Challenges, Changes and Consequences:
Women and the college experience at midlife

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**Declaration**

I declare that this thesis has not been submitted as an exercise for a degree at this or any other university and it is entirely my own work.

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September 2015
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Abstract

This study is a narrative inquiry into the transformation in women’s lives based on the experience of higher education at midlife viewed against the background of their previous educational experiences. The socio-cultural framing of the women’s childhoods is very important, as historically this cohort is the last of its type in terms of traditional embeddedness of class, gender and the Church in Ireland. The study emphasises the transformative capacity of higher education, despite the challenges faced by mature female students who have family commitments as well as other personal, social and cultural demands. It highlights the challenges, changes and consequences encountered and experienced by the women through higher education.

A combined conceptual and theoretical framework of a Gadamerian – feminist phenomenology was used to capture through narrative analysis, the women’s lived experiences. Semi-structured interviews of ninety minutes duration of thirty women provided the data which were grouped in themes generated from the analysis. Twenty five of the women were Irish, and five were of Eastern European, Jamaican and Nigerian origin.

The findings agree with previous studies in relation to the risk of damage to relationships when a mature woman enters college, and the stress associated with the two ‘greedy’ institutions of family and college. The roles of wife and mother together with that of student, combine to place almost intolerable stress on the women. This study is significant in that it reveals an existential change, as it was found that higher education changed the women’s values regarding life. Appreciation of material goods and concerns over money diminished and gratitude for what was important in life grew. As with the previous studies, self-confidence improved, but there was also the change in how they viewed themselves in relation to those in positions of power. There was a tangible move from a position of subordination to empowerment. Higher education provided learning and knowledge, and more so, power, yet for some there were negative consequences for relationships.

The findings demonstrate that higher education is a site for significant learning and transformation. The purpose of the higher education sector may be to provide the necessary knowledge and skills for the workplace, but the actual experience of college for the women in this study went way beyond the instrumental, and resulted in an epistemological and ontological change.
Summary

This study explores, through narrative inquiry, women’s experiences of higher education having entered college at midlife. An examination of the women’s lives, past and present, public and private is central to understanding their experiences. Their lives as mature students were, to a large extent, constructed by gender and class, an intersection which prevailed throughout their narratives. The study highlights the experience of being a mature female student with family responsibilities and other commitments. The exploration extends back to the participants’ life histories and their accounts of experiences of early education in childhood, family and life trajectories. They were born in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, and the majority of them grew up in Ireland when the Catholic Church and other Irish socio-political structures had a firm hold on social and public policy. The study emphasises the transformative capacity of higher education, despite certain challenges faced especially by mature students who have family commitments.

A combined conceptual-theoretical framework of Gadamerian hermeneutical phenomenology and Feminist Standpoint Theory is employed to capture through narrative, the women’s lived experiences. Semi-structured interviews of thirty women generated the data which were interpreted through narrative analysis. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Narrative analysis looked at the accounts of the women’s early life experiences and their life trajectories through to the present, capturing and retaining the voice and integrity of the speakers. The research is historically important and specific, as this cohort of women was raised in a socio-political culture that is in stark contrast to the current era, and they have experienced the rapid social change in the past two decades. Their childhood was embedded in patriarchal dominance and control which for many of them included cruelty and abuse.

The findings of this research concur with previous studies in that there are certain challenges facing older women going to college for the first time in terms of class and gender. Unique to this study is an existential growth for the women whose values changed in terms of a disregard for material possessions and money concerns, and a greater sense of fulfilment within themselves based on intrapersonal transformation. Commencing college study is a major transition in women’s lives and it produces
increased stress and lifestyle adjustment. Despite gender equality policies and legislation, the division of household labour has not markedly changed, leaving women to juggle multiple roles and responsibilities. One main challenge for the women in the study is that of close relationships, as their husbands or partners are, in the main, unsupportive in varying degrees. Renegotiating intimate relationships was required for those relationships to survive the women’s experience of higher education. The women had life experience and skills which were relevant when applied to their college education and vice versa, as much of the academic theory was applicable to events of their present or past life. Experiences of domestic violence, rape and child abuse were dialectically experienced by the women through their studies.

The three main themes generated by the analysis were transformation, change, and women’s ways of knowing and learning. The main theme became transformation, under which aspects such as empowerment, mothering, power, oppression, the Church, violence and obligation to others emerged. Despite the difficulties faced by the women in returning to study, their choice to return initiated a sense of empowerment, an increase in confidence and for some an improvement in employment opportunities. A college degree was a means to relocate themselves in relation to other members of their lives. Higher education and having access to knowledge had given them greater control and power in their lives, which for many brought disapproval from their husbands, partners, siblings and friends. The women’s stories illustrate the challenges, losses and gains, joys and triumphs, not only on their higher education journey, but also throughout their lives. They persisted and succeeded and in so doing, experienced self-discovery, greater fulfilment and transformation.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

This study explored women’s experiences of higher education having entered college at midlife. A key assumption was that an examination of the women’s lives, past and present, public and private is central to understanding their experiences and so a narrative approach was deemed appropriate. It emerged that their lives as mature students were to a large extent, constructed by gender and class, an intersection which prevailed throughout their narratives. The study highlights the qualitative experience of being a mature female student with family responsibilities. The exploration extends back to the participants’ life histories and their experiences of early education in childhood, family and life trajectories. They were born in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s and the large majority of them grew up in Ireland when the Catholic Church had a firm hold on social and public policy. As I shared many similar experiences as some of the women, the study has an auto/biographical aspect to it.

The study emphasises the transformative capacity of higher education, despite certain challenges faced especially by mature female students who have family commitments. A combined conceptual and theoretical framework of Gadamerian hermeneutic phenomenology and Feminist Standpoint Theory was employed to capture through narrative, the women’s lived experiences. Gadamerian phenomenology provided a base for exploring and interpreting the complexities of the women’s lived experiences and understanding of their transformational experiences. Feminist Standpoint epistemology requires women to be at the centre of the process, therefore the women’s voices are placed centre-stage in this study.

I begin with the context of higher education in Ireland and the many policy changes which have occurred in recent years and have impacted on women entering higher education later in life. Following this the objectives of the study are given. The methodology, the theoretical framework and the methods are then outlined, with this chapter concluding with an overview of the thesis structure.

1.1 Rationale for the Study

The rationale for studying mature female students as a particular cohort relates to a number of factors. This cohort represents a significant proportion of enrolled students at the regional third level college where I am employed. I have direct contact with mature female students
with similar demographic and personal characteristics as the women who became my participants, and share myself some of the same demographic characteristics. The availability of the population of interest facilitated convenience sampling, and the college itself provided the setting for the research.

The chosen area of interest is as a result of three influences, firstly, a passion for education as a lifelong process; secondly, as a lecturer observing and listening to the problems associated with an increased and diverse student body, and thirdly, personal experience of having been a ‘Mature Student’ on entering Trinity College, Dublin over twenty five years ago, where I completed a primary degree in Social Studies followed immediately by a Master’s degree. There is also the accompanying strong interest in the qualitative methodology of hermeneutical phenomenology which provides insights into the lived experience of the subjects under investigation. This interest stems from an appreciation of philosophy and metaphysics as important languages for understanding the human condition. Hermeneutical phenomenology can release a ‘narrative’, which is at the core of ‘Transformative Narrative Inquiry’, a recent exciting addition to the social aspect of understanding rather than the scientific model of research. Hermeneutical phenomenology combined with a feminist standpoint provided an interesting methodology for the research.

The focus of the study is the increasing specific cohort of female students entering third level education at ‘mid-life’, a working definition of which is those over thirty five years of age. Female students are the chosen population, as my interest lies in the possible insights of a feminist standpoint (Harding 1992) stemming from lived experience. A conversation with such students some years ago whetted my research appetite for the study, as they spoke about the changes which had occurred within themselves and in their relationships over the course of three years at college. My interest grew from there, and I wanted to find out more about the epistemological and ontological challenges, changes and consequences for women of a certain age going to college. My interest was informed by the literature, especially that of Edwards (1993), Merrill (1996), Letherby (2003) and Field (2005).
1.2 Higher Education Context

The women at the centre of this study are engaged in higher education which is structured and experienced in a particular way in Ireland. The Irish Government’s White Paper on Adult Education (2000) defines adult education as ‘aspects of further and third level education, continuing education and training, community education, and other systematic learning by adults, both formal and informal’ (DES, 2000: 12). A goal of the Lisbon European Council is ‘that by 2010 the EU should become the most competitive and dynamic knowledge economy in the world…with more and better jobs…greater social cohesion’ (Keogh, 2004: 19).

Participation in adult education in many European countries has risen over the past few decades with an average of 35-40% of the population of Ireland, UK and Norway engaging in some form of adult education (King et al, 2002). Historically, third level institutions were centres for a class based elite, with entry prior to 1970 being based on ability to pay fees and to forego a wage; now they have to accommodate all. Enrolment in higher education in Ireland has increased more than twelvelfold in the past fifty years, with 60% of undergraduates being female (Hyland, 2009). Participation rates have improved among groups who were traditionally under-represented, e.g., mature students, students with disabilities and students from lower socio-economic backgrounds. The 21st century university must be inclusive and therefore, accessible.

The Bologna Declaration of June 1999 put in motion a series of reforms needed to make European Higher Education more compatible, more competitive and more attractive for Europeans and non-Europeans. The three priorities of the Bologna process are:

- Introduction of the three cycle system: bachelor, master and doctorate,
- Quality Assurance, and
- Recognition of qualifications and periods of study.

(The Official Bologna Process Website 2007-2010).

In Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve (April, 2009), priorities were established for the next decade for the European Higher Education area. Such priorities included:

- Addressing the social dimension of higher education
- Strengthening equitable access and measures to ensure completion of studies
• Lifelong learning
• Employability
• Student-centred learning and the teaching mission of higher education research and innovation
• Funding
• International openness.

The Bologna Process emphasises the need for Europe to maximise the talents and capacities of all its citizens through lifelong learning opportunities as well as widening participation in higher education. The ‘Consultation on the National Strategy for Higher Education Guidance Document, 2009’ (Network of Irish Mature Student Officers) reminds us that ‘Mature Students’ are valued by academics for their diverse socio-economic and educational backgrounds, ages and experiences and their general contribution to the third level experience of the total student body. It emphasises the need for ‘flexible’ learning options in line with the Bologna Process.

This study is justified and very relevant because, as a lecturer I am in contact with older female students entering third level education for the first time as full-time students in a regional college in the south east of Ireland. Personal and educational concerns merge, and cause an impediment to learning, but most specifically to motivation. The change in attitudes as a result of higher education causes stress and resistance, and a certain level of cognitive dissonance. There is a fragmentation of identity, an identity that a student over a certain age clings to in the face of imminent and unavoidable change. However, as this research finds, higher education has a transformative impact on the lives of the women, regardless of the many changes in their thinking and knowing, which may at first cause some discomfort.

Since the demise of the ‘Celtic Tiger’ economy, more people have entered the educational system, coming from diverse backgrounds and life experiences. While the typical ‘mature’ student is defined as someone who turns twenty three years of age in the January of year of entry; there is a significant cohort in the thirty plus category entering third level education. Some of these students may have left school in their mid teens, they may or may not have had a career, they may be rearing families and caring for their parents in old age; but for most of them, college is daunting. Much of the existing research of adult learning is concerned with
explaining patterns of participation and non-participation (Field, 2005); the purpose of this study concurs with Schuller who points out that the ways in which learning affects lives individually and collectively remains unexplored (Schuller et al. 2001). The frame of reference of this research is the epistemological and ontological changes which occur within the individual, in this case women over the age of thirty, as a result of the experience of higher education.

1.3 Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study are to explore, describe and understand the challenges, changes and consequences experienced by women who enter college for the first time at midlife, which for the purposes of this study is defined as those over thirty five years of age. The tension between their roles as student, mother and wife, which are created by the demands of family and study, is important to the focus of the study. The majority of the specific cohort chosen are women who grew up in Ireland when class and gender inequality determined for them, a restricted and constrained set of opportunities. These experiences therefore, are historically specific and unique to this cohort; making the airing of their narratives an important objective.

1.4 Methodology

Methodology, according to Ryan (2006) refers to a ‘perspective’ or broad theoretically informed approach to research, which stems from the researcher’s epistemological stance or philosophical/political position. Having considered the appropriate paradigm, methodology and method, the most appropriate approach was deemed to be a qualitative methodology in order to generate the data required. Gadamerian hermeneutic phenomenology was united with feminist standpoint theory to place the women’s experiences as the object of the study. A case study approach was applied as the bounded context is that of the college where the women had studied. It is also my place of employment and the setting for the research. Narrative analysis is employed to treat the extensive data generated from the semi-structured interviews.
1.4.1 Gadamerian hermeneutic phenomenology

Gadamer (2000) saw hermeneutics as central to human experience and what it means to be human and is the author of the idea that all understanding is interpretation. We live and participate in the hermeneutical conversation with the events that occur in our lives. We are active agents having feelings, thoughts, ideas, making decisions and taking action always against the backdrop of a horizon of interpretation of our own lives, those of others and of the events that impinge on us and shape us. In the context of this research of a certain cohort of women at a certain point in time, their higher education experience reveals new horizons and re-shapes the way in which they interpret and therefore understand their past and present lives. According to Gadamer (2002: 302) ‘to have a horizon means not being limited to what is nearby but being able to see beyond it’. For the women in the study, the education experience addressed them, and understanding and knowledge expanded their horizons. Gadamer uses the concept of horizon to speak of how comprehension takes place. This is especially pertinent to the research as it is core to the layers of influences, e.g., class and gender experiences. The horizon is defined as ‘the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point’ (Gadamer, 2000: 302). A vantage point can also be defined as the belief system, desires and imaginings of an individual, therefore the horizon is formed by history, both personal and socio-cultural. The women in my study grew up in the 1950’s, 1960’s and 1970s, and especially in the case of the Irish women (twenty five in total), their belief systems were very much influenced by the dominant Church teachings and culture instilled in them by every social institution, the family, school, and the political and judicial systems.

1.4.2 Feminist standpoint theory

Feminist standpoint theory emerged in the 1970s as a feminist critical theory about relations between the production of knowledge and the practices of power (Harding, 1993). It works on the premise that women, due to their personal and social experiences as females are in a better position than men to face and understand the world of women. As an epistemology, it is both ethical and political, as it puts the participants at the heart of the research. According to Lentin (2000) feminist sociological research methodologies are based on women’s lived experience in patriarchy, both that of the researched and the researcher. This is very true of my study.
The initial proposal to the university focused on Gadamerian phenomenology and the qualitative interpretations and understandings that make up the life-world or lived experience of the researched subjects. Further exploration of the methodology necessary to fulfil the feminist stance exposed a specific feminist epistemology and ontology in the key areas of power and voice. ‘Feminist Standpoint Theory’ is therefore integrated with Gadamerian phenomenology to provide what is considered an appropriate and novel theoretical framework. Research influenced by feminist principles gives voice to women and their experiences, by giving credibility to their stories as truth and not just hermenetic. The ultimate and inevitable changes in the life-world of the women as a result of the college experience are what the research reveals, interprets and describes. Feminist standpoint theory values the private and personal as worthy of study and that it values reflexivity and emotion as a source of insight as well as an essential part of the research (Letherby, 2003). The women’s narratives encapsulate all of these components.

1.5 Case Study

Case study is a suitable approach to research when the researcher is interested in the process as it focuses on holistic description and explanation, and case studies are prevalent throughout the field of education (Merriam, 1998). A case study approach was chosen for this research because the focus was on a contemporary phenomenon with a real-life context (Yin, 2009), and the women being graduates of the same college formed a well-defined and well-bounded case. This hermeneutic phenomenological case explores, describes, interprets and explains (to some extent) the challenges, changes and consequences for women as a result of gaining higher education at midlife.

My case study focused on women who entered college for the first time in their thirties, forties and fifties, having family and work obligations. They are also the first to go to college in their family of origin. The use of a case study approach fits well with the Gadamerian – feminist methodology as it is flexible enough to incorporate techniques like intensive interviews while also providing some reassurance to concerns about validity and reliability.
1.6 Narrative Analysis

Narrative analysis, as a data analysis technique, is fully compatible with the Gadamerian-feminist framework as it does not assume, or aim at objectivity, but, instead privileges positionality and subjectivity. Ricoeur (1991) provides the link between hermeneutic phenomenological analysis and narrative analysis as he views the interpretive or hermeneutic tradition as a highly influential strand in narrative work. Narrative analysis provided, therefore, the appropriate vehicle for exploring and revealing meanings to the women’s experiences, which constitute realities. The women assumed and enacted a high degree of freedom to describe and explain their experiences. In the analysis, patterns, processes, commonalities and differences were identified and grouped together as themes. These themes were identified in accordance with the research questions regarding the challenges, changes and consequences for mature women going to college.

1.7 Method

Semi-structured interviews were used to generate the data, and they were electronically recorded and transcribed verbatim. The interviews were between sixty and ninety minutes in duration, and all thirty were completed over three weeks. An initial focus group helped develop the research protocol, and from this it was possible to construct four domains in relation to the research questions. Twenty eight of the interviews took place in the college; the remaining two took place in the respective women’s homes, at their request. Research design, methodology, data collection and analysis will be discussed further in Chapters three and four.

1.8 Thesis Structure

The thesis is arranged around eight chapters. Following this introduction, chapter two contains a comprehensive review of the literature relevant to the context of the research project. The literature review is divided into two chapters, with chapter two exploring the social issues and influences deemed relevant to the specific cohort of women, with a focus on class and gender that emerged during the project and influenced a re-shaping of the discussion of the literature. Chapter three examines women’s epistemologies; women’s roles as student, mother and spouse or partner; women at midlife; adult learning; gender of education approaches, and the policy and legislative framework surrounding adult education.
Chapter four explains and elaborates on the methodology and method employed in the research. A combined conceptual and theoretical framework of Gadamerian hermeneutic phenomenology and feminist standpoint theory is defended as being the most appropriate methodology for this research, and one which I am very interested in exploring. Gadamerian phenomenology provides a base for exploring and interpreting the women’s lived experiences and feminist standpoint theory places the women’s voices and the place of power at the centre of the process.

Chapters five and six give voice to the women’s experiences through narrative analysis, and the complementarity of such analysis with the framework of a phenomenological hermeneutical-feminist approach is explained. Much of this chapter comprises extensive quotations from the women’s narratives, in line with the ‘voice-giving’ of feminist research methods.

Chapter seven provides an attempt at a summative coherent understanding of the narratives under three main themes, which emerged in the analysis from the shared, recurring events in the women’s lives as told in their stories. The first theme of transformation is addressed under the headings of a number of feminist themes around empowerment, which identifies a number of aspects including mothering, oppression and obligation to others. The themes of change and women’s ways of knowing are then discussed.

Chapter eight is the conclusion of the thesis and it summarises what was researched and how it was researched, and provides the main findings of the research. It reminds the reader of the original contribution of this research to the existing body of knowledge, and of its historical and specific importance in the field of adult education in Ireland.
Chapter 2: Literature Review 1

Irish Social Institutions, Laws and Policies with particular reference to women’s lives

Mature, working class students confront complex issues when attempting the transition to higher education (Fleming, Loxley, Kenny & Finnegan, 2010), and the majority of the women in this study came from working class backgrounds. The research would indicate that as a result of this they had less exposure to cultural capital than their more privileged counterparts, which meant, for instance, that the education system was quite alien to their parents’ values and views around their progress in life. A key aspect of their situation is that working class students are trying to negotiate a difficult balance between investing in a new improved identity and holding on to a cohesive self that retained an anchor in what had gone before. This could be seen as a balance between escape and holding on (Lawlor, 2000). According to Reay (2002), despite the many promises and possibilities, higher education also poses a threat to both authenticity and a coherent sense of self-hood for working class mature students. She states ‘feelings of being an impostor are never far away; education was, in the main, a world into which they fitted uneasily’ (Reay, 2002: 404). Bourdieu (1993: 510) refers to the conflicts associated with upward mobility: ‘the feelings of being torn that come from experiencing success as failure, or, better still, as transgression’. I contend that these complex issues are magnified and added to when the mature, working class student is a woman; and especially for women born in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s in Ireland. The core of their specific situation lies at their sense of obligation, duty and self-sacrifice, nurtured in them on the micro-level by family and school, and on the macro-level by the Roman Catholic Church and the state. The centrality of care-work in this group has become very important to feminist theory because the actual work of care is strongly tied to women, is socially devalued, but is vital to society (Folbre, 2001). The asymmetrical social organisation of parenting was noted by Chodorow (1978), and is seen as causing tension between autonomy and commitment, which is especially true for mature female students with a family.

It is quite well established that to be educated produces a new identity, which can threaten and disrupt relations with family members and friends. People might begin to be viewed as superior, or begin to feel superior; both accounts re-shape former relationships (Baxter & Britton, 2001; Brine & Waller, 2005; Johnson & Robson, 1999; Kevern & Webb, 2003;
Apart from the re-shaping of relationships, there are many challenges, changes and consequences facing women nearing mid-life who decide to enter third level education for the first time. According to Gorard & Rees (2002), the most relevant determinant of later take-up of education was found to be the disposition to learn. However, for many of these mature students, earlier educational experiences have left them with fragile learner identities (Gallagher & Crossan, 2000; Weil, 1986). The situation for women of a certain cohort born in the fifties, sixties and seventies is particularly unique from a class and gender perspective. Working class backgrounds provided little in the way of option or choice, and the women’s epistemology was consigned to accepting, repeating and re-enacting what they were told. Belenky et al., (1986) discuss women’s silent voice as a result of authority and power which determine their lives and how they experience themselves. Irigaray (1994) concludes from her research in linguistics that centuries of consignment to reproduction have diminished the stock of symbols with which women can represent themselves. She argues that our linguistic and symbolic repertoire change in size and scope according to what we need to communicate in our lives. Reproduction and housekeeping do not require women to have a very elaborate linguistic code. Silence and a restricted linguistic code, combined with class and the influence of the Church all combine to having had a significant influence on the lives of these Irish women in the study.

This literature review is divided into two chapters. This chapter explores the institutions, laws and policies in Irish society from the mid-sixties to the present day which framed and shaped the life pathways of most of the women and the argument is presented that the particular intersection of class, gender and church imposed many constraints on the lives of Irish people at the time, especially women. Chapter three will examine Irish and European policies around higher education, women’s epistemologies, gender in adult education and women at midlife as learners in order to frame the context of the women’s experience of higher education.

2.1 Women in Ireland: 1965 to the Present

Ireland has often been depicted as a patriarchal society (Mahon, 1994; O’Connor, 1998). Walby (1990: 4) defines patriarchy as ‘a system of social and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women’. She explores women’s subordination in contemporary society when discussing patriarchy and points to women’s everyday experiences, for example, the family as being the site of women’s oppression. She argues particularly for the importance
of housework and wage labour as sites of women’s exploitation by men. Some other well-known radical feminists have also located this imbalance of power clearly within the household, and in reproduction (Firestone, 1974; Rich, 1980; Dworkin, 1981; MacKinnon, 1982). They all argue that male dominated sexuality is at the root of patriarchy. These early feminists were criticised by Barrett (1980) and Acker (1989) who argue that patriarchy used in this way gave the impression that male dominance is not only both universal and historical, but also offers an essentialist stance, that men and women are essentially different. This point is supported by Delphy and Leonard (1992) when they argue that only the actual act of giving birth is essentially female and all post-natal activities can be negotiated. Criticisms of essentialism also came from Rowbotham (1989) who makes the point that, in its general usage, patriarchy implies a somewhat deterministic/fatalistic approach, which women appear to have little or no opportunity to counter.

As an example of a patriarchal society, Ireland is not unique in this respect as the United Nations Human Development of 1995 noted that ‘no society treats its women as well as its men’ (UNHDR 1995: 75). O’Connor (2000) provides evidence of what Connell (1995) refers to as the ‘patriarchal dividend’ in Irish society. She examines the existence of patriarchal privileging in the arena of paid employment, the family and the state. She identifies five key ‘fields in Irish society as being influential in women’s position; the Catholic Church, the state, the economic system, the cultural and social construction of heterosexual relationships and the women’s movement. To examine Irish women’s experience of Irish society in the last fifty years, this section will elaborate on O’Connor’s (1998) five key fields and will consider the many changes which have occurred in this period. The areas where change has not actually gone far enough in terms of social justice and gender equality will be identified.

2.2 Women and the Catholic Church in Ireland

In order to understand Irish women born in the 1960s and 1970s, it is necessary to understand the influence of the Catholic Church on women in this period (Bacik, 2004; O’Connor, 1998; Connolly, 2004; Inglis, 2005). O’Connor (1998) suggests that the Church influenced women on several levels: through its involvement in the educational system; through its influences on women’s values and behaviour and by its legislative embeddedness. Values internalised during childhood both at home and in school were, for most Irish women and up to quite recently, heavily influenced by the teachings of the Catholic Church. The Church still owns
and manages 90% of the schools in the state, and the vast majority of Irish women were educated by nuns (Bacik, 2004). Socialisation into a Catholic ethos was implemented in schools through staffing, symbols, the physical environment and through the curriculum (Tovey & Share, 2000) and according to Whyte (1980: 16), the Catholic Church in Ireland possessed ‘a grip on education of unique strength’.

Inglis (2008) contends that the power of Church was not explicitly and externally violent and Irish women willingly embraced Catholicism and the prayers and rituals that were at the heart of family life, and ‘the family was at the heart of Irish social reproduction’ (Inglis, 1998: 167).

One of the main ways in which priests gained control of women was by gaining control of their sexual life. This they did by portraying women as weak, fragile beings who must be protected (by the priest) from the sexual viper which lurked within them…women are worked into an exaggerated femininity, magnifying their relative weakness into complete helplessness, their emotionality into hysteria, and their sensitivity into a delicacy which must be protected from all contact with the world. (Inglis, 1998: 188)

Women’s close alliances with their priests gave them moral authority in the home, an authority which was guided by a ‘strict moral code that revered sexual purity and taught moral discipline’ (Radosh, 2008: 308). Irish mothers were blamed for preserving and promoting intergenerational sexual inhibitions, emotional repression and perennial personal guilt (Radosh, 2008). A woman’s place was in the home and they monitored their children closely. Scheper-Hughes (1979) in her ethnographic study in rural Ireland, concluded that Irish mothers were indeed the cause of mental illness because they instilled in their children such guilt around sexual matters.

Women’s adherence to Catholic doctrine came with costs, having no access to artificial contraception being an important one. Irish Catholic married women were consigned to having a large number of children, and in the absence of divorce, they were forced to stay in marriage for life, regardless of the quality of the relationship. Poverty, deprivation and lack of education were commonly the products of such marriages. In 1960s’ Ireland, women who became pregnant outside marriage would often disappear into institutions run by religious orders, be denied contact with the fathers of their children, and be returned to the institutions by the Gardaí (the Irish police) if they escaped.
Radical feminist, Kate Millett (1970: 46) has expressed the view that religion plays a crucial role in ‘patriarchal convictions about women’, and she believed that the family is a key component of patriarchal society.

Patriarchy has God on its side. One of the most effective agents of control is the powerfully expeditious character of its doctrines as to the nature and origin of the female and the attribution to her alone of the dangers and evils it imputes to sexuality. (Millett, 1970: 51).

This quote is appropriate here because the majority of the women in the study were raised in a culture of patriarchy. The Irish state influenced by Catholic social teaching presents a particular representation of woman as mother in Articles 41.2.1 and 41.2.2 of the Constitution. De Valera’s constitution was drawn up without the consultation of one woman (Scannell, 2000).

A review of these sections of the Constitution leads to the conclusion that the constitutional intention was to ensure that a selfless dedication is demanded of women to the service of others in the domestic sphere. The interchangeable use of ‘woman’ and ‘mother’ implicitly gives one specific role to women and at the same time, withdraws status from those who do not undertake this role. Kennedy (2004: 46)) maintains that Article 41 demonstrates ‘a basic contradiction throughout patriarchy; between the laws and sanctions designed to keep women essentially powerless and the attribution to mothers of almost superhuman power (of control, of influence, of life-support). Valiulis (1995) describes this idealised role for women as:

The self-sacrificing mother whose world was bound by the confines of her home, a woman who was pure, modest, who valued traditional culture, especially that of dress and dance, a woman who inculcated these virtues in her daughters and nationalist ideology in her sons, a woman who knew and accepted her place in society. (Valiulis cited in O’Dowd & Wichert, 1995: 178)

2.3 Contemporary Religious Adherence

Data from the European Social Survey (ESS) Round 4 (2009/10) and the International Social Science Programme (ISSP) (2008/2009) show that from the late 1980s, there was a fall-off in attendance at daily and weekly Mass in Ireland (O’Mahoney, 2011: 5) and consequently there was a distancing of many people from the hierarchical and institutional Church in Ireland. O’Hara (1997) found, however, that Mass attendance was highest among women who were full time housewives and lived in rural areas. And, according to Inglis (2008), the significant
events in Irish women’s lives are still often marked by religious rituals. Baptisms, First Holy Communions, Confirmations, weddings and funerals are seen as important rites of passage in the life course. However, people’s attitudes to the dominance of the Catholic Church have changed considerably as evidenced by the increase in divorce and remarriage, availability of contraception, the development of multi-denominational schools and the dramatic fall off in Mass attendance. In 2011, 18% of Irish people were regularly attending Mass, compared to 1984 when 90% of Irish Catholics attended weekly Mass (O’Mahony, 2010). The decline in religiosity is co-chronologous to women’s emancipation, better education and economic independence. Revelations of abuse within the Church over the past two decades have also added to the move away from institutionalised religion.

2.4 Women and the State

2.4.1 Bunreacht na hÉireann, 1937 (Irish Constitution)

In Article 41.1 concerning the Family it states:

1. The State recognises the Family as the natural primary and fundamental unit group of Society, and as a moral institution possessing inalienable and imprescriptible rights, antecedent and superior to all positive law.
2. The State, therefore, guarantees to protect the Family in its constitution and authority, as the necessary basis of social order and as indispensable to the welfare of the Nation and State.

Also pertinent is the following section, Article 41.2 The Family:

1. In particular, the State recognises that by her life within the home, woman gives to the State a support without which the common good cannot be achieved.
2. The State shall, therefore, endeavour to ensure that mothers shall not be obliged by economic necessity to engage in labour to the neglect of their duties in the home.

The 1937 Constitution of Ireland (Bunreacht na hÉireann) embodied the dominant gender values of the Irish state, defining the role of women exclusively as that of mothers working in the home. The core values of marriage centred on male property ownership and male
authority. In its role as a provider of a legal framework, the Irish government initially introduced a Constitution and legislation which was clearly influenced by the teachings of the Catholic Church. In Article 41 of the 1937 Constitution (Bunreacht na h Eireann, 1937), the importance of the family and of women’s role within the family is enshrined. The state guarantees ‘to guard with special care the institution of marriage, on which the family is founded’ (Article 41.2.1). This Article also ‘recognises, that by her life within the home, women gives to the state a support without which the common good cannot be achieved’ (Article 41.2.2).

These Articles set the context in which the traditional breadwinner model of family life is seen as the norm. In this model, the man is the patriarch who goes out to work to provide for his family and the woman is a full time housewife and mother, whose role is to take care of her husband and children. The Articles reflect a very traditional ideology on women’s roles and on normative family practices. Motherhood became a signifier for womanhood.

The Articles on family and marriage are symptomatic of a state that has been fearful of the uncontrollable power that might be unleashed if the concession of sexual equality of citizenship were realised in action. (Dooley, 1998: 128)

The married nuclear family remained the preferred model in Irish law, with no legal rights being offered to children born outside of marriage until the passing of the Status of Children Act in 1987. This recognised the guardianship, maintenance and inheritance rights of children of unmarried parents. The Status of Children Act is of huge importance for the women in this study, as marriage for some of them was related to the stigma of having a child out of wedlock, an illegitimate child, more colloquially referred to as a ‘bastard’. The second Act that directly influenced some of the women’s lives in the study is the Divorce Act of 1996. Although, legal separation was a common occurrence in the 1980s (Fahey & Lyons, 1995), the option of remarriage was not available.

The late author, Nuala O’ Faoláin (1996: 15) referred to Ireland as being ‘a living tomb for women’ in her autobiography, and she gives an account of the mental and physical toll that bearing and raising nine children had taken on her mother’s life. Yet, O’Faoláin herself was strongly discouraged from higher education by her mother, in favour of getting married and
having children. ‘I’d rather see you with a husband and a few kids’ (O’ Faoláin, 1996: 89). This was despite her mother’s own wretched unhappiness in marriage.


With the election of Mary Robinson as Ireland’s first female President in 1990, the drift away from Catholic teaching concerning the role of women accelerated as Irish people became disillusioned over the Catholic Church’s rigid position on contraception, divorce and abortion. The flood of revelations about the abuse of children by the religious added to the disenchantment, as did the apparent slowness of the hierarchy to act on the problem.

By the end of the 1990s women had made significant advances. Divorce and contraception were available in Ireland, there were more women in the workforce than ever before and girls were out performing boys in state examinations. There was also a growing number of women’s community groups. Mary Robinson’s highly successful term of office was followed by the election to the Presidency in 1997 of another feminist and human rights lawyer, Mary McAleese. However, currently, women in Ireland continue to be under-represented in politics, business, the churches and higher education professorships.

2.5 Women, Work and the Economic System

Government exclusionary policies and the Catholic Church’s social teachings against the employment of wives kept married women in the private sphere. In the 1920s, the then Minister for Justice, Kevin O’Higgins stated that women should not be allowed to serve on juries or to participate in the body politic, while Attorney General Hugh Kennedy suggested that women were ‘frightened out of their lives at the thought of a public role’ (Hoff & Coulter, 1995: 124). In 1961, 93.7% of married women were described as engaged in home duties and were classified in the CSO as not being gainfully employed (Clear, 2001). The ‘marriage bar’ which prevented women from working in the civil service, local authorities and health boards once they got married came into effect on January 1st 1933 (Considine & Dukelow, 2009). The 1973 Report of the Commission on the Status of Women noted that expectation in Ireland at the time was that most girls would spend a relatively short period of time in employment after leaving school, before getting married and giving up work to take
care of children full-time. The ban was removed in 1973 as a result of recommendations made by the Commission.

The lifting of the marriage bar in 1973, the development of equality legislation in 1977, women having fewer children and better education paved the way for an increase in numbers of Irish married women in paid employment. ‘In the 1980s, the growth of jobs in the computer field and in the service sector brought more women into the workforce’ (Coulter, 1997: 278). However, while women were now welcome in the workforce, the Irish government provided very little in the way of state childcare to facilitate mothers of young children to take up employment, or indeed further or higher education.

The E.U. target for female employment was 60% in 2010. Ireland met this target in 2007, but due to the recession, the figure dropped to 56% in 2010 (C.S.O. 2011). Increases in Irish women’s labour force participation do not mean they have achieved equality in the labour market. There is a strong class dimension to Irish women’s experience of the labour market and labour market outcomes for those with higher education levels are very different to those without (Russell et al, 2009). According to the latest figures available, there are 511,600 people employed in the administrative and secretarial, the caring, leisure and other services and the sales and customer industries. Women comprise 77% of the workforce in these areas, and 46% of women in work are employed in these sectors (CSO, 2013). The 2009 National Employment Survey showed that work in these areas are the lowest paid across occupations. In the year to Quarter 4 2012, 13,000 women lost jobs in these sectors compared to 3,000 men (NWCI, 2013).

Over half a million Irish women in 2010 were looking after family members full time, compared to 7,500 men (C.S.O. 2010). O’Connor (1998) noted that women in their forties and fifties in Ireland were less likely to be employed outside the home than their European counterparts.

2.6 Social Construction of Marriage

Until the 1980s, marriage rates in Ireland were relatively low and there were high numbers of bachelors and spinsters (Kennedy, 2001). This related largely to inheritance practices in a largely rural society which dictated that only one son could inherit the family farm, meaning
that other family members either had to remain unmarried or emigrate. From the 1970s and 1980s onwards, different images of relationships began to emerge. Love rather than money began to be seen as the basis for marriage. Relationships based on love were construed as involving personal commitment and sexual fidelity, open and honest communication, emotional closeness, spending time together and working at the relationship (O’Connor, 1998; Beale, 1986). Marriage involved a companionate type of relationship rather than a traditional instrumental type relationship (McCarthy, 1995).

According to O’Connor (1998), essentialism was the dominant theory in Irish ideology about what it was to be male or female and how relations between the sexes were expected to be conducted. ‘It was men’s values which defined women’s lives’, as the patriarchal system that operated within the Catholic Church was mirrored by the state, (O’ Connor, 1998: 81) and reflected the philosophy that this all was, in some way, grounded in a natural order of things. She is correct, in that homes, schools and businesses were generally managed by men, in the sense that the man was the boss, ultimate decision-maker and protector of a privileged power structure. Irish television broadcasting began in 1961 and it had an impact on making different images of women available, other than those presented by the Church. Programmes produced in the US and the UK portrayed women in different roles, and this challenged the natural inevitability of women’s position in society (O’Connor, 1998). Television also allowed women’s voices to be heard, and highlighted the difficulties that some women experienced within the privacy of their homes.

By the end of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century, Ireland had been through a period of rapid modernisation and liberalisation. The influence of the Catholic Church was no longer the primary influence on the legislation enacted in the country. The size of families had reduced and women were entering the workforce in increasing numbers, as well as returning to education. Notwithstanding these changes, O’Connor (1998) claimed that family was still the basic unit in Irish society, and that women were still seen as central to the life of the family. She argued that women’s destinies still lay in subsuming their identity to their families because ‘within an Irish cultural tradition, the family is an important symbol of collective identity, unity and security’ (O’ Connor, 1998: 89). The notion of individual autonomy for women runs counter to a culture that ‘thrives on social obligation and strong notions of kin, community, connections and social bonds’ (O’Connor, 1998: 103). Fahey (1998: 391) describes the 1970s as a period when the transition from the family paradigm of ‘patriarchal familism’ to that of
‘egalitarian individualism’ was well underway. The 1980s in particular were dominated by what may be described as ‘culture wars’ surrounding sexuality and family life (Fahey & Layte, 2004: 155-157). According to Garvin (2004), those who grew up in the 1950s and 1960s, did so during a period of agonising reappraisal. These can all be regarded as reliable accounts of Irish society in the second half of the twentieth century.

Fine-Davis (2011) conducted a study on attitudes to family formation in Ireland. The initial stage of the project involved a qualitative study of the views of forty eight men and women and this was followed by a quantitative phase in which 1,404 men and women in the age group 20-49 were personally interviewed in relation to their attitudes to family formation, cohabitation and having children. She found that people’s ideal number of children (2.73) is higher than either their expected (2.41) or actual number of children (2). Economic constraints and changing attitudes to family size along with policy barriers account for this. The study found that there was widespread support among both men and women for married women working outside the home, yet, there is also evidence that this is having an effect on some men’s sense of security in the workplace. She found support for couples co-habiting and having children together. There is an increasing wish on the part of men and women to – co-parent’, yet people do not feel that the social supports are there to enable them to do this. However, Fine–Davis (2011) also found that, in some respects attitudes had not changed, as men still believed that women have the primary responsibility for children. To take a comparative view, in 2002 Irish attitudes towards maternal employment were more traditional than those in Denmark and Sweden, but less traditional than those held in the US and UK (Russell et al, 2009). Despite all the changes, Inglis (2008: 137) still contends that ‘[h]undreds of years of self deprecation could not be overturned in one or two generations’. He argues that residues of Catholicism are still present in Irish people’s souls, and in terms of women who are now in midlife, traditional notions of what mothers are like may form part of the yard stick by which women judge themselves and feel judged by others. This is very true in relation to the women in my study who held very traditional views of their role in society.

2.7 The Women’s Movement

Besides the role of Church, legislative and cultural norms, a further social phenomenon can be regarded as significant for the context of the early lives of the women who feature as participants of this study. The second wave of feminism made its presence felt in Ireland in
1970 with the founding of the Irish Women’s Liberation Movement (Connolly, 2003), which lead to a change in the collective consciousness of Irish women. While the majority of Irish women may not have been directly involved in the activities of the Irish Women’s Liberation Movement, the role of the feminists in highlighting the position of women shifted the taken-for-granted essentialist assumptions about the position of women in Ireland. The unequal treatment of women was clearly identified and attempts were made to equalise women’s opportunities. Women who are currently in midlife will have been aware of the changes taking place slowly over their lives. The women taking part in this research will have had their lives moulded by traditional gender role expectations, and the experience of higher education became a journey of self-examination, reflection and transformation. They were, in the main, removed from the earlier influences of the Women’s Liberation Movement, as it was in the Universities and cities that the discourse of gender equality emerged and remained for a long time.

The impact on women’s lives was immeasurable, particularly when it is remembered that by the law of the state they were denied access not only to fertility control, but to knowledge of all aspects of sexuality including information on sexually transmitted diseases. (Hug, 1999: 83-84)

Access to contraceptives and to information about contraception had been severely limited in Ireland until the late 20th century. Restrictive legislation from early in the history of the state remained in place until the 1980s. In 1929, all literature and printed information on contraception and birth control were banned under the Censorship of Publications Act, which aimed to protect the marital family from sexual immorality (Lee, 1989: 158-9). In 1935, the Criminal Law Amendment Act outlawed the importation, advertising and sale of contraceptives (Murphy-Lawless & McCarthy, 1999). This Act portrayed the extent of the intention of the state to police women’s fertility, as the fines for being caught importing contraceptives was twenty five higher than the fines for prostitution (Jackson, 1992: 126). Further restrictive measures on contraception were passed in 1946, extending censorship of publications to prohibit all literature that promoted artificial methods of contraception (Murphy-Lawless & McCarthy, 1999).

As women began to earn their own money, migrate to urban areas and have a life away from the watchful eyes of their mostly still staunchly conservative mothers, their increased levels of freedom encouraged them to demand similar levels of choice and agency in the areas of
fertility and sexuality. This became evident in May 1971 when a group of feminists controversially demonstrated their dissatisfaction with the law by taking a journey to Northern Ireland on what has since become known as the ‘contraceptive train’ and returned to the Republic laden with contraceptives. This was the beginning of Irish women’s fight for control over their bodies and their fertility. This deliberate flaunting of the law was celebrated with a supportive demonstration which received massive coverage in the media, marking the beginning of open political strife on the issue of women’s reproductive rights (Barry, 1992), a strife, that to some degree continues today with the on-going issue of abortion.

The historical McGee Case in 1972 furthered the cause, when a young mother of four with a heart condition took a case against the government using Article 41 of the Constitution on the importance of the family (Murphy-Lawless & McCarthy, 1999). McGee argued that her life was endangered by her inability to have access to contraception, as another pregnancy would threaten her life. Consequently, the well-being of the family would be threatened, which was in direct contravention of the state’s duty. In 1973, the Irish Supreme Court agreed with McGee, ending the 1935 ban. Another advancement was made with the Health (Family Planning) Act 1979, which made the sale of all contraceptives legal, but restricted outlets to pharmacies, and prescriptions were required, with access for married couples only (Coliver, 1995). This Act was amended several times to catch up with the demands and choices of women, and by 1994 access to the full range of contraceptive methods was national policy.

In summary, this chapter has explored some of the key aspects of the institutions, laws and policies from the mid-sixties to the present day which determined, or at least shaped the life pathways for many of the women in this study. The conclusion that can be drawn is that Church, class and gender intersected powerfully in Irish lives, and in the expectations of women, especially in terms of reproduction, life-possibilities and possible choices. For the women of this study, horizons of understanding, decision and acting can be claimed to have been severely restricted and restrictive and for most of them the direction of their lives was determined by factors over which they had very little influence compared to the experience of most women of the generation that followed them. Consequently, any interpretation of their lives, decisions and actions as they remember and report these has to be read in the context of the background sketched in these introductory literature chapters.
Chapter 3: Literature Review 2

Irish and European Education Policies; Women’s Epistemologies and Gendered Roles

3.1 Irish and European Policies on Higher Education

This chapter examines some of the key features of Irish and European policies around higher education, women’s epistemologies, women at midlife as learners and gender in adult education in order to complete the contextual picture of the lives and experiences of the women at the centre of this study.

It is well established that education is a driver of social, economic and personal change (Keeling, 2012; OECD, 2012; Migiro, 2011). Ireland, like many other Western countries has moved into a period of mass higher education. Almost 60% of Leaving Certificate students now go on to some form of third level education (Share et al., 2012). In 2011 there were 190,000 students enrolled in state funded Irish third level institutions (DES, 2011). As well as increased participation rates, there are also significant changes to the nature of participation (McCoy et al., 2009). According to McCoy et al (2009), a range of different instruments have been enacted in Ireland aimed at widening the participation of marginalised groups, for example, Universities Act 1997, Education Act 1998, Qualifications Act 1999 and the Equal Status Act 2000. Equality of access, educational attainment and class are inextricably linked, but there have been improvements under the guise of equality and legislative change. Historically, the introduction of free secondary education in 1967 by the then Minister for Education, Donagh O’Malley commenced the journey of making education available to those who otherwise would have finished school at Primary level. The abolition of third level fees in 1995 made college an option for thousands of people, who would otherwise, have had to finish their education at second level. Garvin (2004: 125) identifies a dysfunctional educational system as being a key cause of why Ireland was ‘so poor for so long’.

EU collaboration has made certain demands on member states to meet specific targets in relation to education. A goal of the Lisbon European Council is ‘that by 2010 the EU should become the most competitive and dynamic knowledge economy in the world...with more and better jobs...greater social cohesion’ (cited in Keogh, 2004: 19). While that is now not the
case, participation in adult education in many European countries has risen over the past few decades with an average of 35-40% of the population of Ireland, UK and Norway engaging in some form of adult education (King et al., 2002: 37). Against this general policy background, this chapter now examines women’s engagement with third level education, especially mature women with family commitments and the challenges experienced by them. With the focus on gender, Irish legislation and policy will be outlined in the evolution of adult education. It is important to remember here that there has been much rapid change in Ireland recently and the current economic recession has impacted on the educational system harshly, with a cumulative fall in expenditure from 2012-2014 being €620m (Keeling 2012).

