women ages 18-24 and 25-68, to investigate if the same tenets of objectification theory apply equally to both age groups. In their quantitative analysis Augustus-Horvath and Tylka explored if objectification theory applies to the older group of women predicting disordered eating and poor self-awareness as it does younger women. They reported, "Older women experience less body surveillance than do young adult college women" although they find the "levels of body shame, poor interoceptive awareness, and disordered eating as do women ages 18-24" (p. 262). Their findings indicate that the shame women twenty-five years and older experience is based on the desired youthfulness promoted by society mixed with their ongoing aging process. Eating disorders become less prevalent for older women, but the shame is still prevalent because the older woman doesn't match the societal ideal of youth and feels they should be thinner. The outcome of the study proposes the same constructs of objectification theory

apply to older women and suggest they may not struggle as much with eating disorders, but may have more shame related to age and weight.

The APA task force (2010) further investigated the sexualization of young girls, and found that, “Findings across several studies indicate associations between exposure to female beauty ideals and disordered eating attitudes and symptoms, such that greater exposure to thin-ideal media has been associated with higher levels of dieting, exercising, and disordered eating symptomatology” (p. 24).

Naomi Wolf’s (2002) *The Beauty Myth* argued that the demand for women to be beautiful is a social construct engineered by the dominant male culture to guarantee the subordination of women. Using Wolf’s premise, subordination is successful due to the dubiousness of perfection:

The influence of pornography on women’s sexual sense of self which was just beginning to take hold at the time this book was first written has now become so complete that it is almost impossible for younger women to distinguish the role pornography plays in creating their ideas of how to be, to look, and move in sex from their own innate sense of sexual identity. Is this progress? I do not think so. (p. 5)

Some evolutionary theories argue that only the strongest survive, and the most desirable and utilitarian thrive. One evolutionary theorist, Dawkins (1989), described an enigma regarding attraction and the emphasis placed on women to be the attractive sex. As Dawkins explained, in many of the animal species the male is more attractive and must out perform, flaunt, or have the more enticing color or physique. In the case of the peacock, for example, the male is more attractive; he is colorful and parades to impress the female. This would cause one to assume that the female is the most preferred, therefore able to scrutinize and choose her mate on her terms, and the male would be the one to go to lengths to compete, strut, and impress. When Dawkins said this phenomenon

is puzzling he is juxtaposing this to human beings, and the mindset that the human male is generally the “chooser” of the mate, while the females are the recipients of this ritual; females compete between each other with their beauty and sex appeal.

Further, Dawkins (1989) said women produce a limited amount of eggs within a limited amount of time, while the male can produce sperm in excess during most of his lifetime, and this would automatically make the female not only more sacred but more scarce than males. Being that the reproductive system is unique to women, it would seem they are essential for society, even esteemed, and, at the least, equally valuable in society as their male counterparts. Given the biological significance it would appear a woman’s status would be elevated versus the historical subordination of women.

A study by Perlini and Boychuk looked at “The effects of social information about a prospective on evaluations of attractiveness, social desirability, and desired relationship” (2006, p. 593). In this study individuals were shown photographs of the opposite sex and asked to rate them. Their ratings varied regarding willingness to date them, have sex with them, or marry them depending on information divulged to the participants viewing the photographs. The idea of prospective dating or marriage requires more information about the person in the photograph because dating and marriage requires a greater investment. Perlini and Boychuk stated, “While social information did not impact one’s likelihood of engaging in sex with the target, this did impact the likelihood of engagement in dating and marriage” (p. 600). These findings may imply sexual permissiveness could influence true commitment or investment in a relationship; this is in contrary to the media’s message that sexuality and sexual objectification bring meaning or success.



Lorber (1994) boldly stated, “The continuing purpose of gender as a modern social institution is to construct women as a group to be the subordinates of men as a group” (p. 35). Lorber’s powerful statement summarizes her theory on how men must preserve their dominant status in society, which can only occur with a comparison from an inferior group, thus proving their dominance and superiority. This circular thinking sustains the dominant groups’ security to remain in control.

Gilligan and Richards (2009) spoke about the shifts in psychology beginning in 1970, with the awareness that psychology and its major theories and theorists heavily pathologized women. Gilligan and Richards explained, “Mind, reason, self, and culture were considered masculine and were elevated above body, emotion, relationships, and nature, seen as feminine and like women at once idealized and devalued” (p. 193).

Gilligan and Richards argued that by labeling the characteristics “body, emotion, relationships, and nature” as feminine they also mark them as abnormal, and the normal, healthy attributes—“mind, reason, self and culture”—became masculine traits, which were considered the normal traits necessary for the individual to be healthy.

Further, Gilligan and Richards (2009) explained how marking gendered characteristics as “normal” and “abnormal” separates the human being from being whole, citing that young boys at the age of four and five are taught to separate from their “body, emotion, relationships, and nature” (p. 193). For example, a young boy is told “big boys don’t cry,” and that his relationship with his mother is feminine, therefore abnormal and unhealthy. The young boy is supposed to take on the characteristics of his father in order to be in the norm, in order to belong to the male gender, because the fear of being feminine does not fit into the category of gender.

On the other hand, Gilligan and Richards (2009) said the separation for girls occurs in early adolescence, when they too must separate from their “body, emotion, relationships, and nature” to become psychologically healthy. Psychiatrist Miller (1986) stated, “Women’s sense of self becomes very much organized around being able to make and then to maintain affiliations and relationships. Eventually, for many women the threat of disruption of connections is perceived not as just a loss of a relationship but as something closer to a total loss of self” (p. 83). Gilligan and Richards (2009) explained that the separation from feelings and relationships takes away the adolescent’s voice, the wisdom she knows through her body and in her relatedness, leaving her without her whole self. According to Gilligan and Richards, during the time of adolescence, young boys—through puberty, hormones, and the awakening of sexual desire—are brought back into relationship with the other, but the young girl has no voice and cannot speak of what she knows, she cannot use her wisdom or the intuition she knows in her body. In their own words:

The finding that most arrested attention, and one that consequently was often buried, was that girls in entering adolescence showed signs of a resistance, not to growing up but to losing their minds, as one thirteen-year-old put it. The crisis was one of relationship, and the resistance was to the split between voice and relationship. Paradoxically, girls were discovering that their honest voices were jeopardizing their relationships (p. 194).

Gilligan and Richards explained, after interest and awareness was ignited due to the feminist movement, many found the majority of theoretical models of human development were based on white men. Women were virtually ignored, although the study of hysteria was prevalent in explaining the women’s condition. Consequently, Gilligan and Richards offered descriptions of young girls going through adolescence and

losing their voice (a kind of dissociation) writing, “hence the depression, the eating disorders, and the other manifestations of psychological distress...” (p. 194).

Gilligan and Richards (2009) highlighted the many changes and recent discoveries made in psychology and neurobiology, focusing on Damasio’s (1999) discoveries of the body, brain and emotions, and the brain’s complex coding of objects. Gilligan and Richards (2009) spoke about Damasio’s discovery as the “Distinction between a core self, grounded in the body and emotions, and an autobiographical self, wedded to a story about itself” (p. 197). Damasio brings together thought and body calling it the “core self” and the “autobiographical self.” Since today’s social climate is one that separates the body and mind through objectifying the female, portraying her as a sexual object for the gaze of others, this severance threatens the psyche of females. This severance may be experienced through depression, eating disorders, dissociative disorders, personality disorders, and the separation of psyche and soma.

### **Summary**

This review of the literature highlighted the varied perspectives on the origin of a sense of self in women, starting with the major theorists in child development and on through to adolescence. Also reviewed were the influences on a sense of self from a social perspective, gender categorization, objectification theory, the media, the ideal beauty image, and the sexualization of the female. The review was followed by the findings of Damasio (1999), and Gilligan and Richards (2009) regarding the shifts of knowledge currently available to reformulate older models of human development. The theories previously discussed may provide insight to the derivation and development of a

woman's sense of self. Knowledge of how a sense of self is developed can facilitate in the empowerment of young women and help to instill confidence in their own abilities.

### CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

The research approach for this dissertation is an interpretative phenomenological theory derived from the literature and research of Clark Moustakas (1994). Using qualitative research as a foundation, the understanding of the phenomenon and the lived experience of a sense of self are explored. Through the analysis of information obtained from eight independent interviews, conducted over the course of eleven hours, with eight women between the ages of fifty-five and sixty-five in the Los Angeles area, this research examines the development of a sense of self in women, and the manner in which it evolves over time. Participants were selected based on a nomination process by their peers. The participants in this study are of legal age and all signed an informed consent to participate in the study. The participants in this study were not compensated financially for their time and acted primarily as participant volunteers.

Upon finalizing the basis for this study, this researcher contacted fellow mental health professionals, university professors, and colleagues with the criteria for the nomination process. This criteria included females aged fifty-five to sixty-five whom they considered as having strong personal boundaries that had been well-maintained over an extended period of time, exhibited signs of emotional stability, and were perceived as possessing a strong sense of self, which is defined in this study as the ability to distinguish one's own values from those of any outside persuasions and to do so well enough to be able to protect those ideals from unwanted external influence. When asked to nominate a participant, individuals were asked to seek out those who "marched to the beat of their own drum" and were unafraid of making and committing to their own decisions in business and in their personal lives, and confidently proceeded with their

own plans, despite opposition or support from outside social cues. The criteria for the women nominated were based on emotional strength, competency, and the ability to maintain stable boundaries. The nominating parties were asked to pull from their own social networks, both personal and professional, to suggest individuals who they perceived as maintaining a commitment to their own well-being and grounding principles, and who had exhibited resilience in the face of opposition. The nominating parties were themselves chosen based on their ethics, commitment to community, and professionalism.

Once an initial list of potential participants was compiled electronically, via email from the nominating parties, this researcher confidentially contacted potential participants through their preferred method, whether email or by phone, to introduce the topic and the researcher. The interviewees were informed about the content and purpose of the study. After brief correspondence, answering participants' questions and informing them of the topic for discussion, this researcher confirmed eight participants. In order to ensure that each participant felt comfortable, they chose the site of their own interview to maintain confidentiality, comfort level, openness of discussion, and to ensure ample time to conduct the interview. This researcher communicated her willingness to meet under their preferred circumstances.

Each interview took approximately sixty to ninety minutes. Once interviews began, introductions were made and participants were given a release form and ample time to read and sign it, consenting to their participation in the study (see Appendix A). In the consent form, it was stated that each participant would be audio recorded, and once the release form was signed, they were again asked to give verbal confirmation and

permission to record. After the consent form was signed and verbal confirmation of recording was secured, participants were given a demographic questionnaire (see Appendix C). Upon completion of the background questionnaire, the participants answered a series of questions and were encouraged to tell their story about their sense of self, as experienced throughout their lifetime (see Appendix D).

Data were collected both from the background questionnaire and from the audio recordings of their in-depth answers to these six questions. The data were transcribed, categorized for commonalities, and then interpreted.

During reporting, the participants were not exposed to any known risks because all of their identifying information was disguised. Names, titles, and professions were changed for purposes of anonymity. As stated, a written consent from the participants was obtained. Confidentiality was provided for the participants. The names of the participants were changed and any identifying information was altered and kept as close to the actual content without disclosing identifiable information. Also, all data were kept securely in a locked filing cabinet.

After the interviews were conducted data were collected and compiled for analysis. Data collected consisted of the background questionnaire (see Appendix C) and audio recordings from the interviews. The answers from the background questionnaire served to develop a profile of the participants. The information was transcribed from the recorded interview. Information from each participant was analyzed using Moustakas (1994) model of phenomenological design.

From the transcripts each shift in the text was marked and taken as an individual segment. The segment was labeled and transcribed verbatim. From the transcription, a

meaning unit was formulated, then cross-referenced with common themes; from this the textural description of the experience was derived. Overlapping topics were condensed to formulate the central themes. This theory of analysis is based on Moustakas (1994) Human Science.

### **Main Research Question**

How do women develop a strong sense of self while remaining impervious to outside stimuli and instead listen to their own voice?

The benefits of this investigation helps young women fulfill their dreams and purpose by understanding how other women developed a strong sense of self. A strong sense of self enables females to live a more fulfilling life unrestrained by external pressure and stereotyping in society. The results of this research reveal needed information, in the field of clinical psychology, which could benefit women of all ages. Females at any age who might be struggling with low self-esteem, low self-confidence, eating disorders, or harmful life circumstances benefit from this information in that it empowers women, giving them a solid sense of self. Practitioners in the field of clinical psychology could presumably gain more inclusive insight to women enabling more effective treatment.

