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# A WOMEN'S TALKING CIRCLE:

# A NARRATIVE STUDY OF POSITIVE INTERGENERATIONAL COMMUNICATION

PAMELA FERRIS-OLSON

A DISSERTATION

Submitted to the Ph.D. in Leadership and Change Program

of Antioch University

in partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

April, 2013

This is to certify that the Dissertation entitled:

A WOMEN'S TALKING CIRCLE: A NARRATIVE STUDY OF POSITIVE INTERGENERATIONAL COMMUNICATION

prepared by

Pamela Ferris-Olson

is approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy in Leadership and Change

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**Abstract**

Narrative inquiry was used to understand how women's experiences with their mothers, grandmothers, and daughters and as mothers, grandmothers, and daughters contribute to their meaning making of communication and connectedness with unrelated women. A purposeful sample of nine women aged 31-69 from a small Midwestern city was studied. Six African American and three white women were chosen for their membership in a group that has regularly engaged in positive intergenerational communication for nearly two years. The women's narratives of personal communicative experiences within their families and with the other women were recorded and interpreted to gain a deeper understanding of how past experiences shape present communicative interactions and feelings of connectedness. Some of the findings validated previous research. Three concepts—sistership, play, and storytelling—distinguished the current study. These three emergent themes are noteworthy for their importance in building and maintaining connection and for the promotion of positive communication across generations and race. The electronic version of this dissertation is available in the open-access OhioLink ETD Center, www.ohiolink.edu/etd.

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# Chapter I: Introduction

Many American women in this early part of the 21st century find themselves feeling isolated from meaningful family relationships (Liebler & Sandefur, 2002) as a result of geographic separations from family and macrosocial forces that contribute to an increased probability of divorce, lowered fertility, and greater participation in the labor force (House, Umberson, & Landis, 1988). Today's often complex, blended family structures with their complicated responsibilities for the provision of support in combination with personal and work life pressures can have a detrimental impact on social relationships. Even women fitting the traditional portrait of a middle class housewife and mother can feel isolated by the demands on her time and energy needed to manage a home and family (Liebler & Sandefur, 2002). As a consequence of these and other factors, it is possible for a woman to experience fewer opportunities for camaraderie, shared wisdom, and support, and the concomitant sense of well-being her mother and grandmothers experienced from positive female interaction. This is particularly problematic because women "describe communication as the prime source of establishing relational identity" (Miller-Day, 2004, p. 10).

Intergenerational communication is an important link between the past, the present, and the future. The "rules and styles of communicating are often transmitted intergenerationally; thus it is imperative that research on family communication explores the relational and symbolic links to previous generations" (Miller-Day, 2004, p.14). A qualitative, longitudinal study of mothers, adult daughters, and grandmothers by Michelle Miller-Day (2004) demonstrated the importance of communication to the relational connections between mothers and daughters. It is "through mutually responsive communication that mothers and daughters establish patterns of relational communication that link them to one another, shaping each woman's sense of self" (Miller-Day,

p.10). Researchers such as Mary Field Belenky, who preceded Miller-Day, also were interested in relational communication; these researchers presented a "picture of different modes of knowing which has enhanced our understanding of women's special and different ways of knowing, in particular 'connected knowing.'" (Jordan, Kaplan, Miller, Stiver, & Surrey, 1991, p. 3). Titley and Chasey (1996) recognized the intersection of a woman's self with her communication with others. Her "self-identity is actively constituted and reconstituted in interpersonal communication (Jordan et al., 1991; Shotter & Gergen, 1989)" (Titley & Chasey, 1996, p.150).

This dissertation studied the narratives of women of different generations to gain a deeper understanding of how past communications with their mothers, grandmothers, and daughters inform their sense of connectedness and contribute to the meaning they derive in conversations with nonrelated women.

**The Origins of My Interest**

My personal and professional experiences kindled within me an interest in women's voices (i.e., self-expression) particularly in discovering what psychological and social factors empower the expression of self. Various issues throughout my life have limited my access to girl talk, but my desire to participate in such conversations has burned deeply. Fortunately, in my career as a freelance journalist I had many opportunities to talk to women about their lives and families. As a result of these experiences I envisioned, then undertook, a book project, a compilation of inspiring stories that I hoped would open a window into the lives of ordinary women, and demonstrate the commonalities between all women across ages and races. I interviewed three women for the book and was particularly moved by the narrative of one woman who, because she was unable to communicate openly with her mother, became entangled

in a series of events that interrupted the forward movement of her life. The woman's travails raised questions in my mind about mother-daughter relationships and the tensions that exist within families. I began to focus my attention on how such tensions inhibit conversations and the exchange of support across generations. The difficulties of the one woman led me to reflect on how women in general are served "through connection, that is, through the establishment of mutually empathic and mutually empowering relationships" (Surrey, 1991, p. 164), because as a woman contributes to the enhancement of another she also enhances her own self. Conversely, by separating one's self from another a woman undermines the other person and thereby reduces her own self and the collective interests of all women (Surrey, 1991). As my thinking has continued to develop I have become interested in how positive communication encourages mutual empowerment. I contend that positive communication has the power to mutually transform. It is a means by which women can learn about one another, share their accumulated wisdom, and lend support to one another. By using narrative inquiry in this study I was able to listen deeply to the stories of women's relational and communicative experiences with their mothers, grandmothers, and daughters, to gain a better understanding of how these experiences become context for and linkages to non-related others.

In the remainder of this chapter I explore some of the historical and intergenerational contexts in which female communication is rooted. I begin with an overview dating back to colonial times and discuss how women's lives have been intimately linked with family; I then progress forward to research that has investigated intergenerational communication within the family. It is within the family where women have their earliest experiences with negative communication; it is also where women learn the value of positive communication and its importance in establishing and maintaining relationship.

**Women's Need for Connection**

Since America's colonial times, women—indigenous, white, and nonwhite—have all struggled, though in different degree and kind, with the need for connection and mutual empowerment. Reliable accounts of the precolonial and colonial status of North American indigenous women in the literature are sparse (Klein & Ackerman, 1995). Klein and Ackerman (1995) surmised Euro-American ethnographers paid little attention to indigenous women, because the ethnographers assumed indigenous women's roles to be similar to those of women in European culture (i.e., ancillary to men). It is more likely the precolonial culture of the indigenous people of North American differed from that of the colonists. The diversity of indigenous cultures reflected the landscape and climate in which they were situated whereas the colonial culture typically echoed Christian church doctrine. The indigenous views of gender, power, and the intersection between them were affected by the interrelation of people with nature. Every individual was valued and recognized as an entity unto herself, and as an important contributor to the whole, similar to the poles of a teepee (Maltz & Archambault, 1995). Social relationships among the indigenous people did not demand that one person be "in any sense controlled by the other. Whereas autonomy in contemporary Western thought is equated with independence, in Native North American thought it is compatible with interdependence" (Maltz & Archambault, 1995, p. 247). Indigenous society changed under the influence of colonizers. Native women's roles were devalued and their lifestyles changed as the traditional ways were exchanged for those promoted by the Europeans who occupied the land in ever greater numbers. Jordan (1991) described the effect of European culture as having been to overemphasize "the agentic, individualistic, competitive, lonely qualities of human life; and women have suffered, as

their valuing of relationship, their immersion in caring and open need for connection have been denigrated" (p. 289).

In contrast, white women in colonial times were well versed in the lonely qualities of the human condition. Many of the earliest colonial women had crossed the Atlantic to reach their new homeland. In doing so they left behind their birth families, traditional culture, and sometimes their native language. Heyrman (n.d.) painted an uncomfortable picture of life in the Plymouth Colony where small-sized families due to the harsh demands of existence were forced to repress feelings of anger and frustration. Because of a lack of open communication an atmosphere of pent up hostility smoldered within the walls of every home. Between the 17th and mid-19th century this repression continued, though, increasingly, religious temperance was the cause; however, Heyrman (n.d.) suggested this repressive atmosphere was not the same across religious sects. The Pennsylvania Quaker communities were an example of more egalitarian practice where Quaker women were able to assume public roles. So, while not all colonial women were cloistered within the family home until they married, the isolation for some was extreme. One illustration of this occurred in Salem, Massachusetts during the 17th century where gatherings of women might be ascribed to witchcraft; the punishment was death (Matthews, n.d.). Geographic distances remained another recurring cause of isolation throughout the colonial and expansion eras as pioneers migrated westward. Some of these westward pioneers established homesteads consisting of large tracts of land which created yet another form of geographic isolation.

The aforementioned should not imply that, during the course of American history, women had no opportunities to gather together on a daily basis. They must have congregated regularly in places such as churches, town squares, and along roadsides to name a few. There

must have been time during these gatherings to talk; however, it seems unlikely that until women's lives underwent socioeconomic and educational improvements would they have time to do more than exchange pleasantries. Even when changes had occurred and there were opportunities for more thoughtful discourse some women still felt their lives impeded by the isolation of their overall existence. One notable example was Elizabeth Cady Stanton, a white, privileged housewife of the 19th and early 20th century. Although Stanton received a personal sense of agency through her involvement with the abolition and suffrage movements and her association with Susan B. Anthony, there were times when she found her daily life to be claustrophobic. Together the pair mobilized millions of American women to actively pursue their right to vote. The unmarried Anthony regularly traveled around the country making speeches and alliances while Stanton during her childbearing years had to stay home and serve as the wordsmith for the movement. During the years Stanton was home attending to her children's needs she often felt cut off from the world. Stanton wrote of this time: "I suffered with mental hunger, which, like an empty stomach, is very depressing. I had books, but no stimulating companionship" (Stanton & Blatch, 1922, p. 144). In her work with women therapist Judith Jordan (1991) gained insight into dilemmas such as Stanton's and the importance of relationships for women: "So much of our sense of ourselves takes shape in relational contexts. Feeling connected and in contact with another often allows us our most profound sense of personal meaning and reality" (p. 289).

While Stanton's generation worked hard for women's rights, among them the right for a woman to vote, to attend college, and to retain guardianship of her children and any property she should inherit, the pervasiveness of discriminatory laws and attitudes continued to affect women deep into the 20th century and beyond. Betty Friedan also belonged to a privileged class of white

women. Despite a significant enlargement of opportunities from Stanton's era Friedan's peers suffered a malaise borne from isolation. Many of Friedan' friends became suburban housewives after graduation in 1942 from Smith College. To commemorate their fifteen year reunion Friedan surveyed her classmates to see what they were doing and assess their satisfaction with their lives. What Friedan discovered was her classmates had lost their sense of agency along with their self-esteem. Friedan surmised that if these educated women were to overcome their feelings of disempowerment they would need a way to connect with one another. Friedan envisioned conscious-raising groups as a way to renew the women's sense of leadership and camaraderie (Trinidad & Normore, 2005). Friedan reasoned that through participation and sharing information the women would restore their self-worth, regain a sense of personal power, and energize one another (Rosener, 1990). In 1974 Barbara Bovee Polk, a professor of sociology at Wayne State University, wrote this about the transformational nature of shared experience:

> The most prevalent activity in the women's movement, therefore has been the small consciousness-raising or rap group in which women piece together an understanding of their oppression and challenge their assumptions about themselves, other women, and men. Within these groups, women find that their experiences, private fears, and self-doubts are not unique but common to many other women and related to social conditioning. (p. 423)

The conscious-raising groups provided a supportive environment where the women shared their feelings and lent support to one another. Unfortunately, as Ezekiel (2002) noted, there was "blindness to the homogeneity of the movement" (p. 248). The movement was predominantly guided by and geared to white women, women who had the time to attend meetings and had access to transportation. Intended or not, there were racial and socioeconomic barriers to participation. Exclusions came about to some degree because of a lack of experience on the part of organizers with the different needs of various groups of women. The omission, as Stephanie Coontz, Director of Research and Public Education for the Council on Contemporary

Families at Evergreen State College, observed meant white housewives were unaware that black women were already living the lives to which the white women aspired. The exclusion of women of color from the liberation movement insulated the movement from “the example of African-American women, who, in fact, [had] a long tradition of combining work, motherhood, social activism, and being wives” (Gross & Coontz, 2011).

The demographics of the United States have become a topic of increasing importance due to a shift towards a more racially diverse population, and with this shift an expectation that the normative view will change accordingly. At the present time, the norm remains balanced in favor of whiteness. It is ironic, however, that some white women have little or no awareness of their race. Edmonson Bell and Nkomo (2003) demonstrated this when they interviewed a group of white women who “expressed confusion, ambivalence, and frustration when asked what they cherished about being white…The white women, unlike the black women, made no mention of any connection to white foremothers, kin or otherwise” (Edmonson Bell & Nkomo, 2003, pp. 217-218). I wonder whether this lack of connection to racial identity represents a long-term, deep seated form of isolation which Pratt (1994) described as born of a powerlessness and “secured by omission, exclusion, or violence” (p. 252), and whether it has psychological implications for the development of mutually empowering relationships. Pratt, who grew up in Alabama, remained blind to her own whiteness until as an adult she realized through her race she had gained privilege. Pratt wondered if in the process of trying to free herself from the past social injustices brought about by her race she had undergone a change and experienced it as some type of loss.

The technological advancements of the 21st century have not eliminated issues of race and privilege, but the prevalence of digital technology and social media have erased geographical barriers, and provided new opportunities for women to connect. Despite these technological

advances, there are women who may still feel as isolated as ever. Fernback's (2007) assessment of social media was that it provides only the illusion of closeness, that online commitment is merely symbolic. "Even intimate online communication is still being mediated by the computer and by the fact that the communicators are most likely strangers. Both the joy and the oppressiveness of that computer-mediated intimacy are tempered by the lack of human contact" (p. 62).

Feelings of isolation may appear in many forms from the multiple demands on a woman who is a single head of household and works a full-time job in addition to her full-time responsibilities at home or on a woman who labors as a full-time caregiver for an elderly parent as well as serving as wife and mother. Anywhere women share space, whether at work in an office, as a volunteer in the community, or with other moms at a playground, they may feel isolation because they are uncomfortable sharing their feelings. This discomfort can have roots in many sources, for example, growing up in a household or culture that promoted independence and did not encourage sharing an emotional or personal concern or where sharing was equated with being needy, something the woman does not wish to appear (Fletcher, 1999).

**Intergenerational Communication**

Communication is an essential link to understanding the development and maintenance of relationships, and intergenerational communication, according to Williams and Nussbaum (2001), "both takes place within relationships and simultaneously defines relationship" (p. xii). A body of literature supports these and an additional proposition that the development of voice and relationship leads to an increased sense of well-being (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986; Jordan et al., 1991). By way of an example, in their review of research with adolescents

S. Jackson, Bijstra, Oostra, and Bosma (1998) wrote: “communication correlates significantly with well-being, self-esteem and aspects of coping” (p. 317). Incompatible goals, differences in relational expectations (J. Comstock & Buller, 1991), and cultural clashes result in conflict. Although conflict can lead to negative relational consequences (e.g., misunderstanding, frustration, dissatisfaction, and a loss of confidence) it is a normal part of intimate relationships (Drury, Catan, Dennison, & Brody, 1998) and should not be assumed to be unhealthy.

The family, as Jiménez (2008) described: “is a fundamental context not only for learning healthy behaviours but also for developing communication strategies” (p. 10). A child’s education about relationships and opportunity to practice skills as a communicator are typically learned at home. My personal experience as a child and adolescent was with a communication strategy Miller-Day (2004) characterized as a necessary convergence of meaning, a communicative effort undertaken to maintain the peace. Miller-Day’s theory describes a communication phenomenon that occurs when women in enmeshed maternal relationships, relationships with a high degree of connectedness and demands for consensus and loyalty, “defer to the higher-status woman in the family, overaccommodate the higher-status woman’s interpretation of events, and ultimately converge toward her interpretive frame for relational maintenance purposes” (p. 201). Tensions in these relationships typically arise from perceptions, both on the part of the speaker and the receiver, about the meaning of the messages being transmitted. From an early age, subtly at first and then with heightened vigilance, I was aware of the tensions and the barriers created by negative communication.

Linguist Deborah Tannen (2006) provides another explanation for communicative tensions. She characterizes communication as having two types of meaning: literal and implied. For example, a mother says to her daughter: “I don’t disagree with you.” The literal meaning is

as stated. The implied meaning or what Tannen refers to as the metamessage is known to the mother and open to interpretation by the daughter. The meaning the daughter gives to the message is based on past experience with her mother and this may trigger strong emotional reactions depending on the implications of the message (Tannen, 2006). Tensions become more pronounced as children become adolescents and more vocal about their independence.

Miscommunication and one possible outcome, the rejection of support, are not limited to interactions between adolescents and adults. The elderly struggle to demonstrate their right to retain independence (Morgan & Hummert, 2000). Children of the elderly who are parents of adolescents find themselves in a double bind, caught in an emotional tug of war between their children who demand independence and aging parents who deny their need for assistance. Control is not the only issue that causes tension across generations. There are also clashes of attitudes, values, and definitions of boundaries. All of these are likely to impact perceptions about the quality of conversations (Weigel & Weigle, 1993) and of the relationship between those who experience tensions. Various factors interact and make communication across age gaps complicated and sometimes tumultuous. These experiences are the foundations upon which preconceptions of and attitudes toward others are built, creating ageist stereotypes and predictable patterns of behavior. These patterns are perpetuated in daily interactions at school, in the workplace, and elsewhere (Garrett & Williams, 2005).

Much of the literature pertaining to communication processes, particularly across generations, has focused on negative, conflict-generating, or unsatisfactory conversation (Mirivel, 2012). Research on disruptive and generally negative communication has provided context and been the basis for cause and effect models which have led to a fuller understanding of how communication can undermine relationship. Drury et al. (1998) recommended a different

approach to the study of intergenerational communication. They proposed researchers investigate positive communication.

Although not focusing particularly on positive communication, Miller-Day was a pioneer with her research of communication between mothers, adult daughters, and grandmothers. Her eight-month, longitudinal study provided "a theoretical framework of relational transactions and meaning within enmeshed maternal relationships" (Miller-Day, 2004, p. 220). Although Miller-Day's theory described negative communication patterns rooted in enmeshed maternal relationships, her intergenerational study has relevance on a broader level because it demonstrated that not all cross generational communication follows negative patterns. Miller-Day's work added support to the view that communication is a primary way women establish relational identity. Mutually responsive communication links women "to one another, shaping each woman's sense of self" (Miller-Day, 2004, p.10).

Various branches of health and social science have studied and theorized about positive psychology, relationships, and their intersection. According to Fletcher (1999):

> Relational theorists would agree that individuals who feel understood, accepted, and appreciated are more likely to be accepting of others, leading to what Jean Baker Miller calls a spiraling dynamic of growth. The result can be the creation of trust, an enlarged sense of commitment to one another, and an increased willingness to see another person's point of view. Theories of the origin of self-esteem also suggest that these attributes contribute to feelings of self-worth. (p. 82)

Recognizing that established paradigms revolve around an individual's sense of self, Roberts and Creary (2012) propose a shift in focus to positive relational identities. Positive relational identities are "self-views that reflect the ability to derive positive value from and enhance interaction patterns within interpersonal relationships" (p. 91). In order to achieve this, Roberts and Creary suggest that scholars "consider the tactics for navigating the self that promote shared

growth, enhancement and empowerment" (p. 91). One tactic for promoting positive relationship, an increased sense of well-being, and strengthened ties between people from different backgrounds (e.g., culture, race, and age) is to use positive communication.

For real change to occur in the lives of women and across generations it is important for communication to encourage the sharing,

> Expanding, and reflecting on each other's experiences. Such interchanges lead to ways of knowing that enable individuals to enter into the social and intellectual life of their community. Without them, individuals remain isolated from others; and without tools for representing their experiences, people also remain isolated from the self. (Belenky et al., 1986, p. 26)

I do not believe it is unreasonable to stretch beyond the findings of Harter, Waters, Whitesell, and Kastelic (1998) and Belenky et al. (1986) to suggest that most people, regardless of age, react positively to and experience satisfaction when their opinions are listened to and given attention. In doing so a community is constructed between interactants. Because these latter statements are conjecture they are fertile ground for research.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to gain insight into how women's experiences with their mothers, grandmothers, and daughters and as mothers, grandmothers, and daughters and the meaning they make of them influence their communication and sense of connectedness with unrelated women. My research focused on the individual stories of women who regularly engage in informal intergenerational conversations. These women—predominantly women of color—ranged in age from their early thirties to nearly 70. They all belonged to a group known as a talking circle. Talking circles are rooted in the traditional practices of indigenous North Americans. The tradition has been adapted by others for use in a variety of contexts. Circle practice creates safe, non-hierarchical places where participants have equal opportunity to speak

without interruption. Baldwin and Linnea (2010) described a talking circle as: "*an energetic social container capable of helping a group draw on wellsprings of insight, information, and story that inspire collective wisdom and action*" (p. xvi).

The women's narratives spoke to their communicative experiences with and as mothers, grandmothers, and daughters. They provided insight into each woman's perception of her communicative experiences across generations and how these contributed to feelings of connectedness. They also contributed to an understanding of the meaning each woman made of her communicative interactions and relationship with unrelated women. Narrative inquiry was well-suited to this investigation of how the social world is embedded in women's stories and how they make sense of, resist, and transform their experiences. Narrative inquiry contributed to this study's primary areas of inquiry, areas that as yet have received little attention. These are:

1. How do women's interpretations of their experiences of intergenerational communication contribute to their sense of connectedness?

2. How do the communication experiences of women across generations promote an understanding and development of positive communication?

**Chapter Summary**

In this first chapter I began with a historical look at the link between communication and connection for American women. This background demonstrated women are well served by mutually empowering relationships. Positive communication provides women a way to share their experiences and lend support to one another, which is another way of defining mutually empowering relationships. With this as a backdrop I painted a broad outline of why this topic is of interest to me, and how this study expands areas of inquiry in the extant literature.

Chapter II presents a review of the literature related to intergenerational communication with a particular focus on identifying conditions for positive communication. The review spans multiple disciplines. The most prominent among them are health, communication, psychology, and other social sciences. It is an international perspective with the majority of studies conducted in the United States, but studies from Canada, The Netherlands, Spain, the United Kingdom, and New Zealand are also presented. Five necessary conditions for positive communication—satisfaction, competence, accommodation, low conflict, and openness—are discussed and a model based on the research is presented.

Chapter III outlines the history and use of narrative inquiry and establishes it as the appropriate method for this study of intergenerational communication. This section is followed with a description and justification for the study's methods (i.e., selection of participants, collection of data, and assessment of findings). The concluding section speaks to ethical considerations.

Chapter IV introduces the nine women who participated in the study. Each woman is introduced separately; her narrative is presented as a compilation of two storytelling sessions. This format provides the reader with an opportunity to hear each woman share intimately and authentically in her own voice and to listen carefully for the emergence of themes.

Chapter V examines the themes which emerged from the narratives. This examination covers the way in which themes emerged from the stories and the rationale for how the themes were combined into overarching main themes. The literature is interwoven to situate these findings into a larger context.

Chapter VI discusses the findings in relation to the questions posed in Chapter I. The primary focus of this research was intergenerational but it was important that race be kept in the

foreground because two-thirds of the participants were African American. Limitations in this research and potential avenues for future studies were also explored.

## Chapter II: Review of the Literature

Intergenerational communication is an area of increasing importance particularly because of the changing demographic profile of the United States. The U.S. Census Bureau projects that in 2030 more than 20 percent of Americans will be aged 65 and over (U. S. Census Bureau, 2010, p.10). Unfortunately, "research that is intergenerational and communicative has for the most part been scattered sporadically across a number of texts, outlets, and disciplines" (Williams & Nussbaum, 2001, p. xii). The earliest investigations of cross generational communication were focused on the elderly and how stereotypes affected them (Giles & Williams, 1994). More recently, researchers have assessed communication by and directed at young adults and adolescents (S. Jackson et al., 1998; Morgan & Hummert, 2000; Ng, Liu, Weatherall, & Loong, 1997), thus broadening our understanding of intergenerational dialog.

> Intergenerational relationships formed within the family are generally both positive and productive. Although the intergenerational communication that defines these familial relationships may at times seem to be quite destructive and marginalizing, for the most part, intergenerational communication within families is caring and life enhancing. Unfortunately, the same is not always true for intergenerational communication outside of the family. The vast majority of the research and theory dedicated to intergenerational communication … has concentrated on nonfamilial interactions and has consistently shown that intergenerational communication can be problematic. (Williams & Nussbaum, 2001, pp. 200-201)

Families are a natural setting for the study of cross generational relations, and it is from studying familial relationships that researchers and scholars have come to better understand the ways in which intergenerational communications develop. Miller-Day's (2004) research provided insight on how functional and dysfunctional processes are transmitted between generations. Other researchers (Carlson et al., 2004; Ennett, Bauman, Foshee, Pemberton, & Hicks, 2001; Miller-Day & Kam, 2010) have studied how communication within families has contributed to or reduced addictive and at-risk behavior in young adults. Outside of the family

context researchers of intergenerational communication have studied college students' perceptions of communication with the elderly (Garrett & Williams, 2005). Williams and Nussbaum (2001) cautioned ageism is a growing problem in our society, and the third great 'ism' in the United States behind racism and sexism. A fuller understanding of everyday communication between generations is necessary before issues inherent in ageism can be adequately addressed and used to promote more positive and constructive intergenerational dialog.

The delineation of age categories and the concomitant segregation of people by them is a socially-constructed phenomenon rooted in the 19th and 20th centuries. According to Williams and Nussbaum (2001), ageist constructs "have emerged from a complex of events including responses to socio-structural needs such as those of industrialization and the growth of social programs designed to protect more vulnerable members of society (e.g., the very young as well as the very old)" (pp. 29-30). As age categories have become more narrowly defined (e.g., toddler, 'tween, teen), there has been an increased inclination to attach stereotypic qualifiers, subjective characterizations limiting objective reality. Sociolinguists recognize that "language shapes the thought of its speakers" (Kay & Kempton, 1984, p. 66) or in even more personal terms Miller-Day (2004) wrote "talk does identity work" (p. 173). The English language is full of ageist (e.g., geezer, golden ager, punk) and emotionally laden (e.g. middle age crises, college girls gone wild, the rebellious teen years) descriptors which in conjunction with media-perpetuated imagery have contributed to the idea of a "generation gap." Recent research has shown that perception of problematic interactions between those categorized as young and those as old are not limited solely to the West. In their studies of Thailand, Japan, and the United

States McCann, Ota, Giles, and Caraker (2003) found “that beliefs about intergenerational communication discord abound internationally” (p. 86).

The challenge should not be simply to identify sources of miscommunication and misunderstanding, it should include studies of positive communication and the development of theories of positive communication in order to promote meaningful and satisfying dialog between generations. Given this vast and generally unsettled generational landscape, positive communication offers the possibility of a bridge across the intergenerational divide, and a study of communicative experiences of women across generations within family and with nonrelated women would contribute to a better understanding of how to promote positive communication.

**What Is Positive Intergenerational Communication?**

An extensive literature search was undertaken to review extant research and theories of intergenerational communication. Much of the literature pertaining to communication processes appeared to be directed toward understanding negative, conflict-generating, or unsatisfying conversation. Drury et al. (1998), for example, surveyed adolescents to ascertain what they identified as negative communication and under what circumstances such communication typically took place. In their conclusion, Drury et al. (1998) proposed that researchers assess peer-to-peer conversations in order to identify what features of communication young people find “meaningful and salient” (p. 194). This suggestion provided a frame for the study of positive communication.

Although most people have an intuitive sense of what positive communication is, scholarship requires something more substantial. In particular, it requires that a definition be given so a common understanding is possible. The literature provides numerous conditions as requisites for or outcomes of positive communication. Among the most common are satisfaction,

competence, accommodation, low conflict, and openness; however, it is insufficient to present a list of terms as a means of defining positive communication. One reason is that each constituent must also be defined. More importantly, these definitions are singularly or as a list no more than a "sterile portrait stripped of many of the complexities we often experience in our relationships—their paradoxes, inconsistencies, and contradictions" (Baxter, 1988, p. 257). Furthermore, four of these (i.e., competence, accommodation, low conflict, and open communication) are themselves constituents of satisfaction, and it is debatable whether any one of them on its own is sufficient for a completely satisfactory experience. However, it is necessary to recognize each of these components in order to have a fuller comprehension of what positive communication is.

**Satisfaction.** Hecht (1978) was interested in the role of communication as a facilitator of relationship. He observed, based on a study of Midwestern college students, "that concerns for substance and openness transcend the specifics of the conversation and are general dimensions of the satisfaction response" (p. 262). He concluded "one's own and other's predispositions and disclosure are important determinants of satisfaction" (Hecht, 1978, p. 263). Satisfaction is important in the promotion of intergenerational understanding (Williams, 1996a); however, the constituents of communication satisfaction vary across generations as a result of different life experiences. In their survey of adults aged 20-59, Garrett and Williams (2005) found that noncommunication and self-promotion, two behaviors previously under investigated, may be core properties in satisfying communication for adolescents. These same attributes did not appear to contribute to elder interlocutor's satisfaction. Garrett and Williams (2005) concluded "these are interesting findings, and suggest that properties associated with satisfying communication may vary across the lifespan" (p. 45).

Giles and Williams (1994) found satisfaction to be reduced in intergenerational conversations when younger participants perceived an older person as being underaccommodative in their behavior. "Under- or overaccommodation (under- or overattuning) occurs when one participant or other deems the interactional strategies of his or her partner to have been under- or overplayed (Williams, 1996b). Inattentive, disinterested, and interrupting behaviors are examples of underaccommodative strategies. Drury et al. (1998) suggested parents would have more success in conversations with their children if, instead of spending a lot of time explaining their own positions, they listened, and tried to understand the other's point of view. S. Jackson et al. (1998) suspected parents and their children would experience more satisfaction in situations "where adolescents feel that they can communicate their point of view to their parents and that their parents express the reasons for their parenting approach" (p. 319). Thus, listening has been shown to be a key element in satisfactory intergenerational communication, and credited with a number of positive outcomes (e.g., increased self-esteem and willingness to engage in continued interaction).

Satisfactory communication has the potential to be transformational. B. Jackson and Parry (2010) described discursive transformation as "careful listening, careful transmitting, and open communication" (p. 84). D. Comstock et al. (2008) theorized that the identification and deconstruction of obstacles to mutuality leads to "mutually empathic, growth-fostering relationships" (p. 279). This definition for relational transformation is similarly descriptive of the transformation that accompanies the identification and destruction of obstacles to satisfactory communication. In this same vein, Baxter (2004) wrote, "selves and relationships are constituted in communication" (p. 109). The mutuality of communicative relationship is transformational because partners expose "each other to different perspectives, interests, and approaches thereby

helping one another's selves to become" (p. 111). Miller-Day (2004) characterized communication as a "vehicle of social definition; participants develop their senses of self, partners develop their senses of relationship" (p. 173). Whether consciously recognized or not "all verbal and nonverbal behavior (including silence) either directly or indirectly comments on the nature of the relationship between interactants" (Miller-Day, 2004, p. 173). The transformative growth of self through the awareness of another is not, however, a given. It requires interlocutors to share a common meaning during an exchange and the competence to react appropriately, otherwise the satisfactory nature of the outcome is doubtful.

**Competence.** Escandell-Vidal (1996), in her exploration of politeness, illustrated the pitfalls of communication when interlocutors do not share meaning and in doing so she demonstrated that politeness is not a universal concept but a social construction. What may be a neutral exchange in one context may elicit a strong emotional response in another. Competent communication requires each participant to be aware of the other's perspectives. Escandell-Vidal exemplified this point with a scenario in which a speaker asks: "Can you pass the salt?" This request might seem innocuous enough to an American, and the expected response would be the presentation of a salt shaker: a straightforward response to a straightforward request. Escandell-Vidal, however, reported the case would be different if the request were made to a Russian. Escandell-Vidal explained that interrogatives made in Slavic languages are received, not as polite requests, but as genuine questions. The Russian would find the request "Can you pass the salt?" odd, because it should be evident,

> They *can* pass the salt, and hence are unable to work out what the intended meaning could be. For other cultures, the same example would receive a more straightforward, but again wrong, interpretation. For example, if you use it while speaking to a Thai partner, you would obtain the opposite effect: s/he will immediately understand that you are overtly casting some doubts on her/his ability to do something, and will become very angry. (p. 631)

Frames of meaning vary across a host of cultural contexts including race, gender, and, as is relevant to intergenerational issues, life history. Williams and Nussbaum (2001) suggested that "many individuals belong to different developmental cultures and that some features of intergenerational communication can be likened to intercultural communication" (p. 7). The idea that language and culture are interrelated is not new. The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, named for anthropologists/linguists Edward Sapir and his student Benjamin Whorf, dates back to the first half of the 20th century. The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis suggests that the structure of a person's native language strongly influences their world-view, and as a consequence people who speak different languages are likely to interpret the world differently (Kay & Kempton, 1984).

Communication across generations, therefore, should take into account a person's life events. A reasonable question then is how to define a generation. In studies of human development ten years is commonly used to identify a cohort (Williams & Nussbaum, 2001). Experience rather than age may have more impact on a person's cultural frame. It is common in historical contexts, particularly in the last hundred years, to delineate time periods as eras. The online reference site Dictionary.com defines an era as: "a period of time marked by distinctive character, events, etc." (Retrieved 2/29/2012 from http://www.dictionary.reference.com/browse/Era). During the last century or so an era has become roughly equivalent to a ten year period (e.g., 1970-1979), definable by a decade's preference for clothing fashions, musical and dance styles, and other lifestyle trends. Twentieth-century eras have been designated with descriptors such as the Roaring Twenties (1920s), the Big Band Era (1940s), and Civil Rights Era (1960s). These names reference major events or trends of the times. The cultural trends of an era have the greatest impact on children and adolescents, those who are in their most impressionable, formative years during the period. The

trends create a culture individuals later associate with, and with which they are associated. For example, today's middle-aged population, sometimes referred to as baby boomers, were teenagers during the 1960s and 1970s, a time period associated with activism (e.g., civil rights, women's rights, environmental protection, and antiwar protests). The young men and women during this time frame are often depicted with long hair, dressed in jeans and tie-dyed T-shirts or dashikis, and referred to as having led a free-spirited lifestyle. Members of this age cohort, however, are no more homogeneous than any other age cohort. Not everyone who grew up during an era associates with its stereotype. However, large scale events such as a world war are experiences that "can transform an age cohort into a generation, even if they do not affect every individual in the same way" (Garrett & Williams, 2005, p. 36). Whether such cultural perspectives can significantly affect attitudes and beliefs or whether they merely perpetuate the perception of difference, a competent communicator needs to be aware of age group experience. A lack of such context can contribute to misunderstandings, a situation likely to undermine the chance for positive communication.