The part played by education in the creation and reproduction of class inequalities has been well established in the sociological literature on Ireland (Gray & O’Carroll, 2012). Daly and Leonard (2002: 131) found in their qualitative study of working class participants that ‘for a third of the children school was nothing other than a venue for meeting friends’. Historically, third level institutions were centres for a class based elite, with entry prior to 1970 being based on ability to pay fees and to forego a wage. Now, they have to accommodate all (Ward & Dooney, 1999). Enrolment in higher education in Ireland has increased more than twelvefold in the past fifty years, with 60% of undergraduates being female (Hyland, 2009). ‘The opening of university education to women was one of the most significant developments of the 20th century. It carried with it the potential to radically alter the role and status of women in society’ (Harford, 2008, speech delivered at the launch of her book, ‘The Opening of University Education to Women in Ireland’ at UCD). She acknowledges the fact that only a minority of middle-class women were in the social, cultural and economic position to benefit from early higher education reform, but argues that their participation in higher education had far wider social implications in that it helped to move women’s role beyond the private sphere of the home and into professions and public life. However, the fact remains that women of lower socio-economic classes were largely unaffected by higher education reform, and the issue of social class remains the single greatest barrier to progression through the education system (Harford, 2008). It was in fact only in the 1980s and 1990s that female participation in higher education expanded, making it an option for the less well-off, with the removal of fees in 1995 accelerating the process. While women are ‘no longer a danger to the men’, Parkes (2004: 301) notes that it was only in the early seventies that women gained full equality in Trinity College, despite the ban on women entering the college being lifted in 1904. In the
1960s, according to Parkes (2004), women were still refused campus accommodation, had to leave Trinity by six o’clock and dine separately.

Participation rates have certainly improved among groups who were traditionally under-represented, e.g., mature students, students with disabilities and students from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Census 2011 reports that participation rates in full-time education for 19-24 year old males increased from 27.1% in 2006 to 38.9% in 2011. This compares with 42% females in the age group in 2011. The 21st century university must be inclusive and therefore, accessible to all regardless of gender, class or race. The National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2008-2013 (HEA, 2008) set targets which have implications for curricular delivery and teaching strategies as non-traditional students will increasingly make up the majority of learners. One of these targets aims to increase the number of students with sensory, physical and multiple disabilities by 50% by 2013. Another target aims to have mature students comprising 27% of entrants to third level education by 2013, an increase of 9% on 2006. By 2013 the actuality was 15% (CAO, 2014). The Irish Government has stated that it is committed to placing the higher education system in the top rank of the OECD in terms of both quality and levels of participation, and has emphasised that Ireland would be a world leader, not only in third level, but also post-graduate and fourth level education (Hyland, 2009). However, as Hyland notes, despite the Government’s pledge, per capita expenditure in the sector has fallen significantly in recent years and less money is invested per student in Ireland than in any of the EU-15 or OECD countries.

The Programme for Action in Education (1984-1987) identified the challenge to education as being its relevancy to the world of work (Walsh, 2011). It emphasised ‘access’ for all, lifelong learning and positive discrimination of the educationally disadvantaged. It also acknowledged the need for gender parity in all aspects of education. Walsh (2011: 59) argues that this document had a significant impact on ‘policy discourse and that it was lauded for introducing issues that reflected contemporaneous concerns’. A report by the OECD on Higher Education in Ireland (2004) claimed the primary role of higher education to be the development of a skilled work force for the economy. The Lisbon Strategy (2000) demands active citizenship and inclusion and regards permanent improvement in the quality of human resources as a key factor in the successful recovery of economies. According to Rabusicova and Rabusic (2006), modern societies are conceptualised as knowledge societies in which education has become
the crucial element for the advancement of both individuals and societies. The EU targeted the year 2010 for building a strong knowledge-based society and economy (EU No. 46).

Acquiring and continuously updating and upgrading a high level of knowledge, skills and competencies is considered a prerequisite for the personal development of all citizens and for participation in all aspects of society from active citizenship through to labour market integration. (Eurostat 2005: 1). However, while a driver for economic growth and human capital, policy also acknowledges that education has a broader impact, on personal change, social cohesion, and social and cultural capital enhancement.

The OECD’s 2011 meeting at Ministerial level was a milestone in the Gender Initiative, which was launched by the organisation to help governments promote gender equality in the three Es, education, employment and entrepreneurship (OECD, 2011). Their report outlines the fact that ‘reducing persistent gender inequalities is necessary not only for reasons of fairness and equity, but also out of economic necessity’ (OECD, 2011: 2). Gender mainstreaming is identified as a policy initiative arising from the World Conferences on Women, beginning in Mexico city in 1975 and culminating in the 4th World Conference in Beijing in 1995 (Carney, 2002). The Irish Government is one of 189 signatories of ‘The Platform for Action’ agreed at Beijing, which states ‘[g]overnments and other actors should promote an active and visible policy of mainstreaming a gender perspective in all policies and programmes, so that, before decisions are taken, an analysis is made of the effects on women and men respectively’ (UN, 1996: 11). Despite this, McGauran (2005) observes that no attention has been paid to gender mainstreaming of policies related to Higher Education in Ireland. Ireland is ranked eighth on the Human Development Index and eleventh on the Gender Development Index and sixteenth on the Gender Empowerment Measure (UNDP, 2005). O’Connor (2008) reviewed seven initiatives related to higher education in Ireland and she argues that they have largely ignored gender and fare badly in terms of gender mainstreaming. She reiterates what Mahon (1994: 3) argues, that ‘Ireland is still very much a society in transition from its patriarchal roots.’

Women’s qualifications are higher than those of men and there are more female graduates, according to the EU Commission 2008, which emphasises the need for gender equality around the issue of cultivating different capacities and the elimination of gender stereotypes in relation to fields of study. Recent studies have shown that women make up almost 80% of
graduates in education; 76% in health and welfare; 69% in social sciences; 62% in law and business and 52% in the in the services area, (EURYDICE, 2012). It is also documented that fields of study which are predominantly male remain: agriculture, veterinary science, natural science, mathematics, engineering and computing.

Even though tertiary attainment rates of women are now equal to or exceed those of men in the OECD countries and beyond, there is a persistent gender bias in the choice of discipline. (OECD, 2011: 25)

Third level education in the EU shows an imbalance in favour of women, for example in 2007 they represented 55% of all students, outnumbering men by about two million (EU Commission, 2009). Despite this however, while women outnumber men in almost all academic fields, they still remain on average, more likely to be unemployed than men (EURYDICE, 2012). Concomitantly, women’s high level of education is not reflected in the positions they hold in the labour market, as they are working in feminised sectors with less access than men to senior positions (EU Commission, 2009). Here in Ireland, in the Social Care and Social Work field, this is especially true, with more men reaching managerial positions. There is evidence that it is similar in the U.K. (EURYDICE, 2010).

The OECD (2008) in its report, ‘Higher Education to 2030’ predicts that student participation will continue to expand and women will be in the majority in the student population. It projects also, that the inequalities experienced by women in terms of remuneration will be reduced but still present. Hunt (2011) comments on Ireland’s rapid move up the ranks of OECD countries in terms of higher educational attainment levels of its adult population, being ranked between 9th and 12th in OECD terms. In terms of mature students generally, population projections from the ESRI for twenty three year olds and older by 2030 are almost 3,600,000 (ESRI, 2012).

Women in Ireland have increased their rates of participation in higher education at a faster pace than men over recent decades and now account for 60% of graduates and two thirds of post-graduates, outnumbering men by 15% (HEA, 2008). The same report, ‘The National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2008-2013, states that the under representation of males in Higher Education is largely a result of their higher rates of early school leaving and their lower levels of performance in the Leaving Certificate examinations. It also states that ‘overall, males greatly outnumber female enrolments in Further Education and Training’
(NPEA, 103). According to ‘The European Journal of Vocational Training’ (2009), the main motive for adults returning to education is the satisfaction gained by the process of learning itself, and the hope of becoming employed in a job with a strong degree of satisfaction.

3.2 Women’s Knowing and Learning

While both policy and activity in the higher education sector has paid some late attention to the issue of women in higher education, there is arguably a more fundamental aspect to the issue that has its roots in history and which has only very recently been challenged in educational and political discourse. According to Hayes (2001) Western philosophers, ranging from Plato to Rousseau questioned whether women could learn at all, or could at least engage in the kind of rational thought typically associated with higher learning. She cites a quotation from Hales (1999) that women were described as a gender of ‘fruitful wombs and barren brains’ (Hayes, 2001: 35). Hayes argues that even within the 20th century, women’s ability to learn has been questioned, or subordinated to their reproductive and affective capacities. Here in Ireland, higher level maths in the Leaving Certificate syllabus was open to boys only until 1974. Girls were generally discouraged from doing the Leaving Certificate course, as a secretarial course was seen more appropriate, as such work would be suitable until they married. I experienced such discouragement at Secondary school when I decided to continue to Leaving Certificate level.

Belenky et al. (1986) describe ways of knowing that women reported to them, based on their individual life experiences. While their work is quite old, it remains relevant to this study. They were concerned to understand how women know what they know. They believed that, what women considered to be truth and reality affects the way in which they see the world, including perceptions of self, and views of teaching and learning. Therefore, women’s self-concepts and ways of knowing are intertwined. Belenky et al. (1986) promoted women’s ways of knowing as characterised by being collaborative with empathetic and more affective than that of male learners. They contrast this with the competitive, individualistic modes of learning associated with men. However, it could be argued that all teaching and learning is relational irrespective of gender, as the teacher-student relationship influences the process. From their interviews with 135 women, Belenky et al. (1986) identified five different ways by which women construct knowledge, ranging from silence to constructed knowledge (Merriam et al., 2007). These five epistemological perspectives by which women know and view the
world, as identified by Belenky et al., (1986) are: silence, subjective knowing, received knowing, procedural knowing, and constructed knowing. They became very important to my study as the women described their epistemological and ontological change as a result of their experience of higher education and a brief description is given below and taken up again later in this work.

Silence: in silence women experience themselves as mindless and voiceless and subject to the whims of authority. Silence is synonymous with oppression. Some described their experiences as being akin to feeling ‘deaf and dumb’ (Belenky et al., 1986: 34). Belenky et al., (1986) argue that this type of silence is marked by violence. Furthermore, they argue that, for these women, school was an unlikely place to find voice, as the traditional role of the teacher was that of the knowledge authority. This term and perspective of silence became a benchmark for Belenky et al.’s study. 

This position though rare, at least in our sample, is an important anchoring point for our epistemological scheme, representing an extreme in denial of self and in dependence on external authority for direction. (Belenky et al., 1986: 24)

Subjective knowing: from this perspective, truth and knowledge are conceived as personal and private and subjectively known and or intuited. The hallmark of subjective knowing is the emergence of the ‘inner voice’. This perspective marks a developmental shift from passivity to action, in effect, from silence to a ‘protesting inner voice and infallible gut feeling’ (Belenky et al., 1986: 54), which facilitates a sense of self, agency and control. However, they warn there is the tendency toward dualism – the belief in right and wrong answers.

Received knowledge: this is where women see themselves as capable of receiving and reproducing knowledge from external authorities. But these women do not see themselves as being able to construct or create knowledge themselves, so they rely on the voice of others. Received knowers are listeners and tend toward conformist thinking. Belenky et al., (1986: 45) suggest that the socialisation of women in society to ‘be seen and not heard’ conditions them to ‘cultivate their capacities for listening while encouraging men to speak’. This view is supported by Cline and Spender (1987) in their aptly named book ‘Reflecting Men at Twice their Normal Size’. Though there have been changes to society’s norms in the West, facilitating opportunities for more equal relationships between men and women, particularly
with regard to educational opportunity, change on the home front by comparison, for many working mothers, has been minimal.

Procedural knowing: Procedural knowledge is generally thought of as the voice of reason. It is present where women are invested in learning. It describes methods for obtaining and communicating knowledge. The self is absent from this procedure.

The inner voice turns critical; it tells them their ideas may be stupid, and because their ideas must measure up to certain objective standards they speak in measured tones. Often they do not speak at all. But this is not a passive silence; on the other side of this silence, reason is stirring. (Belenky et al., 1986: 95)

Constructed knowing: from this position, women view all knowledge as contextual. They experience themselves as creators of knowledge and place value on both subjective and objective strategies for knowing. Belenky et al. (1986: 141) suggest that constructed knowing excites a passion for knowing: ‘the passionate participation of the knower in the act of the known’. It can be argued that these concepts may not apply in all circumstances, but they serve a purpose in presenting some of the themes that are of interest in this study.

Belenky and Stanton (2000) cite philosopher Sara Ruddick who examined mothering as work and realised that maternal work is a discipline with a body of knowledge, philosophy and a set of practices. Ruddick (1989), a mother and a feminist showed how the day to day work of raising children gives rise to distinctive ways of thinking and knowing. This is significant for so many mature students and sets them apart from other students. Polanyi (1961) entitled this type of knowing and thinking as ‘tacit’ knowledge; knowledge that is not easy to write down, as it develops with skills and is often overlooked. Feminist pedagogy is grounded in the belief that personal and academic learning are complementary and that both should be encouraged in the classroom.

Much emphasis is placed on the relational aspect of learning and knowing and the importance of connectedness for women. Noddings (1998) highlights the need for caring in education and learning, while Gilligan (1993) speaks about the ethics of care. According to Gilligan, the relational view of women’s identity is built on the notion that women develop in ways distinctly different from the ways in which men develop. Many essentialist arguments have been used to point out women’s deficiencies, but Gilligan promotes the view that women
have positive characteristics, such as a tendency to be peace-oriented or relationship-oriented, that are underappreciated yet fundamental to womanhood. Longino (2002) has argued for the constructive role of emotion in knowledge. Nielsen (1990), when outlining the principles of feminist research emphasises the environment, emotions and events as experienced. Flannery (2000) argues that this relational view of identity assumes all women are relational and leads to an essentialist view of women which fails to consider the differences among women. She goes on to say that women’s identities as learners is influenced by early schooling, classroom cultures of adult education and their home experience. Feminist poststructuralism, according to Flannery and Hayes ‘gives legitimacy to the particularity of each woman’s experience, helping us recognise the complexity of our identities and our differences as well as our similarities’ (Flannery and Hayes, 2000: 14). A basic principle of feminist poststructuralism is the multiplicity of identities (Harper & Quaye, 2009). Harding (1996) argues that gender cultures shape men and women’s experiences in different ways and this creates gendered knowledge systems, and in turn, this influences learning. Zuga (1999) claims that women are constituted as the other as they function in different ways than men, and that their ways of knowing have much to offer in the reconstruction of theory and knowledge. Flannery (2000) is critical of the assumption in traditional adult learning theory, that it has universal relevance and applicability to all adult learners. She does not believe in making generalisations about all women or all men. According to Flannery and Hayes (2002: 8), there is a ‘kaleidoscope of ways of learning which overlap at times, but are unique because people are of different races and genders and because people’s histories, cultures and life circumstances also differ’. Here again, the debate between essentialism and difference or multiplicity in on the matter of women’s identity and nature is clearly evident. In the framing of this study, no foundational assumption was made or position taken on this debate, but as will be seen later, the data and their analysis would seem to tend towards support for at least a ‘localised’ essentialism that cannot be generalised to a whole population but is evident and operative at a group level.

Returning to the discussion of the education of mature students, Belenky and Stanton (2000) consider it important that adult educators have a profound openness to dialogue and connection when nurturing the development of mature students in terms of epistemological and ontological change. These changes often bring with them, some degree of discomfort and unease, as long held assumptions are challenged and new ways of thinking are developed. As Mezirow (2000) suggested, through the process of transformational learning, adult students
become different people, viewing themselves, their families and their world from new and different perspectives. This was originally explored by Perry (1970), who interviewed college students each spring about how their thinking had changed during the past year. He saw students outgrowing the simplistic dualisms which led them to see the world as sharply divided between right and wrong, we and other, black and white, etc. His work was important in terms of social justice as many forms of discrimination stem from dualistic or binary thinking. King and Kitchener (2003) built on Perry’s model with their ‘Reflective Judgement Model’ with an emphasis on reflection and metacognition. Baxter Magolda’s (1992) ‘Epistemological Reflection Model’ also maps knowing from absolute to contextual. She used qualitative hermeneutical interviews to describe personal epistemology development. She makes several broad assumptions about cognitive development. First, ways of knowing and patterns of knowing are socially constructed. Second, the best way to explore these patterns is through qualitative inquiry. Third, reasoning patterns are fluid. Fourth, patterns are related to gender, but not dictated by gender. Fifth, the context and lives of students are important. My contention is based on the fifth of Baxter Magolda’s model, that is, what is going on in the everyday lives of individuals impacts on their epistemological beliefs. Schommer-Aikins (2004: 23) argues that ‘epistemological beliefs do not function in a vacuum’. This view concurs with the psychological theories of Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological/systems model of development and Maslow’s (1968) hierarchy of needs model. Bronfenbrenner’s theory of human development suggests that development is influenced by multiple levels of environmental and cognitive variables. He places the individual at the centre of a number of concentric circles, which reflect each influence from the micro to the macro, from home to work place to the economic structure. Maslow’s theory is demonstrated by a pyramid, beginning at the lowest level with basic, physiological needs such as hunger and thirst; the second level represents safety needs such as having a stable, reliable home which offers security; the third level is the need for love and affiliation; the fourth level reflects the need for achievement, competence and confidence, and the fifth and final level of self-actualisation is reached only when all preceeding needs have been met. In reality, not everyone either reaches self-actualisation or moves through the levels smoothly. As Tennant (2006: 13) points out ‘[m]artyrs have pursued what can only be called self-actualisation under the certainty of death’. To place these theories alongside the models of adult learning in the context of this research, (mature) students who are privileged are in a better position to progress in education than those who are not. Similarly, Lerner (1995) proposed developmental contextualism in that changes in context bring changes in human development. Stanley (1992) argues that
knowledge needs to be grounded in individuals and their contexts. An example is given in Barbour (2004: 227) as she recounts her earlier work (2000) on the struggle ‘to reconcile my life experiences with academic knowledge’. According to Merriam (2005: 9), '[f]or learning from a life event to be development, a change in the self, in the way we make meaning of our experiences and not just the situation, must take place’. According to Grabinski (2005) development is a lifelong process and that the process of constructing reality is a fundamental activity of a human being. Grabinski (2005) refers to the holding environments which are characterised as the social, physical and psychological contexts in which an individual develops.

Baxter Magolda (2004: 31) refers to ‘personal epistemology’ and ‘self-authorship’ (2008: 269). She argues that meaning is actively made from experiences based partially on assumptions held at given points in time, plus conflicting assumptions encountered and the context in which these experiences occur. She maintains that self-authorship concerns meaning making in three domains, the epistemological, the intrapersonal and the interpersonal. Self-authorship is necessary for individuals to meet the complex demands of adult life, and furthermore, it supports transformational learning (Baxter Magolda, 2004). This compares with Caffarella and Clark’s (1999: 97) belief that ‘autonomy is the pinnacle of human development’. It is the result of moving from external to internal meaning making. All these models of epistemological development discussed suggest that absolutist knowing is most prevalent in the first year of college and that undergraduates progress through a series of stages, going from an absolutist, right-and-wrong view of knowledge to the perception of knowledge as being relative and contingent on the context in which it was created (Brookfield, 2009; McClaren, 1997; hooks, 1994; Mezirow, 1985; Freire, 1985).

Kuhn’s (1991) work explores the thinking that occurs in everyday lives and investigates argumentative thinking. She reports that the epistemological thought evident in the research findings resembles the types reported by Perry (1970), Belenky et al., (1986) and Baxter Magolda (1992). She defines three categories of epistemological views: absolutist, multiplist and evaluative. Absolutists view knowledge as certain and absolute and emphasise facts and expertise as the basis for knowing and express high certainty about their own beliefs. Multiplists deny the possibility of expert certainty and are sceptical about expertise generally. Kuhn argues that in the devaluing of experts, multiplists are likely to give weight to emotions and ideas over facts. The third category, the evaluative denies the possibility of certain
knowledge and recognises expertise. These individuals view themselves as less certain than experts, but believe that it is possible for those with conflicting opinions to have genuine exchange and that theories may be modified as a result. Kuhn claims that argument is at the heart of this process, as it offers a means of influencing others’ thinking. She found no significant gender differences, but those with the higher education were more likely to be in the evaluative category.

In summary, it would seem evident that historically, women met with many challenges in terms of validation of their intellectual ability and class combined with gender tend to increase these challenges considerably. The socio-cultural context of the nature, lives and identities of women, regardless of the position taken on essentialism or difference/multiplicity, influences how and what they knew. The move from external to internal meaning making occurs through education providing a sense of personal autonomy in knowing. For the women in my study, the above literature has definite relevance, as was evidenced in their narratives about change in their sense of self, and their gaining of autonomy in thought and action.

3.3 Challenges for Women in Third Level Education

Women going to college for the first time after rearing a family, or while doing so, experience a certain dissonance as long held assumptions are challenged by epistemological change. Significant others in their lives may view this as reinventing themselves. According to Brookfield (2006), students who take critical thinking seriously (part of the process of adult learning) report that this often causes those around them to view them with fear and loathing – they are no longer ‘one of us’. He argues that ‘[t]he adult who has come to a critical awareness of what most people accept as taken for granted, commonsense ideas can pose a real threat to those who are not on a similar journey of self-discovery...’ (Brookfield, 2006: 106). Brookfield goes on to speak of lost innocence, the epistemological journey which causes a sense of ambiguity and uncertainty and in a sense, a sadness and a loss. There is also, a corresponding growth in wisdom. He advises adult educators to understand the ebbs and flows of the process and to help adult learners tolerate periods of confusion and regression. Identity is being challenged strongly. ‘Identity is the interface between the individual and the world, defining as it does what the individual will stand for and be recognised as’ (Flannery et al., 2002: 55). Johnson and Robson’s (1999) account of the [then] literature on women
entering college suggests that it is a ‘time of change which has psychological consequences’ (Johnson & Robson, 1999: 273). Two of their key words are ‘coping’ and ‘identity’ which are closely associated with the process of reflective epistemological change. They took a phenomenological approach to garner subjective accounts of how coping involves anxiety in such a transition to higher education. Breakwell’s (1986) theory of threatened identities was used by Johnson and Robson (1999) to understand the issues emerging for women. This theory, according to Breakwell has three principles: the need for continuity over time and situation; to feel personally and socially worthwhile (self-esteem); and to feel unique or distinctive from others. West (2006: 42) offers a view of how anxiety can manifest itself in adult learning settings, especially anxiety around ‘threats to the self’. When conflicts arise and identity is threatened, female students are found to exhibit psychological stress and physical symptoms (Rozin, et al., 2003). Chickering and Reisser’s model of identity development theory addresses the psychosocial development of college students on the premise that students undergo developmental changes during their college years and formation of identity is largely influenced by how students resolve conflicts through seven developmental tasks (Harper & Quaye, 2009). Harper and Quaye focus on Chickering and Reisser’s first three tasks; Developing/Achieving Competence, Managing Emotions and Moving toward Interdependence, since these are particularly significant for first-generation minority college students because they often enter college academically underprepared. Most of the women in my study had left school early, some as young as thirteen years of age, hence, they had a huge challenge in adapting to academic demands.

Reay’s (2002) study of working class mature students found that students were strongly motivated by education as a form of self-realisation, but were managing a delicate balance between ‘investing in a new improved identity and holding on to a cohesive self’ (Reay, 2002: 403). Identity and the redefining of identity are central to the account provided by Walters (2000), in her study of mature students’ perceptions. The need for change, as a result of job-loss, marital breakdown, children leaving home or a desire to make up for earlier deficits in education created a catalyst which triggered the move to higher education.
3.4 Women as Student, Mother and Partner

It is claimed that women returning to education at midlife have a desire to redefine at least part of their identity, to see themselves in a different way and exert a degree of control over some aspects of their lives (Parr, 2000).

Become whole, become what you want, become yourself: the individual is to become, as it were, an entrepreneur of itself, seeking to maximise its own powers, its own happiness, its own quality of life, through enhancing its autonomy and then instrumentalising its autonomous choices in the services of its life-style. (Rose, 2001: 158)

The reality of barriers to completion of third level education for women exceeds those associated with identity challenge and psychological discomfort, with childcare being an ongoing concern. In a study by Field (2005) mature men and women students were interviewed about barriers to education, and childrearing was only ever mentioned in the case of women; he states that ‘women in particular appeared to come under pressure from other family members to look after their own children’ (Field, 2005: 69). According to a report from AONTAS (2007), childcare continues to be a barrier to education for women in Ireland. Research has shown consistently that men do not contribute to the domestic and childcare tasks as much as women do, despite the whole childcare issues having been the subject of national concern for more than twenty five years (Fine-Davis, 2007). Fine –Davis (2007) states that there were seven reports on this topic during the period 1983 to 1999. At the Barcelona Summit in 2002, some explicit conclusions and targets were defined with regard to the provision of childcare services, projecting that by 2010, child care provision will be provided for at least 90% of children between three years old and six years old, and at least 33% of children under three years of age. (AONTAS, 2007). To date, this still remains an issue for women.

Edwards (1993) describes both the family and higher education as ‘greedy institutions’ (a term used earlier by Acker in 1980), demanding total commitment of time and energy from women. She argues that women, more so than men, are expected to be constantly available to meet their families’ physical and emotional needs, and higher education demands a similar devotion of mental and physical energy. To meet the demands of both institutions simultaneously seems impossible, but that is the position that many adult women find themselves (Edwards, 1993). Edwards interviewed thirty one female mature students to find
out how they coped with education and the family. Her findings showed that the experience of being a student had boosted their confidence, but they felt constrained by their family responsibilities, and in at least 25% of cases, their relationships had suffered in some way. This is also evidenced in my study, which will be discussed later.

3.5 Motherhood and Mothering

‘Motherhood isn’t a test but a religion, a covenant entered into, a promise to be kept’ (Picoult, 2009: 401).

The oppressive and the empowering dimensions of maternity, as well as the complex relationship between the two, first identified by Adrienne Rich in ‘Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution’ in 1977, has been the focus of feminist scholarship on motherhood over the last few decades. The mother-daughter relationship is one of the most recurring topics in feminist work on motherhood, which suggest that individual women’s sense of self is closely tied up with their relationship with their mother. Ní Chléirchín (2008) draws upon the work of Kristeva and Rich to explore the poetry of well-known celebrated Irish language poet, Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, which dealt with her accounts of the painful relationship she had with her own mother. The poems also expound the process of the lived and embodied experiences of motherhood of the poet. Motherhood and mothering became significant themes in this research, as each woman’s story demonstrated their influence, both negative and positive.

Jeremiah (2006) notes that feminist thought about mothering has also undergone the key shift from essentialism to post-structuralism, drawing on the work of de Beauvoir, Friedan, Rich, Ruddick, Oakley and Butler. Oakley (1980) was controversial at the time, when she proclaimed that biological motherhood was a myth based on the belief that all women need to be mothers and that all children need their mothers. However, a dedication to family and motherhood continues to diminish many women’s ability to remain independent, economically and otherwise, and to pursue meaningful professional choices.

Ruddick (1989: 29) contends that speaking of mothers is difficult; ‘overwhelmed with greeting card sentiment, we have no realistic language in which to capture the ordinary/extraordinary pleasures and pains of maternal work’. She views the ideology of motherhood as being oppressive to women claiming that it defines maternal work as a
consuming identity. Motherhood is also associated with identity loss, especially for first time mothers (Stephens 2004). Chase and Rogers (2001: 30) refer to the good mother as one who ‘is selfless’, and whose children always come first. O’Reilly (2004: 14) goes further and refers to ‘sacrificial motherhood’. Radical feminists see the notion of the good mother implicated in the subordination of women (Goodwin & Huppatz, 2010). Positioned alongside and regulating this idealised view of the good mother is the bad mother, who by choice or circumstances, are not the selfless and tireless nurturers of idealised motherhood. Much of the feminist scholarship on motherhood and mothering make the clear distinction between motherhood, which is the product of patriarchy and the valuing of mothering itself.

Motherhood, no matter how closely conducted in accord with the ideological dictates, does not elevate its performers to the social and economic status experienced by men collectively. Rather, hegemonic motherhood remains subordinated to and under the force of hegemonic masculinity. (Arendell, 1999: 4)

Despite the poststructuralist shift, mothering is still generally presented as essential, an integral dimension of a woman’s identity (Rich, 1986; Richardson, 1993). Rich (1986) speaks very honestly of the many shames and secrets which characterise maternal experience, with emphasis on ambivalence of feelings, from resentment to gratification and tenderness. Warner (2005) refers to the guilt that mothers experience if and when they pay attention to their own needs. Gatrell’s (2005) study found that motherhood is often experienced as stressful and exhausting. While Ambert (2001) has argued that there are significant positive as well as negative outcomes of parenthood for women, it is evident that women often feel overwhelmed by their mothering responsibilities.

The physical and psychic weight of responsibility on the women with children is by far the heaviest of social burdens; it is she who is held accountable for her children’s health, the clothes they wear, their behaviour at school, their intelligence and general development. (Rich, 1986: 52-53)

Good mothering means meeting her children’s needs, particularly their emotional needs; if there is a problem, then the mother is at fault, and is seen as a bad mother. The mother-daughter bond is said to be one of the strongest in human relationships, yet, at the same time is also fraught with the most conflict and ambivalence (Chodorow, 1978). According to Chodorow (1978) for daughters, attachment is fused with identity formation, resulting in a less individuated and separated self. Chodorow’s theory proposes that motherhood reproduces
itself, meaning that mothers raise daughters who want to mother. Therefore, mothers are forced to play the dual role of the one who can nurture individuality, but is also the one who will not allow individuality in daughters. Chodorow (1995: 522) contends that mothers treat sons ‘as differentiated beings, but daughters as extensions of themselves because of their gender similarity or otherness’. Women’s strengths, weaknesses and sense of self-worth are all affected by outside forces, which in turn affect their performance as mothers. These forces include societal discriminations which are oppressive and can complicate the mother-daughter relationship. Being mothered and being a mother are very important aspects to the lives of the women in this study.

O’Brien et al., (2009) conducted a study on mature female students completing a Nursing degree in Ireland. They too, found that family obligations were the cause of stress. Those single and without children found the course caused less disruption to their personal lives. The women in the study expressed feelings of guilt. While they received financial support from their spouse/partner, emotional and practical support was more haphazard. They also continued to carry out the same household duties as they did prior to entering college. A similar study conducted in the U.K. by Kevern and Webb (2004) reveals the same issues for mature female Nursing students. The primacy of domestic concerns whilst at college, and the problem of finding a time and place in which to study at home are recurring themes in the literature. Negative effects of course participation on relationships at home are also documented as being important features in women’s experiences of higher education.

O’Shea (2013) found that issues encountered by attending college for older women were structural and emotional in nature. Structurally, the economic costs of attending college were challenging, and emotionally, the struggles that ensued in terms of managing both study and family were evident, as was the resistance from partners. O’Shea (2013) notes that this resistance from partners was sometimes overt, but for many, it was somewhat hidden behind a veneer of selective helpfulness. This idea finds expression later in this work in the way in which the participants discussed how their husbands or partners supported them in varying degrees while at college. Huston-Hoburg and Strange (1986) found that wives were more supportive of their student husbands than husbands were of their student wives. Maynard and Pearsall’s (1994) study concurs, and they state that while men and women experienced stress during their studies, it was of a different nature and more intense for women in that the stress was largely caused by family factors. Inglehart and Norris (2003) maintain that in post-
industrial societies women are able to remain in the workforce creating dual earning families, but the division of household labour has not markedly changed, leaving working women to juggle multiple roles and responsibilities. Home and Hinds (1998), Baxter and Britton (2001) and Heenan (2002), in their research, all found that mature female students juggle many responsibilities as they try to continue to undertake all their household and family related tasks.

A common theme in much of the literature reviewed is the emphasis on feelings of guilt if those women were unable to do what they perceived to be their household tasks. Even those who spoke of having supportive partners who helped with household chores and child care said that this made them feel inadequate, thus increasing rather than decreasing guilt. Stone (2013: 19) found that ‘maintaining equilibrium in the home requires both sacrifice and strategy’, and despite the challenges, the older female students attributed success or failure in the college environment to the self, and also took responsibility for family matters. In Stone and O’Shea’s (2013) study, the women who made the transition successfully expressed change in their perspectives on life and self. Drury et al. (2008), in their study on mature female undergraduate Nursing students argue that commencing college study is a major transition in the women’s lives, producing increased stress and lifestyle adjustment and changes.

Brine and Waller (2004: 103) argue that the transition to college for women is a period of both great opportunity and a considerable risk where failure could do great damage, to the ‘fledgling identities now infused with hope’. West (1996) believes that women adjust well to shifts and transitions in their family life and therefore adapt to the transition of higher education very successfully, as it is women who hold ‘the delicate fabric of families together’ (West, 1996: 31). Certainly, the women in this study found college to be a daunting experience in the first year especially, but holding the family together was always a priority for them, despite the challenges of college.

3.6 Gender of Educators and Disciplines

Although the study is about undergraduate female students, it was undertaken by a midcareer female academic and in the service of researcher reflexivity it is interesting to note that for female academics, there are many challenges in the academy. Statistics from the HEA (2014)
in relation to our seven universities, show that in 2013 women comprised 19% of Professor grades, and 26% at Associate Professor level. There are fewer role models for aspiring female academics, and the university environment is seen to be a masculine context. Women are seen as less committed to jobs that require investment of time because of family obligations. O’Connor (2010) refers to the fact that female academics in Ireland are paid significantly less than their male counterparts. ‘It has been increasingly recognised that organisations in general, and managerial power and authority in particular, reflect and reinforce gendered realities’ (O’Connor cited in Harford & Rush, 2010: 139). According to the University of Dublin’s Gender and Promotions Report (2009), the overall situation of women in the college is one of under-representation at senior and decision-making levels. One of the issues identified is the need to improve childcare facilities. The report also states that the proportion of women applying for promotion to Senior Lecturer was half that of their male counterparts. Three out of twenty four Heads of School are female, and women make up less than 20% of Professors. It states that the gender imbalance is related to the proportion of women applying for promotion rather than success rate. Promotions to Senior Lecturer in 2007 were at a rate of three for women compared to eighteen men. One issue identified is that women are less ambitious as they employ a more collaborative approach to work, and therefore find it hard to sell themselves. A similar trend is evident in the U.K., where there is on average 3000 female Professors compared with 14,000 males (Broadsheet.ie 2012).

A recent EU Commission Report (2008: 13) states ‘[t]he image of science and scientists seems to be predominantly male, just as the image of power and decision-making tends to be a male picture’. According to the WiSER Facts and Figures Statistics (2012), women account for 37% of all academics in the Faculty of Engineering, Maths and Sciences at TCD. Also, 25% of Schools have no women Professors or Associate Professors; and there are zero women Heads of School in this Faculty. The School of Linguistic, Speech and Communication Sciences and the School of Medicine have the most equal balance of men and women academic staff, but this balance does not continue into senior positions (WiSER, 2012). Finally, WiSER reports that since 2006, two women Professors have been appointed compared with thirty three men. What may seem trivial but is highly symbolic of the gendered history and evolution of TCD is the fact that only one lecture theatre is named after a woman (Professor Constantia Maxwell, who became Professor of Economic History in 1939).
In a Gender Audit at the University of Limerick in 2007 (Richardson, 2008), disciplines were found to be stereotypically gendered. Recommendations were made to increase women’s participation in Science, Engineering and Technology. On a positive note, U.L. was found to have above the national average percentage of females at professorial level with six, which is 14% compared with the national average of 10%.

The League of European Research Universities (2010) focuses on women in academia because more women than men drop out of research careers, resulting in the under-representation of women in leading positions. For many women, on completion of their doctorate, their careers stagnate. This report states that only 13% of Heads of Higher Education institutions in Europe are women. Sweden’s Lund University (2006: 2) in its Board’s Report on Gender Equality states ‘...women disappear from the system to a disproportionally large extent’.

Cotterill et al (2007) assert that there is evidence that women experience sexism in the academy from male colleagues. ‘Female academics seeking promotion must adopt masculine work practices’ (Coppock, Haydon & Richter, 1995 cited in Cotterill et al., 2007: 4). The ‘double bind’ refers to the expectation that women as academics will be professional, detached and objective, while also being a stereotypical caring, relational woman (ibid: 4). Women with any domestic responsibilities are pulled in two by both institutions, that of the family and the academy. Both women academics and women students have to manage home, education and ‘emotional labour’, a term attributed to Hochschild (1983). As a female academic, I share many of the concerns of the women in my study, I am a mother and am working in a non-promoted academic position. It would be naive, at the very least, to assume that this position does not influence core views and approaches to the research of this project, but my position was always consciously in the foreground as I strove to reflect on its significance to this work.

### 3.7 Adult Education Approaches

The underlying ‘cause’ of many of the issues in third level education today is the increasingly competitive circumstances that demand institutional expansion as a priority. Tennant and Pogson (1995) argue that the relationship between tutor and adult learner should be participative and democratic, characterised by openness, mutual respect and equality. They
also noted that this type of tutor-student relationship does not happen naturally because of the constraints in the political, philosophical and psychological dimensions of the educational system. Facilitating such andragogical methods is difficult with increasing numbers of students of a diverse nature and demographic. A ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach is theoretically not applicable, but in practice the transmission of information or ‘banking’ as Freire (1972) referred to it, is widely used in the traditional higher education manner, in which experts impart knowledge to the recipients. Women entering college for the first time at midlife may find that the approaches to teaching and learning are not appropriate for them. They prefer a more participatory manner of learning, and may find the passive experience of the lecture hall a deterrent to learning.

3.7.1 Andragogy

One of the most influential writers on adult learning is the American educator Malcolm Knowles (1913-1997). In the late 1960s, he coined the term ‘andragogy’ – the theory of adult learning – as a contrast to the more traditional term ‘pedagogy’ – the theory of teaching and learning of children. According to Knowles, adults are independent thinkers and are self-directed in their learning. His theory asserts that adult learners expect knowledge to be applicable and to build on their life experience. Reflection is an important component, as is the assumption of internal motivation. ‘The andragogical model is a process model, in contrast to the content models employed by most traditional educators’ (Knowles, 1975: 102).

Andragogy incorporates the following basic assumptions about adults as learners:

- Adults need to know why they learn.
- Adult learners embrace a self-concept of being responsible for their own learning.
- The adult learners’ varied life experiences serve as rich resources in the learning environment.
- Adult learners’ readiness to learn is linked to coping with real-life situations.
- Adults’ orientation to learning is different from children and is most likely life and/or task centered.
- Adult learner motivation comes mostly from internal motivators including promotion, job change and quality of life, (Knowles, 1990: 57).
All of these assumptions are applicable to the women in this study.

Despite the above, Knowles (1984) conceded that his original view of andragogy as being the most appropriate teaching strategy for adults and pedagogy as being appropriate for children, was not always accurate in every learning situation. According to Knowles (1990: 54), andragogy is the ‘art and science of helping adults learn… and an intentional and professionally guided activity that aims at a change in an adult person’ (Knowles et al., 1998: 60). Merriam and Brockett (1997:135) define andragogy as ‘a way of thinking about working with adult learners’; while Pratt states that ‘it is synonymous with the education of adults’ (Pratt, 1988: 160).

Andragogy has not been without its critics (Collins, 1998, Holmes and Abington-Cooper, 2000, Kerka, 2002), yet, Merriam and Caffarella (1999) point out that the issue of how adult learning differs from the learning of children has been debated since the early 1920s. With the increasing diversity of an expanded student body, adragogy and teaching and learning strategies are high on the agenda currently. Since its appearance on the US education radar screen fifty years ago, andragogy has challenged the design and execution of adult education. It emphasises the need for the adaptation of long held theories to meet adult-specific learning needs (Knowles, 1990). According to Knowles, the most significant difference between pedagogy and andragogy is the focus of the learning. Whereas pedagogy is focused on learning content, andragogy focuses on the learning process. Merriam et al., (2007) claim that andragogy ignores the socio-historical context in which learning takes place and also, Knowles’s reliance on humanistic psychology results in the picture of the individual learner as one who is autonomous, free and growth oriented. This ignores the fact that the person is socially situated and the product of the socio-historical and cultural context of the times. They also point out that there is no awareness of structure and agency in the ‘learning transaction’ (Merriam et al., 2007: 88). Social, economic and cultural factors influence and impede individuals’ attempts to control their lives, their ability to respond to opportunities and to manage the consequences of their choices.

3.7.2 Adult Cognition

Brookfield in Field and Leicester (2003) makes the distinction between ‘Life Long Learning’ and ‘Adult Learning’ and emphasises the point that there are distinct, visible forms of learning
that are specific to adults. The four capacities observable are, according to Brookfield: the
capacity to think dialectically; the capacity to employ practical logic; the capacity to know
how we know what we know and the capacity for critical reflection. Thinking dialectically
recognises the importance of contextuality, which concurs with the intersubjectivity aspect or
the socio-cultural aspect of adult learning. Employing practical logic is explained by
Brookfield through Piaget’s concept of formal operations, identified as the end point of young
adult development as adapted by Sinnott (1998), who defines post-formal thought as endemic
to the struggle of adult life in finding existential meaning in life. This promptly links to the
capacity to know how we know what we know, the meta-cognitive thought process or
epistemic cognition that is a self-conscious awareness of how we come to know what we
know. Brookfield quotes from King and Kitchener (1994) in terms of the development of
epistemic cognition in adults, ‘...one’s understanding of the world is not given, but must be
actively constructed and that the knowledge must be understood in relationship to the
context’.

Mezirow (1998) identifies epistemic critical self-reflection as an important domain of
transformative learning; and this, the fourth observable capacity of adult learners according to
Brookfield is at the crux of this doctoral exploration. Irving and English (2011) found that
most of the literature on mature women in education presupposes a transformation. Through
personal development as a result of adult learning, critical self reflection occurs, where there
is a evaluative stance taken. Previous assumptions of perhaps, decades are overturned,
‘givens’ are examined and a certain discomfort is experienced. Both Mezirow and Brookfield
have re-formulated earlier conceptualisations of Freire’s conscientization, in that the self-
directed learner becomes critically aware.

Learning that transforms problematic frames of reference-sets of fixed
assumptions and expectations (habits of mind, meaning perspectives,
mindsets) – to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, reflective
and emotionally able to change. Such frames of reference are better than
others because they are more likely to generate beliefs and opinions that will
prove more true or justified to guide action. (Mezirow, 2003: 58-59)

3.7.3 Gender in Education Approaches

According to Whitworth, Price and Randall (2002) students tend to rate female faculty
members differently than male faculty members. In my experience as a lecturer, I believe that
the more mature women students can relate to female academics of similar age very well. A
study by Basow (1995) revealed that students perceived female instructors to be more sensitive and considerate of student ideas, whereas male instructors were believed to be more knowledgeable. Nelson Laird (2007) conducted a study in the US to compare teaching styles of men and women and to determine whether gender differences vary by context, e.g., disciplinary area and other course characteristics. The results suggest that, compared to men, women spend a smaller proportion of class time lecturing and a greater proportion of class time on active classroom practices. Also, it was found that the ‘largest disciplinary differences exist between hard and soft fields, suggesting that these fields have different preferred teaching styles’ (Nelson Laird, 2007: 16). This study also found that women have a greater affinity for active practices and tend to act as facilitator. Belenky et al., (1986) emphasised that female instructors, as well as female students, are more receptive to a teaching methodology that values connection over separation, understanding and acceptance over assessment, and collaboration over debate. They argued that such connection in teaching provides an environment for growth and an acceptance of uncertainty because knowledge evolves over time and experience. Connected teachers, according to Belenky et al., emphasise group work and discussions, and see their role as facilitator. This contrasts with the more traditional lecturing approach to teaching that Freire (1972) described as the ‘banking’ method, in which the teacher’s role is to ‘fill’ the students by making deposits of information.

Centra and Gaubatz (1999) found that female instructors received higher ratings from female students, while male instructors received equal ratings from both male and female students. Whitworth et al., (2002) found that female instructors were consistently rated higher than males. Bachen et al., (1999) concluded that female students gave higher ratings to female than to male instructors, but male students’ evaluations did not vary by instructor’s gender. Basow and Montgomery (2005) found that female instructors who do not conform to a traditional feminine gender role (i.e. being nurturing, deferring, nice and relational) tend to be perceived negatively by both male and female students. The same study also found that female instructors in the Humanities and Social Sciences were rated higher than male instructors, but the opposite occurred in the physical sciences. Most of the studies debated about whether there is a bias resulting in discrimination based on gender, or whether there are true gender differences in teaching styles.
3.8 Women, Midlife and Learning

With particular reference to this work, the literature on learning in the middle years is of importance, and the next section reveals some of the most pertinent ideas that are taken up in this project. Lachman, (2004: 307) refers to the middle years as ‘the last uncharted territory in human development’. Less is known about this period than about other age periods such as infancy, childhood, adolescence or old age (Lachman, 2004). The benefits of studying middle age include the identification of the roots of ‘early’ ageing and thereby the possible delaying, minimisation or prevention of some of the changes in biological, psychological and social functioning that occur in later life. Gergen (1990) drew attention to the fact that few studies have been done regarding how women experience midlife. Lachman (2001) believes that what people think occurs in the midlife period has been based on imperfect knowledge and many shared cultural beliefs are likely to be wrong. She believes these misperceptions regarding such a cultural legacy of thought about what happens in middle age are transmitted from one generation to the next. Gerdes (1988) relates this to the changing age distribution of the population. In earlier centuries, life expectancy was between thirty and forty years, making the period of adulthood an infinitely shorter developmental period to study. With increased life expectancy, there is a greater number of persons over the age of sixty, so therefore there is an increased interest in midlife development. Lachman et al., (1994) noted that the older the individual, the later they report entering and exiting middle age.