### **Research Methods.**

Each participant's "story" is organized into a narrative and common themes are examined from a phenomenological perspective. The results are illustrated by describing the commonalities in these findings.



## CHAPTER IV: RESULTS

### Data

For this study eight women were interviewed, all of who were nominated for having a strong sense of self and reside in the Los Angeles area. Five of the women interviewed were Caucasian, one woman was African American, one woman was Latina, and one woman identified as mixed, of Latina and European decent. The women were between the ages of approximately fifty and seventy years old. They were asked six open-ended questions in the interview to aid in identifying and describing significant factors of their sense of self. The intention of this research was to understand how a woman develops a sense of self, and whether they believe they were born with that sense of self, or acquired it through life circumstances. Approximately eleven hours of audio recorded material was accumulated, after which transcriptions were created from the data. The subsequent vignettes are accounts derived from the individual interviews.

### Taylor

Taylor is a fifty-four-year-old Caucasian female who identifies as heterosexual. She is one of three children and has an older brother and a younger sister. She and her family moved to California when she was fifteen years old; Taylor looks back at this time as a crucial point in her life. Taylor described the move to a new state and a new school as devastating. She stated that, "I ended up feeling very isolated and I thought people were very different and so I really had to struggle there and find myself." Another major change that occurred at this time was a shift in the familial structure, as she went from having both parents in the home to having a full time housekeeper.

At the age of ten Taylor experienced a personal trauma that she had difficulty processing; she felt alone and disturbed. Not until she moved to California was the trauma triggered. She explained that the reasons the experience did not come to the forefront of her life prior to the move to California included her strong attachment with her parents, the familiarity of her surroundings, and the structure and the reliable routine of her life. Suddenly facing a life that was unsettled, with a routine broken by a cross-country move, Taylor felt loneliness and isolation. For the first time in her life she experienced separation from her parents because they both worked out of the home until 11:00 pm and were mostly unavailable. Always in the care of a nanny or housekeeper she still felt a startling change to the life she had known. She used food to comfort and console herself, which resulted in gaining approximately fifty pounds, and only added to her feelings of shame and isolation.

Within a short period of time after the move, Taylor reported that she decided to take an inventory of her resources and told herself, “Okay. I’m strong. I can do this. I have what it takes.” She explained that she had, “always had that inner voice.” Possessing an inner voice is crucial in developing and maintaining a sense of self amid the changes and uncertainties of life. When asked how she acquired her inner voice, Taylor explained that she had developed it through “survival,” and spoke about her life experiences. She spoke of being married and divorced, raising children, and raising a family, and equated these stages to differing and evolving levels of maturity. “I have a stronger sense of self than women in their twenties or thirties,” she explained, referring to the wisdom only gained through life experience.

In examining her evolving stages of maturity, Taylor reported that she knew her marriage wasn't going well and went back to school for an education, implying this would be a way to support herself if divorced. Taylor described her journey in academia as a means of survival that blossomed into a new phase of empowerment. Yet, when questioned further on exactly how she developed a strong sense of self, she transitioned from discussing marriages and education to her family of origin. Taylor reported that she grew up in a loving and nurturing two-parent family. Her father worked out of the house and her mother worked part-time as a doctor's assistant, a career that she could maintain while Taylor, her older sister, and younger brother were in school. For the most part, her mother and father were always present in her daily life. This, of course, changed when she was fifteen years old and moved to California. Taylor recalled losing the familiarities of her childhood neighborhood and the inconsistent availability of her parents were some of the factors that made moving to California so painful for her.

When asked about how she maintained personal boundaries, she noted her recent health scares. Taylor has had several surgeries, and she immediately expressed her perspective that life is a gift. Then, in the context of discussing personal boundaries, she opened up by noting that, during her period of failing health, she was checking in with herself to carefully monitor her state of mind. She described her inner dialogue:

I have to keep going back and checking myself. I am not a perfect person and I have issues with boundaries, so I have to keep going back and saying 'does this feel good? Does this feel right?' And if it doesn't then I have to say, 'You know what, this isn't working for me' whether it's trying to develop a relationship with a friend, keeping a relationship with a friend or a co-worker, or trying to develop a relationship in a partnership.

Taylor remembered the ability to turn inward, and connect with the core of her own inner voice, did not always exist. Growing up Taylor recalled she, "always wanted to be the

good girl and have everyone like me, even at my own expense.” Reflecting a sense of self that has, perhaps, evolved over time and through life experience, she quickly added, “I’m not willing to do that anymore.” Taylor’s attitude in life is positive; she wakes up, smiles and feels good about life.

What gives Taylor the strength to maintain personal boundaries and bolster her to trust her inner voice? When asked what personal factors have contributed to her strength, she said, “My family, my Mother and Father, work ethics, morals, values, and my sister. She’s hugely influenced me, you know, we were two people out there surviving together. My sister is huge, huge, huge, and education is huge.” Taylor found strength through family structure, her parents, and her female sibling who she saw as a partner in the struggle to survive. She also noted that education is one of the pillars upon which her strength was built.

When asked about how relationships have contributed to her sense of self, she spoke about her parents. Her father, while often busy as a working professional and primary breadwinner of the family, would drop anything when she walked into the room; she explains, “He just thought that I was so perfect.” Taylor noted her father was generous, loving, and always available for her. He communicated with her and instilled in her the belief that any problem could be worked out, together. However, Taylor explained how her relationship with her father might have hindered her later relationships with men. Referring to her past relationships she takes responsibility in saying, “Maybe I would’ve worked on the relationship a little bit better.” She characterized her parents as being “hippy like,” and eccentric, but that her mother was not affectionate. Her father played

the role of the nurturer within the family, while her mother took on a more structured role.

Lastly, Taylor was asked what advice she would give a young girl who is struggling with developing a strong sense of self. She said, “Don’t allow what other people do and say influence you. If it doesn’t feel right don’t do it and listen to your voice.” Taylor reflected back to the trauma she experienced as a child and wished her parents would have prepared and informed her more than they did.

### **Summary**

Taylor believes her strong sense of self evolved over time with many contributing factors, and her personal boundaries are maintained through self-regulation and self-talk. She has an awareness of her desire to be the good girl and frequently checks-in with herself to question her motives in responding to others or when assessing her own opinions. Relationships have influenced her sense of self. Ultimately, she appreciates the gift of life and has a positive outlook on living.

### **Jennifer**

Jennifer is a sixty-three year old mixed Latina and European female who identifies as celibate. She was raised in a two-parent household with an older brother. Both parents worked outside the home. When asked about developing a strong sense of self she answered, “I’m pretty sure it was my mother who had a strong sense of her self as a mother, as a co-partner with my father, as a homemaker, but also as one who was working full-time the entire time we were growing up.” She conveyed respect and affection for her mother.

Jennifer described growing up in a home where she was made to feel important and one where everyone had a role. Referring to her mother she reported, “She instilled in both my brother and me a sense of responsibility and a sense that we were all in this together. Even though I was the youngest, I still had a place in the family.” At a young age Jennifer felt valued. She explains how she was the dessert maker and the gift wrapper for special occasions, and through this found a place in the family structure that only she could occupy. She had distinction within her family. Her parents imparted the knowledge to her and her brother that “we were unique and we could be anything that we wanted to be.” As Jennifer spoke about her place in the family it was with a sense of belonging to something important. She not only valued her family but had a sense of knowing she was significantly valued by her family while growing up. Speaking about being the dessert maker or gift wrapper she implied a sense of contribution to the family, nowhere was there a sense of arrogance or superiority.

Jennifer described her childhood as filled with all the normal things, having sleepovers with girlfriends, going to school dances, and dating. She described her parents as devoted to the family, with a solid work ethics. She went to the prom, ran for a school office in her freshman year of high school, and was a cheerleader. As she recalled her sense of self during her teenage years she stated, “I don’t think we called it a strong sense of self. I think we would call it a leader.” She reported she “hung around with people who were either class officers or leader types,” implying she was active in the school resulting in associations with other active and involved students. Explaining her sense of self, Jennifer communicated it as though it was the assertiveness to accomplish tasks, and her awareness of her peers believing that she was competent to complete the tasks. Jennifer

implied she was stretched and grew each time her peers remarked, “do you want to do this or why don’t you do this?” she called it a “calling forth more of what I already had” as if the ability, strength, and will were already an internal source ready to tap in to, but was being called forth by her peers for the good of the group.

During her high school years she, along with her fellow cheerleaders and athletes, attended mass before games. One particular morning when all the students had cleared out of the hall she says, “I remember hearing the call of God. It was kind of like, ‘I want you.’” This call into religious life would be life-changing with regard to her peers and within her own family dynamic. Jennifer acknowledges the level of seriousness and certainty she had at the young age of seventeen, which helped her to commit to her decision. She knew this choice would in some way set her apart from her peers, as a defining moment in her life direction.

Jennifer communicated the desire to join a religious order at the age of seventeen, a desire that made her different. Joining a religious order for her was almost a defiant act, knowing her parents wanted her to marry and have children. Jennifer also knew she would be turning away from the close relationships she had developed to pursue a deeper calling. Her dating relationships would never be the same; all would be altered in her life. This took an enormous amount of courage, although she saw her calling as another source of strength, and even another step towards more self-empowerment. Jennifer commented:

I was only seventeen when I entered the religious order; I was making a statement of what I wanted to do with my life and how I wanted to contribute to the world. And so that was pretty strong, and my parents, against their wishes, allowed me to do it.

She suggested that so much of the social climate in politics, religion, and society was changing during the time she entered the religious order, and she joined as a protagonist perfectly positioned to make a difference. She spoke about the sixties and seventies as a time of change where a true assessment for the needy and underprivileged was taking place. She was drawn to social justice, “So I think it was that thing of, you can do anything you want to do if you put your mind to it.” Simultaneously she was earning her degrees—a bachelor’s degree then a master’s.

When asked about beauty and body image she first mentioned her mother, saying, “I had a mother who really cared for how I dressed and how I looked and I was able to get into make-up at the appropriate time and place.” Jennifer spoke about her perspective of her body during her high school years. She was positive, pointing out affirmative aspects of her body and areas she struggled with, although she conveyed the message that the struggle was slight, and that the good outweighed the bad. She was athletic, active, and had a good body image.

When asked about how she was able to maintain her personal boundaries she referred to her community acting as somewhat of a personal boundary, but stated in general, “Naming my likes and dislikes or what I prefer and what I don’t prefer I think it’s always been easy for me to do that.” Jennifer referred to her mother saying:

I think I go back to my mother, she did that, she said, ‘this is what I like, this is what I don’t like and it’s okay for you to say that, it’s okay for you to give your preferences even with men,’ I mean that was a big thing, I think, that in my day, even though the feminist revolution was happening.

Jennifer conveyed her tendency to be an extrovert but also having a strong voice commenting:



My grandparents too, my mother's mother and father, he was from Spain, she was from Mexico and they were, I mean they had their voices. My grandmother had her voice, but it wasn't to the detriment of anybody else but clearly she expressed her opinion and made it known.

Jennifer communicated her strength in speaking her truth, and attributed it to strength found within her family for generations.

Jennifer attributed her faith to personal factors that have contributed to her strength. She spoke about her belief in Jesus and how:

He spoke truth to power, he wasn't afraid of going against the Pharisees. He wasn't afraid of going against the current law that was hurting poor people and so I think it's not just a blind faith of, 'Oh, I'm religious and God is in heaven and I'm here,' but it's really a journey of faith. I consider myself a God seeker and so when I say that I really mean it that I'm on a journey that is more and more revealing God's strength in my own life and who he is to me and who I am to God.

Jennifer spoke about her chosen profession as an empowering journey, but is quick to add she is always collaborating with others. She expressed her sincere desire and effort to grow, saying, "I ask for help and I value people who know more about something than I do." She is a woman who, if she feels uncertain or gets stuck, doesn't stay stuck for long.

### **Summary**

Jennifer was brought up in a family that taught her she was an equal and important part of the family. She was made to believe her contribution to the family was essential. Even with an older brother she conveyed she did not feel less valued in birth order or gender.