Competent communicators are aware and empathetic. Competent communicators have the ability to successfully interact with others, and their personal satisfaction "is directly related to the level of interpersonal competence" (Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984, p. 12). Competence and an aptitude for achieving desired outcomes increases with experience and as a consequence so does satisfactory communication. The process is transformational for both the communicator and those with whom she engages in conversation.

**Accommodation.** Competence necessitates adjustments in communication be made to fit the context of a conversation. These adjustments are referred to as accommodation. Garrett and Williams (2005) observed: "we prefer our conversational partners to be accommodative rather

than nonaccommodative," but saying this does little to illuminate what is meant by accommodation. Accommodation, like satisfaction, is not a constant. McCann et al. (2003) use accommodation as a counterbalance to nonaccommodation. In their research, young adults described accommodative behavior in a number of ways including supportive, attentive, and respectful (p. 76), while nonaccommodative behaviors were described as being closed-minded, inattentive, and patronizing (p. 76). When communication partners are perceived as nonaccommodative the potential for conflict and negative feelings such as frustration, resentment, even anger, are more likely to occur. Elsewhere in the literature nonaccommodation has been subdivided into two types of behavior: overaccommodative and underaccommodative. These two behaviors are not cleanly definable as opposites; as a result comparison of concepts can get muddled. For example, Williams (1996a) studied the intra- and intergenerational perceptions of 94 Midwestern undergraduates using a conversational vignette between two women in a coffee shop. "The underaccommodative woman was characterized as being inattentive, nonlistening (e.g., she turns away to look out of the window having just asked a question), interrupting, more dominating, and less sensitive to the younger person's conversational needs" (p. 297). Overaccommodation is often characterized as patronizing behavior such as when someone "baby talks" to a senior citizen or speaks to a young adult in an over-protective way (e.g., It's cold, don't you think you should put on a sweater?). The distinction between overaccommodation and underaccommodation fades when, as Giles and Williams (1994) did in an earlier paper, patronizing talk was categorized by one of three behaviors: non-listening, disapproving/disrespect, or over-protective/parental. In this instance the line between the two types of nonaccommodative behavior and what constitutes them blurred. This example demonstrates the importance of defining from the onset what specific terms mean.

What is essential, if there is to be any possibility of satisfactory communication, is for negative aspects of the conversation to be ameliorated.

To enhance the chances for satisfactory communication, "we try to adjust to where we *believe* our partner is communicatively and psychologically. Inaccurate beliefs are likely to lead to over- or under-accommodation" (Garrett & Williams, 2005, p. 38). In their study of young, middle-aged, and older adults, Morgan and Hummert (2000) found age colored participants' perceptions of competence, control, and the positionality of the interlocutors. Adolescents, for example, reacted negatively to underaccommodative language, and interpreted patronizing speech as questioning their competence and their ability to live independently. The same has been found to be true for the elderly. Morgan and Hummert (2000) referred to this as the "communication predicament of aging" (p. 59). Any perception of power differential among interlocutors has the potential to decrease satisfaction, increase tension, and elevate the potential for conflict.

As previously mentioned in Garrett and Williams' (2005) study, noncommunication and self-promotion appeared to be associated with satisfaction in conversations among adolescents, but had no bearing on satisfaction in conversations with adults. This may be because adolescents as a group do not need to compete for access to communication. Young people have numerous outlets (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, YouTube) for self-expression. Some of these platforms for expression may be interpreted by persons unfamiliar with or not accepting of the social media culture as self-promoting and self-serving. Preferences aside, communication is far more accessible, faster, and widely dispersed than in any time prior to the arrival of social media and mobile communication devices. Social media has reduced the need for face-to-face interactions for those who are competent with and frequent users of digital technology and brief styles of

communication. Someone who is more comfortable with a direct style of communication may characterize brief exchanges as noncommunicative. Furthermore, they may feel disrespected and suggest the other lacks social etiquette. There is an expectation that communication progresses within a set of ‘rules,’ rules with which they are familiar but may not be clear to the other. Without an appreciation of the communication culture in which someone was educated or functions, it becomes possible to marginalize the other (Mindell, 2002). Modern technology is changing the cultural landscape of communication. The rapid changes require an awareness of the different communication norms in order to circumvent misunderstandings, unsatisfactory communication, and possibilities for conflict. “People may therefore find they must adapt their communication more often and in response to a greater number of communicative situations, media and people than in the past…today’s communication environment presents many unique challenges that make competence an important and highly relevant concern” (Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984, p. 13). This is even more likely to be the case nearly three decades after Spitzberg and Cupach’s article was published.

**Conflict.** The way conversational partners interact is integral to the quality of the communicative experience. For example, when adolescents perceive adults to be using a direct, controlling style of communication, they may interpret their competence as being called into question (Morgan & Hummert, 2000). This situation is ripe for conflict. Incompatible goals, differences in relational expectations (J. Comstock & Buller, 1991), and cultural clashes result in conflict; thus, it is important for anyone who wants to promote positive communication to be familiar with research that characterizes both the negative and the positive elements of discourse.

Beaumont and Wagner (2004) examined how different styles of conversation (e.g., high involvement versus high consideration) contributed to conflict. In their study of adolescent-

parent discourse Beaumont and Wagner discovered adolescents utilize a high involvement style of communication in contrast to their parents, particularly their mothers. A high-involvement style of speech is characterized by fast rate, “short pauses within and between speaking turns, and a lot of simultaneous speech. In contrast, the *high-considerateness style* consists of a relatively slower speech rate, longer pauses within and between speaking turns, and an avoidance of simultaneous speech” (Beaumont and Wagner, 2004, p.339). The researchers concluded that expressions of disgust positively predicted an adolescent’s level of relational conflict with their parent. They suggest that a parent’s and their adolescent’s conversational style clash, and, this difference in style contributes to the negative perceptions of relationship. Beaumont and Wagner (2004) also suggest that parents and children hold different viewpoints in regards to the purpose of discourse. Miller-Day (2004) observed that relationships exist in a state of flux, moving in and out of connection and disconnection. When someone perceives themselves marginalized it leads to “distorted expectations (relational images) of how others respond to them. These can be based on past experiences, and require more energy expenditure and continuity of contact to overcome (i.e., build trust overcome stereotypes)” (D. Comstock et al., 2008, p. 283).

Differences in discursive style may be consciously undertaken as a way to distinguish oneself from another. This is referred to as divergence within the accommodation literature. “Discursive action draws upon the social fabric to fashion identities for the self and for others, which are used creatively as well as strategically to achieve interpersonal goals such as positive self-presentation, resisting negative categorization, or other goals beyond the immediate situation” (Williams & Nussbaum, 2001, p. 146). Once the categorization of self is constructed, boundaries are drawn. Eckert (2003) observed that adolescents use language to set themselves apart by “the coining of lexical items, discourse markers, intonation patterns, and so forth”

(p. 115). Slang, Eckert asserted, is more than a lexical innovation, it is a discursive style adopted by adolescents to set themselves off from adults. Such demarcations require interlocutors from different generations to invest energy to avoid conflict.

The way conflict is managed affects the development of relationship. When adolescents reported more bad communication experiences with their mothers compared to fathers Morgan and Hummert (2000) speculated this perception could be attributed to the more continuous nature of communication between adolescents and their mothers. Drury et al. (1998), however, noted "that adolescents of all ages report significantly more positive *general* attitudes to communication with mothers than with fathers" (p. 191). So conflict is not sufficient, in and of itself, to lead to an overall negative communication experience and, while boundaries may have limited the likelihood for positive communication, the potential for an open exchange of ideas is still possible.

**Openness.** Openness has been characterized by intentionality to control discourse, appropriateness of language used, and approachability. Baxter (2004) provided a utile definition of openness: "being open *to* another person, one is willing to listen to him or her from that person's perspective, to display receptivity to what that person has to say, to be open to change in one's own beliefs and attitudes" (p. 111). In Greenglass's (1971) comparative study of native-born Canadian mother-daughter dyads with native-born Italian mothers and their Canadian-born children she found Italian mothers "communicated less with their children and employed fewer justifications based on concrete appeals than did Canadian mothers…the data suggest that Italian mothers, when compared with Canadian mothers, expected obedience simply by virtue of occupying the status of mother" (p. 689). The Italian mothers in this study exerted more control on and were less available for open communicative exchange with their children. A more recent

study by Jiménez (2008) reported “consensus in the literature: that both boys and girls communicate more frequently with their mothers” (p. 2). Jiménez observed that mothers “are perceived as more open, understanding and interested in adolescents’ affairs, and tend to more frequently initiate communicative exchanges with their children” (p. 3). S. Jackson et al.’s (1998) study of adolescents aged 13 to15 in the Netherlands concluded that open communication has positive outcomes (e.g., self-esteem, well-being, and general satisfaction) for adolescents. These studies indicate that adolescents value openness, and that openness contributes to a positive communicative experience.

**Positive Intergenerational Communication**

The literature on communication and relationship is vast, spanning many decades and multiple disciplines, yet Burleson, Metts, and Kirch (2000) lamented the lack of an articulated “broad theoretical framework that organizes and integrates the literature on communication in close relationships” (p. 245). If the purpose of any good communication research is to improve the lives of participants, as Allen (2011) suggested, then the overarching purpose of a body of work is well used if it assists in the development of ways to improve communication and, in terms of intergenerational research, across generations. A multiplicity of interacting factors makes the job of describing intergenerational communication a complex one, but, as Williams and Nussbaum (2001) observed, this is the function of theories.

> They [theories] help us to organize a wide variety of variables—both relationships and experiences—into an integrative whole. They provide the potential to extend knowledge as when two or more theoretical conceptions are combined to produce new predictions and hypotheses or when underlying theoretical understandings are challenged by new knowledge. In this way, then, theory should both stimulate and provide an organizing framework for future research. (p.4)

The literature is filled with theoretical models of communication. Many of these models are narrow in scope, and skewed toward the explanation of dysfunction. There are numerous

reasons why disruptive and generally negative communication has been the focus of research and subsequent models. Such models provide context and cause and effect for the constituents of communication that undermine relationship. Miller-Day (2004), for example, observed both functional and dysfunctional communication in her intergenerational study of mothers, adult daughters, and grandmothers. What emerged from her research was a grounded theory on enmeshed maternal relationships; these relationships have a high degree of connectedness and demands for consensus and loyalty. Miller-Day's Necessary Convergence of Meaning Theory describes "periods of symbolic transaction, [that] privileged the interpretative frame of the higher-status women in the relationship, impeded meaning coordination, and promoted the lower-status woman's submission to the higher-status woman's symbol interpretation and assignment of meaning in communication interaction" (p. 204). Around the same time as Miller-Day's work, Morgan and Hummert (2000) investigated the perceptions of control in mother-daughter dyads, and concluded that their study of communication within the aging family was only preliminary because none of the strategies they investigated guaranteed a pleasant interaction.

**A model of positive intergenerational communication.** The aforementioned body of research was the impetus for identifying the most cogent elements of intergenerational communication, and using them to construct my own model of positive intergenerational communication (see Figure 2.1). This model was designed to enhance an understanding of the dynamic factors at work in positive communication as well as encourage researchers and practitioners to focus attention on new paradigms of intergenerational communication.

Two elements contained in the model shown in Figure 2.1 were not discussed in the previous section: boundary management and safe places for communicative encounters. Both are

directly related to the psychological sense of security, a construct developed by Edmondson (1999) for organizational teams. Psychological safety refers to an environment in which a person believes that well-intentioned interpersonal risks will not be punished. Boundaries are created to demark areas of psychological, topical, and relational safety. Boundaries during communication undergo constant negotiation. The size of the area contained within the boundary depends on the context and content of the conversation, and assumptions held by the interlocutors. The circle in Figure 2.1 has a dynamic boundary that expands in situations such as when the other party in a

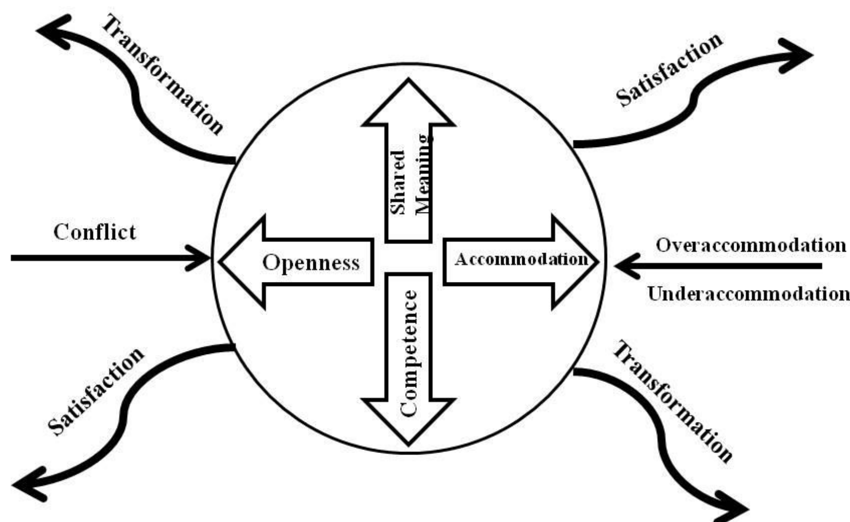


*Figure 2.1* Model of positive intergenerational communication

conversation is perceived as approachable (i.e., open). Other factors expanding the boundary of the circle are accommodation, competency, and low conflict as indicated by the arrows inside the circle. In these cases the positive forces pushing outward are greater than the negative ones that act to contract the circle's size. Impediments to communication are high levels of conflict or nonaccommodative behaviors, behaviors that are patronizing, inattentive, or stereotypic. These contract the boundaries in which positive communication is likely to occur. Faraj and Yan (2009) refer to this process as buffering. It is an action that is "undertaken either in response to or in

anticipation of disruptive forces within the environment" (p. 606). Edmondson and Faraj and Yan's work focused on group/team behaviors, and, thus, the application of these constructs to personal safety may not be directly transferrable. It also is important to mention, as Mindell (2002) noted, that not all conflict is counterproductive to the communicative experience. Conflict, in some cases, can result in process-oriented work that promotes healing (p. 4).

A safe place is typically required for positive communication to occur. D. Comstock et al. (2008) identified a safe space as a place that permits people to be authentic in the expression of their thoughts and feelings, fosters mutual empathy, and allows otherwise taboo issues to be named. In such a space, "everyone's experience is broadened and deepened because people are empathically attuned, emotionally responsive, authentically present and open to change" (p. 281). When these conditions are met communication is personally satisfying and transformational. Mindell (2002) acknowledged that such places can be challenging to establish, but when such a "container" is created it becomes a space where people can "go through complex, emotional territory" (p. 29).

Figure 2.1 represents the importance and balance of particular elements during the process of positive communication. The positive forces must outweigh the negative for interlocutors to gain wider access to positive communicative behavior. Such communication offers a satisfactory and potentially transformational experience. The elements labeled in Figure 2.1 are all subjective, so interlocutors may not share the same perceptions about the communicative experience (Barnes & Olson, 1985; Weigel & Weigel, 1993). For example, in Weigel and Weigel's (1993) study of intergenerational communication, the older generation reported more satisfaction with their communication experience than the younger generation. The younger perceived more problems and had lower satisfaction than their parents. Is it

possible, then, for any theoretical concept to be truly utile in practice? Certainly, as Williams and Nussbaum (2001) acknowledged, intergenerational communication "has rich potential for misunderstanding and miscommunication. This is particularly true when the chronological distance between interactants means that they lived through very different historical periods and may be operating with different communication assumptions, skills, needs, and experiences" (pp. ix-x). A decade ago when Williams and Nussbaum made their observations, they noted that the extant knowledge of intergenerational communication had not yet "uncovered the keys to successful multigenerational relationships within the family" (p. 198). Scholarship continues to unravel the complexities of intergenerational communications, and practitioners increasingly have found a growing need in multiple settings to bridge the generational communication gap.

One such group of practitioners supports the theory that context, or what Underwood (2007) has dubbed generational dynamics, is the key to addressing the generational problem. The premise of generational dynamics is that an individual's core values and beliefs are laid down until roughly the time of their graduation from high school. This chronology becomes the marker for the generational divide.

> Those people who share the same formative years' times and teachings will by and large share the same core values. *And by sharing the same core values, we will become a generation*, or what the intellectuals like to call an "age cohort" ...a new generation is created. (Underwood, 2007, p. 29)

Underwood, who admits his work has only been field tested in the United States, contends that if Americans understand each generation's unique core values the bulk of the intergenerational communication problem has been addressed. This contextual perspective suggests that if interlocutors know each other's history, culture, and life experiences they will understand where the other's meaning is situated and the opportunity for positive communication will be enhanced. However, there is also the possibility of unintended consequences that rather than easing barriers

to positive communication it reinforces them. One of these unintended consequences is the possibility of reinforcing stereotypes. It remains to be proven whether knowledge of intergenerational differences is sufficient on its own to significantly and sustainably improve communication.

Harter et al.'s (1998) study is an example of the importance of communication process. Harter et al. studied the relational context and communication among high school students. When adolescents perceived their opinions were not listened to or taken seriously they suppressed their true selves and disengaged from the situation. Before real change can take place an effort to improve the communication process must be made. There has to be a sharing, expanding, and reflecting of each other's experiences so individuals are not isolated from one another and from the self (Belenky et al., 1986). It does not seem unreasonable to extrapolate beyond the studies of adolescents by Harter et al. and Belenky et al. to suggest that most people, regardless of age, react positively and feel satisfaction if their opinions are listened to and taken seriously. By doing so a community is built between the interactants.

**Communication, Women, and Connection**

Communication serves an important role of connection for women. This connection is what House et al. (1988) call social support. Social support is "the positive, potentially health promoting or stress buffering, aspects of relationship" (p. 302). This field of study began in earnest in the 1970s with the work of two epidemiologists, John Cassel and Sidney Cobb. Cassel and Cobb reviewed the existing literature of the time. They observed that when the basic human need for relationship is fulfilled there is a corresponding sense of wellbeing, both physical and psychological. Their interest in the literature was situated in the times and the changing roles of women. Various societal shifts were taking place, including women's expanding role and

numbers in the workforce. Social scientists and health practitioners wondered what the consequences of these changes might be on the structure and function of the American family, particularly as they related to women's roles and health. How might women's well-being be affected "without the development of substitutes for the care and support roles women have traditionally assumed in families" (House et al., 1988, p. 313), and would a decrease in social support result in increased stress? A body of evidence accumulated demonstrating a direct relationship between social support and physical and mental health benefits (MacGeorge, Feng, Wilkum, & Doherty, 2012; Pugliesi & Shook, 1998; Thoits, 1995). Social support appeared to act as a buffer against "the damaging mental and physical health impacts of major life events and chronic strain" (Thoits, 1995, p. 64). Scholars from multiple disciplines recognized that the way people communicate with one another contributes to how well they deal with negativity in their lives. For example, psychologists believed that perceptions of the availability of support "arise from communication, either from recent supportive interactions, or in childhood, when we establish patterns of relating to others" (MacGeorge et al., 2012).

What still was lacking were an understanding of how social support accomplished these health benefits, and "detailed qualitative studies of age, race, and socioeconomic differences in preferred coping and support-giving strategies" (Thoits, 1995, p. 67) so a more thorough "examination of the interactional dynamics that shape judgments of perceived support" (p. 67) could be undertaken. Liebler and Sandefur (2002) studied whether there were gender differences in the exchange of social support. Their assessment of data on primarily white, middle-aged individuals was that women are more likely than men to give and receive emotional support, and that women's relationships depend on emotional closeness. What Liebler and Sandefur (2002)

could not ascertain was

> Whether giving and/or receiving social support has an impact on mental and physical well-being, and if so, is women's better health in middle and later ages in part due to greater involvement in giving and receiving social support. Further, can friends, neighbors, and co-workers as well as family members outside the immediate household provide the emotional and instrumental support for unmarried people that married people receive from the spouses? (p. 389)

Women are also more likely to play a prominent role in support. Hogan, Eggebeen, and Clogg (1993) speculated that women assume more active roles in social support because it is a lifelong investment. While some of their propositions, now decades old, are dated for today's working women, others still have a ring of truth:

> In the early adult years she is more likely to need assistance as a single parent and in her later years she is more likely to survive her spouse, living to a frail old age…it is important to remember that many American families—both black and white—lack the resources for a sustained exchange of support and, in fact, do not give or receive support. (Hogan et al., 1993, p. 1455)

The amount and characteristics of intergenerational support within families depend upon a variety of factors, including socioeconomic, cultural, and family structure. Limited economic resources, geographic distance, and dysfunction act to reduce social support, while intact families and cultural traditions of caring for the young and the elderly act to increase the likelihood of support. The changing work environment during the last half century also has resulted in a reduction of family members available to provide intergenerational social support. The number of women working has increased, leaving fewer at home to assist in childcare and elder care. An increase in the frequency and distance with which people must travel in order to find employment or commute to get to work has reduced proximity to extended family and the time available to be with them. Combined with a greater economic need for two family incomes or two-job workloads for a single wage earner and the demand of immediate family, the time and energy for the support of extended family members is reduced. Women who experience such

reductions in the availability of kin ties may be likely to seek social support from their network of coworkers and non-kin relationships (Pugliesi & Shook, 1998).

The literature presented in this chapter on communication, women, and connection seemed particularly appropriate in the autumn of 2012. At that time the media were filled with stories and commentary about the important role women were playing in the presidential election. It was, and remains, debatable whether this was primarily political pandering in order to generate votes or an earnest recognition of the value of women's voices in the democratic process. What eventually mattered was that when the 113th Congress began its session in January 2013 records had been broken in terms of the number of women seated in its chambers. There were 101 Congresswomen, and three of them, Democrats Elizabeth Warren, Tammy Baldwin, and Mazie Hirono, were the first female Senators to be elected in their states. With examples of new growth in leadership opportunities for women it is an appropriate time to conduct new research into the relationship between communication and the connections built between women. If women of different generations are to work together for their mutual benefit there is a need to understand how women make meaning of their conversations and how this meaning making leads to positive communication.

## Chapter III: Methodology

The purpose of this research is to study the connections between women across generations. The intention in designing this study was to use the narratives of women's experiences within their families to gain insight into the meaning making that occurs during intergenerational communication and how these experiences affect communication and the development of communications with nonrelated women. It was hoped the narratives would provide a clearer understanding of intergenerational communication and suggest ways to encourage positive exchanges across generations. Bljczyk, Lehan, McWey, Melson, and Kaufman (2011) argued in their qualitative study of mothers' and daughters' perceptions of their relationships "that exploring how mothers and their adult daughters evaluate and reframe their childhood experiences is the best way to understand how their relationship in adulthood is linked to earlier periods of their life courses" (p. 456). Clandinin and Connelly (2000) also reflected upon temporal connections in their work by moving "back and forth between the personal and the social, simultaneously thinking about the past, present, and future" (pp. 2-3). These researchers found the process allowed them to envision how the past affects the present and the present the future and how thoughts of the future affect the present both for the individual and the social milieus in which they are embedded.

### Narrative as Personal and Connection

Narrative is an important tool to understanding relationship. "Theorists believe that narrative is very useful, if not indispensable, when it comes to understanding and knowing the self (Sarbin, 1990). Since the self is not constructed individually but in collaboration with others, the narrative is the principal pathway to understanding the self" (Cooley, 2008, p. 22). Creswell (2007) elaborated further: "In the end, the narrative study tells the story of individuals unfolding

in a chronology of their experience, set within their personal, social, and ***historical context***, and including important themes in those lived experiences" (p. 57).

Humans, most likely, have always been storytellers. Stories are a way to make sense of the world and to pass knowledge between generations. Scientists are also storytellers. Scientists may use specialized methods for collecting and assessing their stories but they nonetheless endeavor to make sense of their observations. The scientific method is a highly formalized and formulaic way to construct knowledge. For a long time the scientific method was the dominant epistemology in the Western world for the evaluation of information. The scientific method has been generally accepted as a logical and objective way to measure a complex world and distill it into legitimate models. During the last fifty years this epistemology has been questioned by social scientists who have cast doubt on whether deductive methods reliant on quantitative data gathering techniques and statistical analysis are suitable for the study of human experience, particularly of marginalized populations. Allen (2011) wrote that feminists have "queried the 'male epistemological stance', challenging its ostensible objectivity while not recognizing 'its own perceptivity' or its subjection of the world it observes" (p. 25). A new method was needed to study women's experiences. The method "in contrast to the detached and analytically oriented approach to science" (Allen, 2011, p. 25) would be a holistic, integrated, and connected approach "crafted out of located social-historical-bodily experience" (Allen, 2011, p. 25). Anthropologist and author Clifford Geertz (1995) believed narrative inquiry was just such a method. Narrative inquiry, he wrote, could account for "the connectedness of things that seem to have happened: pieced-together patternings, after the fact" (p. 2).

> It calls for showing how particular events and unique occasions, an encounter here, a development there, can be woven together with a variety of facts and a battery of interpretations to provide a sense of how things go, have been going, and are likely to go. (Geertz, 1995, p. 3)

The connectedness in this study is located in women's narratives of their communicative experiences across generations within their own families and with unrelated women.

**Narrative Inquiry as Method**

I am interested in the lived experiences of women of different generations. I seek to understand how experiences of intergenerational communication within the family inform experiences with unrelated women. Since narrative inquiry can serve as practice and as method, it seemed fitting to choose narrative inquiry as my method for study. "Narration is a major way in which people make sense of experience, construct the self, and create and communicate meaning" (Chase, 2003, p. 79). Academic researcher and practicing psychotherapist Donald Polkinghorne described two types of narrative inquiry—descriptive and explanatory. My approach is explanatory in nature because my "interest is to account for the connection between events in a causal sense" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 16). I listened deeply and reflected globally to the stories the participants told to learn how they "as individuals and as groups make sense of their experiences and construct meanings and selves" (Chase, 2003, p. 80).

My intention was to examine women's experiences of intergenerational communication, their narratives of maternal communication as and with mothers, grandmothers, and daughters, in order to understand their communication and connectedness with unrelated women across different generations and potentially across race. Bodie (2012) has noted that previous:

> Research on family communication patterns (FCPs) suggests that communication within families and the values families place on communication help to explain the intergenerational transmission of communication attitudes, predispositions, and styles. That is, a primary reason that adult children manifest particular ways of relating communication with close relational partners (friends, romantic partners) is because of how they were taught to think about and value communication from their parents. (p. 118)

Researchers, such as Miller-Day (2004), Surrey (1991), and Taylor, Gilligan, and Sullivan (1995), who subscribe to the relational communication frame emphasize that for women communication is the lifeblood of relationships. Communication is the mechanism by which relationships are developed and the glue that holds them together. Another aspect of the relational communication frame is how it conveys meaning (i.e., how an individual's view of her relationship with another affects her interpretation of the other's message). Context also plays a role in the production of meaning because "personal narratives, no matter how unique and individual, are inevitably social in character" (Chase, 2003, p. 79).

Unlike positivist studies my work is not structured around a specific hypothesis, and as little research has yet to be undertaken in the area of positive intergenerational communication there are few upon which to build. Narrative inquiry is well-suited to new explorations. From narratives of women making meaning it is possible to craft theoretical foundations; however, it is important to remain mindful that women are not a homogenous group and that every woman is unique in her own right. Additionally as Bljczyk et al. (2011) recognized "the same theme may be verbalized quite differently by mothers and daughter" (p. 469). Scholars, therefore, need to be attentive and "avoid the search for a unified or coherent self or voice" (Creswell, 2007, p. 26). In narrative inquiry a researchers' role is to collect narratives without preconception and to validate their findings by asking participants what things mean to them (Angrosino, 2007) because they are "interested in the meanings people construct as they talk about their lives, as well as in the social contexts and resources that enable and constrain them" (Chase, 2003, p. 81).Therefore, the primary functions of the narratives are discovery, conceptualization of ideas, and observations with the possibility of the development of hypotheses (Wells, 2011).

**Participants.** A purposeful sample of women was sought in a location that made it feasible for the investigator to have regular interactions with them. Other important criteria were that the members of the group be of various ages and engage regularly in conversation. A group of women was identified who had participated for nearly two years in what is known as a talking circle. The practice of a talking circle is deeply rooted in the tradition of indigenous people. It has been adapted and utilized more widely in recent years. Talking circles establish safe, non-hierarchical places in which every participant has an equal opportunity to speak without interruption (Umbreit, 2003). The talking circle creates a place where participants are coequals and have the security to think and speak reflectively (Baldwin & Linnea, 2010, p. x). The talking circle, hereafter referred to as the Circle, selected for this research was an amenable group to work with because its members ranged in age from approximately 30 to 70, it had been active for nearly two years, and it had met monthly throughout this time frame. The Circle, therefore, had all the essential elements defined for this study of communication experiences of women across generations and was likely to facilitate an understanding of and contribute to the enhancement of positive communication.

It is important to note that I am a member of the Circle and have participated in the group's activities almost since its inception. My membership is in line with feminist research traditions in which "the goals are to establish collaborative and nonexploitative relationships, to place the researcher within the study so as to avoid objectification and to conduct research that is transformational" (Creswell, 2007, pp. 25-26). As a member of the Circle I have been able to reflect upon my own communicative experiences from both inside, as participant, and outside, as researcher, of the Circle.

The Circle has roughly 15 core members, women who regularly attend the monthly gatherings. The number of participants in this study was limited by the number who expressed a willingness to participate. Because, as previously stated, the primary function of this narrative inquiry was the discovery of meaning making of communicative experiences across generations, I hoped to collect stories from women born in different decades and to have at least two women for each decade, and for them to represent the diversity within the extended Circle. The composition of the Circle is predominately women of color. I am white. Nine women volunteered (see Table 3.1) to participate. Three are white, and each is representative of the youngest, middle, and oldest age categories. Two of the three are a biological mother and daughter; the only such pair in the Circle. Two African American women who participated in this study are loosely connected through marriage. The elder woman is married to the stepfather of the younger woman.

Table 3.1

*Participants*

| **Pseudonym** | **Age** | **Race** |
|---|---|---|
| Emerson | 31 | White |
| Tammy | 33 | African American |
| Penelope | 41 | African American |
| Katherine | 45 | White |
| Iman | 50 | African American |
| Miss Sis | 53 | African American |
| Claire | 63 | White |
| Brown Sugar | 63 | African American |
| Rose | 69 | African American |

In order to be mindful of their self-identification, the nine women were asked for a pseudonym of their own choosing and the six women of color were asked what racial descriptor they preferred. There were three different responses (i.e., African American, Black American, and

person of color). Of the four women who responded, two said African American. This identifier was chosen based only on this numerical majority. African American is used throughout to maintain consistency in the presentation of the stories and their interpretations.

The demographics of this purposeful sample are fortuitous. While my intent was not to look for racial differences, the composition of the group provides a means to do so *if* the narratives indicate variation in experience and/or meaning making.

**Interviewing.** I conducted a series of informal, audio-taped interviews with the women who voluntarily agreed to participate. The interviews typically lasted about an hour. As all the women in the study work or are actively involved in her community, and many have childrearing responsibilities, the interviews were conducted on a one-on-one basis to accommodate each woman's time constraints as well as to honor her individual story. Prior to the first interview (i.e., I [1]) each participant was presented with an Informed Consent form (Appendix A) that had been previously approved by Antioch University's Institutional Review Board as part of the Application for Ethics Review (Appendix B). No interview was conducted before a participant had read the consent form, asked any questions she might have about the process or the research, and signed the form. I endeavored to make certain that each woman knew her decision to take part in the study was completely voluntary, and if she decided to take part she was free to withdraw at any time. Once she signed the consent form, a participant was asked to fill out a brief demographic questionnaire (Appendix C). This form was designed to gather personal information that might be relevant to the study (i.e., current age, marital status, number of children living at home, and historical information related to the demographics of the household in which she was raised). Collecting these data in advance of the interview was done to save time and to focus the interview session specifically on the narrative.

I have had prior experience with the interview process as I worked for nearly two decades as a journalist and as an author before undertaking this study. However, as a mindful researcher I am cognizant that the journalistic style which I had used for my previous work was inappropriate in the context of this study. While interviewing in both contexts involves launching a topic for conversation and taping the proceedings, a distinct and formal distance is called for between a journalist and her interviewee. Of more consequence is the journalistic perspective that the stories collected during an interview belong to the journalist; a journalist gives meaning to the stories often without consulting the interviewee to confirm the accuracy of the interpretation. This prevents the interviewee from being a coauthor of her own story which is both the value of the narrative inquiry method and a means by which a researcher validates the meaning she gives to the stories she collects. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) cautioned researchers engaged in narrative inquiry to be aware that "The research-participant relationship is a tenuous one, always in the midst of being negotiated" (p. 72).

I followed Josselson and Lieblich's (2003) advice and wrote a detailed sequence of questions (Appendix D) prior to beginning the interviews. The guideline was discussed during the dissertation proposal process, so I had begun to think about and discuss the interviews with my dissertation committee long before the interview phase of the research began. The topics outlined in the guideline were not designed as questions to be used during the interview; instead, they were valuable as a frame for listening.

Prior to the first interview (I [1]) I conducted a trial interview. I selected to do the trial interview with the woman who served as the transcriptionist for this study. She is not affiliated with the Circle. The trial interview provided both of us an opportunity to familiarize ourselves with the interview phase of the research. It also gave me a chance to test my digital recording

equipment and build proficiency with the narrative inquiry interview. The transcript of the trial interview was shared with my dissertation chair Dr. Elizabeth Holloway. Dr. Holloway and I addressed several issues that arose during the trial interview and tried to imagine what other issues might be forthcoming during the actual research interviews.