According to Waskel and Phelps (1995), the majority of studies of the middle years of the life span have been devoted to the study of men, with the major emphasis on crisis events. Gergen (1990) noted that those studies conducted on women focus on the biological, where women’s lives are described according to their position in the marital-reproductive cycle, and suggested that future research should surpass the limitations of a strictly biological orientation and consider other aspects of women’s functioning.

Psychological theories are commonly essentialist and focus mainly on the biological role of women, as opposed to studying women’s life narratives and the importance of context in determining their experience of midlife. The term ‘midlife crisis’ is a familiar description of prevalent experiences in midlife. Wethington (2000) suggests that the term describes personal turmoil and sudden changes in personal goals and lifestyle, resulting from the realisation of ageing and physical decline, and suggests that a ‘mid-life crisis is a difficult transition
occurring at about the age of forty’ (Wethington, 2000: 86). Helson and Wink (1992) studied women between forty three and fifty two, and found that women in their forties experience uncertainty that gives way to calm and stability in the fifties. It was found that feelings about life in the areas of turmoil and identity questioning were rated higher in the early forties than in the early fifties. Views of midlife can range from describing a period of turmoil or crisis (Levinson, 1978; Sheehy, 1976), to the view that midlife is a time of peak functioning and responsibility (Neugarten, 1968). Often the term midlife conjures up negative images of bodies beginning to age, increased forgetfulness, menopause, children leaving home, depression and a loss of purpose and meaning (Lachman, 2001). Wethington (2000) found that career crises and marital disruption appear to be more characteristic of earlier periods of adulthood than in the middle years. According to McCrae and Costa (1990), epidemiological study of psychological distress does not suggest that midlife is a time of unusual distress in adulthood.

Defining midlife, in a physiological sense, is relatively straightforward as being the middle of a person’s life. According to Freund and Ritter (2009) this is 32.5 years for men and 34.75 for women. Acknowledging the extended economic dependency of young adults on their parents as a result of graduate and post graduate education, there is a general expectation that by the age of thirty, the responsibilities of adulthood are taken on, with career, family and finances the focus. In a more existential and phenomenological sense, Neugarten (1969) claims that at midlife, an individual becomes more aware of how much time is left to live, and that there is a growing awareness of one’s mortality. It is a time of evaluation and reconfiguration. This can result in the so called ‘midlife crisis’. According to Sheehy (1976), the Western cultural message of the menopausal woman is a negative one and could have a deleterious effect on the emotional functioning of women experiencing midlife. Although children are growing up faster, they take longer to reach emotional maturity. Couples are marrying later and delaying starting a family, and life expectancy has increased. These factors, according to Sheehy (1976) have resulted in the phases of adulthood being shifted by up to ten years.

According to Lachman (2001), psychologists have traditionally focused on changes in personality and social functioning throughout adulthood, tending to ignore the role of physical ageing. Images of ageing in Western cultures are more negative than positive, and Lachman (2001) argues that the challenge for this mid-life cohort is to incorporate the changes into their identities, without becoming overwhelmed or depressed. She believes the menopause to be
associated with depression and emotionality in women, although evidence suggests that this is not the case. Matthews (1992) found that biological changes occurring during the menopause are not directly associated with depression.

Levinson (1978) conducted research on men and women in midlife and found that they go through similar stages, but with a number of important differences. According to him, the men’s dreams focused on work and careers; but the women’s included family with career. Women tended to be less driven to climb corporate ladders or accumulate the visible material trappings of success. Sheehy (1976) describes a similar developmental progression as Levinson but with some important differences. She speaks about ‘passages’ instead of stages and refers to middle adulthood as the ‘deadline decade’ (Sheehy, 1995: 115). She argues that women encounter the midlife passage earlier than men and re-examine goals and priorities considerably earlier and the resolutions are more active than those of men. Tamir (1989) believes women to be more self-reflective by nature and so, are not as unsettled by entering midlife. Gould's (1978) description of adult development concurs with both Levinson and Sheehy, but he focused more on the individual’s understanding of the self with progress through the lifespan requiring the shedding of a variety of false assumptions. This, according to Gould results in greater self-understanding and greater self-acceptance. This is apparent in the narratives of the women in this research, as the experience of higher education provided a lens through which they examined their sense of self.

Baltes (1987) describes the experiences of midlife as having both gains and losses. A central task is to identify alternative pathways to health and wellbeing (Brim et al., 2004). This aspect is highlighted by Lachman (2004) who lists the various illnesses and diseases that can surface at midlife, e.g. high blood pressure, high cholesterol, arthritis, etc. These can trigger distress because they signal ageing. She refers to the fact that in a rampant youth culture, ageing is neither desirable nor valued. The idea of midlife as a crisis has been popularised in the media and exaggerated by talk shows, magazines and birthday cards (Lachman 2001). Kirasic (2004) believes that how a society views menopause is a direct reflection of how it views ageing women in general. In Western society, women are valued for their sexual attractiveness and ageing is viewed negatively.
Magai and Halpern (2001) point out the positive changes in midlife as being better emotional regulation, increased wisdom and practical intelligence. Lachman and Bertrand (2001) point to the strong sense of mastery that occurs at midlife. ‘The story of midlife is one of complexity, with the juxtaposition of peaks and valleys across the social, psychological and physical domains’ (Lachman, 2004: 307). Frameworks of adult development include ‘ego’, ‘identity’ and the ‘epistemological’. The latter is at the core of my research with the exploration of changes in women’s meaning – making processes and the subsequent impact on reconstruction of identity, self-concept, relationships, belief systems and values, i.e., their ontological experience. This egoistical development of a sense of self in relation to the surrounding social context can be explained by Erikson’s model of psychosocial development. For him, the successful transitions which are resolved create a functioning whole. For Erikson the ability to consider multiple perspectives and multiple and simultaneous role possibilities is evidence of healthy ego development and required in a post-structural society in which dialectical thinking is necessary in order to remain ontologically secure. For Doan (1997), the main message of poststructuralism/postmodernism is that essentialism and the grand single narrative has gone and has been replaced by the need for examination of alternative multiple accounts.

Optimism research suggests that how one views midlife determines the outcome (Isaacowitz, 2005). Being in the middle of life may be an impetus for change but not necessarily a crisis. The word ‘midlife’ is usually associated with crisis. This reflects a widespread cultural stereotype about this life stage. According to Wethington et al., (2004), only a small percentage of people experience a midlife crisis. There may be major restructuring of time and a reassessment of priorities (Aldwin & Levinson 2001). Life events such as children leaving home, (often referred to as ‘the empty nest syndrome’), becoming a grandparent and experiencing the menopause are typically associated with being middle-aged. Erickson (1959) describes the conflict of the middle years as one of generativity (being productive in work, community and family) versus self-absorption (temptation to become self-absorbed). Peck (1968) elaborates on Erikson’s last two major stages, adding for middle adulthood – valuing wisdom versus valuing physical powers, socialising versus sexuality, emotional flexibility versus emotional impoverishment and mental flexibility versus mental rigidity.
Cognitive decline is well known to be delayed or prevented by being cognitively active. From daily completion of a crossword to lifelong learning, exercising the brain is as necessary as physical exercise is for the body. According to O’Connor and Wolfe (1991), transitions in adulthood are inevitable and patterned, but they do not necessarily result in personal growth. They contend that commitment to learning enables growth during the midlife transition, and leads to what they refer to as a paradigm shift. They explain this concept as they apply it to be ‘...the complex process of system transformation’ (O’ Connor & Wolfe: 329). In terms of relevance to adults at midlife, they are referring to a system of assumptions, perceptions, expectations, feelings, beliefs and values. They conclude that involvement in higher education and learning new skills act as concomitants to paradigm shifts.

3.9 Life Trajectories in Education

As will be seen, the early educational experiences of the majority of the women in this study were negative, and this had a significant influence on their belief in their ability to learn. They had very little opportunities in terms of a career path. Life trajectories in education and the dynamics of learning throughout the life course involve the changing constellations of risk and opportunity in early childhood; the transitions from primary to secondary school; further and higher education into employment and the opportunity to engage in lifelong learning. Both Beck (1992) and Giddens (1991) focus on the ways in which life-chances are shaped by structures of opportunity and risk. In their theories of reflexive modernisation and the role of human agency, they argue that the dissolution of traditional class, gender and family parameters has, in post-industrial societies, created the conditions for people to shape their own destinies. The emphasis is on the increased uncertainty and unpredictability of the individual’s life course.

Life chances and opportunities are polarised for the less privileged young person who leaves school early and those who are privileged and participating in higher education. Young children with affluent parents attend enriched early childhood programmes and well-equipped primary and secondary schools, which position them for successful college careers, which in turn position them for occupations that pay well. Children who do not come from affluent families are more likely to drop out of school early and experience unemployment. Life course development is profoundly affected by macroeconomic conditions, institutional
structures, social class, gender and ethnicity as well as individual resources such as ability, motivation and aspirations.

Carter and McGoldrick (2005) assert that families are more vulnerable to going off track when confronted by multiple disruptive events and transitions. The study of life course dynamics requires an interdisciplinary theoretical framework, of sociology, economics and psychology, as human development must be viewed in context. Teenagers’ decisions, for instance, are shaped by earlier experiences in the family and the school. Evans et al. (2010) point out that there appears to be continued differences in educational participation based on social background, race and gender, with people from disadvantaged backgrounds being less likely to pursue further education, regardless of their actual abilities. O’Rand et al. (2009; 431) state that ‘[c]hildhood conditions select individuals into different educational trajectories that provide differential exposures to learning...and women are more vulnerable to the anchoring effects of childhood conditions in their later health’. Many adult students, particularly those from families in which neither parent has earned a college degree, may lack what Bourdieu (1977) termed cultural capital, which is the accumulation of knowledge of higher education that facilitates adjustment to college. Brookfield (2006) refers to the concept of impostership, which is the sense reported by adult students that at some deeply embedded level they possess neither the talent nor the right to become college students. Women are more likely than men to experience this, as they suffer associated guilt over placing college over the family (Lake Howell, 2002). Clinchy et al. (1985) found in their study that some adult women believed that they got into college on a fluke, and that their sense of impostership was compounded by past educational experiences. Lake Howell (2002) in her study on resilience in mature women students concludes that for women to achieve resilience, they must sense ownership of their strengths and not avoid challenges and adversity but develop successful responses to them.

According to Evans et al. (2010: 43) learning and life chances are rooted in ‘...educational trajectories and their complex intertwining with social institutions (of labour market, workplace, family and community) and social roles (of employee, citizen, family member) at different stages of the life-course’. For mature students with families, especially women, trade-offs tend to reward her role as family member. The transition to the role of student requires a change in their sense of obligation. Schlossberg (1984: 43) originally defined transition as an ‘event or non-event resulting in change’. This includes any impact on
relationships, routines, assumptions and roles. They may be subtle or large, expected or not. They are turning points and may be perceived as crises. Transitions must be accommodated psychologically, emotionally, socially and attitudinally by the individual. The modern life course is now characterised by an increasing number of transitions. Important to these transitions is gender, as both men and women’s development is influenced by gender (Ross-Gordon, 1999).

In 1984 Schlossberg proposed the Adult Transition Theory to study and understand adults approaching momentous life events. According to McCoy (2003: 49) this theory ‘integrates several other theoretical perspectives, and is responsive to both commonalities and idiosyncrasies’ of human experience. For first generation mature women embarking on and proceeding with a third level course, this theory is applicable. Langenkamp (2011: 498) states ‘[s]ingle life transitions, particularly those that occur early in the life course, have the potential to affect an individual’s life trajectory well into adulthood’. Merriam (2005) contends that all types of transitions hold the potential for learning and development. She believes that all adult students are in transition and that adult educators can promote developmental change by challenging learners to think beyond their current frame of reference.

3.10 Policy and Legislative Framework

Finally in this chapter, a brief description of the policy and legislative framework of adult education is given to complete the contextual background to this study. Adult education came to the fore in Ireland with the founding of AONTAS in 1969. It was set up as, and remains an advisory and consultative body for the promotion and development of adult education. AONTAS’s focus in on community education and its mission is to advocate for the right of every adult in Ireland to quality learning. Adult and Community education acts as a progression route to higher education. In 2010, one in five applicants to CAO was a mature student (AONTAS, 2012). AONTAS links community education with community development:

Community Education is a process of empowerment, social justice, change, challenge, respect and collective consciousness...It builds the capacity of local communities to engage in developing responses to educational and structural disadvantage and to take part in decision making and policy formation within the community. (AONTAS, 2000: 6)
The late 1980s and 1990s saw a growth in locally based women’s community education groups addressing the educational and personal development needs of marginalised women in disadvantaged communities. Today in adult and community education women comprise of over 70% of the participants in programmes, with the focus on improving education attainment levels of adults (AONTAS, 2007).

Community education is generally founded on Freirean principles of praxis and conscientisation (Freire, 1974), whereby power relations are challenged by community based education while simultaneously situating education at the centre of social change. Emancipation through education involving the active participation of the oppressed themselves is based on ‘an active, dialogical, critical and criticism –stimulating method’ (Freire, 1974: 45).

Government policy for Adult Education in Ireland is set out in a document published in 2000 entitled ‘Learning for Life – White Paper on Adult Education’. It sets out a template for the development of the Adult Education Sector as part of an overall Government commitment to establishing a comprehensive system of lifelong learning for all (DES, 2008). In addition to the White paper, several other pieces of legislation have been enacted, along with the publication of numerous policy documents, all of which which impact on the delivery of higher education services in Ireland.

‘The Consultation on the National Strategy for Higher Education Guidance Document, 2009’ (Network of Irish Mature Student Officers) states that mature students are valued by academics for their diverse socio-economic and educational backgrounds, ages and experiences and their general contribution to the third level experience of the total student body. This is true because mature students have a lot of life experience and are willing to participate in dialogue in the classroom. The document emphasises the need for ‘flexible’ learning options in line with the Bologna Process. The Bologna Declaration of 1999 put in motion a series of reforms needed to make European Higher Education more compatible, more competitive and more attractive for Europeans and non-Europeans. The three priorities of the Bologna Process are:
1. Introduction of the three cycle system: bachelor, master and doctorate,
2. Quality Assurance, and

Prior to the Bologna Declaration, theme 4 of the Hamburg Declaration (1997) specifically addressed gender issues:

We commit ourselves to promoting the empowerment of women and gender equity through adult learning and, by promoting a gender-sensitive pedagogy which acknowledges the daily life experiences of women and recognises both cognitive and affective outcomes; and by educating women and men in such a way as to promote the sharing of multiple workloads and responsibilities. (UNESCO, 1997: 18-19)

Androulla Vassiliou in the Foreword of the Bologna Progress Report, 2012, acknowledges the progress of the Process which has transformed the face of European education. However, she said there is much more to be done. The report states that during the first decade of the Bologna Process, more women than men entered higher education, but fields of study remain gendered. Women dominate in the fields of education, veterinary science and in health and welfare. Men are predominant in computing, engineering and transport services. There is room for improvement, for more to be done, but de-gendering fields of study requires more than legislation, it requires attitudinal change at the micro and macro level. Accessibility of higher education for non-traditional students like women at midlife is excellent for degrees in the Humanities and Social Sciences. Legislative and policy change enhanced the opportunities for those whose early educational experiences were damaging, which in turn enhances democracy and citizenship.

3.11 Conclusion
The literature reveals that mature women entering college for the first time face many challenges and barriers, from family commitments and obligations to socially constructed notions of behaviour. Irish women born in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s and from a working-class background were heavily influenced by the church, their gender and their class, especially in educational limitations. Their learner identity is very often weak and their sense of obligation to family is strong and as learners they frequently experience the obligations of family and education as ‘greedy institutions’. Mothering, as well as being daughter are also significant aspects of their lives. From the review of the literature on women in Ireland, the
role of mother and wife or partner emerged as a key theme for this work, and the role conflict experienced by mature women who return to education, and the tension created within relationships.

Education can help women move out of poverty (Migiro 2011), however, essentialism of gender maintains an aspect of inequality that is pervasive in social structures, attitudes and economics. Regardless of the challenges, it would seem that the emerging renewed and remoulded self as a result of tertiary education creates a new sense of responsibility to that self. The epistemological and ontological transformation demands recognition (Honneth, 1995) as a way of describing the changes that women undergo who, despite the difficulties and challenges they encounter in their day-to-day and learning lives, embark on higher education. Many of the themes that have been presented and discussed in the two literature chapters will appear in the frame of the analysis of the women’s narratives, especially the perspectives in the work of Belenky et al and the major themes of essentialism, identity, motherhood and daughterhood. However, before proceeding to the data, the usual convention is retained of discussing the research approach and methods adopted in this study.
Chapter 4: Methodology

4.1 Introduction
This chapter sets out the theoretical framework and the methodological approach taken in this study. The theoretical framework is constructed in steps which argue that a particular merging of phenomenology and feminist standpoint theory is most promising in understanding the lives of women who entered higher education in their 30s, 40s and 50s. The overall objective of the study is to produce insights that increase the level of understanding of the challenges, changes and consequences experienced by the women during their journey of higher education by attending to their own narratives of these experiences. The extent to whether the educational experience results in an existential transformation in the lives of the women and the degree or permanence of this transformation is at the core of the inquiry. The meaning of their lives after college interested me and the hermeneutical phenomenology of Gadamer together with feminist standpoint theory offers a rich and useful framework for designing the inquiry and interpreting the results. For this reason the theoretical framework is included in the Methodology chapter.

4.1.1 Research questions
A consideration of the literature, my own position, and set of interests led to the formulation of three distinct but interconnected research questions.

1. What are the challenges facing women over thirty five years of age while completing a full-time degree programme at college?
2. What changes occur during the course of study and to what degree have they permanence?
3. What are the personal and social consequences for these women on completion of the course of study?

4.2 Research Design
A single case study approach was chosen for this research project because the focus was on a contemporary phenomenon with a real-life context (Yin, 2009), and the female participants were all graduates of the same college. The purposes of case study may be exploratory,
descriptive, interpretive and explanatory (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Mariano, 1993) and this hermeneutical phenomenological case explores, describes, interprets and explains (to some extent) the challenges, changes and consequences for women entering college at mid-life. The participants’ perspectives, as revealed in narrative, were central to the process. While the findings may be generalisable to a similar cohort in other colleges, in a type of ‘local’ essentialism mentioned earlier, immediate change in educational policy was not a goal, but the utility of this case study is that, if it encourages educators to consider applying additional steps to a more caring syllabi that emphasise relationships and obligations, then, women entering college having family responsibilities, may not face as many barriers in their development of self.

My case study focused on women who entered college for the first time in their thirties, forties and fifties, having family and work obligations. They were also first time college goers in their family of origin. The college as the site of the case is a small, rurally based institution in the South East region of Ireland. This college has a high intake of mature students, and students from a working class background. The use of a case study approach fits well with the Gadamerian/Feminist Standpoint Theory methodology as it privileges techniques (eg. intensive interviews) which is also capable of addressing the concerns in the literature about validity and reliability. A case study is ‘an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident, and in which multiple sources of evidence are used’ (Yin, 1991: 23). Hartfield (1982) argues that case study analysis is a type of research that is different from other forms of investigation, and demonstrates the following features: it studies whole units in their totality; it employs more than one method and it perceives the respondent as an expert not just a source of data. Shavelson and Towne (2002: 99) argue that case studies are pertinent when your research addresses a ‘descriptive question – what is happening?’ This approach accurately accentuates the use of hermeneutical interviewing and focus groups, which were employed as the instruments most appropriate for the generation of data necessary to respond accurately to the research question/s.

There are two key approaches that guided this case study methodology; one proposed by Robert Stake (1995) and the second by Robert Yin (1991, 2003, 2006, 2009). Both Stake and Yin base their approach to case study on a constructivist paradigm. Constructivists claim that truth is relative and that it is dependent on one’s perspectives, in keeping also with feminist
standpoint theory. This paradigm recognises the importance of the subjective human creation of meaning through interpretation, as proposed by Gadamer. Constructivism is built upon the premise of a social construction of reality (Seale, 1995). Therefore this approach was deemed fitting within a Gadamerian and feminist framework, through which this research has been moulded. Also important to this research is Yin’s (2003) recommendation that a case study should be considered when the focus of the study is to answer how and why questions; when you cannot manipulate the behaviour of those involved and when you want to cover contextual conditions, because you believe they are relevant to the phenomenon and context. Robson (2002) notes that the descriptive approach is used to portray an accurate profile of a person’s events or situations, requires extensive previous knowledge of the situation to be researched or described, and, may be of a flexible or fixed design. This type of case study is used to describe a phenomenon and the real-life context in which it occurred (Yin, 2003).

The main criticism of case study method is that the results are not sufficiently representative to permit generalisation to other situations (Jupp, 2011). Yin (1984) argues that this issue affects other methods also and as indicated already, generalisation was not an aim in this exploratory study. He argues that analytic generalisations depend on using a study’s theoretical framework to establish a logic that might be applicable to other situations and while it was of interest to construct an interpretative frame that could make sense of the data, it was always only the intention to understand the lives and experiences of a very particular group of women. This inquiry is firmly grounded in the exploration of meaning and understanding in qualitative data. Hammersley (1990) states that qualitative research represents a distinctive paradigm and as such, should not be judged by conventional measures of generalisability, or validity and reliability. A degree of generalisability can be achieved by ensuring that the research report is sufficiently detailed for the reader to be able to judge whether or not the findings apply in similar settings (Mays & Pope, 2000).

Case study research is suitable for contextually rich events or phenomena (Hakim 1987), especially those which may be queried using how or why questions, such as in the present case. The women’s experiences generated very rich data. Validity and reliability was built into the case study with an appropriate research protocol. Focus group discussion helped create an interview protocol that elicited data which were directly related to the research questions.
The method is the ‘route that leads to the goal…[t]he interviewer wanders along with the local inhabitants, asks questions that lead the subjects to tell their own stories of the lived world’ (Kvale, 1996: 4). Qualitative research is appropriate to research questions that start with a how or what. Phenomenological interviewing, as adopted here, is a specific type of in-depth interviewing grounded in the theoretical tradition of phenomenology. Interviews allow for topics to be explored differently and in more detail than a focus group and can provide data that is not accessible in any other way. According to Cresswell (1998:12) this approach involves ‘entering the field of perception of participants; seeing how they experience, live, and display the phenomenon; and looking for meaning of the participants’ experiences’. Van Manen (1990: 2) states that there is a need for a ‘phenomenological sensitivity to lived experience’. Creswell (1998: 86) emphasises the meaning of experiences for individuals…based on ‘the premise that human experience makes sense to those who live it’. According to Crotty (1998), meanings are constructed by human beings in unique ways depending on their context as they engage with the world they are interpreting.

Qualitative research allows researchers to attempt to get at the inner experience of participants, to determine how meanings are formed through and in culture, and to discover rather than test variables. (Corbin & Strauss 2008: 12)

Mason (2002) and Bryman (2008) concur in that qualitative research is interpretivist and preoccupied with seeing through the eyes of the people being studied. Phenomenological research ‘always begins in the lifeworld…the world of the natural attitude of everyday life’ (Van Manen, 2002: 7); ‘the emphasis is always on the meaning of lived experience’ (Van Manen, 2002: 62).

It must be emphasised that qualitative research involves interpretation of perceptions and social processes, and demands a high degree of self-awareness and reflexivity and this is discussed further a little later on. What may seem like the lack of objectivity to some is in fact a more holistic social reality of which the researcher is an integral part. The experiences of the women in the project were their reality, constructed in their narratives through the lens of the interpretative horizons and language available to them. McCloud and Thompson (2009: 7) argue that the researcher can never be outside the process of knowledge production and data generation. Sarantakos (1998) suggests that objectivity is associated with and results from
standardisation, a methodological tool that is incompatible with the main principles of qualitative research.

Qualitative techniques are especially appropriate to this study of life experiences and ‘Gadamerian hermeneutics leads to a very liberal view of the meaning of qualitative data: its meaning for the interpreter’ (Ashworth, 2000: 104). The goal of this research was to understand a human phenomenon, the women’s changed epistemological and ontological stance as a result of their experience of higher education in mid-life. This goal fits with the philosophy, strategies and intentions of the hermeneutic interpretive research paradigm. Hermeneutical phenomenology is concerned with lived experience, and is thus ideal for investigating personal learning journeys.

Trede et al. (2009: 19) state that in hermeneutics, ‘knowing is seen as a kind of being, as a concrete form of being-the-world and as pragmatic’. They argue that epistemological questions address theories of knowing and the relationship between the researcher and the researched in terms of developing understanding of the phenomenon in question. The women experienced change having completed higher education, their way of knowing and their way of being fundamentally changed. Their descriptions provided me with vivid evidence of such change.

Reinhartz and Chase (2002) note that well into the 20th century most social research was based primarily on men’s experiences, and women were relatively invisible. This has changed since the feminist movement of the 1960s. Reinhartz and Chase argue that, for women who come from less privileged backgrounds, the qualitative in-depth interview can have a liberating effect. The approach taken in this research and the results reported later support this view, as chance meetings with some of the women many months after the interviews provided me with feedback that they not only enjoyed the interviews, but they felt better having told their stories.

Researchers who interview women should thus understand the possibly radical impact of the interview on the women herself. She may discover her thoughts, learn who she is, and find her voice. (Reinhartz and Chase 2002: 225)
A phenomenologically informed research design was selected because it provides ‘a rigorous approach to qualitative research using systematic procedures’ (Crotty, 1998: 9). The design aspect of qualitative research is characterised by its emergent nature since the researcher set out to observe and interpret meanings in context, and hence the research design may, in the process of data collection, develop from the initial design (Patton, 1990). The research questions in this project form the basis of the objectives and methods. These objectives are ‘clear, specific statements that identify what the researcher wishes to accomplish as a result of doing the research’ (Saunders et al, 2007: 610). From a methodology point of view ‘objectives are more generally acceptable to the research community as evidence of the researcher’s clear sense of purpose and direction’ (Saunders et al, 2007: 32). The planning and organising of the research require good organisation skills (Blaxter et al, 2004) and I increasingly became more aware of this when it came to structuring the actual schedule for the gathering of data.

A preliminary focus group helped refine the interview questions and even more importantly provided a provisional heuristic frame for an understanding of the narratives as a more coherent whole. Semi-structured interviews were employed in order to generate the data. Narrative analysis was used to interpret the lived experiences of the participants, in agreement with the theoretical framework of hermeneutical phenomenology, as I sought to understand the ‘complex world of lived experience from the point of view of those in it’ (Denzin & Lincoln 1998: 221). This echoes Mason’s 92002: 3) view of qualitative research which she says is ‘…broadly interpretivist in the sense that it is concerned with how the social world is interpreted, understood, experienced, produced, or constituted.’

A useful way of describing the research process is that of an onion, being made up different layers or processes: philosophies, approaches, strategies, choices, time spans, data collection and analysis methods. It is important to decide on your research philosophy first, as ‘the research philosophy that you adopt contains important assumptions about the way in which you view the world. These assumptions will underpin the research strategy and the methods you choose as part of that strategy’ (Saunders et al.: 101). For this reason, this chapter begins with the philosophical underpinnings and theoretical framework of the research.
4.3 Philosophical and Theoretical Framework

Epistemology is the science of knowing and methodology is the science of finding out, (Babbie, 1989). This investigation accepts the useful differentiation of two realities:

1. Experiential reality: the things you know as a result of direct experience.
2. Agreement reality: things you consider real because you have been told they are real and everyone else seems to agree they are real (Babbie, 1989: 5).

Both of these realities are at the core of adult education; students bring with them their experiential realities of lived experiences, and education itself discerns for them, the distinction between both realities. To get to the core of this ‘experiential reality’, my broader reading introduced me to the hermeneutical philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900-2002), whose work was influenced by his teacher, Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), who had been heavily influenced by Edmund Husserl’s (1859-1938) phenomenology. Hermeneutical phenomenology as a philosophy is interested in ‘the everyday life-world of social actors’, (Rundell, 1995: 11). This includes the contextual everyday interpretations and understandings that make up this life-world. The ‘real question’ according to Gadamer, ‘is not in what way being can be understood, but in what way understanding is being’, (1979: 49). Philosophical hermeneutics is grounded in the view that human beings through this understanding are first and foremost interpreters. Gadamer was of the belief, that truth cannot be adequately explained by the scientific method of positivism. The two broad traditions within social science are positivism and interpretivism. Positivists start from the belief that there is a real world out there that can be observed and measured. They hold that ‘there is a world that we can record and analyse independently of people’s interpretations of it’ (May, 1997: 11). Interpretivists start from the belief that our ideas mediate what we see as real and that it is not possible to separate experience from how we understand it. According to May (1997: 13), ‘the only thing we can know with certainty is how people interpret the world’. Haack (2003) denies that there is any such thing as scientific method and that a variety of methods are used to facilitate the improvement of human perception and judgement.

For my research, philosophical hermeneutics will explore and expose the women’s realities from their experiences as described in their own stories, as narrated and narrative realities. Phenomenology as a methodology investigating lived experience seems most apt as it is the
lived experience or hermeneutic epistemology of older female students in third level education that I wish to explore. Phenomenology as ontology in this research exposes the existence of such experiences as interpreted hermeneutically. Using feminist thought, ontological issues concern the idea of ‘being’, and stress the existence of patriarchal social relations and the negative implications these have for women. I sought to understand the women’s ways of knowing and being in the world. The review of the literature revealed the phenomenology of Heidegger (1963), and of particular interest, the philosophical hermeneutics of Gadamer. A qualitative methodology focuses on understanding a phenomenon, as distinct from a quantitative methodology, which is oriented towards description and classification. Being inductive and interpretive, the comparison of data discovers concepts and themes recurring and emerging, enabling easier analysis. Thus, a Gadamerian – Feminist phenomenology forms the theoretical framework for undertaking this research on mature female third level students. Feminist Standpoint Theory will be discussed further on.

4.4 The Role of Phenomenology in this Research

The purpose of phenomenology is to describe particular phenomena, or the appearance of things, as lived experience (Speziale & Carpenter, 2007). It is the interpretation of another’s experience, in this case the experiences of the women. They, of course had experiences that were not lived, the most obvious here being their aspirations and expectations which they may have held in the past as their younger selves or contemporaneously. It is the lived experience that gives meaning to each individual’s perception of a particular phenomenon and thus presents to the individual what is true or real in her or his life (Giorgi, 1997). ‘As such, phenomenology offers an important shift from a positivist cause-effect focus to one of human subjectivity and discovering the meaning of actions’ (Giorgi, 2005: 45). The women’s narratives reported their lived experience, but these reports are from memory and are therefore selective and influenced by other forces. However, their experiences are their reality.

In phenomenological research data are commonly collected through face-to-face interviews to gain insights into the experiences of the participants. Open-ended interviews facilitate the collection of rich data by providing the participants with the opportunity to describe their experiences fully, as they have them from memory. The face-to-face nature of the interviews
allows for immediate clarification or expansion of the participants’ thoughts and access to nonverbal cues such as gestures and facial expressions (Speziale & Carpenter, 2007). Some of the women’s facial expressions indicated great sadness at times through the interviews.

The genesis of this research project is as a result of a conversation with a group of mature female students some years ago. As their lecturer, I was intrigued by their openness and candour about the changes in their attitudes, beliefs and plans as a result of three years of college education on a Social Studies degree programme. They spoke about the impact of their education on their lives, especially their private relationships. They were aged from thirty to fifty years, many had left school early, and a few had a Leaving Certificate. All of them had married at a young age, and had family responsibilities. Their comments focused on their husbands or partners, the level of support given by them and the changing sense of obligation combined with a sense of guilt. They also expressed some regret about how imposed gender-roles had held them back in life. The opportunity to pursue third level education did not present itself at an age appropriate time and they felt circumstances beyond their control disrupted their educational experiences. This informal conversation during a coffee break in evening study provided for me insights into the women’s thinking, knowing and being in a phenomenological sense. From listening to these women, I realised that for them, studying at degree level at certain stages of the life-cycle posed three epistemological and ontological demands; the challenges, changes and consequences brought about by broadened understanding and horizons (Gadamer 2002). Therefore, the most appropriate and accurate methodology for this research is a phenomenological one, and more specifically, a hermeneutical phenomenological approach, as the participants and researcher try to make sense of what is occurring for them. Gadamerian philosophy provides a background for exploring the complexities of their lived experiences and understanding of their transformational experiences. His philosophy represents an emphasis on a shift from pure phenomenological description of the conscious experience to an interpretation that includes evolving meaning. At the core of Gadamerian philosophy is the belief that the interplay of partners in dialogue has the potential to generate shared meaning through what Gadamer refers to as the fusing of horizons (Gadamer, 1975). People come from different backgrounds and it is not possible to totally remove oneself from one’s background, history, culture, gender or education. In conversation with others different ideas and opinions are exchanged and the totality of all that can be thought about by the person widens and enriches.
This fusing occurs because the interpreter of dialogue belongs to and is conditioned by their culture, or as Gadamer would argue, their horizon of tradition. He argues that all interpretations are anchored in the individual histories which contain values, assumptions and relationships. Therefore, meaning is always temporal and situational.

The women in this study share a particular historical horizon of tradition and therefore, in Gadamerian terms, all interpretations are anchored in our social and individual histories. As most of reality remains unreflected, occurring in a routine manner, the researcher must attempt to bring the unconscious forward into the conscious realm in order for the participants to articulate their daily assumptions and occurrences (Gadamer, 1997). The women were given the freedom in the interviews to reminisce and reflect on their lives.

Meanings are constructed by human beings in unique ways, depending on their context and personal frames of reference as they engage with the world they are interpreting (Crotty, 1998). In this type of research, findings emerge from the interactions between the researcher and the participants as the research progresses (Creswell, 1998). This suggests that subjectivity is valued and that humans are incapable of total objectivity because they are situated in a reality constructed by subjective experiences. Hermeneutics adds the interpretive element to explicate meanings and assumptions of the participants’ experiences that they themselves may have difficulty in articulating (Crotty, 1998).

4.5 Gadamer’s Philosophical Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics is the theory of interpretation. It began as the art of interpreting sacred texts but during the twentieth century was developed into a broader philosophical position (Palmer, 1969). Historically, Gadamer traced the development of hermeneutics from its origins in the work of Schleiermacher (1768-1834) and Dilthey (1833-1911) through to Heidegger (1889-1976) (Blake et al, 2003). According to Corliss (1993), Schleiermacher is known as the father of modern theology and modern hermeneutics, who transformed the traditional Biblical hermeneutics into general hermeneutics which incorporated texts of all kinds, the sacred and the profane, both ancient and modern. Noteworthy too, was his idea of applying general hermeneutical principles to the interpretations of oral statements.

Rutt (2006) states that texts also refer to conversation and understanding, and that by raising hermeneutical inquiry on to a universal level, Schleiermacher opened up the problem of
interpretation to a new world of understanding and explanation. He compared the reading of a
text to dialogue in conversation (Rutt, 2006). The reader was to play both parts in the
dialogue: the author and the recipient of the text. According to Klemm (1986) Schleiermacher
referred to this as significant conversations. What emerged was a methodology for various
human sciences (Graham, 1993). Dilthey believed understanding to be a process by which
something is known from signs received by the senses, and he too sought to expand
hermeneutics as the foundation of all human sciences (Young, 2009). According to Prasad,
2002), Schleiermacher transformed hermeneutics from a technique to a general theory,
whereas Dilthey raised hermeneutics to the status of a general epistemology. Both reacted to
the rationalistic sciences and indicated their inadequacy in understanding human phenomena
(Hughes and Sharrock, 1997). Heidegger focused on the hermeneutics of Dasein, and thus for
him, phenomenology is primarily a method and he employs it almost exclusively in order to
articulate and clarify the phenomenon of being (Young, 2009).

There are two predominant ways of looking at hermeneutics (Gadamer, 2000). One is as a
method for providing rules and procedures to interpret what a text means, especially when the
text comes from a different time or culture (Warnke, 1987). The other position, developed by
Gadamer, casts hermeneutics as central to human experience and what it means to be human
(Warnke, 1987). The latter is very important in my research on women’s lived experiences, as
the women’s descriptions of their experiences were, in the main very articulate and clear.
According to Gadamer, hermeneutics was at the centre of modern philosophical problems,
such as the ‘relationship of language to being, understanding, history, existence, and reality’
(Palmer, 1969: 43).

Gadamer uses the concept of horizon to speak of how comprehension takes place. This is
especially pertinent to this research, and is core to the layers of influences, e.g., historicity,
class and experience. The horizon is defined as ‘…the range of vision that includes everything
that can be seen from a particular vantage point’ (Gadamer, 2000: 302). A vantage point can
also be defined as the belief system, desires and imaginings of an individual, therefore the
horizon is formed by history, both personal and socio-cultural (which pertains to this
research). The women in my study grew up in the 1960s and 1970s, and especially for the
Irish women who made up the majority of the sample, their belief systems were very much
influenced by the Catholic Church’s dogma instilled in them by every social institution, the
family, school, political and judicial systems. Desires and imagingings therefore were limited to what choices and decisions were imposed on them.

Applying this to the thinking mind, we speak of narrowness of horizon, of the possible expansion of horizon, of the opening up of new horizons and so forth. (Gadamer, 2000: 302)

We live and participate in the hermeneutical conversation with the events that occur in our lives. We are active agents having feelings, thoughts, ideas, making decisions and taking action. We all have pasts, presents and futures. Gadamer (2002) argues that all understanding involves application to one’s present situation, where situation is understood to mean one’s historical standpoint, or the sum of one’s prejudices. He refers to this as ‘the fusion of horizons’ (Gadamer, 2002: 303). The majority of the women in the study were in their forties and fifties, and there were many shared experiences associated with their class and gender, but each too, had a uniqueness on their understanding of experiences, a visceral connection as it were.

In the context of this research of a certain cohort of women at a certain point in time in a particular culture, the higher education experience reveals horizons. Gadamer (2002: 302) speaks of those ‘who have no horizon and overvalue that which is closest to them’, but, horizons can be acquired. According to Gadamer (2002: 302), ‘to have a horizon means not being limited to what is nearby but being able to see beyond it’. According to Noel (1996), those who do not move remain stationary, and have no horizon as described by Gadamer, and have limited perspectives and have no understanding of multiple perspectives. This type of situation can occur when an individual is isolated, associating only with people of her class, culture, region and race. As Gadamer (2000: 299) says, ‘[u]nderstanding begins… when something addresses us’. For the participants in this research, the educational experience addresses them, and facilitates expansion of horizons. Conversations with participants enable the hermeneutic researcher to explore and examine her or his own horizons, subsequently challenging existing prejudices and identifying what is taken for granted (Blaikie, 2004). The movement of horizons (both my own and those of the women in the research) between the first and second conversations should result in altered meanings. According to Rasmussen (2002), the horizon is limited by an interpretative bias because interpretation can never be done from a neutral position, as it is always determined by tradition and history. ‘The
tradition asserts its own truth in being understood, and disturbs the horizon that had, until then, surrounded us’ (Gadamer, 2002: 486). Horizons are not more or less true, they are more or less informed (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). The horizon of the present cannot be formed without considering our past and understanding the prejudices and traditions from which we come, our history, culture, society and gender (Laverty, 2003).

Gadamer refers to the process of becoming cultured as ‘Bildung’, a word which in its most literal sense means self-formation in culture (Gadamer 1960/1989). Gadamer’s idea of Bildung, or self-cultivation, occurs by means of confrontation between horizons of understanding and fusions of such horizons (Gadamer 1960/1989). Through the process of higher education, the women in the study confronted many aspects of their lives and previous experiences, and through a different gaze, were challenged to re-understand. This occurrence, or formation or self-cultivation was a challenge as well as an opportunity for growth. Although Bildung has several meanings in German, Gadamer (1960/1989) characterises Bildung as the properly human way of developing one’s natural talents and capacities. Bildung is an educative process that aspires to achieve moral development (Herder, 2002). This educative process is comprised of several key concepts, according to Erben (2002); and these are: communication and narrative; a link with history; self-reflection and personal responsibility for learning. Erben emphasises that the ability to tell one’s own story is a critical element of Bildung. He argues that it is through the expression of experiences, organised as narratives that individuals come to realise connections, and make sense of their lives. Bildung allows individuals to see things from a different perspective, or horizon as Gadamer states, as it cultivates and encourages growth. It is in building and forming oneself through Bildung that one assumes a stance of openness to other points of view and perspectives that differ from one’s own (Grondin, 2003). Higher education provided an experience of Bildung for the women in the study.

Fundamental in Gadamer’s work is the concept of understanding, which is a condition of being human. Remembering pieces of factual information alone is not understanding. To have understanding is to be able to put pieces of information together and to use such understanding to do things, e.g., solve problems, create new ideas, etc. Surface understanding involves memory and recall, while deep understanding or true understanding is relational and extended. We understand a language, we understand how to use tools and technology, we
understand social norms and we understand theories. Understanding leads to meaningful action.

Humans are constantly in the process of self-development through engagement with culture and civilisation (McManus Holroyd, 2007). ‘Understanding is not an isolated activity of human beings, but a basic structure of our experience of life…’ (Gadamer, 1975: 87). For Gadamer, people have a dialogue with experience, and the most fulfilling dialogue opens one up to more experience and more truth. ‘The dialectic of experience has its proper fulfilment not in definitive knowledge but in the openness to experience that is made possible by experience itself’ (Gadamer, 2006: 350). Van Manen (1990: 12) argues that the aim of hermeneutic phenomenology is ‘the fulfilment of our human nature, to become more fully who we are’. Phenomenological research ‘always begins in the lifeworld…the world of the natural attitude of everyday life’ (Van Manen: 7); ‘the emphasis is always on the meaning of lived experience’ (Van Manen: 62). According to Gadamer (1999: 457) ‘[l]anguage is the medium from which our whole experience of the world unfolds’.

‘Lebenswelt’ or lifeworld for Gadamer is ‘the whole in which we live as historical creatures’ (Gadamer, 1980: 247). Hermeneutical phenomenological research focuses on understanding human beings within the context of their lifeworld. For Gadamer, according to Moran (2011), the concept of lifeworld is the exact opposite of objectivism. The taken-for-granted, everyday life that we lead provides the experiential grounding for knowledge as opposed to science’s privileged knowledge claims. Lifeworld is a term used by Habermas to distinguish between the private and intimate realm of everyday living and the public realm of the social system (Habermas, 1987).

4.6 Feminist Standpoint Theory
The second theoretical pillar for this study is provided by Feminist Standpoint Theory, which emerged in the 1970s and 1980s as a feminist critical theory about relations between the production of knowledge and the practices of power (Harding, 1993). Subsequently, it became a methodology to guide feminist research. Feminist Standpoint Theory works on the proposition that women, due to their personal and social experience as females are in a better position than men to face and understand the world of women. This relates to contexts of the world of work, division of labour, mother-child relationships and so on. There are many
different contexts within Feminist Standpoint Theory as a model of research (class, ethnicity, culture, education, etc.) and hence, many standpoints which share common criteria to guide the research. It has contributed to the understanding of marginal voices as it has privileged the standpoints of women and also, minority groups.

Some of the most developed accounts of Feminist Standpoint Theory appear in the work of Nancy Hartsock (1983, 1997), Dorothy Smith (1991) and Sandra Harding (1991, 1993). They were responding to the hierarchy of knowledges which privileged the experiences of men and discounted the experiences and corresponding knowledges of women. The justification for Feminist Standpoint Theory is made on the grounds that certain experiences ‘provide a less partial and distorted account of the social realm’ (Harding, 1991: 268, 284; Harding, 1995: 209-210; Harding 1993: 24), ‘a more complete understanding’ (Hartsock, 1983: 1, 116), ‘a less partial and perverse understanding’ (Hartsock, 1983: 1, 246), or an ‘enlarged understanding’ (Harding, 1993: 24).

Feminist standpoint epistemology requires women to be at the centre of the research process. Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2006: 56) state that ‘women’s concrete experiences provide the starting point from which to build knowledge’. These concrete experiences consist of what women do. Most feminist standpoint scholars now acknowledge that women ‘occupy many different standpoints and inhabit many different realities’ (Hekman, 2004: 227). While there are a variety of positions among feminists, they have all challenged the ‘god-trick of seeing everything from nowhere’ (Haraway, 1991: 189). Stotezler and Yuval Davis (2002) argue that one of the cornerstones of feminist theory has been its challenge to positivist notions of objectivity and truth. Feminist standpoint theory holds that there are multiple realities that we can observe and experience, and such researchers should totally respect the truth of the subject’s perspective.

As a methodology, feminist standpoint encompasses several different but interrelated discourses, some of which are used in this work. Harding, Hartsock and Smith are the three proponents of feminist standpoint theory to be discussed here, as stated above their accounts were the most developed, and are the more salient in the literature. Their collective theories have their origins in the feminist and women’s movement (Harding, 2004); and the blueprint from which they took their cue is Marx’s ‘standpoint of the proletariat’ (Harding, 2006: 82; Smith, 2005: 2). Hartsock (1998: 106) forges the link between Marx’s proletariat and women
by stating ‘Marx proposed that a correct vision of class society is available from only one of the two major positions in capitalist society, that is from the proletariat’s position’. She compares the proletarian position with that of women, in that ‘[l]ike the lives of the proletariats according to Marxist theory, women’s lives make available a particular and privileged vantage point’ (Hartsock, 1998: 107). Smith mounts a similar argument, ‘[t]here are parallels between the claims Marx makes for a knowledge based in the class who sell their labour and the claims that can be made for a knowledge of society, from the standpoint of women’ (Smith, 1987: 79). In adopting Marx’s standpoint of the proletariat as their blueprint, standpoint theorists argue that women are disadvantaged, discriminated against, excluded from opportunities available to men and oppressed. Hartsock (1998) qualifies this view by stressing the importance of links among all human beings. The criteria for judging standpoints are not purely epistemological but also ethical and political (Hartsock, 1997). Harding (1986) emphasises the need for ethical and political criteria in a standpoint, and the preferable grounding of such epistemologies to be located in women’s experience. Smith (2005: 42) concurs, stating that the method of inquiry she proposes is political and should ‘serve those whose standpoint it undertakes’. She goes on to say that she is committed to a form of knowledge which reveals ‘how forms of domination are put together, thus making resistance and progressive change more within our reach’ (Smith, 2005: 42). The epistemological and ethical components which Smith and Harding advocate are also acknowledged by Hartsock’s contention that ‘contested claims to knowledge cannot have equal validity because some knowledge claims can be privileged over others’ (Hartsock, 1997: 371).