Jennifer did not know a time when she did not have a strong sense of self. Her mother and grandmother were influential role models who were not shy about expressing their opinions and interests. Looking back to her high school days Jennifer seemed to know she was a leader but referred to it as self-esteem. At seventeen years old she

courageously announced her plan for her career and future, even knowing it might not be an acceptable choice to her family, but, receiving a call from God, she persevered anyway. She earned her degrees and held influential positions that impacted individuals and the community. Overall Jennifer is an optimistic individual, with a list of impressive professional accomplishments, and looks at every stage of life as a learning opportunity.

### **Catherine**

Catherine is a sixty-four-year-old Caucasian female who identifies as heterosexual. She was raised in a two-parent household, and was the youngest sister of three. Her eldest sister was born with an illness, and her parents were obviously concerned and preoccupied with the health of their eldest daughter. Catherine explained that her parents did not baby or pamper her sister, but instilled in her that she could be and do what ever she wanted. The three sisters were born in a span of four years. Catherine stated they were extremely close, “almost like triplets.” She spoke fondly of her sister, who passed away in her twenties. She stated, “My middle sister is now the one that’s the closest besides my husband, she’s my closest female friend, we’re best friends.”

Each sister accomplished a great deal professionally, and education played a significant role. Catherine’s father was a successful physician, which brought a deepened awareness of his eldest daughters’ medical and physical condition. Catherine explained her mother “was a real worrier, very anxious and very, not rigid, but not easy all the time” while growing up. Having her parents focused on the well-being and care of Catherine’s sister left her with the sense that she did not want to be an extra burden to her parents. Catherine stated her middle sister was a little feistier, implying she spoke her

mind, possibly to the point where she may have demanded her parents to be more attentive.

Catherine seemed to internalize what she observed and took on the role of being the good girl, not to make waves or give her parents anything more to worry about. From her experience it appeared she became familiar with how to please her family and came to know their preferences. Later in college, Catherine explained, learning her own preferences became an essential component in claiming her identity. She remembers an incident from her childhood that affirmed her sense that she should be the good girl, putting her eldest sister's needs before her own, stating:

I remember and even as children we were very close but I remember my grandmother, who was a good person, still saying, I must've been about nine, my grandmother saying 'oh let' we were in some little spat saying 'oh let her have it, she has the illness so let her have it' that was told to me a lot. So I was told to push my feelings down. That happened very frequently.

Catherine remembered college as a period of time in which she realized she needed to have a voice and consider her thoughts and feelings:

Healthy siblings of disabled kids, you have—you're very aware of what the disabled child needs. You have to—I mean, it's all encompassing, and it's nobody's fault. So I had to kinda figure out—listen to what I need and I started doing that.

College proved to be a rough time until she started to take herself into consideration:

I learned I had to tend to my own needs and then I really became strong. I had to learn to tolerate disappointment—I was in therapy and the therapist said in the short run you have to—it'll be hard on them in the long run it'll be good for them because you'll be happier. And that's what I went by and so I started learning who I was.

From that point on Catherine seemed to experience her own voice and strength, and successfully continued on with her education. Devoted to her profession, Catherine wondered about how she would fit a relationship into her life. She dated on and off but

was not pleased with what was out there, and was often talking herself into dating men she didn't necessarily want to date. Dating became a source of pain and caused her to question if she would find the right relationship or get married. Eventually she did find the right man and was married.

When asked about her thoughts regarding beauty and body image, Catherine indicated she did not have any conflict with beauty and seemed positive about her appearance. She stated her stumbling block in the past was her struggle with weight, and described how her dad's job as a physician led to a very strict approach to the household foods they could eat. Catherine's dad was very conscientious regarding good eating habits and maintaining good health. According to Catherine this resulted in substantially limiting sweets and fatty foods. Currently, food is not her struggle and she conveyed her awareness of her dad's best intention for his family. But when she was on her own in college she says, "So, of course, by the time I got to be a teenager, I wasn't interested in alcohol, I wasn't interested in drugs, I was interested in fatty foods." She remembered this being an obstacle for her, resulting in starting and stopping diets often.

When asked about how she maintains her personal boundaries, Catherine attributed her ability to maintain boundaries to her parents and the strong moral foundation they gave her. She explained how open her parents were about dating and sexuality. Catherine conveyed she was sufficiently informed by her parents to the point that she could not be easily influenced or manipulated by others; she had a strong ability to read the intentions of those around her.

Catherine communicated her sense of self came in part from her family, stating that they were, "Hardworking, honest people. Integrity was very important in my family

and hard work's very important in my family, and love, and just, you know, you did the good decent thing and it really comes through in the end." She deeply values her family and friendships.

### **Summary**

Catherine struggled with her sense of self until approximately her early twenties. She had taken on the role of the good girl, wanting to spare her parents from any unnecessary concern; she felt her parents were going through so much with the multiple complications from her sister's illness. This seemed to result in redefining and claiming her identity. She stated she did struggle with her sense of self and spent time working on herself through therapy and through her years of academia.

### **Leslie**

Leslie is a sixty-three-year-old Latina female who identifies as lesbian. She grew up in the Midwest and came from a two-parent household with four siblings. She was the eldest of four daughters, and one older brother. When asked about how she developed a strong sense of self she attributed it to her parents at an early age. She communicated her parents view towards their children, saying they "thought we were the best, well-behaved kids, and they really promoted us in whatever we wanted to do." Leslie stated her mother was protective over her and her siblings, but did not express over protectiveness. She suggested it was more as though her mother thought her kids were the best and was an advocate for them. She explained:

In fact, to a fault, I think our mother was really pretty protective of us. It was always somebody else's fault if anything went wrong at school. If we got in trouble about anything, she was up there at the principal's office, which is not such a great thing cause you know some of the time it was our fault.

She points out how both of her parents promoted self-esteem. As she was explaining her view she acknowledged this was only her perspective and possibly her siblings would have a different view.

Leslie described herself as being an optimist, but also a realist. Working for social justice she exuded her passion for the underprivileged. Leslie stated in school she didn't study that much and wasn't the best student, although she conveyed a belief in her intelligence, explaining, "I just thought I knew things." She said she grew up with an innate sense of knowing and understanding others.

Leslie explained how she felt as though she was special to her grandmother because she was her first granddaughter. She also expressed her affinity for the Latino culture because her maternal grandmother was Latina, which Leslie also identifies as. She says she has the fondest memories of her grandmother.

Leslie talked about beauty and body image with a sense of confidence. She remembers always feeling positive about her appearance and physique. She did not seem to struggle with her looks as a teenager or as a young adult, and she spoke about dating and finally finding the right person, but suggested she stood up for herself through the ups and downs of dating.

She described her mother as a beautiful woman, but one who could "put on overalls and help plaster a house" and also took pride in her appearance. She believed her mother was the core of the household, independent and the disciplinarian, while her father stayed more in the background. Leslie expressed her greatest respect lies with her mother. She repeatedly spoke about how her parents treated each of the siblings as

individuals, and expressed her sense of feeling supported, loved, and valued by her parents.

When her parents were working, her older brother was in charge when she was a young girl. When she was in high school, and her brother was out with his friends, Leslie was in charge of taking care of her younger sisters. The family seemed to be very active in business and in their hobbies and interests.

Leslie dated in high school, “but it was never quite right for me, even though it never felt like I was really drawn to women.” She conveys a meaningful respect and love for women. After one year of college she focused on her religious interests; Leslie admired the work the religious community was doing for children, and it seemed to coincide with her longing to help others and be active in the community to make a difference in people’s lives. Leslie recalls after three months she felt stifled and restrained by the religious group, “I was a free thinker. I wasn’t going to be told what to do, and I questioned everything, and we all did in the sixties. We were all questioning all this stuff.”

Leslie continued to date men, and then the awareness of her sexuality seemed to materialize in a new way. She expressed that she received support and acceptance from her family regarding her sexual identity. Although Leslie described the support and love from others, she also conveyed her resolve to be who she was with or without support.

Asking Leslie about how she was able to maintain her personal boundaries, she responded as if the question might be a tad bit unusual, being that she so freely speaks her mind and doesn’t seem to struggle with her boundaries. But, after spending some time reflecting on the question, she said:

I don't think I learned it necessarily from mother, and I don't know that learned it from my dad. I don't know. I think that there are pieces in your life that you just take on and learn on your own. And that you don't really need to have somebody tell you how to think, I'm a pretty reflective person.

She indicated that, because she never had children of her own, she was able to spend that phase of her life directed at self-reflection and personal growth. She described how she felt able to “challenge people on the injustices and racism, sexism...but I do it in a way that people are going to hear me.” Leslie emphasized how she was raised in a home where everyone had a voice and could speak their opinions.

Commenting on specific factors that contributed to her strength, Leslie spoke about her compassion for the minority status, and even as a young girl she saw the disparity between minority groups and privileged groups. She spoke about how growing up her parents modeled generosity and kindness to the homeless and underprivileged.

### **Summary**

Leslie became an agent of change in her community, serving the underprivileged. Her love for people is apparent; she has an aura of joy and optimism. Leslie seemed to have an active and well-rounded childhood, involved in sports and the community. Her parents, though different, were instrumental in providing a strong moral foundation and work ethic. Leslie's parents instilled in her a belief that she could be and do whatever she chose. Her sense of self seemed to be intact from a young age. She spoke about her voice and the modeling she had from her mother and grandmother to speak her mind. She saw her grandmother as a strong, affectionate woman who made her feel special. She saw her mother as a strong woman, and capable in multiple arenas. She seemed to have a realistic view of her father—seeing both negative and positive sides—but overall describing her acceptance and love for him.



**Robyn**

Robyn is a sixty-one-year-old African American female who identifies as heterosexual. She was raised in a two-parent household with six siblings. She had four older sisters, a brother approximately two years older than her, and a fifth sister eleven years younger. When asked about how she perceived her strong sense of self she stated it started with her family:

My dad particularly, because he was a very strong man. He was responsible for taking care of his family at the young age of nine or ten, because his dad was ill and there were seven in his family and so, he left school in fourth grade and worked every day.

Robyn portrayed her dad as being earnestly respected and revered in her family. He encouraged her to learn everything, with no limitations regarding gender stereotypes. She mentioned the jobs given to her and her brother were not gender-specific; she was expected, along with her brother, to be well versed in everything. She had an inner knowledge that she contributed to the well-being of her family; she had specific responsibilities to carry out, just as every other member in the family had specific responsibilities to accomplish. She conveyed this not with feelings of resentment, but from a place of strength. She implied a mutual respect and equality within her immediate and extended family.

Robyn spoke about how her father taught her to evaluate situations and decisions, in short, to become a critical thinker. Robyn said when she would ask her father about going to a friend's house or joining in an activity she learned to weigh the pros and cons of her activities:

He gave me lots of decisions to make early on...He basically said, "What are you going to be doing? What's going to happen? You know what all the possibilities are? The outcome of your actions?" and he'd ask, "Are you

prepared to deal with it, whatever it is?” In his words, he would say things like, “Well if you make your bed hard, you have to lay in it.”

Robyn explained how she started to evaluate circumstances for herself and participate in activities according to her judgment, not to peer pressure.

Robyn and her family worked long hours, getting up at four in the morning to accomplish the multiple tasks at hand, and the multiple jobs they each carried. School was a central focus for Robyn. She remembers laying on the floor in the family room with her older sisters as they studied for their classes. By the time she started school, Robyn seemed to be well versed in knowing how to learn, even to the point that she was assigned to instruct and teach other students who were behind. In communicating information about her academic success she never presented conceit or arrogance, but instead a healthy perspective on her abilities and intelligence.

When asked about beauty and body image and how that factored in or influenced her, she communicated it was not a factor. Robyn replied, “Not really, I mean, I wanted—I always wanted to look nice. As I said, if I saw somebody with something really nice on I went home and I made one for me...I used to make suits and outfits.” She said she wanted to be healthy, and conveyed she felt content with her body image.

Speaking to Robyn about maintaining personal boundaries she replied:

I can say no, because I come from a place of caring, I think not just about myself but about the other person, and if I don't like something I try to put it, phrase it in a way so that I don't hurt their feelings. But I just let them know that again I'm looking at this from my vantage point, viewpoint in life and that's based on my past experiences and it differs from theirs. And I respect others opinions, and they can be totally different from mine, and I'd like for them to respect mine.

Robyn spoke about feeling comfortable speaking and standing up for what she thought was right. She said if she felt she was getting angry she would “just pause and take a deep

breath and realize what's really important in my life." As far as teenage peer pressure was concerned, Robyn seemed able to convey her own thoughts and feelings without feeling uncomfortable or insecure. She said, "If my girlfriends were doing something and I didn't particularly care to do it or think it was right, I'd say 'well, you could do it, but I'm not interested.'" Robyn communicated a sense of ease and comfort in being true to herself.