I employed an unbounded approach to the interviews; the questions used in the interview were designed to invite a participant to tell a story. In the first interview I began with the question: “Tell me about a memorable conversation you had with a woman in your family. This conversation may have taken place with your mother, a grandmother, or a daughter.” The prompt allowed participants to choose what story they wished to tell and the way in which they wanted to tell it. A pseudonym selected by each participant was used during the interview. After each interview, I did as Chase (2003) suggested, I wrote a brief summary and included notable behaviors (e.g., sighs, shrugs, etc.) and events (e.g. dogs barking, doors slamming) that occurred during the recording. A separate recording disk was used for each interview. When the interview was completed the recording was given to the transcriptionist, and when she provided me with a transcript I reviewed it. This review process informed all the interviews that followed. Every future interview was guided by past interviews and provided new contexts for listening deeper.

The second interview (I [2]) with each participant was aimed at listening to stories about the communication and connectedness each woman has had with the unrelated women of the Circle. The second interview began with the prompt: “Tell me about a memorable conversation you either participated in or listened to in the Circle.” I conducted second interviews with all participants except one woman who was unavailable. All participants were asked to engage in an assessment phase. It was an opportunity for me to share my assessment of the woman’s meaning making with her and to get her input. This provided a means for me to validate my assessment

and each participant to co-author her story; both are well-established principles in narrative research:

> In narrative research, a key theme has been the turn toward the relationship between the researcher and the researched in which both parties learn and change in the encounter (Pinnear & Daynes, 2006). During the process, the parties negotiate the meaning of the stories, adding a validation check to the analysis (Creswell & Miller, 2000). (Creswell, 2007, p. 57)

It was hoped this back and forth refinement of ideas contributed to our mutual growth from the narrative experience.

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) cautioned all researchers to be mindful that interviews typically have an inequality about them, and that the imbalance of power is typically on the side of the interviewer. A different issue arises when an intimate, participatory relationship exists between the researcher and the participant. In this case even when the researcher begins "with the intention of conducting an interview, the interview often turns into a form of conversation" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 110). Clinchy (2003) offers practical advice to her students to assist them in navigating such challenges. She instructs students not to interject their personal views.

> Do not give your own opinion, but do express your understanding. For example, you can say, "I think I know what you mean," but not "I feel that way too." Do not reinforce or praise the person. On the other hand, *do* reassure the person and maintain the flow of talk by little interjections like "mmm-hmmmm," "yeah," "I see," and reflecting back the person's words. (p. 38)

Miller-Day described her approach to the collection of narrative accounts using taped interviews as a "phenomenological method of data collection (Langellier, 1988; Hycner, 1985). When approaching the narrative accounts from a phenomenological viewpoint the researcher is factored into the research process. The narrative interview is a joint search for understanding with the interviewer co-constitutive (Langellier, 1988)" (Miller, 1992, p. 5). During his field

work at the Bay Street School, Connelly had a participant express concern about the value of her response. The participant wanted to know if Connelly had gotten what he needed from her interview. She asked "was it okay." (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p.73). I present these examples to demonstrate that I am aware that other researchers have had to find ways to manage their dual roles as interviewer and participant. As a member of the Circle I am particularly mindful of my dual roles as participant and researcher.

**Assessment.** It is in the assessment phase that narrative moves from story to process. In this phase of the research I used thematic coding to understand how the women in the Circle make meaning of their experiences of maternal communication with their mothers, grandmothers, and daughters and as mothers, grandmothers, and daughters, and how these experiences contribute to the women's relationships and communication with unrelated women which in this case are the other women in the talking circle. The narrative inquiry process, as Ochberg (2003) described it, is for the researcher to respectfully listen to the narrative and while doing so listen with an underlying purpose (i.e., seek meaning that contributes to the research question). "Not only is an interpretation shaped by our 'fore-understanding' of what the text might mean it is also shaped by the use to which we anticipate putting it" (p. 115). Analysis to some degree then begins in the interview stage with the anticipation that certain information will come to light during the analysis stage.

While Ochberg (2003) suggested there is no "single, universally valid procedure" (p. 116) for reading narrative, Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, and Zilber (1998) presented two main dimensions for reading, interpreting, and analyzing life stories: holistic versus categorical and content versus form. The first of these dyadic dimensions refers to the unit of analysis, and the latter refers to whether narrative is interpreted in content or form (e.g., structure of the plot,

sequence of events, etc.). The unit of analysis in this dissertation is categorical and the interpretation is content driven in the form of themes. The analysis of the narrative involved unpacking the women's stories, identifying emergent themes related to how women and their experiences speak across generations, and retelling the stories using the themes, first person narrative, and interpretation grounded in psychosocial and communicational context. "The primary task of the analytic process is to decipher the meanings inherent in the material and to render them in a form consistent with the research question. *How* this is done is the art of this kind of work" (Josselson & Lieblich, 2003, p. 268).

The analytic process began when transcripts were coded and themes were outlined. Coding is used here to mean a process for identifying significant aspects of the story, and as a tool for establishing themes or patterns of meaning. Once the audiotape of an interview was transcribed, I reviewed it, added any nonlexicals to the transcript that occurred during the interview, and then shared the amended transcript with Carolyn Coles Benton who is also a student in Antioch's Leadership and Change doctoral program. Carolyn and I worked together on the trial interview transcript to develop a coding process. The process as it evolved was for us to independently identify codes and emerging themes before conferring on our discoveries. Carolyn has added tremendous value to this research not only because of her wealth of experience working with women across generations and socioeconomic levels in her professional roles in health care and college counseling, but also as a woman of color. She has enhanced this research by adding another lens with which to assess the narratives. This is extremely important given the diversity within the Circle. Carolyn's experience—professional and personal—and her point of view broadens this study's ability "to hear how the social world is embedded in individual's

stories" (Chase, 2003, p. 98) and "how individuals constantly use, make sense of, resist, or transform these cultural resources and constraints" (p. 98).

Carolyn and I engaged in an established interactive and iterative process of reading and rereading transcripts (e.g., Bljczyk et al., 2011; Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011; Erkut &Winds of Change Foundation, 2001). As we discussed them we created codes, brainstormed themes and clustered similar codes into themes. These were logged on to spreadsheets I developed using Excel to help keep track of the emergent themes. A spreadsheet was created for each of the nine participants and for each emergent theme. This made it possible to locate the exact position in each woman's transcript where the themes emerged. The spreadsheets made the process of accessing particular themes efficient.

As analysis and interpretation began in earnest it was valuable to return to the transcripts to revisit the appearance of themes, to look at the excerpts for each category, and think about the meaning of these for each of the participants. This afforded a chance to think about other ways to articulate the emerging patterns. It was a time to examine the themes across all interviews and organize the narratives around primary influences, and to identify direct quotes that illuminated the process of meaning making (Chase, 2003). It was also important to remain mindful that until all the stories had been gathered and read sufficiently "themes that seem predominant at the outset might well recede in importance or their role in the overall scheme might change as the work proceeds" (Josselson & Lieblich, 2003, p. 269). Lieblich et al. (1998) instructed researchers to read narratives several times until a pattern emerges. "Read or listen carefully, empathically, and with an open mind. Believe in your ability to detect the meaning of the text, and it will 'speak' to you" (p. 62).

At this early stage of research into positive intergenerational communication, I hoped to avoid the pitfall of over analysis of content. Too much analysis can lose the essence of a story and in the case of this research would raise questions about why a different method had not been selected. Furthermore, as this study breaks new ground, I contend a "freer, more descriptive manner" (Lieblich, 1998, p. 138) is required for analysis and by doing so the interpretation of the narrative "can reach more profound realms of understanding lives and experiences" (p. 139).

**Ethical considerations.** In any research that involves human participants there is always the potential for risks, obvious and unforeseen, that may result in harm. These range across a broad spectrum, including financial, social, physical, and emotional harm. As no invasive procedures (i.e., the application of electrical, mechanical or other devices on or substances into the bodies of participants) were used in this research, it was unlikely that participants would experience any physical harm. Less obvious risks, however, were possible though expected to be minimal. I tried to lessen the chance any occurred, and did my best to respect participants while collecting data (i.e., narratives). Additionally, I tried to act as any mindful investigator should. Such individuals are:

> Sensitive to power imbalances during all facets of the research process. They respect individual differences rather than employing the traditional aggregation of categories such as men and women, or Hispanics or African Americans. Ethical practices of the researchers recognize the importance of the subjectivity of their own lens, acknowledge the powerful position they have in the research, and admit that the participants or the co-construction of the account between the researchers and the participants are the true owners of the information collected. (Creswell, 2007, p. 24)

As a member of the Circle for nearly two years, I have a history of collaborative practice with the participants in this study. My continued commitment to these women made me particularly sensitive to ethical considerations; however, this is not to say misjudgments and mistakes may not have been made in the course of the research. Pseudonyms for both individual

members of the Circle and for the group as a whole were used to maintain privacy. As confidentiality is a keystone principle of the Circle, I have consciously tried to uphold it. Additionally, discussing my interpretations of each of the woman's stories with the storyteller not only provided validation for the investigator, it also provided each woman the opportunity to amend or remove anything she was uncomfortable with me using in this study. This same validation process was undertaken with Carolyn Coles Benton for similar reasons.

## Chapter IV: Their Stories

*"I will live in the Past, the Present, and the Future. The Spirits of all Three shall strive within me. I will not shut out the lessons that they teach."* Charles Dickens (1897, pp. 90-91)

Nine women were invited to tell two stories: one about a memorable conversation with a mother, grandmother, or daughter; the other about a memorable conversation that occurred in the Circle. The Circle refers to a talking circle to which the women belong. The practice of the talking circle creates a non-hierarchical space where every woman feels they have the ability to speak without interruption and the safety to share intimately of themselves. Some of the women's stories spoke to positive practice; others did not. Some were deeply emotional, others reflective. As might be expected given the relatively unbounded nature of the prompts the stories were as different as the women, but there also were commonalities and in a few instances the stories intersected. Both the differences and the similarities point to elements of conversational and relational practice that are foundations of positive communication and connection.

A benefit of narrative inquiry is that it moves the storyteller away from a conversational frame where "the quick pace of ordinary conversation requires that we often revert to cultural truisms or habitual responses" (Miczo, 2012, p. 81) and into a more reflective frame where memories are accessed and brought forth. Narrative inquiry presents space for intimate and authentic sharing. It, however, is important for an investigator to remain cognizant that recollections, particularly from childhood, are "primarily through the prism of adult reconstructions and integrations of the past" (Bljczyk et al., 2011, p. 473) and are an "interviewees' construction of reality as they see it" (Erkut & Winds of Change Foundation, 2001, p. 9). While a story is situated in the past the making of its meaning forms a bridge with the present and provides a glimpse into how the narrator is likely to interact with the future.

During the assessment phase of narrative inquiry an investigator must continuously alter her focus. She moves from an intimate perspective to a broader social one, from the storyteller's interpretation of self to their place within the social world. It is as if the story is placed under a dissecting microscope; as the investigator turns the microscope's knob she brings different levels of the story into focus.

This chapter introduces the nine women who participated in this study. Their stories permit the reader to feel as if she occupies a space on the edge of the Circle, to hear each woman in her own voice share intimately and authentically, and to listen for themes as they emerge. Although the memories told in these stories belong to the participants during the inquiry process, their meaning has become a co-construction of the tellers and the author's interpretive lens. As a mindful investigator I am aware of my responsibility to correctly characterize each teller's meaning making within my interpretation and to this end the co-authored stories have been shared with each participant to validate the co-construction.

The nine women's stories are presented in an order that contributes to the dissertation's primary questions (i.e., How do the communication experiences of women across generations promote an understanding and development of positive practice? How do women's interpretations of their experiences of intergenerational communication contribute to their sense of connectedness?). The order in which the stories are presented is by no means linear, but it does represent a range from positive communicative practice and strong connection towards negative communication and disconnection. These characterizations are not made as judgments of the women or their stories. These characterizations are only of the communication and relationships as they are described within the story. I begin with Emerson and Claire's stories. These two women are unusual in this study because they are the only biological mother and

daughter. Iman and Terry are connected through marriage only. Terry is the stepdaughter of Iman's husband; he was married to Terry's mother before his marriage to Iman. The fact that Emerson and Claire are biologically related is not the reason for presenting their stories first. One reason for this placement is that although they were interviewed independently, the women's stories intersect; they tell stories about each other and these corroborate the positive relational and communicational practices of the other. Their two stories also demonstrate both positive communication and strong connection between the mother and daughter.

**Emerson**

At 31 years old, Emerson is the youngest woman in the study. She is one of the three white participants. I arrive at Emerson's residence about fifteen minutes late for our first interview. I'm a little frazzled after being lost along country roads. A pile of discarded shoes greets me in the entryway when Emerson opens the door. The castaways represent practice; in Emerson's home it is customary to remove one's shoes before climbing the short staircase to the main floor. At the top of the stairs and once admitted through a gate installed to prevent an aged, blind house pet from having an accident Emerson offers a seat to me at a dining table. She also offers a seat on the sofa as an alternative. The space to the left of the staircase is open, made for living. The outer walls of the house in this area stand as the only architectural boundaries; even the kitchen in its present state has been stripped of its inner walls. The kitchen contains only the bare essentials: a refrigerator, a stove, a sink and a dishwasher which is at work when I arrive. I select to sit at the dining table. As I set up my digital recording equipment Emerson offers me a cup of coffee or hot tea. It is a friendly gesture that would help to ward off the chill of the October day, but I decline. I hope to avoid interrupting Emerson's interview for the purpose of visiting the bathroom.

As we settle into the high backed wooden chairs at the table the only sounds that register with me are a dog barking from behind a bedroom door and the steady murmur of the dishwasher. Emerson and I sit at arms' length. The small microphone is poised on its miniature spidery-legged tripod between us on the table. From my seat I can look out the living room window across the road to the yellow-brown remains of this year's crop of corn. It feels like a fine time to ask my question: Tell me about a memorable conversation you've had with a woman in your family. It could have been your mother, or one of your grandmothers, or your daughter.

Emerson replies: "*The conversation would be with my mother and honestly all conversations with my mother are significant and memorable*."

Although Emerson thinks she was 15 or 16 years old at the time of the conversation she recounts, her story, as it unfolded, is not described as a singular event. She paints more of a pattern of recurring yet infrequent *"melt down moments where all the weight that she* [Claire] *had been carrying for that year, all the juggling of things that had been going on for the year and it was just too much for her. She would allow herself to share it with me."*

During her storytelling Emerson uses the word "allow" on thirteen occasions. The majority refer to Claire (i.e., allow herself), the others relate to Emerson directly (i.e. allow myself) or in the more general case (i.e., allow oneself). Its use is demonstrative of Claire's desire to control her emotions and to her work as a mother (i.e., motherwork). The need to control her emotions will become clearer in the section on Claire's personal storytelling. It is there that Claire discusses the emotional constraints of her upbringing.

In her statements that Claire "allowed" herself to share Emerson implies that boundaries exist between herself and her mother. Natural boundaries exist in any mother-child relationship

and are created, in part, to protect a child from the burdens of the adult world and more specifically from their mother's world. Emerson recognizes these boundaries when she says:

> *My mother was a parent first. She was still conscious of me and always very loving, but she would also allow herself to be herself and to show me that part of her. This was very significant to me because many times we can go through pain and you wonder how much to burden other people with especially if it is your children.*

Emerson, like her mother, a university professor, is an educator. Emerson is conscious of the times her mother interjected *"very empowering thoughts or philosophy."* Emerson is familiar with the concept of motherwork; she may have learned it from Claire who believes among the many constructs motherwork shares with transformational leadership are the power to create thoughts and relationship, and, like transformational leaders, mothers mentor, teach, and nurture others. Emerson recognizes this leadership behavior in her mother. *"She was always uplifting me when she was down…She put me into the lead role in the midst of her own crises."*

As a transformational leader a mother may choose to teach her child by reducing the power differential and easing the boundaries that separate them. In Emerson's story the easing of boundaries is a chance for her mother to create relationship. Emerson sees Claire's decision to "*allow herself to share with me*" as a significant component in building their relationship (i.e., bonding). Claire allows herself to reveal her authentic self to Emerson, who views the act as "*empowering and uplifting…What was memorable about, as she still does, as she was processing she was allowing me to be a part of it."*

Emerson feels a connection because she is able to see her mother in a different way. Claire is no longer an idealized figure (i.e., *"My mother is everyone else's rock"*). Claire reveals something of her true self and allows her daughter to see her vulnerability. The easing of boundaries makes it possible for Emerson to approach Claire.

> *She would allow herself to be vulnerable and to share; we would work through it together. I know that during that time, I felt like she allowed me to give her input and to comfort her and I felt that and I was proud to be able to do that. Looking back, I am so glad that I had that opportunity to share that with my mother.*

Without asking Claire it is impossible to know if her behavior spoke to a feeling of safety in her daughter's presence sufficient enough to ease boundaries and place Emerson in a position of trust or whether the action simply represented a dimension of motherwork aimed at transforming her child into an adult. The behavior may have been both. Whatever the thought behind the behavior, the result is the two assumed a relationship less like mother and daughter and more like sisters. Claire has suspended her maternal power and allows Emerson to share in the work. Emerson feels: "*grateful that we could lean on one another and as I comforted her, she was doing the same with me and also walking herself through this process of problem solving where we would come up with a plan together."* Their mutual planning to solve Claire's problems demonstrates a change in leadership style from motherwork to participatory leadership. The mother and daughter have become a team cooperating to attain an objective. As Emerson recounts her story the mother-daughter team did more than brainstorm a solution—they also enacted it.

> *One plan we came up with was a chore chart. We came up with people in different times, doing their own dishes, and each person having their own set of dishes. We actually went out after this conversation and bought everyone their own different color dishes.*

Emerson uses the word sharing thirty times while telling her story. She uses it in two ways. One refers to Claire's sharing her emotional meltdowns.

> *That was part of our significant relationship and conversation with my mother. Conversations are always real even if we are on auto pilot. We know we can vent and share and be unedited, and I am sure she was edited with me somewhat in terms of age appropriate sharing; but when I think of conversations with her, I think of the time of her sharing herself with me and coming up with solutions and me being able to do the same with her.*

The other usage of sharing occurs between Emerson and her own eight-year-old daughter. This latter example demonstrates how deeply Emerson values sharing one's authentic self. Emerson makes a conscious effort to model the behavior for her own daughter (i.e., Claire's granddaughter).

> *So as I am raising my daughter I try to make sure to allow her to be a guide for me like I said it has to be age appropriate. Not that I put the weight of the world on her shoulders, but I share myself and very conscientiously try to recreate this sense of allowing myself to be real and to listening to her and valuing her thoughts and burdens, not just saying it, but doing it.*

For Emerson sharing one's authentic self is what builds connection, and that is something Emerson says she values highly. Emerson recounts an episode that she interprets as demonstrating how her own daughter is aware of and protective of her mother's emotions. The story as retold suggests that Emerson and her daughter share an emotional connection; they both try to protect one another. In this instance the two had been watching a movie about a mouse. At one point during the movie it is suggested that the mouse gets hurt. Emerson was concerned that her daughter would be upset by the turn of events. When Emerson asks her daughter how she feels, the girl replies that her mother need not worry. Her daughter assures Emerson that the mouse will be all right.

> *She was doing exactly what I did for her, and she knew that the little mouse got squished. She wasn't bothered by it. She was okay for some reason. She was more concerned about me and was trying very gently to comfort me and be there for me...even if it is not conscious my daughter understands the relationship that we have.*

Emerson values authentic sharing beyond the realm of family. Emerson briefly mentions how being able to share stories of life's conflicts (i.e., authentic self) is something she looks for in friendships. Talking about such things with friends is in Emerson's opinion done in a similar spirit to what she does with her mother. In response to my prompt at our second session Emerson

provides a fuller depiction of this. The prompt was: Tell me about a conversation in which you were involved with or that you overheard in the Circle. I'd like for you to describe for me why it was meaningful.

The story Emerson tells is about Brown Sugar, one of the other participants in this study. Emerson has a special bond with Brown Sugar, a woman who is the same age as Claire. The three women know one another, and have worked on several projects together. The connection Emerson shares with Brown Sugar has arisen from their working relationship. A mutual empowerment and what Emerson refers to as a healing process has grown from their connection.

Claire and Emerson have shared many of their deep conversations in the bedroom. It is not surprising that the work involved in sharing and creating connection requires a private place (i.e., safe). When Emerson recounts her conversation with Brown Sugar she says they talk "*off to the side*." The two create a space for their intimate conversation even in the midst of others. Within this space the pair enacted a call and response for authenticity.

> *We did our kind of typical: she gave me a hug and she said, "How are you really?"*
>
> *I said, "I am all right." I can't remember exactly, but it was something affirming a rough time. I said the same thing back to her and I gave her a hug and said, "And how are you?" It was very similar.*

The women create a special place where they can suspend their personal boundaries in order to share their struggles and offer support to one another. They require only brief action to initiate their authentic sharing.

> *We both understand the spirit of this, about healing. It being healing for you and to help others, and to connect others and to have this kind of reciprocal relationship where I am there for her and she is there for me…And she started telling me about a couple of things. Then I did the same to her.*

During this second interview Emerson states she doesn't *"share with a lot of people."* One prerequisite for sharing is that she must feel the other person wants to know about her. Emerson doesn't want to impose herself on other people. Emerson believes authentic sharing is both the glue that connects people and the ointment that heals them. *"When people share intimate details and share thinking and their struggles they connect, and then that is the connection, and that is the bond which has a healing mechanism in and of itself. You're not alone in the world."*

Emerson's practice combines elements of motherwork and sistership. It is this mix of relational practices that results in her personal feelings of empowerment and sense of well-being.

> *When we are able to step outside of ourselves and help another person, to say 'What do you need, and what can I do?' we then completely change. We put ourselves in the mode of that guide and as we guide someone else through their issues, and as we walk with them, and we do what we can. We're also being that person for our self and we are able to give. And as we become that person, it is exactly what we need at any moment.*

**Claire**

Claire is a full-time faculty member at a university in southwestern Ohio. She is one of the three women in the study who are 63 years old. Although she identifies herself as white she is strongly connected to her Native American as well as her Appalachian heritages. Claire is one of only two participants who are currently married. She has three children, but Emerson is her only daughter. Our first interview takes place on campus.

I park my car in the visitors' lot and make my way up a small hill toward the building where we are scheduled to meet. The school like so many others in the area has a long tradition memorialized in the assemblage of dignified brick buildings. I am one individual in a steady stream of humanity making my way along the ribbons of concrete that connect campus facilities. Any discomfort I feel either from the late autumn afternoon chill or from the unfamiliarity of

place is quickly dispelled when I find Claire. She gives me her customary greeting—a heartfelt hug. She leads me to a conference room; a massive but otherwise unremarkable wooden table occupies a majority of the space. Tall windows at one end of the room face out on the quad across which I have just walked. Claire and I sit next to each other at the end of the table closest to the windows. Claire faces the door with her back to the window. I am uncertain whether she has chosen this position intentionally in order to avoid distractions that often come from gazing out windows. It is clear she intends to give me her full attention. We chat about the upcoming holidays as I arrange the recording equipment, and then, just as I had with her daughter Emerson, I ask Claire to tell me about a memorable conversation she has had with a woman in her family.

Claire begins by telling me a story about Emerson; the story involves an interview Emerson conducted with her a year or so previous to the present. Claire is deeply moved by Emerson who after the interview tells her mother how much she has been influenced by her. It is likely Claire has authentically shared herself: her past struggles and probably her regrets. Claire has also probably admitted that there have *"been many times in my life which I felt that I had failed at everything."* In response to Claire's openness Emerson demonstrates how much she has learned from her mother. Emerson engages in motherwork; she nurtures and heals Claire with affectionate and supportive communication, and with touch. *"She put her arm around me and we were just sharing like two best friends*." It is a transformational moment for Claire. Emerson's speech not only acknowledges and confirms Claire as a good mother it also stirs within Claire a realization that she has positively influenced more than her daughter.

> *She started telling me how much I had influenced her in her life. I had influenced not just the person she had become but also how she approaches people, and her choice of her vocation in life, and her empathy and perspective which are very different from many of her friends...That was really an extraordinary moment for me. Because all of a sudden, I thought about that pebble in the pond, and how a lot of times when you do things you don't see the ripple effect*.

Claire has never forgotten this conversation with Emerson which has given her *"healing and peace."* In retelling the story Claire reflects on the generational transference of maternal behavior (i.e., motherwork); she recognizes a strong connection between Emerson's behavior and her own.

> *I am just making some connections here … I remember when my children were little. This strategy that my daughter uses now, actually, I used to use it on them … I remember when Emerson and her little brother were in this big, big fight. We were actually on our way to the movies and they were fighting and saying mean things to each other. I pulled off the side of the road and I pulled into a deserted parking lot. And I said "All right. You are saying very unkind things to each other."*
>
> *And I said, "We are going to talk this out, because I am not going to the movies with you guys doing this."*
>
> *So, I said to my son, "You told Emerson that you hate her. Tell her what made you feel like that? Why did you say that?"*
>
> *So he told her and I said, "Now Emerson how did you feel?"*
>
> *Emerson told her little brother how she felt.*
>
> *Then I said, "Ok, do you still feel like you hate your sister?"*
>
> *My son said, "No, I was really angry."*
>
> *"So, what you were feeling wasn't hating her. You were just angry with her."*
>
> *They were only really little, but I felt they were old enough to start learning how to identify what they were feeling and to be honest without saying mean things to each other. They ended up apologizing. I guess the point I am making is I actually used this strategy with my children, from the time they were very young, and I have watched Emerson use this strategy with her own daughter. But Emerson has greatly improved and expanded on that strategy I taught her.*

Claire provides an example of how Emerson uses this strategy. She describes this communication strategy as a series of questions that encourage Emerson's daughter to explore and *"then arrive at her own epiphanies or her own realizations."* The practice is used to

circumvent unkind, disrespectful, judgmental, or self-centered thinking, and arises from Claire's desire to redress bounded practices she had with her own mother.

> *My mother was very controlling and very autocratic; about how you were not allowed to disagree. You were not allowed to express anything that wasn't part of her dogma or whatever was right or wrong for her, good and bad for her, and that included your feelings. I thought if I ever had children that I was going to do two things: One I was going to teach them to think critically, to deconstruct everything ... Two is I also emphasized that people have a right to express their own feelings and in a correct way. I was very adamant that there is a right and wrong way to express your feelings and thoughts. We always emphasized being non-judgmental, not being the ideals of others, and being respectful. You can disagree but you have to have respect and allow others to express their thoughts and feelings.*

Similar to how Emerson characterizes Claire as "*everyone else's rock*" (see section on Emerson), Claire says of her daughter: "*she mothers everyone.*" Their mutual appreciation for each other's gift in this area is part of the glue that binds mother and daughter. Claire acknowledges that her daughter is:

> *One of the few people who knows how to come to me and say, "Mom, I know this is really hard for you, and I am here for you, and what do you need? Let's just talk." Even that whole affectionate thing of putting her arms around me or even coming to me when she needs a mother—that is part of our mothering each other.*

Claire remembers growing up mostly in the company of women who were "*nurturers.*" As Claire is a rock and Emerson is everyone's mother, Claire describes her own mother as someone who "*totally devoted herself to us.*" But unlike Claire's relationship with Emerson, there have always been impermeable boundaries between Claire and her mother. "*She was the matriarch. She was the one in control. She had the last say, and part of respect meant you were totally obedient... She still expects to tell me what to do and what to think, and respect means obedience.*" This boundary continues today even though Claire's elderly mother *"has become very vulnerable and very fragile."* Claire connects her mother's behavior to previous generations in her family, a family Claire characterizes as hard working, blue collar workers from

Appalachia. Her mother and grandmothers did not share their authentic selves with their children. Children were kept on the periphery and told to *"Go away, this is adult talk."* Instead of following this practice with her own children Claire elected to do the opposite. Claire wanted to be a role model and leave a different *"kind of legacy."*

Claire recounts a story that is demonstrative of the depth to which Claire and Emerson share their authentic selves, how this sharing contributes to the strength of their bond, and how transformational these experiences are for Claire. The story takes place a few days before Claire is to embark on a long trip. Claire is 49 years old, and Emerson is 18 years old. On the day the story occurs there is a rainstorm. Emerson asks her mother to go outside and play. Claire is reluctant but says Emerson *"literally drags me out of bed. She physically drags me downstairs."* The rain has accumulated in puddles; Emerson wants to undress and play in them. The idea of disrobing in front of her daughter is outside of Claire's comfort zone. She explains *"I had been raised in a very, very restricted, conservative Roman Catholic family and one of the big things was modesty. And, you never show your body to anybody."* Emerson's persistent call to play permeates her mother's psychological boundaries, leading the way for Claire to physically disrobe. Claire feels comfortable in revealing herself physically and in relating this story because she has constructed another kind of boundary when she says: *"I want to be very clear there was nobody around. There was no house around. Nobody could see us, because we were between two out buildings, and we were way out in the country."* What Claire experiences with Emerson on that rainy day enables her to reach a new level of authenticity within herself and to achieve a deeper sense of connection, like *best friends*, with her daughter. It is a truly transformational moment for Claire.

> *And when it was all over I think it was like I had crossed some kind of barrier. We all have psychological barriers that come from our childhood and mine had*

> *been I never ever went outside of the box. I never went outside of any protocol; there were very rigid protocols that were: right and wrong, good and bad, appropriate and inappropriate … When I took off my clothes and played in the rain, I felt like all my inhibitions were erased and that I had broken through some kind of being in a strait jacket, and I had ripped that strait jacket off to just be myself, to be the little girl that I was never allowed to be, to be the adolescent I was never allowed to be. So, my daughter did that for me.*

The value Claire places on authentic sharing is demonstrated again in a story she tells at our second meeting. In response to my prompt to tell me about a memorable conversation she's had in the Circle, Claire talks about a woman who is not a participant in this study. Claire and the woman work at the same institution, but they did not know each other well until they independently join the Circle. Claire finds herself becoming increasingly connected to the woman.

> *After we got into the faith circle, she would share things. It's the first time she really shared things about her life, and her beliefs, and philosophies, and last year when we were in the retreat she and I had alone time to share some very personal things about our lives. At that point I bonded very much with her.*

This connection has deepened. Recently, the woman revealed a secret. After receiving a diagnosis for a serious illness the woman confesses her vulnerability. She is concerned about losing her autonomy, but realizes she needs to ask for help. Claire is aware of the effort such a confession demands from the woman, and is touched by being within a circle of friends with whom the woman feels safe enough to share her authentic self. And, for Claire this is one of women's most valuable talents; it is their talent for motherwork.

> *There is something about women which is amazing—they nurture and they take care of and they embrace. And I notice that men come to women when they need that and women go to women when they need that for the most part. It is a reason why I am very close to women. It is because of that loving, nurturing, caring. It is like a bunch of mother hens that kind of make a circle around you or elephants that put a circle around the ones that need to be taken care of.*

Within the context of motherwork, Claire identifies another talent in which the women of her family excel. Claire may not recall authentic sharing taking place between the women and their children, but she does remember and place significance on the women's storytelling. She views storytelling as a legacy passed between one generation and another. Stories are an engaging and unrestrictive way for women to share their cultural traditions, their values, and their practices. Stories, rather than bounding the meaning and expected outcomes in the way directive statements do, allow those who hear them to interpret the meaning and choose if and how they will incorporate these into their own practice. The importance of storytelling to Claire is evidenced both in the stories she told during the interview process and by her placement of the following statement as the dénouement.

> *In terms of this whole generational mother-daughter thing ... I was always around my grandmothers and my mother ... I was around my aunts, grandmothers, and mother. And my grandmother and my mother were storytellers, phenomenal story tellers. And that is the way they preserved tradition and kept family history, but also taught values. And I think that I am a storyteller. And I think my daughter is a storyteller. And I think my granddaughter is a storyteller. It is a theme in our family; that if we want to make a point or teach a value or share something it is usually in the form of a story. I despise proselytizing. I despise evangelizing. I despise anybody who lectures to me and has that heavy-handed, "I am going to show you the light" approach. For me, it is much more effective if you want to share something of value to put it into a story. Let the receiver of the story co-create the meaning with you and make their own journey to whatever it is as that you're trying to share. Emerson got that storytelling from me and so did her daughter.*

**Miss Sis**

As I cross the threshold into Miss Sis' house I am embraced by a cozy warmth. It is hard to believe the thermometer outside registers less than 40 degrees. A space heater on the floor near the door and a fireplace at the far end of the room are doing their job, but they do not add nearly as much warmth to the space as Miss Sis's smile. Hers is bright and broad and nearly

always on display and may contribute to the 53-year-old African American's youthful appearance.

After Miss Sis takes my coat we settle in to the front room for our interview. She is a widow and we have the house to ourselves. Rather than sitting on the furniture, Miss Sis chooses a place on the floor. She rests her back against the sofa, her feet stretched out in front of her. The informality of our meeting is enhanced by the absence of her hijab. I follow Miss Sis's lead and sit on the floor facing her. Although Miss Sis has to go to work soon, she gives no appearance of being pressed for time. When I prompt her to tell a story about a memorable conversation she has had with a woman in her family the story unwinds from her effortlessly. It feels as if we are two friends with Miss Sis reminiscing about her daughter, a young woman for whom she has much affection. Occasionally she shares a glimpse of her deep love and admiration for her departed husband.

Communication is a key element in Miss Sis's story of her daughter. Miss Sis begins her storytelling by describing her daughter as *"a chatterbox;"* something she has been ever since a child. This quality has both its positive and negative aspects. On the positive side talkativeness denotes authentic sharing. The spontaneity of her daughter's talk is a characteristic that Miss Sis values in her daughter. This is indicated in a story about the daughter's realization why she liked a particular television show.

> *The girl in this series was very introspective ... the young lady in the story interrupts the plot of the storyline and narrates her feelings at any particular moment. Whatever the feelings were at that particular moment, the young lady would express them and her conversation just came out without any editing.*

Miss Sis's daughter realizes she is like the girl in the series. Miss Sis agrees and admits she has *"always been captivated by that"* aspect of her daughter's behavior. She also likes *"that in*

*myself and I know that is a natural part of my personality."* She values the trait in other people, too, because when people are open with her Miss Sis knows they care about her.