To achieve a feminist standpoint one must engage in the intellectual and political struggle necessary to see natural and social life from the point of view of that distained activity which produces women’s social experiences instead of from the partial and perverse perspective available from the ruling gender experience of men. (Harding in Stanley 1991: 27)

Letherby (2003) argues that feminist standpoint theory values the private and personal as worthy of study and that it values reflexivity and emotion as a source of insight as well as an essential part of research. The theory is challenged by Code’s (1995: 36) contention that it is necessary to tread a path between ‘the old tyranny of authoritarian expertise that discounts women’s experiences and a new tyranny of experientialism that claims for first-person experiential utterances an immunity from challenge, interpretation or debate’. However, Harding (1987) emphasises that women’s experiences are considered a significant indicator of
reality, and for her and the other feminist standpoint theorists, these experiences are at the centre of the research and reality is built on and from these experiences. Certainly for this research, the private and personal along with emotion are very important aspects of the women’s accounts of events and processes in their lives. While Code makes a valid point regarding ‘a new tyranny of experientialism’, which has been increasingly magnified in recent years by popular culture, such as ‘reality television’, the women in this research have experienced a more temporal depth, in which their present, past and future come together for them. Their experiences are emotional and are significant indicators of their reality. Feminist standpoint combined with hermeneutical phenomenological methods therefore, are particularly effective at bringing to the fore the experiences and perceptions of individuals from their own perspectives.

Feminist standpoint theory has many parallels with a newer development within feminist theory and research, that is postmodern feminism, which adheres to similar philosophical principles that have a strong impact on the way research is to be done (Lather, 1991). Feminist postmodernists are critical not only of feminist practices regarding theories of gender and patriarchy, which are, according to Butler (1990) considered to be essentialist. Butler (1990) refers particularly to the feminist belief and practice of considering concepts such as ‘women’ and ‘patriarchy’ to be universal. This issue was raised in relation to lesbian women and women of colour, but class is equally important in the debate. Kristeva (1979) divided feminism into three generations and suggested that there could be a parallel existence of all three. According to Kristeva (1979), the first generation pursued equality; the second generation made the claim of difference, and the third generation’s aim is to ‘undermine the kind of fixed identity on which the first two have been based’ (Kristeva, 1979: 209). This is also Butler’s (1990) argument; according to her, problems arise if we assume that being called a woman indicates a life being led in a common set of circumstances and with a common set of experiences. Furthermore, there are also problems if it is assumed that all women have a similar sense of themselves and that they all share a common identity (Butler, 1990). Butler (1990) is critical of feminism for making both these assumptions, for her, different experiences and attitudes among women are valued as sources of richness and diversity that empowers feminism.

Referring to the differences of opinion within the feminist ranks, Harding (1987: 188) notes that ‘there can never be a feminist science, sociology, anthropology or epistemology, but only
many stories that different women tell about the different knowledge they have’. This is supported by Blaikie’s (1993: 125) argument that ‘in an unstable world, the establishment of consistent and coherent theories would be a hindrance to understanding and practice’. Despite the diversity in feminist theory, feminist researchers share many standards and principles, such as the beliefs that women have been marginalised; that there is still a long way to go to establish gender equality, and that the relationship between researcher and researched requires serious reconsideration (Farber, 2001). The advent of feminist research has added a new lens to the perception of the world, helped to raise women’s consciousness and empower them, and freed social research from androcentric blinkers, and what some radical feminists refer to as gynopia and misogyny (Stalker, 1995).

Harding (1987: 184) agrees with this, arguing that ‘women’s experiences, informed by feminist theory, provide a potential grounding for more complete and less distorted knowledge claims than do men’s’. The foundations of feminist research are those of critical theory and therefore as a research model it is critical and emancipatory. It studies the social conditions of women in a sexist, male-stream and patriarchal society and also identifies the gender-blindness of government policy and practices in the subjugation of women (Stanley & Wise, 1983). Cook and Fonow (1986) identified five epistemological principles in feminist research methodology, which can be seen as enduring themes:

1. Women and gender are the focal point of analysis.
2. The rejection of the subject and object dichotomy.
3. The importance of consciousness-raising.
4. A concern with ethics.
5. An intention to empower, alter power relations and inequality for women.

These principles were at the heart of my research. ‘Attending to the basic significance of gender involves accounting for the everyday experiences of women which have been neglected in traditional sociology.’ (Cook & Fonow, 1986: 22). Feminist research has been at the forefront of challenging the silencing of women’s voices and a narrow, gendered research regime which cast women in passive and subordinate roles. Crucially, feminist research aspires to be for women as much as it is about women (Burns, 2005), and is more than a matter of method as it is a perspective that raises philosophical issues of ontology and epistemology (Reinharz, 1992).
As stated previously, this explorative qualitative study was informed by phenomenology, specifically the principles and philosophy espoused by Gadamer (1975). These principles have been selected primarily because they allow for feminist and critical analysis of data. The principles call for understanding gained from the women’s stories to be linked to tradition and transformation. Feminist principles guided the research and the interview process. I will now attempt to bring Gadamer closer to Feminist Standpoint Theory. The purpose of this study is to explore and describe the challenges, changes and consequences for women in first time higher education at mid-life. Central to the research is transformation, that is, how knowledge and understanding through education, which may be resisted at times, create a certain epistemological and ontological transformation.

### 4.7 Bringing Gadamer and Feminist Standpoint Theory Closer

In line with Gadamerian philosophy, feminist research places the woman’s experiences as the object of the study. Harding (1986) asserts that feminist research is relational and attempts to discover relationships between the scientific world and the subjective world of feeling, experiences, values and collective consciousness. Additionally, it is emancipatory in that, through the research process women are encouraged to see new possibilities in their lives. Research influenced by feminist principles also gives voice to women and their experiences by giving credibility to their stories. The ultimate and inevitable changes in the life-world of these women are what I am interested in revealing, describing and interpreting. The research will grant authentic expression to women’s experiences and to the knowledge that women have cultivated from these experiences. ‘A feminist standpoint is a way of understanding the world, a point of view of social reality, that begins with, and is developed directly from women’s experiences’ (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006: 60).

Jaggar (2003) argues that feminism has probably helped philosophy more than philosophy has helped feminism. Langton (2004) states that philosophy leaves everything as it is, but feminists on the other hand, do not. She believes that feminism illuminates philosophy.

In thinking about how feminism has contributed to philosophy, it will be worth looking at two rather general ideas; the idea of dualism, and the idea of androcentrism. In thinking about how philosophy has contributed to feminism, it will be worth looking at one rather specific idea: the idea of treating someone as an object. (Langton, 2004: 232)
Mainstream philosophy suffers from male bias, as it is generally functualist in its views of women, who are represented as less rational than men, which leads to thinking that women’s sense of reason is inferior to men’s. Feminists think philosophically, as Rice (1996) argues that feminism has had a significant impact on how many philosophers of education view pedagogy and teacher-student relations. Also, engaging in the practice of mothering, according to Ruddick (1989: 123) ‘fosters certain metaphysical attitudes, cognitive capacities and conceptions of virtue’. This quotation is the essence of the argument for me, that feminism has helped philosophy more than philosophy has helped feminism.

Code (2003) frames the collection of essays in ‘Feminist Interpretation of Hans-Georg Gadamer’ with a persuasive argument as to why feminists should read Gadamer. Hoffman, in her essay ‘Gadamer’s Philosophical Hermeneutics and Feminist Projects’, defends his philosophical hermeneutics by referring to them as a fruitful resource. All the contributors to this book agree that Gadamer does not address the questions of power and gender, but many of them argue that Gadamer’s thought can be put to use to support feminist exploration of power, gender and politics. Feminists appreciate Gadamer’s account of human experiences and human knowing, as being engaged, situated, historical and dialogical (Code, 2003).

This accounting for the situatedness of the knowing subject has been used epistemologically in standpoint theory in at least two different ways: the first claims that a specific social situatedness endows the subject with a privileged access to truth; the other, closer to the theoretical view expressed in this article, rejects such a position and views the process of approximating the truth as part of a dialogical relationship among subjects who are differentially situated. (Stoetzler & Yuval-Davis, 2002: 315)

Most of the contributors to the book see Gadamer as offering a positive theory of change in contrast to the negativism of Butler. They argue that it is philosophically sounder to think of gender identity as being interpreted (Gadamer) rather than as constructed (Butler); and it is noted that Gadamer does not thematise the body. They are of the belief that Gadamer offers a more realistic conception of reason that is useful to feminism, and finally, understanding is practiced by many of the authors as Gadamer has described it.

Both Gadamerian and feminist research critically focus on how knowledge is created. As Harding and Norberg (2005: 201) note, ‘[r]esearch processes themselves can [re]produce power differences’. Gadamer (1960) understood hermeneutics as a process of co-creation.
between researcher and participant, a feminist standpoint requires a similar, reflexive production of meaning. Through this process, the search is toward understanding of the experience from a feminist position, as well as the horizons of participants and researcher. Hermeneutic research demands self-reflexivity about the experience while constructing interpretations of the experience (Hertz, 1997).

Gadamer’s emphasis on understanding achieved in this research by interpretation of women’s stories of their experiences, is mirrored by a feminist methodological perspective that views the research process as central to any account of feminist research and as itself, is part of the research findings that are subject to critical evaluation. Asking questions requires a certain skill for Gadamer (2006: 361); ‘[a] person skilled in the art of questioning is a person who can prevent questions from being suppressed by the dominant opinion’. Gadamerian hermeneutics fuelled by Feminist Standpoint Theory can expose structural power relations, and in so doing, empower the women in the research in relation to agency.

One of Gadamer’s central concepts according to Moran (2011) is the notion of Verstehen, which means understanding as contrasting with scientific explanation. In this research, it is accepted as empathic understanding directed by questions of emancipation and well-being in keeping with the approach of blending Gadamerian and feminist standpoint thought. Bildung requires researchers to go beyond what they know and are currently experiencing by keeping themselves open to what is different and to other points of view through increased sensitivity and openness to the possibility of multiple truths (Gadamer, 1960). Bildung allows individuals to see things from a different perspective or horizon.

Bringing Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutical phenomenology closer to Feminist Standpoint Theory as the methodology for this research provides a strength and rigour in the process, and enables a truth or truths to be told by giving voice to the women’s experiences of transformation in relation to education.

In my philosophy, my faith and my feminism, I practice understanding as Gadamer has described it. I place myself within a tradition, and then continuously fuse past and present as I negotiate a modern life within traditional horizons. (Kaplan in Code, 2003: 368)
4.8 Reflexivity

In any hermeneutical project it is important for the researcher to monitor and reflect on all aspects of the research from the formulation of research ideas through to writing up the findings with particular concern for the way in which the researcher’s own horizons of experience, world-view, moral and ethical positions impinge on and guide her choices, decisions and interpretations. Such reflexivity has a special role where the researcher is close to the subjects and the data, as in the case of this study. Feminist researchers operate reflexivity and relationality and are fully aware that ‘all knowledge is affected by the social conditions under which it is produced; it is grounded in both the social location and the social history of the observer and the observed’ (Mann & Kelley, 1997: 392).

Reflexivity was very important in my research and became increasingly so during the analysis of the data. The reading of the transcripts was an encounter, often emotional, which required my attention in relation to any biases that I might impose in relation to the women’s class, religious beliefs, relationships with partners and mothers, among others. Interrogation of self was necessary, and a key element in the research process, in order to legitimise, validate and question research practices, and most especially representation as I attempted to allow the women’s voices to be heard clearly. I experienced one interview during which the woman seemed unwilling or unable to describe the events of her life, so interpretation of her experiences was difficult. The result of this reflexivity is to produce research that questions its own interpretations and is reflexive about its own knowledge production towards the goal of producing better, less distorted research accounts (Hertz, 1997). Reflexivity under feminism is not only about investigating the power embedded in one’s research, but it is also about doing research differently. Oakley (1981) argues that the need to do research differently arises from the ethical and political problems within traditional research. May (2011) views the insights of feminism to be central to the investigation of reflexivity; in that the connectedness and continuities between women are exemplified through the exercise of empathy and an ethic of care. Personally, I felt a strong affiliation with the women, and that continued after the research was completed.

Reflexivity assumes a pivotal role in feminist research and in an hermeneutic approach (King, 1994). Buraway (1998) states that reflexivity has gained a vital role in qualitative research and that it is central to debates on subjectivity and objectivity. Reflexivity is a process that
challenges the researcher to examine how her research agenda, assumptions, personal beliefs and emotions enter into the research. The researcher is an active participant in knowledge production rather than a neutral bystander (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995). Reflexivity is described by Etherington (2007: 601) as ‘the development of an ability to notice and respond to the world around us, to stories, and to other people and events, and to use that knowledge to inform and direct our actions, communications and understandings’. This latter idea is attractive to me in that it offers a principle on how to live one’s life.

Dowling (2006) identifies two types of reflexivity, personal and epistemological. Personal reflexivity involves my reflecting upon the ways in which my own values, experiences, beliefs and social identity have shaped the research. Giddens (1974) defines personal reflexivity as self-awareness, which quite simply means that I am aware of the relationship between myself, as researcher, the women as the researched, and the research environment. Epistemological reflexivity requires that I question how much the design of the study and my analysis have constructed the findings. Epistemological reflexivity encourages the researcher to reflect upon the assumptions that are made in the course of the research, and to think about the implications of such assumptions for the research and its findings.

Chriseri-Strater (1996: 130) makes a distinction between reflexivity and reflection: ‘to be reflective does not demand an ‘other’, while to be reflexive demands both an ‘other’ and some self-conscious awareness of the process of self-scrutiny.’ Reflexivity was a central feature in this study in the sense that the long hours I spent reading and thinking about the women’s stories were filled with their presence as real ‘others’ whom I had encountered in often emotional meetings and with some of whom I also formed empathetic relations.

More generally, in philosophical hermeneutics, understanding is derived from personal involvement by the researcher in reciprocal processes on interpretation that are inextricably related to one’s being in the world (Spence, 2001). Gadamer (1989) argues that pre-judgements (prejudices) have a special importance in interpretation and cannot be disposed of. Hermeneutic phenomenology as a methodology investigates ‘lived experience’, and Gadamer was of the belief that truth cannot be adequately explained by scientific method, but by the exploration of ‘the everyday life-world of social actors’ (Rundell, 1995: 11). The implications of our social situatedness is that we experience and interpret the world from a particular perspective and we can never fully escape this subjectivity, and indeed no attempt was made
to escape this involvement in this study. In terms of ‘horizons’ (Gadamer, 1975), we each have our own presuppositions, beliefs, predilections and these make up our horizon of understanding. The majority of the women in my study grew up in an era when Church, class and gender were strongly determining in their path in life, and provided very few opportunities of choice. They experienced gender from a classed position as I was aware of how I experienced my gender from my own life-historical and socio-cultural position.

Emotional response

Mauthner and Doucet (2003) emphasise the importance of social location and emotional response to respondents during the research interviews. They signal the importance of how the researcher’s emotional responses to respondents can shape interpretations of the respondents’ accounts. They insist that ‘[s]ituating ourselves socially and emotionally in relation to respondents is an important element of reflexivity’ (Mauthner & Doucet, 2003: 419). This was the case in my research, as I shared a lot of the experiences which the women described. It is also argued that reflexivity in feminist research emphasises the power differentials within the various stages of the research process. Reflexivity is vital in feminist research as the researcher identifies with the women she is researching and must therefore constantly be aware of how her values, beliefs and perceptions are influencing the research process. Feminist researchers have epistemological concerns at the centre, and the notion of value neutrality is challenged (Koch & Harrington, 1998). Oleson (1994) argues, and I have assumed this position here, that feminist bias does not distort the findings of a study, but is a resource that can be used for understanding their interpretations. Reflexivity and intersubjectivity are married in feminist research and in this research, as human beings are interdependent rather than independent. Both researchers and participants therefore undergo reflexivity (Letherby, 2002). This intersubjectivity between researcher and participant, and the mutual creation of data are essential aspects of the research as I hope will be evident in the chapters to come. This type of relationship between researcher and participants is of key importance for my research with women who were former students of mine. Reflexivity closes the door on the belief that researcher objectivity and researcher – participant distance is paramount, and opens another one to the transparency of reality and the need to address ethical, political and epistemological concerns of research (Marcus, 1994). The most important aspect of reflexivity for Jupp (2006), is its evaluative role in terms of validity and reliability, as a description of how the interviews were carried out and what methods of
recording data were used is given. He sees reflexivity as being concerned with ‘the social production of knowledge’ (Jupp, 2006: 258).

Reflexive knowledge building occurs through the dialogical practice of sharing with others. It is only by reflexively considering the relationality between varying positionalities through dialogue that we are able to build knowledge. (Hesse-Biber 2007: 148)

4.9 My Account of Being Reflexive

To begin with, the process of questioning my assumptions and values was disconcerting; it was uncomfortable to truly look inward and reflect on all the assumptions and values that were built up over a lifetime. I was tempted to take an outside-in stance, but the process of interviewing and hearing the stories forced me to be conscious of just how the stories made me feel, reflect and remember. Many highlighted certain aspects of early school and family experiences that transported me back in time. That was a strange, but revealing experience of temporal shrinking, which triggered within me, an inside-out stance.

I scheduled two semi-structured interviews per day for three consecutive weeks. At the end of week one, I was thoroughly exhausted, physically and mentally. It makes sense that interviewing can be draining and tiring as you are constantly listening in a state of heightened awareness and sensitivity to personal stories. Three of the most powerfully profound interviews occurred in the first week, where accounts of sad childhood and school experiences, marital violence and rape were disclosed. I felt sympathy and empathy for those women, but I also felt pride in their resilience, our resilience – women’s resilience. Interviewing the thirty women became emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983), which requires the management of emotions, both theirs and mine. Emotional labour in this context also includes my gratitude to the women, which increased significantly with each interview. Other emotions experienced were related to my private and personal identity as I shared the experiences of many of the group, which created a type of disjunction between my professional and personal roles in the research process. A form of exchange occurred as the women pursued sensitive matters in their story-telling. Hochschild’s (1983) notion of emotional labour is a useful conceptual tool for understanding the emotional process involved in conducting such research, because, in the performance of emotional labour, the researcher will frequently suppress her emotions to make the interviewee feel more comfortable.
However, she will be left to process these feelings, and in my case, on my own. The woman who cried during the interview resulted in my feeling very concerned for her, and also, the details of her story disturbed me. Letherby (2003: 113) rightly asks why ‘the same formal support systems that exist for other professions who perform ‘emotional labour’ – such as psychology or counselling do not exist for researchers’.

There was frustration also towards the end of the third and final week of interviews, because a couple of the women gave, what I thought were ‘bad’ interviews. There was a lack of detail, enthusiasm and connection. I lost confidence in my work. However, Butler’s (2005) ethical position is useful here; to accept the ‘failure’ of the encounter without attaching blame to the self or the other.

During the transcription of the interviews, it was interesting to realise that there were pieces of conversation that were new to me. I questioned my ability to listen attentively. The transcripts became a daily part of my life, as I read and re-read them. I could almost hear the women speak. As time went by from the interviews through to the discussion of the findings, I had an almost sisterly attachment to these women with whom I have had no further contact, yet the connection remains vivid, as do their stories, and their impact on me and my own life and thoughts. I certainly identified with many of their experiences, having come from a working class background and having been born in the 1960s. Family issues resonated with me as communication in my own was more or less devoid of any warmth and affection. The research process became quite cathartic for both the researched and the researcher. There was a strong element of conceptual triangulation around the shared understanding which the women and I had on certain life experiences. I understood how their experiences and understanding were shaped by their location in a hierarchically structured system of power relations and the material conditions of their lives. Despite a personal commitment to reflexivity, collaboration and equality during the research, I was aware that there is an implicit power imbalance in the researcher/participant relationship, as educational differentials and occupational status cannot be eliminated. However, I made my best efforts at striving for a non-hierarchical relationship while being aware that while, power rests with the participants in the telling or withholding of their stories, eventual power rests with the researcher as it was I who writes the account of the encounters.
I wanted the women’s voices to be heard with as little filtering through an academic lens, but to prevent bias due to certain similarities of experiences which I shared with the women, I maintained a professional lens to enhance the scope for their insights to emerge. My background in Social Work provided the skills for considerable empathic interviewing which enabled what I believe to be, strong rapport with the women. As with a feminist standpoint, I wished to represent the lives of ordinary women, lives which were either ignored or presented in one dimensional terms. This emphasises the importance of the experiential, the private and the personal, and highlights the extent to which women’s worlds are organised in ways which differ from those of men in a cognitive, emotional and political way. However, I recognise that feminist standpoint research is open to criticism with the suggestion that one group’s perspective (women’s) is more valid or more real than another (men’s). I certainly have no desire to replace male supremacy with female supremacy.

4.10 Validity and Reliability

I was aware of the fact that I as researcher, was the instrument of both data collection and data interpretation, and that I had personal contact with and got close to the women in the study. However, the process of data collection was not an end in itself, the presentation of findings was. The data provided a detailed rendering of events and experiences of complex situations with many dimensions. Any reactivity on my behalf belonged to the co-authorship of the narratives. I prepared myself prior to the interviews in terms of my capacity for concentration and patience, tolerance of boredom and ambiguity and the need for resolution, conclusion and certainty. It is true that we are biased by our own background, knowledge and prejudices to see things in certain ways and not others. I strived for precision in description and stringency in meaning interpretation to enable confidence in the findings. The tool of analysis was my mind supplemented by the minds of the women. My sharing of experiences with the women, based on the socio-historical context of our lives, served only to enhance understanding and interpretation. I refer to this as intersubjective trustworthiness. There was a depth of trust between the women and I which, through the interviews captured their social reality. They were all asked the same questions, with flexibility in the order in which they responded to allow them the freedom to express their own thoughts and experiences. The Interview Protocol was developed in conjunction with my supervisor. Each woman received a copy of the transcript for the purpose of participant validation, and all were in agreement that the transcript fairly and accurately represented their narratives. Many of the women reported
positive outcomes as a result of the interviews. One woman said the interview gave her the opportunity to remember, which was something she had never given time to.

I had taken notes during the interviews also, as was the practice in my former career of social work, which also provided the interview skills. The sampling technique, data collection and analysis procedures are specified clearly. An informal focus group was held prior to developing the interview schedule and this provided some insightful ideas in relation to my overall research questions. Theoretical triangulation of Gadamerian hermeneutical phenomenology and feminist standpoint theory strongly influenced the collection and analysis of the data, providing strong validation of the representation of the women’s narratives through their voices. The challenge of all qualitative research is the necessity to incorporate rigour and subjectivity into the process. I strove for credibility, authenticity, integrity and sensitivity while collecting, analysing and interpreting the data, as I had a strong sense of respect for the women. I was aware of any identifying with their stories and sought their voice as individuals who shared certain experiences, but with nuanced differences making each unique. The interpretations which were grounded in the data, reveal truth external to my own experience.

The findings are specific to a small number of women, so it may be impossible to demonstrate that the findings are applicable to other situations as they are defined by the specific context. However, as the findings are supported by other studies, and such experiences are highly possible to be shared with other groups of women, the prospect of transferability cannot be rejected.
### 4.11 Brief biographical data of the Women in the Study

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<tr>
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<th>Family background</th>
<th>Previous experience of education</th>
<th>Age returning to education</th>
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<td>1953</td>
<td>India Middle class</td>
<td>Positive College degree</td>
<td>Fifty-two</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dolores</td>
<td>1966</td>
<td>Working class</td>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>Forty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carol</td>
<td>1965</td>
<td>Middle class Jamaican</td>
<td>Positive Incomplete Primary degree</td>
<td>Forty-two</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Angela</td>
<td>1969</td>
<td>Middle class</td>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>Thirty-five</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brenda</td>
<td>1958</td>
<td>Middle class</td>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>Forty-eight</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* names are, of course, pseudonyms

### 4.12 Sampling

The purposive or convenience sample of thirty former female students was recruited from the cohort I was interested in, that is women entering college after the age of thirty-five. Many of the women had been students of mine, and some had completed a different degree programme at the same college, the latter were recruited through a snowballing method. As they were a homogeneous group, thirty was a considered a sufficient number. I knew many of the women very well, others I met for the first time at the interview. There were four non-Irish women having migrated from India, Hungary, Nigeria and Slovenia, and there was one woman of Jamaican origin who had been adopted in the United Kingdom, but grew up in Ireland. As a collective, they had completed degree programmes between the years 2000 and 2013.

The participants of the study had completed a degree programme at the college where I lecture in Sociology and Advanced Child Care. I am also the Programme Board Chair of the BA in Social Studies. It is a small third level college with a total of less than one thousand students, of which about 350 are studying Social Studies. I get to know the students, especially those who attend regularly and participate well. These are usually the mature
students. I was confident that those who knew me trusted me, and I gave some time to
developing rapport with those who did not know me, so the interviews provided rich data. Yin
(2009) argues that rigour in case study research is enhanced by the use of open-ended
interviews, with the participants’ construction of reality providing important insights.

I had discussed my research with some of the final year mature students in the year prior to
the interviews, and some expressed an interest in being part of it, giving examples of the
various changes in their lives, including relationships and within themselves. Those who
studied for different degrees were reached by phone as they expressed interest to the others
who had been my students. The women were very enthusiastic participants, and I had to turn
away a few, as my supervisor had recommended a sample of thirty participants. Those turned
away were women over thirty five years of age when going to college for the first time, but
they contacted me after I had recruited the recommended sample. I knew the type of
participant and therefore, sample I wanted, as it was from listening to mature women students
discuss the changes in their lives as a result of education, some years ago, that I became
interested in this phenomenon. With the exception of the non-Irish born women, the majority
of the sample had left school early and had disliked school. With the exception of two in the
majority group, and the non-Irish born women, the women were from working class Catholic
backgrounds.

I e-mailed all the participants several times, as well as speaking to them by phone to organise
times for interviews that suited them, but would also fit into my proposed schedule. I sent
them each a letter outlining my research project’s objectives, a consent form and a ‘promise
of confidentiality’ form relating to the initial focus group. I emphasised their right to
withdraw at any time, and I explained to them how I would deal with the interview recordings
and transcripts. Confidentiality and anonymity were promised, except for my sharing some
data with my supervisor. I asked them to e-mail their confirmation of participation to me as
soon as they were sure that they wanted to proceed. A schedule was established and time slots
were offered to the women, with some re-negotiations necessary as there were a few who
could not make it at the last minute. Genuine reasons were given and another date accepted.
One woman withdrew because of illness in her family, so having recruited more than thirty
was valuable at this time.
4.13 Methods

In-depth, semi-structured interview and focus group discussion were the chosen instruments to explore and gather narratives of lived experiences. Diaries and visual methods were an option also, but I chose to hear the women tell their stories and record them. An Interview Protocol which had been developed as a result of the pilot, was used to guide the interviews. This was carefully designed from the research questions and in tune with the philosophical and theoretical framework. The Interview Protocol focused on four domains of inquiry relating to the research questions. The participants were individually interviewed over the months of June and July, 2013. All but two interviews took place in my office in the college. At that time of the year, quiet and privacy were guaranteed because staff and students were on summer break. As the weather was warm, the office window was open, allowing for some outside noise to be recorded, which during the transcription was quite amusing to hear the constant squeaking of young swallows in their nest as their parents returned frequently to feed them. This also served as an anchor, by which I place myself in the interview again. The remaining two interviews took place in the homes of the women, as they had requested. The duration of the interviews was just over one and a half hours. They were recorded digitally and transcribed when all interviews had been conducted.

Van Manen (1997) argues that this type of interview is a vehicle by which to develop a conversational relationship with the participant about the meaning of an experience. The women shared their life-story openly, and expressed their experiences in an easy, conversational manner even though some of the experiences that they related were traumatic at the time, deeply influencing and still emotionally raw.

A semi-structured interview provides the advantages of both structured and unstructured in that they provide greater breadth or richness in data compared with structured interviews, and allows participants freedom to respond to questions and probes. Another advantage of the semi-structured interview is the ability to compare across interviews because some questions are standard. Further, they encourage the participant to tell the story in their own words. This is most beneficial not only for a feminist approach, but also when seeking an understanding into processes and beliefs. They can also return an element of power to the participant in that the participant can, to some extent, determine the direction and context of the interview. The interview is a unique situation and it can offer the participant as well as the researcher great
benefits (Richardson, 1999; Charmaz, 2006), which is true, as I met some of the women months later and they told me that they felt better after telling their story. The interview offers an opportunity for the participants to reflect on their experience in a way they probably would not normally do. It allows the interviewer to probe the interviewees’ thoughts and feelings and to get beneath surface descriptions and generally to go further and deeper than normal everyday conversational style would allow. Therefore, great care about the potential difficulties which may occur for the participant is required which leads to a consideration of ethical issues.

Interviewing is rather like marriage: everyone knows what it is, an awful lot of people do it, and yet behind each closed front door there is a world of secrets. (Oakley, 1993: 221)

Gorman and Clayton (2005) warn that interviews, particularly semi-structured ones, are not problem-free as they are time consuming, costly, overly personal and open to bias. However, Oakley (1981: 30)) encourages the researcher to ‘give back’ to the participant, so as not to treat her as a data source, because, if there is little or no social interaction between the two people, the situation is one of hierarchical power. I agree with Oakley, as it was important to me that I give back to the women with some words of shared understanding and experience.

The method of the interview was adopted also in the light of the contradiction posited by Oakley (1981) between scientific interviewing requiring objectivity, and feminist research requiring openness and engagement. What Oakley (1993) calls the qualitative/quantitative divide has been a source of great debate in discussions of feminist research methods. Given the desire to give voice to the subjective experiences of women, and because women’s frame of reference has been characterised as relational and contextual, qualitative research approaches such as in-depth interview, have been argued to be the only appropriate methods for feminist investigation (Reinharz, 1992). Ikonen and Ojala (2007) state that feminist research gives audience to previously unheard voices, making visible what had previously been unseen and displaces the focus from the biologically informed concept of sex towards the more cultural concept of gender. ‘Epistemologically, it meant looking from the standpoint of women or a particular group of women – taking women’s experiences, instead of men’s as a point of departure’ (Ikonen & Ojala, 2007: 82).
Feminist research places an emphasis on experience and the researcher’s involvement in interpretation (Maynard, 1994) and is particularly concerned with asymmetrical power relationships (Charles, 1996) and I was certainly aware of this dimension as a representative of the system of higher education in my position of college lecturer. The central qualitative method in feminist research has been, and remains the interview (Fonow & Cook, 1991; Reinharz, 1992) and the practice of open-ended, semi-structured, in-depth interviewing favoured by feminist researchers is discussed in every textbook of qualitative research methods so that there were sufficient sources to consult on proper and careful conduct. While there is some structure, there is room for spontaneity as became quickly evident in the course of the study.

Feminists are particularly concerned with getting at experiences that are often hidden (Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2005).

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

I constructed a participatory model (Oakley, 1981) that stressed the importance of the researcher sharing her biography with the researched. This sharing of identities and stories with one another is thought to increase reciprocity and rapport in the interview process. This was done in a measured way, so their voices were heard more than mine. I used non-verbal communication to respond as there were protracted accounts of experiences given, that deserved attentive listening, attention and silence on my behalf. Personal accounts are seen as having central importance in social research because of the power of language to illuminate meaning (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995).

The expressive power of language provides the most important resource for accounts. A crucial feature of language is its capacity to present descriptions, explanations, and evaluations of almost infinite variety about any aspect of the world, including itself. (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995: 126)

Jacob & Furgerson (2012) suggest that all human beings have a natural urge and ability to tell stories and even just a little nurturing of this impulse can bring about astonishing results. This
was certainly true of the women in this research, for many of them it seemed to have been the first opportunity to tell their stories.

As a preparation for the generation of the data in the interviews, informal focus groups were used to explore the dimensions of women’s experiences of higher education and the potential factors that influenced their decision for further education. They were valuable in refining the interview discussions and even providing a heuristic frame for the later analysis. Focus group research can best be described as a loosely constructed discussion with a group of people brought together for the purpose of the study (Sarantakos, 2005). However, the purpose of the focus group was to explore rather than describe or explain. Morgan (1997) argues that focus group research is a particularly powerful strategy to bring together participants with a common background with regard to the discussion topic. He points out that focus groups are useful when it comes to investigating what participants think, but they excel at uncovering why participants think as they do (Morgan, 1988). The technique is a socially oriented research method capturing real-life data in a social environment that was particularly valuable in this case.

Group dynamics often bring out aspects of the topic that would not have been anticipated by the researcher and one example in this study was the way the women seemed to compete with each other in emphasising their experiences or opinions. Focus group interviews nurture different perceptions and points of view and are used to gather information for discovery, bench-marking, evaluating, verifying perceptions, feelings, opinions and thoughts (Patton, 1990). However, Krueger (1988) also points out some disadvantages of focus groups; the researcher has less control than when interviewing, data are difficult to analyse and a conducive environment is required. From my own experience of group work, controlling the dynamic within the group is a major challenge. Also, I am aware of the herd mentality, where everyone wants to belong to the group, so one cannot be absolutely positive that what people say in the group genuinely represents his/her individual experience. They may be eager to impress each other. This was evident to some extent in my work as an element of competition among the women in the groups, with some needing encouragement to speak and others who needed to speak a lot. However, what was spoken about was meaningful for the research in that the women outlined many of the challenges while at college, and importantly, the changes to their relationships.
According to Kitzinger (2005: 57) the focus group method is an ‘ideal approach for examining the stories, experiences, points of view, beliefs, needs and concerns of individuals’. Rose (2001) argues that focus groups, as an interviewing technique, have been gaining in popularity in social research generally, and especially in feminist research and Wilkinson (1999) states that focus groups offer a most suitable research tool for feminist research. She views the researcher as facilitator not as controller; implying a lack of hierarchical structures. The use of focus group method reflects feminist research practice ideals, and has been effectively used by feminist academics such as Ann Oakley and Esther Madriz. Montell (1999) found focus groups to be highly effective in revealing assumptions about sex and sexuality in her study of gender, sexuality and the mass media which was also a feature of this study. Montell credits the group dynamic created in focus groups for fostering an informative discussion that exposed and challenged the closely held beliefs of different women. Hesse-Biber and Leavy, (2001: 166) provide a useful definition of a focus group: ‘[a] focus group can be thought of as a happening in which rich conversation occurs, but while dynamic and unpredictable, it is not a naturally occurring conversation’. I found that the women were not comfortable speaking in the groups, despite the informal nature of the conversation. They were much more open in the interviews.

I was trying to construct dialogue which is a powerful process for nurturing participant self and intergroup understanding of the topic of inquiry (Freeman, 2006). Dialogue is central to meaning making and understanding, and should ultimately lead people to broaden and/or alter their perceptual horizons (Gadamer, 1975/1999). Freeman (2006) states that one of the basic assumptions of philosophical or dialogical hermeneutics is that our relationship to language and to understanding is ontological. ‘We live within the symbols, gestures, language, beliefs and assumptions of an already interpreted world’ (Freeman, 2006: 84). Collective understanding of such in a focus group discussion enhances dialogue and, as Freeman (2006: 86) states ‘…it is through engaging, in being in dialogue with the world and others that I recognise and come to know myself’. Gadamer (1975/1999: 358) in discussing tradition as a genuine partner in dialogue, states ‘…we belong to it, as does the I with a Thou’.

The women were uncomfortable at first in the group, some said very little, while others had a lot to say and enjoyed the audience attention. There were some who were very strong academically, who seemed to intimidate their former class-mates, who were less academically able, as if they were in the classroom. This inhibited the flow of conversation at times. The
focus groups were helpful in so far as they redefined the interview questions. The one-to-one interviews generated very rich data as the women were more confident in telling the stories that they really wanted to have heard, and more intimate, private issues were openly discussed.

4.14 Interview Protocol and the heuristic frame

Beginning with the research questions informed by the literature on the challenges, changes and consequences [see 4.1.1 above] and as a result of taking a narrative approach that allows for and even encourages a more unstructured inquiry that goes beyond and behind explicit questioning, there was need for some guiding frame both for the interviews and also as a heuristic frame for the later analysis. Certainly, it was to be expected that specific and explicit challenges, changes and consequences [Research Questions 1-3] would emerge and that the frame should be constructed in a way that captured these in their explicitness. However, taking a narrative approach that was informed by a Gadamerian hermeneutic with its emphasis on inter-subjectivity, authenticity, fore-structure, presuppositions, prejudice, temporality and history and the feminist themes of gender, emancipation and power, I thought it necessary to place three other domains around that of the ‘challenges, changes and consequences’ [Domain 4] in order to be able to understand what was going on in this domain. As a result a set of four domains of inquiry were constructed with the aim of generating data rich and relevant enough to answer the research questions. The four domains, life trajectory, multiple roles, women’s knowledge and ‘challenges, changes and consequences’ encapsulate the broader research philosophy and approach, and allow de-construction to sufficiently discover the more nuanced and detailed aspects of the phenomenon associated with the participants’ experiences. The diagram below gives a schematic view of the frame but it should not be interpreted as a hierarchy of levels but as an indication of embeddedness and relation. Certainly, it can be argued, for instance, that women’s knowledge [Domain 3] can and does impact on the construction of life trajectories in narrative [Domain 1] and vice versa. Similarly, role and life trajectories are also stand in relational connection. Despite these deficiencies, however, there was deemed to be value in employing the frame as a way of structuring both interviews and data. The Protocol was also guided by the focus groups which preceded the semi-structured, in-depth interviews, in a looser sense, in that I was in the process of tailoring the interviews in terms of honing in on the individual personal experiences.
4.14.1 Domain One: Life trajectories

This is perhaps the overarching dimension of the women’s narratives describing the background to their educational lives, the decision or motivation to go to college, and the influence of childhood and adolescent experiences of education on the college experience. It evoked memories about early school, teachers, parents’ attitudes, socio-cultural-political norms and practices, and looked at their sense of agency and choice. The stories told around the following guiding points laid the foundation for later decisions around leaving school early, getting married or not getting married, and the desire to go to college. This domain is very important as it portrayed the beginning of a sequence of events in their lives in a linear manner. The following areas were explored:

- Early experiences of education
- Parents’ level of education
- Career ambitions
- Early adulthood fulfilment, employment and family
- Choice versus lack of choice in decision-making (retrospective awareness of).
The women were asked their date of birth and the age at which they began school, and their experiences of Primary and Second level school. The relationships with teachers and parents’ relationships with teachers were explored. The attitude towards education in the home, the encouragement by parents and teachers and their subsequent career hopes were examined.

4.14.2 Domain Two: College student at a mature age/multi-roles
Domains two and three are connected to the various challenges and changes which occurred in the ‘self’ or identity of the women, in their way of being in, and experiencing the world, in their way of knowing and understanding, and in their relationships. Relational aspects, obligation to family and managing multi-roles were the focus here also. The following areas were explored:

- Motivation to go to college
- Challenges as a college student
- Challenges to relationships
- Managing multi-roles and transformation.

The women were asked about the reason for going to college when they did and how being a student, mother and wife placed demands on them. The role of student was explored for its unique challenges, e.g. assignments and timetables, and how they impacted on their roles as mother and wife. The transitions involved were discussed, as relationships were challenged and changed.

4.14.3 Domain Three: Women’s ways of knowing and understanding
The women were asked and spoke eloquently about their social class and that of their family of origin and how this influenced their learning and self-confidence in a system that is essentially middle-class. Changes in how they viewed the world after a third level education were examined, as was the tension around this, and how they saw themselves in life.

- Socio-economic status and education
- Influence of college experience on knowing
- Ambiguities
- Aspirations
4.14.4 Domain Four: Challenges, Changes and Consequences

The final domain was intended to explore more closely the explicit research questions in the women’s stories. In the interview setting it was also a rounding off, a de-briefing, a preparation to leave the interview setting, and to allow them to reflect on the interview so they could add something, or clarify something they had said earlier. It allowed some distance to be placed between the deeper and sometimes darker aspects of their lives which were spoken about earlier in the interview. They were encouraged to speak about where they are in the present, their hopes and aspirations. This gave the women who had graduated many years before my research the opportunity to speak about post-graduate study or employment gained as a result of their college education. Importantly for all the women, it gave them the opportunity to describe their transformed sense of identity; which was the case for all but one. Self-discovery was explored in relation to knowing oneself, accepting oneself, changing perspectives, empowerment, growth, redefining goals and connecting with, or disconnecting from others.

- Narrative on the now
- Transformation and empowerment
- Relationships/Connections/Disconnections
- Expectations

Not everything was discussed neatly and in sequence, as in true narrative fashion, there were natural digressions (Riessman, 2008), and the women told their stories in the way the felt was the correct way to describe their experiences. However, the Interview Protocol was more than a checklist, it was an analytical instrument that allowed me to reflect on important questions and themes, and was useful at the stage of analysis. It was referred to frequently during the analysis of the data, and was a constant connection to the interviews. It certainly was a strong guide to the conversation, but it did not guarantee successful interviews, as in two cases where the results were quite disappointing. These interviewees’ stories were restrained and lacking in the emotion that was palpable in the others. The Interview Protocol was useful for generating rich data in the very strong majority of the interviews.
4.15 Ethical Considerations

I sought approval from Trinity College School of Education Research Ethics Committee before beginning the focus groups or the semi-structured individual interviews for my study. Written consent was obtained from each participant prior to the commencement of data collection. Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured and maintained through the use of pseudonyms in the research reporting; but the participants were informed that the findings may be used in post-doctoral publication. The transcripts and recorded data were all maintained in a locked and secure place. The option of having the transcripts and recordings of the data returned to the participants was given, so they would have an opportunity to view the interpretations of their stories. As Focus groups provide a particular challenge to confidentiality because once something is said in the group it becomes common knowledge, I requested that all group participants sign a Promise of Confidentiality Form. Each participant was informed clearly of the objectives of the study prior to giving consent, and they were aware of the types of questions that would be asked. The choice to withdraw from the study at any time was made clear verbally and in writing.

The following decision was taken by Trinity College School of Education Research Ethics Board:

The detailed materials submitted and the undertakings given were of a high quality and conform to recognised standards in the field. There is good recognition of the ‘insider’ dimension of the research and the very specific sample that is at the core of the project.

Approval is hereby granted to the project subject to the usual condition that the project is carried out as indicated in this application. The final report should note that the project was carried out as originally designed, or indicate the changes that were necessary with further ethics approval.

The project was carried out as originally designed.

4.16 Insider Research

This research can be regarded as an exercise in insider research, as twenty four of the participants were former students of mine, and all but two of the interviews took place in the
college where I work, as it was convenient for the participants and me. My insider status offered potential as the women who knew me were very comfortable in the interviews, and this increased validity due to the added richness, honesty and authenticity. There is no guarantee of honesty and openness of subjects, but there was strong rapport and trust established between the women and myself, and I made my position vis-à-vis the research as transparent and honest as possible.

Rooney (2005:6) defines insider research as being ‘where the researcher has a direct involvement or connection with the research setting’. Loxley and Seery (2008: 15) refer to the ‘numerous challenges to the orthodox institutionalised forms of going about research’. Loxley & Seery (2008) reject the idea of an insider/outside dichotomy, concurring with Mercer (2007: 5) who argues that the concepts of insider and outsider are not necessarily ‘two mutually exclusive frames of reference, but are better seen as a continuum’. So, it could be taken as fact that I was an insider doing research in the college where I am intimately familiar with the ‘culture, its workings and its lived experience’ (Brannick & Coughlan, 207: 69). Yet, I am in many regards an outsider to the participants’ world, as I am a lecturer, so the lived experience of the participants and my own were to a large extent much removed. However, as an insider-practitioner, I operated from a position of privilege as I had practical and psychological advantage of easy access so gatekeepers were not required; nor did I have to negotiate a new environment. Drake & Heath (2011: 22) warn that power is a factor in insider-research, and state that ‘[p]ower, according to Foucault, becomes more dominant when one has information not only about what subjects do, but also about how and why they come to think and believe as they do.’

### 4.17 Data Analysis

The aim of phenomenological data analysis is to ‘transform lived experience into a textual expression of its essence, in such a way that the effect of the text is at once a reflexive re-living and a reflective appropriation of something meaningful’ (Van Manen, 1997: 36). ‘Phenomenological descriptions are rich and evocative, invoking in readers the phenomenological nod in recognition of a phenomenon so richly described that they too may have experienced’ (Van Manen 1997: 27). Such an inductive approach is appropriate as the researcher can attempt to make sense of a situation ‘without imposing pre-existing
expectations on the phenomena under study’ (Mertons, 1998: 160). Inductive approaches are intended to aid an understanding of meaning through the development of themes.

The recordings of all interviews were transcribed fully and with great care and analysed through phenomenological narrative analysis which exposed parts of experience in the lifeworld, which in turn, offer a thick description of the phenomena. As argued above, narrative analysis emerged as the appropriate manner in which to deal with the data as it also complements the Gadamerian-Feminist Standpoint framework as it does not assume objectivity, but, instead privileges positionality and subjectivity. Ricoeur (1991) provides the link between hermeneutic phenomenological analysis and narrative analysis as he views the interpretive or hermeneutic tradition as a highly influential strand in narrative work. He views self-understanding as being subject to the effects of the imagination through interpretation. The impulse to narrate is inherently human; ‘every human existence is a life in search of a narrative...existence is inherently storied’ (Keaney, 2002: 129, 130). Narration is connected to identity (Taylor, 2010) and identity is worked or constructed in talk (Wetherell, 1998). Identity, and the way in which it is formed is important as it influences the way in which human beings think and act.