When asked how relationships have contributed to her sense of self, she stated, "They confirmed that I was a pretty self-confident person and I didn't need them to complete who I was." She voiced a deep respect for people and desire to care for others. She indicated a concise appreciation for her surroundings and the individuals she interacts with, while being very at ease existing in her individuality.

Robyn was raised in the south and was subjected to racism. She experienced various discouraging and demeaning circumstances. The value she felt in herself as a young girl, contributing equally to her family, carried her through the trials she was faced with. Self-respect and self-worth are obvious threads in her life. Robyn spoke about dating and romantic relationships and the meaningful connections she experienced. She expressed multiple situations where relationships ended to keep intact the woman she wanted to be. She would not allow the relationship or the man to take over, or let either exert ownership over her. The stereotypical relationship model did not fit Robyn.

Throughout Robyn's years of academia she endured racism and sexism. However, she stated she always felt affirmed and encouraged by her family, who instilled the belief that she could do anything she set her mind to do. At age sixteen she was at a conference listening to a professor speak about iconoclasts and she said to herself:

Oh, what is an iconoclast? I said, what is an iconoclast? I'm thinking. I'm thinking, and it's an image breaker, someone who just busts images, what's expected, and I said, wow that kind of sounds like me in a way.

She had an innate sagacity about herself when she was sixteen, which propelled her through many challenging circumstances.

### **Summary**

From an early age Robyn was given responsibilities to achieve and accomplish. She felt valued by her family; she had a sense that she was equal to her siblings, regardless of birth order or gender. She respected her mother and father and felt safe in the enveloping nurturance of her extended family. She learned to make decisions at a young age and evaluate outcomes. She also believed she was intelligent and a hard worker. Throughout her life she did not struggle with or question her sense of self.

### **Sabrina**

Sabrina is a sixty-seven-year-old Caucasian female who identifies as heterosexual. She was the eldest of three children, and had a sister and a younger brother. She was raised in a two-parent household. Her father worked full-time but frequently worked away from the home. Her mother was the primary care giver. The age difference between her sisters and their brother was substantial, so for many years it was just Sabrina, her younger sister, and their mother for the majority of the time in the home.

When Sabrina was asked about how she developed a sense of self she replied it evolved over time stating, "Well, I certainly remember not having one for a long time as a young person." She reports she did not have a sense of self when she was a young girl growing up. She said during her mid to late twenties she experienced a definite shift towards gaining a sense of self. This shift included:

Being in therapy and learning more about myself. I think anger had a lot to do with it, not feeling comfortable admitting I had anger, certainly not comfortable expressing anger. When I realized that I had a right to have opinions about what other people did or didn't do towards me, and that I had a right to express those feelings, and that I had a right to stay firm in those feelings, I think that helped sort of develop a deeper structure.

Sabrina's mother could not tolerate anger, so anger was not acceptable. She remembers an occasional outburst from her dad, but then it would be over and no one would discuss it. Sabrina spoke about emotion and anger, and commented how this was an impediment to her sense of self in her youth. She explained:

It's not just expressing anger that it's about. It's really feeling that you have worth, that you have a right to protect yourself, and defend yourself, that you are a person of value so that you can be angry because you have a right. So it is what's being given that comes along with learning how to express anger. Do you know what I mean? It's not just here are five ways to express anger, its realizing that you have worth and value.

Sabrina said while growing up her mother made repetitive comparisons between her and her sister. She believed her mother and father favored her sister over her. Her mother made disparaging remarks, and her father was out of the home, working frequently. When she was eight or nine years old Sabrina remembers her mother telling her to suck in her stomach, and comparing her body to other girls'. She spoke about her parents and how they did not have high expectations for her, or at least did not express them. They set such high standards for her and seemed to reflect back to her that she did not meet them. She spoke about how her parents imposed markedly different standards for their son and their daughters.

When Sabrina eventually moved out of her house and got an apartment she said, "I think they were probably grateful that I was able to work full time, and they, you know, were happy that I had moved on and they were free."

Sabrina recalled the favorable comments she repeatedly grew up hearing about her family. She was given the message that she was fortunate to be in the family she was in, but the feedback from family and friends did not match her experience, or what she was feeling internally. This led her to believe that the struggles or problems she was experiencing internally with her family indicated something wasn't right about her. She thought everyone else must be correct, because from the outside the family looked good and she continued to hear that sentiment from others, and this caused her to question her own feelings. These mixed messages seemed to obscure her own perceptions and made Sabrina feel as if something was wrong with her. Sabrina explained that, as she slowly shared her personal experience with her peers in high school, she received their feedback and felt more validated by their comments; they started to resonate and match what she knew inside. Sharing her feelings enabled Sabrina to get a more accurate view of her experience, and it seemed to widen her horizon from one way of thinking.

As she became an independent young woman, Sabrina worked full-time and took classes in the evenings. During this time the construction of appropriate female body images took on a one-dimensional view of a woman's figure—a woman's body had to be “Twiggy” thin to be acceptable. Sabrina commented:

I think during these early years, this was before bulimia and anorexia and any of that, so it was just more body image. You were supposed to be like, it was Twiggy's time, and you were supposed to be really super skinny, and so I thought that if I could be a certain weight...life would just get a lot better.

Being thin was the message issued from the magazines and culture of the time; exercise and good health were not emphasized. Sabrina struggled with her weight thinking her life would improve if she became thinner. She also struggled with dating; reflecting on that stage of her life, she indicated the struggle came in part because her feelings about herself

were very negative. She said she dated men that were not her equal because at that time she did not feel good about herself, so she dated, and when the relationships failed, she blamed herself.

In the beginning Sabrina took one to two classes at a time; she implied that taking a class was more like a test, and she felt unsure of her academic abilities:

It was never like I'm going to start a new career by going to school. That would have been much beyond what I thought of myself at the time. But I had done so poorly in high school because I really didn't try that hard. I think I wanted to test myself and see if I was dumb, as I assumed they thought I was, or if I could do something. It was very scary for me...you know, I could fail and this is going to confirm all of my worst expectations or maybe I'll do well. I'll see, so I took one class, and I really tried, and I got a B, and I was so delighted. So then I took another class, you know, so that, again, started the momentum going.

Sabrina said she always felt like a leader but felt as though she was limited. By going to therapy, learning about herself, and putting herself through school Sabrina continued to learn about her capabilities. Each time she stretched beyond her comfort zone she grew more, and discovered more about herself. As she continued to accomplish more in school she spoke about feeling that, at each level she advanced to, she had to prove to herself all over again, almost as though she was questioning her confidence or competency again and again:

I always felt that there was this reset. You know, every time you like started undergrad, okay, now I'm gonna have to sort of prove myself, and I'm with a whole new peer group...and then I said okay, now I'm going to start grad school, and now I have to kind of go back to zero and see how I do 'cause I'm with a whole new group, and it's a whole—the stakes are high now. I'm in grad school.

It appeared that Sabrina came to know her resiliency, strength, intelligence, and competence the more she challenged herself academically. She also added how important her relationships were to her and how they remain important in her life. She implied she

built a family of her own choosing, which matched her new identity, and her strong sense of self.

### **Summary**

Sabrina came from a two-parent household with two siblings. Her parents seemed to have two different sets of standards for their two daughters and their one son. She was not affirmed by her parents but instead compared to others negatively. If Sabrina was unhappy, angry, or down she was dismissed, not asked, “What can we do about it?” or given any regard as to her feelings. It seemed as though her mother shut down at the appearance of emotions, limiting Sabrina’s ability to express her own feelings. Not until interacting with her peers in high school did Sabrina receive an indication that her feelings were valid. After moving out of her parents’ home, she worked full time and took a class in the evenings. She attended counseling to learn more about herself. During this time she learned her preferences and opinions, she developed a healthy body image, and decided practicing good health was a better alternative than just being thin.

She became a successful professional, affirming her personal competence, intelligence, and abilities. She entered into a relationship with someone her equal. As a woman with a strong sense of self, she is a role model for the younger generations in her family.

### **Susan**

Susan is a sixty-eight-year-old Caucasian female who identifies as heterosexual. Her mother died when she was very young. Her father remarried when she was approximately six years old. Susan expressed having a difficult time with her new stepmother, because it was such a drastic change for her. After her mother died, Susan’s



grandmother moved in with her and her father to help out with raising her. After her father remarried, her grandmother moved out of the house, which was another substantial adjustment and loss. Susan spoke well of her stepmother but realizes, when her father married her, she didn't know much about raising a daughter, and, like Susan, was introduced into an unknown situation. When asked how she developed a sense of self Susan referred to her brave decision to join a religious order after high school, against the protest of her parents. Up until that time Susan had been associated with a different religious order, but decided she would choose another one where no one knew her so she could have a fresh start, this too against her family's wishes. Susan expressed her desire to start in a new environment where no one knew her. She said, "I just wanted a fresh start." This instinctual fresh start was unclear to those close to her, but making her own path was something Susan was used to doing.

Susan stated she developed a sense of self during her high school years. She felt it was possible her stepmother wasn't ready to step into the role of mother. Susan spoke about many wonderful traits her stepmother had, but said at times she was embarrassed to bring her girlfriends around:

She had a temper, though, and so I would be embarrassed if my friends were over, because if she lost her temper, it was kind of scary, and I didn't have that before. Nobody lost their temper, and my father was a pretty mild man. So it was kind of difficult. I missed my grandmother being around all the time.

Susan indicated her father put effort into making sure she still saw her maternal grandmother and included her in family events, still, her presence in the home was missed.

When asked about beauty and body image Susan recalled a story about her hair. She said when she was younger she had a lot of hair and her stepmother did not know

how to fix it; she said she can remember being self-conscious about her hair. Susan believed she was vain growing up; she cared about her appearance, and especially cared about her hair. Susan stated from her father's side of the family her grandmother had been a beautiful woman, "My father was a very good-looking man, and so there's something in me that I think comes from that stream of the family that you try to look your best and I wanted to do that." When asked specifically about experiencing external or social pressure to look a certain way she said, "Well, if I didn't like it, I wouldn't conform. I wouldn't."

Susan commented that she thought she was a tomboy. Before her stepmother entered the picture many of her friends were boys, and her grandmother seemed to facilitate her social relationships by driving her and her friends to different places and back and forth to school. This seemed to change after her father remarried. She said:

When my dad remarried, I was a different; I think it was difficult for me, obviously. It's like it took me by surprise or I wasn't, I don't know, I guess I wasn't prepared, and I think my mother, I call her my mother, and she didn't know the first thing about raising a child my age. I was almost six.

Susan spoke about how independent she was at a young age. She took the bus to her own dentist's appointments. At one point her family moved and she liked the school she had been going to so she stayed at that school, which required her to take a bus across town by herself. Susan took piano lessons at school but did not have a piano at home, but her friend had a piano and she went to her house to practice. She went to high school proms, but going to an all-girls school did not provide her much opportunity to date.

Susan entered a religious order after high school and earned her academic degrees. Throughout her career she seemed to be in charge of directing her own path, even when others had authority over her direction. She seemed to instinctually know

what was right for herself and what she needed. Throughout her professional career she persisted to follow her interests and passion. She used each stage of learning, whether it was in a class or a personal experience, to expand her worldview. She took from each learning experience and put it into practice whether it was her work or personal life.

At one point Susan came to believe she missed out on some developmental stages in her life, and sought to focus her attention on the areas she sensed needed to grow. This involved leaving her religious order after an extended period of time. This again represents the careful attunement she practiced to her own personhood; she was very active in numerous events that were life changing for the community around her, and she believed in and continued her work for social justice.

When first asked about how Susan maintained her personal boundaries she said, "I can get pulled in different directions from different people that I know." She explained how she has a lot of energy and gets involved in many things and sometimes takes on too many of them at once. But when asked how she prevents getting pulled in different directions, she said, "I just say no, I can't do it. I don't have time or I don't want to do it." Susan implied she does maintain her personal boundaries.

When asked about what personal factors have contributed to her strength, Susan added that education, work, and family were all factors contributing to her strength. She recalls when she was quite young her grandmother took her to pray, not realizing at the time her grandmother was praying for her mother, who was deceased, and her husband, Susan's grandfather. Susan commented on religion and suggested her current stance is much different than it was in the past. She suggested many discrepancies and conflicts she sees within religion. She left her religious community after an extended period of

time, but is still actively involved with the community through various causes and relationships. Changing her views on religion seemed as though it was a shift in her thinking as she evolved as a woman. This environment became a world where she saw biases, sexism, and injustices thriving and was no longer congruent with her own thinking or beliefs.