As much as Miss Sis enjoys the spontaneous, unedited talk of her daughter, she is less appreciative of the seeming disregard for conventions of polite behavior or a lack of awareness of other people's priorities. *"When it's just the two of us, often, my daughter will just start talking. She may think later and add, 'Oh, are you busy?' Which is often rare."* This lack of convention, however bothersome, is not an impediment to the mother-daughter communication because Miss Sis values their connection. *"Most of the time I will put aside whatever it is I am doing and engage in conversation with her."* Miss Sis does not relish constructing barriers between herself and her daughter, at least not now that they are both adults (the daughter is 30 years old). She prefers the conversation to be authentic and open and says her daughter is rarely *"embarrassed about the conversations that come up and I am even less embarrassed."* However, possibly because of the young woman's religious training, Miss Sis expects some order to their relationship: *"My daughter was raised in a religiously structured and caring home; she was raised to be a lady, and to respect and love her mother. Our bond is real strong."*

The strength of the mother-daughter bond and their authentic sharing has placed them in a relationship where they do motherwork for each other. *"She is not hesitant to point out my mistakes or flaws in reasoning, and as a result I am a better person … Likewise I do the same for her, but she is a little less accepting especially when it results in me siding with her husband"* (i.e., when Miss Sis takes the husband's side of a discussion).

Motherwork is not always done by women. Although the use of the word motherwork implies gender specificity the term was developed specifically with the work that mothers do in mind. However, as is the case with gendered notions, gender is socially-constructed and

stereotyped and not necessarily linked with sexual characteristics. It, therefore, is possible for men to do motherwork and made more probable when men shoulder the major responsibility for raising and nurturing their children. Miss Sis's husband is an example. He did such work making his wife both grateful and conflicted.

Around the time their daughter was 4 years old he took a major role in her care. What bothered Miss Sis about her reduced day-to-day responsibilities for her daughter were her sense of neglecting her motherwork duties and the fear of losing her special bond with the girl. This is poignantly expressed in her story about the little girl's hair. Miss Sis has been away on a business trip. When she returns home her husband announces:

> *"I can do everything for her now except her hair."*
>
> *He couldn't do her hair. I smiled and we went on with our evening, and later that night I cried, because he didn't know the impact of that statement ...The next time I went away he tried to do her hair. It was a mess. He had shampooed it and not knowing the ritual of shampooing her hair he didn't put any detangler on it. Her hair was like this* [Miss Sis uses her hands to show the messy hair].
>
> *I walked in and she says, "Mom, I really tried to stop him. I really tried to stop him, but he insisted that he could do my hair."*
>
> *She said when he finally realized that he couldn't do it, it was a mess, he just twisted it up and put a big ponytail clip on it and said, "Your mom will fix it later."* [Miss Sis laughs].
>
> *So that made me feel better. It's ridiculous, I know, but it was just a wonderful feeling to know that he couldn't do everything for her.*

Miss Sis's husband was a promoter of family togetherness (e.g., he insisted dinnertime be a family time). He was also a disciplinarian. As his daughter grew older he felt:

> *He needed to be more firm with her, because she was a young lady and we raised her to be a Muslim young lady. Raising a Muslim girl in a largely non-Muslim society places an additional level of stress on the whole notion of raising a family. For a Muslim teen-ager raised in North America, the lifestyle is often synonymous with limitations and expectations.*

This was the case for a few years between the husband and daughter. The love never ceased between them, but the boundaries grew and became a barrier to the father-daughter relationship. According to Miss Sis, time (i.e., years passing and maturation), listening, and dialog restored the parental connection.

> *She went away to high school and college, and I began to see their relationship mend as she went through college ... he began to listen to her more. They began to have more dialog as she went through college ... Not her freshman year, maybe in her sophomore and certainly in her junior year. That is when I noticed that he was really listening to her. This is when they had conversations rather than him lecturing and delivering a lesson on every occasion.*

Miss Sis reflects on two behaviors she believes promote positive dialog: patience and mindful practice. She noted that on occasional her husband waited before he spoke. He waited until Miss Sis was in a mood where she could address an issue without the emotional tension present in the immediacy of an event. He also encouraged mindful speech. Miss Sis gives as an example an incident where she had been frustrated with her daughter. She flippantly responds to her daughter's behavior by saying, *"I can't wait until you turn 18 and become and adult and you are on your own."* Miss Sis's husband reacts by asking his wife to recall how painful it was for her to have heard a similar comment from her own mother. Such mindful practice has been passed on to their daughter. Miss Sis proudly acknowledges this transference and tells me a story about an incident when an irresponsible brother-in-law becomes the topic of conversation during a family gathering. Miss Sis's daughter is aware of her uncle's shortcomings but thinks it wrong for the assembled family to denigrate the man. The daughter explains the source of her displeasure and then leaves the event. Such mindful practice, as Miss Sis points out, is part of her religion:

> *One of the teachings in the practice of my religion is that talk about someone in a negative manner when they are not present is a terrible, terrible deed. We call it back-biting, and discourage it by reminding each other that to do so is akin to*

> *eating the flesh of a person. A kinder way to remind someone of this is to say that "if you can't say something in a person's presence, then don't say it when they are not present."*

During our second interview Miss Sis talks about the value of speaking publicly about one's own problems. Miss Sis confesses that when the women of the Circle reveal their personal struggles she finds it *"powerful."* The emotions evoked by the women's authentic stories often result in Miss Sis drawing parallels with her own experiences. In one particular instance a woman discussed issues she had to navigate during her childhood *"I felt my heart hurt for her, but I felt empowered; I felt a sense of kinship with her in that she was a woman and I wanted to be strong like her."* This type of sharing, which is a form of storytelling, provides the women of the Circle with a means to connect and support one another, and serves to empower them through their connection. Miss Sis recognizes that the women, who differ in a variety of ways (e.g., race, socioeconomics, religion), share at least one powerful connection—their gender. "*I guess that is our purpose. In my youth, I may have even thought that this was a women's plight or dilemma. I know better now. We take care of others, including ourselves, and we do it well."*

There, indeed, is circularity in the stories of the past and the authentic sharing of the present among the women in the Circle. The kinship (i.e., connection) the women feel with each other crosses the generations within their families and within the Circle. For Miss Sis, one woman's sharing of her experiences, although different than her own, brought memories of Miss Sis's childhood and her mother's efforts to make ends meet. The memories were strong enough she was able to visualize her mother sitting on the sofa, hunched over, and trying to figure out how to stretch the few dollars she had earned to feed her family. Miss Sis's vision of her mother on the sofa *"literally making herself as small as possible"* reflects the pressures of motherwork. While her mother was unable to share "*those kinds of things with me"* (i.e., her burdens), the

Circle provides a place where Miss Sis and the women can step outside of the confines of their motherwork and engage in sistership (i.e., authentic sharing, supportive conversation, connection, and empowerment).

**Tammy**

It is late afternoon in December. Rain from a steely gray sky falls upon fallow fields. Tammy, who at age 33 is the youngest African American in the study, and I sit in a spare dormitory-style room. The white wooden building we occupy is situated on a rural campus a short walk from what once was a thriving railroad stop. I am uncertain of the campus' original purpose but now it is used primarily for educational and spiritual retreats. Tammy and I are here to attend the Circle's second annual retreat. Most of the other women have not arrived yet, so we are taking advantage of our early arrival to talk. Tammy is a busy single working mother; she and I are the only women in this study who do not have a daughter. She and I have previously decided this would be a convenient time to schedule our session.

In this second floor room we cannot hear the two women downstairs; the only sounds are the radiator and the rain. I place my recording equipment on the ledge above the radiator. It's a convenient spot particularly because there is little furniture in the room. The placement turns out to be a poor choice as the radiator vibrations reduce the clarity of the recording, not enough to make it unintelligible but just enough to make portions of the transcription difficult. There is energy in our anticipation of the impending arrival of the others and the weekend's activities, but Tammy is gracious. She unhurriedly responds to my prompts. As she is the only one of the nine women participants I have not yet interviewed and because of her busy schedule I decide to ask Tammy both prompts during this session. I will begin by inviting her to tell me about a memorable conversation she has had with a woman in her family, and when her story has

unraveled I will ask her to tell me another, this time about a memorable conversation with someone in the Circle. Tammy chooses as her memorable conversation about family to tell a story about her mother. The mother and daughter have an open line of communication.

Tammy's story takes place about a dozen years ago. She is at college, a time when Tammy says she spoke with her mother three to four times daily. Tammy has had her first sexual encounter and wants to talk with her mother about it. Her mother is at work when Tammy phones her. The college student asks her mother if they can talk about something important. When her mother says it is all right for them to talk, Tammy tells *"her pretty much everything."* Her mother's reaction is unexpectedly emotional. A coworker picks up the phone to inform Tammy that her mother's head *"is between her knees and she is breathing into a bag*." Tammy who was unprepared for her mother's overly emotive response explains to her mother's co-worker: *"All I did was tell her that I lost my virginity."* The co-worker's reply is equally unexpected. *"She is just telling me, not my mother, about protection and all these other things and like love and all this other stuff."*

When Tammy's mother recovers sufficiently to talk to her daughter her message is different than her co-worker's. In naming these differences Tammy emphasizes characteristics of her mother's motherwork that she values: *"She asked me how I felt, how I felt about the stuff happening, and what I thought; she talk[ed] with me like I was an adult; she didn't judge me and she didn't condemn me; she told me she loved me."* Tammy values the supportive and affectionate communication, and, as a college-aged woman, she appreciated that her mother treated her as an adult.

> *It is memorable because it was the first time she talk[ed] with me like I was an adult ... She just wanted me to know the adult thing; that sex doesn't mean love. If you are big enough to do it, you are big enough to handle that.*

Tammy describes her mother as her best friend. Authenticity is a cornerstone of their friendship. Tammy feels this authenticity was lacking with her friends during her discussions with them about her new sexuality. She says they did not tell her what she really needed to know. Their response was *"you're in the club now."* Tammy feels they told her what they thought she wanted to hear. Her mother, on the other hand, talks to her *"like someone who needed advice and who needed guidance."* The difference between their previous mother and daughter relationship and this more adult version is that boundaries had shifted. Her mother's has become more permeable, allowing for more equitable sharing. The mother sees Tammy not so much as her child but *"as a daughter ... there's not as much guidance as much as it is sharing of opinions and sharing viewpoints. It is more of an exchange. There is no leader anymore."* Tammy believes her mother's expectations have also shifted.

> *I guess that the big change is that up until then I think it was expected that I would obey what she said because of course her advice is right. I think after that point, the reality is I was going to do what I wanted in spite of her advice.*

Tammy is comfortable interacting with older women as she is used to spending time with her mother, an aunt, and her best friend. These women are all over 50. Tammy says these conversations are comparable with those she has with her peers. All these conversations are *"like taking a stew and you keep throwing carrots in it. You don't even remember who said what.* [Tammy laughs.] *It's just all there."* In contrast, the Circle incorporates orderliness into their practice of conversation. Tammy acknowledges this as appropriate for a situation where people do not have the same *"emotional investment"* that best friends have and as a consequence may be uncomfortable with unbounded sharing of self. The Circle's turn-taking process provides the unrelated women with an opportunity to self-censor. While Tammy accepts the need for this

communicative process within the context of the Circle she does not prefer it over the free-for-all style she is accustomed to in communications with friends and relatives.

> *For what I prefer, and what I do prefer is more honest communication where people are just throwing themselves out there and you either catch or not catch. I think that if I had to choose it would be the more honest expressions, but the more useful is the way we do it in group, especially when we have people who do not know each other very well; because you never know when you are stepping into some sensitive areas. I think even though it is not my most pleasurable, it is probably the best way to communicate.*

In order to have unbounded communication Tammy believes a woman must have an "emotional investment," an affection for another. Such affection creates a relationship or space that allows authentic sharing. There is connection created by the authentic sharing of the one and the knowing of the other, so that *"It's not whether or not that you know them, it's whether or not that they know you."* Thus, a woman must bring her authentic self to a relationship and in sharing herself honestly the other feels connection. When this connection exists then authentic communication can occur.

> *I think an authentic conversation is when you are in a place where you know you can be honest, whether the person likes it or not. I am not the kind of person who is unkind. I am not going to say things that will purposely hurt you, but I am going to be honest about my feelings towards whatever it is that you're saying. I think that is authentic.*

Authentic relationship, however, does not convey the right to suspend mindfulness. Tammy recognizes that authenticity is honesty with the caveat *"as honest as you can be at that moment."* One can be honest while maintaining boundaries around what is shared. By way of an example Tammy suggests a scenario of a friend who has broken up with her boyfriend. If she is going to be honest Tammy says her response will be: *"I am sorry that you are hurting. I wish you weren't hurting," which is just as true as if I said, "I never liked him anyway."* However, it is important to recognize and be mindful of the friend's emotional state. The negative statement

about the boyfriend may be authentic but it is also judgmental with implications that extend beyond the boyfriend. In an authentic relationship there will be time to share those feelings, but not at that moment.

The intersection of authenticity and mindfulness creates a place of safety. For Tammy a safe place has less to do with physical space and more with relationship and expectations about the way she will be treated. Tammy occupies a safe place whenever she is around people who love her. She also feels safe when she is familiar with the rules for engagement such as her work place. At work Tammy knows that *"There are boundaries that you can't talk about certain things. You can't get excited about certain things, and you have to try to be as professional as possible."* Tammy distinguishes between rules and boundaries. There are office rules which are established and agreed upon, and then there are boundaries which are less well-defined. She sees boundaries as varying depending upon a person's race, religion, age and other socially defined categories. Boundaries are also personal so it takes time, practice, and mindfulness to learn to navigate another person's boundaries. Tammy recognizes that the Circle's rules help the women navigate personal boundaries. Tammy doesn't feel these rules are necessary when she engages in conversation with a similar aged woman in the Circle, a young woman who is not a participant in this study. This belief is situated in their belonging to the same generational culture: "*We speak the same language, so we can test each other out where the boundaries are. It may be a little different with someone else."*

**Iman**

Fifty-year-old Iman lives in an historic neighborhood of the city with her husband and two daughters. The interior of her home has features that only older homes have. There's a laundry chute on the second floor and a fireplace in the front parlor. The feature that

distinguishes her home from others is Iman's sense of interior design. The walls of the front room where we sit for our interview are a warm tone—somewhere between sunflower and mustard. The furniture is the color of fertile soil. It is a comfortable place to come to rest. As the African American woman settles down on the sofa with a cup of hot tea cupped between her hands, I take a seat on an overstuffed chair next to her. I place the microphone on one arm of the sofa. My intent is to maintain the informal atmosphere of our session. This is not a wise placement for the microphone; I later discover the sound is absent in several sections. However, the integrity of her stories remains intact. Iman selects to talk about a memorable conversation with her mother.

Iman has had a good relationship with her mother throughout her life, although there were some autonomy issues during Iman's college years and for a time afterwards. The story Iman tells is evidence of the positive relationship and communicative practice that existed between mother and daughter. The memorable conversation about an important life decision Iman faces coincides with her mother's battle with a terminal illness. Iman seeks her mother's counsel to help make a difficult choice. *"I went to have this conversation with my Mom, because I was really struggling about which pathway to take."* The daughter trusts her mother's practice (i.e., motherworks); it is supportive and participatory. *"I needed to get my heart and head together to make a good decision. I knew that she would help me do that."* Her mother's strategy is to invite Iman to tell her story. She listens (i.e., *"Based on what you are telling me."*) and uses questions (i.e., *"What is the problem; Okay, tell me about* [it]*."*) to guide Iman in her decision-making. As the daughter weighs her options the mother is mindful of her daughter's challenge (i.e., "*That is a tough decision."*) and offers her support (i.e., "*Don't under estimate your ability to handle things."*). Their process demonstrates positive participatory leadership. Iman's mother

eventually shares her version of a solution, but she does it in a way that remains supportive of Iman's decision (i.e., *"It's still your decision."*).

Iman admits that the mother-daughter relationship was not always as open. At some point in high school Iman constructed boundaries around what she shared with her mother. *"We would still talk. We really wouldn't talk intimately about things…I was trying to find my own way."* Her mother struggled to be supportive while offering the guidance (i.e., motherwork) she felt her adolescent and young adult daughter needed.

> *I don't know if my mom was trying to acknowledge the fact that her little girl wasn't her little girl anymore. That my friend and I were making this transition to young adulthood and making our own choices and they were choices that maybe she didn't approve of. I think at the end of the day, in hindsight, that was what she was trying to convey, but she just wasn't sure how to do it.*

While Iman's mother struggled to find the words, she still managed to be mindful and convey support for her daughter.

> *Even though she didn't like the choice I made, even though she was very concerned about the choices I made, even though she probably thought I should make better choices and maybe I should have at that point and time, she would still support me. She would try to balance what she said, and how she said it. She wouldn't just come out and say, "You're a fool and what are you crazy?" She may have thought that* [Iman laughs] *but she never would ever say that. You could see it on her face.*

It is a practice that Iman admires, and she tries to carry on with her two young daughters. Iman's method is to slow her responses down in order to have time to put her daughters' behaviors into perspective. She makes a conscious effort to breath and in that momentary space seeks an approach that is mindful of her girls' self-esteem and her own desire to correct their indiscretions. Iman also has taken time to reflect on her mother's ability to be mindful in her practice of motherwork. This practice is evident in the Circle, a group which Iman conceived. Her labor in bringing forth the group may be the reason she is unable in our second session to

detail a memorable conversation (i.e., *"For me they are all memorable"*). Iman is empowered by the sharing that occurs in the Circle. Iman says she always comes *"away being very fulfilled by whatever conversation that we have."* Motherhood metaphors aside, the group speaks more to sistership than motherwork. The mutual sharing provides *"healing"* for those who need it and is informative for others. Iman believes the Circle speaks *"to the power of the friendship that has developed within the Circle."* Is there also power that comes from without, in the placement of the Circle? Does Iman think the Circle needs a special space, a place like her peaceful and private front room, to foster the mutual sharing?

> *I don't think it is about place, it is environment. The environment is created by the people who are there and the energy that they bring and the personalities that they bring and their willingness to share as well as their willingness to listen.*

**Rose**

Rose, a divorcee, is on the verge of completing her seventh decade of life. The 69-year-old African American is the most active senior member of the Circle. She also has a great deal of experience with intergenerational communication, having grown up in a multigenerational household that included grandparents, a godmother and as she puts it *"other close friends."* As Rose opens her front door I have almost a straight line view to the sliding glass patio door at the back of her house. In a few steps I cross the hall and enter the home's living area. It's several more steps before I stand next to the dining table, its surface ornamented with piles of neatly stacked envelopes, lists, and reading materials. Most prominent among them is a large, study Bible, open and notated with papers to mark meaningful passages. Rather than indicating a disorderly life this description of the table expresses the level of engagement with which the home's occupant lives. Jazz music can be heard playing on a radio somewhere upstairs and from time to time the music gives way for an announcer's voice. The radio's volume is not distracting;

on the contrary, it adds to the feeling that the house is full - full of life. There is no evidence in her home or in her manner that Rose has any plans of coming to rest, settling into her place, and waiting patiently for her end time.

Rose makes room at the table for me to set up my recording equipment. We sit next to each other at the edge of the kitchen, the third room in the downstairs living area. We sit side by side. I face Rose as I ask her to tell me a memorable story about a conversation she has had with a female member of her family. Rose on occasion is turned in the direction of the patio door. At those times I am unable to tell whether she is gazing out at the brown grass and dried foliage created by the late fall's frosty mornings or whether her eyelids are closed allowing her to look inward and gaze upon the people who inhabit her family stories. Rose has many stories. She is captivated by her family, and says she *"can't get enough of the stories."*

Rose has become the keeper of her family's secrets. We don't directly discuss the reasons behind the family's need to keep secrets, but the reasons for the guardedness appear varied and complex. Rose tells a story of visiting a grandmother who lived in the South. As a six-year-old growing up in a North Atlantic state Rose has had no training in the conventions which apply to African Americans in places like Georgia in the 1950s. She is unaware there are protocols to follow in order to safely navigate public spaces like the counter area in an ice cream parlor. Rose's mother and grandmother; however, are aware and demonstrate motherwork in their measured explanation to Rose of her faux pas, trying to sit on a stool at the ice cream store's counter. They maintain a level of secrecy as a way to preserve the little girl's positive racial and personal identity.

> *I didn't understand at the time what was the problem. It was interesting how my mother and grandmother explained that scenario to me without being very explicit. I remember coming away puzzled, but I appreciate that neither my mother nor grandmother really made me feel that I had done some horrible thing.*

> *I clearly got the message that I had done something I shouldn't have. It is a hard thing to define. I don't think I came away really beat up, so to speak. I always wondered, and no one fully explained to me why it was that I couldn't sit up there… It was just as if they were trying to protect my little psyche, while keeping me politically safe at the same time. They did it in a very subtle and non-denigrating way.*

Rose gradually comes to the realization that hers is *"a family that guarded their secrets."* Rose uses the word secret seven times during our first session. The boundaries the adults construct around her family history are breached by stories told to Rose by her older siblings. A maternal cousin also shares stories about family members who have died long before. The stories, the cousin says, are as unfamiliar to Rose as the long dead relatives because *"We just don't talk about the things that went on in the family."* Rose appreciates the resiliency and toughness of her ancestors and their desire to preserve secrets, but she also recognizes *"that sometimes there can be heaviness in keeping secrets."* The heaviness can be lifted through sharing, and Rose believes that:

> *The next generation deserves to know some things. I don't think we need to expose everything, but I think the next generation who often thinks that they're the first ones on the planet to come to certain life skill conclusions needs to hear that we have been around the block too.*

Sometimes sharing family stories can provide another generation support during troubled times. Rose can hardly bear her mother's emotional response when she shares the news of her pregnancy; the burden would have been less, Rose says, if she had known her mother had experienced similar circumstances. Rose has tried to be open with her own daughter, letting her know that *"You can ask me anything you want to know."* In reply Rose's daughter has said *"I appreciate that Mom, but I think there are some things that I would rather not know about you."* So how does one mindfully share without crossing another's personal boundaries? For Rose the

answer is storytelling. *"Storytelling is a wonderful way of cloaking. You can make it a vehicle about disclosure, about something without an identity. I think it allows one to have a story told."*

Rose is a storyteller. She uses it to cloak meaning but she also uses it to celebrate. Rose celebrates her mother as a woman who was *"forever taking advantage of a teachable moment. We couldn't walk down a street without her giving me some kind of life lesson."* Rose has embraced her mother's legacy. She views storytelling as having a powerful and positive purpose and a conduit for generational transference. *"If nothing else I always want to have something that celebrates what they* [my children's children] *are doing, but also causes them to commemorate with what someone else has done. They can wear those too. That is the gift that we give."*

Her mother's positive leadership qualities have given Rose first-hand experience with the value of positive communication and relational practice. It, therefore, is easy to understand what has attracted Rose to the Circle. She says positive leadership, mindfulness, and authenticity are the *"consistent signature"* of the Circle. Rose acknowledges that as with any group of humans, the women occasionally stray from their open and inclusive practices, which sometimes leads to misunderstanding and conflict. Rose, who has been involved with numerous civic organizations, feels that one way to reduce the chances for misunderstanding is to add a modicum of structure to proceedings. Rose believes that stating openly, consistently, and regularly the group's purpose would reduce the potential for misunderstanding and enhance connection to the Circle.

> *I think we have to have, almost to the point of an affirmation statement, that everyone says, 'Yes, and I can sign that.' Almost like a pledge…Those oral declarations are not intended just to make noise and to make sounds. Those are intended to keep us aligned mentally and our inner actions with someone else that we have in common or mutual interest: why we exist.*

**Brown Sugar**

Her office is on the lower floor of a two story brick building. The building and her office are unremarkable in design and furnishing, but the work that goes on in the rooms Brown Sugar occupies is where the beauty resides. The place may be plain in appearance but this cannot be said of Brown Sugar who energetically celebrates life in her manner, her talk, and her dress. There is no hint in the 63-year-old African American's behavior that she has experienced many difficulties in life or that she still lives with a good deal of physical pain. Even on her day off from the restorative work she does with men and women who are trying to cope with their own challenges, Brown Sugar is generous. She gifts me her time and during our sessions she authentically shares herself and many a good-natured laugh. Her face with its winsome smile is always framed by a colorful scarf that covers not only her head but also her shoulders. Today, instead of wearing a dress coordinated in color with her head covering, Brown Sugar is wearing sweatpants and a T-shirt with a design recently created for her organization. The T-shirt is appropriate because her work is always close to her heart.

We sit at a round wooden table that occupies one side of the large room. The space looks more like a teachers' lounge than an office. The walls are hung with photographs of the men and women with whom Brown Sugar works. Also on display are newspaper clippings about the awards Brown Sugar has received and the work she does. And there are numerous messages of wisdom and support. This space serves as office, counseling center, and retreat; it is Brown Sugar's home away from home. This afternoon there is no one else here besides the two of us. When I ask for her memorable story Brown Sugar tells me about a sister.

Brown Sugar tells me that her sister is someone who *"has been the most supportive person to me."* This support extends back to a time when Brown Sugar existed in a *"selfish*

*mode"* and a *"victim mode."* Now that she no longer dwells in such places Brown Sugar wants her sister's forgiveness and the opportunity to lend support to and connect with her. It is a task that requires time and patience. Brown Sugar must learn how to navigate her sister's boundaries.

> *There are times that we are talking and I feel like she is closing down. I need to open up more and really listen to her silence because she is really speaking a lot. I really appreciate that. That is a learning experience for me because I want to be there for her. She was always there for me.*

Brown Sugar's practice demonstrates patience, mindfulness and affectionate (i.e., *"I need to talk to you, and where I am coming from is in a very loving place*.") and supportive (i.e., *"How can I be of help to you?"*) communication.

In Brown Sugar's childhood, boundaries were more difficult to maintain because her extended family lived in close quarters. They shared resources and they shared responsibilities for raising the children. *"You couldn't do anything unless this one knew, and everybody had to know, and everybody was in everybody's business. Sometimes there were problems and sometimes it was okay."* Later, as the resources of a smaller family group improved they relocated to separate housing. The result was not only geographic and economic separation but also an emotional one. When her mother moved away from the extended family Brown Sugar found there was more attention focused on her within the smaller family unit. She and her sister had more responsibilities placed upon them; they competed for approval and attention. One area of competition where Brown Sugar had no chance of besting her younger sister was skin color. Brown Sugar was darker and as a consequence she suffered the indignities of favoritism and insults. "*I can now look at it and I can laugh; but at the time when I look at the damage that it did to me as a child because sometimes it makes you feel less than."* Brown Sugar now is working to overcome other barriers that have been constructed between her sister and her. She wants to reestablish an authentic connection. The chances of Brown Sugar doing this with her

mother are unlikely. The older woman, according to Brown Sugar, is burdened by her guilt; it is the guilt of not having been able to protect her daughter from many difficulties. She is stuck in a place where she wants to protect and nurture her daughter as if Brown Sugar was again a child.

> *For a long, long time I used to react to that, but now I don't ... I just accept it and if I need to say something I say it. I don't most of the time. It is best not to say anything at all ... I had to stop reacting to a lot of things that she does.*

What Brown Sugar has learned from watching the older women in her family has informed her own practice of motherwork. Brown Sugar has an unusual relationship with her daughter because the grandmother (i.e., Brown Sugar's mother) adopted the girl when she was small. The identity of the girl's real mother was kept secret until she became an adult. This secret was managed by the limited interactions Brown Sugar had with her young daughter. Brown Sugar has nonetheless experienced relationships with her daughter from the perspective of sister and as mother.

> *I am her mother and she is my daughter. We are also best friends. From that perspective we have learned to like each other, and we have learned to respect each other so we can talk to each other on different levels. From what I saw with my grandmother and mother and great grandmother, I didn't want to see my child, "Do as I say, but not as I do." I don't want to ever tell someone to shut up. I want everyone to have a voice, even a child. That is the difference between my relationship with my daughter.*

Brown Sugar defines a best friend as someone with whom she can talk openly. It is someone with whom she can share her authentic self and there is the expectation that if she is making poor decisions the friend will offer supportive guidance without being judgmental. This practice is what Brown Sugar demonstrates in the story she tells at our second session.

Brown Sugar selects to talk about a woman who shared something personal about her marriage with the Circle. Brown Sugar connects with the woman's story; she had a similar experience in her own marriage.

> *I wanted to shake her and say can't you see. The other side of me was: "Okay, nobody could tell me anything." I had to learn it for myself, so just be supportive for that person. So that was the stance that I took.*

Rather than offering direct advice, Brown Sugar choose to listen, to let the woman voice her pain, and then to offer support so the woman could find her own path. She knows that listening requires work, and acknowledges the value of the Circle practices that promote listening. Brown Sugar is an accomplished listener. She listens to many things: the silences in a conversation, her own thoughts, and the many ways people express themselves. *"When I am listening I am also looking at the body language, and the expression, and the sighs and frowns and the lips being poked out, the sparkle in their eye, then I am also listening to mine too."* Brown Sugar believes it is because of the mindful and supportive practices such as listening that the Circle encourages sharing. The sharing and support lead to connection between the women and in this way they empower one another.

Brown Sugar is aware that there is not one type of support suitable for every woman. In Brown Sugar's case, her faith runs deep and she believes God will show her the right course. She prefers that others listen to her, and does not want anyone to tell her what to do. "*Just let me rattle off; let me cuss; let me holler; let me cry; and all that kind of stuff. I will come to my decision."* Brown Sugar is also knowledgeable about other ways to provide support.

> *Another way of being supportive is like some people have their own experiences that they can bring to the table … usually my form of support is like I will listen, and I will ask questions, and then I will tell a story that will help that person hopefully be able to reach to wherever their pain is and try to draw that out so they could find a way to learn from that experience. I look at life, even painful experiences, as a learning experience.*

**Katherine**

Katherine's small office is located at one end of a two story brick structure that stands adjacent to a park. Hers is a crowded room. Nearly half the floor space is occupied by a round

wooden table and almost half of the remainder by her desk. Papers spill over the table top and the desk and out from shelves; there are lots of papers hanging on the walls, too. The space is representative not only of her busy work life but her personal life, too. Her paid work involves helping individuals and families who need assistance to build healthier futures. As a divorced mother 45-year-old Katherine works without pay, guiding her own children to healthy futures and supporting them as they grow towards independence. Katherine, who is white, has more children than she can count with the fingers on one hand. And, just as her office is full of papers, I imagine her house is full of people. Despite her disorderly office Katherine appears unruffled as she sits at her desk. Her back is to the window, which frames a residential block of older homes. Her personal cell phone rings as I set up the recording equipment. Katherine silences the phone without answering it. She seems comfortable to let whoever is at the other end wait until our session is finished. Katherine pauses as I invite her to describe a memorable conversation with a female relative. *"That is a hard one."*

Hard describes Katherine's relationship with her adoptive mother who has filled this maternal role since Katherine was born. Within the first few minutes of her storytelling Katherine makes numerous statements about trying to gain her mother's approval, but her mother seems incapable of much other than taking control of a situation and meting out judgments. Katherine relates one instance when having told her mother *"why I was upset and it was like she wanted to fix everything, like she wasn't really hearing what I had to say … There didn't seem like there was any connection there."* Katherine says what she really wanted in that instance was advice and empathy (i.e., supportive communication). When her mother talks Katherine hears only judgment and questions about her ability to handle responsibility.

> *She will do things like, for example, my son, the oldest, when he was two or three we had just painted his bedroom. She had kept him for the day while we were*

> *painting. At the end of the day she brought him home, and the first thing she said was, "Well you're not going to let him sleep in there tonight are you?" What kind of person do you think I am that I would put a two year old in a room with paint fumes? I was so offended that she would even suggest that. I cut her off, for a month. I had her phone number blocked. I had her email blocked. I told her, "Don't come to my house. Don't talk to me. Don't call me." It was so offensive to me that she would say things like that.*

This pattern of negative talk continues to this day, but Katherine believes she is "*better at recognizing it and setting better boundaries."* The boundaries she has constructed protect Katherine from her mother's condescending communication but they also offer little chance connection will ever occur. *"I don't tell her anything anymore, because I know she is just going to tell me, 'Well you need to do this and this...' So we have very superficial conversations now. I don't tell her much of anything that matters."* The basic elements of motherwork, affectionate and supportive behavior and communication, are absent from her mother's practice, yet Katherine continues to seek her mother's approval. Katherine endangers herself whenever she eases her personal boundaries in the hopes of receiving some type of support. "*If she does offer to do something it comes with a price."* While her mother's support would have provided Katherine with one type of empowerment, Katherine has achieved another on her own by learning how to build boundaries against her mother's negative communication. While Katherine now is pragmatic about her mother's abilities to be supportive she used to think she's be better off with her mother's support.

> *There was a period of time when I was very angry with her. If she would have been there for me and taken my side it would have been all better. That is not necessarily what would have happened, but I did hold that grudge for a while.*

Katherine describes her own maternal practice with her children as *"open."* The word open fits prominently in her descriptions. Katherine credits professional counseling and training with her competence in *"listening and feedback."* She tries to be non-judgmental, supportive,

and relational in both her practice and her communication. *"It is more like: 'What do you think about that?' and 'What do you want to do?'"* Katherine offers as a specific example of this an incident with one of her daughters who was *"getting pretty serious"* about a boy. Katherine who said *"she is not one to bury my head in the sand"* took the daughter to a physician so the teenager could get a prescription for birth control. When the daughter came out of the examining room she says to Katherine:

> *"Mom, you know what the doctor asked me?"*
>
> *What did the doctor ask you?*
>
> *She said, "What do you want me to tell your mom about why you need birth control pills? Do you want me to tell her it was a heavy period?"*
>
> *My daughter told her: "My mom knows exactly why I am here."*
>
> [Katherine laughs]. *My daughter tells the doctor, "My mom is the one who brought me."*
>
> *My daughter thought that was so funny that everybody wouldn't have that kind of relationship with their mom and that they could talk about things and have a mature conversation.*

Although her mother was not skilled in mindful motherwork, Katherine spoke about her own efforts to practice the art. She has purposefully undertaken the practice in reaction to the negative relationship she has had with her own mother. *"I didn't like not feeling like I couldn't talk to her about anything, or she was just going to try to fix it or tell me what to do."* Katherine has created, with the use of open conversation and supportive practice, an environment that promotes sharing between herself and her children. Openness means nonjudgmental to Katherine.