Storytelling is a relational activity that encourages others to listen, to share, and to empathise. It is a collaborative practice and assumes that tellers and listeners/questioners interact in particular cultural milieus and historical contexts, which are essential to interpretation. (Reissman, 2003: 333)

Narrative analysis provided the appropriate vehicle for exploring and revealing meanings in individual experiences (Mishler, 1986; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Stories are not just representations of lives lived, they constitute realities (Bruner, 1987). According to Minichiello et al., (1995: 61) narrative, or ‘in-depth interviewing is conversation with a specific purpose – a conversation between a researcher and informant focusing on the informant’s perception of self, life and experience, and expressed in his or her own words’. In a sense this is essentially a double hermeneutic, as it involved my rationalisations of their rationalisations.

The analysis of the data with the aim of inference to some theoretical considerations, incorporated an holistic approach; as the ‘researcher examines the entire case and presents descriptions, themes and interpretations and assertions related to the whole case’ (Cresswell,
The participants were allowed a high degree of freedom to describe and explain their experiences, but, as is the nature of qualitative inquiry, findings are not representative of all women (Wrushen and Sherman, 2008: 460). The data analysis began by collecting all of the data and sorting it into groups; focus group notes and interview transcripts, and observations made throughout the study. Focus group notes were used to refine the interview protocol. From these discussions, the three inductive themes of church, class and gender provided a common thread through the women’s stories of their childhood education and family life, their entry to employment and their marital situation so that these can be considered to be cross-domain themes that appear to a greater or lesser extent in the descriptions of life trajectory, roles, knowledge and challenges, changes and consequences.

This is represented in the amended frame below.

The data were then grouped together according to inductive theme and domain. Different colours were used to link the data items to the interview protocol. ‘A vital part of the reflections undertaken by qualitative researchers will be to attempt to identify patterns and
processes, commonalities and differences’ (Denscombe, 2003: 272). The transcripts were read and re-read several times, and a revised and more nuanced set of analytical lines of inquiry were identified that incorporated the inductive cross-domain themes with the initial heuristic framework in accordance with the research questions regarding the challenges, changes and consequences for mature women going to college. These were:

- Early life experiences of education. [incorporating life-trajectory, gender, class, church]
- Role conflict. [incorporating role, gender, class church]
- Impact on family and relationships. [incorporating challenges, changes, consequences, gender mostly]
- Impact on identity (perception of self as adult learner and knower). [incorporating women’s knowledge, class, gender mostly]
- Intra/Personal change or transformation. [incorporating challenges, changes, consequences, gender mostly]

The gap between engaging others where they are and representing them where they aren’t, always immense but not much noticed, has suddenly become extremely visible. What once had seemed only technically difficult, getting ‘their’ lives into ‘our’ works, has turned, morally, politically, even epistemologically delicate.

Geertz (1988: 130-131)

Narrative analysis was chosen as the appropriate manner in which to treat the data and I immersed myself in this method of analysis by reading Reissman (2008) firstly, followed by Labov (1982), Gee (1991), Mishler (1995), Polkinghorne (1997), Martin (1998), Mattingly (1998), Wetherell (1998), Clandinin & Connelly (2000), Evans (2001), Plummer (2001), Andrews (2004), Elliot (2005), Taylor (2010), Kristeva (2011), and importantly, Ricoeur (1991) who proved to be the crucial link between hermeneutic phenomenological analysis and narrative analysis. This link was explained earlier, and is important for the methodological integrity of the project, as narrative analysis is grounded in interpretive hermeneutics and phenomenology, where the focus is on the meanings that people ascribe to their experiences as it seeks to provide ‘insights that befit the complexity of human lives’ (Josselson, 2006: 4).

Narrative analysis also fits the Gadamerian-Feminist Standpoint framework as it does not assume objectivity but, instead privileges positionality and subjectivity. I agree whole
heartedly with Josselson (2006) as she correlates the degree of rapport and trust with a greater degree of self-revealing, and thus, a greater degree of trust that the researcher will treat the data with respect and compassion. This became very real as I transcribed and re-listened to the stories, and even more so as I began to analyse and interpret the narratives. A couple of the women became upset during the interview due to the emotional significance of the segment of their life story that they were recalling. One in particular cried for a while, and I feared that her recounting of the abuse she had suffered would cause some damage. Yet, she insisted that she was okay with the process, so I realised that perhaps I was more uncomfortable than she was. I also knew that I had initiated the event and had no right to decide if she was fit for purpose at that stage.

During the analysis stage, on reading again the transcripts and extracting pieces and quotations, I felt transported back to the actual interview, but in some cases I realised I had not fully heard them. The reason for this became clear; I had connections with some of their stories, I identified with and related to their experiences. With Josselson in mind, I became aware that I had got to know a lot of the women very well over four years, and this strong relational aspect of the process emerged sharply during the analysis stage. I felt both privileged and protective of their stories, which they so generously and openly shared with me. I also gained a sense of satisfaction in knowing they trusted me so much, and that is very rewarding.

As indicated earlier, thirty one women participated in this study and they represented a purposive sample of women who had entered college in their 30s, 40s and 50s. The majority had been students of mine, the other six I met through those I knew and from interest generated among the women themselves. All but one studied at the same college where I am employed, the other one studied at a college in the area where I had worked. There was one each from Hungary, Russia, Nigeria and India, with the remaining twenty six from Ireland. (One recorded interview was lost through technological ignorance on my part, as I had bought the electronic dictaphone just days prior to using it for the interview, and deleted the content when attempting to transfer it to an external hard drive). Twenty came from a working class family of origin, and the other ten came from middle class backgrounds.
Powerful and intimate stories—the challenge of analysis

I experienced what Reissman (2008) had initially interpreted as digressions, which instructed her in so far as to realise that one cannot suppress the narrative impulse.

Although we have particular paths we want to cover related to the substantive and theoretical foci of our studies, narrative interviewing necessitates following participants down their trails. (Reissman, 2008: 24)

In much of what follows in the next chapter, this impulse to communicate was often evident in the women’s narratives and led to the disclosure of deeply personal and often intimate detail about their lives that, initially, did not seem to be connected to the inquiry at the heart of this project. However, as the narrative took shape, it became clearly evident that events and experiences in the past had far-reaching impact, also on their lives as late formal learners. This is illustrated here with some powerful examples. For instance, Yvonne spoke about her fertility treatment in detail, the disappointment and sense of loss when it failed on four occasions, and the delight, when the fifth attempt was successful, and the happiness she felt on seeing her newborn daughter who weighed just two pounds. This story was linked to her motivation to go to college further on in the interview, having experienced her husband’s gambling problem which cleared out their bank accounts. She said that trust was gone, so she had to carve out a contingency plan for herself and her daughter. However, in the interim, she told her story about her experience of rape, where it happened, when it happened and by whom.

I have resilience, and I think it comes from an incident that happened to me some years ago...I was raped by someone I knew...I knew him, and I was babysitting for them.
(Yvonne, Interview 1: 42-14)

Carol, recounted the story of her early life, which was quite cold in terms of her parents’ treatment of her, as she was fostered by another family when she was seven years old, and then sent to boarding school at eight. She became very ill at school and was forgotten about. Yet, she finds a humorous memory at the same point:

My parents bought an apartment in Dublin and they sent me to another boarding school in Glenageary. School life had become more real than home life. I remember poor Mrs. O’Dowd who got eaten by her cats, they didn’t find her for a while! [Laughs].
(Carol, Interview 12: 78-81)
Annette, while describing how higher education had improved her life and enhanced her relationships by understanding people better, also made an admission of guilt regarding her children:

...and I have said it to them that I was very hard on them, and I apologised, what I learned at college has helped me deal with ...
(Annette, Interview 2: 99-100)

I was offered help in transcribing the interviews which I turned down out of respect and care for the women and their stories. I am relieved that I transcribed the interviews myself, that no-one else heard the recordings and that I relived the stories of the women alone. As Reissman (2008: 29) states ‘[s]ome mistakenly think the task is technical and delegate it’, so for me, transcription became an important part of the interpretive process.

The distinction between ‘event’ narrative and ‘experience’ narrative is made by various authors. Event narrative deals with particular past events and experience narrative involves many hours of life histories. It was obvious then that I was dealing with event narratives, yet, Andrews et al (2013) suggest that the division is a heuristic one and that the boundaries between them are porous and overlapping. They also state that event and experience narrative share the fact that there are assumed to be individual, internal representations of phenomena, events, thought and feelings – to which narrative gives external expression. Reissman (2008) emphasises the point that narratives are both event - centred and experience - centred. She states that narratives do more than describe what someone does in the world, but also what the world does to that someone. Mattingly (1998) argues that narratives do not merely refer to past experience but create experiences for their audience, which was a reality for me as I listened and transcribed. Reissman’s (2002:263) approach ‘examines interrupted lives, where events have disrupted expectations of continuity...and allows for systematic study of personal experience and meaning: how events have been constructed by active subjects’. Elsewhere, she emphasises the performative dimension (Reissman in Gubrium and Holstein, 2001).

Martin (1998: 9), from her experience of narrative research with young people leaving care, insightfully states ‘to speak is one thing, to be heard is another, to be confirmed as being heard is yet another. I believe the narrative interview operates at the third level’. Gee (1991) uses a socio-linguistic approach by examining how a narrative is spoken, just as Reissman (2004) distinguishes narrative from other forms of discourse by emphasising sequence and
consequence and the interrogation of language. She found that some Social Work researchers claimed to apply narrative analysis, but on closer inspection, findings were constructed by inductive thematic coding. She viewed these snippets of talk as having been stripped of sequence and consequence. ‘No story speaks for itself, but instead requires interrogation and contextualisation’ (Reissman, 2008: 154). In agreement with all of the above, and content to agree with Elliot’s (2005) five key aspects of narrative research as redefining my work, I was challenged by the increasing disconnect between my theoretical framework, methodology and analysis. Elliot (2005: 6) suggests the following five key aspects of narrative research, which I have used:

1. An interest in people’s lived experience and an appreciation of the temporal nature of that experience;
2. A desire to empower research participants and allow them to contribute to determining what are the most salient themes in an area of research;
3. An interest in process and change over time;
4. An interest in the self and representations of the self;
5. An awareness that the researcher him or herself is also a narrator.

From an intense period of immersion in the literature on narrative analysis and hermeneutic phenomenological analysis, I discovered Paul Ricoeur, who proved to be the missing link in this discussion. Hermeneutic phenomenological analysis involves the detailed examination of participants’ life-worlds; their experiences of a particular phenomenon, how they have made sense of these experiences and the meanings they attach to them (Smith, 2004). Ricoeur provided me with the necessary link between hermeneutic phenomenological analysis and narrative analysis as he views the interpretive or hermeneutic tradition as a highly influential strand in narrative work. He describes the complexities of interpretation, saying ‘the hermeneutical problem begins where linguistics leaves off’ (Ricoeur, 1991: 27). Smith, Flowers & Larkin (2009: 37) summarise the co-dependency of interpretation and phenomenology as follows: ‘[w]ithout the phenomenology, there would be nothing to interpret, without the hermeneutics, the phenomenon would not be seen’. The key theoretical perspectives of interpretive phenomenological analysis are phenomenology, hermeneutics and ideography (Smith et al, 2009). In terms of the latter, ideography, the women who participated each had their own unique story and journey. The aim is not to find one generalizable truth, but to ‘sing up many truths/narratives’ (Byrne-Armstrong 2001: 112).
Ricoeur, like Gadamer, embraced the philosophy of hermeneutics. Ricoeur’s approach drew on the earlier work of Heidegger and Gadamer, by aiming at developing a fusion of horizons that occurs between the researcher’s understanding of the participant’s experiences and that of the participant. The fusion of horizons refers to a facet of the process of understanding (Gadamer, 1997). Every person’s horizon consists of ‘a range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point’ (Gadamer, 1997: 302). It refers to our frame of reference, based on our experiences. The fusion of horizons occurs in the encounter between the researcher, the topic of inquiry and the researched, in which two standpoints come together, and ‘we genuinely let the standpoint of another speak to us, and in such a way that we are willing to be influenced by the perspective of another’ (Thompson, 1990: 246). This process leads to a joint creation of a new understanding about oneself, the other, and the topic of inquiry.

For Ricoeur (1991) also, the relationship between the researcher and the participant can have a significant impact on the researcher’s understanding of the meanings contained within the participants’ narratives. With subjectivity, reflexivity and positionality in mind, I felt very comfortable with the interviewees, even in times of their being upset, as I knew some of them as former students, but not them all. It was the shared experiences that created quite a bond. This bond became more intensely experienced on listening and transcribing. I saw parts of my own life in the narratives.

Interpretive phenomenologists argue that each person perceives the same phenomenon in a different way, that each person brings their own lived experience, understanding and history to that perception. What constitutes knowing and knowledge, then, appears far from straightforward: ‘[w]e need to be aware of what it is to begin to know and to claim the right to produce knowledge, what is involved in this and what is the nature of our relationship to knowledge’ (Gray & Schubert 2013:9). As a researcher, I brought to the research the knowledge of my own experience and background. This encouraged me to use my own reflecting, intuiting and thinking as an important part in the research (Finlay, 2002: 533).

The task of hermeneutics within narrative inquiry, which is important for Ricoeur is to discern or construct the meaning of the text through interpretative phenomenological analysis. ‘Hermeneutics can no longer be defined as an inquiry into the psychological intentions that are hidden beneath the text, but rather as the explication of the being-in-the-world displayed
by the text’ (Ricoeur, 1997: 215). Phenomenology for him lies in ‘the quest to not merely relive or describe experiences, but to interpret that experience in order to give it meaning and significance’ (Ricoeur, 1997: 219). In the analysis I used his idea that knowledge about our human experience can most effectively be reached through the exploration of representations of that experience, such as through stories shared with others. The task of phenomenological hermeneutics within narrative inquiry is to pass these stories and texts that objectify human experience through this process of interpretation and in so doing, a deep understanding is developed of the meaning contained within them (Muldoon, 2002). Ricoeur believed hermeneutics must include both explanation and understanding (Muldoon, 2002). He distinguishes between two forms of hermeneutics: a hermeneutic of faith which aims to restore meaning to a text and a hermeneutic of suspicion which attempts to decode meanings that are disguised (Josselson, 2004). This hermeneutic of suspicion emerged strongly in the narratives of childhood of a few of the women, especially for Julie, who felt ‘dirty’ as a child. For Ricoeur, written and told stories are reconfigured in their readings or hearings: ‘The process of composition, of configuration is not completed in the text, but in the reader’ (1991: 26).

The traditional method of coding for themes in transcripts and studying those themes separated people’s words from their spoken and heard contexts (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994). Lincoln and Denzin (1994: 576) refer to the ‘crisis of representation’. Research is ‘a product of human action’ (Polkinghorne, 1997: 9); characterised by ‘blurring the boundaries between research and everyday life’ (Norris, 1997: 89). McCormack (2000: 285) argues that knowledge is situated and constructed and has a tolerance for ‘paradox, contradiction and ambiguity’. There is a lot of focus on the fluidity of such knowledge, however, the narrative paradigm is more specific in its focus on the storied nature of human conduct and therefore, social reality is primarily a narrative reality (Spector- Mersel, 2010). The narratives of the women in this study provide knowledge that bears the marks of the knowers’ biographies and identities, and therefore, their individual personhood and self. As Kristeva (2001) states: ‘The art of narrative resides in the ability to condense the action into an exemplary moment, to extract it from the continuous flow of time, and reveal a who’, (Kristeva, 2001: 16).

The theoretical framework of phenomenological hermeneutics within narrative analysis in this research facilitated the exploration, composition and representation of the women’s lived experiences through the interpretation of their stories. The interview protocol generated rich
data that confirmed the usefulness of the initial heuristic frame with its four domains and these will be examined in the next section. However, many threads of digressions provided much deeper understanding of the meanings given by the women to their experiences, and these experiences were for the most strongly influenced by the forces, which emerged during analysis. Class, gender and the influence of the Church became very important as did empowerment and transformation. Transformation, of different kinds and persistence were the result of higher education for the majority of the women.

4.18 Methodological Limitations

There are challenges in every methodological tradition (Cresswell, 1998). Patton (1999) suggests that there are pitfalls for the lone researcher, and as I am a lone PhD candidate, I am not working in a research team. A limitation might be the fact that I work full time and cannot attend some tutorial sessions available. Participants who were former students of mine may prove to be another possible limitation, compared to those I had never met before the interviews. My own lack of prior experience in the empirical field may be a limitation, and also there are the possible limitations in the approach taken.

4.19 Conclusion

This chapter has explored the approach of phenomenology and focused more specifically on hermeneutical phenomenology of Gadamer and why it was chosen as the theoretical framework for the research in conjunction with a Feminist Standpoint. This methodology was chosen as it is seen as the most appropriate way of dealing with the research questions, that is, to understand through interpretation the challenges, changes and consequences for mature women at third level education. The method, data collection and analysis were discussed, as were the sample, ethical considerations and possible methodological limitations.

The aim of this research was to explore the lived experiences of women who complete a college degree for the first time at midlife. A combined conceptual and theoretical framework of Feminist Standpoint Theory and Gadamerian hermeneutical philosophy was used to capture through narrative, the women’s understanding of their experiences. The questions were formulated to gain a thorough understanding of the women’s earlier life experiences, and their current life experiences having completed higher education at midlife. A case-study approach was taken, and semi-structured, in-depth interviews were used to generate the data. Deeply embedded in this qualitative phenomenological approach is an acknowledgement of
the importance of reflexivity. It is necessary to reflect on our own histories, our social and cultural locations and subjectivities and values when we write stories of others (Merrill & West, 2009).

Narrative analysis as the appropriate manner in which to treat the data, and how it is complemented by, and complements the framework of phenomenological hermeneutical analysis will be explained in the next chapter. The theoretical framework of phenomenological hermeneutics within narrative analysis in this research facilitated the exploration, composition and representation of the women’s lived experiences through the interpretation of their stories. The analysis of the women’s narratives is shaped by the four domains of inquiry included in the interview protocol, which are life trajectories; the experience of being a student; changes in their way of knowing and the changes to their lives as a result of education.

The voices of the women are primary in the treatment of the data, as the purpose of the phenomenological and narrative approach is to illuminate the specific and to identify phenomena through how they are perceived and interpreted by the actors themselves. Therefore it is these voices that will be given prominence in the following two chapters which examine the lines of inquiry through the lens of the inductively augmented heuristic frame. Chapter four presents and analyses the data on the women’s early life experiences and roles and chapter five presents and analyses the data on the college experiences, following the lines of inquiry on impact on family, relationships, identity and transformations. The Discussion (Understanding the Narratives) will follow the Analysis chapters, and this will elaborate on the findings by making interpretations and linkages across and through the interpretative frame and relate the findings to previous research.
Chapter 5: Analysis: Background Experiences

5.1 The Women’s Narratives

This chapter focuses on the first two dimensions or domains of the heuristic framework, the background experiences of the women in terms of early education and roles in family life, but is respectfully cognisant of the flowing narrative shape of the interviews.

The voices of the women are primary here, with only short commentary, as the purpose of the phenomenological approach is to illuminate the specific and to identify phenomena through how they are perceived by the actors in a situation. Personal knowledge and subjectivity are important in gaining insights into the women’s motivations and actions. The aim is to be faithful to the women, and not to misrepresent or distort the findings which have been provided in good faith and with trust. The Discussion chapter on understanding the narratives will allow me to intrude more into the study by making interpretations and linkages, and to relate the findings to previous research.

5.1.1 Life trajectories

Life trajectories as an appropriate title for this domain or dimension here because the women’s lives were determined by the influences and actions of forces external to themselves. The powerful intersection of class, gender and church was discovered to be embedded in the pathways of their lives, and for the majority of them, their entry into the education system encapsulated the choices and opportunities ahead of them. For the women who had come from working class backgrounds, their experiences of Primary and Secondary school in the main were not positive. For many of them there was no appreciation of education in their homes, as their parents had left school as young as twelve years of age, and had never benefited from education. Work responsibilities created a lack of distance between childhood and adulthood. The impact of class, gender and church of the particular historical-social context emerged forcefully from the narratives, and illustrated clearly where the women’s agency or lack of agency was embedded. The intersection of being poor, being female and being Catholic in the Ireland of the 1960s and 1970s narrowed their worlds from the day they were born. There were numerous accounts of the cruelty endured at school, and at home. Yet, the majority of these women qualified these events as normal and expected at
the time. Those who spoke of class distinction explained in detail how it manifested itself as early as four years of age. Both lay and religious teachers gave preferential treatment to the children who came from wealthier homes. The poorer the family of origin meant for the child, harsher treatment which involved corporal punishment and ridicule. The two younger Irish women who were born in the late 1970s had no recollection of being slapped in school; while those women from Hungary, India and Russia described very happy experiences at school. The woman from Nigeria had experienced corporal punishment, but she believed it to be necessary that children are disciplined in this manner. Corporal punishment in the home was quite prevalent in the 1960s and 1970s, even in the early years (Sheper-Hughes, 1979). Therefore, it was also acceptable that teachers could inflict physical pain as discipline, some of which was extreme or excessive. The Department of Education abolished corporal punishment in National Schools in 1982, and it was made a criminal offence in 1996. As an accepted practice, up to its abolition, the prevailing view was that ‘a good beating never hurt anyone’ and that some corporal punishment was necessary to instil respect for authority, to maintain discipline, and to rear good citizens. The legislation in place at the time, the Children Act, 1908, specifically upheld a parent’s right to punish his or her child as they saw fit. It wasn’t until 1991, when the Child Care Act came into being, that there was an acknowledgement of such treatment of children as being actual abuse.

In many of the women’s recollections of corporal punishment, it was inflicted with a degree of severity, for a variety of ‘offences’, including failure to answer a question correctly, not having books, being late or absent, homework incomplete, or perhaps for seemingly no reason at all, other than the teacher’s desire to hurt simply because they had the power to do so.

The nuns were frequently described as being very cruel and in a few cases sadistic in their manner of punishing children. Nancy (aged 40) spoke about her lisp which was pronounced when using number 15 and she was beaten for that. She was given a hat to wear with the word ‘Amadán’ written on it. Yet, she felt that she had it easy compared to her brother.

My brother had a very bad stammer and he was citóg [a left-handed person] and she used to hammer him altogether. Most mornings we’d be at the breakfast table and he’d take off across the field and the rest of us after him to get him back for school [laughs]. I remember he met her a couple of years ago in a shop and the stammer was back straight away when he saw her. I remember reading something about the connection between stammers and
Most of the women born in the 1950s and 1960s endured a lot of beatings at school, and in some cases, at home also. Again, the majority of cases involved nuns. From being caned or hit on the head with a hard cover book, the torment in one case involved the almost unbelievable use of nettles. This event was described very vividly with measured delivery.

We had one nun, we were in 6th class, it was a really warm day like this and we were up on the second floor, and we had this nun and she was looking out the window and she chose two of the girls to go down and pick bundles of nettles, and they went and did it, and she was watching them…we were doing whatever work we were doing and they came up after a while with these bundles of nettles and of course their hands and everything were all stung and she said to put the nettles on the desk. She always wore gloves, because she didn’t like the chalk dust, because there was always chalk dust, and she always wore white gloves. We were going to have, then they called it ‘Cathecism’ [sic], so we were going to have a Cathecism test and her desk was on a rostrum…you know it was raised. We would stand in a semi-circle round the rostrum. Now, she’d usually sit behind her desk, but this time… she took her chair and put it down on the floor, which meant we were standing to close to her. It was in the summer time and our uniform in the summer was ankle socks, we never wore tights, it was knee-high socks in the winter. And she started to the left and every time that somebody missed a Cathecism question, she ran the nettles twice over everyone’s legs and by the time we walked out that evening, everyone of us, we were roaring, our legs were blistered…There was another day…Louise used to sit beside me and I had really long hair, thick hair down in ringlets. Louise had really thick curly hair as well, but hers used to grow out like an Afro hair and we used to sit together, we were best friends. But there was this particular nun, she really didn’t like me and she didn’t like Louise and, I don’t know why, I don’t know how she thought of it, but she kept teaching class during the day and she had Louise and myself sitting together like this, and she plaited our two heads together like Siamese twins, so when we went to the toilet we had to go together. All day, for no reason.

(Tina, aged 59, Interview 25, 41-65)

Ridicule was another weapon used, not only by nuns, but by many male and female teachers, again it was used only against the poorer children. For one woman, Frances, the treatment she received in Primary School resonated through her adult life in education and relationships.

I wasn’t great at Maths. But then I wasn’t a farmer’s daughter and I wasn’t a shopkeeper’s daughter or anyone that would be great in the community. That meant I was down at the back of the class and I was stupid. I was stupid, that’s what they used to tell my mother.

(Frances, aged 49, Interview 13, 45-49)
I left school at 13…the teacher told my mother and father that I was stupid and that I would be less of a financial burden out of school. My parents believed that.

(Frances, Interview 13, 113-115)

Frances describes the fear experienced by the children when a member of the Gardaí [the Irish police force] came to the school to check attendance:

I remember the guard used to come on a Monday to take the roll, to see who was out, and I remember I was out sick, I can’t remember what it was, and we were all standing in line…and I was terrified…and God help you if you had been out the week before, even if it was only one or two days, I remember one girl soiled herself with fright and another girl wet herself and there was a young lad who wet himself as well and then of course, they were the butt of the jokes.

(Frances, Interview 13: 50-57)

Cruelty was reported by many of the women:

This one, she would hop the cane off…it didn’t matter if it was the back…your back, your shoulders, your legs…this particular day anyway, myself and Mary…the other girl were called up. Mary had a woolly hat on her because she had head lice and back then a lot of parents shaved your head…so she had a woolly cap on. The two of us had got our homework wrong, so she put sums on the board for us to do and of course neither of us could do them. We made an attempt and she was giving out because it was wrong. And she said to Mary ‘take that fucking hat off of your head’…and of course Mary wouldn’t do it because everyone would know then…that she had no hair…but she did take it off and of course there was a big loud cackle of laughs.

(Frances, Interview 13, 63-74)

Frances went on to describe how the teacher beat her friend and herself, knocking Frances to the floor and hitting her in the face. She went home very upset and in pain, but instead of comforting her child, Frances’ mother beat her again. Frances could see no wrong in this, as she told herself she was stupid. She believed it to be common practice then, an accepted part of society and that was it. She explained that parents couldn’t cope with the poverty and large families. She remembered how the priest would expect a woman to be pregnant within a year of marriage, and if she wasn’t the assumption by the priest was she was using artificial contraception. She was aware of poverty and class distinction from a very young age especially within the context of the school and church.
And I remember in Mass, them saying stop putting in coppers, put in silver...anyone who couldn’t afford to buy a seat weren’t entitled to sit when you went to Mass. The parents were afraid of the priests. They passed it on, and I am guilty too...now I get so angry...I am older and wiser.

(Frances, Interview 13, 92-101)

Frances’ life after school continued with a menial job in a restaurant, where she worked long hours, and walked ten miles home afterwards. The oppressive control of authority continued, as she discovered many years later that her mother had been taking almost all her wages. She obediently handed up her pay packet every week to her mother who gave her back five pounds. Her father went to shoot her when he discovered her pregnancy, but her brother stopped him. She then moved in with her boyfriend to escape home, but soon discovered she was in an equally abusive relationship.

From the frying pan into the fire. It was a violent relationship. If I didn’t get pregnant...you’re fucking on the pill. And he’d go and search the place to see if he could find it. When I had John I said it to him that I was having no more...he was no good, at providing...support...anything. He was a useless bastard. But, I had no money of my own. I didn’t want three...all I wanted was one. Then I ended up having five, it didn’t matter, I was afraid.

(Frances Interview 13, 162-168)

A salient cross-dimensional theme that formed a thread through many of the women’s stories was the significant influence that the Catholic Church had on Irish society in the 1960s and 1970s, both at the micro and macro level. The women’s narratives reveal the manner in which this influence was very clearly gendered and classed and some of these gendered, classed features of religious power are important findings of this study. At an individual level, it had a strong impact on behaviour and attitudes, and at a societal level it had direct and indirect influence on the ethos of schools and hospitals and on certain legislation. The influence of the church was very strong for many of the women growing up, with their mothers being especially oppressed, but almost willingly so. Inglis (2008) states that women willingly embraced Catholicism despite it being an institution which excluded women from the priesthood. The identity of mothers, what it was to be a good mother, would seem to have been closely allied to identification with the Catholic Church (Inglis, 1998). It was the mother who played a key role in passing on and keeping Ireland so Catholic, as it was the mother who dealt with the schools and the sacraments.
Family and motherhood are strongly associated with the women’s identities. The data shows that gender roles and division of labour in the family were made clear to the women at a very young age. Expectations and opportunities were also gendered. This was universal across nationalities, as the data shows sons were prioritised in terms of education. Daughters were expected to get a ‘nice little job’ (Tina, Interview 25, 84) for a couple of years until they got married. Also, there was the marriage bar preventing women from working after marriage, so, it was deemed more financially favourable to educate sons where possible. It has to be noted that free second level education was introduced in 1967, therefore, it became more accessible for many after that. However, many of the women’s second level education occurred in the 1970s, and yet, the rigid gender roles determined the educational pathway. Many of the women left school at a very early age in the early teens, and many of them got married quite young. Lack of choice, opportunity and encouragement was paralleled by oppression and disempowerment. Social policy was strongly committed to the preservation of traditional family-hood and the perpetuation of a ‘vision of the role of woman in Irish society as a fulltime wife and mother in an indissoluble marriage, having preference for home duties and natural duties as a mother’, (Scannell, 1988: 125).

Rita spoke about the class distinction in school, something that she noticed from a very early age. In Riessman’s sense, this is an event narrative of an episode in Rita’s life. The issue of being poor was compounded by the fact her parents were separated. So, she was put at the back of the class while ‘the doctor’s children were up the front and that would have been from day one. You had this fear factor, that you’d look stupid in front of everyone else, so you didn’t answer the questions even if you did know them’ (Rita, Interview 14, 11-13). Lack of confidence followed her to Secondary School, where streaming of students was based on class not ability. Rita became pregnant before her Leaving Certificate exams and she felt she had disappointed her mother. Her father had been violent towards her mother and she had left him. Rita went on to experience this in her own marriage. She explains how the patriarchal judicial system treated her when she sought a Barring Order, when she was told by a male court clerk to go home and make her marriage work. On one occasion she called the Gardaí, and they told her that they could do nothing for her as she was married to the man. Lack of choice was highlighted by many of the women, and Rita told me that when she was young she wanted to join the army, but she acknowledged that it was never to happen, as they were poor, and in their family work was the focus. She emphasised lack of choice again, when she attempted to prevent pregnancy in a marriage where violence reigned. ‘There was no contraception back
then, you couldn’t ask anyone…when I was married I asked the doctor for contraception and I was eaten.’ (Rita, Interview 14, 46-47).

Donna’s strongest memory of Primary School is of being put into a remedial class, simply because she lived in a certain Local Authority Estate. She was placed at the back of the classroom, as described by many. ‘Even as a teenager…when you were going for a job and said where you were from and it was like…’ (Donna, Interview 15, 16-17). The significance of being placed at the back of the class is that, those children’s self-esteem, self-concept and self-confidence were immediately stunted in that they compared themselves to the children who were placed at the front of the class. From the age of four years, that sense of being of lesser importance was recalled with precision. Donna felt that Secondary School was better because she was placed in the middle of the class, not up the front, but it meant so much not to be placed at the back of the classroom. Symbolically, for many of the women in the research project, being placed at the back of a classroom represented how they were viewed as less important, less able and less likeable from those pupils closer to the teacher. Unfortunately, this experience influenced their life journeys right up to the interview in terms of their identity and sense of self.

Julie spoke poignantly and openly about how, as a very young child she felt the class distinction in the school. For her there were clean children and dirty children, and she was one of the dirty children. When she was about six years old, she got a small, plastic piano for Christmas, and she was delighted with it. In the January after this, it was announced that there was going to be piano lessons for those interested, and able to pay for them. Julie was excited, as she had a piano, and put her hand up in enthusiasm. But, the comments of the teacher knocked her back into the realisation that what she had was not a real piano, and the teacher knew her family did not have a real piano. Julie said she never picked up her little piano after that.

Her feelings of being a dirty child and her unhappy home life destroyed any chance of self-confidence. Even at forty two years of age, she spoke about her self-doubt while attending Trinity College Dublin completing a Master’s Degree in Social Work.

*Always there. Sometimes I get up in the morning and I am going into that college, I’m going ‘oh my God, oh my God’, and when I am premenstrual*
or sometimes when I am after having a real bad time, I say to myself ‘oh God, just leave, there is no point in you being here’.

(Julie, Interview 3, 36-39)

Julie’s interview was the most powerful for me from a majority of wonderful stories; there being two that didn’t yield much insight, but yet were stories worth listening to. The reason for this is because she had such precise recollections and also because, I could identify with some of her feelings. I actually closed in on parts of her story during the transcription and reflected on my own memories of my childhood. I am particularly taken by her interview story.

Julie refers to her childhood as being miserable as she believed no value was placed on the child. The violence exercised by her father against her mother with her mother prioritising him over the children confused the young Julie; and it also angered her. Through her story that anger grew and it was stated at the end of the interview that her mother is a frail old woman, but yet, the anger is there. Violence, poverty and the sudden death of Julie’s younger brother are clear memories of a forty two year old woman from a time when she was two years old. Her mother’s mental breakdown and leaving to move to England are outlined as a result of the sudden death of an eighteen month old son. Julie describes the morning her younger brother died as if she recalled it precisely, despite being two and a half years old at the time.

He woke up one morning with a chest infection, they called the doctor, the doctor gave him an injection and twenty minutes later he was dead. Meningitis or something. And back then the women couldn’t go to the church, or the children couldn’t go to the church…he was brought straight from the house to the graveyard, and my father and my mother’s father buried him. A white coffin left the house and went straight to the graveyard. My mother was six months pregnant also…she had constant pregnancies and my father was a drinker, and there was no money, and when I think about it…fuck…she ended up in psychiatric unit afterwards for a little while, then she went to England for a little while, then she came home and had my younger sister. I remember her coming home, I got a Gollywog, do you remember those?’

(Julie, Interview 3, 54-66)

Julie holds a lot of anger against her mother who is now an old woman, but the anger emerged when Julie was a child. At the age of four years, she suffered a burst appendix, and she was delivered to the hospital and abandoned. Hospitals at that time did not encourage or allow
parents to stay with a sick child, but Julie associated this with the general rejection she felt by her mother.

Julie became pregnant in her late teens and she admitted to having gone a bit wild in response to her home life, which had deteriorated through her teens. She refers to violence frequently. ‘Throughout our lives we had witnessed his violence. He had knelt on her and beat her’ (Julie, Interview 3, 117-118). The hypocritical behaviour of her mother increased Julie’s anger. At his retirement event she states her mother stood beside him dutifully and was presented with a bouquet of flowers. Another story regarding how her mother had always put her father first outlined how she told her mother about her pregnancy. That evening Julie was to inform her father, but she felt that she would be protected from the worst response as she had her mother to stand up for her. Her mother feigned shock and disgust to back up her father’s response. There was a renewed sense of abandonment and betrayal. ‘And when I did have my son, she wasn’t supportive you know. I was told to leave the house and I had to go.’ (78-80).

Julie would not be pressurised into getting married (she went on to marry the father of her son) and set up home in an apartment with her son. She had no support from her family. She started a course and put her son into a crèche only to be told by her mother that she would not finish the course. Ironically, Julie has just completed a Master’s Degree and remains married to the father of her son who she married when her son was a couple of years old. Julie’s mother is frail, but Julie refers to her ability to manipulate, and only recently has she had the ability to pull back.

Right from the start of the interviews, unexpected and unsolicited findings were emerging. All the hurdles which I had expected the women to have to negotiate in going to college at this stage of live were there, but also, I quickly realised that they were talking to me about personal issues both current and in their past. These ranged throughout the women’s lives from events in their childhood, such as controlling and manipulative parents, abuse, violence, bereavement to painful adult experiences of rape, addictions and physically abusive partners. I conducted two interviews most days, and three on occasional days; and by the end of week one, I was very tired. I had not anticipated the effect of the interviews on myself; the concentration needed for listening, combined with the emotional rhythm of the content of the stories, and my own personal identification with the women’s lives.
Joan had a complex relationship with the nuns. She grew up in an Army Barracks which meant she went to a school which was attended by children of very wealthy parents, but Joan’s family were not wealthy. She noticed that the nuns preferred the children from wealthier backgrounds. She did well and enjoyed Primary school despite the differential treatment. She wanted to do particular subjects, but the nuns streamed her into a class that ultimately prevented her from doing the Leaving Certificate and as a result of this, Joan had no choice but to go to Commercial college to prepare for secretarial work.

No Leaving Cert because of the snobbery of the nuns and because my father stood up to them because they wouldn’t put me in the year I was entitled to be in…I was so disappointed…I used to sell newspapers outside a shop and I went out and bought a history book called Conquest and Colonisation, and it had been on the reading list, and I was at home reading it when they came home that night from the meeting and told me.
(Joan, Interview 21, 23-27)

Nuns were significant in Joan’s life also because her mother had been a resident in one of the now infamous ‘Magdalen Laundries’. She said her mother was a Magdalen ‘survivor’.

I went to England with her to find out the last known address of her mother and it turned out that she was born in a unit attached to a workhouse, the nuns came in and got her.
(Joan, Interview 21, 47-50)

Joan recalled how her mother frequently told her and her siblings about the happenings in the laundry, or ‘horror stories’ (38) as she referred to them. Yet, she wanted nothing to do with the Redress Board.

Yet, when the Redress Board was set up she wouldn’t have anything to do with it…they gave me a start in life…blah, blah, blah. McAleese said they had received tuition in sewing…no, it was a fucking factory where they sat behind those big Singer sewing machines and made all those shrouds and communion dresses for wealthy people and table cloths and whatever else…and whenever they weren’t sewing 13 hours a day, they were making beads by hand. I think when it came to money, she wouldn’t do it, she didn’t want compensation, having said that when Enda Kenny did his crying act, she’d have been quite pleased to see that. She was a very dignified woman…but she wasn’t affectionate…not until I was a teenager, when I’d come in and swing her around and she’d always say Joan taught me how to be affectionate when she was a teenager.
(Joan, Interview 21, 39-50)
Joan went on to talk about the mental cruelty she had endured during her five years of marriage, ‘by the time I left, I didn’t know what food I liked’ (64). She describes her journey from walking out that night with her children, with no belongings, to spending four months in a Women’s Refuge to eventually getting her home back after a court battle. Her husband had stalked her and when she got a job, he told lies to the boss, who let her go, and so she had to get another job. He provided no financial aid, but she didn’t want him having any control over her, which money would have brought. Four months later, she returned to her home with her two daughters, and on that very day they disclosed to her that their father had been sexually abusing them. There began another battle through the courts, which again she won.

At the time of the interview, Joan was recovering from a break - in to her home, which had been very violent, as her eighteen year old son had been very badly assaulted in front of her. The interview took place in her home, as she was afraid to leave the house, and was suffering from post-traumatic stress syndrome. During the initial phone-call, on hearing about this, I tried to advise her that the interview was an unnecessary intrusion, but she insisted that she wanted to do it. The only condition was that I go to her home. Her mother and best friend died within a month of each other ten months previously. During the analysis, I felt amazement at this woman’s resilience and forbearance.

At thirty five, Sheila is one of the youngest women in the research. She saw no corporal punishment in school and had very happy memories of her childhood, of school and of playing in the fields. The youngest of eleven children, her parents were well into their forties when she was born. Secondary school proved to be challenging for her as the pressure from some of the teachers impacted on her. She witnessed bullying by teachers and by students and tried to stand up for the victims. Then her sister became pregnant at seventeen, a year older than Sheila, and their mother became very angry at Sheila, and there was violence involved. Sheila assumed it was her mother’s way of making sure that she did not let it happen to her.

Sheila’s father worked from the age of eleven and her mother finished school at Primary level. She spoke very warmly about her father, but seemed sad when she said she saw very little of him, as he played in a Showband.

Religion was very important, especially to their mother, who in her old age remains committed. They went to Mass every Sunday, prayed the Rosary every night and the Angelus
was said. ‘If you are in the house and it’s 6pm you have to say it with her, which is fair enough’ (Sheila, Interview 22, 53-54).

She goes to Mass every week. That’s just a habit, something she has been doing all her life. It’s social as well, with Daddy being gone all day all the time, she was at home with the kids, she never went out to meet friends, so her weekly social gathering was at Mass. (Sheila, Interview 22, 59-62)

Sheila points out that, despite the Church playing a large part in her childhood, it has no influence on her life as a woman of thirty five, unmarried with two children and cohabiting with their father. She also adds that her sister who was pregnant at seventeen remains unmarried.

The Church definitely did not influence my life…my mother’s yes. I suppose I was the 11th and she had quite a few disappointments down the years because some of them had children out of wedlock and then got married afterwards. (Sheila, Interview 22, 78-81)

Jane (56) attended a small, rural school with four classes in one room. There was very little emphasis on learning, as a result of which, when she went to Secondary school, she had problems, particularly with Irish. ‘I don’t ever remember much learning…it was all about prayer’ (Jane, Interview 30, 9-10).

One experience I remember in Secondary school, I didn’t know Irish and I remember the teacher coming up and hitting me on the back of the head with the book, and the humiliation and the tears, I tried not to cry in front of everybody…I just hated it. (Jane, Interview 30, 26-28).

So, she left school at thirteen and went to work in a small factory. While she appreciated the money, the experience was not pleasant for such a young person.

I worked there for thirteen years. I left at twenty six when it was burnt down. I became floor manager…it was money, but it was like a concentration camp because you couldn’t talk, you couldn’t speak to the person beside you, you were not allowed chewing gum, when I went for my interview I was only allowed to wear a skirt. (Jane, Interview 30, 33-37)
Jane developed a strong work ethic from a young age in that factory, but felt that she had been very put down. This sense of oppression and disempowerment form a significant part of the re-presentations of the lives of many of the women, especially those who had negative early experiences of education and began formal work early. It formed a thread through their lives involving lack of choice and autonomy, which in retrospect emerges as loss.

Christine’s case is somewhat different in so far as she has dyslexia and refers to herself as a ‘non-traditional learner’ (Christine, Interview 19, 9). She clearly recalls the day she was called up to the blackboard to write her name in Irish. She had spent the previous evening learning it at home.

It was my first time to go to the blackboard to write something. I can remember where I was sitting in the classroom, but when I was called to the blackboard, I couldn’t remember it. But I knew I knew it…I don’t remember the punishment I was given, but I do remember how I felt. (Christine, Interview 19, 11-15)

Throughout her Primary and Secondary education Christine had struggled in the system, but had a great love of learning and school, and it was only at the age of forty five when she went to college, that she was diagnosed with a learning disability, dyslexia. From that day at the blackboard, she had developed strategies to overcome the hurdle of dyslexia. One word that was written on all her work throughout her school years was ‘atrocious’, which she actually thought meant poor spelling and grammar. She only discovered what it meant many years later. She learned to recognise words from context. At work as a secretary, she kept a file of necessary words to type letters.

Hazel experienced education in the shadow of her sister who is ten months younger than her. She states that her sister was the intelligent one and they were compared all the way up through school. She got used to it, but it hurt when her mother came back from a Parent-Teacher meeting with an account of what the teachers had said.

But it would hurt when Mammy would come home after the P/T meeting and she’d say they’re comparing the two of you again, and Hazel, you just don’t come in to it. (Hazel, Interview 23, 11-12)

Even as a middle-aged woman, she views her sister as superior:
She is very much in control of her life, organised, there’s a time for everything and a place for everything, she is brilliant and I would love to be more like her, but in all the years of trying, I have never got there, I think I will never get there.

(Hazel, Interview 23, 13)

Self-confidence is clearly related to negative early educational and family experiences, resulting from the broader aspects of the context of their lives which included the institutional structures of power and class combined with gender, that determined where they were placed in the classroom and what that symbolised, to how they viewed themselves, even as adults. Hazel spoke about her mother’s wish for her and her siblings not to end up like her.

Even still, Mammy is seventy…but you can see that she was very intelligent, she still is very intelligent, but how it has eaten her, that lack of opportunity and that has affected me. She left school after primary.

(Hazel, Interview 23, 18-24)

Helen described some negative events at Primary school, but felt she deserved what she got. She felt she was kept in her place as the nuns treated the wealthier children with kindness and without the ridicule lavished on the poorer children. Her being treated differently didn’t mean she disliked school, she actually loved school because she was bright. Coming from a family of seven with very traditional roles, her father was a miner who died at sixty, and her mother worked as a cleaner unknownst to her husband; Helen said she did this to protect her husband from some of the financial difficulties. He would not have wanted her working outside the home. This arrangement repeated itself in Helen’s own marriage, and at a sudden point in the interview, Helen quickly redirected herself back to her school days.

In Secondary school, geography was her problem subject, and she was ridiculed by the teacher, ‘and I really thought she hated me’ (Helen, Interview 6, 87-88). A new text book was introduced in the February of her first year and she knew her mother could not afford it, so she did not ask for the book. She added that her sisters would not have been so considerate. This sense of self-sacrifice was noted again as she explained why she left school at thirteen as a result of this new book cost, but more so because her brother was getting married and her mother would be down a wage coming into the house. She regretted leaving school very shortly after leaving because she realised her future was mapped out for her. Self-sacrifice paradoxically combines with self-blame for Helen as she says:
To be honest if I had my Leaving Cert, I knew I wasn’t going anywhere, I was going out to work. I would have loved to be a nurse or a teacher, a nurse or a nun actually. I knew when I left school that wasn’t going to happen. But then if I’d wanted it hard enough, I would have worked harder for it.
(Helen, Interview 6, 118-122)

This sense of having little power and autonomy comes into Helen’s account of her marriage also, because her husband was very controlling.