When asked about how relationships factored into her sense of self, Susan implied her relationships were important to her. She said when she entered her religious community, “I just was who I was, and then to be accepted by the great majority of them, that was good, it was affirming.” By being who she was, doing her job, and attending to her tasks, Susan developed relationships, and gained respect from others. As she spoke she seemed to imply she evolved through different stages in her life leading to specific positions within her profession being realized. She spoke about having the ability to assess her situations and surroundings, “I guess it’s just, I kind of go into situations and just do my job, but then I can be aware of a lot that’s going on. I mean, I can kind of sense things, and assess things.”

### **Summary**

Susan had a close relationship with her grandmother and her father. Her mother died before she came to know her. Her father remarried, which took a considerable amount of adjustment for both her and her stepmother. Susan was especially independent as a young girl, exerting effort to care for the things that were important to her. Her family moved several times, and the moves caused her to face decisions regarding new schools and new friends. As much as she was able, she worked to maintain her connection to school, friends, and her surroundings.

At an early age Susan made an important decision, which would deeply influence the direction of her life. She maintained vigilance to herself and her commitments, but always stretched from her comfort zone to learn and grow in the areas she sensed she was lacking. She seemed to be attuned to the needs of others but was careful to stay attuned to her own needs as well. Susan values her relationships and the multiple accomplishments in her career that were self-validating along the way.

Throughout her life Susan maintained an optimistic view of working and service for others. She gives off an aura of humility but it is evident there is an internal sense of stability, strength, and purpose.

### **Madeline**

Madeline is a sixty-six-year-old Caucasian female who identifies as heterosexual. She was raised in a two-parent household and was the eldest of three daughters. Madeline comes from a large family with strong work ethics and strong morals. When asked how she developed a strong sense of self, Madeline first explained how she was the eldest of two younger sisters and the eldest of approximately thirty cousins. She explained how she stepped into a leadership role:

So it was sort of a role, I don't know but I don't think it was put on me, but I just sort of assumed it, and I was surprised in high school to find that people looked to me to take charge and to do things. It didn't occur to me that this was something unusual or, you know, it just felt like, I didn't even think about it frankly...and I don't think it was an expectation. I think it just felt like this was my job in life.

She implied being a leader wasn't something she intentionally sought out but it also seemed to be a natural fit. She did not feel her parents pushed her into a leadership role nor did she feel obligated at any time. She described how she was the oldest and had a sense of what to do to take charge, and knew how to take care of everyone:

Well, in my head, it was because I was the oldest, and therefore, the wisest, or whatever, you know, but I was expected somehow to do all this, although you know I don't think anybody really, any adult asked me or expected me to do it, but it just felt that, I felt I could do it. I was confident in myself enough to just take charge.

Madeline acknowledged her status within the family. She realized she had influence over her sisters and cousins. It seemed a natural role for her because of her knowledge that she was capable, and not because she thought she was superior or that she thought anyone else was incompetent. Madeline even seemed unaware on some level when others around her reflected her leadership role back to her:

I was surprised several years ago to hear one of my cousins' who was about seven years younger than me, I guess called me the director. He said you were always the director, you always looked out for all of us.

Throughout her high school years and through college she was looked up to as a leader.

Madeline explained her family was very stoic and they were not effusive in displaying their emotions. She was raised in the Midwest region and said, "We were just a regular family, except there were all these extended family members that we saw frequently. So it was a very good childhood in that sense, lots of people around, lots of fun." She said her parents were not expressive and "didn't talk about things, you just got on with life."

When asked about how beauty and body image factored into her life she recalled how it affected her as a young girl:

I was reading magazines that told me I had to be thin and lovely and, you know, all of these things, as well as a homemaker, and a wife, and a parent. I mean, just the whole stuff, again, to do it all, and you know I just knew then that wasn't going to be me.

Madeline spoke about the influence from the feminist movement in the sixties and seventies implying this offered an alternative perspective for young women:

There's an age at which I decided I'm not spending time and money making myself look gorgeous and stuff like that, but I've always been thin, I've always been athletic, and so keeping a decent figure was never an issue...the beauty thing was not so important. I mean, I feel like I need to present myself in an acceptable manner, sort of thing but I just, whatever was easiest and didn't take much time was okay with me.

Madeline said she did not struggle with the projected female ideal from society. She was aware of the standards society was pushing for, saying, "It was there, in the back of my mind," but it did not alter her way of being in the world.

Madeline talked about relationships she had during her high school and college years and how she was aware of others befriending her because of her leadership qualities. Madeline said the reason others may have gravitated to her was because of her strong leadership role, she felt others connected with her because she sensed they had some insecurities or confidence issues. She said she was surprised with the people who felt insecure, because from the outside it appeared they had the desired social female image, and of all people would not have any reason to feel insecure or not confident.

Madeline had an internal sense of her likes and dislikes, even when hearing opposing comments and opinions of adults around her:

I wasn't going to have kids, you know all these kids I had to take care of all those years made me realize it was a very big responsibility and a lot of work. It wasn't what I wanted to do, so I knew from a young age I was not going to have kids.

She recalled her aunts would say, "When you have your own, you'll just love them." She reiterated she wasn't going to have them. Madeline indicated her mother knew that what she was saying was who she was, which she implied was a meaningful affirmation of being known by her mother. There seemed to be certainties in Madeline's life from a young age, she knew she did not want to have children, she knew she was going to go to

college, and she knew the career path she would take. Inspired from a book she read as a young girl about a heroic young woman, Madeline knew what career she wanted.

Madeline explained when she was a young girl professional roles for women were limited, and if she were choosing today her choices of profession may have varied.

Although from a young age it was a given she would go to college she stated, “Both my parents were college graduates, and three out of four of my grandparents were college graduates.” She thrived in organizational and leadership skills.

When asked about how she maintains personal boundaries she said it was the result of a strong moral code:

I guess I’ve always had kind of a strong sense of what’s acceptable to me and what’s not. I’m not religious, but I was raised in the church, and between my parents and my church, I think, you know, I picked up what I sensed anyway was correct and what wasn’t for me. That hasn’t changed. I mean it’s just always been there.

Madeline attributed family, parents, education, and the relationships of colleagues, and travel as factors that have contributed to her strength. Madeline felt supported by her parents while growing up, but said they always expected that she could handle life. She maintained close relationships with her two younger sisters and acknowledged them for teaching her valuable life qualities.

Madeline married but carried her independence and autonomy into the relationship. She and her husband shared similar thoughts and perspectives about marriage and family.

### **Summary**

Madeline was raised in a two-parent household. She was the first-born and the eldest of her family’s generation. She was aware of her leadership skills from an early



age. She realized and appreciated her strengths and wanted to help others in a society based on the career she chose. She always felt she had a strong sense of self and could not recall a time when she didn't have one. She knew what she wanted to do for her career and the choices she wanted to make for her personal life. Madeline acknowledged her parents and family for providing a solid foundation of strong morals and strong work ethics. Madeline is successful in her profession and continues to be open to growth and learning new things.

### **Findings**

The fifteen themes that emerged from the participants were as follows. 1) Parenting according to gender stereotypes had an influence on self-worth. 2) Females who believed they had contributed equally within their family of origin felt more self-value. 3) Females who had specific tasks and held positions within their family of origin had a strong sense of self. 4) Females who were acknowledged as capable by their family of origin were more confident. 5) Females who struggled with body image reportedly had mothers who were overly concerned with their appearance at an early age. 6) Females who always had a strong sense of self did not have a difficult struggle with body image or social influence. 7) Leadership qualities indicated higher self-esteem. 8) Specific known attributes affirmed a sense of self. 9) Females lacking a sense of self at an early age sought out a social role to please others. 10) Romantic relationships were a struggle for the participants whose sense of self evolved over time; when a sense of self was identified from a young age, long term romantic relationships were not a priority until after careers were better established. 11) Education was a significant influence to a sense of self. 12) Openness and collaboration with others was a commonality. 13) Friendships

were significant. 14) Strong morals and strong work ethics provided confidence and connection to a sense of purpose. 15) The inability to express emotions, particularly anger, caused dissonance with a sense of self.

### **Summary of Findings**

In this study participants were identified as possessing a strong sense of self. They were nominated by opinion leaders in the community through a written letter sent via email. The participants answered open-ended questions to explore the phenomenon of the development of a strong sense of self. The participants answered basic demographic information by filling out a written questionnaire over the course of the hour and a half interview. The fifteen themes that emerged were analyzed to rule out overlapping themes. This resulted in four themes: 1) parenting according to gender stereotypes and the derived qualities of self-worth, 2) self-efficacy through family status, 3) morality and work ethic were indicative of a strong sense of self, and 4) the significance of relationships and collaboration.

The participants' parents had a significant impact on their self-image in society. Those whose mothers seemed distant, disconnected, or unaffectionate, and also cared more about their daughter's appearance and body image than others, negatively impacted their daughter's understanding of self-worth. The women identified as having a strong sense of self as children did not struggle as much with body image or societal influence during their teenage years. These women were also more confident in their athletic ability. Three out of eight women who believed that they did not have a sense of self as a child strove to be the "good girl" and/or the "perfect girl" and tried to please others. Three out of eight participants spoke about how they evolved over time to gain a sense of

self. They felt they gained it over time because, as children, there was a lack of parental validation and a disruption to their interpersonal relationships.

It also became evident that a strong sense of self develops from an understanding of one's status in families and societies. Five out of eight of the women in the research referenced as important the respect and value they earned by making a contribution to their family of origin. Describing their experience growing up, these five women each communicated that they were expected to complete assigned tasks and that these tasks were not necessarily gender specific. They each believed strongly that fulfilling their task or role was essential for their family's functionality. By contrast, two out of the eight women interviewed spoke about how their parents had different standards for their brothers. Overall, the women who were treated equally to their brothers did not struggle with their sense of self.

The expression of emotion within their family of origin, namely anger, was another reoccurring commonality between the participants. For three of the women interviewed, anger was not modeled by parents, or even acceptable within the family of origin. These three participants expressed feelings of inadequacy, as if something was wrong with them, or that they were "less than" others.

Education played a substantial role in the lives of the women and added greatly to their sense of self as it fine-tuned a strong work ethic and sense of accountability. The women articulated that it was through education that they came to know themselves better and experienced vital personal growth. Also, apparent within the theme of education was that it reflected a journey that was very personal, and solely focused on

their own interests and individual growth, without any imposed societal obligation to others.

Leadership, and defining a sense of purpose, was also a significant theme that emerged. Two out of eight women identified themselves as leaders from an early age and that identification was congruent with their personality traits and characteristics.

Leadership, or caring for others, was not considered an undesirable obligation but a rewarding and essential contribution to society. It is interesting to note that four women declared their profession and life purpose at an early age, even when it meant going against their parents wishes.

Additionally, all the participants reported that a broad range of interpersonal relationships including friendships, colleagues, family ties, and romantic associations, were common and reflected to varying degrees the development of the sense of self. Each of the participants described a communal experience they held in collaborating with their relationships, and expressed the personal growth they achieved through these relationships. Romantically, three out of eight women struggled with dating due to the feeling that they were inadequate, or because they had a damaged sense of self-worth. They made apparent their essential need was for external validation.

## CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

### Overview

The participants valued a strong sense of self. They each held an optimistic view of life and were inclined to relate the propensity of being a leader to having higher self-esteem. All the women valued personal growth and illustrated this through travel, relationships, and family. The inclination to improve social injustices and help the underprivileged was a common theme driving each of the participants' lives. Each woman held an inner appreciation for the self and from this projected confidence. Additionally, each woman was secure in her personal approach to life, but also possessed humility and gratefulness.

The results led to four major themes that facilitated the emergence of a strong sense of self in women. The four themes are as follows: 1) parenting according to gender stereotypes and the derived qualities of self-worth, 2) self-efficacy through family status, 3) Morality and work ethics as indicative of a strong sense of self, and 4) the significance of relationships and collaboration.