> *First, I believe every human being is inherently good. People make mistakes. People screw up. People have their issues, their baggage, but people are inherently good. Just because I wouldn't chose to do things one way doesn't mean that it is not perfectly okay for them. I try to be very open as far as each of my*

> *kids. I look at them as individuals. They are not a reflection of me … I don't try to superimpose what I think they should do.*

She has also cultivated supportive communication within the context of her motherwork. For example, Katherine calls her children to ask them how they are doing rather than following her mother's practice of demanding to know if they did something. Katherine's positive practice and communication has forged connection between herself and her children.

Katherine believes she learned positive practice and reaped the benefits of connection from her father. She has fond memories of the hours they spent together. Her father was a storyteller, sharing stories of his youth. Katherine's father protected, *"ran interference"* for his daughter when she found herself in trouble with her mother, and he nurtured her with the challenge of intellectual games so that she "*felt like he respected me."* He also engaged in play taking her to the movies, father-daughter dances, and dinner.

Respect was a prominent word in our second session. Respect is an important variable in Katherine's selection of who she prefers to spend time with outside of work and her home.

> *I am also very picky about who I tend to associate with. I don't tend to hang-out with people who are into drama and cattiness and the gossipy ... Generally, most of the folks that I hang-out with tend to have the same kind of mind set. Not always the same values or the same ideas, but the same basically. We can agree to disagree. We can have different ideas, different values, and different faiths, whatever. We can still be friends. We can still respect one another, respect what the other person has, that their feelings and their thoughts and their whatever is just as valid to them as mine are.*

The Circle fits Katherine's requirements for association. The women of the Circle are uncompetitive and respectful.

> *Even when there is a difference of opinion it seems like it is dealt with in a very respectful way. Like "I don't agree with you and this is why I don't agree with you," but it doesn't ever seem like it gets personal, like "You're wrong, I can't believe you think that."*

This respect is displayed in the conversations the women have; they feel empowered to share authentically. *"It is not just chit chat. It isn't like, 'Oh, how was your day?' and 'What did you do at work today?' It gets very in depth with people's feelings and especially with relationships."*

Katherine recognizes that both place and respectful practice may be key elements in the Circle's success in connecting participants. Katherine ponders what specific benefits might there be in having the women, as they do at each meeting, sit in a circle formation. She recognizes that it is a common formation but admits she has not studied the psychosocial implications of the geometry on people. Spatial characterizations that Katherine names that are more relatable are: homey, calming atmosphere, not busy, not a lot of noise, not a lot of distraction, and non-threatening atmosphere. The Circle gatherings are typically held in a member's home, but in those instances which are not the venue is thoughtfully chosen for privacy and to accommodate the sharing of food which starts the gathering. Mindful practice during sharing is the other key element; *"the dynamic is people take turns going around the circle … it is basically people take their turn."* Katherine says she has never felt uncomfortable being able to say what she wants but recognizes that a practice to make talking equally accessible to everyone is valuable; however, she thinks it would undermine the feel of the Circle if the process was too formalized. Arguably, the most important aspects of the Circle for Katherine are the women and her sense of empowerment as a result of their authentic sharing.

> *Being with the Sisters and having so many women and so many different backgrounds, I look at them all very educated and very intelligent, very articulate, very well read, and I value what they have to say. I have a lot of respect for them, and I feel like I can learn a lot in that setting. There are some people you talk to, and I don't think you necessarily take them seriously, but it seems like all the women there are very up to date with current affairs, politics, and they are very good at expressing it, in a non-threatening way. They can have a completely different opinion from me, but I don't ever feel attacked.*

**Penelope**

Penelope's son answers the door. He is a tall young man, maybe a head taller than I or maybe it is a faulty impression I get from his demeanor and the fact I am standing on the stoop and he is inside the house. He lets me in without a question, and then disappears into the back of the house. Forty-one-year-old Penelope comes down the staircase. She cancelled yesterday's appointment because she was not feeling well. As it's her day off and she's still not feeling her usual self, the African American woman is casually dressed. She walks into the living room and takes a seat on the far end of the sofa which stands in the front window. Across the room, the entrance to the dining room is partially blocked by birthday decorations, the drooping remnants from the party Penelope's children threw for her a few days previously.

Penelope calls out in the direction of what I imagine is the kitchen. She instructs her son to go upstairs so we can have some privacy. The boy dutifully follows Penelope's command. His whereabouts are soon marked by the sound of a television. This time as Penelope calls out she tells her son to turn down the volume. He complies. The house is quiet; it seems we are alone at least for a while. I begin the session with my invitation to Penelope to tell a story about a memorable conversation she's had with a family member; I am aware that one of Penelope's daughters is soon due home from school. Sitting by the large living room window we are both able to see when the school bus arrives, and the girl crosses the front yard of Penelope's suburban home. When the girl enters, without rising to greet her daughter, Penelope inquires about her school. Penelope briefly explains my presence. The daughter goes upstairs, and once again it feels as though we are alone in the house. There is no further evidence that anyone is there, but I am aware that Penelope's sister is due over later in the afternoon and Penelope's two other children have yet to come home from school.

Penelope's story centers around control (i.e., who is in control and how they exert it). Penelope's story is still emotionally fresh even though the incident dates back several years. She recalls when she was finally able to intimately share her feelings with her mother. This occurred during the last weeks of the woman's life. Penelope was able to find forgiveness. Unfortunately, her mother's illness and death resulted in incidents of negative relational and communicative practice within the family; these have caused additional emotional turmoil for Penelope.

As she narrates, Penelope finds it increasingly difficult to speak about the lack of mindful practice within the family; she begins to cry. I reach over and place my hand on hers until she pulls hers away. Penelope dabs her eyes. When she regains her composure, she says it is okay to continue. She returns to her story of the last weeks she spent with her mother before the woman died. During that time boundaries were eased between the mother and daughter. Penelope was able to share with her mother, who had not been emotionally or physically present much of Penelope's youth. Penelope reflects on the disconnection between herself and her mother and her long standing inability to forgive the woman for her past indiscretions; it was her mother's lack of mindfulness and a lack of time together. "*I guess then I realized that I hadn't forgiven her, because I didn't give her any time during my adult life."* The opportunity to spend several weeks together provided the women time to connect, and there were times when they *"laughed and talked like friends."* Penelope and her mother were empowered by their time together and the sharing that resulted.

> *We had never talked and laughed like that. We had a very rough relationship. She wasn't the best mother ... I was mostly raised by my grandmother most of my childhood life. So, it isn't like we had talked before ... We had never talked to the point where we were laughing and it was just all about her realizing that I did love her so much … It came about needing closure for she and I and we got it.*

Although Penelope's story about her struggle to find forgiveness for her mother suggests a difficult mother-daughter relationship, she has avoided the generational transference of disconnection with her own daughters. Penelope is an affectionate, mindful mother, as demonstrated in a story she told about her daughter. During a ride in the car Penelope suggests the two take a detour to the movies. A dilemma arises when the two want to see different films. At first Penelope is disappointed. She tells her daughter: "*I wanted to go out with you so we can spend some time together like a date;*" but rather than taking control of the decision-making process Penelope suggests they each go to the movie of their choice. She tells her daughter it will be like going on a date with themselves. Penelope's rationale demonstrates a mindfulness of self-esteem. She tells me that:

> *The reason why I said that about going out by yourself—because you have to learn how to treat yourself so you can treat other people how you want them to treat you. You have to treat yourself the best, so you know that is what you want from other people.*

The pair discovers when they go to buy tickets that the movie the daughter wants to see is sold out, so the mother and daughter end up watching the same movie. Penelope says their date night was a success: "*She leaned on me and we held hands and really had a fun time.*"

Penelope has established, clear boundaries between her roles as friend and mother. In her role as mother she has set boundaries for her children with clear choices and consequences. For example, Penelope has told her daughters to stop arguing. On a recent occasion when they did not follow these rules Penelope cancels a party. The girls complain and blame each other. Penelope will not listen to their pleas because she has warned them both to stop bickering. She tells the girls they were free to walk away from the disagreement; they can always go to her and ask for help to settle a situation. During her childhood Penelope did not have as well defined a solution for her own problems; she found herself caught in the middle of a situation from which

she didn't know how to extract herself. Her grandmother, who raised her siblings and her until she was a teenager, favored Penelope over the others. It was a practice that benefited as well as hurt Penelope. She appreciated the attention and affection she received from her grandmother because the woman's attentions prevented Penelope from feeling *"neglected or abandoned;"* however, there was complicity in this favoritism:

> *As a kid, I wasn't going to complain. I wasn't getting neglected, but didn't see how my brothers and sisters were getting neglected. It doesn't register until you become adult. If you would buy for me, why won't you buy for them? She would take me to the movies, but she wouldn't take anybody else. I could go on and on. She treated me as if I was an only child. She treated everybody else like they were visiting.*

As Penelope grew older she realized that her grandmother's behavior may have been learned, transferred from relational and communication patterns she experienced as a child with her own mother. Penelope recalls a conversation in which Penelope's grandmother discloses that her mother (i.e., Penelope's great grandmother) used to call her Dumb Dora. It is a name the grandmother used to call Penelope. When Penelope points this out to her grandmother, the woman gets angry and denies the allegation. Penelope has reflected on this conversation over the ensuing years. She thinks about people and how they may unconsciously perpetuate behavior they learned as children.

> *It rolls off so easy that you don't see it. And when it is brought to your attention it is so hurtful, because she was saying about how much it had hurt her for her mother to say that. She didn't want to hurt me like that. She had. At that point, it helped to have that incident that encounter, because I understood.*

Penelope is the only woman who did not participate in a second session. Although I tried several different modes of contact (e.g., email, Facebook, telephone) and tried several times in each mode to reach her, I was unsuccessful. As her participation was completely voluntary and I did not wish to imply otherwise, I felt uncomfortable doing more. As the themes in the other

participant's second stories appear to have approached or reached saturation I feel confident that the absence of Penelope's voice, although missed, would not have significantly altered the findings.

## Chapter V: Findings and Interpretations

At the same time I digitally recorded the nine women's stories I listened to the women as they talked. I continued to be attentive as I read their transcripts. But it wasn't until my colleague Carolyn Coles Benton and I read the transcripts together that I focused deeply, listening for each woman's voice and her meaning-making. Carolyn participated in the interpretation process. Her professional work in health care and college counseling with women across generations and socioeconomic levels was invaluable. It was also important, as Socha and Diggs (1999) observed, for me, as a white scholar to have an African American to coauthor the interpretation. Our collaboration is in the narrative inquiry tradition of Clandinin and Connelly (2000), who found that working in teams to read and discuss work provided a keener vision with which to "see other meanings that might lead to further retelling" (p. 60). Carolyn's perspective was necessary if this study was to achieve a meaningful level of cultural sensitivity "as well as remain open to the complexities and variability of findings" (Socha & Diggs, 1999, p. 14). Together through the iterative process of reading and discussion, Carolyn and I co-constructed an interpretation which was shared with the woman who originated the narrative. In this way Carolyn, the woman, and I became co-authors of an enhanced narrative wherein the meaning-making was brought to the forefront. During the interpretive phase Carolyn and I developed codes and brainstormed themes. In the final phase I reassessed emergent themes and where similarities existed and warranted they were aggregated under a new overarching theme. Because this final phase was done solely by me, I am responsible for the interpretation as it relates to this study's research questions.

It was primarily due to scheduling issues that I conducted the first storytelling session with Emerson, thus it was with Emerson's story that Carolyn and I began our discovery process,

and where the first themes began to emerge. Not all themes emerged in a straightforward way, as will be discussed in the next section. As we began the thematic discovery process on the eight other women's stories our investigative lenses moved back and forth, from an individual perspective to the group and then back again. This resulted in discussions about the classification of themes and comparisons about their importance across age and race.

It is at this juncture that I, as a mindful investigator, feel an obligation to revisit the socially-constructed concepts of generation and race. As previously mentioned in the second chapter, there is discussion in the literature as to how to define the concept of a generation. In this study the concept is not designated by a specific age range, but rather as a span of time that separates a mother from her daughter. This context is pertinent particularly as the majority of stories I collected refer to conversations between a woman's mother or her daughter, and because what appeared important between the pair was not the number of years that separated them but the form of communicative and relational practice with which they engaged. As regards race, although the primary attention of this dissertation is the investigation of differences across generations, I have been conscious of the possibility that race may contribute to variation in participants' meaning making. This is not to say I assumed there would be differences, but neither did I assume there would be none. What I have been aware of is that within the literature there are authors who have articulated "the need to critically examine assumptions regarding the similarities among Caucasian women and women of color" (Erkut & Winds of Change Foundation, 2001, p. 9). Another presumption I have tried to avoid is that the women of color in this study are a homogeneous group. This was demonstrated when the women were asked to name a term they preferred I use to describe their race. I received three different responses (i.e., African American, Black American, and person of color) from the four women who responded.

Two responses were for African Americans which is why I selected to use the term throughout the study. As the aforementioned attests, diversity is an important factor to keep in the forefront of the analysis.

In the final assessment four overarching themes emerged (see Table 5.1). Boundaries,

Table 5.1

*Emergent Themes*

| Theme |
|---|
| **Boundaries and Intimate Sharing** |
| Emotional Control |
| Power Relations/Forgiveness |
| Secrets/Disclosure |
| **Affectionate Connection** |
| Participatory Relationship |
| Appreciative Practice |
| Safeness |
| Mindfulness |
| **Nurturing Practice** |
| Motherwork |
| Storytelling |
| Sistership |
| Judgment/Expectation |
| Play |
| **Authentic Listening** |
| Listening |

which later was renamed Intimate Sharing, has three subthemes: Emotional Control, Power Relations/Forgiveness, and Secrets/Disclosure. The subthemes of Emotional Control, Power Relations, and Secrets act as inhibitors to intimate sharing while Forgiveness and Disclosure facilitate intimate sharing. The second major theme, Affectionate Connection, has four subthemes: Participatory Relationship, Appreciative Practice, Safeness, and Mindfulness. These subthemes positively contribute to feelings of connectedness. The third theme is Nurturing Practice with the subthemes of Motherwork and Sistership as descriptions of the types of leadership evident in women's relational behavior. Motherwork is associated with a mother's

duty to serve as role model and mentor. Sistership has less to do with work and more to do with friendship. The final theme is Listening. Listening is intimately involved in intimate sharing, affectionate connection, and nurturing practice, and it is because of this importance that it was discussed on its own merits.

**Boundaries and Intimate Sharing**

Beginning the discovery process with Emerson's stories was fortuitous. Her storytelling was dense with conceptual content and served as fertile ground for discussions with Carolyn about the development of codes and to gain a deeper understanding of Emerson's meaning making. Emerson's use on thirteen occasions of the word "allow" predominantly in reference to her mother Claire, as discussed in Emerson's story in the previous chapter, led Carolyn and me into a discussion of the tension that exists between control and vulnerability. Carolyn characterized Claire as someone who needed to control her life. Claire wanted to protect her vulnerable side, and, therefore, constructed boundaries around her emotional vulnerabilities.

**Emotional control and power relations.** Claire's life felt out of control because of life balance issues, also referred to as work-family conflict (Erkut & Winds of Change Foundation, 2001), she experienced as a working mother and consummate nurturer. The concept of boundaries is supported by Emerson's reference to Claire's occasional willingness to *"allow herself to share."* In these instances Claire revealed her emotional turmoil (i.e., *"meltdown"*) to her daughter. In her own storytelling Claire alluded to her emotional boundaries, as in her story about taking off her clothes and playing in the mud when she said: "*I felt like all my inhibitions were erased and that I had broken through some kind of being in a strait jacket, and I had ripped that strait jacket off to just be myself."*

At the time of our discussions neither Carolyn nor I was familiar with Sandra Petronio's work related to how individuals manage their personal and private information. In the development of her theory of communication privacy management (CPM) Petronio (2004) wrote this about a person's desire to protect information they deem private: "Individuals need to control that information because it has the potential to make them vulnerable. In addition, control is also important because people feel they have the right to determine what happens to their private information" (p. 202). It is of interest to note that CPM was originally known as communication boundary management (Petronio, 2013). In our deep reading of the women's stories Carolyn and I discovered boundaries serve to protect not only women's emotional states but also power imbalances and secrets.

Claire learned to construct boundaries as a child in order to protect herself from her mother's oppressive use of power. Claire described her mother as controlling and autocratic, and in reaction Claire felt the need to repress her feelings (i.e., construct boundaries to protect her emotions). She did not offer insight as to why her mother created such a restrictive environment, but in doing so Claire's mother walled herself off from her daughter and the daughter walled in her own emotions. Katherine's story also expressed an oppressive power imbalance between mother and daughter. Carolyn described Katherine's mother as someone who had a strategic plan for her daughter's emotional failure. The mother wanted the appearance of being able to fix any situation. While Katherine's mother empowered herself she disempowered her daughter. Katherine found it necessary to construct an emotional boundary around herself; it was also a boundary inside which she had control.

Boundaries, however, are not permanent, impermeable constructions that once erected remain indefinitely. They can be eased. In Brown Sugar and Penelope's stories forgiveness

accomplishes this and makes intimate sharing possible. Brown Sugar's story depicts her on both sides of forgiveness. In reference to her sister, a woman who carried the burden of many familial responsibilities during the years Brown Sugar was engaged in poor decision-making behavior, Brown Sugar seeks forgiveness.

> *So, I am finding myself wanting to be there for her. She is still resistant to that. Sometimes, I take it that she mistrusts me. I took it personal because I thought we were closer than that. I just finally decided to sit down and ask her; say to her "What is going on? I feel your pain and I see you going through things and I want you to lean on me more."*

Although they may not be as close as Brown Sugar would like, she now has open lines of communication and an opportunity for intimate sharing. In the case of her mother Brown Sugar is the one who grants forgiveness.

> *I think she is dealing with a lot of guilt behind my having a hard life coming up. I told her continuously "Look how I turned out. Yes, I went through some changes in life, and I made some mistakes, but look at how I am now. It is only because of you. It was because I had to learn how to grow up and accept some things and that I had to get out of being a victim all the time." I said "A lot of that I attribute to you."*

Penelope is a grantor of forgiveness. She bestowed it on her mother who was absent during much of her childhood. When terminally ill Penelope's mother asked why she had never been forgiven for the past. Penelope felt sad *"when she said that, but I knew it was true. I always felt like my grandmother was more like my mother than my mother ... This was one of the most memorable conversations. We had so many talks before she died."* By granting forgiveness to her mother, Penelope eased the boundaries she had previously erected to wall off emotional pain. With her boundaries eased sharing took place and Penelope felt reconnected to her mother.

**Secrets/disclosure.** Contained in the stories of Brown Sugar and Rose was another type of boundary—secrets. Carolyn suggested that some of these secrets are rooted in the African American experience and in analyzing texts from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries

Lewis (2007) provided proof of how the institution of slavery engendered secrets. In the early years of Brown Sugar's childhood secrets were difficult to maintain because several generations lived under one roof. When smaller family units moved into their own houses there were more than physical walls that separated them from the others. The secret Brown Sugar shared with her mother involved her own daughter. The girl had been raised by Brown Sugar's mother. Brown Sugar's daughter did not know her older sister was in fact her mother. Brown Sugar's mother controlled this secret as well as Brown Sugar's access to the girl. In a discussion Carolyn and I had about Brown Sugar's story she noted that the adoption of granddaughters reflected the past for many African Americans, a past when southern families moved North in search of a better life. "Moving to the North provided families with a great opportunity to start all over, begin anew, which meant adopting grandchildren to give their daughters a better opportunity of normalcy" (Carolyn Coles Benton, personal communication). Billingsley (1992) wrote that in contemporary African American families children born out of wedlock are generally cared for by grandmothers without the benefits of legal adoption. Brown Sugar's secret identity, as Carolyn noted, was not permanent. With the secret's elimination Brown Sugar and her daughter have been able to establish a warmer, more open relationship. Rose's family also kept secrets. Her story about an experience as a young girl in an ice cream parlor in the South demonstrated both Rose's lack of awareness of the rules of segregation and her mother and grandmother's desire to keep secrets in order to protect their child's psyche. Rose concurs with such practice although she believes *"the next generation needs to know some things."* Rose also acknowledged she's equally aware there are some things the next generation does not want to know. Rose mentioned an offer she made to her daughter to tell her whatever she wanted to know. She said her daughter replied: *"I appreciate that Mom but I think there are some things I would rather not know."*

When Petronio began working on her CPM theory 35 years ago there was a good deal of research on self-disclosure. Petronio was intrigued that far less research existed about the rules regulating access to personally-held information and what needed to transpire in a relationship to ease the boundaries and allow intimate sharing. In subsequent studies one of her findings was that "When people disclose to each other, they essentially link others into a privacy boundary … the recipients essentially become co-owners or shareholders of the information because of concomitant expectations that they will keep the information confidential" (Petronio, 2004, p. 203). Just as boundaries are constructed by individuals to withhold information for the protection of their emotions and psyches, these same boundaries can be eased to allow for an intimate sharing of information.

It is the intimate sharing not the boundaries that are important in my study as I seek to understand positive practice and connectedness, and so with this new insight I deemed it appropriate to rename and refine boundary management for use as a theme. While I no longer use a theme entitled boundary management, boundaries are implicit within the concept of intimate sharing. There are factors that contribute to sharing and others that inhibit the sharing. I opted not to use the word sharing alone but include the descriptor intimate as a way to draw attention to the personal nature of the action and to the connection or responsibility that co-ownership of such information evokes. The importance of this, as Petronio (2013) recognized, is that the idea of co-ownership makes "a significant contribution to seeing privacy issues and disclosure as relational in nature" (p. 9).

Secrets, power relations, and emotional control issues act to inhibit intimate sharing and, therefore, are impediments to positive relationship. Intimate sharing connotes participation with authentic self, and through disclosure a person connects and empowers another (see Figure 5.1).

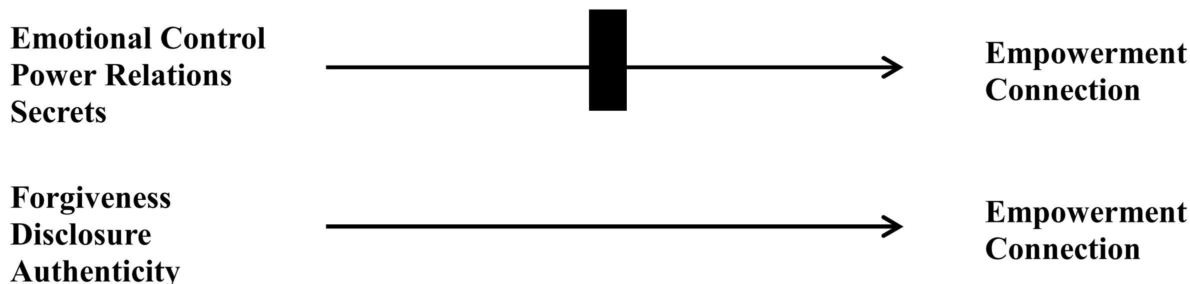


*Figure 5.1* Impediments and facilitators to intimate sharing

In Tammy's story of disclosure, a matter which might be considered of a highly personal nature (i.e., the loss of her virginity), Tammy demonstrates the epitome of intimate sharing. Another example of intimate sharing is Iman's story about seeking her mother's counsel. Iman shared her heart with her mother. Iman knew her mother would help her make a life changing decision. Stories of intimate sharing were also told about the Circle. Brown Sugar talked about a woman who disclosed her struggle in deciding whether to leave her husband, and Miss Sis talked about a woman who revealed she had been violated as a child. This intimate sharing caused Miss Sis's heart to "hurt" for the violated woman. In their storytelling Brown Sugar and Miss Sis acknowledged that intimate sharing resulted in connection with the women who told the stories. Miss Sis said: "*I felt empowered; I felt a sense of kinship with her*." Brown Sugar said: "*I really felt what this woman was going through*." It is the association between intimate sharing and connection that led to the second theme—affectionate connection.

**Affectionate Connection**

The analogy of high-quality connection as a healthy blood vessel providing life-giving nourishment to a relationship (Dutton & Heaphy, 2003) is beautifully descriptive. High-quality connections are "evidenced by both the expression of more emotion when in the connection and the expression of both positive and negative emotions" (Dutton & Heaphy, 2003, p. 266). This characterization fits well with the theme of intimate sharing. Subjective experiences associated

with high-quality connections include a feeling of being known or being loved and mutuality. Mutuality, Dutton and Heaphy (2003) wrote: “captures the sense that both people in a connection are engaged and actively participating” (p. 267). These elements of connection were evident in the women’s stories, and are aggregated under the theme of affectionate connection. Related concepts to Dutton and Heaphy’s characterizations of feeling known and being loved were situated within the nine women’s stories. These were the desire for approval, security, affection, support, and intimate sharing. The inclusion of intimate sharing within the affectionate connection theme demonstrates the interrelatedness of positive relational behaviors and experiences. As the question about the chicken and the egg is an unsolvable puzzle it is equally impossible to state with certainty whether one of the following statements is more correct: intimate sharing leads to connection, or connection creates the framework for intimate sharing. Dutton and Heaphy include mutuality among the subjective experiences of high-quality connections. Mutuality is a characteristic supported by the positive practices of participatory relationship, appreciative practice, safeness, and mindfulness, themes that emerged during the women’s storytelling.

Roberts (2006b) indicated that an authentic sense of relatedness (i.e., connection) and mutuality are characteristics of a positive relationship. Mutuality offers individuals engaged in a positive relationship a basis for feedback on the expectations and benefits of their connection.

> In a positive relationship, both parties also have mutual influence on one another, so that both people are learning from one another through the connection. Mutuality is also important with respect to expectations; both parties have clarity and agreement on roles and boundaries in the relationship ... in a positive relationship, both parties understand one another’s intentions and are aware of the impact of their behavior on the other party. (p. 31)

Alternatively the absence of mutuality results in disconnection. Expectations and judgmental attitudes undermine affectionate connection and can have negative consequence on an

individual's social identity. Claire and Emerson's positive mother-daughter relationship is characterized by mutual sharing. Both women are aware of the empowering benefits of their connection. Emerson spoke of being uplifted by the supportive, emotional work they do together. Claire said that the mutuality has given her peace and helped her heal. Claire has been freed to see her own gifts. The positive expectations for their relationship maintain and strengthen the mother and daughter's connection. In contrast Katherine expects her mother to be judgmental and to work unidirectionally. This one-sided division of labor has caused Katherine personal anguish that has eventually led to her erecting boundaries for protection from her mother's disempowering behavior. Now, there is little chance of mutuality and affectionate connection.

**Participatory relationship.** A participatory relationship is one of mutual influence in which those involved cooperate to support one another; there is connection in doing. I imagine this concept as a combination and reinterpretation of relational and participatory leadership practices. Within the rubric of participatory relationship, relational practice involves both the mutual concern for another's well-being and collaborative participation in decision-making so that rather than being exclusive concepts relational practice, mutuality, and collaborative participation enhance one another. A demonstrative example of participatory relationship is Emerson's story about Claire's meltdown. Emerson said that she and her mother leaned "*on one another and as I comforted her, she was doing the same with me and also walking herself through this process of problem solving where we would come up with a plan together.*" The mother and daughter worked together as a team; they brainstormed a solution to a problem and then enacted the plan which involved creating a family chore chart and buying dishes in different colors for each member of the family. The plan assigned each family member a dish color. Each member then became responsible for cleaning and putting away their own dishes. In Katherine's

story there was a lack of participatory relationship with her mother. Rather than engaging in mutual decision-making Katherine characterized her mother as wanting "*to fix everything, like she wasn't really hearing what I had to say ... There didn't seem like there was any connection there."*

Collaboration is intimately tied with participatory practice. Uhl-Bien (2006) stated that participation is relational and as such connection is built from the mutual work. Intimate work requires that connection exists before the work is undertaken. Neither comfort level nor willingness to participate in helping occurs instantaneously. It has taken the Circle time to reach their current depth of cooperation. Such affectionate connection (i.e., friendship) is grounded in perceptions of "interdependence from which emerge a sense of respect and responsibility for the welfare of self and others … [it is] a relationship among all involved. As such it is inherently participatory" (Perreault, 2005, para. 20, 22).

Participatory relationship is one of the hallmarks of the Circle. I have heard requests for practical help on occasion, such as requests for prepared meals for someone who is recuperating. The less tangible forms of requests occur frequently during Circle gatherings. In their most basic form the requests are calls and responses, the opening up by one woman and the supportive response of another. For example, Brown Sugar spoke about a woman who was challenged by her marital situation. Brown Sugar expressed a desire to "*shake her and say can't you see*;" instead, she lent support and offered advice. A different type of story came from Claire. She spoke about a woman who revealed a personal secret to the Circle. After receiving a serious medical diagnosis the woman told the group that "*I am going to need all of you ... I am going to need your support and your help, because I don't think I can get through this by myself.*" When Claire asked the woman what help she could provide the response caught Claire unprepared.

> *She said to me, "I want you to come and be with me and tell me your stories." I was floored. I expected her to say, "Come and help me do this. Come and help me do that. Be there when I…" She didn't say that, she said, "I want you to come and tell me your stories. I get so much from your stories.*

This response lifted both women; it is the essence of participatory relationship. Lewittes (1989) emphasized the importance of the reciprocity of help and support in adult women's relationships, particularly women in close relationship. Lewittes' (1989) data also suggested that there was:

> Some difference between Black and white women in the kinds of things that were exchanged in friendships. While for both groups emotional support was central, for Black women practical help, such as visiting when sick, was also an important aspect of close friendship. (p. 150)

Carolyn Coles Benton pointed out that she and I have been engaged in a participatory relationship since we began working toward a deeper understanding of the meaning the nine women make of their maternal and Circle experiences. Carolyn observed that our mutual scholarship has brought her into the Circle, and created a meaningful connection between the two of us. Carolyn's participation in the interpretative work of my dissertation has enhanced my scholarship, and our exchange of messages of support and affection during our phone conversations during the interpretative process has been a personal reminder of the uplifting nature and warm outcomes that can grow out of participatory relationship.

**Appreciative practice.** It is a fundamental human need to seek approval and a sense of belonging. Humans have an emotional investment in and a strong desire to form and maintain attachments (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Taylor et al., 1995). It is "not just about social locations and constructions of individuals and collective identities and attachments but also about the ways these are valued and judged" (Yuval-Davis, 2006, p. 203). When we feel judged in a negative way "it cuts to our core of self-image as being good, competent, and worthy" (Ely, Meyerson, & Davidson, 2006, p. 82), but when a person experiences appreciative recognition (i.e., being

known and understood for one's valued qualities and contributions) she experiences a sense of relatedness and mutuality (Roberts, 2006b).

In her assessment of Miss Sis's story Carolyn Coles Benton observed the woman demonstrated appreciative practice by making time "to listen to her daughter's concerns no matter how big or small, putting aside whatever she was doing to listen to her beloved child" (Benton, personal communication, December 9, 2012). Iman's mother showed appreciative practice though supportive language; it is part of the reason that Iman sought her mother out when she had to make an important life changing decision. Like Miss Sis's practice of taking time to listen, Iman's mother's choice of supportive language (e.g., "Don't under estimate your ability to handle things.") was a subtle gesture compared to physical affection, but these were none-the-less demonstrative of appreciative practice.

The concept of appreciate practice addresses this fundamental desire for approval with elements of positive communication which appear in the literature by a variety of names (e.g., supportive, affectionate, comforting, and celebratory communication) and affectionate behavior (e.g., gift giving, hugs, etc). MacGeorge et al. (2012) define supportive communication as "verbal and nonverbal behavior produced with the intention of providing assistance to others perceived as needing that aid" (p. 211). Appreciative practice goes beyond supportive practice and confers approval and affirms a person's positive value.

Katherine's stories of her mother's practice lacked both subtle and outright examples of appreciative practice; however, her father's practice conveyed to his daughter her worth.

> *He would buy me books like Mensa books, like the logic puzzles and critical thinking stuff. I think that part of that was he always challenged me so I always felt like he respected me, but he knew that I could do it. It wasn't, "You're not good enough." It was, "I know you're capable." He didn't have to say a whole lot for me to know that by his actions. I am more of an action person. I communicate better with actions and he was like that.*

Penelope like Katherine longed for maternal approval and affection. Penelope is not one to withhold it from her own children, as displayed in her story about going to the movies with one of her daughters: *"She leaned on me and we held hands and really had a fun time."* Emerson and Claire are exemplars of appreciative practice. Claire described in one story how she and her daughter: *"sat down on the bed (we have been very affectionate with each other; we have always been) and she put her arm around me."*

Appreciative practice frequently occurs in the Circle. I refer again to Claire's story about the woman who told of her need to undergo treatment for a serious illness. Claire told how after a *"stunned silence, each person, each woman in the Circle, went around and shared their feelings and told her how much they loved her and how much she meant to them, and how we wanted to be there for her in any way we could."* Another example came from Katherine, who talked about a woman who is not part of this study. This woman confessed she was challenged by a workplace issue.

> *It just seemed like everybody was very supportive and they pulled together and asked: "Anything you need? We'll talk to people. Hope it is going well." I know in subsequent meetings, somebody, a lot of people were asking, "What is going on with the job?" And it seemed like people were genuinely interested in her success during her struggles.*

Appreciative practice lends support and inspiration for an individual's positive identity and is "a powerful mechanism for transforming relationships from a state of damaging disconnection to one of growth-enhancing connection" (Roberts, 2006b, p. 30). Such a practice "enhances the quality of life for both parties. Both parties in the relationship experience themselves as being "better off" and being better people as a result of the relationship" (Roberts, 2006b, p. 31).