My husband didn’t want me working, but I worked part-time like my mother cleaning houses that my husband didn’t know about. And I took in students. I did have one evening job working in an office and he knew about that, but he didn’t want that either. Without going into my life, he had to be in control. I would say, with my husband it was insecurities…I am a pretty independent woman. I’d bend to accommodate people and when I went back into full time education I found I wasn’t bending as much. I would loved to have gone back into education a lot earlier, but my husband wouldn’t hear of it; so I had two children to rear, so they became my social life, everything they were involved in I became involved with. I am happy that they are happy. I feel that both of them are with the right people, before that I felt they might live the life I had.
(Helen, Interview 6, 124-136)

5.1.2 Abuse experiences as a manifestation of power in life-trajectories and roles

On reflection at this point of the analysis, abuse has been highlighted in marital relationships by Frances, Rita, Julie, Joan and Helen, and the enduring effects are threads through their life stories. Julie’s experiences have been explored earlier, but they are relevant here, as she has so many unhappy memories of her childhood because of her parents’ volatile relationship. Her mother described in detail to her exactly how her father had tried to strangle her. She had wanted her mother to stop, as she was tired of it all. She felt let down by both her parents, but especially by her mother.

Frances and Rita spoke about physical abuse, with Frances describing very vividly, the extent of her husband’s violence towards her and the children. She refers to being punched in the stomach while pregnant; and how she tried to make sure the baby did not cry, as that annoyed him; and the way she dressed to meet his approval.
The beatings when I was on the pill or when one of them was crying…I hated him. I swore by the time the baby was one year old, he’d be gone. I put away even if it was only a pound. I waited and waited.
(Frances, Interview 13, 176-179)

Helen and Joan spoke about psychological abuse which is made clearly understandable by Joan when she said that by the end of the marriage she did not know what food she liked. The psychological abuse however was not the only trauma involved, as she discovered that her husband had sexually abused her two daughters. Helen was quite stoic about her husband’s behaviour, as had her mother before her in a similar marital relationship. She, like her mother worked part-time outside the home in cleaning jobs, and the husbands did not know, as they forbade their wives to do so.

I worked part time like my mother cleaning houses that my husband didn’t know about…he had to be in control.
(Helen, Interview 6, 124)

Helen’s account of her marriage reveals a cold and distant relationship with her husband, but yet, she has no inclination to change the situation.

Aoíshe shows resentment at her mother’s passivity in the marriage, as she saw her father to be the dominant parent who made all decisions for the family with no input from her mother. Her mother relied so much on her husband that when he died tragically, she had a complete breakdown. This resulted in Aoíshe becoming the main carer in the family in her early teenage years.

My mother was the type of wife who allowed him to make all the decisions and went along with them…Unfortunately, when I was in 6th class my father died in a car accident at 43. That changed everything in our lives. My mother never got over it…she was left with four children.
(Aoíshe, Interview 26, 14-16)

Common to these stories of abuse is increased resilience and ability for survival. Much of the male power in these cases is associated with the economically disadvantaged position that the women were in, which was the norm of Irish culture at that time. This made leaving an abusive relationship almost impossible, especially where there were children.
There was a lot of fear also experienced in childhood education through the differential treatment as a result of class. The Church was central to it all, both on a micro and macro level. Disempowerment and oppression created a lack of self-confidence and self-esteem that pervaded these women’s lives. Their representations of self, reflect this. Julie’s reference to her miserable childhood, her constant life-long self-doubt and her guilt about her son’s depression are all related to her being put second by her mother for her father, but whose love she craved. Control by men is also illustrated in the stories by Helen, Frances, Rita and Joan.

Rosemary recalls an incident when she was very young, having just started school. It happened on the school bus. She was a shy, nervous child by her own admission, and due to this nervousness, she wet herself. She recalls the green tights she was wearing on the day, and her older brother being protective of her. She feared the Principal before she even met him, as he gave her brother a hard time, and so she expected similar treatment.

I saw more than I needed to see, he was violent. He carried a stick all the time. I was a lot quieter than my brother, he would probably be classed as a handful now, you know the way people say. My only real memory the one time I was beaten, I normally say slapped, but this was with a stick. I was in third class, we were doing money measures with weighing scales, but the bags of money were in paper at the time and somebody in the class tore one of the bags and the teacher went extremely wild...if it happened now, I can’t even comprehend what would happen now, but anyway, he beat us all. He kept beating us all until one of us told who did it, but none of us told, he never found out. He even beat the boy in the wheelchair with spina bifida.
(Rosemary, Interview 31, 14-22)

Rosemary spoke about her older brother as a buffer for the trials of Primary education, and how this reliance on him continued into Second level. He was two years her senior and left school at sixteen, so she left at fourteen before the Group Certificate exams. She went on to work in a factory, followed by work in a shop.

You were paid I think in terms of how much they thought you were worth...But the woman who I was working with up to this point told the shop owner that I wouldn’t need to be paid so much and that I wouldn’t expect very much.
(Rosemary, Interview 31, 46, 64-66)

Despite being looked down upon, Rosemary believed she was lucky in so far she was given chances. She met her husband when she was sixteen and got married when she was twenty and went on to have three children.
Katie (59) began by saying that she liked school, but quickly recalled the nun who was very cruel, not just to her but to all the children. ‘I think our generation, that’s what made people have no confidence you know’ (8-9). Many of the Irish women struggled with issues of self-confidence, particularly those born in the 50s and 60s. Katie’s comment about her generation having no confidence is true of so many of them, and is directly linked to early childhood education.

Yvonne (48) came from an inner city Dublin, working class family. She left school at fifteen and became a hairdresser. At nineteen she got married. She recounts the visit to the priest about the wedding and he ignored her and asked her husband to be if he was being forced into marriage. She laughed as she told me this, but said that she took offence. Much of Yvonne’s life centres on her only child. After a miscarriage early in her marriage, the years passed by with no more pregnancies, so they went for fertility treatment, and she had five sessions before she became pregnant. She informed me that the recommended amount is three, as the risk of cancer increases then. Such was her determination to have a child. There was huge strain on the relationship and she emphasised the painful months waiting and the injections.

The process is very uncomfortable and undignified. Those four times of disappointment were like another loss each time. It took double the dosage the last time, so my risk of cancer was high. She was only two pounds when she was born, and she was nine weeks old when I got her home. And now she jokes that she was a chemistry set baby! She knows how much she was wanted and how much she is loved.
(Yvonne, Interview 1, 34-40)

Yvonne refers to her own resilience and discloses an event that changed her life. She was raped by a family friend while babysitting.

My younger sister was supposed to babysit that evening, and it affected her badly because she felt guilty. I did sink really low...you never forget...I felt so dirty and violated...I couldn’t let anyone near me, my sister couldn’t look at me.
(Yvonne, Interview 1: 43-48)

She quickly follows this by talking about her father, who she states, came from a very abusive family, ‘his mother was kicked around...even went to the priest, and he told her to go back to her husband and be a wife’ (51-52). She made the point that her father never slapped her or her siblings, despite the trend in beliefs that the abused will go on to abuse.
The focus on her daughter as central to her life came to the fore again when she described the day she found out that her husband had a gambling problem. He failed to collect their child from school as arranged. Yvonne said that she was very concerned, and thought he may have been in an accident. She phoned hospitals, family and then the Gardaí. The Gardaí arrived at the house and took statements. Their daughter kept leaving messages on his phone begging him to come home. She was very upset. Then, Yvonne checked their bank account and it had been cleared out. Yvonne’s immediate feeling was one of anger she said, and she asked herself how he could do this to their child. Eventually the Gardaí located her husband and he returned home.

I wanted to kill him...but when I saw him he looked so...I felt sorry for him. It has made me strong. To see him cry, he looked so...I asked him to explain to me. I asked how he could do it to X. I asked if we owed loan sharks. I thought we were about to lose our home...The only thing that came out of this was, he hadn’t been talking to his family...and they came down to offer help. I took his name off the bank accounts, and he was so humble...the trust was gone. I would have rather he had an affair.

(Yvonne, interview 1: 76-84)

She outlined how determined she became to get a degree to improve her chances of earning a good living for her daughter and herself, as she could no longer trust her husband.

Looking back on it now, my mother probably had a nervous breakdown. At the time we wouldn’t have realised what was going on and she didn’t have any support system. It was a pretty horrible time for all of us. My mother never got over it.

(Aoishe, Interview 26, 17-20)

Aoishe spent most of her early teenage years looking after her mother, her siblings and the house, her mother was unable to get up some mornings. Her sister became pregnant at seventeen, and Aoishe looked after that baby also.

I spent my teenage years caring. I tell him (son) I never had a youth, I spent my whole young years worrying about my mother, my sisters and my brother.

(Aoishe, 67)

5.1.3 Differences in life-trajectories by class and nationality

Six of the women differed in their experiences from the majority for two reasons of significance, they came from a middle class background and five of the six are not Irish. The
one Irish woman from this subset is Liz, aged fifty four attended fee paying schools, with the Primary and Secondary schools being on the same campus, so she spent fourteen years in the same space. She describes the school and grounds as physically beautiful with lovely gardens, where the nuns used to serve them flasks of tea on summer days. She has very happy memories of her education. With a lot of Jewish girls at the school, there was not an emphasis on Catholicism. Liz had no experience of physical punishment at school or home.

There were many different streams of subjects so there was a choice. I chose Greek. There was only ever twelve of us in the class, they were tiny, our desks were always in a circle. I loved school.
(Liz, Interview 7, 37-40)

The nuns at school were very strong feminists, they were very well educated women, a lot of them would have had doctorates, they probably came from wealth... they used to say to us ‘girls you can do anything’.
(Liz, 172-175)

Her parents were both born in 1916 and were both in their late forties when Liz was born, but many of her friends had older parents. Her story is very different from the majority of stories told to me. There was no evidence of self-doubt and she has a strong sense of herself and ability. She described a very happy life from early childhood right up to the present with no adversity, violence, fear, disempowerment or lack of choice and opportunity. Coming from a middle-class background created a completely different set of experiences of school and of other aspects of life’s journey for Liz. However, for the majority of the women, lower socio-economic status and the powerful position of the Church combined with gender created a category of women who believed they were inferior to those who assumed superiority in order to be superior through interlocking oppressions. The Church influenced women’s lives through the educational system, through the values and expected behaviour imposed on them, and by its legislative embeddedness (O’Connor, 1998).

The other five participants who differed from the majority in that they had completely different experiences of early education and encouragement are Karen from Hungary, Marie from India, Nicola from Nigeria, Amanda from Russia and Carol, who is of Jamaican origin, but was brought up in Ireland, having been adopted in the U.K. at the age of one in 1966. Karen (52) was born and raised in Budapest by parents who were both well educated. She already had a degree prior to coming to Ireland, where she works as a chef. She loved school
and especially loved languages, and believed that under Communism all had a chance, but boys had more choice of schools.

Marie (59) was born and raised in India and was privately educated for some time, but her brothers’ education was deemed more important. The best schools are Catholic and the fees are very high, but she loved school and stated that there was a lot of fun. Both her parents were professionals and wanted her to study medicine, but she became a professional hockey player for three years. She emigrated to London and ran a restaurant for thirteen years. Having converted to Judaism, become divorced and later on, widowed, she moved to Ireland to find a good school for her children as she could not afford the standard of education she was looking for in the U.K. Settling into a rural community, she became involved in local activities and decided to go to college to study for a degree in Citizenship and Community Studies.

Nicola is Nigerian and comes from a well educated family with both parents educated to third level. While corporal punishment is an accepted part of life in Nigeria, Nicola loved school. Her parents were very ambitious for their children, and she had a degree before coming to Ireland, where she completed a four years honours degree, followed by a Master’s degree. Religion is very important to Nicola’s family and she is Catholic, but prefers to be known as Christian.

Amanda was also educated under Communism and enjoyed school. She was encouraged strongly by her parents to succeed, as they were both doctors, with her father being a surgeon. Prior to the demise of Communism and the collapse of the Soviet Union, being educated was of huge importance for itself, but since then according to Amanda, the emphasis is on class and economic status.

The values have changed. Under Communism, there was stability, and everybody had enough...now nobody knows what is going to happen tomorrow, it is not that stable anymore. But there was no freedom of expression, people were unaware, the Communist party was probably like the Catholic Church here in Ireland...it was 1991 when the Soviet Union collapsed fully and there were fifteen Republics who gained independence, I remember that time and it was a bit scary for everyone what was going to happen, people wanted freedom and democracy. But look at what is happening in the Ukraine, people are preoccupied with democracy. (Amanda, Interview 29, 20-27)
Carol’s story was unique to the group because and she was of Jamaican origin, so she grew up in Ireland at a time dark skinned people were very much a minority group. Her memories of Primary school involve the Northern Ireland Troubles, as she lived in Belfast with her parents who were academics. Her father went on to become a Professor, and ironically was a lecturer on my undergraduate degree programme. She remembered the bombas and the security checks. But, she was too young to understand the gravity of the matter, and got used to being searched when she went to ballet classes, and also of the banter of the kids who called her a ‘Prod’. What was significant was the fact she wrote with her left hand and with the ink pens used at the time, all her written work was smudged and she was in trouble for this. Reports all stated that she was ‘messy’. Yet, she was not treated as harshly as her brother, who was also left-handed and had his left hand tied behind his back. They were slapped on the hands and legs.

At seven, she was sent to live with a family she did not know, and to this very day, she does not know why. She hated it. It was at a time when things were getting very rough in Belfast and there had been a couple of bombas along their street. Her parents sold up and moved to live on a boat and her three siblings were sent to boarding school. Being the only black girl in school made her feel different than the rest. Yet, she loved school; she saw it as a refuge from the family she hated. ‘I enjoyed school...I was so unhappy being with the family, school was an escape...I would have slept there’ (Carol, Interview 12, 51-52).

At the age of eight, Carol was sent to boarding school, which she said was the norm for Protestant families, and her own parents were sent at that age also. She returned home at Christmas and for the summer.

To be fair, both my parents had very difficult childhoods, they were children of the war, they had been evacuated...my dad would have been one of those little boys in the photos with the little suits and a little gas mask and a little case. Not knowing where they were going or if they would come back. So that was their experience so I suppose they knew no other way. (Carol, Interview 12, 64-69)

Carol went to Trinity College after her Leaving Certificate, but did not complete the course and emigrated. She spoke about failed relationships, her return home and her problematic marriage. The loss of three children, almost full term had a devastating effect on the relationship, and her husband began to have mental health difficulties. Her desire to escape to
education returned, which has been a thread throughout her life. She left her husband and started in college in 2007, and her parents died within months of each other that year.

5.2 The Role of Mothering

Mothering is significant throughout the study, as it defined most of the women. The relationship between the women and their own mothers was revealed in their telling of childhood and adult experiences. From adoration to resentful, dutiful respect and embitterment, the mother-daughter bond is unbreakable and hugely influential. Attempts were made to excuse and explain any shortcomings disclosed of their mothers, for example the socio-cultural context in which they were doing the mothering. Love for one’s mother is mandatory it seems, and any omissions on their behalf must be endured with this love. Mothers simultaneously feel guilt with respect to their own mothering and yet blame their own mothers for their childhood experiences, even when they acknowledge that their mothers were oppressed by their husbands. This is significant in terms of ‘mother blaming’ and the perpetuation of a patriarchal society.

The popular perceptions of maternal influence and power are mythological and the origins of this myth lie within patriarchy. The repercussions of this have had a powerful psychological effect on relationships between mothers and daughters, and affect expectations of mothering from generation to generation.
(Nicolson, 1993: 202)

Julie developed a strong sense of anger towards her mother during her third level education; however, her stories strongly suggest that she has been angry at her mother for most of her life, even as young as four years of age. This anger was rooted in Julie’s experiences of being rejected and betrayed by her mother when she was a child and as a young teenage mother. When she was five years old, she suffered appendicitis and states that she was left at the door of the hospital. When she was eighteen and pregnant she confided in her mother who allayed her fears about telling her father that night; but that night, her mother feigned absolute shock and disgust in agreement with her father. When Julie had her son, her mother told her to leave the home. Julie viewed her mother as hypocritical in how she related to her violent husband to the detriment of her children.

Helen, who had been protective of her mother at a very young age (not asking for the new school book because she knew her mother could not afford it), maintains a dutiful acceptance
regarding her mother’s attitude towards her going to college to better herself. The resentment by her mother at her going to college, was understood by Helen as her mother missing the daily visits by her.

Her eyes would be thrown to heaven when I mentioned anything about college, and I would say to her ‘sorry mam, getting above my station’. She was a good woman, but quite demanding of her children time wise.

(Helen, Interview 6, 164-166)

Helen’s mother refused to attend her graduation:

But that didn’t upset me because that is what my mam is like, she never went to anything. I was reluctant to ask my husband but I did and he did come because he wanted to be there, but not to support me, not to say well done…I am going to say it straight out, it would have been to make sure I wasn’t talking to any men. So, I was on edge the whole day of my conferring. (Helen, 172-177)

Inglis (1998) refers to the power of the mother in 20th century Ireland:

She did the dirty, menial tasks involved in the care of members of the household...she slaved, especially for her husband and sons. By limiting and controlling the physical expression of her affection, she inculcated an emotional awkwardness in her children.

(Inglis, 1998: 249)

As is the case for many middle-aged women, some were caring for an elderly mother. Cases of suicide, mental illness, and the death of close friends and family were included in the stories. Multi-roles proved to be the main challenges as well as maintaining relationships.

The majority of the women, regardless of country of origin experienced differential treatment in their childhood in terms of their gender and role in the education sector. It was unthinkable that any woman would desire something other than marriage and motherhood. However, despite Ireland’s emphasis on the desirability of the married state, most brides reached the altar in ignorance of the details of wifely duty (Hill, 2003), and for some, they soon began to realise that their ‘natural’ place in the home could be filled with limitations, stresses and struggles. As Hill (2003: 148) points out:

One of the most common, yet least discussed causes of marital unhappiness, and indeed of relationship problems in general, was abuse, mental or physical, usually inflicted by men on their female partners.
Class distinction was highlighted by the majority of Irish women from a working class background, beginning as young as four years of age on entering Primary school, and continuing through second level school, and into the workforce. Nuns were particularly cruel, using corporal punishment, ridicule and the placing of poorer children at the back of the classroom. However, the few from middle-class families had much better experiences. Gender is important to this study as girls were expected to become wives and full-time mothers, therefore education beyond the age of fifteen was seen as a waste of time and money. In the 1960s, 1970s and even the 1980s, the role of woman was that of wife and mother.

The cruelty endured at school was also replicated in the home for many of the women. This is because class and the Church combined placed teachers, priests and nuns on pedestals societally. If a child was beaten in school, parents believed they deserved it, and more, so they too beat them. Some of the women had complex relationships with their parents, especially their mothers. While the role of mother was viewed as the most important one for women, in many cases they were not seen as successful in their mothering. For some of the women their mothers were sometimes controlling and manipulative, even in old age. It is not surprising that many of the women lacked self-confidence all their lives. Some of them who witnessed domestic violence between their parents later found themselves in similar situations of a considerable duration.

The five non-Irish women’s experiences of education were very different to the Irish women from working-class backgrounds illustrating once again the ‘classed’ nature of the life-experiences reported. Education was encouraged and higher education was expected by the parents who themselves were educated to third level and had professional occupations. The gendered nature of experiences was also evident and boys were given priority over girls however, as the gender role expectation of women also focused on marriage and motherhood. The relationship of mother and daughter for those women was not characterised by the same intensity and enmeshment as described by some of the Irish women. The emotional separation was stronger and there was less sense of obligation as described by the Irish women, and yet there was great mutual respect. Many of the Irish women felt very obligated to their mothers, and in some cases there was resentment. Geographical distance is an obvious factor in this, but there is a psychological bond that for some has become almost tyrannical. There is the strong indication in these narratives that the mother-daughter relationship in this culture and time was specific to both and complex to the extent that it even harboured contradiction. The
Irish mother born in the early 20th century seems to demand very specific cultural responses and behaviour from their daughters, and it is a lifelong demand. The pressure brought to bear from Church dogma and social expectations of a woman’s role and identity shapes an existence that is restrictive in its possibilities and opportunities for change. The narratives reveal that this existence created frustrations, and as seen through the eyes of their daughters, and that these frustrations caused many ambiguities to emerge.

This chapter has explored the early life experiences of the women in terms of education and family roles and has highlighted the classed and gendered nature of these phenomena which were strongly coloured by the Irish experience of the time of women in the Catholic Church. The next chapter examines the second two domains or dimensions of the heuristic frame, with specific reference to the challenges and changes they faced while completing the degree programme, and also the consequences in relation to their lives in general.
Chapter 6: Analysis: Going to College, the Challenges, Changes and Consequences

6.1 Introduction

A series of life transitions and critical incidents relating to early family and school life, work and marriage were catalysts in their decision to study for a degree, so that there is the division between the four domains or dimensions of the interpretative frame are porous. Also, the cross-disciplinary themes of gender, class and religious culture are equally evident in these dimensions.

Redundancy or a change in the work situation emerged as a reason to go to college for quite a few of the women interviewed. Others had decided to do something when their children were reared. A few began the higher education journey with a further education course which gave them a FETAC qualification. Many of them referred to returning to education as ‘me-time’ or ‘it’s my turn now’ implying that they had given themselves over to childrearing and homemaking for a couple of decades. The cultural norms of the time for their class did not encourage girls to aspire to college and career. Their stories illustrate the influence of gender and class and how they intersect to influence decision-making. Johnson and Merrill (2004: 2) suggest that ‘particular life stories demonstrate how learning experiences are shaped by the dialectics of agency and structure’. Poverty and a low level of parental education had influenced the choices and opportunities available to the women as children and young adults. The lack of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1977), encouragement and prospects combined to create many obstacles to learning.

This section explores the motivation or reason for going to college; the experiences and challenges of being a student among many other roles; the changes in relationships, and the journey of self-discovery. The voices of the women are prioritised here with only short commentary, but the synthesis will come in the discussion and integration of the literature. A phenomenological approach strives to illuminate the specific and to identify phenomena through how they are perceived by the actors in a situation. The women’s experiences are represented from their perspective of personal knowledge and subjectivity.
I started working part time in the evenings, my husband came in at 5.30 and I went to work until 10. I needed to do something else, I had been at home for so long. I developed knee problems and I had to give up work, so for a year I stayed at home. Then I thought I have to do something, so I applied for here, but I didn’t get it, so I did a FETAC course and I know now had I not done that I would have been gone out of here on the first week. (Annette, Interview 2: 34-40)

...it was always my intention to get back some day and do what I should have done when I was younger. (Aoiehe, Interview 26: 34-36)

I have always regretted...I suppose the one time every year I thought of education was the 17th of August, when the Leaving Cert results came out. When I’d watch the news and all these kids were just so excited and the world was their oyster I said I wish I had done that. I went back to work in the VEC and I was cleaning the Adult Education Guidance Office, and there were posters...back to education, so I would be cleaning and reading the posters and say to my husband this poster was up...the IFE were offering a two year Leaving Certificate course. So, I said I am either going to do it now or I am never going to do it...I took English, Irish and Geography...I ended up with an A1 in geography, Ordinary level I have to state. I applied for college then. (Rosemary, Interview 31: 79-94)

I finished work and after two months I had to get something to do, looked on the internet and saw the course and two weeks later I started. (Tina, Interview 25: 127-128)

When I moved back to Ireland...I had so many friends in X. I lived in the country side, which I never had done, I had no job and I was losing my mind. (Marita, Interview 30: 75-81)

For years and years, particularly after the children were born, I said I would go back to college...so that was always going to happen. (Liz, Interview 7: 87-89)

I did a correspondence course and I did a FETAC course. So, I went further and I kept hearing the other lad telling me I am useless and the teachers telling me I am stupid. (Frances, Interview 13: 181-183)

Redundancy. I wondered what I could do...confidence was low. I kept thinking I was too old. (Katie, Interview 4: 60-63)

I always wanted to do Social Work because of the environmental factors that I had experienced. I felt it was an area I could bring something to.
Maybe it was because I came from a family where the children weren’t put first, I could see the need for children to be put first.  
(Julie, Interview 3: 127-130)

Due to my husband’s gambling problem, I decided that I needed to make sure I could support my daughter and myself. He may not be in the picture.  
(Yvonne, Interview 1: 57-58)

One of the recurring themes from the stories is the sense of guilt that the women felt in relation to their parenting responsibilities. They tried to mirror their college timetable with their children’s daily routine, even if it meant missing some classes. Some felt angry at this guilt. Many of these had devoted their lives to the home and family, and in so doing had experienced a loss of their public selves. Situational and dispositional obstacles were encountered by the majority of women in that, they struggled with domestic demands which they felt obligated to, and their self-confidence regarding their ability was weak. Edwards (1993) described both the family and higher education as greedy institutions, and this was evidently felt by the majority of the women.

Annette looked back on her life as one of predominantly caring; which she had no regrets about, as she felt that was right for her at that time. However, she is very sure that she no longer wants to be that person.

For years I cared for my uncle and they had adopted two children who were very young when their mother died. I used to go up at lunch time and do a few things for him. Even at home I would scrub floors at night, that was the mode I was in then…but I want to use the knowledge and skills I learned. I want to work in Family Support.  
(Annette, Interview 2, 69-75)

Lisa faced resistance from her husband all the way through her college degree, and she felt pulled in two about her home responsibilities and the demands of college. She describes her change of thought in relation to her husband’s expectations of her.

He thought I was mad to go to college. After a year in college, I realised that…it is not my job, I am not Cinderella…it is not my mess, it’s your mess…it’s not my dinner, it’s your dinner. I try to get that into them. I think a lot of it was me trying to change Paul’s mindset. My career now is my place in college…and I think he found this very difficult.  
(Lisa, Interview 8, 98-103)
Lisa had just finished her degree when she was interviewed, so the use of the present tense suggests that she is still reacting to her husband’s attitude towards her while studying. She was angry at the fact that he undervalued her college career, making life difficult with demands, and she points out that all he wants to do is to play golf. She made it clear to him that the children were his responsibility also.

Yvonne suffered huge guilt around her only child, the child she had five sessions of fertility treatment to conceive, the child who motivated her to go to college so she could provide for her, as reliance on her husband was destroyed with his gambling problem. During her final year, with frequent assignment deadlines, Yvonne began to time her daughter; she said she actually stopped the conversation if it exceeded ten minutes. She would then feel so bad that the assignment she was working on would become even more challenging as she dealt with the guilt.

Guilt, not having enough time for my daughter. When I had an assignment, I got so caught up. She is so relieved that I am finished. I would time her! I would give her ten minutes!
(Yvonne, Interview 1, 91-93)

Over the course of the month of interviewing the women, I developed a routine of taking each of them for a coffee or lunch, depending on the time of the interview. Yvonne refused the offer, as she said she was making up for lost time with her daughter, and so, she rushed off home.

Sheila experienced a lot of guilt regarding the children in her first year, but then she started to notice that the male student fathers felt no guilt whatsoever.

One of the things that made me want to give up in the first year was guilt, you know if there was a day off school, like an in-service day and I had to come to college, I felt so guilty. That didn’t last though because, James, his son is the same age as mine, he never worried about child care, whereas I did. I think it’s ingrained in us. It’s what we are made to do, be mothers.
(Sheila, Interview 22, 115-121)

The findings of Field’s (2005) study of mature students that female students were much more concerned about child care than their male counterparts, were confirmed in this study. He found that women in particular appeared to come under pressure from other family members to look after their own children and to fit everything else around the primary task of child-
rearing. Lack of family support and the cost of childcare were cited as the main obstacles for women improving themselves academically.

Unlike other barriers to learning, which were mentioned for both women and men, it is unlikely to come as a surprise that child-rearing was only ever mentioned in the case of women. (Field, 2005: 69)

Field draws on the findings of a field-based study of adult learning and social capital in Northern Ireland. The data were collected through thirty face-to-face interviews and ten group interviews with people whose jobs brought them into contact with adult learners, such as personnel officers, trainers and college tutors.

Fine–Davis (2011) argues that men believe that women have primary responsibility for children, and Edwards (1993), who conducted research on mature female students found that women have to be available at all times. Edwards (1993) focuses on the separateness and connectedness between education and the family for mature female students. She saw the potential for disruption to relationships between women and their spouse. Edwards (1993) interviewed thirty one mature women students to find out how they coped with education and a family. Her findings showed that the experience had boosted the women’s confidence, but they still felt constrained by their family responsibilities, and in at least 25% of cases their relationships had suffered in some way. Here again, this study confirms these findings but adds to these by highlighting the specific constraints and disruptions that working-class Irish women of a certain age endured.

In terms of navigating the dual roles of mother and student, Edwards (1993) found that students who are also mothers had various ways of both separating and connecting these dual roles. In most cases these women simply added studying to their traditional domestic roles, a stance that required them to find new or additional ways of managing their domestic responsibilities and child care arrangements.

Gender socialisation was evident also in that, for some of the women guilt was provoked by daughters more so than by sons. As Sheila states: ‘[m]y son was different, give him an Xbox and he’s happy’ (125).
Guilt was a factor also for Rosemary, who said it was difficult especially when the children were unwell and she left them with a childminder. While she had praise for the support her husband gave her, the quotation indicates that she carried the household chores burden.

...he was totally behind me from the beginning, but then again, in saying that I don’t think they understand that an essay needs to be done and it takes time to be done and you still have everything else as well, like you still have lunches, you still have housework. (Rosemary, Interview 31, 107-110)

Donna and her husband were both in two different colleges at the same time, but she had all the child care responsibility.

I spoke about this with two other women and yes, we had to look after the kids. He just went to the library until seven or eight. He had more options. (Donna, Interview 15, 63-65)

Hochschild (1989: 1) refers to the ‘stalled revolution’, meaning, despite beliefs about equality, women continue to perform the majority of family work. The data demonstrate in almost all cases that the women continued to bear the responsibility for child care and housework, thereby confirming Hochschild’s argument. Only one of the women had total support of her husband, in terms of taking over the menial tasks of the home. This support continues, as Julie is pursuing the final year of a Master’s degree.

He is great; he renegotiated his work times with his boss to match my days at college. He would make all the lunches, and not like me, where I would throw a slice of ham on the bread, he would have radishes, cucumber, the whole lot. And he’d have my flask of tea and bottle of water ready for me, and he’d drop me off at the train station and collect me in the evening. The dinner would be cooked, the laundry done. The homework almost done. But our relationship has changed. (Julie, Interview 3, 154-160)

6.2 Changes in Relationships as a Result of Going to College

Friendships were fractured and even family members reacted differently to the women, in some cases it was due to jealousy and resentment.

They’d be saying ‘oh you know everything now.’ It was a kind of jokey thing, but it was said. Then I started the course, we lived in this estate and then we bought a house, it wasn’t the house, in fact the one we left was bigger than the one we’re in now, it was just the estate. You don’t have that thing about giving your address. My mother thinks I know everything now. (Donna, Interview 15, 71-75)
I have one friend who gave me a wide berth for nearly a year, it boiled down to her insecurities about herself. She said my language had changed, but of course it changed. David went to Trinity, and for years I would ask him about things but then I started getting him to check the grammar, in the second year I stopped asking him, and he wondered why.

(Joan, Interview 21, 108-112)

Joan also stated that her eldest daughter accused her of having no time for her, but Joan believed she had given the children all she could and doing a degree was for herself. This daughter was over thirty at this time, and this example again highlights the demands of a motherhood that never ends. Some other friends pulled away from Joan as they thought she was ‘dry’ (116). Hazel, who always looked up to her younger sister and was compared to her during her school days by parents and teacher, found that her sister was resentful and their relationship became strained.

My sister, the quick one found it very disconcerting...you think you’re somebody now...the oldest student in town, but my husband said that’s okay, I am sleeping with a student [laughs]...it has taken years for my sister to come back to where we were.

(Hazel, Interview 23, 86-89)

Dinah said that her greatest challenge was time-management and guilt.

Time, the guilt. But I thought it was a better option than working because I was at least at home, even though I was typing. Any spare time was spent with my daughter, my husband was totally abandoned, so he felt neglected. Stress and guilt certainly.

(Dinah, Interview 24, 45-47)

Tina’s family were very supportive and encouraging, but then her children were in their thirties. At the age of fifty nine, she was one of the eldest women in the study. She made interesting observations about her class colleagues. There had been fewer than twenty on the degree programme, so they got to know each other quite well over the course of four years.

I could see relationship difficulties with some of my class mates. I think it happens where one person breaks the mould and the other is feeling inadequate.

(Tina, Interview 25, 137-141)

Aoishe is full of praise for her husband, as he helped out a lot when she was having computer difficulties, and he frequently salvaged material she had lost. She believes that she could not have done it without him. The irony of her gratitude is difficult to avoid on reading this quote:
We had lots of take-aways [laughs]. Housework, I can’t say my husband and son ever made me feel that I had to do it, but they didn’t care if it wasn’t done, and I did. If the house was in chaos it wouldn’t bother them at all, whereas I’d lose my mind. I couldn’t live in it. The only thing that has changed and the change remains to this day, and that is I iron nothing only my husband’s shirts, that’s all, nothing else gets ironed.

(Aoishe, Interview 26, 102-106)

Stephanie also refers to her partner’s feelings of abandonment.

I suppose he felt second fiddle to the course...no matter what weekend came up...you could never concentrate on anything other than college. He’d say ‘can you not leave that’, and I felt guilty. Or I am sitting at the table typing and he’s going ‘I am going to bed’ and I’m ‘go on’ [laughs].

(Stephanie, Interview 27, 33-36)

6.3 Challenges, changes and consequences beyond relationships

Amanda from Belarus spoke about wanting to do really well, but the children and other demands placed a lot of strain on her. She felt very old at thirty three going to college, as she and her husband both have third level education since their early twenties.

I felt that I became emotionally less stable because I was trying to do so many things at the same time and I felt my emotional stability was going down the drain because I couldn’t cope with everything. Will there be a job, why am I doing this. First of all I did it for myself, for my own self-respect and my own confidence. My husband did understand that, but nevertheless he demanded attention, I still had to cook as normal...oh, you’ll be fine...he didn’t see it as important.

(Amanda, Interview 29, 67-72)

Marie, from India moved to Ireland from London to find good quality education for her daughters. Being widowed led her to college, as she needed to get a job to pay for her daughters’ education.

Firstly, this building was very imposing...the very first day, I had no induction. When I walked in, I almost turned around and I told myself to get in there. But the nerves, oh my God Catherine. Mike was always my rock, I could do anything, but now that was gone. I knew nobody, absolutely nobody. The first year was pretty tough; everyone tried to pretend they knew it all, everyone tried to impress each other.

(Marie, Interview 9, 107-112)
In the group which Marie joined for four years, out of eighteen, six were not Irish. They came from Africa, Portugal, Russia, Hungary and India. Marie was instrumental in the bonding of these students by sharing different cultural meals in each other’s homes, and while in college shared lunches together. She and some of the others felt that the Irish students did not mix very well with them, especially outside of college.

My greatest challenge in college was English, the problem was the proper sentences, not the spelling. Hungarian is so different. My daughter learn by listening, she is thinking now the English way...but me...maybe I too old [laughs]. My husband and my younger son don’t speak well...we speak Hungarian at home. They don’t speak, they resist [laughs]...I am working with the Integration Forum and we set up a plan...I found something very interesting in my class...my English speaking friends were very friendly to me but I was never invited for a cup of tea at their houses. My Indian, my Belarus, my Ghanian, my other foreign class mates invited me, so how can be integrate into the Irish society if we are always excluded...they are more understanding. I asked my young friend who has just finished at X and she said that she has no national friends. My employer went to Australia for a holiday and she loved it and said it is because the language is the same. I see that when you speak English here that somebody from Cork does not understand someone from Dublin.

(Karen, Interview 5, 58-71)

Angela had been a successful business woman and went to college when the business began to lose profits, and she treated the college day like going to work from nine to five. She was very organised and her mother looked after the children. Their dinner was eaten and their homework done when she collected them. She just prepared them for bed and read them a story.

This one evening I started work on the computer and I totally forgot about Michelle waiting for her story and at 9pm she came up and asked if I was going to read her a story. I was gutted by that. There was a joke in our house: what’s the difference between a terrorist and Mam doing exams? You can negotiate with a terrorist! [laughs].

(Angela, Interview 20, 53-56)

Christine had been working for over twenty years as a secretary when she became unwell and she had to give up work. It took well over a year for her to get better, and then she decided to make some changes to her life. She completed a FETAC course before going to college. Her greatest challenge was her lack of confidence and she found herself transported back to that day at the blackboard as a very young girl. She was amazed and in awe of herself, as she never, ever thought she would get the chance to go to college.
Changes? As wide as the Grand Canyon...it is everything, it has transformed my life...I have very little money, but if I was to scrub toilets or stack shelves I wouldn’t care...nobody can take away what I have learned. Mental health, self-awareness, confidence. The gift of reading, the shades of meaning. Learning comes from within.  
(Christine, Interview 19, 58-61)

Jane was working at home as administrator for her husband’s business. Her mother, who lived with them, died suddenly, and Jane experienced huge grief. She had to get out of the house instead of working there all day, so she did a FETAC course and then went to college.

So I said to my husband I really don’t want to be in the office because I was running up and down cooking dinners, and he got somebody else in to do the books. I wasn’t stuck in the house, the company was great. I wasn’t thinking of my mother the whole time...even when my father died, I never felt like this, despite being close to him, but he suffered a lot, with her it was so sudden. If I had to run to the school, she’d stay with the kids. 
(Jane, Interview 17, 63-68)

Jane found college very challenging and considered giving up at times.

My husband used to say to me ‘Jane you go into that room like a lamb, and come out a monster!’ . I was stressed and I wanted it so much and the marks I got didn’t reflect the effort because I left school at thirteen...what took them a night could take me three weeks. The minute I got an assignment, I started to research it straight away. They are all very proud of me at home. 
(Jane, 93-99)

I met Jane four months after I interviewed her and she informed that she is studying at Master’s level, and loves it. Despite all the stress she endured, she said she loved learning.

Marita went to college because she was very isolated living in a rural area, having relocated from London where she had lived and worked for fifteen years. She and her husband moved to rural Ireland to rear their young son. The first year was acceptable for her as she was adjusting to motherhood, but very soon she became very lonely and felt isolated, as she knew nobody in the area. Her husband worked some distance away from home, and was gone from early morning to late evening daily. She had to get away to London for a break, during which she says she reassessed her life. She knew she had to do something or she would become mentally unwell. In 2006, she started college, and her son started school the same time, so she said that there was no guilt, as a routine was established immediately. She believes that
college filled a huge gap in her life, she suffered no stress and she was at her happiest. Her self-confidence grew significantly and even her husband commented on this.

Nancy, like many of the others completed a FETAC Course prior to doing the degree. While she loves the studying, she also felt the guilt.

Time...the guilt...Louise was only small, bring her to crèche and peeling her off me. It never let up. Fourth year with Mam being sick was fierce. I was studying at the Hospice...and then the kids. The pressure, Mark was great, but at times he got frustrated with the abandonment. I was always asking my daughter to make me a cup of tea. (Nancy, Interview 10, 108-112)

She went on to emphasise how much more confident she is now.

I have so much more confidence, I feel empowered, I work in a Secondary School and I feel on a par with the teachers. I lacked confidence...the knowledge. (Nancy, 115-117)

Rita, a separated mother had to work two jobs to pay the bills, while at college. She experienced a lot of resentment from friends and having graduated did not put the photos on her wall for some years afterwards, so as not to provoke her friends. However, she comments on how her confidence grew as a result of doing the degree and getting a good job. She contrasts her current life with her former one with an abusive husband.

Balancing everything, balancing children and I had two jobs. I was still in the hostel and I was cleaning in Tesco, I was getting up at four in the morning, in to work for five and in to college for nine. Sometimes I would get up at three to cook dinners if I knew I had a long day ahead of me. There was guilt, my kitchen table was covered in books. Laura was going into Secondary and I was trying to settle her in. They were very supportive, the three of them. I was so tired all the time. When I was supposed to be sleeping I was studying. (Rita, Interview 14, 71-78)

Structural forces such as gender and class, and in the case of one woman, race also shaped their lives as early as Primary School, through to work and marriage. Through higher education, most of the women interviewed were able to change their lives for the better. Studying for a degree enabled these women to reflect upon their past lives and reinterpret how they perceive themselves as women. Annette recounts how the caring which extended beyond
her immediate family was a stage of her life which she has no regrets about, but believes that having graduated with a degree has changed her priorities, and she has no desire to return to her old life.

For years I cared for my uncle and they adopted two children who were very young when the mother died. I used to go up at lunch time, and do a few things for him. Even at home I would scrub floors at night, that was the mode I was in then. Now, there is more to life, but I am glad I did that then...But, I want to use the knowledge and skills I have learned...I want to work in Family Support. I have experience from Barnardos. I really saw the whole attachment theory in action. It’s great to be able to apply theory, to see it. From day one, Family Support was the area I wanted.

(Annette, Interview 2: 69-78)

Gaining confidence was a major factor in terms of self-change. Their roles as daughters, mothers and wives had subjected them to male dominance throughout their lives, resulting in low self-esteem. Developing confidence gave them a stronger identity. Some, e.g., Julie, Christine and Yvonne spoke about their new found ability to deal with professionals in authority. For the majority of the women there came a new sense of power and control over their lives. Carol believes that her mental health improved as a result of completing the degree programme.

It brought me back to life. For me education has been a way of reawakening my sense of self. Identity.

(Carol, Interview 12, 125-126)

She also believes that she is a good role model for her two teenage children in that they are planning on going to college.

Dolores had a sick mother to care for while at college, she also had a sister who died from an overdose of heroin, and because of her mother’s illness, she had to care for her seventeen year old brother. The Social Studies degree had helped her in understanding what she was living, and she emphasised that studying is great for self-growth.

Social Policy and Family Studies really influenced the way I now think. My mind was opened. Understanding of the family situations. I can cope better now with my mother’s situation. I suppose even my understanding of drug addiction has changed, there isn’t a family that I know that isn’t affected by drugs or drink. My dad was an alcoholic, he is a recovering alcoholic. I remember it as a child, but my younger siblings would have been exposed to a lot more than me, I got out early. (Dolores, Interview 11, 88-95)
The women had a lot to say about the challenges imposed by their obligations to family, husband and home, and for some, there was a changing sense of obligation having completed their college education. They became more aware of inequalities based on gender and patriarchy. Most of them had planned their study around the needs of the family, and were continually trying to reduce the impact that their studying had on the family. Traditional female socialisation had instilled in them the importance of the mother as primary caregiver, and some women are reluctant to ask anyone to care for their children. The overwhelming aspect is that college had become so important to them that they were willing to juggle and manipulate their lives in other areas to continue their degrees, but they could only do so if they felt that they were looking after the needs of their families. The majority of the women felt that they had responsibility for nurturing their families and they felt that it was their role to rearrange their study to ensure that the family was not inconvenienced. Examples spoken about were studying and writing essays between mid-night and dawn, cooking chickens in the early hours to ensure that evening’s dinner was ready and studying beside a hospital bed of a terminally ill parent.

They also had a lot to say about increased confidence and sense of self. Ironically, some spoke about keeping their degree parchments in drawers, and even under the bed in a box; and for some who hung them on the wall, it was up the stairs out of sight. Yet, for many of them, this new found sense of efficacy and belief in themselves changed the way they negotiated relationships at work and at home. Nancy, who had negative experiences of school states:

I have so much more confidence, I feel empowered, I work in a Secondary School and I feel on a par with the teachers. I lacked confidence...the knowledge.
(Nancy, Interview 10, 115-117)

Annette speaks about how she checks her husband on how he speaks to her.

Also my husband has a habit of saying things with a tone that is condescending, but now I point out you may have meant to say that, but this is what you said. You need to think about the words you use. The course has done all this for me.
(Annette, Interview 2, 131-135)

Karen is very positive about higher education for women as it provides a sense of power for them. She had struggled with the English language, but she loved the content.
I just want to say...learning never late...learning never late, even though somebody left school early because of circumstances...but never late to learn something. I would like to encourage women to just do it. It is very important for the self-confidence, for self-awareness, self-esteem everything.
(Karen, Interview 5, 96-99)

Therefore, it can be said that education can be emancipatory, empowering, and for some, transforming; as knowledge opens up new ways of viewing the world and in the process of learning, the self is redefined, re-presented and they become changed persons. Through higher education, they are able to change their lives for the better.

Higher education seems to have given the women control over their lives, something which will last for life, as there is no undoing of it. The opportunity to pursue third level education for many of them did not present itself at traditionally age-appropriate times. Their educational experiences had been disrupted by circumstances beyond their control. Their socio-economic class and their gender combined to produce constraints which determined their paths in life. Returning to education in their 30s, 40s and 50s was as a result of changes in socio-economic status, a desire for self-development, a desire to learn and regrets about not having completed Secondary school. Many of them went to college because they always wanted to, but never had the opportunity. Some had parents who had very little education and saw no value in it. This is reflective of the conservative traditional social norms for those from lower socio-economic backgrounds in the 50s, 60s and 70s. Teacher expectation for some of the poorest children in Primary school was very negative and this affected the women’s sense of competence. A sense of feeling inferior and less adequate in relation to other people was instilled in them by teachers and for some, by their parents also. According to Hofer (2001), personal epistemology is an important component of student learning, and it was important to bear this in mind when analysing the women’s stories, especially for those who came from working class backgrounds, and had negative experiences of early education. The majority of the women had left school early and had restricted understanding of knowing and knowledge construction. Research has shown that students come into the educational system with differing epistemological viewpoints (Perry 1970, Baxter-Magolda 1992), in that they differ in their ways of knowing and understanding knowledge. This has implications for learning, as a student’s epistemological beliefs may stimulate and enhance learning or may set limitations for learning. Those with simple epistemological beliefs entered college with the view that
knowledge is absolute, black or white, handed down by authority, acquired quickly or not at all, and that the ability to learn is fixed at birth (Schommer, 1994).