### The Common Themes

#### **Parenting according to gender stereotypes and the derived qualities of self-worth.**

Parenting according to gender stereotypes is called "gender parenting" and it communicates strong messages to children and often influences a young girl's sense of self-worth. For those participants who had families in which different standards were set according to male and female siblings, the girls evolved to understand that they were not as valuable as their brothers. When more restrictions were placed on girls within the

family structure, it led to feelings of incompetency, which in turn motivated the young girls to seek people pleasing roles. By being the good girl they sought approval from their parents at the expense of altering their behaviors, and ultimately were denied their own developmental stage of self-exploration. For Taylor and Sabrina, who both had brothers with unlimited freedom that women should have equally but lacked, there was a distinction and separateness implied between the opposite sexed siblings. The young girls were put into roles such as the mediator or the good girl, or made to feel as though they were all together flawed. Rather than progressing through natural developmental stages, and coming to know their likes, dislikes, and preferences, they were forced to center their energy on obtaining parental attention and validation. Erikson's (1980) ego identity development requires a mirroring from a primary caregiver to gauge one's own identity, and if the child's mother and/or father are restricting females and not males, a strong message of inferiority is sent to the females.

The women who identified having a strong sense of self from childhood had parents who treated them and their brothers according to the same standards. Their parents required both sexes to be competent in all roles, ignoring stereotypical female and male tasks. For example, some participants' brothers were expected to be as competent as other family members in the kitchen, while the sisters were expected to be equally competent to do yard work or take out the trash. The women whose brothers were given status solely because they were boys developed a sense of self later in life. They struggled with various issues like their weight, relationships, identity, and feelings of inadequacy. When the siblings were all of the same gender, however, it should be noted that each of the siblings was expected to have a greater capacity for competence.

### **Body Image**

For some participants, physical appearance was emphasized as a priority, and used as a means of comparison with others. Females who struggled with body image reportedly had mothers who were concerned with their daughter's appearance at an early age. Catherine, for instance, had a mother who often compared her body to other girls', suggesting her daughter make changes to her body. Catherine recalls that at nine years of age her mother referred to her stomach as a potbelly, which resulted in restrictions Catherine placed upon her clothing choices. Through this incident and others like it Catherine learned her mother did not approve of her. Another example of gender parenting influencing a daughter's perception of body type is Taylor, who struggled with weight gain during her teenage years. Her weight gain can be attributed to a disruption in the accessibility of her parents and dissociation following a traumatic event.

In contrast, females who identified as always having had a strong sense of self did not have a difficult struggle with body image. Robyn and Madeline were raised with a very different level of communication from their mothers. In their families, appearance was not an important objective, and they reported being content with their body image and felt good about being healthy.

Moreover, through the interviews with participants it became apparent that identifying specific, known attributes added to a sense of self. Robyn, Susan, Madeline, Leslie, and Jennifer each took great satisfaction in the areas in which they excelled or had perceived strengths. For instance, instead of expressing a hopeless desire to look more attractive, or match the unattainable social agenda for the ideal female body type, their responses were much more favorable. These participants were quick to point out that they

had good legs, for example, and were athletic, smart, or outgoing. They were readily able to recognize their own positive characteristics. Moreover, these women believed they had an innate sense of knowing things about the world around them and were skilled at comprehending their environment. They were able to identify strengths easily, but were also aware of their imperfections, although thoughts of imperfections or differences were not overly emphasized as a priority. Simply acknowledging their personal strengths seemed to be enough to provide the foundation for a sense of self. While they were receptive to personal growth, they were not obsessed with the need to change themselves to the standards of others. Furthermore, the parents validated the girls' personal strengths, and the acknowledgment and validation of these strengths enabled the young women to hold themselves to higher standards. This can be seen in Robyn, whose father taught her to evaluate her situations and environment by giving her decisions to make, thereby increasing her level of responsibility. Parents that affirmed their daughter's strengths helped them to identify and believe in their personal abilities and then continue to develop them.

Emotional expression played a significant role in the family structure and reflected differing parental acceptance. The inability to express emotion, particularly anger, caused dissonance with the sense of self for some of the participants. When anger was considered unacceptable in the family and was not permitted in the home, the young girl felt unworthy of her feelings and opinions.

#### **Self-efficacy through family status.**

Another common theme that emerged was that status within the family of origin promoted self-efficacy. Females who had specific tasks and roles in their family of origin



were more confident, felt valued, and had a greater sense of self. When these females perceived their contribution was equally important to the family as any other family member's contribution they experienced more self-worth. By understanding their contribution and role in the family as essential and necessary, they established self-efficacy, displaying confidence in their capacity to accomplish desired tasks and achieve specific results.

Each woman who identified having a strong sense of self at an early age also identified as holding a particular role within the family, providing her a sense of status and meaning. For example, as a young girl Jennifer was the dessert maker of the family at dinnertime and the wrapper of gifts on holidays. Because she had a specific role, which belonged only to her, she held a sense of pride and importance to the family. Similarly, Madeline had the responsibility of being the eldest of her siblings and cousins. She stepped into a leadership role, which was valued by the family, and also provided her with a sense of competency and self-worth. Her cousins referred to her as the director. She was an organizer and a leader.

Additionally, we see this emerge in Robyn's life, where she was assigned tasks, along with her siblings, in order for the family to function. Robyn held status in the family for being smart, and, from grade school through high school, she helped tutor other students at school who were having difficulty with their assignments. This role bolstered her status within the family and validated the personal contributions she was making to the livelihood of the whole group. Additionally, Susan was known in her family for doing things her own way and she was independent and creative in getting her needs met. Whether it was getting help from a friend's mother to fix her hair or learning

an instrument, she instigated a plan independent of her parents and followed it through with ingenuity. For Leslie, who had a talent for singing, she derived status within her family by sharing this talent. She also worked in her family's business, and having a specific role in the family gave her a feeling of significance.

Having an early-identified title or role offered the girls a foundation for self-worth. This status enabled the girls to get involved frequently in school and social activities. By having a status in the family, the identity of the young girls was positively reinforced.

The women whose sense of self evolved later in life did not hold a specific role in the family, as their status was either negative or over amplified. In the families who over amplified the status of the young girls, it was communicated by unspecific, general praise that did not affirm any particular strengths or talents. This vague form of generic praise resulted in a lack of self-description and identity among the girls, which had to be discovered later in life on their own.

### **Morality and work ethics were indicative of a strong sense of self.**

#### **Inner voice**

Strong morals and strong work ethic were prevalent among the women. Many of the participants referred directly to their internal sense of morality. All of the women, except for three, reported that it was their family that instilled in them the understanding and concept of strong morals. The three women who did not credit their family for instilling strong morals explained that they had developed them on their own. Yet, whether communicated through family or learned individually, each woman spoke about how important strong morals were in enabling decision-making in business or personal

relationships. They spoke about possessing an inner voice and having the ability to check-in with this internal voice to gauge their own mental and emotional health. Many women mentioned gauging this health by answering the question of whether or not they were able to “sleep at night,” affirming a clear conscience.

### **Boundaries**

The ability to maintain personal boundaries emerged from the premise of maintaining strong morals. A strong moral code acted as an anchor to negotiate what was acceptable or not acceptable to the women. Madeline explained:

I've always had kind of a strong sense of what's acceptable to me and what's not. I'm not religious but I was raised in the church, and between my parents and my church, I think I picked up what I sensed was correct and what wasn't for me. And that hasn't changed. I mean it's always been there.

Gilligan (1982) speaks about morality as it pertains to women; she surmises that caring for others is at the root of morality for women, but that women must have a voice to defend the self, rather than only having strong boundaries to resolve the crises of others, which is typically the only acceptable way to stand ground for morality under the feminine stereotype. The participants in this study all have the belief that morality can help to discern the true needs in society and they have also learned the power and influence of their own voice. They have gone to the next phase of morality maturation that Gilligan discusses. Their morality is a combination of survival of the self and survival for the social good.

### **The significance of relationships and collaboration.**

Through the interview process, it seemed that romantic relationships were more of a struggle for the participants whose sense of self evolved over a longer period of time.

When a sense of self was identified from a young age, although their long-term, romantic

relationships were important, they often only emerged after careers were established. Three out of eight women who explained that their sense of self had evolved over time also admitted to struggling with romantic relationships through their late teens, twenties, and some even through their thirties. Two of these women had brothers who were raised in a privileged status because they were male. The third woman, Catherine, had no brothers but had a sister who was born with an illness and needed attention and care throughout her life. Catherine tried to be the good girl knowing her parents were doing all they could do to care for her older sister. Growing up she felt as though she did not know herself, and, in her late teenage years through her twenties, discovered her likes and dislikes and was able to take a stand for her personal needs, since up until that time she had been trying to please others and meet their needs instead of her own.

The three women felt at times deeply discouraged in dating and wondered if they would find anyone appropriate. They stated their choices were not good choices because their identity and self-image were poor. Two of the women said there was a feeling of unworthiness about the self, so if someone showed interest in them that is who they would be with, not so much a picking and choosing of who they wanted and who they thought would be the best for them. They didn't think, "I want the best partner because I deserve one." Their self-esteem was too shaky. After going through their twenties, becoming educated and more stable in their careers, they each came into and discovered their sense of self—meaning they came to know their own self-worth and claimed a powerful identity. They clearly spoke up for their needs and got them met. They went through an important self discovery in their twenties and into their thirties of learning the acceptability of their emotions and learned they had a right to express their anger. Instead

of the childhood experience of pleasing others they learned about their personal preferences, opinions, and style. During their childhood they did not have the opportunity to focus and explore their personality and to define their identity, because they were focused on monitoring the environment, being a mediator, or trying to be the good girl to gain validation and approval from their parents. The three women, who self-identified as not having a sense of self in their childhood, came to develop their identity on their own as young adults, and each one confirmed pursuing academia was pivotal in the transformation process of obtaining a strong sense of self. They are clearly women with a strong sense of self and have created their relationships and families according to the high standards of their belief system in their selves, and by owning their personal strength and value.

Similarly, like the five out of eight women who were identified in their families for having a status and a specific positive role including a familial awareness of their strengths, the other three women defined their strengths and internal self-worth independently in their late teens, twenties, and thirties. The five out of eight women who identified with a strong sense of self in childhood were spared the distress of a negative body image, weight loss, weight gain, tumultuous romantic relationships, and feelings of inferiority and low self-esteem.

Five out of eight women who identified as having a sense of self at an early age communicated less anxiety and trauma related to romantic relationships during their teenage years, and through their twenties. Their career took precedence over finding the right partner, and finding the right partner was not a worrisome prospect. All of the

women were currently either content in romantic relationships or were content with being single.

Each woman explained the importance of friendships in their lives and how they helped to strengthen their sense of self. Interestingly, their friendships were not limited to a specific socioeconomic status nor were they limited to a small circle of friends; instead, their friendships crossed over and through a diverse population. Each woman used collaboration as a tool for consultation in business and to ferret out her own thoughts.

Travel was identified as a significant component in the lives of the participants. They spoke about how travel helped broaden their perspective within their personal worldview. Regardless if women were partnered or not they all took time to travel, either independently or with their girlfriends. Close female relationships were meaningful and abundant. Several women mentioned book clubs they belonged to; they were involved in activist organizations of interest, and some had simply met with the same small group of women over many years as a way to maintain checks and balances for personal growth, and to keep deep, connected friendships alive.

Education was a powerful agent of change for each of the participants. Whether they self-identified their sense of self in childhood or had it evolve over time, each woman spoke to the lived experience of education and the affirmation of self within learning. The self-discovery, which took place through each phase of their academic life, became a unique arena to practice personal boundaries in a male world, and to understand the depth of their own vast personal strength. As each woman progressed through her academic life her personal calling to the needs of society became more urgent, and more remarkable to implement.

### **Summary**

The importance of young girls having equal parenting standards within their family of origin appeared to be an essential component for self-worth, enabling a rapid path towards reinforcing a sense of self. Parenting without a gender bias seems to provide young girls with self-worth. Giving young girls responsibilities to which they perceive they are making a necessary contribution to the well-being of their family provides self-efficacy. By performing these responsibilities their confidence was bolstered and ignited to face new challenges at each stage of development.

The participants determining their own personal worldviews and proposed actions carried on the strong morals and strong work ethics modeled by their parents. The participants whose parents did not reinforce strong morals and work ethics added this component to their lives as a necessary gauge later on, which was common to all the participants in weighing life's decisions and choosing life paths.