**Safeness.** In any interpersonal exchange or activity individuals evaluate personal risks to determine the level of participation (i.e., connection) with which they wish to engage. In her study of psychological safety Edmondson (1999) found that in environments where people perceive interpersonal threats to be low they are more willing to ask for help and discuss problems. The notion of safe environments can exist in the physical sense and in the relational. A physical place of safety may exist for one person behind a locked door and for another as a place where friends are engaged in relational practice. This latter case could be little more than a table in the corner of a coffee shop. Physical place did not appear to play a significant role in this study. Physical place acted as setting only in Emerson and Claire's story about intimate sharing and affectionate connection. Emerson said that bedrooms were important settings for intimate sharing, because her family understood they were spaces where privacy could be preserved. Physical place was important in Claire's story. She made a conscientious effort to make it clear that her intimate mud play occurred in a very private place, somewhere no one could intrude visually.

The talking circle is a mixture of physical place and relational practice. The talking circle endeavors to create safety not as much from the place as from the practice. In discussing the Circle, Iman characterized safety as practice. Iman referenced an occasion when one member shared an intimate story of abuse. Iman thought this intimate sharing epitomized Circle practice.

> *That women who have gone through something as challenging, as difficult emotionally, sometimes even life shattering in some aspects, would feel to such a degree of comfort that they would be willing to open the door and places within themselves, that for me, I think, it was that conversation for me. Well, I guess you could say clarified for me that the Circle was doing what it was designed to do which was to give a safe place for women to be themselves, to share what they needed to share or wanted to share, or felt they needed and wanted to share.*

Baldwin and Linnea (2010) described safety arising from practice as a shared responsibility which "breaks old patterns of dominance and passivity and calls people to safeguard the quality of the experience" (p. 27). Miczo (2012) states that "reflective conversation is premised on the notion that we have created a safe space in which to appear to each other" (p. 77) and as a result the quality of the experience and connection and the resultant well-being of the participants are preserved by each person's consideration of the impact of their words and actions (Baldwin & Linnea, 2010). Tammy's personal view of safety had less to do with place and more to do with relationship.

> *It is not so much a physical place than the level you are with a person. I think your expectations kind of set the safeness; I mean they go together. I know that when I am with people who love me then the place is safe no matter the topic. No matter where I am emotionally, I am at a safe place. Can that be duplicated with people who don't love you? Yes, 'cause I know I am also in a safe space when I am at work even though those people don't love me and I don't love them, because the rules are established.*

Safety is another example of how intertwined the concepts of interpersonal communication and relationship are, because in the consideration of how one's words will impact another is the notion of boundary management, and the management of boundaries suggests the construction of spaces to preserve feelings of safety.

**Mindfulness.** Mindfulness, as used here, is a reimagining of Bentz and Shapiro's (1998) concept of a mindful inquirer into the context of affectionate connection. In this reconstitution mindfulness connects an individual's inner self, her assumptions and commitments, with the way she engages the world. It is a thoughtful engagement undistorted by power relations and with a conscientiousness regarding how to treat others. In so doing the individual and the other are positively connected and transformed.

Both positive and negative examples of mindfulness appeared in the women's stories. These practices occurred in relation to how daughters related to mothers and vice versa. Claire is a devoted mother who only has positive things to say about Emerson's practices. Claire said about Emerson: *"She doesn't talk to people in terms of telling them or giving them advice; in other words, she is not one to say, "You should do this. You should do that." She doesn't do that."* Miss Sis also has a strong affectionate connection with her daughter, who she characterized as a chatterbox. It was her daughter's insistence for attention without apparent consideration that her mother might be otherwise engaged that created consternation and referenced a lack of mindfulness. *She never says, "Mom," rarely does she say, "Mom are you in the middle of something," or "Mom is this a good time to talk." She just starts talking.* Tammy's story about openness with her mother seemed the epitome of affectionate connection to me, so I was surprised by Carolyn Coles Benton's assessment of Tammy's story. Carolyn characterized Tammy's phone call to discuss her loss of virginity with her mother as the antithesis of mindfulness. "*By sharing this information on the telephone with her mother, was a message that showed she really didn't care about her mother's feelings and attitude in regarding this subject. As an adult she should have had some idea of her mother's reaction on learning this news."* (Carolyn Coles Benton, personal communication, January 28, 2013). Carolyn was aware that hers was a personal opinion, a *"value judgment as a baby boomer."*

Iman and Rose, however, told stories of maternal mindfulness. Claire's story was the opposite. She described her mother as controlling and autocratic and unmindful of how such behavior affected her children's psyches. Other women who experienced problems as a consequence of their mother's lack of mindfulness were Katherine, Penelope and Brown Sugar.

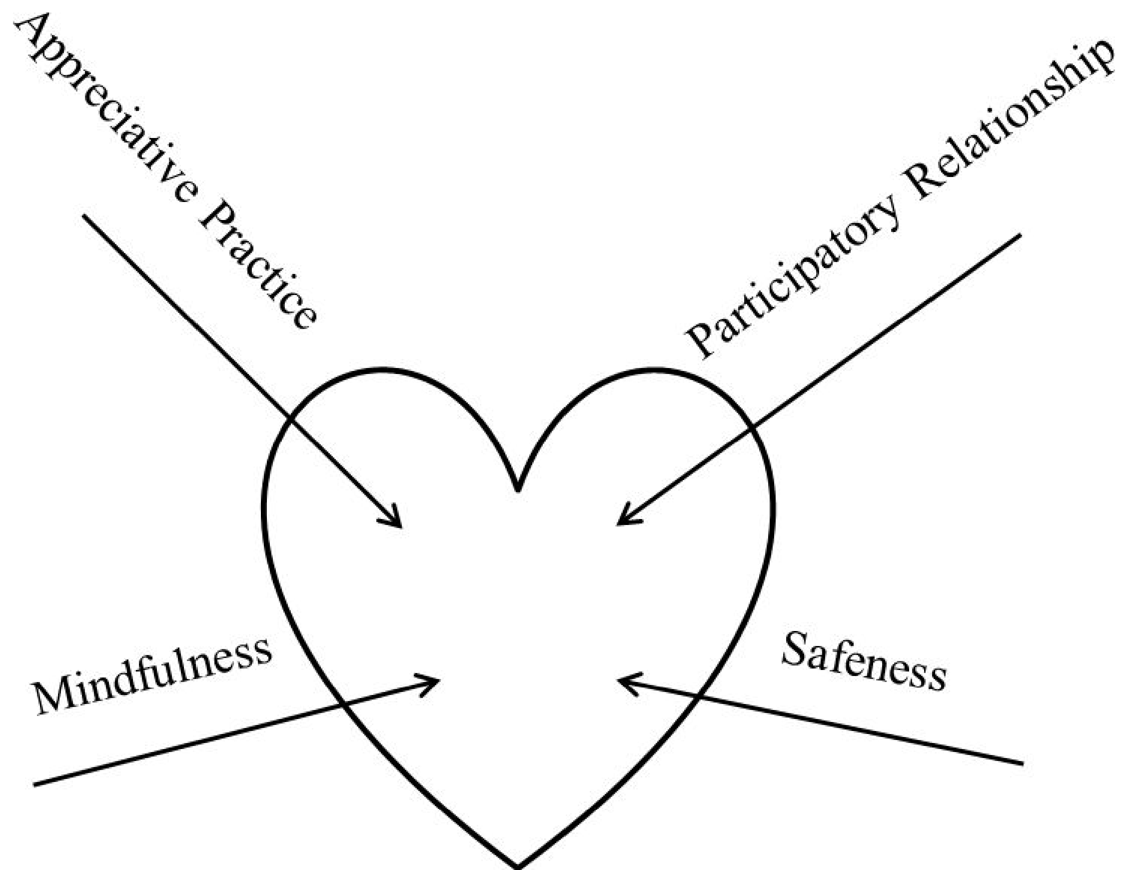


*Figure 5.2* Components of affectionate connection

Harkening back to Dutton and Heaphy's (2003) analogy of high quality connection as a vessel providing nourishment to relationship, four components were discussed in this section as contributing to affectionate connection (see Figure 5.2). In participatory relationship it is the doing or action that results in relationship and the relationship encourages mutual sharing of the task. Appreciative practice recognizes the human need for approval and a desire to belong that is fulfilled by communication that affirms and recognizes the other. Safeness is a relational practice that promotes mindful behavior and encourages intimate sharing. Together, these four components insure that the work invested in creating affectionate connection is transformational.

**Nurturing Practice**

Women do not always recognize that what they do as mothers and grandmothers, as sisters and as friends, is leadership. Leadership can be defined in many ways. One of the most fundamental is that leadership is the power of a person to influence another through ideas and by example, something mothers and grandmothers do on a daily basis. The "female leadership voice is gained through the example of role modeling, mentoring, and coaching" (McLeod, 2012, p. 20). While there is much discussion in the literature about whether there is a singular female style of leadership, it is generally agreed that women attend to the growth and development of people around them (Erkut & Winds of Change Foundation, 2001). Meyerson, Ely, and Wernick's (2007) position is that a gendered-comparative approach to leadership has outlived its usefulness. They argue that the focus, rather than being on a comparison of men's versus women's styles, should be on what leaders value and how leaders accomplish their work. This perspective directs those interested in the study of leadership to examine behaviors that are most effective in a given situation.

Two forms of women's leadership (see Figure 5.3) emerged during the assessment of the women's stories. Both are practices that nurture connection and positive communication, and both share many of the same elements such as intimate sharing, affectionate connection, and appreciative practice. Motherwork recognizes the work women do as mothers. This concept has been described before in the literature, but sistership is my own term. This latter concept originated from the women's stories of relationships and has more to do with friendship as leadership and play as connection. Neither term is mutually exclusive, so elements from the other and from previously discussed concepts overlap.

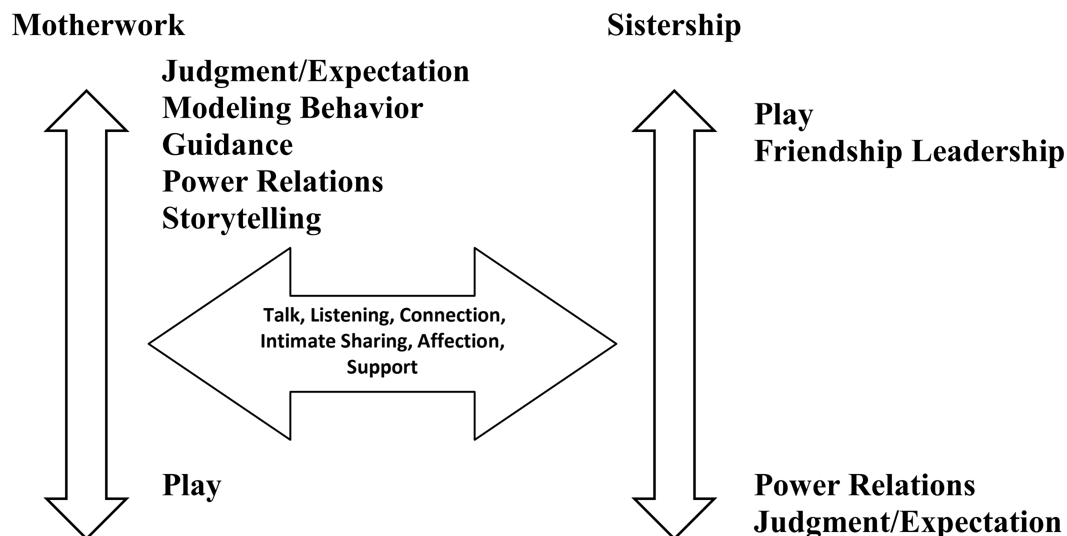


*Figure 5.3* Comparison of motherwork to sistership

**Motherwork.** Marie Porter (2008) identified motherwork as an expression of a mother's agency and ability to change herself and her child. The "relationship is one of power which transforms both the child into an adult and the mother into a multi-skilled, capable woman in many essential areas of life" (p. 2). This power is a link between a mother's nurturing practice and her intergenerational legacy. The link between generations is deeply understood within the Indigenous community. Kenny (2012) wrote about the principle of seven generations; it "instructs us to reflect on our actions and to be aware of the consequences of these actions seven generations hence" (p. 3). Thus, a mother's actions have implications for future generations and come to her from the past.

***Storytelling.*** A common way to bring teachings forward is though stories. "Stories provide many of the guiding lights to show us our way" (Kenny, 2012, p. 4). Kellett (2012) observed that even on an intuitive level we know that stories help us learn about life from others as well as our own past. We can learn from both positive stories as well as negative ones. In the latter case learning arises when "we can become more critically aware and understanding of how

and why we experience the conflicts that we do" (p. 183). Storytelling, however, is more than a generational passing of stories for the sake of teaching—it can also be highly entertaining. In a study of two mother-daughter dyads, one older, the other younger, Fingerman (2000) found that younger daughters preferred their mothers to act as sounding boards while older daughters enjoyed listening to their mother's stories about the past.

Claire associated storytelling with her cultural heritage. Claire, who grew up in Appalachia, described her grandmother and her mother as excellent storytellers. Storytelling was a way for these women to preserve tradition, keep their family history alive, and to teach values. Claire views herself, her daughter Emerson, and her eight-year-old granddaughter as storytellers.

> *It is a theme in our family; that if we want to make a point or teach a value or share something it is usually in the form of a story ... For me, it is much more effective if you want to share something of value to put it into a story. Let the receiver of the story co-create the meaning with you and make their own journey to whatever you're trying to share.*

In the nine women's narratives storytelling was often used as device to avoid confrontation and camouflage lessons. Rose's mother used storytelling as a way to convey the positive and highlight *"accomplishments that existed … and when she felt or analyzed that it was safe to move on she introduced various social elements of charity and giving*" (Carolyn Coles Benton, personal communication, December 9, 2012). This talent for motherwork and specifically for storytelling was passed on to Rose, who is adept in the nurturing art of storytelling.

> *You can give a life lesson without someone having to know that you were either a casualty or a participant. I think that is the beauty of caring about someone else ... If you're open-minded you're trying to either tell a story or give them examples of an experience that they can benefit either by not having experienced it or know that this is what can potentially happen. Then allow that person to pick up that item and keep on going.*

Tammy, who is young enough to be Rose's granddaughter, appreciates Rose's storytelling. For Tammy, Rose's stories provide a living connection with the past. Tammy recounted one story in particular.

> *It was probably one of the most vivid conversations. I could see her home in my mind. I could see her grandfather's hand. I could see the people, the colors, the smells, and places. And it wasn't so much the different individuals giving or sharing it was that snippet of finding out about not just her past, but the past and what it used to be like with African American families. I read a lot, like Nikki Giovanni. I hear stories ...but to hear Miss Rose tell about those things made it come alive. It made it not a thing of books, but a thing of people.*

**Sistership.** Sistership and motherwork have much in common. Both involve supportive and affectionate behavior. Mothering is not always work; at times the mother-daughter relationship may bear more resemblance to friendship than the work of a parent with a child. Historically, responsibility of a mother to protect and guide her child has been a central principal of motherwork (Porter, 2008). There are responsibilities in sistership too but they grow from the relationship rather than because of it. Lewittes (1989) wrote about the chemistry that exists between close friends, a situation that allows them to communicate with ease. The perceptions of connection and interdependence of friends:

> Diminish the likelihood that criticism would be taken as a personal attack. If two people respect each other, criticism by one or the other is less likely to be perceived as a message about her/his inherent unworthiness; the connection of respect is there to sustain the relationship (Perreault, 2005, para. 49).

Two areas where sistership differs from motherwork are in the relative lack of judgmental communication and the increased likelihood of play as a contributing component in the relationship.

***Judgment/expectation.*** Perreault (2005) envisioned friendship as leadership. She wrote that genuine friendship is a relationship where:

> One seeks the welfare not only of oneself but also of the other. Friends feel a connection with each other, listen and seek to understand, respect each other, and support each other but are not afraid to voice criticism of potential errors and misjudgments. (para. 15)

The willingness to voice criticism, however, is not the same as passing judgment on another. Lewittes (1989) noted: "Typically when women explain the difference between family and friends, the issue of being judged is raised. Relatives, even if they are close, often have expectations of each other and a personal stake in each other's actions and decisions" (p. 147). Judgmental communication, direct or indirect, was one of two elements that set the practice of motherwork apart from sistership. As an example, Katherine's stories contained numerous statements about her mother's judgmental communication. It was apparent in Katherine's stories that her mother's proclivity for judgmental statements was a major barrier to a mutual interpersonal exchange (Mirival, 2012). Katherine has tried consciously to avoid such dialogue with her own children.

> *I don't try to superimpose what I think they should do or like some parents that tell their children, "You should be a doctor or lawyer." You should do this. I just want my kids to be happy, and I know that God has a purpose for them. And it is my job to help them figure that out, but not tell them what it is.*

Iman found her mother more supportive in her communication; however, as the following excerpt shows she was well aware of her mother's underlying judgment.

> *She still would support me, even though she didn't like the choice I made, even though she was very concerned about the choices I made, even though she probably thought I should make better choices and maybe I should have at that point and time. She would still support me. She would try to balance what she said, and how she said it. She wouldn't just come out and say, "You're a fool and what are you crazy?" She may have thought that* [Iman laughs] *but she never would ever say that. You could see it on her face.*

Tammy was unprepared for her mother's reaction to the news of her daughter's sexual activity. Tammy felt the relationship with her mother was equivalent to sistership, but her mother's strong physical reaction spoke otherwise.

While there is concern for the other in sistership, the weight is carried differently. Emerson's story about her relationship with Brown Sugar is demonstrative.

> *No matter what we are crying about, or what we are struggling with, or when we are sharing these things that we don't know, we don't know how to deal with at the time, we end up, at least, end up somehow laughing.*

Circle practice is designed to support sistership. Katherine believes the women feel comfortable expressing their opinions but she said it is done in a way that does not imply judgment:

> *Even when there is a difference of opinion it seems like it is dealt with in a very respectful way. Like "I don't agree with you and this is why I don't agree with you," but it doesn't ever seem like it gets personal, like "You're wrong, I can't believe you think that."*

***Play.*** Research on play has shown that adults, like children, benefit from play. One benefit for adults is its role in the alleviation of stress (Wenner, 2009). Play can also help build connection between those who engage in it. Play can take many forms, from crafting, physical activity, or small talk. This latter form is what makes the women of the Circle sisters. They laugh, they share food, and they talk. It isn't always serious talk. The Circle is a place where the women come to engage with others. Iman said that the women: *"like the energy, they like the company, they like the conversation, and it is something they look forward to once a month."*

In instances where play was mentioned during storytelling it was the younger women who initiated the activity. For example, Emerson invited her mother to play in the mud, and while Penelope suggested going to a movie to her daughter she is one of the younger women in this study. Tammy, almost the youngest woman in the study, highlighted the different style of

communication between her friends and the women of the Circle. In the Circle there is a format and rules of conversational practice to follow. With friends of her own age Tammy said the conversation is *"One big, kind of a blob … I offer you this and then you offer me this. It is like taking a stew and you keep throwing carrots in it. You don't even remember who said what.* [Tammy laughs]. *It's just all there."*

Like Tammy's stew metaphor, there is a multiplicity of interacting factors that make the job of describing intergenerational communication a complex one, and in creating categories or themes that are distinctly unique from the others. As Carol Smart (2009) wisely observed: "life is messy and complex." She encouraged those who undertake qualitative methods to "grasp the mess and represent it without forcing coherence and logic to the experience" (p. 2). Because of this messiness many of the elements of women's positive relational practice (see Figure 5.4) have appeared in previous sections of this chapter; one of these elements is listening. For

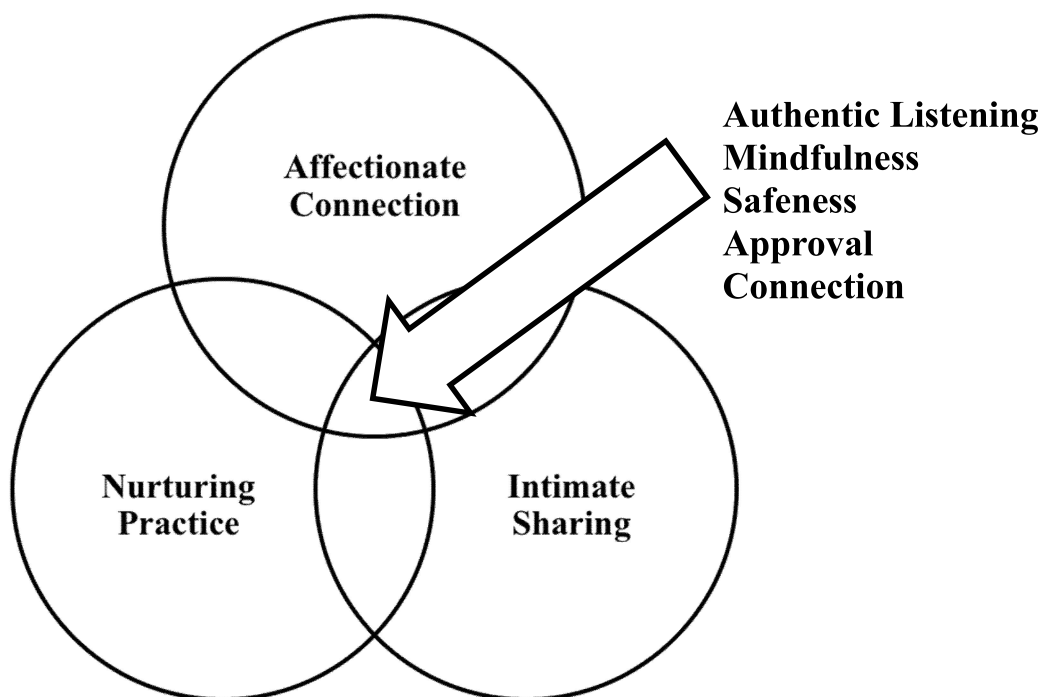


*Figure 5.4* Women's positive relational practice

example, listening, as it is done by Miss Sis with her daughter, demonstrates affectionate connection and promotes intimate sharing, and in the absence of listening, as Katherine's story demonstrates, intimate sharing and affectionate connection are inhibited. Because of listening's importance to women's positive relational practice and its contribution to connection and positive communication listening warranted being discussed on its own merits.

**Authentic Listening**

From the broad context of research "across communication and allied fields, it is clear that listening is an important and positive communication behavior" (Bodie, 2012, p. 120). And from the more personal perspective of individuals it also is clear that "listening is deeply rooted in the context of its ability to help create, maintain, and enhance positive interpersonal relationships" (p. 109). Authentic listening is a mindful practice; it signals engagement by the listener and gives the impression to the speaker that she has something worthwhile to say (Miczo, 2012).

**Listening.** Miss Sis's story reflects a belief that listening is important work for a mother to do. Miss Sis said she is always ready to put aside whatever she is doing to listen to her daughter. As a result her daughter, now married, still seeks Miss Sis's ear. *"For instance, if I am at home and she is out and about she will call me, because she has a conversation she wants to have with me. She wants to share something with me."* Their connection, supported in part by listening, has value for both mother and daughter. Katherine also believes deeply in the importance of listening. She is all too familiar with the heartache of a mother who is incapable of authentic listening. Katherine suggested her children freely come to her because they know that she is *"going to listen and try to talk them through it. But I have had professional counseling, training on listening and feedback."*

Listening is central to the mindful practice of the Circle. Iman thinks the tone of the Circle is created by the people *"and their willingness to share as well as their willingness to listen. This is what creates that space."* Rose has a more global view of the importance of listening. She believes: *"As human beings we always have to try to stay open and listen to what someone else is expressing and then at that point try to meet it and that is where reasoning takes place."*

Listening was a core element in this study. I listened to the nine women as they told their stories. I listened more deeply as I read their stories. I listened as Carolyn offered her personal perspective, and I listened as I read the perspectives of the many voices published in the literature. I also listened to my own voice as it spoke about past experiences, reflected on current ones, and pondered future implications. All have held my attention as I listened and thought about the meanings. I shared some of these thoughts and their implications in this chapter and the previous one. What remains is to, as the expression goes, come full circle. It is time to discuss what we can learn from the women's stories of intergenerational communication. How do these stories contribute to our understanding of and desire to promote connection and positive communication between generations?

## Chapter VI: Discussion

Although there have been voices in the past, for example, in the 1950s Abraham Maslow, one of the founders of humanistic psychology (Roberts, 2006a) and Drury et al. (1998), who have drawn attention to the need for positive scholarship, it is only in the 21st century that the concept has become a field in its own right as well as incorporated into others, as is evidenced by the plethora of work in positive psychology. There is a growing proliferation of publications on positive scholarship including a special February 2009 issue of the *Journal of Organizational Behavior* dedicated entirely to *The Emerging Positive Agenda* and the 2012 book *The positive side of interpersonal communication* edited by Socha and Pitts (2012). Positive scholarship is "an organizing frame for current and future research on positive states, outcomes, and generative mechanisms in individuals, dyads, groups, organizations, and societies" (Roberts, 2006a), and it is within this frame that my research is situated. My intent in studying the nine women's narratives of their memorable communicative experiences with their mothers, grandmothers, and daughters was to gain a deeper understanding of how women make meaning of their intergenerational experiences and in doing so contribute to the scholarship on positive intergenerational communication. I began with two questions—questions that have received little attention in the literature thus far; these were: How do women's interpretations of their experiences of intergenerational communication contribute to their sense of connectedness, and how do the communication experiences of women across generations promote an understanding and development of positive communication? Within the four overarching themes (i.e., intimate sharing, affectionate connection, nurturing practice, and authentic listening) that emerged during the storytelling, five subthemes (i.e., power relations/forgiveness, secrets/disclosure, participatory relationship, appreciative practice, and mindfulness) and one secondary subtheme

(i.e., play) provide insight into the link between past experiences and sense of connectedness. One subtheme (i.e., listening) and two secondary subthemes (i.e., storytelling and judgment/expectation) have implications for positive intergenerational communication (see Table 6.1).

Table 6.1

*Application of Subthemes to Dissertation Questions*

| Emergent Themes/Subthemes | Sense of Connectedness | Communication Experience |
|---|---|---|
| **Intimate Sharing** | | |
| Emotional Control | | |
| Power Relations/Forgiveness | X | |
| Secrets/Disclosure | X | |
| **Affectionate Connection** | | |
| Participatory Relationship | X | |
| Appreciative Practice | X | |
| Safeness | | |
| Mindfulness | X | |
| **Nurturing Practice** | | |
| Motherwork | | |
| Storytelling | | X |
| Sistership | | |
| Judgment/Expectation | | X |
| Play | X | |
| **Authentic Listening** | | |
| Listening | | X |

In this chapter I discuss how these six subthemes and three secondary subthemes relate to the two dissertation questions. I begin with the question of women's interpretations of intergenerational communication and how six subthemes and one secondary subtheme contribute to a woman's sense of connectedness. At the end of the section I summarize the major principles that emerged during the study. In the second section I discuss one subtheme and two secondary subthemes that relate to a woman's communication experience across generations and how these

shape positive communication. Following a summary of major principles I offer a final analysis highlighting the three concepts that distinguish this study from previous ones. I conclude the chapter with a section on limitations situated within the study and another on implications for future research. As the field of positive scholarship is in its early phase and as little work has been done thus far on positive intergenerational communication, I believe this statement by Roberts (2006b) is particularly apt here: This "chapter should be read as a series of propositions rather than conclusive findings, intended to spark interest in systematic investigations" (p. 38) of positive intergenerational communication and relationship.

**Sense of Connectedness**

A challenge arose in deciding under which question heading (i.e., sense of connectedness or communication experience) each of the subthemes would be most appropriately discussed. The challenge stemmed from the fact that the questions of connectedness and communication are interrelated. A sense of connectedness enhances the possibility for positive communication, and positive communication contributes to feelings of connection between interlocutors. Furthermore, the six subthemes contributed to both connectedness and positive communication. Therefore, a certain amount of subjectivity was involved in the assignment. The determination was based on whether I felt the subtheme contributed more to relationship or more directly to communication. I admit the process was imprecise, but the intention was to assign subthemes that were most salient to the research questions. This assignment of subthemes to one of the two questions made the discussion clearer and more robust. Six subthemes (i.e., power relations/forgiveness, secrecy/disclosure, participatory practice, appreciative practice, mindfulness) and one secondary subtheme (i.e., play) will be discussed in this section on sense of connectedness.

**Power relations/forgiveness.** Conflict is a normal part of any intimate relationship (Drury et al., 1998). The presence of conflict can have both healthy as well as unhealthy consequences for a relationship. Issues of respect are a source of conflict in mother-daughter relationships (Dixon, Graber, & Brooks-Gunn, 2008), and, while respect played a role in the nine women's stories, what was far more likely to generate conflict was the difference in parenting style (i.e., authoritative versus authoritarian) and a daughter's reaction to the perception of the mother's unwarranted use of power.

Bljczyk et al. (2011) called attention to an important issue that studies which link past experience to mother-daughter relationships face. Experiences, especially those from childhood, are altered by memory and by reconstructions created by the meaning making that takes place in the present. Despite the passage of time, the past still evoked a strong emotional response for some of the women, and one area of emotional conflict that was frequently discussed was a perceived imbalance of power between a past self, sometimes continuing into the current self, and a mother or grandmother. This conflict caused an emotional and sometimes communicative disconnection between the woman and her maternal relative. While the women discussed these past struggles with a mother or grandmother, there were only a few cases where a woman acknowledged the power she exerted over her own daughter.

Tammy's story was the only one to lack a reference to power. Emerson acknowledged one when she characterized her mother as a parent first, yet she also stated that her mother was *"very empowering"* and that *"she was always uplifting me ... put me into the lead role."* Claire's parenting style is authoritative. Dixon et al. (2008) define this as "parenting behaviors including reasoning with their children about problems, encouraging independence, and using less physical punishment" (p. 2). Claire and Emerson who are the only mother-daughter pair in this study have

a strong bond, a fact independently corroborated by both. Claire noticed her parenting practices were evident in the way Emerson interacted with her own daughter. Emerson was aware that similar patterns were emerging in her eight-year-old daughter's behavior, thus Claire's authoritative style has been transferred to the third generation. Rose also appears to have had an authoritative style of parenting and, like Emerson, Rose modeled the practice after her mother. Rose said of her mother: *"She would always tell me, it was one of those things from Deuteronomy 6 where it says, you ought to teach your children as you go out, and as you come in, as you sit down, as you rise up."* According to Erkut & Winds of Change Foundation (2001) "motherhood is a symbol of power in the African American community. Powerful mothers do not dominate or control but bring people along, 'uplift the race,' so that vulnerable members of the community will be able to attain self reliance" (p. 80). The conflicts Miss Sis and Iman experienced with their mothers as adolescents have dissipated. Miss Sis testified, *"I love my mom more than anything."* Iman's narrative spoke of a willingness to seek her mother's advice in making a life changing decision.

Brown Sugar and Penelope, women who characterized their childhood relationship with their mothers as disconnected, offered forgiveness as a means to achieve connection. Penelope's desire to connect was successful; Brown Sugar's story is less conclusive, but suggests she remains open to the possibility. Claire and Katherine continue to have strong negative emotional responses to their mother's authoritarian parenting style. Claire described her mother as *"the one in control. She had the last say, and part of respect meant you were totally obedient."* Claire is dutiful to her elderly mother, but does not share the same deep emotional connection she has with her daughter Emerson. Katherine is the most disconnected from her mother among the nine women. Katherine characterized her mother as extremely authoritarian, and it has taken

Katherine years to learn to set stiff boundaries to contain her mother's hurtful behavior. While this disconnection from her mother continues Katherine inferred her own style of parenting is authoritative and that she has a connected relationship with her own children. Therefore, four women in this study experienced some level of disconnection with their mother as a consequence of authoritarian practice.

Claire, even though she is oppressed by her mother's practice, remains dutifully connected to her mother. Katherine, however, continues to be disconnected. Forgiveness is not part of either woman's narrative, but it is part of Penelope and Brown Sugar's stories. Forgiveness is a positive behavioral construct (Luthans & Avolio, 2009) and one that Penelope has found successful in building connection. Penington (2004) noted that crosscultural communication models show variation in the value orientations among ethnic groups. Penington used a qualitative approach in her study of connection and autonomy in seven African American and seven EuroAmerican mother-daughter pairs from a large Midwestern city. She proposed that values of individualism versus collectivism might be useful in studying connection and autonomy because "Those in individualistic cultures put personal needs before the needs of their in-group. They value freedom, self-reliance, and uniqueness. Collective cultures, on the other hand, perceive group needs as primary, and emphasize conformity, cooperation, and harmony" (p. 5). Dixon et al.'s (2008) work is also useful in a discussion of cultural variations; their study looked at differences in attitude to respect and parental authority. Dixon et al. were interested in how notions of respect differed and how these affected the conflict that occurs between African American, Latino, and European American mothers and their daughters. One of their findings was that Latina and African American girls scored significantly higher on respect for parental authority than European American girls, and that conflict between the Latina and African

American girls and their mothers was more intense than their European American counterparts. The researchers proposed the reason for this was due to the Latina and African American mother's high expectation that their daughters would respect their authority. In terms of culture it is likely that Claire's Appalachian heritage makes her more like Penelope and Brown Sugar than Katherine. Claire's heritage is rooted in collectivism and there is a strong history of respect for parental authority. Katherine, on the other hand, was adopted as a child. As it is impossible to refer to her history, it is necessary to reflect on the socialization she received from her adoptive family. While Katherine maintains a strong faith in Christianity, she does not follow the Biblical commandment of respect for her mother.

Rose and Brown Sugar both grew up with an extended family in close proximity. Theirs was a childhood spent with three generations living under a single roof. Additionally, Rose's mother exposed her daughter to the idea that community extended beyond her blood family. Penelope's childhood experience also was in the context of a large family. She was one of six children who were raised by their grandmother. Penelope's was a community experience not only because of the number of her siblings but also because of the shifting nature of relationships that occurred in their grandmother's house. If, as Dixon et al. (2008) suggest, "within African American families, an extremely high value is placed on respecting, obeying, and learning from elders in the kinship network and community" (p. 2) then there is a likelihood that Brown Sugar and Penelope's use of forgiveness is borne from their collective cultural experience and a tradition of respect. Despite the dislocation and disconnection Penelope experienced as a child she admires at least one positive quality in both her grandmother and her mother; it is their strength. *"They had the same type of strength. They were just able to use it in different ways. I think they have passed that on to me, because I have a little bit of both of them which I am very*

*thankful for."* Penelope demonstrated what Davidson and James (2006) characterized as competency for learning in relationship. Penelope established connection with her grandmother and mother by reframing past conflict. She showed personal growth in this competence to step beyond the conflict and transform it into a sense of positive connection between the generations.