Time management, obligations to others, ambiguity of roles and adjusting to academic requirements proved to be challenging for the women. Organising their time to attend lectures and spend time in the library working on assignments competed sharply with the demands of motherhood and household duties. For some of the women, care of an elderly parent was also a responsibility. Abundant support from husbands/partners was evident in only one case where there were dependent children. Varying degrees of support were given by the others. Guilt regarding not giving enough time and attention to children was a common experience not only for mothers of dependent children, but also for those with adult children and grandchildren. This sense of obligation to others and guilt in relation to children is well documented in the literature (Chodorow 1999; Gilligan 1993; Hochschild 1983; Edwards 1993; Merrill 1999; Johnson & Robson 1999; Merriam & Caffarella 1999; Baxter & Britton 2001; Reay et al 2002; Brine & Waller 2004; Field 2005; Fine-Davis 2011). The priority of intensive mothering which gives rise to guilt was also extensively highlighted in the literature (Chodorow 1999; Hayes 1996; Inglis 1998; O’Connor 1998; Ruddick 2001; O’Reilly 2004). Much of the literature focuses on how women’s identity formation is closely linked to their connections with others. The women in this study provided certainty to this, as they strived to divide their limited time while at college with their families who had been their only priority for some time.

Confidence and self-growth are the outcomes for the majority, and with this comes an epistemological change, and hence an ontological relocation. Schuller et al (2001) claim that growth in self-confidence is the most pervasive benefit from learning, and all but one of the women in this study expressed an increase in their confidence.

6.4 Women’s Ways of Knowing and Re-Knowing

This final section examines the data of the women’s narrative with the lens of the third domain or dimension of ‘women’s knowledge. As presented earlier, this dimension in the frame was informed by the work of Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarule (1986). Their study was the first of its kind to address the issue of knowledge and knowing from women’s perspectives. They interviewed 135 women from all levels of life and education to understand
what was ‘important about life and learning from her point of view’ (Belenky et al., 11). As I read the book, I found myself making connections to my life’s experiences and learning. Having been socialised by family and school to accept absolutes, the study echoed my journey towards understanding that ‘knowledge is constructed, not given; contextual, not absolute; mutable, not fixed’ (Belenky et al., 1986: 10). With this in mind, I was interested in how higher education had relocated the women from a position of silence to finding their voice and to achieving what Belenky et al (1986: 133) refer to as ‘a voice of integration that finds a place for reason and intuition and the expertise of others’. This involves a challenge to long-held assumptions and connecting positionality to epistemology. The majority of the Irish women in my study had very negative memories of their early schooling, especially around their socio-economic class and their gender. Being silenced and placed at the back of classrooms established very early in life that they were somewhat less worthy than others.

Women returning to education at midlife have a desire to redefine at least part of their identity, to see themselves in a different way and exert a degree of control over some aspects of their lives (Parr, 2000). There are clear links between identity and education, it was proof of ability for some women, it improved employment potential for some, and for others it was associated with the status which education is perceived as bringing with it. Years of housekeeping and caring for the family followed by higher education created a new identity. For some, this new identity took the form of resentment and resistance to the old identity and a desire to be seen as somebody other than a housewife and mother (Annette, Lisa and Rosemary). Yvonne is treated differently at work, especially by the men who have problems being her subordinate. Much of the change in identity is associated with increased confidence, for some this was in the public sphere, for others it was experienced more in the private sphere of close relationships. Schuller et al (2001) found that increased confidence comes about from learning. This is supported in the literature by Belenky et al (1986), Edwards (1993), Merrill (1999), Mezirow (2000), Flannery (2000), Brine and Waller (2004) and Field (2005). Julie, Hazel, Nancy, Rita, Christine and Rosemary are examples of increased confidence in the public sphere, and gaining a higher education had given others the confidence to demand equality and respect in relationships (Annette, Lisa, Joan, Frances, Carol and Sheila), with Sheila actually separating from her partner and Lisa considering a separation unless there were changes made within the relationship.
For most of the women, education was linked with a sense of independence and there was an awareness and recognition of the fact that much more was gained than just paper qualifications. There was the independence of new ways of thinking, of thinking for themselves and of a more critical nature. As Merrill (1996) found in her study, the acquisition of knowledge broadened perspectives for the mature women students, not just of themselves, but of society also.

Changes to the self and learning were dialectically related...Their consciousness was awakened to new perspectives and new ways of perceiving and analysing the world. (Merrill, 1996: 275)

The women spoke about changed perspectives, broadened minds and greater understanding of others and themselves. In some cases there is a better acceptance of themselves with less tolerance for others’ attitudes and behaviour. There is also the emergence of a realisation of injustices suffered during their young lives, which for some caused a dissonance, as they were loath to place blame on their parents. There is a better engagement with the world, as many of the women reported being able to speak about things now, being able to speak to those who before elicited silence from them.

There was an awareness created by higher education for the women in the data that they had passively allowed their lives to proceed in certain directions and a vicarious life was lived. Learning and engaging with the material created knowledge that remodelled their thinking, their knowing and their being in the world. They had more self-belief. Belenky et al (1986) studied the changes in women’s ways of knowing and they focused on women’s epistemological perspectives based on women’s experience. They were interested in women’s perspectives on truth, knowledge and authority. Also, they studied women’s conceptions of themselves as knowers. They classified five major epistemological perspectives: Silence, Received Knowing, Subjective Knowledge, Procedural Knowledge, and Constructed Knowledge. Their research findings resonated through my analysis of the data from the women’s interviews. Social class and gender form the basis for my applying their work to my study. Silence and received knowledge represents a woman’s place in Irish society for much of the 20th century, especially is she was from a poor background. Silence and received knowledge are positions of disempowerment and oppression. The majority of the women came from working class backgrounds and were silenced from a very early age. They adopted and accepted this position because it was imposed on them by institutional power.
Not all these epistemological perspectives are evident in the data of all of the women, but there is evidence of positions of silence, received knowing, subjective knowing and connected knowing in them all. Constructed knowing is evident to a lesser extent as women’s capacity for empathy maintained a stronger element of connected knowing.

In the silence stage, women experience themselves as voiceless. In the second stage, received knowing, women imagine themselves as acquiring knowledge and truth from the voice of others with authority. In the third stage, subjective knowledge, women view knowledge as personal, private, and subjectively known. In the fourth stage, procedural knowledge, Belenky et al found two types, connected knowing and separate knowing, but what is shared by both types is the sense of ambiguity or dissonance, which at first does not feel like progress as confidence wanes and the inner voice becomes critical. Connected knowing is based in the women’s capacity for empathy. Separate knowing involves the separation from feelings and emotions of self in the cause of objectivity. The final stage for Belenky et al is constructed knowledge, where women begin to see all knowledge as contextual and merge their own voices with those of experts. Many of the women in my study claimed to have a more independent mind as a result of doing a degree, which involved challenging themselves and their relationships, while reconciling with a new sense of identity.

The women in my research and their mothers before them held the position of silence, as they felt inadequate to those in authority in schools, the workplace and in the home.

My mother was a Magdalen survivor…I used to think I got my strength from him, but it is only in the last ten or fifteen years I realised I got it from her. She put up with him…an army man who thought everyone should be dictated to.
(Joan, Interview 21: 35/55-57)

My mother was the type of wife who allowed him to make all the decisions and went along with them.
(Aoishe, Interview 26: 12-13)

He had been very violent with her in the bedroom. Throughout our lives we had witnessed his violence.
(Julie, Interview 3: 116-118)

All I was given back out of my money was a fiver, but I didn’t know how much I was getting. I gave it to my mother and she opened it and gave me
back a fiver. So, I was working from 8 to 6 and then again 8 to midnight, so I asked one of the other girls what they were getting. She said 50 pound. (Frances, Interview 13: 143-147)

Although we would have loved to have been something we knew there was no chance. (Dolores, Interview 11: 15-17)

My mother was the type that whatever the teacher said was right, and I actually brought it through into my own marriage and my children. (Katie, Interview 4: 17-18)

Patriarchy had instilled in the majority of the women that they were second class citizens. Interpersonal oppression and control had lasting and often ongoing effects on the life and identity of the women, as for many their lives had been manipulated by their parents firstly, and then their husbands. Dissonance around the issue of obligation emerged during the course of their study, as they became aware of gender inequality and gendered roles which were constructed for them and imposed on them. The women went from a position of silence where they were ‘voiceless’ and ‘mindless’ and ‘subject to the whims of external authority’ (Belenky et al 1986: 153) through received, subjective, procedural stages ending up with, for some, constructed knowledge. The women in my study described experiences as to how they had changed over the four years of the degree programme. Their new found ability to speak to those they would not have had a voice for before; and in situations in which they would formerly have shied away from. Yet, with such change, for some the long-held fragile learner identity (Weil, 1998) could not be totally eliminated, as they spoke about self-doubt even when studying for Master’s degrees. The message received by them as young children from teachers, parents, authority figures and social processes was that they were not as good as other people who had status and wealth. This moulding of their selves became fixed at a time when attachments were being formed, and schemas developed firmly.

The study by Belenky et al (1986) threw light on the way people who have been misrepresented or are unable to represent themselves, act and think. Frances developed the strength to leave her abusive husband as a result of her study and its influence on her agency. The link between class, gender and power became a very important aspect of this study. The women used information gained from the lectures and tutorials to inform their thinking and contextualising this knowledge was important for them as a revised view of the world required harmony with their own frame of reference. Belenky et al sum up the complex
process of how women’s thinking shifts and changes, and refers to the final product as connected knowing.

Connected knowers develop procedures for gaining access to other people’s knowledge…they know that they can only approximate other people’s experiences so can gain only limited access to their knowledge…they begin with an interest in the facts of other people’s lives, but they gradually shift the focus to other people’s ways of thinking…they see personality as adding to the perception and so the personality of each member of the group enriches the group’s understanding. (Belenky et al, 1986: 113, 115, 119).

My way of being and knowing has changed immensely. I would not be as concerned now about social stuff, how I look to others, or material things. I can appear flippant, but I think we put so much in to how we look, houses and things. College was such a wonderful experience, mind-opening. I loved psychology, when I get rich I will go back.
(Angela, Interview 20, 63-69)

I have travelled the world since my degree and Master’s, I hadn’t been outside of Ireland until I was thirty seven…I wouldn’t be the person I am today if it wasn’t for…
(Angela, 105-107)

I always had that attitude. Now I come across a lot of dickheads in Trinity, lecturers and students and I came across a lot of lovely people as well. I never felt inferior to anyone, but I was always aware of my lack of education. I feel I can now hold myself much better in the world with the education.
(Joan, Interview 21, 125-128)

King and Kitchener (1994) considered epistemological development to be stimulated when experiences do not coincide with expectations. Contradictory experiences may provoke a person to ‘reconsider, reinterpret or reject prior assumptions or beliefs’ (King & Kitchener, 1994:229). Their theory claims that changes in the epistemological thinking of undergraduate students centre on the confrontation with multiple perspectives. They provide a model that is important in understanding epistemological development. Many of the women experienced these changes within their thinking and being, and for some there was a discomfort in the loss of assumptions which had dictated their lives.
Katie recalls how she had to deal with her negative assumptions about a particular ethnic group while on practice placement in conversation with her supervisor:

I told her that I don’t like them, I don’t like the way they go on, I don’t like anything about them. She said I was going to have to get over that…I did have a change of heart, but not all the way.
(Katie, Interview 4: 111-114)

Any hope of believing was completely undermined by my learning…this loving Jesus!
(Aoishe, Interview 26: 124-125)

But, I still don’t have a classification, you kinda feel you are a little in limbo land. Other than a woman and a mother…there’s a sense of loss. I hated the fact that my rose-tinted glasses have been removed. I struggled with that.
(Marita, Interview 30: 112-114)

However, for the majority of the women, higher education facilitated cognitive maturity and gave them the ability to confront contradiction, ambiguity and uncertainty without being paralysed by it. In many cases, the return to education was many years after a childhood engagement with formal education was now viewed with a mixture of resentment, regret and a sense of wasted or stolen opportunities. This is especially true where schooling left them with a fragile self-esteem, a consequence of being labelled a failure as a child. While these negative past experiences of education led to a lack of confidence in their ability to succeed in an academic context, these mature female students’ level of motivation gave them a very important advantage over younger students. Despite the substantial emotional demands and changes in routine required by the college schedule, the outcome was more than the opportunity to obtain better employment, instead, college offered a means by which self-confidence and esteem could be significantly improved. The education was not only about acquiring knowledge, but it provided a means to restore a sense of self and a transformation. Growth in confidence in their own knowledge and opinions inevitably brought about a change in their perceptions of themselves in relation to others. The women’s college experience had contributed to the development of a greater sense of personal agency and the possibility for greater independence. The impact of college extended beyond the lectures and exams, effecting and negotiating many aspects of their lives.
It widens your world, you see the world in many different colours, and the only thing that bothers me is how limited young people are in their view having done the course, now maybe it’s because they are young and without life experience. For an older person who did the degree I would say it had far more value because it added to my experience, and it was another piece of the jigsaw. To some degree I was more at peace with myself. If something is bothering me and I need to speak to someone about it, I will do all of the research beforehand. You question your religion, your relationships, your society, there is no structure you can depend on.

(Hazel, Interview 23, 98-106)

I think I became more assertive from the course, standing up for myself more...he’s coming round to it [laughs]. My partner and I still have a good relationship, perhaps it is even better, I suppose I was quiet by nature, but I am more open to say how I feel...the whole thing about the church, the way we were brought up, hell...and all we were taught, you get to see how it oppressed.

(Dinah, Interview 24, 48-54)

I was awakened to the whole area of disability, back home they relied on alms and they were seen as no good. I saw it from the charity model, you know they need help. No knowledge of them having ability. I hope to work in the area of policy and advocacy in my country, because things need to change...it’s a curse from the gods.

(Nichola, Interview 28, 66-69)

The whole four years of theory have enlightened my practical experiences. I can actually attach theory to practice now. Kant comes to mind, it has not just to be good for you, it has to be good for the whole community. And that is the way I am looking at things. I have a better understanding, I have the ability to be analytical now which I didn’t have before. I would question, but I would not be criticising. I have the power to question because I have the power to question because I have the confidence to question authority. The academic side is necessary. To use the right language.

(Marie, Interview 9, 119-131)

In the workplace, there are two men who cannot respect my position of superiority and they make it clear. I think being a woman, plus having an education and applying theory to practice to make changes in the work place makes me unpopular. They defy me on everything.

(Yvonne, Interview 1, 100-104)

I certainly see things differently.

(Brenda, Interview 16, 124)
I remember epistemology and ontology in philosophy and ethics. One of the first things we came on was Socrates and the notion of how do we know anything and his method of constantly questioning things to get at the truth. The biggest revelation for me for the five years of college is how little I actually know...I constantly felt I had to read more as I knew so little. If something was introduced in the class, it wouldn’t be enough for me, I would have to go off and find out more...I am an agnostic...any hope I had of believing was completely undermined by my learning.

(Aoishe, Interview 26, 109-124)

There is evidence from the women’s stories that there is a clear sense of self-transformation and of growing autonomy and confidence as a result of having completed a degree programme. Hazel uses the word ‘colours’ to describe the many perspectives with which she now sees the world. She qualifies this by suggesting that being older as a student is involved in the process of change brought about by higher education. She is more at peace with herself despite not having any structure to depend upon. This is quite powerful as it implies a tremendous growth in her self-belief.

Dinah moved from being passive and shy to being more assertive, although she laughs when she mentions that her husband is adjusting to the changes. The inference here is that he is reluctantly doing so. Nichola was motivated by her study of disability to bring her new found knowledge back to her own country and work to improve policy. Marita is somewhat nostalgic about how things used to be prior to her epistemological change. Marie is clear that critical thinking and the ability to apply theory in her life has given her courage to question authority, and important to this is improved vocabulary.

Yvonne’s change impacted on relations with her male work colleagues. She now believes herself to be unpopular, which may require some conflict negotiation skills on her behalf. Aoishe developed a hunger for knowledge, but lost the faith she had, as she now sees knowledge and faith as being incompatible. Marta, Yvonne and Aoishe may be in a stage of adjustment to their relatively recent change in educational status, and some rebalancing may occur.

This revised self was a process and was not straightforward as it involved losses as well as gains. West (1996) refers to it as a fragmenting process. From their own words, it is clear that their ways of processing, producing and evaluating knowledge had changed. This change or epistemic doubt forced them to weigh up evidence and to discern the truthfulness of beliefs.
There was, for some of the women, a dissonance, a discomfort arising from conflicting views. Many of the women had held a blind faith in authorities all their lives prior to the college experience. For these women, much of their lives had been determined by external forces, and the new perspective highlighted this, causing an existential anxiety (Barnett, 1999). Reay’s (2002) study of working class mature students found that students were strongly motivated by education as a form of self-realisation, but were managing a delicate balance between ‘investing in a new identity and holding on to a cohesive self’ (Reay, 2002: 403). Bennetts (2003) discusses developmental and transformational learning, the two forms that adult learning takes. Developmental learning focuses on human effectiveness in personal life and career. Transformational learning however, aims at evoking a new consciousness and self-understanding. This consists of major changes in thinking, feeling, acting, relating and being. The women’s stories certainly support this, as their being in the world had changed significantly. The concept of transition generally refers to ‘periods of major change in a person’s life during which his or her entire world view is challenged and the situational context calls for a readjustment in social roles and activities’ (Chiroboga and Pierce 1993: 43).

According to Gorard and Rees (2002), the most relevant determinant of later take up of education was found to be the disposition to learn. This is evident to me as a lecturer as mature students are committed, dedicated and enthusiastic, and their attendance by far surpasses that of the younger students. They participate and contribute well in tutorials. The majority of the women in my research came to higher education because they wanted to learn, to better themselves and to compensate for their potential having been diminished or destroyed because of their earlier educational experiences. They had fragile learner identities (Gallagher 2000, Weil 1998), but they had a positive disposition to learn. Weil’s (1986) study of non-traditional students (older and previously unqualified) on undergraduate courses formed a foundation for the concept of learner identity. Early school experience was found to be a determinant of a poor learner identity, and significantly also was parental attitude during school years. However, the most relevant determinant of later take-up of education was found to be the disposition to learn (Gorard & Rees, 2002).

The part played by education in the creation and reproduction of class inequalities has been well established in the sociological literature on Ireland (Gray & O’Carroll, 2012). The majority of the women in my study had been born into working class families and their early
educational experiences had been negative. Many of the women who described very negative Primary school experiences added that their resilience relied on their friendships. Daly & Leonard (2002: 131) found in their study that ‘for a third of the children school was nothing more other than a venue for meeting friends’. Parents were indifferent to or rejecting of the value of education, and this resulted in a lack of confidence around learning and self-doubt about the women’s own ability. Having a positive learning identity is associated with positive learning experiences, however, for these women, lack of success at school was an incentive to go to college and had provided them with the disposition to learn.

Edwards (1993) found that mature students with children were both financially poor and time poor, and this is borne out in this study for many of the women as they relied on grant-aid to get through the course. Those with young children commented on the lack of time to do everything, and several spoke about their attempts to compensate their children by occasional Saturday trips. The struggles meant that, for many, study was to be endured, rather than enjoyed. An important aspect of time management was combining study, childcare, family responsibilities and in some cases, paid work. Obligation to family became a tyrannical but much accepted challenge. Gender socialisation provided these women with a low threshold for guilt around what they believed to be their primary responsibility: the home, husband and children. The guilt experienced by the women caused problems for their learning, as they reported not being able to concentrate on an assignment if they had put the children second. Serious distress was experienced by some of the women due to this. One woman continued to care for her grandchild during the most demanding times at college, because she did not want to disappoint her adult daughter. Another felt guilty on turning down a request to babysit her grandson coming up to her final exams. Some of the women felt they had abandoned their spouse or partner and felt the need to compensate for this. Regardless of nationality, these feelings were shared by all the women; there was a strong obligation to be a good wife or partner and a good mother. They had to be available at all times, and when they just could not be available, they experienced a disappointment in themselves. It appeared that many of the women were running to keep up with all the demands on their lives, but they were determined to do so. Time management was identified by all as a major issue, as they dealt with college and family. They put the onus on themselves to solve the problem of reconciling the demands of family responsibilities and study. However, what was interpreted as a problem of time management seemed to be more of a structural than a personal issue, linked to the gendered assumptions about women’s primary responsibility being child care.
They were aware that they could not give as much time to their studies as they would have liked. Strategies were developed to cope with the work without neglecting family responsibilities. At best, they attended lectures and tutorials, but most informal study was squeezed in between attending to domestic issues and sleep. Edwards (1993: 73) describes women in this situation as ‘tethering on a knife’s edge with a finely-tuned structure of arrangements that they had constructed for fitting family and education into their lives’. Merrill (1999) notes that a lack of integration between home and college life often requires students to engage in complex coping strategies and the pressures of family life often force students to assign lower priority to their study. One of the women admitted to cooking meals at three in the morning, others worked until five in the morning on assignments and some cleaned the house and did the laundry when they should have been in bed. They were pulled in two very different directions by what Edwards (1993: 62) refers to as the ‘two greedy institutions’. For the women in my study, the responsibilities of motherhood were both accepted and in a sense, tyrannical while at college. Also significant, and was highlighted by many of them, was their own mothers’ influence on their lives. Mixed emotions were associated with their mothers, some of whom were very old and frail at the time of the interviews. Given the traditional view of the mother in patriarchal society as passive and powerless, it is ironic that the influence, either positive or negative of their mothers was significant. Julie has grown progressively angry with her now elderly mother; her story of her early childhood told of a sense of abandonment and dismissal by her mother. Guilt experienced by Julie regarding her own mothering extended beyond her college experience. She felt guilty most of the time because her youngest son hated his after-school club while she studied; but when her sixteen year old son became clinically depressed, she also blamed herself for that. There was a damage done in her childhood, and her sense of self is closely tied to her relationship with her mother. The work of Rich (1977) is pertinent here. She emphasised the complexity of the oppressive and the empowering dimensions of motherhood. Julie was driven in her mothering by her childhood parental, and especially, maternal experiences, she felt somewhat inadequate most of the time as a mother. Any unhappiness experienced by her two children was associated with some fault of hers.

There was the woman in this study whose daughter became distant, and the woman whose young daughter waited two hours for a bed-time story to be read, before approaching her mother working on an assignment, who had forgotten about the story. These women were unforgiving of themselves for these things, and spoke of being devastated in such perceived
failings. Ruddick (1995: 119) defines mothering as a ‘kind of work, involving protection and nurturance’, and refers to it as ‘attentive love’. The majority of the women in the study (except for those whose children were adults while they attended college) provided evidence of attentive love as a way of thinking and being, something that when challenged by an assignment for college caused much conflict and discomfort. The women who came from middle-class backgrounds, two Irish women and three non-Irish displayed less dutiful obedience to their own mothers than the Irish working class women. The latter group showed intense duty to their mothers, respect and love were expressed by many, but they also exposed a thin veil of anger and resentment. However, any faults of their mothers were quickly defended and forgiven in words by many. Children of highly educated parents have weaker parental as well as general family obligations than children of less educated parents (De Vries et al, 2009).

All of the women spoke of different events in their childhood which had a major influence on their lives and had affected their self-perception in some way. This is especially true of the Irish women. For many of them, there was a rejection of, or a need to modify the way in which some part of their identity has been defined, either by their family, past or present, or by others in society. They became more than their household and caring responsibilities.

Very clearly, the data show that the women gained much more than a qualification from having returned to education. There was the need to prove, both to themselves and to others that they had academic ability, which for many of them which had been thwarted in their childhood. Another common thread interpreted from the stories was a strong desire for independence; a personal independence that goes beyond financial independence. Important too, was the need for a positive self-image which is clearly linked with the growing confidence which they spoke about. Independence, greater control over their lives and a more positive self-image gave the women a revised identity. Education also has a therapeutic and cathartic outcome.

Dissonance around the issue of obligation emerged during the course of their study, as they became aware of gender inequality and gendered roles which were constructed for them and imposed on them. Belenky et al (1986) describes frameworks of meaning making. The women went from a position of silence where they were ‘voiceless’ and ‘mindless’ and ‘subject to the whims of external authority’ (Belenky et al 1986: 153) through received,
subjective, procedural stages ending up with constructed knowledge. The women in my study described similar experiences as to how they had changed over the four years of the degree programme. Their new found ability to speak to those they would not have had a voice for before; and in situations from which they would formerly have shied away. Yet, with such a change, for some the long-held fragile learner identity (Gallagher 2000) could not be totally eliminated, as they spoke about self-doubt even while studying for a Master’s degree. The message received by them as young children from teachers, parents, authority and social processes was that they were not as good as other people who had status and wealth. This moulding of their selves became fixed at a time when attachments were being formed, and schemas developed firmly.

The study by Belenky et al. (1986) threw light on the way people who have been misrepresented or are unable to represent themselves, act and think. In the position of silence and received knowledge words are viewed as weapons and ways of knowing are limited to the present, the actual or the concrete. There is blind obedience to authorities and speaking of self almost impossible. (Frances, who finally got the courage to leave an abusive marriage had developed the strength to do so while at college). The link between class, gender and power became a very important aspect of this study. The women used the information gained from lectures and tutorials to inform their thinking and contextualising this knowledge was important for them as a revised view of the world required harmony with their own frame of reference. Belenky et al sum up the complex process of how women’s thinking shifts and changes, and refers to the final product as connected knowing.

Connected knowers develop procedures for gaining access to other people’s knowledge...they know that they can only approximate other people’s experiences so can gain only limited access to their knowledge...they begin with an interest in the facts of other people’s lives, but they gradually shift the focus to other people’s ways of thinking...they see personality as adding to the perception and so the personality of each member of the group enriches the group’s understanding. (Belenky et al 1986: 113, 115, 119)

‘Women’s Ways of Knowing’ (Belenky et al, 1986) was groundbreaking in that it studied women from diverse backgrounds. As well as samples of women from universities, the authors specifically included women from what they called ‘the invisible colleges’ who had limited formal education. Generally, they came from poor and working class backgrounds. The focus of the interviews was on women’s experiences of life and learning. The majority of
the women in my study came from working class backgrounds (twenty two); and eight from middle class backgrounds, five of whom were non-Irish and had already completed a higher education degree programme in their own countries. All but one of the women attended a small college in rural Ireland. Although the study by Belenky et al is quite old, I believe it to be relevant for the cohort that makes up my sample. The work of Gilligan (1993) and Hayes and Flannery (2000) are also important to understanding women and their learning, but, I focused on the Belenky et al study because I felt it contributed to and guided what was current in my research.

6.5 Summary

For many of the women, their experiences of life fitted well with the theoretical construct of patriarchy espoused by Walby (1990) in terms of subjugation in various forms. According to Walby (1990), women’s labour is expropriated by their husbands, and sometimes their fathers, within the marriage and household relationship. This private patriarchy operates via the gender division of labour in the household which forces women to take primary responsibility for housework and childcare, even if they are also in full-time employment. Walby (1990) maintains firstly that the domestic labour arrangements are a principal form of gender division and a serious form of inequality, and secondly, that there are significant links between this and other forms of inequality. Hart (1995: 118) argues that ‘the sexual division of labour still gives an almost exclusive responsibility for raising children to women because the work is devalued’.

Walby’s (1990) concern with the way gender is represented in society is important to this study. The traditionalist approach is essentialist, that men and women are essentially different in physical, emotional and psychological make-up. This approach influences the socialisation of men and women into different roles from early childhood through the institutions of the family, education, the church, and the media. For all of the women in my study, from early childhood, there were very different expectations for their brothers by their parents, teachers and communities, than what was expected for them. Class and gender combined to diminish and limit their life choices and opportunities. Power and control, and for some, violence were common determinants of their lives. I interpreted deeper understandings of the women’s experiences than what they sometimes expressed directly. What emerged included physical and psychological violence, guilt, control and oppression, not only by men, but by women in
their lives, and the expected concern with structure and agency. However, while there was ample evidence from the stories that patriarchal society influenced the women’s lives significantly, but in terms of agency, their returning to education was indicative of agency.

Free Second Level education was made available in 1967 (Smyth, 2003), and this benefited most of the women, in so far that they had the opportunity that would not have been there for those born in the 1950s. Yet, for the majority of them, this opportunity did not present with options for life after school. Their young lives were pre-determined at the intersection of class, church and gender. Their life trajectories contained none of their choices, wishes or dreams. Love, affection and respect between parents and children seems to have been absent for some, or conditional on blind obedience, compliance and conformity. There was coldness, yet, paradoxically, there was for many, respect for and a sense of duty, especially towards the mother. A common strength was the bond between siblings, and how they looked out for each other. Words to describe their lives include powerlessness, oppression, lack of opportunity and choice, and childhood disruption.

All but one of the thirty women believed that higher education transformed their lives, despite the challenges. However, while several examples describing greater self-confidence were given, in other ways the entrenchment of childhood socialisation emerged in some comments about the support by their husband or partner. One woman felt her husband was really helpful, as on occasions when she had to stay in college later than usual, he would cook dinner. There was the husband who did not notice the need for housework, but his wife felt he did his best, so she dealt with the shortfall. There was a man on the other hand who deliberately created barriers. The woman who experienced no sense of transformation as a result of higher education claimed to be disappointed as she reached a plateau after first year. She felt unchallenged intellectually as she consistently received distinctions for all assignments. Consequently, it was clear that for some of the women the transformations were principally in the realm of confidence, new perspectives and a change in role and some of these transformations can be considered to have persistence and perhaps even permanence. In other cases, even though there were significant changes in self-value and perspective, there were domains of their lives which remained unchanged by the educational experience and they often remained with the same roles in the family that they had prior to entering higher education.
Consistent in all the stories was a sense of guilt, usually to do with children and home. This caused a lot of stress, as these women were very committed to their studies, and also, they were very committed to their role of mother and wife. The conflict actually caused one woman to have a breakdown requiring medication. Competing demands and her availability to all, meant doing a degree was very stressful for her.

Many of the stories included the experience of violence, from early childhood to married life. The majority of the women had experienced corporal punishment at school, but a few also encountered it at home also. There was quite a lot of emotional abuse or neglect. Religious adherence was very important to a lot of the families, inculcating and instilling in them values that positioned the children, and especially daughters, in a fixed space of lesser value and obedience. In a way, many of their childhoods were stolen or damaged.

The transformative aspect of education was shared by most of the women in the study, especially those from a lower socio-economic background. The intersection of class and gender in the socio-cultural era of domination by the Church determined their life pathways. This research, based on their stories therefore, belongs to the history of education and indeed, history itself. These women who grew up in 1960s’ Ireland are a unique cohort, with shared experiences and individual realities. Agency and structure interacted to shape the behaviour and consciousness of the women, their lives were products of patriarchal structures, yet by their action of going to college they made an attempt to transcend structural constraints From childhood to adulthood, their lives had been shaped by the forces of gender and class. Studying for a degree represented an active decision to take greater control, to break free from gender and class constraints, and to transform their individual lives. They had realised that being female and, in most cases working-class, had limited their aspirations and horizons. A high value was placed on education as a mechanism for personal change and self-development; it was seen as a way of reaching self-realisation, and self-actualisation.

The women in my study had returned to education many years after leaving school with life experiences both good and bad. Parr (2000) claims that women who return to education at midlife do so to redefine at least part of their identity, to see themselves in a different way and to exert a degree of control over some aspects of their lives. This is true of the women in my study. Lack of control and choice, oppression and disempowerment were recurring themes throughout the majority of the women’s stories of their lives. Class and gender in the context
of Irish society in the 1960s and 1970s had combined in force to prevent most of these women from having a voice or a choice. Their lives were very much influenced by the historically and culturally engrained definition of womanhood. Higher education brought a revelation, and with it, an awareness that their way of being in the world had changed. It is evident from their stories that there is a clear sense of self-transformation and of growing autonomy and confidence.

6.6 Conclusion

On the whole, higher education had a transformative effect on the inner lives of the women even though these changes were not shared among all of the women. Those who may never gain employment as a result of furthering their education were, in the main contented with the personal consequences of having completed a degree. Those who were born into middle-class families felt distinctly less transformed within as their less privileged counterparts; those, whose early experiences of education had negatively tailored their ways of learning and knowing. The prevailing meritocratic view that ability and effort alone will bring reward resonates through the stories of the majority of the women, as ability could not be realised in the system as experienced by them, and effort was thwarted by the attitude and treatment they received by the institutions of family and education.

The main obstacles for the women in college were their caring responsibilities, time poverty as a result of managing academic, child care and domestic tasks, emotional stress about child care provision, and guilt in relation to the conflicting roles of mother and student. The women changed within themselves and they experienced change in their close relationships. However, despite the challenges and possible deterioration of relationships, the most fundamental and pervasive benefit from learning is the growth in self-confidence and its influence on their relational capacity.
Chapter 7: Understanding the Narratives

7.1 Introduction
The research questions ask about the transformation in women’s lives based on their previous educational experiences and the experience of higher education at a later point in life. The discussion of this chapter brings together the individual narratives and attempts to provide more contour to the data by identifying those features of the cross-dimensional themes of gender, class and church/power that stand out and constitute the distinguishing findings of the study. These themes came about from the shared, recurring events in the women’s lives as told in their stories. Under the heading of the dimension of the challenges encountered a number of sub-themes around power (Firestone, 1974; Butler, 1990; Harding, 1996; Hartsock, 1997) can be distinguished and given greater focus. Similarly, consideration of change over time reveals more specific facets of the changes and their results. Finally, greater definitions can be given to the final dimension of women’s learning and knowing (Gilligan, 1982; Belenky et al. 1986). The combined conceptual and theoretical framework of a Gadamerian-Feminist phenomenology through narrative analysis, is thereby shown to have been an effective approach that respects the integrity and distinctiveness of the narratives while, at the same time, allowing for some more analytical conclusions concerning the interpretation of these women’s lives.

7.2 The Challenge of Negotiating Power in Roles and Decisions
In the consideration of the challenge posed by power relations in the lives of the women, it is possible to identify a number of distinguishing aspects within this particular group of women:

- mothering and relationships with mothers,
- experiences of oppression,
- the socio-cultural influence of church, and
- obligation to others.

The majority of the women indicated that higher education made them stronger in themselves, more wise and more self-confident. The space offered by college provided the means for growth and change and for a sense of empowerment and control in their personal lives. I draw on the work of Mezirow, who has written extensively on the transformative possibilities of
learning, arguing that educators can provide opportunities for adults to develop skills to be ‘critically reflective’ (Mezirow, 2003: 62), and thereby open up opportunities for personal transformation. For the majority of the women in the study, this transformation was both cognitive and intuitive which created a shift in consciousness and altered their way of being in the world. Mezirow describes transformational learning as:

The process by which we transform our taken for granted frames of reference (perspectives, mind-sets, habits of mind) to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change, and reflective so that they may generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or justified to guide action. (Mezirow, 2000: 7-8)

He argues that through education, women challenge their psychosocial assumptions and develop a more critical positioning towards their structural oppression, and this was borne out in this study by the women who made changes in their relationships and in how they interacted with those in authority. In their earlier lives they lived within structures of domination and oppression which determined their actions. Higher education facilitated the majority of the women in this study to acquire the insight, ability and disposition to realise the potential in their lives. According to Mezirow, transformative learning occurs when an adult engages in activities that cause or allow them to see a different worldview from their own. They then have to integrate the implications of that different worldview into their own worldview, thereby enlarging it. For the most of the women, higher education placed a microscope on their earlier lives, and for some, their current lives as they took on new perspectives. With change and transformation came ambivalence and anxiety. This finding supports that of Reay (2005) who claims, change and transformation occur when habitus encounters a field with which it is not familiar, but also occurring are disquiet, ambivalence, insecurity and uncertainty. The women were strongly motivated by education, but they had to manage a delicate balance between ‘investing in a new improved identity and holding on to a cohesive self’ (Reay, 2002: 403). They viewed their world differently and they viewed themselves differently. As indicated above, a number of subthemes could be identified in the analysis of the data. We now take each of these up in turn analysing each in terms of the theoretical frame and the literature.
7.2.1 Mothering and relationships with mothers

Many of the women in this study returned to domesticity after finishing college, for some temporarily as they awaited the start of a post-graduate course or others who were actively seeking employment. While this might seem as returning to unchanged roles, they were however, more critical about their role as housewife. A gender consciousness had emerged. The acquisition of knowledge had led the women to reflect upon their position as women in society. As Lisa pointed out, that for her it had taken a full year of college to realise that she did not have to cook and clean for her husband. So radical was her awakening she almost left her husband. Nancy spent a lot of time in her final year of college visiting her terminally ill mother in a Hospice. She would bring her college work with her, and she combined visiting her mother with study. Retrospectively this caused regret, remorse and guilt. The feeling of guilt was also associated with her young children, and although she said her husband was ‘great’, she described his frustration at being ‘abandoned’. Generally, for most of the women, guilt associated with children and obligation to family was the most salient challenge for them while studying. They were pulled in two opposing directions. The role of mother was significant, as was the relationship between the women and their own mothers. Their mothers in many of the cases were subjugated by their husbands. The U.S. concept of intensive mothering (Hayes, 1996) is applicable to women in Ireland of the 1960s. The majority of the women grew up in this environment. Intensive mothering includes three beliefs: child rearing should be child-centred, it should be done by mothers, and it should be done by mobilising countless resources of time, money and energy (Hayes, 1996). O’Reilly (2004: 14) refers to this as ‘sacrificial motherhood’. In 20th century Ireland, motherhood was seen as synonymous with being a woman (Scannell, 1988; O’ Connor, 1998; Valiulis, 2009).

Julie felt resentment and anger at her mother for always putting the children second to their father; a man who inflicted violence and instilled fear. Julie felt abandoned by her mother on several occasions throughout her childhood and adolescence. She was angry because of the powerlessness of her mother in relation to her father. From a very young age, Julie experienced the effects of class and gender inequality which resulted in a lifelong lack of self-confidence. From her experiences with her mother and in the mothering of her own two sons, Julie described very well the contradictions of motherhood. Women’s strengths, weaknesses and sense of self-worth are all affected by outside forces, which in turn affect their performance as mothers (O’Connor, 1998). These forces include societal discriminations such
as disadvantage, lack of education and gender role expectations which are oppressive and can complicate the mother-daughter relationship. The hurt she experienced in childhood as a result of her relationship with her mother has, it would seem, blinded Julie to the outside forces of the 1960s and 1970s experienced by her mother, such as the power of the church and cultural expectations of women as wives, even in abusive relationships like hers. Julie remains unforgiving towards her mother, even as an old woman in poor health physically she is deemed very manipulative. Despite the violence of her father, Julie focused her anger on her mother. I found no literature on this phenomenon. She states that her mother was terrified of her father, yet can feel no empathy for her. Julie also describes her feelings of failure as a mother on discovering her teenage son’s depression. She, like many of the women felt responsible for their children’s on-going happiness.

In the Western world, women are seen as individuals who can effortlessly engage in the task of emotional giving (Hochschild, 1983), and are likely to feel inadequate and guilty when they cannot meet this ideal, or when their children experience problems (Hayes, 1996). The ‘good mother’ image persists in the media, popular culture and workplaces, and as Ruddick (2001: 189) argues ‘the good mother casts a long shadow over other women’s lives’. This social construct of the ‘good mother’ places pressure on women to conform to certain standards, against which they are judged and judge themselves. Radical feminists implicate motherhood with the subordination of women (Goodwin & Huppatz, 2004).

The fantasy about how a mother is supposed to feel haunts almost every mother. Because the myth of the ‘good mother’ denies the power of real-life ambivalence of love and hate – mothers feel ashamed of acknowledging their ‘unacceptable feelings’ and their limits...When taboo feelings can’t be acknowledged, not even to ourselves, a mother’s self-regard is likely to plummet. (Lerner, 2001: 250)

Parker (2010) agrees that maternal ambivalence is socially unacceptable and therefore inflates maternal guilt. Motherhood in reality is often experienced as stressful and exhausting (Gatrell, 2005), but disclosing this can be seen as failing. Twenty-three of the women had dependent children while at college. Organising time for the children was their on-going concern, and they all spoke about the guilt felt when they could not be available at all times. When attending to homework from college, they made judgements against their commitment to mothering, especially if they were enjoying the work. The contradictory aspects of mothering involves the disconnect between what is expected and what is experienced. Chodorow (1995)
argues that the idealised mother, full of love, forgiveness and selflessness does not and cannot exist, so all mothers are destined to disappoint their children and themselves. Yet, despite all the negative arguments, O’Reilly (2006) sees the potential for empowerment in mothering as it involves the agency of women in their roles as mothers. Despite all the tensions around being a full-time college student and being a mother, they enjoyed the power that came with taking charge of their children’s lives. Those who had teenage children were proud of the fact that they were positive role models for them. They influenced and motivated their children to do well at school. For most of these women, such empowerment was very important, as they were the first in their family to go to college.

Carol is very forgiving of her parents and makes no distinction between mothering and parenting. Her parents were academics and they moved from the UK to Belfast in the late 1960s, so Carol was a child during ‘The Troubles’ in the north of Ireland. At the age of seven, Carol was placed with a family which she had never met. She was very unhappy and remembers school as offering some comfort. At the age of eight, she was sent to Boarding school. Education became her escape in life as she refers to the safety of education. Being black, adopted and consequently different, she found solace in education, and asked very little of her mother or father. She spoke about the difficult childhoods that both her parents had as they had been evacuated during the Second World War, and she used the well-known images of young children in photographs standing in train stations, with little suits on the boys and little bonnets on the girls, with the suit cases and gas masks. She had huge sympathy for her parents’ childhoods, and held no resentment about her childhood. Her interest was in the fact that she was a year old on being adopted and so, as a therapist, she views the attachment as somewhat disordered.

Frances experienced a lot of cruelty from her parents. Both parents had very little education and had no interest in Frances’ schooling. She was beaten by both her teacher and her mother with sticks. The teachers told her that she was stupid; they told her parents that she was stupid and her parents believed it. The teacher advised Frances’ mother when she was thirteen years old that she would be less of a financial burden if they removed her from school and sent her out to work. Frances’ mother continued to dominate her when she went out to work, by taking her wages. Frances had worked for five years before she found out how much she earned, and she had thought that the five pounds her mother gave her weekly having handed up her page packet, was her actual wage. Forgivingly, Frances explained that such behaviour was
common-place in those times as families were so big and impoverished, mothers had to do these things to survive.

Frances escaped her home-life by moving in to live with her boyfriend as she had become pregnant. Her father had aimed a gun at her on discovering that she was pregnant. She was to spend years a victim of horrendous physical, emotional and sexual violence. She was forced into multiple pregnancies and had five children, despite only ever wanting one. Her choice regarding motherhood was removed, as her husband beat her when he discovered she was taking contraceptives. Having no control over her fertility meant that each pregnancy increased her economic dependency on him. Motherhood became her prison, and he continued to beat her for any random reason, if the baby was crying, if she cooked a meal which was not to his satisfaction, or if he felt like it. Frances, it seems became the ‘…passive self-sacrificing mother’ (O’Connor, 1998: 87).

Helen placed her mother on a pedestal in that she sacrificed her life almost for her father, who was the boss in the household, as was the case in many of the women’s stories of their early life. Frances saw her father as unapproachable. Julie knew her mother was terrified of her father. Jane believed her father to be strict. Helen went on to imitate her mother in her own marriage by facilitating her husband’s superiority. He would not ‘allow’ her to return to education at one point and she accepted it. She made the mothering of her children the sole priority of her life until they were adults.

Aoishe was somewhat critical of her mother because she felt she allowed her father make all the decisions in the household, she had no voice, especially when it came to the many times they moved home. Her father was a Second Level school teacher and perhaps he had to move to make more money, as different schools had different pay scales. She, like Julie was angry with her mother. When her father died in a traffic accident, her mother became depressed and could not cope, as she did not know how to live without him. She was from another country and was very much alone. As her father had made all the decisions for the family, Aoishe’s mother had problems dealing with four young children on her own, so a young Aoishe took over as carer and spent her teenage years looking after and worrying about her mother and also her younger siblings. Aoishe felt resentful of having lost out on her youth, which she believes is the reason she over compensated with her only son, who she feels has become too uncaring. Nancy, Amanda, Nichola, Rita, Donna, Carol, Christine, Annette, Dinah, Liz,
Yvonne, Sheila, Dolores, Rosemary, Helen, Julie, Stephanie and Katie held themselves responsible for the happiness and contentment of the other members of their family. Julie is the only one of the women whose husband was fully supportive in that he did the housework, made lunches, cooked dinners, did the laundry and even changed his hours of work to allow Julie time to study. However, when her son became clinically depressed at sixteen, she felt responsible. Nancy and Tina cared for their sick mothers as well as children. The welfare and happiness of the children remained the priority, with the husband or partner a close second. Annette and Katie gave time to grandchildren on a regular basis, and even coming up to exams, Katie continued as she did not want to disappoint her daughter and grandchild. This kind of behaviour has been termed emotional hoarding (Hochschild, 1989), or intensive mothering (Hayes, 1996).

Being a wife and a mother is more than merely roles for the women, they are core identities which cannot be easily separated from the rest of themselves. Their student role required attitudes and behaviour that are inconsistent with traditional female spouse and parental roles, which in turn created a lot of conflict as they were determined to fulfil these roles as well as being diligent students. These attitudes and behaviour required for their student role are those of self-investment and the ability to remove themselves completely from the expectations of family (Edwards, 1993). Their wife and mother role, being culturally tenacious and designed around traditional models of women as self-sacrificing all of the time, runs counter to the investment of time to their studies.

The narratives about mothering suggest a strong connection with place and family history in an old fashioned manner. According to Taylor (2010) this is the ‘born and bred’ narrative pattern. This ‘born and bred’ narrative ‘overlaps with a narrative of ancestry in which women are positioned as wives, mothers and homemakers’ (Taylor, 2005c: 251).