### **Implications**

Implications from this study suggest developing a strong sense of self involves a non-biased gender approach to parenting young girls. When the participants understood they were assigned specific tasks and obligations equal to their brothers they perceived an innate belief in their abilities. When both brother and sister were equally capable and required to carry out gender specific tasks, the relationship between brother and sister was more positive. Additionally, when rules and standards related to behavior were equal, girls felt more empowered. If the young girls had only female siblings and were expected to know and carry out all chores regardless of gender they were empowered and

self-efficacy increased. When a negative status was implied, the exploration of self-identity was stunted.

The acceptability of freely expressing emotion seemed to be a crucial part of self-worth. As one participant said, “If you can’t even say you’re angry, what worth do you have?” When primary caregivers freely modeled their preferences and opinions their daughters felt empowered to follow in their example, providing self-worth. This also provided a necessary component to developing an identity. They were given room to experiment and explore their preferences and personality traits.

Holding a status (or owning a positive position) in the family that led to meaningful contributions for the family, provided self-efficacy. The positive role the young girls held within the family gave them a sense of pride. The awareness of their productivity and proficiency within their known contribution was instrumental in their self-worth and their ability to approach the future with courage.

As women with a strong sense of self, each participant reflected back to an inner stability, which was predicated on strong morals and strong work ethics. Whether it was directly taught by their parents or developed on their own, it was used as a core concept in determining how they dealt with life circumstances. The concept of morality was also a key element in maintaining personal boundaries; through this process emerged a precise conduit for business decisions, relationships, and self-affirmation.

Relationship was a key facet to the lived experience of having a strong sense of self. Romantic relationships, friendships, and collaborating with colleagues were essential components in the development of meaning and purpose for women with a strong sense of self. Neediness was not a component of their sense of self; instead, self-sufficiency,



resiliency, and looking towards a higher calling were the implied and underlying principles.

The women who identified gaining a sense of self over time required a deeper look into their sense of self later in life. It would be wrong to assume these women did not have an inherent sense of self. Indeed, it seems that it was this strong sense of self that in fact helped to counterbalance the multiple obstacles they were forced to overcome. Without a strong sense of self it is difficult to comprehend how these women overcame the obstacles they were faced with, instead of succumbing to a lack of identity or lack of self-worth.

Based on the conclusion of these findings a high significance should be placed on parenting and the construction of the family unit. Status in the family correlates to self-worth and value of oneself. Moreover, having a specific skill set or talent that is nurtured provides for a successful outcome of a sense of self. The women in this study realized their sense of self at different stages throughout their lifetime; however, the significance of this cannot be overstated because capturing their experience of having a strong sense of self provides a road map for young girls to follow to gain self-confidence, and a strong sense of self. Despite the gains women have made through the feminist movement—the right to vote, to own property, to go to college, to own a business—they still struggle with finding their voice in a male dominated world. Studies which focus on the development of a sense of self in women serve to provide further insight into the inner world of developing women and help professionals in the field of psychology facilitate their empowerment and success in society. Leading experts such as Elisha (2011), Gilligan (1982), Lorber (1994), Mahler, Pine, and Bergman (2000), Maccoby (2000), and

Miller (1986), are necessary and significant to the development of these studies because they offer a new perspective in a formerly male dominated arena. Because the founding theorists of psychology and the subjects they studied were generally all men hundreds of years of research have left us with an identifiable gap in knowledge. Studies like this one, which this author hopes has built upon the foundation of research pioneered by such experts in women's health, guide us in understanding the nuances, strengths, and platforms that empower women.

Implications from this study would benefit clinical work in psychology because psychologists would have a better understanding of the influences and effects on a sense of self in the young women they treat. Whether it is depression, disordered eating, low self-esteem, or the lack of stability in interpersonal relationships, the slow development of a sense of self could likely be at the root of these symptoms. The knowledge of the origin of a sense of self will enable the practitioner to engage with the client in a more precise way, reaching the etiology of the presenting problem more efficiently. Similarly, just as a psychologist may look at a client's environment to see where changes can be made to ameliorate the symptoms of depression, this study helps to give psychologists the tools to bridge the gap in the development of a sense of self. Psychologists can work with a client to empower her with the ability to build a sense of self by encouraging her to find her voice, strengthen her ability to express emotions, and let her know that she has a right to express them. Based on the findings in this research, psychologists also have the opportunity to provide an environment in which to begin interventions where the client can, for the first time, start to discover her own opinions, personal likes, and dislikes. Whether it is a dysfunctional family, a toxic work place, or an abusive relationship,

developing a strong sense of self in therapy would be advantageous to the empowerment of a woman.

Further implications of this study should involve a focus on the female gender and the differences in obtaining a sense of self and the crucial components for self-agency between how the male gender acquires a sense of self. Men have developed the core foundation of psychoanalysis and many subsequent psychological theories. In the development of these theories biases are inherently ingrained. Research has predominantly taken place by white men studying white men. Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1997) state, “With the western tradition of dividing human nature into dual but parallel streams, attributes traditionally associated with the masculine are valued, studied, and articulated, while those associated with the feminine tend to be ignored” (p. 6).

Studying only male attributes and making them the standard to which everyone must aspire demeans the attributes possessed by women. By studying the attributes of women and how they become empowered with a strong sense of self, including their longing for connectedness in relationship and sense of contribution for the betterment of society, psychologists can better diagnose rather than over pathologize women, and perhaps cease to see their inclination for connectedness as dependent or weak, but instead strengthened by others. In particular this study adds to more intimate information in the formation of a sense of self, which can be used to esteem women by helping to lift them to their own ideals. As these authors point out, “When the woman’s voice is included in the study of human development, women’s lives and qualities are revealed and we can

observe the unfolding of these qualities in the lives of men as well” (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1997, p. 7).

### **Strengths and Weakness of the Study**

Weaknesses in this study included the small number of participants involved. This suggests avenues for future study by broadening the cross section of the population to include women who did not choose the path of higher learning in the academic world, but instead proceeded directly to their entrepreneurial goals or chose to solely focus their efforts toward raising a family, working in the home versus outside the home.

Strengths in this study were the openness, honesty, and willingness of the women in sharing their story with the hope of helping young girls to develop a strong sense of self. Having the opportunity to speak to older women who have a strong sense of self and examine their lived experience brings forth their knowledge and wisdom to the forefront making it attainable to empower and encourage younger women to find their voice. With a strong voice women may not feel as if they need to separate their intelligence and knowledge from their femininity to be acceptable in a male dominated society. As stated earlier, Gilligan and Richards (2009) explain that the separation from feelings and relationships takes away the adolescent’s voice, the wisdom she knows through her body and in her relatedness, leaving her without her whole self.

### **Recommendations for Future Studies**

Recommendations for future study include a study with a larger sample size. Further research in the development of a sense of self may benefit from exploring the phenomenon through the lens of adolescent girls. Due to current changes within society a focus on how the prevalence of social media and technology affects a woman’s sense of

self could be beneficial to understanding the plight of young women today. Social media has significantly influenced how adolescents and adults communicate with each other. Previous social norms of person to person contact have been transformed by electronic text messaging, and a study to explore how this change in interpersonal relationships affect a woman's status in society and her sense of self would be beneficial.

Morality was brought up repeatedly throughout the various interviews despite not being included in the six questions this researcher asked; nevertheless, it ended up being a focal part of discussion. Further research could explore the current trends in morality as a consequence of the feminist movement and how this affects a woman's sense of self. The social norms of sexual activity have dramatically changed including sexual permissiveness in early adolescence. An area of exploration might be the progressive social norm of having sexual encounters starting in early adolescence and how this affects a young girls sense of self. If in the past it was necessary for men to court a woman or to promise marriage to have sex with her, then the connotation implies the act of sex acted as a powerful criterion woman held. This would imply a specific power women possessed, but how does this surrender of power affect a woman's sense of self if sex is considered common, without boundaries, and is this diminishing of a young girls sense of self?

Another important area of future study is how a man's sense of self is affected by new social norms. What are the effects of the feminist movement on a young boy's sense of self? The social norms of the past have had a dramatic impact on men also. Is society making similar unrealistic demands on men as they have on women? For example, social media, advertising, film, and television have underscored the significance of body image

for men. Clinical psychology has seen the prevalence in “muscle dysmorphia, eating disorders and depression” for men (McFarland & Petrie, 2012, p. 329). Similarly, as women have been objectified in society increasingly more men are being objectified and are struggling with body image related issues. Wiseman and Moradi (2010) stated, “levels of body image and eating problems in samples of gay men have been found to be more similar to levels in samples of heterosexual women” (pp. 154-155). The consequence of splitting and objectifying the body from the psyche may have a significant impact on a sense of self.

In addition, socioeconomic status and how it relates to a strong sense of self would be an important direction for future research. Often times, a lower socioeconomic status is an antecedent for fewer available resources, rendering feelings of powerlessness. Observing how socioeconomic status affects a young girls sense of self would further assist the practitioner’s awareness and thereby enable her in building a stronger therapeutic alliance with the client. In a qualitative study focused on the relationship between psychotherapy and social class Thompson, Cole, and Nitzarim (2012) interviewed twelve women and four men who identified as being from a low socioeconomic status. They found the prevalent issue was based on stress, and the anxiety of financial pressure. Also, the researchers found obstacles the clients faced when dealing with the social stigma related to a lower socioeconomic status. Thompson, Cole and Nitzarim (2012) stated, “We encourage clinicians to increase knowledge and awareness about social class as a specific cultural identity” (p. 218). Connecting the development of a sense of self with social class may better serve the practitioner to see a client through the same lens the client may see his or her self in society, and forming a

more complete picture of the issues he or she faces as a result of ethnicity, social class, and gender.

Moreover, further research focused on how a sense of self is viewed and valued in other cultures around the world would help to broaden our perspective, and also help psychologists who are seeing clients from various cultures and ethnic backgrounds better treat their clients. This study explored how young girls are socialized into western culture according to gender and how it affects their sense of self. Studying how other young women are socialized into different cultures may highlight significant areas of interest to shed light on the general overview of the psyche of the human female. Do certain cultures that are more interconnected value women more as opposed to a heavily individualistic society? For example, Triandis (1986) speaks about a culture of individualism versus collectivism and the differences of the individual that develops the self as a result of an individualist society, as opposed to the individual who is part of the collectivist society who develops more of the self in relation to the group. As important as it is to have a global perspective, it is also imperative to consider the various minority groups in North America; while women are considered a minority group in a male dominated society, it would be beneficial for further research to focus on how being a woman and identifying in an ethnic or cultural minority correlate with a sense of self.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion it appears to some a sense of self is known at an early age and affirmed later in life by others. The family unit seems to play a significant role in developing a sense of self, and parenting without biases seems to have a powerful impact on how young girls see themselves in comparison to young boys. Morality and ethics

appear to have substantial impact in developing and maintaining a strong sense of self. Further exploration on these topics may contribute to a young girl owning her power, strength, and her voice by having a strong sense of self.



## REFERENCES

- American Psychological Association, Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls. (2010). Report of the APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls. Retrieved from <http://www.apa.org/pi/women/programs/girls/report-full.pdf>
- Augustus-Horvath, C., & Tylka, T. (2009). A test and extension of objectification theory as it predicts disordered eating: Does women's age matter? *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 56*, 253-265.
- Bandura, A. (2001). Social cognitive theory of mass communication. *Media Psychology, 3*, 265-299.
- Bates, U., Denmark, F., Held, V., Helly, D., Hune, S., Lees, S., & et al. (Hunter College Women's Studies Collective). (2005). *Women's realities, women's choices: An introduction to women's studies*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Belenky, M. F., Clinchy, B. M., Goldberger, N. R., & Tarule, J. M. (1997). *Women's ways of knowing: The development of self, voice, and mind* (10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary ed.). New York: Basic Books.
- Bornmann, L., Mutz, R., & Daniel, H. (2007). Gender differences in grant peer review: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Informetrics 1*, 226-238. doi: 10.1016/j.joi.2007.03.001
- Bowen, J. (1985). *Family therapy in clinical practice*. New York: J. Aronson.
- Bowlby, J. (1982). *Attachment* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). New York: Basic Books.
- Damasio, A. (1999). *The feeling of what happens: Body and emotion in the making of consciousness*. New York: Harcourt Brace.
- Dawkins, R. (1989). *The selfish gene*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, (originally Published in 1979).
- Eagly, A. H., Wood, W., & Johannesen-Schimidt, M. C. (2004). Social role theory of sex differences and similarities: Implications for the partner preferences of women and men. In A. H. Eagly, & A. E. Beall, & R. J. Sternberg. *The psychology of gender* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed., pp. 269-295). New York: Guilford Press.
- Elisha, P. (2011). *The conscious body a psychoanalytic exploration of the body in therapy*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Erikson, E. H. (1980). *Identity and the life cycle*. New York: Norton.
- Fonagy, P. (2001). *Attachment theory and psychoanalysis*. New York: Other Press.