Of the nine women who participated in this study all but Tammy have daughters. I have already mentioned that the women rarely spoke about their use of authority when dealing with their daughters. The paucity of negative descriptions is probably attributable to a phenomenon commonly observed in mother-daughter research; mothers consistently view relationships with their children more positively than their children do (Fingerman, 2000). Claire spoke most about her parenting style. Her decision to rely on an authoritative style comes from a determination made long ago not to treat her own children in the same authoritarian manner as her mother. Miss Sis, who talked a good deal about her daughter, shared little about her own parenting style. She did at one point indicate her daughter pulled away from their relationship, possibly because of authoritarian practices that may be linked to the family's religious practice. An examination of Miss Sis's personal parenting style suggests a mix of authoritative and authoritarian practice. Miss Sis said about conflicts with her daughter: *"I have fought for the connection with her because there are times when we have had a gulf between us also, but I never gave up."* Miss Sis's story suggests she has been successful in maintaining connection. As for Penelope, her actions during my visit to her home might have indicated an authoritarian style but her narrative spoke of a woman who tries to balance friendship with the responsibilities of motherhood. In Penelope's story about her daughters arguing and the decision to cancel a slumber party she said:

> *There was not much of a dialog. I think when it comes to being a mother compared to a friend, that's how that goes. I do give my kids choices, and I did at that time and they made the wrong choice, because they did what I asked them not to. So that is the consequence.*

The above quotation suggests this particular aspect of Penelope's parenting style is better described as disciplinarian rather than authoritarian.

Tammy and Emerson, the two youngest women in this study, feel they have a more equitable relationship with their mothers in comparison to the other women in this study. They also feel a strong connection with their mothers. Penelope who is next in age had issues with her mother but offered forgiveness and as a result was able to establish connection. Much has already been said about Katherine's negative reaction to her mother's authoritarian style of parenting. Katherine is only a few years older than Penelope. Thus a diversity of response to parenting style spans the younger age group. This is also true in the older groups but it is only in the case of the youngest women that the suggestion of equanimity with the mother was expressed. Authoritative parenting style may account for this.

The women who belong to the Circle have come from a range of intergenerational relational experiences from highly authoritative to equitable. The practices of the Circle which allow equal opportunity for a woman to express herself with as much time as she needs appear to be effective in removing the stigma of power imbalance that some have personally experienced. Power, rather than being a notion of dominion over another, thus has become the power to change oneself and others (Surrey, 1991). Respect bridges the differences of race, culture, and generation. This willingness to bring one's best self is exemplified by the fact that in nearly two years of participation I have never witnessed a woman be denied access to or a chance to fully express herself in the Circle; to the contrary, I have observed women delay their turn and to offer it to someone else who seemed anxious to share her own thoughts. Freewill operates in the Circle, something that is not typically available in familial situations. Connection in the Circle may come about because the women have "a willingness and ability to learn about others and

skill in managing the differences (Davidson & James, 2006, p. 154). The women have the freedom to participate in the group whenever they want and the skill to manage the differences they bring with them from their familial relationships. The Circle is by no means a utopia. Conflicts do arise. Tension, however, has generally been met as opportunity, a chance to explore how the group can be more mindful and balanced in practice going forward.

**Secrets/disclosure.** Everyone has secrets. Secrets serve many purposes. Some may seem of less consequence than others, for example, not telling a co-worker she has a piece of food stuck in her teeth versus not telling her she is about to be fired. It is difficult to say which, if any, secrets are truly less consequential than another especially without knowing the context and the person involved. In this study the most common reason for keeping secrets was for emotional protection. There were instances of parents who wished to protect their children from the harsh realities of the adult world, as in Rose's family who kept many secrets. There were things they "*just didn't talk about it; things that made us sad. We just didn't talk about it. We just live through them."* Secrets also were used by individuals who wished to protect their own psyches. In terms of connection, it is the disclosure not the secrets that are more important.

There was a pattern involved in Emerson and Claire's disclosure. It required a private place for them to exchange their call and response, an invitation to disclose and an openness to receive. This openness to disclosure explains why their mother-daughter relationship has a strong friendship component (Lewittes, 1989). Emerson uses a similar call and response approach with Brown Sugar, again to signal a readiness for disclosure. Emerson's use of the behavior suggests that Claire has acted as an effective role model. Iman's narrative was similar, not in detail, but in her willingness to disclose to her mother. This situation did not seem to run throughout Iman's life but by the time Iman had become an adult she had a comfortable enough relationship with

her mother to reveal certain facts in order to receive support. This may not be evidence of friendship but it is of trust. Tammy was the only other woman in the study who evidenced openness to disclosure with her mother. Tammy's narrative portrayed a young woman with a close bond with her mother, and disclosure seemed natural. Tammy's story does not indicate whether disclosure flows in both directions. However, after Tammy's mother recovered from Tammy's disclosure of sexual intimacy the mother did nothing to discourage future disclosures on the part of her daughter. Brown Sugar has tried to establish trust and connection with her own daughter since she was able to disclose the truth about the girl's parentage. Rose had to have her secrets unwrapped for her by siblings and an aunt. I can only speculate why these individuals and not her mother or grandmother were the ones to provide the details hidden in the secrets. It seems likely that the siblings and the aunt either did not imagine Rose experiencing any serious harm in the disclosure or they were far enough removed from the meaning of the stories not to be embarrassed or threatened to tell the stories.

Dixon et al. (2008) note there have been few studies that have examined mother-daughter relationships among families within different cultural contexts, so it is difficult to do more than speculate about variation in this study. Any further speculation about connection must recognize that "family communication is a significant context where constructing and managing individuals' ethnic or 'racial' identity takes place" (Socha & Diggs, 1999, p. 5). Other factors such as the role of socioeconomics must also be taken into consideration.

There appears to be no consistent generational trend regarding disclosure. Disclosure was just as likely to occur at the younger (i.e., Emerson and Tammy) as at the oldest end (i.e., Claire and Brown Sugar). From Tammy's loss of virginity to Brown Sugar's desire to disclose to her

daughter the truth about her parentage, the depth of intimacy seems equivalently weighted across the generations.

Within the Circle disclosure is a matter of personal practice and mutual respect. In terms of practice no one is expected to disclose secrets. The women are free to come to group meetings and to share when they are moved to do so. In terms of respect when a woman chooses to reveal herself, the expectation is that their secret is kept within the Circle. These "expectations create the possibility for greater self-discovery and a heighted sense of self-efficacy" (Roberts, 2006b). Women of varied backgrounds and intergenerational experiences have disclosed stories of an intimate nature in the Circle. The stories ranged from abuse and oppression to illness and self-doubt. This type of talk has been characterized by Tannen (2006) as rapport-talk. "It invites the other person to express sympathy, display understanding, and recount similar experiences" (pp. 83-84).This depth of personal exposure is demonstrative of the trust and connection that exists within the Circle. There appears to be no significant difference between generations in the willingness to disclose. As the younger women appear to have more access to friends for intimate disclosure (Lewittes, 1989) and they have their mothers with whom to share, it may be the older women who benefit more from the Circle because they have less access to a safe place for intimate sharing. The opportunity for intimate sharing may be what brings women into the Circle and also what motivates them to leave. The membership of the group is fluid. Some people have come and gone; some have remained over the duration of the Circle's existence. There is no way to know whether a norm of self-disclosure was the reason for their departure, but it would seem it is part of the reason women stay.

**Participatory practice.** At the core of participatory relationship is connection, and it is this connection that permits collaboration in the doing. Connection can be accomplished with

mindfulness, but when affection is the ingredient the result is a stronger bond. Collaboration in the doing depends on the issues of power being resolved. Fingerman (2000) concluded that there is a basic and natural imbalance in the mother-daughter connection. “Mothers appear to be more invested in their daughters than the reverse throughout adulthood” (p. 102). A further imbalance is suggested by Bljczk et al. (2011) whose research discovered: “Mothers were considered role models (positive and negative) for their daughters, but daughters were not viewed as role models in important ways for their mothers” (p. 470). Such findings lead to the possibility that a mother’s opinion is likely to carry more weight in any mother-daughter decision-making process. Thus, even when participatory practice between mother and daughter is mutual it is unlikely to be equal.

Emerson’s story about seeking a solution with Claire to a kitchen problem provided an exemplar of participatory relationship. Claire’s story about Emerson’s invitation to play in the mud demonstrates that she held her daughter responsible for the doing. Iman’s story exhibited a similar variation of participatory relationship. Hers involved decision-making only, and Iman’s mother left the doing to her daughter. Tammy’s mother was not involved in the decision-making that led to Tammy’s sexual encounter; however, Tammy involved her mother in the decision-making that occurred after the encounter. Participatory relationships in the other women’s stories also tended to be balanced in one direction. The issue of maternal control was an obstacle to equal participation. In the best cases the doing was more equivalent to mother’s guiding their daughters (i.e., motherwork), in the worst total control by one party prevented any participation by the other. Katherine’s mother, for example, maintained control of all situations. Katherine’s mother kept herself in the position to fix any problem. For a long time Katherine believed that *“Mom was always right and you should listen and do what she says.”* Growing up, Claire

experienced a similar situation to Katherine; however, now that Claire's mother is elderly the responsibility for the doing often falls to Claire though her mother still tries to maintain the responsibility for the decision-making.

One particular type of participatory relationship, although not equitably balanced, is worth noting. This is the practice of adoption by grandparents. There are two examples within the Circle. Brown Sugar's daughter was adopted by Brown Sugar's mother, and Penelope and her siblings were adopted by her maternal grandmother. According to Billingsley (1992), nearly 15 percent of all African American children are informally adopted. In both Brown Sugar and Penelope's stories the grandmothers adopted their grandchildren to assist their daughters while they attempted to restore their lives, so it is reasonable to say that work was being done on both sides.

Emerson engages in participatory practice with Brown Sugar, who is the same age as Claire. The two women talk and mutually do the work to shore each other's spirits up and solve problems. In contrast the majority of stories of mother-daughter practice seem to involve an imbalance in the doing so that participatory relationship looks more like motherwork than equitable sharing of work. This phenomenon seems particular to the mother-daughter bond, not the age differential. In the context of the Circle the established practice supports equitability; the women take turns doing the work of lifting each other up. In describing this equitability, Iman noted that there are women in the Circle who are natural leaders and others who prefer to follow, but *"the beauty of the Circle is that there is no leader, that people should be seen as equal partners, with where it goes and what it does. That is part of the purpose of the Circle it is so that people are equally in fluidity of conversation and input, ideally that is how it should be."*

If all the women of the Circle, as I have suggested, have experienced to a variety of degrees with their mothers and grandmothers an imbalance in the doing then there is something in the nature of the Circle that has shifted this imbalance and allowed a more equitable sharing of the work across generations. Surrey (1991) suggested that in relationships where there is an assumption of power, strength, or expertise women feel unable to act. In the Circle the active/passive dichotomy is disengaged "suggesting that all participants in the relationship interact in ways that build connection and enhance everyone's personal power" (p. 165). Thus, all the women, regardless of their familial experiences or their age discrepancies, share in the work of the Circle.

**Appreciative practice.** Appreciative practice has the power to transform. The recipient of a message of approval experiences a positive feeling of identity and an associated sense of well-being while the sender of the message is uplifted by the other's response. Although there may be cultural variations in what is perceived as a positive message (Penington, 2004; Roberts, 2006b) it is not the exact content of the message which is important but whether the recipient reacts positively to it.

There were examples of appreciative practice in most of the women's narratives, although in the majority of stories approval was transmitted from mother to daughter. Approval messages were transmitted either through action or language. Physical examples of appreciative practice (i.e., arms around one another) were demonstrated in both Claire and Emerson's stories; however, only Claire spoke of receiving verbal expressions of approval. Emerson may have implied that she received such messages from Claire but she made no outright statement to that effect. Iman's mother verbalized her approval by letting her daughter know she was competent to make her own decision. Penelope showed positive feelings for her daughter when she told her: I

wanted *"to go out with you so we can spend some time together like a date,"* later Penelope held hands with the girl during a movie. Miss Sis showed her approval by making time to listen to her daughter.

Katherine, Claire, and Penelope's narratives also included examples of an extreme lack of appreciative practice; these involved maternal relatives who expressed strong disapproval. Katherine, however, was fortunate to have a father who supplanted her mother as the provider of appreciative messages. Penelope, as the recipient of negative talk (i.e., *"You stupid MF"*), suffered more than simply a lack of appreciative practice from her mother. Penelope, however, recognized that while she had *"a very rough relationship"* with her mother, her mother's behavior grew out of a difficult past. Bljczyk et al. (2011) observed that as children mature to adulthood their relationships with their mothers become the "object of reflection and meaning making … [and] daughters may draw implications for their present relationship from their assessments about the past and the present" (p. 456). Before her mother died Penelope was able to forgive her mother's past failings. In this act of forgiveness Penelope demonstrated a positive form of learning in the face of conflict (Kellett, 2012), and by engaging in appreciative practice with her children Penelope demonstrates she knows how to positively negotiate conflict.

There were fewer examples of daughters demonstrating appreciative practice towards their mothers. Penelope with her grandmother and Emerson with her mother related stories of physical affection. Miss Sis's daughter, Tammy, and Iman demonstrated their approval by sharing intimate details with their mothers. Although the results were not definitive it appears the younger women were more likely than the older women to exchange physical affection with their mothers or grandmothers.

Talking was the most commonly exchanged form of appreciative practice in both mother to daughter and daughter to mother directions while listening was the common currency mothers gave to their daughters. Dixon et al. (2008) found that nurturance did not appear to differ between ethnic groups. This finding applies to the women in this study when they interact with their daughters, but there appears to be a distinct difference when looking at how the women respond to their own mothers. Katherine and Claire expressed strong negative attitudes to their mother's lack of appreciative practice. It is difficult for me to speculate why other women in this study did not react similarly but I suspect the reasons are complex. I subscribe to Billingsley's (1992) proposition that "one cannot understand contemporary patterns of African-American family life without placing them in their broad historical, societal, and cultural context" (p. 22). Actually, Billingsley's words are applicable when considering all women.

The connection that exists between the women in the Circle attests to the value of appreciative practice. One example of this was evidenced in Claire's story about a woman who revealed she had a serious illness. When the women in the Circle heard the revelation, Claire said about the women's response: *"they went around and shared their feelings and told her how much they loved her and how much she meant to them and how we wanted to be there for her in any way we could."* Another example is found in Miss Sis's story about a woman who admitted to being violated as a child. Miss Sis said about the Circle's response: *"People were huddled around her, hugging her."* In the Circle appreciative practice knows no racial or generational boundaries.

Appreciative practice, as I have just discussed, can be expressed in many forms. Every woman seeks approval. Miller-Day (2004) suggested that while it is generally accepted that children seek parental approval, "we don't often consider how adult children continue to seek

parental (in this case maternal) approval and regard across the life span; nor do we consider the possibility that grandmothers and mothers seek their granddaughters' or daughter's approval" (p. 143).

Appreciative practice in the Circle may come in more subtle ways. Unlike relationships with maternal relatives in which they have an investment in maintaining the bond, the women are not driven to please but by a joy in relating. In a positive relationship, like the ones that exist in the Circle, the women are "more self-aware of strengths and limitations, to feel affirmed, and to become more open to continued growth and development" (Roberts, 2006b, p. 31). Such high quality relationships result in the women experiencing authentic affection for one another (Davidson & James, 2006).

**Mindfulness.** Both negative and positive examples of mindfulness appeared in the women's stories. A lack of mindfulness was exemplified by descriptions of disrespectful or insensitive acts that negatively affected another's feelings. The absence of mindfulness was expressed in words and in deeds. Some negative acts were momentary, such as the thoughtless consequences that take place when a woman loses her temper; others were of longstanding practice. Miss Sis's husband assisted his wife in reflecting on her own unmindful behavior. Miss Sis talked about momentary instances that grew out of frustration. During those times Miss Sis would tell her daughter it wouldn't be soon enough for her to have the girl grow up and leave home. When her husband asked Miss Sis to recall how she felt when her own mother had said similar things Miss Sis regretted her outburst with her daughter. An example of a longstanding practice of unmindfulness is Katherine's mother. Katherine's mother was unmindful of the message she sent her daughter every time she stepped in to fix her daughter's problems. The implication was that Katherine was incapable of managing her own life. Claire's mother

demonstrated a similar lack of mindfulness through authoritarian practice. This practice had a repressive effect on Claire's emotional state and on her self-esteem. Penelope's self-esteem was diminished whenever her mother or grandmother referred to her as stupid. In contrast, Rose's mother managed, even though she was the one who dispensed punishment in Rose's childhood home, to remain mindful of her daughter's psyche. Thus, it appears from a comparison of the women's narratives that authoritative motherwork is more mindful than authoritarian practice. However, Penelope, who experienced an authoritarian upbringing, demonstrated it is the meaning each woman makes of her stories that determines the impact of the practice. In reflection, Penelope has come to recognize that her personal strength has been passed on from her mother and grandmother, and thus Penelope has given a new, positive meaning to what from a distance appears to be only unmindful behavior.

The nine women spoke less of their mindful practice with their daughters. Emerson is an exemplar of mindfulness. She exhibited mindful behavior with her mother, her daughter, and in her description of her interaction with Brown Sugar. Penelope displayed a mature mindfulness when she forgave her mother. Penelope is an example of growth because earlier in their relationship Penelope had avoided her mother and withheld invitations to visit and even to her wedding. The mindfulness Penelope has cultivated now extends to her children. This was evidenced in her story about going to the movie with her daughter. The two had gone to the movies to celebrate Penelope's birthday. Rather than criticizing her daughter for not wanting to see the same movie Penelope used the disagreement to uplift her daughter. Penelope told her daughter that wanting to do things on one's own was not necessarily selfish. It *"is not a bad thing, for people to go to dinner and a movie by yourself. It is like dating yourself."*

Tammy's decision to phone her mother at work so she could speak about her first sexual encounter may be interpreted as a lack of mindfulness. In her research Fingerman (2000) concluded younger daughters (i.e., women around 21 years old) highly valued conversations with their mothers as a way to gain input in their lives. Tammy said she wanted to have the conversation with her mother because she believed her mother would not tell her what she wanted to hear, something Tammy felt her friends had done, but what she needed to hear. This desire for a mother's input is likely to be the driving force behind Miss Sis's daughter's constant chatter. So what may appear unmindful when viewed from a mother's perspective, a daughter may interpret as proof of her openness to and trust in her mother. This is a recognition of the strong connection of mother and daughter and the daughter's way of showing respect for this relationship. The framework for evaluation is different. Furthermore, it would be incorrect to characterize Tammy as an unmindful young woman. As Tammy engaged in open conversation on a daily basis with her mother, and since she had asked for permission to talk with her mother, Tammy felt her mother had given permission to discuss the topic of her virginity. Tammy is cognizant of rules related to mindful practice. She would not launch into a sensitive topic with another person, she said, until she could determine whether the conversation is appropriate. However, Tammy is aware that on occasion she has *"said some things that I know have shocked people."*

Mindfulness requires work as well as competence. The work comes from a willingness or predilection to care about another. Competence, as was assumed in this study, is acquired as a result of motherwork. The experiences of the women in this study were not equivalent, and some women had poor maternal role models for mindfulness. An individual needs to know the rules for engagement that apply in different contexts if they are to be competent. According to Fletcher

(1999), women who felt understood, accepted, and appreciated, as is the case in the Circle, were more likely to accept other's points of view—necessary components of mindfulness. Thus, what some women lacked in experience of mindfulness at home they gained by participation in the group with rules that encouraged mindful practice and by direct experience with the thoughtfulness of others. Rose provided an example of this when she discussed an episode that took place in the Circle. A young woman, who is not a participant in this study, became upset when the group decided guests would not be invited to a special event. The young woman had assumed an open invitation policy. The young woman's reaction was unmindful of the group. Rose's assessment of the situation was: "*As human beings we always have to try to stay open and listen to what someone else is expressing and then at that point try to meet it and that is where reasoning takes place*." Rose's position is applicable to the group as well as the individual. When the Circle tried to discuss the incident at the next meeting the young woman was absent. Rose cautioned the group to be mindful of the young woman's absence; she was unavailable to express her viewpoint. As these examples demonstrate, mindfulness does not arise from a single perspective and requires an awareness of another's culture as well as a willingness to confer the benefit of doubt to the other. In terms of mothers and daughters it is probably worth remembering that mothers, no matter how old their daughters, will always occupy the parental role and their daughters will always be seen as children (Fingerman, 2000).

**Play.** Under the overarching theme of nurturing practice were the subthemes of motherwork and sistership. As previously discussed in Chapter V these two subthemes have much in common, however, contained within the term motherwork is the notion of work. Freed from parental responsibilities, relationships based on sistership are less about work and more about friendship. One aspect of sistership that, while not unique to this form of relationship,

tends to be an important role in forming and maintaining connection is play. While mothers engage in playful activity with their children it tends to be unbalanced due to differences in age and size. Mothers have advantage. A mother may eliminate her advantage in order to teach as well as uplift her child's self-esteem, but in sistership play is undertaken for the purposes of building and maintaining connection between those engaged in the activity.

Play was mentioned in only four stories, and in each the focus was on young people. In Claire's story about playing in the mud, the invitation to play came from her daughter. Initially, Claire refused Emerson's request. Claire described Emerson's efforts as determined to get her mother to play: *"She literally drags me out of bed. She physically drags me downstairs ... She drags me out there between those two out buildings, and it is pouring down rain and we were drenched.*" It is a positively memorable experience for Claire but she was definitely reluctant to engage in this kind of free-for-all play until her daughter made it happen. Penelope invited her daughter to go to the movies. Here the focus is on Penelope as one of the younger participants in the study. Going to the movies may be a more sedate type of play than Emerson's mud-play but going to the movies is an activity meant to be fun and maintain connection, so it is classifiable as play. Katherine also talked about going to the movies; her father was the person who initiated the invitation. The other woman who talked about play was Miss Sis; however, she was not involved in the play. She referenced her daughter, who is about Emerson's age. Before the young woman got married she went to movies and watched scary movies at home with her girlfriends. The young women also enjoyed going together in the fall to haunted houses.

As the lyrics of the 1979 Cyndi Lauper song with the same title says: "Girls just want to have fun." Play is an ingredient that in this study appeared to separate the girls from the women. Play may well be an important ingredient needed to build relationship between older and

younger women. Gray (2008) wrote that the important characteristics of play are not what people do when they are engaged in play but their motivation for play and their mental attitude when engaged in play. An adult may be said to be engaged in play if she brings a playful attitude to the activity, has the freedom to quit and to direct her own actions, and is "relatively free from the strong drives and emotions that are experienced as pressure or stress" (p. 4, para. 11). Laughter and talk are examples of some of the playful ways the Circle engages. Although not mentioned in their narratives, the women have made bracelets, danced, and watched movies together. Play is a major focus of the annual retreat. Recently Claire suggested the Circle had strayed too far from playful engagement at its monthly gatherings. She suggested the women consider being more purposeful about inserting more time to engage in light-heartedly activities with one another. Play allows for the "I" to become more engaged in the "We." The positive engagement creates an increased level of energy and a desire for continued interaction and thus connection.

**Summary.** In this section the five subthemes of power relations/forgiveness, secrets/disclosure, participatory relationship, appreciative practice, mindfulness, and the one secondary subtheme of play were discussed as a reflection of how the nine women made meaning of their communicative intergenerational experiences and how these contributed to their sense of connectedness. Five principles emerged from the discussion. These principles are:

• Authoritative dialog builds connection; authoritarian creates barriers. All the women in the study spoke of appreciating guidance and many spoke negatively about messages that were delivered from a position of control. The women desired agency in their actions and recognition of their worth. They were open to guidance when it was given authentically and without the subtext of control.

• Vulnerability is at the heart of connection. Communication that implies unworthiness, ineptitude, or meanness undermines connection by placing barriers to intimate sharing. Mindful and authentic conversation, expressions of endearment, and words of forgiveness signal a safe space for a woman to share intimately. Such a communicative space promotes connection.

• Sistership involves relational speech. Talk that signals equanimity in access to and input in a relationship creates an open playing field. Mutual recognition of another's contributions further builds an environment for participatory and appreciative relationship.

• Mindfulness is hard but necessary. Mindfulness is work; it demands recognition that culture, race, and age, among other factors, contribute to different viewpoints and interpretations in relationship. The practice of mindfulness reminds individuals of their past, grounds them in the present, and has positive implications for the future of relationship.

• All work and no play makes for nothing but work. It seems harder for older women to make the time or open themselves to play. Play does not require physical engagement but it does require that participants feel free to play, to engage without the threat of control or the fear of negative communication. Play is valuable to the human spirit and physical well-being.

**Communication Experience**

This section looks at how the one emergent subtheme of listening and the two secondary subthemes of storytelling and judgment/expectation contribute to an understanding in and development of positive intergenerational communication. The three subthemes discussed in this section form an important triad (see Figure 6.1) in bridging the generational divide by fostering understanding, mindfulness, and mutual respect. One component in the triad is storytelling. Storytelling can help to diffuse nonjudgmental/expectations, the second component in the triad. Storytelling is best served by authentic listening, the final component in the triad. If women are

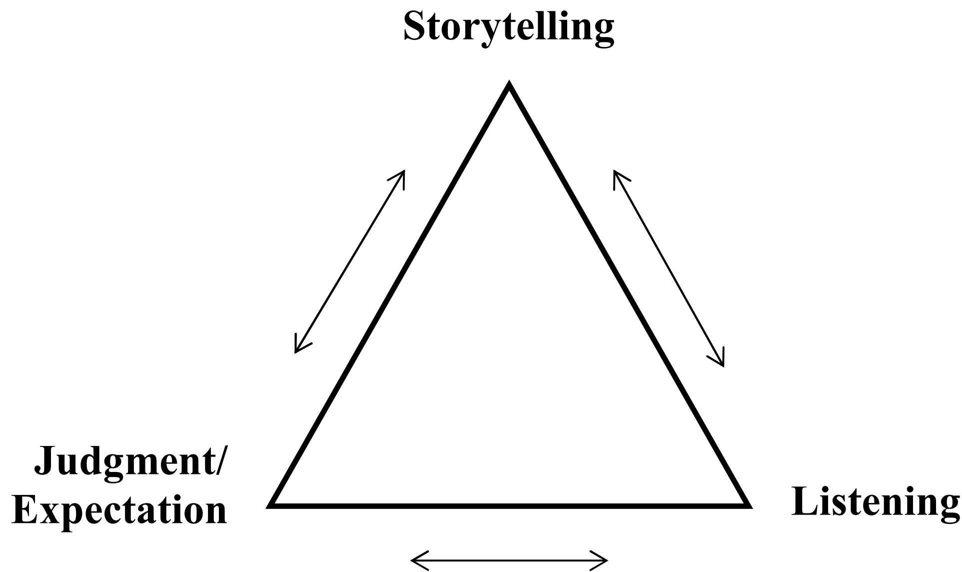


*Figure 6.1* The storytelling, judgment/expectation, listening triad

to move beyond unrealistic or unfounded expectations and judgmental language they need to listen in order to understand another's perspective.

**Storytelling.** It should not be surprising that storytelling emerged as a subtheme from the women's narratives. Stories have long been used to do motherwork, to teach, and to connect. Stories are a verbal tradition that most likely date back to the beginning of the spoken word, and were later preserved in written texts. Among the earliest known collections of stories to offer lessons on how to live a moral life are Aesop's Fables and the Bible. Aesop's Fables, attributed to a Greek storyteller circa BCE 620-564, feature animal characters that confront such dilemmas of human life as greed, narcissism, and sloth. Also dating back centuries BCE is the Bible, which in its current form is an accumulation of texts. The Bible presents a history of the human race as well as stories of the human experience.

Rose is well versed in both Biblical stories and the purpose and value of storytelling. She understands that masking the identity of the people in stories is a mindful way to discuss difficult subjects. *"Storytelling is a wonderful way of cloaking,"* Rose said. *"You can make it a vehicle*

*about disclosure about something without an identity. I think it allows one to have a story told. You will never know necessarily down to minute parts of it, is it all fictional, or not?"* Cloaking is a way for people to avoid direct confrontations over difficult subjects, and allow space for people to talk about issues that might otherwise be a source of conflict. Rose's stories create strong emotional connections, too. Rose's stories about her youth provided a link for Tammy to their common heritage, a heritage Tammy previously knew only through books and movies. As an adept storyteller Rose has been able to connect Tammy more directly with the past and to her. Tammy said of one particularly vivid story Rose told that it had transported her, she had been able to:

> *See the people, the colors, the smells, and places. And it wasn't so much the different individuals giving or sharing it was that snippet of finding out about not just her past, but THE past and what it used to be like with African American families were like. I read a lot, like Nikki Giovanni. I hear stories ... about life back then. To hear Miss Rose tell about those things made it come alive. It made it not a thing of books, but a thing of people ... It was like a fairy tale coming alive. I don't think it was something that I'd ever touched. I never had experienced. It was something like being familiar with the War of 1812 by reading about it; there was no personal experience before, but she made it more personal.*

Brown Sugar, a contemporary of Rose, also recognizes the value of stories in maintaining family and cultural history in the face of change and the progression of time. "*Storytelling is so powerful, because one of the things that really keeps cultures going are the stories that people can tell of ancestors, as a matter of fact, this is how in many cultures not just in the Native American culture this is how people keep historical facts going. This is how they keep lineages going."* Claire recognized that she is a link in a familial chain of storytellers. She described her mother and her grandmother as storytellers. Claire described herself and Emerson as storytellers and projected into the future when she said her granddaughter was a storyteller. Claire, Rose, and Brown Sugar are among the older women in the Circle. The younger women did not name

themselves as such. Iman, however, demonstrated herself to be one when she related her dilemma in detail to her mother in order for her mother to get a full picture of the decision Iman faced. Tammy, in phoning her mother several times a day to talk, described someone who needed to share stories. The women, young and old, saw the value of storytelling in the maintenance of their relationships, something negative communication, such as Katherine has had with her mother, could not do.

Storytelling not only preserves cultures it can be used to connect them, too. In a concurrent session at the 14th Annual International Leadership Association Conference held in 2012 in Denver, Colorado presenters discussed how stories are a powerful tool in creating a frame in which "to reach leadership goals in communication, trust building and leadership influence. They spark imagination, provide an insight into human behaviors and create a bridge across cultures" (Srivastava & Bublani, 2012). Stories for the women in the Circle create bridges between a number of cultural traditions (e.g., Muslim with Christian, the South with the North). Stories connect the African American sisters with one another as well as their white sisters. The women's words create a mutual experience between older and younger women and transference of wisdom, historical perspective, pathos, and humor. While the stories may be unfamiliar due to different experiences, by sharing their stories the women come to know each other and to feel more connected through these shared experience.

> Connected learning means taking the view of the other and connecting this to one's own knowledge, thus building new and enlarged understanding of broader human experience. The more numerous and diverse the perspectives one has connected with, the broader the relational context and the more enhanced will be the sense of being both connected to and empowered to respond to a larger "human reality." (Surrey, 1991, pp. 171-172)

The women in the Circle may not be able to walk in the other's shoes but they can get a sense of looking through the other's eyes and feeling what is in the other's heart. As McKee

(1997) said about storytelling: “It’s the currency of human contact” (p. 27). Storytelling is, as Fletcher (1999) characterized, an empathic way to teach. “It is a way of teaching that takes the learner’s intellectual or emotional reality into account and focuses on the other (what does she need to hear?) rather than on self (What would I like to say?)” (p. 56). It moves from the value laden motherwork of a power-nuanced teaching to sistership support. In all these regards stories epitomize positive communication because they support open, satisfying, and transformational relationships.

**Judgment/expectation.** Tension is a reasonable expectation among people who have a history of negative communicative interaction. This history creates expectations about the meaning behind the words outwardly spoken. These metamessages, as Linguist Deborah Tannen (2006) refers to them, are embedded in numerous areas for conflict including gender bias, racial prejudice, and generational intolerance and misunderstanding. Ely et al. (2006) wrote about the double-edged nature of political correctness. The fear of judgment does not belong only to members of oppressed groups who have been subjects of prejudice but, in situations where political correctness is in play, the majority group fears being accused of treating others unfairly. Such experiences produce what Ely et al. (2006) refer to as identity abrasions “on both sides of the interaction. Identity abrasions cause people to burrow into their own camps, attend only to information that confirms their positions, and demonize the other side. The overall result is a number of negative dynamics” (p. 81).

Prejudicial racial statements or the appearance that anyone held an expectation that such judgments were implied was not a major theme in the nine women’s stories. Rose’s story about the ice cream parlor referenced segregation policies in the South, but she made only one outright mention to an expectation that involved race. Rose characterized that incident as humorous. It

took place on a cold day when she was a college student. A woman walking on campus passed Rose and said *"I don't think I have ever seen a black person with a red nose in the cold."* Rose replied: *"Who says I am all black?"* Rose went on to talk about her mixed heritage, which includes Native American and Irish. Brown Sugar spoke of hurtful conversations that came from within her family rather than from outside. Brown Sugar spoke about an issue of social comparison, a comparison to her biological sister. *"She was lighter than me. Back in those days it was if you were lighter you were right and if you were black you're bad ... It was more rampant within our culture then it was with the white culture ... For a long time I thought my name was Black Heifer."*

While no other woman in this study told stories that related to race there have been discussions in the Circle generally between African American women about intra-racial social comparisons. This may be because the conversations were not particularly memorable or because the women wished not to remember them. I remember hearing Tammy say on one occasion that she felt more comfortable being the only African American woman in a room full of white women than being in a room filled with other African American women. Tammy said the reason was because African American women seemed to her to always be judging themselves against one another. The women in the Circle do not to my knowledge purposefully avoid conversations related to race, but there seems to be a general acceptance that we all have different experiences based on our skin color and also variations in our economic status and other factors. We all experience privilege on different levels. Maybe because the Circle accepts this the women are able to discuss other issues or it may be because the women have a desire to talk about other issues that the issue of race has stayed in the back seat. Tammy offered another perspective when she referenced Circle practices that encourage women to have equal access to talking. She

suggested that taking turns gives people time to think about being mindful before they talk. Ely et al. (2006) suggest that "When people replace their need to defend themselves with a desire to learn, the possibilities for constructive cross-cultural interactions increase enormously" (p. 82). Such practices help maintain positive communication and relationship.