- Fonagy, P., Gergely, G., Jurist, E. L., & Target, M. (2002). *Affect regulation, mentalization and the development of the self*. New York: Other press.
- Fredrickson, B., & Roberts, T. (1997). Objectification theory toward understanding women's lived experiences and mental health risks. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, *21*, 173-206.
- Gilbert, R. M. (2006). *The eight concepts of Bowen theory*. Falls Church, VA: Leading Systems Press.
- Gilligan, C. (1982). *In a different voice: psychological theory and women's development*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Gilligan, C., & Richards, A. J. (2009). *The deepening darkness patriarchy, resistance, and democracy's future*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Goodin, S., Denburg, A., Murnen, S., & Smolak, L. (2011) "Putting on" sexiness: A content analysis of the presence of sexualizing characteristics in girls' clothing. *Sex Roles*, *65*, 1-12. doi: 10.1007/s11199-011-9966-8
- Grace, D. M., David, B. J., & Ryan, M. K. (2008). Investigating preschoolers' categorical thinking about gender through imitation, attention, and the use of self-categories. *Child Development*, *79*, 1928-1941.
- Levant, R., & Silverstein, L. B. (2005). Gender is neglected in both evidence based practices and treatment as usual. In J. Norcross, L. Beutler, & R. Levant (Eds.), *Evidence-based practices in mental health: Debate and dialogue on fundamental questions* (pp. 338-345). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Lorber, J. (1994). *Paradoxes of gender*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Maccoby, E. E. (1980). *Social development psychological growth and the parent-child relationship*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc.
- Maccoby, E. E. (1998). *The two sexes: growing up apart, coming together*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Maccoby, E. E. (2000). Perspectives on gender development. *International journal of behavioral development*, *24*, 398-406.
- Mahler, M. S., Pine, F., & Bergman, A. (2000). *The psychological birth of the human infant: Symbiosis and individuation*. New York: Basic Books.

- McFarland, M. B., & Petrie, T. A. (2012). Male body satisfaction: Factorial and construct validity of the Body Parts Satisfaction Scale for men. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 59*, 329-337. doi: 10.1037/a0026777
- Miller, J. B. (1986). *Toward a new psychology of women* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Boston: Beacon Press.
- Miller, P. H. (2002). *Theories of developmental psychology* (4<sup>th</sup> ed.). New York: Worth Publishers.
- Moustakas, C. (1994). *Phenomenological research methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Perlini, A., & Boychuk, T. (2006). Social influence, desirability and relationship investment: The effects of resourcefulness and sexual permissiveness. *Social Behavior and Personality: An International Journal, 34*, 593-602.
- Piaget, J., & Inhelder, B. (1969). *The psychology of the child*. New York: Basic Books.
- Santrock, J. W. (2006). *Life-span development* (10<sup>th</sup> ed.). New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Schore, A. N. (2003). *Affect regulation & the repair of the self*. New York: W.W. Norton.
- Siegel, D. J. (1999). *The developing mind: How relationships and the brain interact to shape who we are*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Thompson, M. N., Cole, O. D., & Nitzarim, R. S. (2012). Recognizing social class in the psychotherapy relationship: A grounded theory exploration of low-income clients. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 59*, 208-221
- Triandis, H. C. (1989). The self and social behavior in differing cultural contexts. *Psychological Review 96*, 506-520. doi: 10.1037//0033-295X.96.3.506
- U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2010, June). *Highlights of Women's Earnings in 2009*. Retrieved from <http://www.bls.gov/oco/ocos001.htm>
- Watson, J. S. (1979). Perception of contingency as a determinant of social responsiveness. In E. B. Thoman (Ed.), *Origins of the infant's social responsiveness* (pp. 33-64). New York: John Wiley & Sons
- Wolf, N. (2002). *The beauty myth: How images of female beauty are used against women*. New York: HarperCollins.

Winnicott, D. W. (1965). *The maturational processes and the facilitating environment: Studies in the theory of emotional development*. New York: International Universities Press, Inc.

Winnicott, D. W. (2002). *Winnicott on the child*. Cambridge, MA: Perseus Pub.

Wiseman, M. C., & Moradi, B. (2010). Body image and eating disorder symptoms on sexual minority men: A test and extension of objectification theory. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 57*, 154-166. doi: 10.1037/a0018937

## APPENDIX A

### Consent Form

Project Title: **The Origin of a Sense of Self in Women.**

Project Investigator: **Kimberly D. Robbins, M.S.**

Dissertation Chair: **Barbara Lipinski, Ph.D., J.D.**

Dear Participants:

My name is Kimberly Robbins and I am a doctoral student in Clinical Psychology at Antioch University in Santa Barbara, California. To fulfill the requirements for my degree, I am conducting research on the origin of a sense of self in women. Specifically, I am interested in your thoughts, feelings, perceptions, and memories of how you developed a strong sense of self.

The interview should last between 60 to 90 minutes. For the purpose of maintaining accurate information, the interview will be audio recorded. Your names, titles, and or professions will be altered to protect your identity. The information I will collect within the interview will be secured in a locked filing cabinet. I will be the only person with access to this information. Quotes and excerpts of the interview may be a part of the final research report, but under no circumstances will identifying information or names be included.

Your participation in this study is purely voluntary and you may withdraw at any time. If at any time you are uncomfortable with any of the questions please feel free to decline to answer the questions. There is no reward for participating in this study, and no penalty for withdrawing.

I sincerely appreciate your participation in this study. It is my hope that your participation in this study will contribute to empowering other women in developing a strong sense of self. If you are interested in participating in this study, or have any questions, please feel free to email me at [klyrobbins@yahoo.com](mailto:klyrobbins@yahoo.com) or call me at (818) 371-4382. Thank you very much for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Kimberly D. Robbins, M.S.

Clinical Psychology

**I have read the above letter addressed to participants and fully understand the intentions and purpose of this study. By signing this form, I allow the investigator to audio record the interview and acknowledge my willingness to participate in the study of a sense of self.**

**Please Print Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Signature:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

## **APPENDIX B**

### **Form B**

#### **THIS FORM IS TO BE COMPLETED BEFORE RESEARCH BEGINS**

#### **Ensuring Informed Consent of Participants in Research:**

#### **Questions to be answered by ASUSB Researchers**

**The following questions are included in the research proposal.**

- 1. Are your proposed participants capable of giving informed consent? Are the persons in your research population in a free choice situation?...or are they constrained by age or other factors that limit their capacity to choose? For example, are they adults, or students who might be beholden to the institution in which they are enrolled, or prisoners, or children, or mentally or emotionally disabled? How will they be recruited? Does the inducement to participate significantly reduce their ability to choose freely or not to participate?**

This study will explore how women develop a strong sense of self.

#### **Participants**

The participants in this research study are of legal age and will all sign an informed consent to participate in the study. The participants will be nominated by opinion leaders in the community and invited to participate in the study. The criteria for the women nominated will be emotional strength, competency, and the ability to maintain stable boundaries.

Once they are nominated they will be informed about the content and purpose of the study. If they agree to participate they will sign a release to be audio recorded for purposes of collecting data. The interview will take approximately one to one and half hours (see appendix D). The participants will be asked to fill out a demographic questionnaire (see appendix C).

**2. How are your participants to be involved in the study?**

The participants will be involved in the study by answering a series of questions and encouraged to tell their story about their knowledge of their sense of self throughout their lifetime.

**3. What are the potential risks – physical, psychological, social, legal, or other?**

**If you feel your participants will experience “no known risks” of any kind, indicate why you believe this to be so. If your methods do create potential risks, say why other methods you have considered were rejected in favor of the method chosen.**

The participants will not experience any known risks because all of their identifying information will be disguised. Names, titles professions etc. will be changed for purposes of anonymity. A written consent from the participants will be obtained. In the unlikely event that any unresolved emotional issues arise during the interview process, a list of therapists will be provided for the participant.



- 4. What procedures, including procedures to safeguard confidentiality, are you using to protect against or minimize potential risks, and how will you assess the effectiveness of those procedures?**

Confidentiality will be provided for the participants. The names of the participants will be changed and any identifying information will be altered, keeping as close to the actual content without disclosing identifiable information. Also all data will be kept securely in a locked filing cabinet.

- 5. Have you obtained (or will you obtain) consent from your participants in writing? (Attach a copy of the form.)**

Each participant will receive a letter regarding informed consent. This letter will explain in detail what is expected of them and how the interview will be conducted. (Please see Appendix A).

- 6. What are the benefits to society, and to your participants that will accrue from your investigation?**

The benefits from this investigation may be that it may help us understand how young women develop a strong sense of self. A strong sense of self will enable females to live a more fulfilling life unrestrained by external pressure and stereotyping in society. The benefits to the participants will be a personal benefit, which reinforces their strong sense of self.

**7. Do you judge that the benefits justify the risks in your proposed research?****Indicate why.**

I believe the benefits justify any risks, which may occur, this study in particular has minimum risks involved for the participants especially since they are of legal age and developmentally mature. The results of this research will hopefully reveal needed information, which could benefit women of all ages. Females at any age who might be struggling with low self-esteem, low self-confidence or harmful life circumstances could benefit from this information that could empower them, giving them a solid sense of self.

**Both the student and his/her department supervisor must sign this form and submit it before any research begins. Signatures indicate that, after considering the questions above, both student and supervisor believe that the conditions necessary for informed consent have been satisfied.**

**Date:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Signed:** \_\_\_\_\_  
Student

**Date:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Signed:** \_\_\_\_\_  
Department Supervisor

**APPENDIX C****Demographic Questionnaire**

1. What is your age?
  - under 55
  - 55-60
  - 61-65
  - over 65
  
2. What is your gender?
  - Female
  - Male
  
3. What is the highest level of education you have completed?
  - High School or Equivalent
  - Some College
  - Bachelor's Degree
  - Master's Degree
  - Doctoral Degree
  - Professional Degree (MD, JD, etc.)
  - Other \_\_\_\_\_
  
4. How would you classify yourself?
  - Asian/Pacific Islander
  - Arab
  - African American/Black
  - Caucasian/White
  - Hispanic
  - Latino
  - Multiracial
  - Would rather not say
  - Other \_\_\_\_\_
  
5. What is your current marital status?
  - Divorced
  - Living with another
  - Married
  - Remarried
  - Separated
  - Single
  - Widowed
  - Engaged
  - Would rather not say

6. What sexual orientation do you identify with?

- Gay
- Lesbian
- Bi-sexual
- Heterosexual
- Transgender
- Would rather not say
- Other \_\_\_\_\_

7. Do you have any children?

- None
- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4 or more
- Step-child or Step-children

8. What is your religious affiliation?

- Protestant Christian
- Roman Catholic
- Evangelical Christian
- Jewish
- Muslim
- Hindu
- Buddhist
- Other \_\_\_\_\_
- No religious affiliation

9. What was/is your employment status?

- Employed full time out of the home
- Employed full time in at home business
- Full time caregiver
- Unemployed
- Other \_\_\_\_\_

10. Have you ever had psychotherapy or counseling?

- yes
  - no
- If yes, was it helpful?       yes       no
- If yes, at what age or time periods did you receive counseling?
- \_\_\_\_\_

11. Do you have siblings?

- yes
- If yes, how many? \_\_\_\_\_

Where were you in birth order? \_\_\_\_\_

- no
- step-brothers and or step-sisters

12. What was your family structure growing up?

- Two-parent household
- Single parent household
- Female primary caregiver
- Male primary caregiver
- Other \_\_\_\_\_

13. Any pertinent information you would like to add?

---

---

## APPENDIX D

### Interview Questionnaire

1. Tell me how you developed a strong sense of self?
2. Lets talk about beauty and body image in women, how have those been a factor in your life?
3. How have you been able to maintain your personal boundaries? Or how have you been able to stay intact when you've gotten pressure from outside things or people?
4. What personal factors have contributed to your strength? (e.g. religion, education, work, and family)
5. We haven't talked about the relationships in your life, can you tell me more about how this has contributed to your sense of self? (What about childhood or early life?)
6. If you were giving advice to a young woman today who is struggling with developing a strong sense of self what advice would you give her?