As previously discussed, expectations based on past communication (i.e., metamessages) can undermine conversations. Davidson and James (2006) wrote that it is no trivial point to presume that relationships across difference can be positive. The fact that the Circle promotes such relationships through positive communication practices is a testament to the work that is accomplished in the Circle. Iman gave an example of expectations when she talked about a letter she received many years ago from her mother. Iman was in college at the time. The letter was full of emotion, particularly sadness. It seemed that Iman's mother had concluded her daughter had left her virtuous ways at home. The message was unclear to Iman at the time, it is only in hindsight that Iman realizes what her mother was trying to say but wasn't certain how to approach it. Clearly, Iman's mother did a poor job because Iman reacted to the letter with anger. Iman's assessment of the letter was that her mother had reached unfounded conclusions without talking directly to her. This is not without precedent. Parental expectations typically become more pronounced as children become adolescents, attempt to assert their independence and competence, and move away from home. Such expectations and the tensions that follow can extend beyond the teenage years, as twenty-something-year-old Roger Fierro is all too aware. Fierro who was written up in the *NY Times* in 2011 is an exemplar of his generation; he's a young man who works four jobs to make ends meet. He is critical of older adults who sometimes "peg millennials as whiny or lazy or entitled. And instead of kind of thinking about why that is ... it instead is seen as a negative thing." (Rehm, Seligson, Burstein, Fierro, & Taylor, 2013,

time 11:09:44). When individuals feel judged, as Ely et al. (2006) found, "They feel inhibited and afraid to address even the most banal issues directly … Resentments build, relationships fray," (p. 80). These stresses inhibit personal and relational growth and undermine positive communication. This is something Katherine has long experienced. The metamessages and outright judgmental comments Katherine received during her childhood limited the range of conversation she can have with her mother. Unfortunately, the mother and daughter have never found a way to disengage from this negative pattern. Fortunately, Katherine has been able to circumvent negative communication with women her mother's age. To accomplish this Katherine has become picky about those with whom she associates socially. She avoids women she describes as engaged in drama, or act catty or gossipy. In an atmosphere where Katherine does not feel judged she feels free to express her opinions. She admits she loves *"being able to talk to people and even debate with people that have different opinions and ideas. I learn a lot from that whether it is questioning what I am doing or whether it is reaffirming what I am doing or thinking."* Katherine finds the Circle a space conducive for sharing herself.

> *It seems like all the women there are very up-to-date with current affairs, politics, and they are very good at expressing it, in a non-threatening way. They can have a completely different opinion from me, but I don't ever feel attacked. I don't feel like something is wrong with me, because I don't think their way.*

Any issues involving expectations that typically undermine conversations between mothers and daughter do not typically surface in the Circle. This is probably due to a combination of factors already recognized. However, there have been on occasion broad statements with a negative tone made about young people. These generalizations cause a conversation to ensue about the problems with making generalizations. This speaks to the awareness in the Circle of the problems inherent in having negative expectations and casting negative judgments without fully knowing another's position. This, as Ely et al. (2006) noted in a

different context but which I apply here to the Circle, is governed by “A learning orientation [which] motivates us to seek to understand—rather than to judge—the other person” (p. 83). Though by no means perfect, the women of the Circle attempt to practice principles of positive communication which include avoiding judgmental statements across race, religion, and age. Admittedly, the women are not always mindful in their practice particularly in regards to gender, but the Circle members are after all human.

**Listening.** If a person is inattentive when another is speaking they convey a negative message which may be taken as a personal judgment about the speaker. How the message is interpreted depends on the recipient of the underaccommodative behavior. Giles and Williams (1994) found that satisfaction in intergenerational communication is reduced when an older person appears inattentive to a younger person. This is typified by David Burstein, the 20-something-year-old author of *Fast and Future* (Burstein, 2013), a book about the accomplishments of millennials. Burstein is frustrated when he hears older adults make stereotypic pronouncements about his generation. His response is: “Stop telling this generation, you know what we are and what we aren’t and actually listen to people in this generation and what their perspective is” (Rehm et al., 2013, time 11:55:05). Listening does more than make a conversation satisfying, it also contributes to feelings of self worth as well as presenting the “ability to help create, maintain, and enhance positive interpersonal relationships” (Bodie, 2012, p. 109).

In the nine women’s narratives listening was often portrayed as a caring act a mother does for her daughter. I have previously referred to a conversation Iman had with her mother about a difficult decision Iman needed to make. Iman’s mother was a good listener. In her narrative Iman tells how her mother responded with statements such as: *“Based on what you are*

*telling me."* When her mother echoed her daughter's statements she signified to Iman she was listening. She also conveyed the value of her daughter's words. Iman's mother was demonstrating support for Iman's own decision-making, and so it is reasonable to speculate that Iman sought her mother out as a sounding board (Fingerman, 2000) rather than for her opinion. Miss Sis talked about making time to listen to her daughter, and it appears the daughter appreciates having someone who listens. Although it is unclear if the daughter has a specific purpose in calling Miss Sis it is obvious she values the attention. This also seems to be the case with Tammy and her mother. Katherine, on the other hand, has suffered because her mother has been unable to listen. Without a model she has had to seek training on how to listen. Katherine believes she is now able to convey the message to her own children that she is *"going to listen and try to talk them through"* any difficulties they might have. Brown Sugar is a woman who deeply understands the value of listening. Brown Sugar is keenly aware of the importance of listening in reestablishing relationship. She underscored this when she said in regards to her sister, *"I need to open up more and really listen to her silence because she is really speaking a lot."*

Stories about daughters listening to their mother were less frequent. Katherine referred to her youth when she listened in order to do what she was instructed by her mother to do (e.g., *"I wasn't real good at figuring out for myself what was the right decision to make. So, I listened to her."*). Katherine's self-esteem suffered from this oppressed position of listening. Tammy also referenced listening as if it were an action that required an instruction or advice be followed; however, in Tammy's case she evidenced free will. *"I will always be a daughter. I will always be someone who needs her advice even if I don't listen."* Emerson's act of listening also appeared to be an act of freewill. She listened to her mother when Claire needed to vent

frustration. As previously discussed, Emerson's openness to listening has resulted in the women having a relationship that is at the intersection of sistership and motherwork. Emerson has heard her mother reveal vulnerability to life balance issues and helped her find solutions.

Tammy's recollection of Rose's storytelling is another way younger women listen to the older women. In listening Tammy becomes a vessel for the historic, cultural, and family heritage Rose wishes to preserve. Tammy provides Rose with the satisfaction that she has been the vehicle for this transmission. As a storyteller Rose has transmitted her legacy; she's passed stories on to another generation. As evidenced by Tammy's story Rose is a consummate storyteller, capable of etching strong images in the mind of the listener.

So the women come to the Circle from positions of listening as motherwork and listening as learner, and in the Circle they are prepared to listen to feelings from the others which, as Fletcher (1999), noted "is an important aspect to fostering group life" (p. 76). The practice promotes egalitarian access to conversation. As Iman described it, when the women come to the Circle they *"bring their willingness to share as well as their willingness to listen. This is what creates that space. A good listener and as empathic as possible."* Listening is both an important component of positive communication but also of relational practice. Listening indicates empathy, a sensitivity to emotional contexts, and a number of other relational skills. Of course, neither the women nor the Circle are perfect, and there are times as Tammy so deliciously described where it sounds as if everyone has something to throw into the stew.

**Summary.** In this section, the subtheme of listening and the secondary subthemes of storytelling and judgment/expectation were discussed in terms of how they contribute to the development of positive intergenerational communication. Four principles of significance emerged from this discussion:

• Storytelling is a way to convey messages without the negative emotions that arise from direct confrontation. Storytelling, if done competently, removes the specific identity of and increases mindfulness for, and dissociates power imbalances with the person being discussed by placing them as a character in a story.

•Storytelling is a form of women's leadership. It provides a frame for bridging cultural, life experience, and other family-related traditions in order to build connection.

• Expectations of or making judgments about a person without directly engaging them in conversation to understand their position undermines positive communication and relationship.

• Listening is a necessary companion to positive communication. Listening conveys a message that what is said has value. Listening builds trust and creates openness for additional communication.

**Final Analysis**

A final word about the principles outlined above and this study's findings in general is required. Some of the findings in this study are not new. Their emergence from the nine women's narratives is, however, additional validation of past work and gives credence for the model presented in Chapter II of this dissertation. Although the themes and subthemes that emerged in the narratives were not given similar names to those used in the intergenerational model the concepts underlying them are intimately related. For example, conflict, depicted as a negative force in the positive communication model, was discussed within the overarching themes of intimate sharing and nurturing practice. In the study's findings conflict typically undermined positive communication and connection. Conflict grew out of the tensions engendered in power relationships and in communication that involved judgmental expectations. So while there may not be a one-to-one relation between the positive intergenerational model and

the emergent subheadings, they are both illustrative of and related properties that affect communication and connection.

Corroboration of this study's findings with past research should not be a surprise since the literature on communication and relationship spans many decades and multiple disciplines. However, with the recent interest in and growth of positive scholarship there is now increased likelihood that new principles or new ways to view old ones will be uncovered. This dissertation is an example of this.

Michelle Miller Day's study of communication between mothers, grandmothers, and adult daughters opened a new era for communication and relational study. To Miller-Day's proposition of intergenerational communication as a form of connection, I now add that intergenerational communication is a way women lead. Grandmothers and mothers, whose communication is incompetent, oppressive, or unaffectionate, may have their messages ignored. There is also the potential their messages will undermine relationship and negatively affect the recipient's self-esteem. Leadership occurs when positive communicative behavior is passed to the next generation or when the next generation disconnects from the negative practices and charts a new course to communicate positively.

Three concepts distinguish this study from previous ones. They are: sistership and the values of play and storytelling to building and maintaining connection between women and promoting positive communication. Sistership is more than a renaming of the concept of friendship as leadership. Sistership encompasses authentic sharing, supportive conversation, connection, and empowerment. It incorporates elements of motherwork, in which storytelling has a part, and also involves play which moves the relationship beyond simply work into nonjudgmental action that empowers the spirit. Sistership, storytelling, and play can be practiced

in varying degrees between all women—related or not. They make the work of positive engagement worthwhile.

**Limitations**

All research has limitations and this study is no exception. This study was limited by the use of a purposeful sample of nine women who reside in the proximity of a small Midwestern city. As a result the findings may not apply to women who live outside the area. As all the women in the study have had some college education and three have or are seeking graduate degrees the findings also may not apply to women of different educational backgrounds residing within this same area. While the present study did address calls for communication research of maternal relationships to use more diverse samples (Penington, 2004) participation in this study was predominantly African American. A more even distribution may have provided additional perspective on emergent themes or on the emergence of additional themes.

The investigator's role as interviewer presented another limitation. Disclosures may have been limited when cross racial interviews were conducted, but, as Taylor et al. (1995) suggested, there may have been more disclosure because there was a presumption I might not have otherwise understood what was being said. This type of limitation may also have been at work in interviews across generations. It should also be noted that one participant was unavailable for the second interview on a memorable conversation within the Circle. Her involvement may have provided additional insight into relational and communication practice with non-related women. Two women including the woman just mentioned did not provide feedback on their individual narrative assessments. It was difficult to know when requests for their feedback crossed the line from friendly reminders to a step beyond blurring the lines of voluntary participation. I may have erred and been too conservative in the number of times I left messages on their phones, email

accounts, and Facebook pages. It may be worth noting that the two women occupied the younger end of the participant age spectrum. As there were few comments from the other participants the absence of the three's feedback may have not changed the overall assessment.

By occupying both an insider and outsider position in the Circle my involvement as investigator may have resulted in another limitation. There may have been things that the women did not wish to tell because of my prior relationship with them; however, the possibility also exists that they may have been more open to deeper revelations with me because of that proximity.

From my standpoint as a member of the group I have tried to bracket my personal involvement with the women from my position as investigator. There still exists the possibility that I may have merged the two roles. But as Fletcher (1999) has observed, all research is affected by the investigator. We come to a study with our own unique perspective. Our perspective affects what questions we ask and the point of view, invisible as it may be, we use to interpret the data and form conclusions.

**Implications for Future Research**

This study of positive intergenerational communication is situated at the intersection of positive scholarship and intergenerational communication, both relatively new fields of inquiry, and represents a preliminary investigation into this intersectional area. As a scholar of communication and of leadership interested in positive change particularly for women and across generations this study was designed to build upon the work of Miller-Day (2004), a pioneer in research in intergenerational communication between mother, grandmothers, and adult daughters. This study was a next step, a preliminary step toward more fully understanding and finding ways to promote positive communication across generations. This study was an

assessment of women's past experiences and how these shaped their present communicative practices. What comes next? It would be appropriate to investigate practical applications of this study's findings. Based on the discovery of the importance of storytelling as a frame for creating both positive communication and women's leadership, talking circles in general and the Circle in this project have been shown to be supportive, open, satisfying, and transformative places for unrelated women to bridge differences across race and generation. It, thus, seems reasonable to utilize talking circle practices to evaluate their effectiveness in other settings. Storytelling is a device to avoid confrontation and a form of nonjudgmental learning that builds connection, transforming an authentic listener from an "I" and places her in the collective "we."

Storytelling has attracted considerable attention among leadership scholarships during the last decade (Gabriel, 2000). One reason is that storytelling provides new perspectives "ideally suited to communicating change and stimulating innovation" (Denny, 2011, p. 11). Another, as Ready (2002), discovered is the importance of storytelling in developing the next generation of leaders. Ready's research showed that stories help "emerging leaders absorb the company's culture, values, and guiding principles in preparation for the day when they will be called upon to serve as role models" (p. 64). This use of storytelling by a senior leader to guide and nurture the development of an up-and-coming leader is akin to motherwork and demonstrative of the value of future exploration into women's ways of leading.

A practical application of talking circle practice and storytelling would be to actively explore the creation of positive connection (i.e., sistership) among women who regularly engage in relational and communicative practice but where conflicts, misunderstandings, or simply a lack of connection (i.e., teamwork) is prevalent, such as in an office, university, or hospital setting. Women could be invited to join a group where a facilitator would introduce them to

talking circle practice. The facilitator would then suggest topics for storytelling and invite the women to tell their own stories related to the prompt. These stories would be recorded. Later the women would be asked in separate sessions to tell stories about their experience within the group. These stories would present the opportunity to assess in a practical setting, if and how, storytelling can be employed in the service of connecting unrelated women and to promoting positive communication in a variety of settings which have practical applications in the workplace and beyond. If the findings confirm the propositions as outlined they will also contribute to the scholarship of women's leadership both practical and theoretical.

**Epilogue**

I have long had a desire to be involved in a dialogue about intolerance, especially after the growth in the U.S. of anti-Middle Eastern rhetoric that arose from the events of September 11, 2001. What I didn't realize until I enrolled in Antioch was how ill-equipped I was to speak about intolerance. As a student in Antioch's Leadership and Change doctoral program I have learned to unpack my preconceptions and to question what I know. It has been a humbling yet transformational experience. As a result I look back on the book I published in 2009 and realize that while I hit the target I was aiming for I was far from reaching the bull's-eye. My desire to show women's similarities overlooked the importance of difference; the recognition of difference, instead, of being the cause for divisiveness and stereotype is a means by which women can establish dialogue and build bridges across differences to establish relationships.

As I began to envision this dissertation I was pleased to have at my disposal a set of tools that were more suited to my personal philosophy than the journalistic one I had developed as a freelance writer and which I used to write my book. I no longer needed to take the role of an impartial interviewer, who in the collection of stories had the right to claim ownership of them; rather I became a collaborator and co-author with the women who shared. This is not to say that as an investigator I did not feel the total absence of an imbalance of power, but the intent to remove it was definitely there. The process felt more equitable. It felt more comfortable, and I hope the product of these participatory relationships will be appreciated by all involved.

I have learned much from the interviews, the women, and the process of narrative inquiry. The interviews confirmed my belief that women are resilient creatures who often are unaware of their leadership qualities. Women share a deeply held desire to be acknowledged and loved. In this sense we are all intimately tied as sisters. While I probably will continue to feel

like an outsider I also see I have friends. Friends, after all, are people who are earnest and open, and freely give of themselves. The women of the Circle shared intimately and authentically with me. I am grateful for their trust and friendship. Their stories have also shown me that as women we are not all the same. Our life experiences frame our viewpoints. This, I believe, is why Circle practices are important in the creation of connection. It is necessary to feel free from prejudgment and to have the ability to speak with equity before it is possible to feel safe enough to express oneself earnestly. As a result of the authentic sharing in the Circle I have learned that leadership is not a single quantifiable entity; there is not one formula. Agency in order to get a job done is not achieved in the same way for everyone, and it may not be achieved in the same way over one's life time. Narrative inquiry has taught me that personal meaning making can legitimize and empower, and it is a woman's ability to make meaning of her past that gives her the strength to keep going.

One of the empowering aspects of education then is to learn to be reflective and wonder what it is we do not know. So what have I learned from my journey at Antioch and from the dissertation? Back in August 2010 I wrote a reflective essay in which I said that I'd never felt accomplished as a leader because I lacked some undefined set of skills. Now I understand that what I needed was a new vocabulary and a revised philosophy on leadership, and I am grateful to have packed my backpack with an ever expanding notebook on leadership qualities. I also have learned that the promotion of positive communication, be it interracial or intergenerational, begins with me. I learn from doing. This means I will have to continue to listen deeply when my children, my husband, or someone else is speaking. In order to be competent I must constantly practice, try to understand the message others hear rather than thinking only of the words I am

saying. Maybe most importantly I need to be respectful of others' desire for recognition and affection. And, as I do, so is it returned to me.

# Appendix

# Appendix A—Informed Consent Form

## Consent Form

**Title of Study:** Women talking in circles: A narrative study of positive intergenerational communication

You are being asked to take part in a study designed to gain a better understanding of how women's experiences with maternal communication (i.e., with mothers, grandmothers, and daughters and as mothers, grandmothers, and daughters) inform communication with nonrelated women, particularly those from different generations. Insight gained from this study will be useful in the development of theories of communication and the promotion of meaningful and satisfying dialog between generations.

**What I will ask you to do:** If you agree to participate, I will ask you to fill out a brief questionnaire seeking some general demographic information, and I will ask you to engage in a series of informal, open-ended conversations with me. We will talk about your conversational experiences within your family and as a member of the women's circle. As an example I might ask: "Please tell me about a memorable conversation you've had with a woman in your family. This conversation may have taken place with your mother, a grandmother, or a daughter." What I am most interested in is hearing about your experiences. I invite you to bring photographs or memorabilia of anyone you might like to talk about with me.

Most likely there will be 2-3 interviews. Each will be scheduled for your convenience. The length of each interview will depend upon your time constraints, but will provide sufficient time for you to fully express yourself. I imagine a typical interview will last about an hour. The final interview will offer a chance to review transcripts of your interviews, make adjustments, and discuss my newly informed thoughts on the topic of positive intergenerational communication.

**Risks and benefits:**

As with any study that involves human beings there is always the potential for risks, obvious and unforeseen. As this study is limited only to interviews, the likelihood of risks is negligible and is far outweighed by the benefits from constructing new understanding of intergenerational communication. I am particularly sensitive to your rights and welfare. To this end I will maintain confidentiality throughout the study. All participants and the group will be assigned pseudonyms. Any information you wish to be kept strictly confidential will be handled in this manner.

In the event an adverse incident occurs I will try to address it in a timely manner. If I am unable to address it to your satisfaction you can contact Chair of the Institutional Review Board, Ph.D. in Leadership & Change, Antioch University.

**How your answers will be used:**

Your responses will be added to those of other women. It is expected that when your interviews are combined with those of other women participants patterns will emerge. These patterns will contribute to a fuller understanding of communication between women of different generations. The final result may serve as the basis for new theories of intergenerational communication and future studies.

**Taking part is voluntary:** Your decision to take part in this study is completely voluntary, and if you decide to take part, you are free to withdraw at any time.

**If you have questions:** Please feel free to email or call me. You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records. If you have any questions regarding your rights as a study participant, please contact Chair, Institutional Review Board, Ph.D. in Leadership & Change, Antioch University.

**Statement of Consent:** I have read the above information, and have received answers to any questions I asked. I consent to take part in the study.

Your Signature ___________________________________

Date ________________________

*This consent form will be kept by the researcher for at least three years beyond the end of the study and was approved by the IRB on October 2012.*

## Appendix B—Application for Ethics Review (IRB)

**Institutional Review Board**
**Application for Ethics Review**

**Project:** WOMEN TALKING IN CIRCLES: A NARRATIVE STUDY OF POSITIVE INTERGENERATIONAL COMMUNICATION

**1. Name and mailing address of Principal Investigator(s):**
Pamela Ferris-Olson
**2. Academic Department**
Leadership and Change
**3. Departmental Status** Student
**4. Phone Numbers a) work** 937 885 3545 **b) home** same
**5. Name of research advisor** Elizabeth Holloway
**6. Name & email address(es) of other researcher(s) involved in this project:** n/a
**7. Title of Project** WOMEN TALKING IN CIRCLES: A NARRATIVE STUDY OF POSITIVE INTERGENERATIONAL COMMUNICATION
**8. Is this project federally funded** No
**9. Expected starting date for data collection (Start date cannot be prior to IRB approval.)** 10/14/2012
**10. Anticipated completion date for data collection** 06/15/2013

**You must respond to every question in this section. All supplemental documents / attachments must be added using the "Attachments" tab.**

**11. Project Purpose(s): (Up to 500 words)** The purpose of this research is to understand how women's experiences with mothers, grandmothers, and daughters and as mothers, grandmothers, and daughters contribute to their communication and connectedness with unrelated women across generations. This is a uniquely positioned research project because an extensive review of the literature shows most studies of intergenerational communication have focused on the negative perspective. Researchers have been interested in dysfunction and ways to correct it rather than understanding positive communication and how to promote it. Positive intergenerational communication is increasingly important because of an expanding age range distribution in the United States. One age group undergoing expansion is those over 65. It is projected that more than 20 percent of Americans will belong to this age group within two decades. So it is more important than ever to develop theories of positive communication and to promote meaningful and satisfying dialog between generations.

**12. Describe the proposed participants- age, number, sex, race, or other special characteristics. Describe criteria for inclusion and exclusion of participants. Please provide brief justification for these criteria. (Up to 500 words)** As the focus of this research is seeking a fuller understanding of how maternal communication (i.e., mothers, daughters, and grandmothers) contributes to positive intergenerational communication and connectedness with unrelated women, participants should be unrelated women of different generations. I will interview between 5-20 women ranging in age from approximately 21 to 75. The actual number

depends on how many willingly agree to participate. The participants will represent a purposeful sample which means the women will be selected for the aforementioned reasons and because the women I propose to interview have regularly engaged in conversation with one another for nearly two years. The group is racially mixed, composed of women of color and white women. The group meets once a month in the Dayton, Ohio area. It is, thus, easily accessible (i.e., within a 25-mile radius) to the student/researcher.

**13. Describe how the participants are to be selected and recruited. (Up to 500 words)** All women on the group's email list and who attend meetings during the recruitment period will be asked if they would like to participate. Anyone who is interested will receive a Participant Letter describing the research: its purposes, its potential risks and benefits, and indicating that participation is entirely voluntary. The final number will depend on how many women volunteer. The most desirable situation will be to have multiple representatives for each generation (i.e., roughly born in each decade from the 1930s-1980s) and both races.
**NOTE: If the participants are to be drawn from an institution or organization (e.g., hospital, social service agency, school, etc.) which has the responsibility for the participants, then documentation of permission from that institution must be submitted to the Board before final approval of the project. This document should be scanned and attached to this application (final section below)**

**14. Describe the proposed procedures, (e.g., interview surveys, questionnaires, experiments, etc.) in the project. Any proposed experimental activities that are included in evaluation, research, development, demonstration, instruction, study, treatments, debriefing, questionnaires, and similar projects must be described. USE SIMPLE LANGUAGE, AVOID JARGON, AND IDENTIFY ACRONYMS. Please do not insert a copy of your methodology section from your proposal. State briefly and concisely the procedures for the project. (500 words)** The proposed procedure is to conduct a series of audiotaped, informal conversational interviews with each woman who voluntarily agrees to participate. In order to accommodate each woman's time constraints and to honor their individual views the interviews will be conducted on a one-on-one basis. A series of open-ended interview style questions will be asked, as an example, "Please describe as completely as possible one of the most satisfying conversations you've had with a woman in your family such as your mother grandmother, or daughter." The length of time for each interview will depend on the time the participant has available and how much they wish to say. The student/researcher expects an average interview to last between 1-2 hours. The total number of interviews per interviewee will depend on their available time and desire to talk. The student/researcher envisions there will be on average three interviews: one to tape the interviewee's experiences with maternal communication, a second to tape the interviewee's experiences of communication with the women's group, and the last to discuss the transcripts of their earlier interviews and my interpretation of these as they related to positive intergenerational communication. Sharing thoughts and evolving text with participants gives participants ownership of their stories and is a means of validation for the research.

**15. Participants in research may be exposed to the possibility of harm — physiological, psychological, and/or social—please provide the following information: (Up to 500 words)**

**a. Identify and describe potential risks of harm to participants (including physical, emotional, financial, or social harm)** There is always the potential for risks, obvious and unforeseen, in any research that involves humans. As no invasive procedure (i.e., the application of electrical, mechanical or other devices on or substances into the bodies of participants) will be used, there is little likelihood of physical harm. Less obvious risks are always possible (i.e., financial, social, physical, and emotional harm) though the student/researcher expects these will be negligible as participation is entirely voluntary and the student/researcher will conduct interviews at a time and for a length of time that is convenient for participants. Additionally, the student/researcher will endeavor to maintain each woman's privacy.

**NOTE: for international research or vulnerable populations, please provide information about local culture that will assist the review committee in evaluating potential risks to participants, particularly when the project raises issues related to power differentials.**

**b. Identify and describe the anticipated benefits of this research (including direct benefits to participants and to society-at-large or others)** The study of intergenerational communication is relatively new, and most of the previous research has focused on the negative perceptions of those engaged in conversation. Positive intergenerational communication is an area of increasing importance because demographic projections in the United State are rapidly undergoing a change. More than 20 percent of Americans are projected to be aged 65 and over within the next two decades. This in combination with people being healthier, active, and working longer means there is greater breadth in the age span found working and interacting in offices, nonprofits, medical facilities, and elsewhere. As a result it is more important than ever to develop theories of positive communication in order to promote meaningful and satisfying dialog between generations.

On a more personal level (i.e., participants) the anticipated benefits for the women of the group are several. The group has been seeking ways to give back to the community at large. This project will help to fulfill that desire. It is also hoped that by collaborating in the back and forth exchange of meaning making the participants will gain insight into their own positive communicative practices and apply and share this knowledge with others outside the confines of their group.

**c. Explain why you believe the risks are so outweighed by the benefits described above as to warrant asking participants to accept these risks. Include a discussion of why the research method you propose is superior to alternative methods that may entail less risk.** As negligible risks are expected and as this research is constructing new understanding of positive communication the benefits appear to far outweigh any risks.

**d. Explain fully how the rights and welfare of participants at risk will be protected (e.g., screening out particularly vulnerable participants, follow-up contact with participants, list of referrals, etc.) and what provisions will be made for the case of an adverse incident occurring during the study.** As an active member of the women's group from which the participants are to be selected the student/researcher is particularly sensitive to ethical considerations. As a participant in the group for nearly 18 months the student/researcher has had time to engage in collaborative practice, and she has a proven record of positive and

nonexploitive relationships. This relational base is expected to serve as a strong foundation for the maintenance of the rights and welfare of participants. The student/researcher also will continue to let the participants know throughout the project (e.g., through consent letters, at each interview sessions) that their participation is entirely voluntary and that she respects their right at any time to withdraw. The student/researcher will have follow-up contact with each participant to insure transcriptions are faithful, discuss her interpretations and make adjustments, and identify any text that participants prefer to remain unpublished.

In the case of an adverse incident the student/researcher will try to address it in a timely manner with the individual. If the matter cannot be addressed adequately in this way, the student/researcher will seek guidance from the senior faculty on the research committee. The consent form will also have the contact information of Chair of the Institutional Review Board, Ph.D. in Leadership and Change, if the participant wants to contact a faculty member regarding the issue.

**16. Explain how participants' privacy is addressed by your proposed research. Specify any steps taken to safeguard the anonymity of participants and/or confidentiality of their responses. Indicate what personal identifying information will be kept, and procedures for storage and ultimate disposal of personal information. Describe how you will de-identify the data or attach the signed confidentiality agreement on the attachments tab (scan, if necessary). (Up to 500 words)** All participants and the group to which they belong will be given pseudonyms to maintain the anonymity and/or confidentiality of their responses. Although the information gathered is not expected to be of a particularly sensitive personal nature, all interviews will be conducted on a one-on-one basis. If there is any information that a participant asks to be kept confidential, it will remain unpublished. Any interviews given to a person, other than the student/researcher, for transcription will contain only the pseudonym of the participant. No digitally recorded interview will be given to a transcriptionist until they have agreed to maintain confidentiality of the material and to return all copies in all formats (i.e., digital, electronic, and hard copies) to the student/researcher. The student/researcher will keep the number of transcriptionists used to a minimum, preferably one, to reduce the chances of a breach of confidentiality.

All materials will be stored in an area of the student/researcher’s home that is limited to her use. Any personal information collected during the course of the project will be discarded in a security-conscious manner at the end when the research is completed.

**17. Will electrical, mechanical (electroencephalogram, biofeedback, etc.) devices be applied to participants, or will audio-visual devices be used for recording participants?** Yes

**If YES, describe the devices and how they will be used:** A digital audio recorder will be used to record the interviews.

**18. Type of Review Requested** Expedited

**Refer to the definition of review types in your paper documentation.**

**Please provide your reasons/justification for the level of review you are requesting**.

I have requested an expedited review for the following reasons:

1. The probability and magnitude of harm or anticipated discomfort from this study in which the sole procedure consists of the audio recording of interviews between the student/researcher and a participant is expected to be minimal. It is unlikely that any discomfort will be more than that experienced in conversations encountered in ordinary day-to-day conversations.

2. This is a study of positive communication. It is to be conducted with normal adults who have voluntarily agreed to participate at a time and place of their choosing.

3. Participant's privacy will be protected by the use of pseudonyms. Every effort will be made to protect their anonymity and privacy. Transcriptions of interviews will be given to as few transcriptionists as is possible, preferably a single transcriptionist. No transcriptionist will be used until they have agreed to maintain the strictest of confidentiality as well as turn over all materials related to the interviews once transcribed. Therefore, risks related to participant's privacy and confidentiality are expected to be no more than minimal.

**I agree to conduct this project in accordance with Antioch University's policies and requirements involving research as outlined in the IRB Manual and supplemental materials. My research has been approved for submission by my departmental HRC representative, and by my advisor (if applicable).** I agree

**Attachments**

**19. Informed consent and/or assent statements, if any are used, are to be included with this application. If information other than that provided on the informed consent form is provided (e.g. a cover letter), attach a copy of such information. If a consent form is not used, or if consent is to be presented orally, state your reason for this modification below. *Oral consent is not allowed when participants are under age 18.**

**20. If questionnaires, tests, or related research instruments are to be used, then you must attach a copy of the instrument at the bottom of this form (unless the instrument is copyrighted material), or submit a detailed description (with examples of items) of the research instruments, questionnaires, or tests that are to be used in the project. Copies will be retained in the permanent IRB files. If you intend to use a copyrighted instrument, please consult with your research advisor and your IRB chair. Please clearly name and identify all attached documents when you add them on the attachments tab.**

**Add all clearly labeled attachments for this application below (e.g. confidentiality agreement(s), questionnaire(s), consent /assent forms, etc.).**

**Applicant: Once you are satisfied that you have completed your application and are ready to submit it for review click the Submit for Review button. Once you have submitted your application you will be unable to make any further changes to the application. Once your application has been reviewed, any comments will be shown below, and you will be sent email which will include this information.**

## Appendix C—Demographic Questions for Participants

The following demographic questions are being asked to help place your story in context of your family and society.

**Name:**

**Preferred pseudonym:**

**Place of birth:**

**Who lived in your childhood home? Please identify the individual's relationship to you and for children please indicate whether they were older or younger than you and if possible by how many years. (Feel free to use the back of this paper if you need additional room.) If you lived in more than one household growing up, please answer this question based on the household you feel influenced you most.**

**Who was the head of household in your childhood home?**

**What was the economic status of the household? Please describe in as much detail as you are comfortable providing.**

**What is your current marital status?**

**Who in your household is most responsible for decisionmaking?**

**Who lives in your household? Please identify their relationship to you and for children please indicate their ages. (Feel free to use the back of this paper if you need additional room.)**

## Appendix D—Template of Topics to Guide the Conversation

• Describe for me in as much detail as you can a memorable conversation you had growing up with a grandmother or your mother or maybe one you witnessed between your grandmother and your mother.

•Was there anything about the place that may have made the conversation seem memorable or helped to promote the conversation?

•How did you feel during the conversation?

•What effect did this conversation have on you?

•What made you select this story as opposed to another one to describe for me?

•How might you pass on the meaning of this memorable conversation to another generation?

•Have you had similar conversations with others? I'd like to know more about one of them.

•Describe for me in as much detail as you can a memorable conversation you participated in during a Circle gathering.

•What went through your mind during this conversation?

•Where would you imagine other conversations of this kind taking place?

•How would such a conversation take place if you were to have it with your grandmother, mother, or daughter?

•Do you think that your participation in the Circle has changed the way you communicate with others? I'd appreciate you describe how you feel you have changed.

•Are there any additional stories about your conversations growing up, in the Circle, or as part of the interview you'd like to share?

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