### 7.2.2 Experiences of oppression and the socio-cultural influence of Church

This section addresses the sub-theme of oppression and the Church and its distinctive place in the lives of the women of this study. As suggested earlier, the world and the culture in which these women grew up and experienced education for the first time is now in the past and would not be familiar to women of later generations. However, this aspect is one that emerges
as being crucial in any understanding of these women, and those of their generation, entering higher education.

In Ireland of the 1960s and 1970s, sexuality, marriage and reproduction were inseparable (Barry, 1992; Inglis, 1998; O’Connor, 1998), particularly in rural Ireland. External pressures – familial, religious or general social influences – and also the internal pressures – economic dependence and large families meant that the union of marriage was far from democratic and fair for the woman (Hill, 2003). As referred to in ‘Chains or Change’, a publication by the Irish Women’s Liberation Movement in 1971, a married woman was regarded as the chattel of her husband. This was particularly true for working-class women. The Irish Women’s Liberation Movement was established by a group of feminists, mainly journalists in 1970 (Connolly, 2003), and they are especially remembered for taking a train to Belfast to purchase contraceptives, which they brought back to Dublin. Gender inequality was becoming an urgent item for discussion and action in Dublin, but there were no challenges to patriarchy in rural Ireland, where the lives of working class women centred around enforced domesticity and rearing of children by church and state. Avoidance of pregnancy was viewed by the Roman Catholic Church as sinful and therefore most families were large. In 1960 the Irish fertility rate was 40% higher than the average for European countries, and decline proceeded sooner and faster in those countries (CSO, 2000). The childhood of many of the women in this study was bound by Ireland’s traditional patriarchal society that confined women to the home and ‘characterised them as uni-dimensional’ (Colgan-McCarthy, 1992: 37).

The education system was biased against the children of working class background, even though the Christian Brothers and other congregations of religious educated tens of thousands of working class children. One of the negative memories spoken about by the women was the differential treatment by lay and religious teachers because they were from poor families. Cruelty by nuns was described by Katie, Dolores, Joan and Tina. Being placed at the back of the class-room was mentioned by many of the women. Liz, Karen, Carol, Amanda, Nichola and Marie had no experiences of cruelty or differential treatment, and all six came from wealthy families.

All Primary schools were church run and a significant number of teachers were members of the religious congregations. The bias was not only against working class children, but against girls also. Girls from poor families were taught to read, write, sew, cook and pray, as
highlighted by Jane in her interview, ‘…a lot of the emphasis wasn’t on teaching, I don’t remember much learning…it was all about prayer’ (Interview 17: 9-10). The data reveal that for this group girls were educated to be wives and mothers. Girls were not encouraged to aim for Third Level education (Harford, 2008). School as an agent of socialisation exerted power and control through which class and gender inequality were transmitted. Ridicule, belittling and shaming played a major role in how teachers and in many cases, parents, disciplined children. Many of the women spoke about not only the cruelty, but the ridicule they experienced at school, and their early awareness of class distinction. These early education experiences had a significant impact on their learning and self-esteem, which influenced their learning in college. Lynch and Lodge investigated issues of power and justice in schools in 2002.

If all students are not treated with equal respect and enabled to develop their capabilities to the full, this raises important moral questions about the right of the state to confine people in an institution that may have enduring negative effects, be that culturally, economically or socially. (Lynch & Lodge, 2002: 2)

Oppression came in other forms also for some of the women. Domestic violence was a reality for Katie, Rita, Yvonne, Joan, Helen, Frances and Julie. Rita was advised by a court official to go home and make her marriage work; Frances was refused help by the Gardaí and Yvonne recounted her mother-in-law’s cry for help through the church Confessional where she was admonished to be a good wife. Frances’s life included very harsh treatment from an early age which continued in her adult life with physical, emotional and sexual abuse tailoring her marriage. She accepted this treatment because of her five children, the children she tried not to conceive. Her attempts to use oral contraception which were discovered by her husband were responded to by kicks, punches and general beatings. Julie spoke about her father’s attempt to kill her mother; and the paradoxical situation in which Julie observed her mother’s fear of, respect for and sexual attraction towards her father. Yvonne recounted her rape vividly as part of her story. Rita emphasised that it was only twenty years ago that she was told by the Gardaí when she approached them for help in a domestic violence situation, that there was nothing they could do. Katie said her marriage ‘went downhill from the start’ prior to having three children, and stated that ‘after ten years it was awful’ (Katie, Interview 4: 53-54).
These women had disclosed their experiences of domestic violence in class discussion. When the subject was the issue for a class, those who said nothing disclosed the trauma in their non-verbal communication, which for a few was leaving the room. Joan’s visible anger; Frances becoming upset; Julie nodding in agreement when the cycle of abuse was mentioned; Rita’s haunted look and Helen’s silence are examples of how their experiences remained very close to the surface for them. It became an open secret, as did other experiences of abuse in the tutorials. Open disclosure can increase vulnerability for the woman in the group, but for those who did disclose, it was their right to do so, and not to be silenced.

The experience of violence by these women unfortunately is not a 20th century phenomenon. A recent report from Amnesty International claims that violence against women in this country is widespread. At the core of most cases are coercion, intimidation and the use of male privilege as the social world remains gendered. Whilst the recent focus on the violence perpetrated by the church has come centre-stage in Ireland, gender-based violence has yet to receive the same recognition and attention. It must be acknowledged that men are sometimes the victims, however, the victims are overwhelmingly women in 2014.

Joan spoke of her mother’s life in a Magdalen laundry and referred to the horror stories she told. Through a series of laws and agreements, the Catholic Church was granted unregulated and unmonitored control of these laundries to which over 30,000 women were sent over the course of the 20th century. ‘Fallen women’ was a phrase used in describing women like Joan’s mother who lived and worked in such a laundry managed by nuns. The ideological climate of the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s for rural, working class women was characterised by domination and oppression from institutional power and control. This control is associated with the strictures of the Catholic Church. Control was achieved by instilling fear, especially in women. Enforced domesticity was another feature of domination and oppression where women were subjugated as chattels of their husbands who had complete control of them. This included the sexual availability of the wives and the conjugal rights of the husband. Yvonne spoke about her mother in law who confessed to the priest her anxiety about personal matters and he told her to go home to her husband and be a good wife. Rosemary remembered over hearing how the priest had advised her mother that she and her husband must live as brother and sister. This acceptance of church control over issues of sexuality was deeply rooted in the position of power held by the priest at that time.
Deprivation and poverty, ignorance and the complicity of mothers with their husbands caused emotional suffering for many of the women during their childhood. Julie gave a very dark account of her childhood, from her parents’ toxic relationship to her own feelings about herself at school. She described her childhood as ‘miserable’ (Julie, Interview 3: 43). She felt ‘dirty’ compared to the others, the ‘clean’ children. The use of these adjectives denoted her discernment of class difference, and possibly, the darkness of her home life. Such are her memories of a troubled family and poverty, she used a Soap Opera, ‘Eastenders’ analogously to emphasise how real her bad memories are: ‘I would love to be able to sit down and watch Eastenders like other people, but I can’t’. (Julie, Interview 3: 124-125). Even as a Master’s student, Julie experienced severe bouts of self-doubt and a sense of impostership at college, an enduring consequence for her of her childhood emotional deprivation.

The common thread running through the stories of childhood by the women who came from poorer backgrounds was the impact of the combination of their social class, their gender and the Catholic ideological climate of the time. Girls were socialised to be meek, self-sacrificing, inferior and in deference to men. However, as college students there was equality with the male students. Mature male students became their friends, and groups were formed early in their studies, which endured until the end of their studies, and for many beyond the college experience. They formed bonds in which hierarchy and authority have no bearing, as there was a broad similarity of status and circumstances which created a strong connection and a sense of solidarity.

Reconnecting with the state apparatus of education after more than two or three decades was found to be terrifying for the women. The first few months were challenging as they adjusted to the timetable, assignments, academic writing, finding their way around the building, and being in classes of over one hundred students, some as young as seventeen years of age. Annette, Rita, Katie, Yvonne and Sheila decided to leave within months of commencing college, but support from lecturers and class-mates changed their minds. Receiving a poor mark on an assignment knocked them back considerably as old memories of school came back, and developing the skill of essay writing was a big challenge for them. However, from second year, their confidence in their ability had increased, and they found college to be a friendly, supportive place, unlike any of their early experience of education. They wanted to learn and do well, and all of them were diligent students.
7.2.3 **Obligation to others**

The final distinguishing feature of the narrative data as constituted by the questions and frame of the study concerning the challenges faced and which is also one of the key findings in the search for ways to understand the lives, experiences and decisions of this group of women is their standpoints with regards to obligation to others. Twenty two of the women in the study had dependent children while studying for a degree, five had three, ten had two and eight had one. Those whose children were grown up were obligated to elderly parents or to the care of grandchildren. The health of Tina’s elderly mother deteriorated in her final year at college and she co-cared for her with her sister, taking turns at staying over at night. Coming up to Tina’s exams her sister took over most of the care by staying with their mother most nights. This made Tina quite guilty. Interestingly, they had a brother, but he was excused from the task as it was deemed a daughter’s role. Tina also collected her grandchildren from school three days a week. Katie cared for her grandchild one day a week. Lisa and Nancy, who are sisters, cared for their terminally ill mother until her death in their third and fourth year respectively. Helen’s mother had to be visited every day regardless of what else had to be done. Quite a bit of time was given by the women to their grandchildren, even coming up to exams. They felt obligated to their adult children and did not wish to disappoint them or the grandchildren.

Obligation as mothers has been discussed earlier, but a maternalistic view of being a wife was obvious in many of the stories. While many of the women gave positive statements about their husbands’ support, quite a few contradictory comments were made also. An example shared by many is that of a husband who is very supportive, and would cook dinner if she didn’t get home on time, or would get a take-away, or the husband who was great with the children, but just did not notice the sink full of dishes, or the need to clean the floors.

Several of the women believed their husbands felt abandoned by them while studying. Edwards (1993) argues that the time women spend with their partners is not just a matter of servicing domestically, but it is also time spent servicing them emotionally. This was certainly the case in this study for Amanda, Lisa, Helen, Yvonne, Sheila, Stephanie, Nichola and Karen. They made accommodations for their husbands, as it seems some of the husbands felt threatened and reacted by becoming more dependent. Amanda and her husband both had degrees from their country of origin. She felt that her husband deliberately ignored how important her studies were for her by increased dependency on her for attention and emotional
sustenance. Helen’s husband began a conversation when he saw that she was studying. She also had a very demanding mother, not only when she went to college, but most of her life. She had to phone her every day regardless of what was happening. Her mother did not want her going to college, possibly because she was less available, and after four years at college, Helen’s mother refused to attend her graduation. Helen continued to attend to her mother’s demands through it all.

Stephanie had no children, but she had several beloved dogs, one of which died during her final exams. She felt that she had not given the dog the necessary attention at the time. There was guilt and remorse in how she spoke about her dog’s death, and added that the other four were probably neglected to some degree also. Her husband and friends showed their annoyance when she turned down a night out because she had an essay to do. Lisa had constant arguments with her husband and they considered a separation. Sheila and her partner split up for six months. For many of the women, their education was threatening to their husbands, and resulted in varying degrees of domestic and emotional support, even in cases where the husband’s education was of university level. Even for those women who had a supportive husband, the college aspect of their lives remained unshared emotionally in the main.

Family, education and society together had shaped the course of the women’s lives from childhood into adulthood. Both institutions shaped their lives as women also when studying. The majority of them experienced the friction between the two greedy institutions in their lives. Edwards (1993) maintains that families are greedy institutions for women because their constant allegiance and availability to cater to all physical and emotional needs of the members are required in a way not required of men. Loyalty to both study and family on an equal basis proved impossible and any sense of neglect of family evoked guilt. Edwards (1993), Merrill (1996) and Field (2005) found this to be the case in their studies. The women were highly motivated as students and were under pressure to achieve success, but they also felt they must show that their educational work was not affecting their family. Family came first as their priority was responsibility for others. Even those who are grandmothers felt that they must have time to care for their grandchildren on a regular basis. Katie cared for her grandson every Tuesday, but coming up to her final exams she said she would have preferred not to, but decided that she would let her daughter down by not doing so. Another grandmother cared for a grandchild over night at the weekends, but stopped doing so in the
few weeks coming up to the final exams. To allay her guilt she promised to make up for it in the summer.

It was reported that child care and family responsibilities were the main source of inner conflict regarding obligation. Yet, those women with young children or adolescents believed that they were good roles models and that the children were very proud of them. This was a source of strength and inspiration. Fourteen of the women had Secondary school going children, and thirteen had Primary school going children. Organising themselves, their lives and the lives of their families meant they could ‘fit’ everything in. They had to organise carers for their children when necessary, when the shopping was done, and they had to organise time for themselves to study. The majority of the women organised their studying around their family lives, and many spoke about using the early hours for getting assignments completed. Many of them arranged for the feeding of children and husbands if they were not going to be there to prepare and cook food. Some spoke about preparing meals at five in the morning. One woman (Aoishe) said that she gave up ironing, except her husband’s shirts. Most of them let the housework go to the extent they felt that they could tolerate. Housework was justified as part of being a wife and mother and studying provided a legitimate reason for not doing it. It seemed that excuses were needed for not meeting each of the needs of the greedy institutions of family and higher education (Edwards, 1993). Edwards interviewed thirty one mature female students at various stages of a social science degree from two universities and three polytechnics in the south-east of England. She explored their early education and family experience and their experiences of college. Her main conclusion was that the public and private spheres of education and family are not separate entities; they interact and impinge with particular implications for the position of women in each sphere. The data of my study bear out the findings of Edwards.

Any form of relaxation that had nothing to do with being a mother or wife or being a student appeared to be out of the question for the women in this study. The psychological domestic division of labour was left intact due to the powerful ideology of the all-responsible and available mother/wife which meant that the women themselves could not allow any encroachments upon their defined territory. Some of the women said that their husbands’ attempts at housework were so poor that they would have to do it again themselves. It seems that the women felt power and control only in this area.
Gilligan (1982) researched women’s relationships of care and concluded that not only do women define their self in terms of their relationships, they evaluate their sense of self by their ability to give of themselves to others. In the context of this study, this is relevant because all the women felt uncomfortable if they did not attend to the needs of others. They were guilty when they gave time to their studies at the expense of time they could have given to children, partners, mothers. Studies by Chodorow (1999), Gilligan (1982) and Josselson (1987) established that women’s identity formation is closely linked to their relationships and connections with others. The women in my study were socialised to take care of others before searching for their self. They viewed their role as mothers to be the most significant role and dedicated much of their time to it. Family was a continuous mental presence, even when not physically present.

It would appear that the women did not separate from the private world of family on becoming students. Their status, identity and psyche rely strongly on the private world of family. Their family was of immediate, ultimate and daily concern, as they attempted to insert their lives as wives and mothers into the educational process. Being a student was embedded in their family life; with a struggle to create a balance which at times, exacerbated the tension and conflict between the two institutions. This conflict is a structural tension whereby the institutions of both the private and public spheres are organised around the traditional model of women as the backbone of domestic labour.

7.3 Change over Time

The second theme of how the women changed over time can now also be discussed in more refined detail when viewed over the complete set of narratives. Highlights and distinctive insights from this group regarding change include the change of influence of childhood education, the change in the struggle to achieve, changing ambiguities of being a student and family of origin influence and the change in fear of failure. To take this last element first there was a fear of failure reported by many of the women especially during their first year at college. Their previous educational experiences had been negative, and had given them a fragile learner identity (Weil, 1986). However, it is becomes clear that getting through the first year of college provided a change in how they viewed their capacity to learn that leads to a lessening of the fear of failure.
With regard to the changes in the ambiguities of being a student and the influence of families, the majority of the women in the study received no encouragement from their parents, especially from mothers, and were openly discouraged by some. The delimitation of their lives began with their education. For many of them, evident in their commentaries is the concept of ‘last chance’, which caused the women to feel that if they did not make it in higher education, it would confirm something inherently wrong with them. Any sense of failure was rooted in themselves and they did not consider the possibility that the failure might in fact be a failure within a system, something quite separate from themselves. This fear was interwoven within their self-image, and created many moments of crisis as they made the transition to being educated to degree level. These crises were opportunities for change within, the most resistant of change as it demanded a much deeper change than adjusting to others’ reactions. The women had to face their childhood’s influences which had determined their life journeys, try to make sense of it in adulthood, for the most in midlife, and emotionally relocate the experiences.

According to Schuller et al (2001: 14) ‘[t]he most fundamental and pervasive benefit from learning of every kind is a growth in self-confidence’ and all but one of the women remarked that what they had gained from higher education was confidence. They spoke of an increased ability to express their views, both in informal and formal situations. They saw themselves as being able to talk to teachers and others in ‘authority’ on more equal terms than previously. Edwards (1993) also found that the mature women students in her study had grown in confidence in the public sphere and when dealing with those in authority. They were aware of their lack of confidence around exams or essay writing abilities while at college, but they recalled themselves as being more confident than younger students at seminars. In addition to highlighting issues of increased confidence, the women also referred to other aspects of their self-concept. They spoke of the necessity to reconcile their changing perceptions of themselves as wife, mother, daughter and student with the traditional model of a women’s role that they had been brought up with. In some cases, going against the culture of their upbringing and families of origin caused intergenerational and sibling discord, with some women having to justify their studying and perceived neglect of their primary responsibilities (Edwards, 1993; Field, 2005).

They must show that their educational work is not affected by their family commitments, and that their family lives are not suffering because of their studies. Women cannot meet public world obligations without being
accused of neglecting their duties in the private domain. (Edwards, 1993: 63)

Women in particular appeared to come under pressure from other family members to look after their own children, and fit any work around the primary task of child-rearing. (Field, 2005: 302)

Despite the internal conflict which the women experienced, they viewed the adaptation as increasing their resilience in facing the multiple challenges of attending college and completing the degree programme. The women’s enthusiasm for studying, acknowledgement of their own academic and organisational abilities, and perceptions of their own personal growth were immense. In terms of personal development, the engagement with higher education had indeed been a transformational event with welcome intrapersonal outcomes for the majority of the women. However, the journey involved many hurdles along the way from adjusting to college itself to coping with the impact on personal lives.

Education threatened the women’s friendships as well as their intimate relationships. This was found by Edwards (1993) and Merrill (1996) in their studies also. Some felt that they grew increasingly estranged, not only because there was not enough time to invest in friendships and relationships, but also because, they had little in common to talk about. Education provided a new lens through which to view the world and they began to reassess their lives and relationships. Annette challenged her husband on his use of words, in how he communicated with her and the inherent meanings associated with gendered ways of interacting. Lisa, whose husband created many obstacles for her on her educational journey, realised in her second year that she did not have to do all the cooking and cleaning in the home. She was prepared to leave her marriage and had very strong negative feelings towards her husband. She spoke about such change in herself, how selfish her husband had been, and how their marriage had to be renegotiated and relocated in order to survive. She felt that her husband accepted the new order of things with reluctance and resentment. This new order involved the division of domestic labour and also an attitudinal change. There was a distinct divide in the couple as she described her situation since graduating from college.

Christine was very explicit when referring to how college education had changed her, paraphrasing would not do her justice: ‘[c]hanges? As wide as the Grand Canyon… it is everything, it has transformed my life…I have very little money, but if I was to scrub toilets
or stack shelves I wouldn’t care…nobody can take away what I have learned. Mental health, self-awareness, confidence. The gift of reading, the shades of meaning. Learning comes from within’ (Christine, Interview 19: 59-61).

Angela mentioned that her way of being and knowing changed, that she was no longer concerned with material things or how she was perceived by others. She appreciates her family and friends. For her, college was mind opening, and she stated that she had travelled the world since her degree and post-graduate study which led her to a teaching career. She said she had never been outside of Ireland before the age of thirty seven. Christine and Angela’s comments regarding change indicate a new found sense of fulfilment in their lives; a peace of mind that knowledge and learning, not material things gave them.

Hazel offered a terse comment regarding change, ‘I am stronger with removing myself from those who do damage to others’ (Hazel, Interview 23: 18). This is understandable because as a child she lived in the shadow of her younger sister, who was deemed brighter by the school teachers and the parents, especially by her mother. Hazel became empowered and stronger in herself, liberating her from allowing others to make her feel inferior. It is worth noting that her sister who was the favourite was very begrudging of her college education. Education can bring about a liberating or emancipatory experience (Freire, 1985; Brookfield, 2009), and in this sense is transformative (Mezirow, 2000), in that it can redefine identity (Walters, 2000).

Julie features very strongly in the analysis, and again here is discussing the narratives because of her story and also because of the manner in which she told her story. In true narrative analysis style, her story contained specific embedded meanings and evaluations of the context (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). She judged her mother harshly and did not try to balance her evaluation with consideration of the era (1970s) in which events took place. I admired her honesty; for her, childhood was a time of emotional neglect and abjection. Her story involved early experiences of domestic violence, and especially her understanding of the relationship between her parents and its impact on her, both as a child and as an adult. Regarding the impact of completing a third level education, she said ‘… it definitely transformed me, it gave me power in society’ (Julie, Interview 3: 184). She gave an example of her son’s diagnosis of Asperger’s Syndrome, while she was at college. The power she referred to had given her the strength to fight for his rights with school teachers and other people in authority. ‘I’m on a
one with them, or even sometimes I feel more powerful’ (Julie, Interview 3: 187). This was a very positive sense of power.

She did not describe social mobility, but her poignant story regarding her early childhood at school is important in her understanding of the changes within. She stated that she is now ‘clean’. This is significant because as a child she felt ‘dirty’, not unwashed, but different, othered by how she understood her world where the children of wealthier families were treated with more respect and kindness than those of poorer families. There was more to this than financial deprivation for her, as a ‘dirty’ child she felt less important, less worthy, less likeable and less able. Higher education had given her a different view of herself, one which saw her as able, worthy and well respected by her husband, children and friends. Using the vocabulary of her childhood, she was ‘clean’. Using the words ‘dirty’ and ‘clean’ to describe early childhood experience was not found in the literature reviewed, but may have a psychological or psychoanalytical grounding in terms of toilet training and trauma or child abuse.

Improved mental health in various forms was mentioned as an outcome. Field (2005) refers to the improvement of well-being as one of the most important outcomes of education for adults. Well-being and mental health are synonymous in this study as improved mental health was referred to by a few women, and defined around greater confidence and a more positive outlook on life. Greater tolerance, hope and ambition were expressed in different ways when describing the changes within themselves. Many of the women clearly have a greater sense of agency, are less passive and more open to opportunities and new experiences. The actual learning from specific modules gave them greater understanding of issues in their families and relationships, and equipped them to problem solve more effectively. The wider benefits of the women’s education are noted here as the women’s families and communities are affected also. Field (2005) claims that adult education builds social capital and the women’s stories demonstrate how their education can create bonds and bridges. Change was very dramatic for many of the women and more subtle for others, but all of them experienced a change in some aspect of their lives. Even those who believe that they are too old to gain employment expressed greater self-worth, and all of the women, regardless of the content and meaning of their narratives, exuded a sense of optimism about their current lives.
7.4 Women’s Learning and Knowing

Within the dimension of women’s learning and knowing, the narratives taken as a whole offer also a refinement of understanding of how this was operative in the lives of the women of this study. Philosophers like Plato and Rousseau questioned whether women could learn at all, or could at least engage in rational thought. Plato believed that women who were physically strong should be allowed to learn the same skills that men do, which meant that only the women who were like men should be educated. Rousseau proposed domestic education only for women to prepare them for marriage. Hales (1999: 240) argues that women were considered in that era to be the gender of ‘fruitful wombs and barren brains’. Even within the last century, women’s ability to learn has been questioned, or at least subordinated to their reproductive and affective capacities. An obstetrics textbook in the early twentieth century stated that ‘[a] women has a head too small for intellect but just big enough for love’ (Hales, 1999: 4). Harford (2005: 503) quotes the Bishop of Elphin in his opposition to the equal treatment of boys and girls in secondary education: ‘The American idea of educating girls on the same programme as boys and preparing them to compete for the same offices and professions should not be entertained for a moment in this country’. Studying was believed to be against women’s nature, and they were educated largely to become wives.

Our ideas about women as learners have come a long way, reinforced by women’s success in formal education and the women of the study underwent a personal process that parallels the large-scale changes. While at one time women were excluded from higher education, they now constitute over 60% of undergraduate students in Ireland (Hyland, 2009). The opening of university education to women was one of the most significant developments of the 20th century, but change was slow for certain women, as those of lower classes were largely unaffected by higher education reform (Harford, 2008). While women are ‘no longer a danger to the men’, Parkes (2004: 301) notes that it was only in the early seventies that women gained full equality in Trinity College, despite the ban on women being lifted in 1904. It was in fact, only in the 1980s and 1990s that female participation in higher education expanded, making it an option for the less well-off, with the removal of fees.

Learning for the women in this study is associated with their relationships and need for connection, and their presumed preferences for subjective and affective ways of learning. Longino (1996) has argued for the constructive role of emotion in knowledge and learning.
The significance of relationships in women’s lives (Gilligan, 1982) is hardly surprising given women’s traditional roles as caretakers in the home and their concentration in caretaking roles in the workplace, such as teaching and nursing. Gilligan (1982) argues that women have a greater orientation towards empathetic and compassionate relationships and towards interdependence. ‘Women define their identity through relationships of intimacy and care’ (Gilligan, 1982: 48). However, emphasising an orientation toward relationship can create stereotypes that women are not, or cannot be, competitive and self-directed. A more feminist and less essentialist perspective on relationship in women’s learning concerns women’s ways of acquiring new knowledge through connected knowing (Belenky et al, 1986). Connected knowers seek to understand others’ ideas and points of view, emphasising the relevance of context in the development of knowledge and the fundamental value of experience. Many leading feminists thinkers of the 1970s and the 1980s rejected essentialism on the grounds that universal claims about women are invariably false. However, women as a group share a distinctive, and distinctively oppressive history, and for the majority of the women in my study this is a reality.

Connected knowing was described in this study also as embracing new ideas and seeking to understand different points of view as distinct from separate knowing which takes a more adversarial stance towards new ideas that excludes personal feelings and beliefs. Belenky et al (1986) suggest that women seem to do best in learning environments where affective forms of knowledge, or knowledge that comes from experience of life is valued. They do best in learning environments where there is an effort to relate theoretical concepts to real-life experience. Some of the women in my study commented on how the college education had given them greater understanding of family and social problems. Some had regrets as they retrospectively regarded their own parenting skills as deficient. One woman even apologised to her adult children.

Overall then, the data have shown that for many of the women in this study, their early experience of education was very negative, both the school experience and parental attitude to education, especially for girls at the time. The findings here support those of Baxter-Magolda (1992) who found that the home of origin has a strong influence on attitude towards education, one’s ability, and decisions about life paths. In this study this was defined as the parents; the women spoke about their parents’ lack of education and lack of appreciation for it, probably strongly influenced by the sets of power relations that the parents themselves
were subject to in the Ireland of the time. In contrast, the non-Irish women spoke about their parents’ university education and the encouragement given to them to be well educated. However, in all cases, sons were prioritised, but to a much lesser degree for the non-Irish women.

Class and gender together with the ideological climate at the time ensured that the majority of the women (especially the Irish women, but not exclusively) received the lowest level of education possible in a very harsh system. It would seem clear that learning was made difficult because they were constantly put down, beaten, discouraged and/or ignored. Descriptive comments are salient in the transcripts: ‘we all got beaten’, ‘Sr. X died last year, I said thanks be to God, she’d beat the knuckles off you with the cane ...you’d be writing away’, ‘the nuns used to beat the life out of my sister because she was left-handed’. Home was no safe haven from the torment of school as in many cases, parents believed in the power and authority of the teacher, priest and nun. Many of the women experienced similar ‘punishment’ from their parents, mostly the mothers. Learning in the formal sense was made almost impossible, and it was through epistemic self-reflection at college on their early experiences of learning (their frame of reference) that they became aware of why they were predisposed to learn in a certain manner. Clinchy et al (1985) found that some adult women believed that they got into college on a fluke, and that their sense of impostership was compounded by past educational experiences. Julie spoke of the days when she heard a voice telling her to go home, that she should not be in college, and this was while studying for a Master’s degree. For the majority of them, learning to think for themselves was catalytic in their transformation, a transformation that was accompanied by some degree of discomfort.

Issues of agency and power are involved in their narratives and through education they became their own referent for knowing and learning, possibly for the first time in their lives. Tina was born into a middle class family and was a very high achieving student at college and engaged easily with the theoretical aspects of the course. There were only seventeen students on this course, so they knew each other quite well by the end of four years. She commented on how some members of her class struggled over the four years and never seemed to be able to improve their grades. She associated this with early education experiences and early school leaving. She had completed school to Leaving Certificate level and had emigrated and spent three decades in a job where she had been promoted and well paid. She also noted how those academically weak students blossomed with increased confidence and self-esteem after
completing the course. She described how the dress sense of a couple of the females in her class had changed in tune with a new sense of self.

According to Flannery and Hayes (2002: 8), there is a ‘kaleidoscope of ways of learning which overlap at times, but are unique because people are of different races and genders and because people’s histories, cultures and life circumstances also differ’. This concept is useful here because the women who were treated harshly in school did not find learning easy or pleasant; yet, they successfully completed a four years honours degree programme at a much later stage in life. The social dimensions of learning are important as learning is inextricably intertwined with the context in which it occurs. This was a salient finding from the data. Julie recalled the day when she brought her plastic toy piano to school. She had received it as a Christmas gift, and was very proud of it. On that day her teacher asked the children to put up their hands if they wished to take piano lessons, and Julie put up her hand with enthusiasm. The teacher told her that she could not take lessons because she did not have a real piano. Julie realised then that the poverty of her home was visible. She said that she never played with the piano again.

Dolores spoke about the housing estate that she came from and how it influenced the teachers’ treatment of her and her friends from the same estate. ‘You were a nobody’ (Dolores, Interview 11: 24). Nancy recounted how her mother asked her every day about the number of slaps she received, but she felt that her brother had a much harder time because he was left-handed and he was beaten so much he developed a stammer. Frances was frequently told that she was stupid by her teachers. Marita, Helen, Katie, Donna, Rita, Lisa, Dinah and Rosemary shared the experiences of being placed at the back of the classroom, of being humiliated, ridiculed and beaten on an on-going basis. They had problems learning, and left school before they were fifteen years old.

Belenky et al (1986) grouped women’s perspectives on knowing into five major categories: silence, received knowledge, subjective knowledge, procedural knowledge and constructed knowledge. By this they argue that women’s ways of knowing and awakening through education move from a position in which they experience themselves as mindless and voiceless, and subject to the whims of external authority to a position in which they view all knowledge as contextual and experience themselves as creators of knowledge. In other words, the women, having completed a degree programme are transformed from being passive,
feeling incompetent and defined by others to having an authentic voice. External authority is put into perspective and they take responsibility for their own beliefs, identity and relationships. Lisa’s story illustrates this, when she realised that her relationship with her husband was not built on mutual respect as he expected her to take full responsibility for all household and child care tasks while at college, while he had time for golf. She renegotiated her marriage on new terms. ‘The internal voice became the co-ordinator of meaning-making’ (Baxter-Magolda, 2004: 40). Voice is a metaphor for growth and development in the women’s ways of being and knowing, including critical thinking. The idea of finding voice is symbolic of the journey that the women have had to make to ‘put the knower back into the known and to reclaim the power of their minds and voices’ (Belenky et al, 1986: 19). Baxter–Magolda (1992) found that a move towards an independent way of knowing occurred after graduation for most students. They moved from an absolute way of knowing to a more reflective (King & Kitchener, 2004), and independent way of knowing.

The women had life experiences and skills which were relevant when applied to their college education and vice versa, as much of the academic theory was applicable to events of their present or past life. This was especially true for those women who studied Applied Social Studies. The ordinary and extraordinary events of their lives provided learning and understanding. However difficult, Yvonne’s five attempts at fertility treatment, her rape and her husband’s gambling addiction were sources of learning however difficult. Dolores had experience of a sister with a drug problem who died from an overdose; therefore she enhanced her existing knowledge through the modules on Social Problems and Psychology. Those with stories of domestic violence had learned first-hand about the patriarchal judicial system; and they engaged critically with Legal Studies. The stories themselves are instructive; there is learning in the women’s narratives which were very personal, and the analysis of which captured and retained the voice and integrity of the speakers.

7.5 Conclusion
This study set out to explore the transformation in women’s lives based on their previous educational experiences and the experience of higher education at a later point in life. The key findings that were generated by the analysis have been discussed in this chapter and some considerable evidence has been gathered to suggest that this study contributes a more refined frame to the understanding of these lives and their changes.
Despite the difficulties faced by the women in returning to study; their choice to return initiated a sense of empowerment, an increase in confidence and for some an improvement in employment opportunities. A college degree was a means to relocate themselves in relation to other members of their life-stories. For the majority of the women, this was a transformative experience. Church, class and gender combined were powerful determinants of the women’s life-trajectories through the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, when opportunity and choice for women were scant. Initial education and the family reproduced gender and class relationships, restricting employment horizons and constraining their role within the family. Higher education and having access to knowledge had given them greater control and power in their lives, which for many of them brought disapproval by their husbands, partners, siblings and friends. The women’s stories illustrate the challenges, losses and gains, joys and triumphs not only on their higher education journey, but also throughout their lives. They persisted and succeeded and in so doing experienced self-discovery, greater fulfilment and transformation.
Chapter 8: Conclusion

The aim of this research was to explore the transformation in women’s lives based on their previous educational experiences and the experience of higher education at a later point in midlife. A combined conceptual and theoretical framework of Feminist Standpoint Theory and Gadamerian hermeneutical philosophy was used to capture through narrative, the women’s lived experiences. Deeply embedded in this qualitative phenomenological approach was an acknowledgement of the importance of reflexivity, as ‘we cannot write stories of others without reflecting on our own histories, social and cultural locations as well as subjectivities and values’ (Merrill & West, 2009: 5). Feminist Standpoint epistemology requires women to be at the centre of the research process and their concrete experiences to be the starting point from which to build knowledge. It is hoped that this demand has been met by this study and that there is the acknowledgement that women occupy many different standpoints and inhabit many different realities.

The chosen area of interest is a result of three influences, a passion for education as a life-long process; my role as lecturer dealing with many mature students, and personal experience of being a mature student. The genesis of this research lies in conversations with mature female students over several years, and hearing about experiences and issues that were uniform in all the stories. It became evident that there are specific challenges for mature female students on entering college, mainly to do with relationships, connections to others and change in themselves. Mature male students did not mention such issues. The changes articulated by the women provided the concept of transformation and an interest in the consequences of completing a degree programme during the specific life-stage of midlife developed.

The socio-cultural ideology of the women’s childhoods is very important, as historically this cohort are the last of its type in terms of traditional embeddedness of class, gender and Church. Twenty two of the women classified their family of origin as working class, while eight claimed middle class status. Five of them were not born in Ireland and had immigrated during the Celtic Tiger era from Eastern Europe, India and Nigeria. The findings regarding gender were similar regardless of nationality in terms of roles and inequality. The frame of reference for this research is the epistemological journey and the subsequent ontological relocation experienced by the women having completed higher education. Overall, it has
sought to highlight the transformation in their lives by exploring the challenges, changes and consequences experienced by them having completed higher education at midlife.

8.1 Challenges Facing Women Over Thirty-Five Years of Age at College

Being the first amongst one’s family and friends to go to college is a daunting experience. None of the Irish born women had a parent who had been to college. Most did not have a family member or even friends who had been to college. The majority of the Irish women’s husbands had left school early, so they had little or no understanding of the various challenges that college students face, therefore, the women lacked the necessary support networks. Identities were threatened and this brought anxiety which was exacerbated by their entering college academically underprepared. While strongly motivated by education as a form of self-realisation, they had to manage a delicate balance between ‘investing in a new improved identity and holding on to a cohesive self’ (Reay, 2002: 403). The need for change, as a result of job-loss, marital breakdown, children leaving home or a desire to make up for earlier deficits in education created a catalyst which triggered the move to higher education.

The immediate challenges involved adjusting to the academic environment of assignments, deadlines, reading lists and technology. However, their roles of mother and wife or partner proved to be the greatest challenge, as the gendered role of carer is inescapable and not delegable. Caring for children, husbands or partners, ageing parents, and for some holding down paid work, combined with the demands of a degree programme were a source of internal conflict and required constant re-negotiation of schedules. Time management was a persistent challenge, but rather than see the outcome of competing demands of college and family as overload, the women viewed the problem as a lack of organisational skills. Therefore, a prevailing feeling of guilt was commonly reported by the women, which was generated by a feeling of failure to meet all competing demands simultaneously. The guilt was particularly associated with their role as mother; a role that is felt to be their primary responsibility. Achieving their academic goals was only acceptable if family responsibilities were not neglected. Maintaining equilibrium in the home required both sacrifice and strategy, and despite the challenges, the women attributed success or failure in the college environment to the self, and also took responsibility for family matters.
Edwards’ (1993) study of mature female students is important for this study in that it is the only one I found that had similarities in its focus on the challenges encountered by mature female students in college. She views the family and higher education as two greedy institutions that compete for women’s full attention, and notes the contradiction between the qualities that are associated with achievement in higher education, like competitiveness, and those to meet the needs of the family, like caring and nurturance. Just as in this research, women set standards for themselves which are socially constructed. All but one of the women are mothers, and they experienced similar challenges relating to being a student and being a mother, just as the women in Edwards’ study had done over twenty years before. Family and motherhood were strongly associated with the women’s identities. Mothering is significant to their lives throughout the study. Gender roles and the division of labour in the family were made clear to the women at a very young age; and this was universal across all nationalities. The politics of male-female relationships are echoed throughout the study.

Guilt and a sense of obligation to others pervaded the lives of the women and not only in relation to children, it extended to husbands, parents and siblings. The findings of my research in relation to women’s intimate relationships and gaining a third level education are identical to those of Edwards (1993), in that, there is serious potential for the disruption to the relationships. The majority of the women reported the lack of support, both practical and emotional, given by their husband or partner. In some cases the husband or partner was perceived to be deliberately obstructive; in other cases, any domestic task attempted by him was perceived as good support even if it was reluctantly and inadequately done. The women developed a greater need to be organised, so demands of college did not impinge negatively on their primary responsibility, that of the family and home. They judged themselves harshly against socially constructed expectations which were crystallised in early childhood.

A second challenge for the women from working class backgrounds (twenty two of the thirty women) was the influence of their early childhood education which was negative to say the least, and cruel in the truest sense. Baxter – Magolda (1992) found that the home of origin has a strong influence towards education, one’s ability and decisions about life paths. The working class families had little experience of education, and had very little understanding of the benefits gained through it. Girls were prepared to be mothers and housewives, and therefore formal education after the mid-teens was viewed as a waste of time. The women experienced gender from a classed position. The influence of Church, class and gender in
rural Ireland of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s determined their lives, and opportunities and choice were almost absent in terms of their adult lives. Children from poorer families received differential treatment from those who had wealthier parents. The women had become aware of this very early in life, as young as three or four years of age, as they were placed in the back of the room, were harshly treated, ridiculed and for some, ignored. They were predisposed to have problems learning; and as a result developed fragile learning identities that re-emerged for many while at college three decades later.

8.2 Changes Experienced by the Women

My interest was in examining epistemological change as the women’s assumptions were challenged by new knowledge acquired from their college learning, resulting in their understanding and horizons being broadened. The initial idea for the research resulted from overhearing final year mature women students’ conversation about how they were changing in their way of knowing the world. One salient change for the women in my study was in their intrapersonal and interpersonal skills. Given the subordination experienced by many of them in their earlier lives, it was transforming for them to feel equal when dealing with people in authority. One woman claimed that she was now stronger with removing herself from those who damage others. This was an important finding as there was no reference to this in the literature. This sense of empowerment is truly transformative for the woman’s life. As for most of the women, education brought about emancipatory and liberating changes, redefining their sense of self, and increasing their self-confidence. Gaining confidence was a major factor identified in terms of self-change. Their roles as daughter, mothers and wives had subjected them to male dominance throughout their lives, resulting in low self-esteem. Being confident gave the women a stronger identity which enabled them to question and challenge male hegemony in the family and at work.

Education threatened and changed old friendships as well as their intimate relationships. Some of the women’s friends distanced themselves as higher education began to have an influence on their sense of self and how the viewed the world. The learning process and the acquisition of knowledge broadened their perspectives about themselves and society. There was not enough time to socialise with friends, as there were assignments and housework to be done, so friendships weakened. Some of the women believed that they had nothing in
common anymore with many of their old friends, or that their conversations were no longer interesting to them. Education highlighted the past banality of much of their own lives.

Many of the women found their attitude towards the division of labour in the home changing; the inequality was rejected by some and they made changes in the household, others accepted that their husbands or partners were what they were and that is how it is, and it was the women who made changes by doing less, or doing things differently. Separation was seen as a solution for two of the women, at least as a temporary measure. Even for the one woman who had a very supportive husband, there was a distinct change in the nature of their relationship. There was clearly a greater sense of agency as the women were less passive in both the private and public sphere. Education inevitably changes lives, and for the women in this study who had not been to college before, change for the majority of them was life-changing, and it has given them control over their lives.

Change was very dramatic for many of the women and more subtle for others, but all of them experienced a change in some aspect of their lives. Even the women who felt that they were too old to ever be employed again expressed optimism about their current lives. They became more critical in their thinking and more positive about problem-solving. For some there was a healthier outlook on life, as they were less inclined to worry; for others, there was a greater appreciation of family and friends and a decrease in the desire for, or appreciation of material things. There was a depth to their lives which was absent before their experience of higher education. Having less of an interest in material things is an interesting contribution to the literature and learning.

8.3 Consequences for the Lives of the Women Having Completed a College Degree

Gaining knowledge had improved the women’s quality of life, bringing greater fulfilment. Studying for a degree represented an active decision to take greater control, to break free from gender and class constraints and to transform individual lives. From childhood to adulthood the women’s lives had been shaped by the forces of gender and class. Being female, and in most cases working-class, had limited their aspirations and horizons. For many of the women, the decision to go to college was the first occasion when they had ever really asserted themselves and put their individual needs first. Through education, their sense of agency was
increased and it was embraced by the women as they developed a new discourse and found their voice. For some, for a while there was a nostalgia around how they used to be as they adjusted to their newly acquired way of being in the world. Harmonising their old sense of self with the new one also caused some sadness, as perceived mistakes and regrets were exposed. This was a solitary experience for the women, as their husbands’ or partners’ mind-set was no longer aligned with theirs.

Many of the women realised that their opportunities for employment were limited, and for all but one of them, they felt that education had transformed their lives in different ways. This transformation includes a non-reversible shift in their meaning perspective (Mezirow, 2000) towards greater inclusiveness, discrimination, openness and flexibility to other ideas. Such transformation had a profound impact on the women’s lives, and however difficult this transformation had been initially, the outcome was an epistemological and ontological improvement. Their communication skills were enhanced, their problem-solving ability improved, they had a greater sense of self-efficacy and empowerment, and they were more mindful of the world. The women believed that going to college was of great benefit to their family and themselves, as their children were motivated to go to college, and they themselves were more fulfilled in their lives.

Relationships were different and some of the husbands had to make adjustments in their roles in order to renegotiate the terms of reference of their marriage. Some friendships were weakened or terminated as a result of the women gaining a college education. The new way of knowing and being was not in accordance with that of their friends, who like them had left school early, but had no interest or motivation to return to education. Their new identity threatened and disrupted relationships, and this was highlighted in the literature also (Edwards, 1993; Merrill, 1999; Reay, 2002). The main cause of this was the tension between autonomy and commitment, as the women had been socialised to have a strong sense of obligation to others, and also a strong sense of self – sacrifice.

8.4 Contributions of the Study
A significant contribution of the study lies in the comprehensive treatment of the methodology, and to methodological advancement by applying a hermeneutical-phenomenological-feminist framework to narrative inquiry. This theoretical framework may
be useful for examining other cohorts experiencing major life transitions, for example, individuals moving from employment to retirement. The process was both challenging and rewarding for both the researched and the researcher. Remembering and recounting life-stories caused some degree of upset for the participants, and for the researcher, feelings of identification with what was being told to me; but the richness of the data produced exposed a purity of knowledge. Overall, the methodology worked very well to produce rich and insightful personal accounts of experience.

This research is historically important and specific, as this cohort of women were raised in a socio-political culture that is in stark contrast to the current era, and they have experienced the rapid social change in Irish society since the demise in the influence of the Catholic Church. Their childhood was embedded in patriarchal dominance and control which for many of them included cruelty and abuse. Higher education provided a mirror to reflect on their life-experiences and to find answers, and it also gave them a new perspective with which to live an improved and enhanced life. There are residues of Catholicism for women at midlife, as the influence of their childhood culture is tenacious, but they are better equipped to make changes in beliefs, values and behaviour.

The findings of this research concur with those of reviewed studies (Belenky et al., 1986; Edwards, 1993; Merrill, 1999; Reay, 2002) in that there are certain challenges facing older women going to college for the first time in terms of class and gender. What is unique to this study is an existential growth for the women who emphasised that education gave them a new sense of appreciation of non-material aspects of their lives. They saw themselves as equal to those in positions of authority whereas before, they would not have spoken out in certain situations where they felt inferior. Moving from a position of subordination to empowerment and self-fulfilment had nothing to do with the acquisition of material possessions; and concerns about money and material things had diminished for many of them. Inner strength was gained and their ability to deal with difficult people and situations improved. For these women, education provided learning and knowledge, and with this knowledge came power.

While third level institutions cannot predict or control the external circumstances of students’ lives, the increasing number of older, female students with family responsibilities does require a rethink about taken for granted aspects of these learning environments. Despite institutional rhetoric, there remains a lack of commitment to accommodating the needs of non-traditional
students such as older women with family responsibilities. Included in Theme four of the Hamburg Declaration (1997) on addressing gender issues is the requirement to promote a gender-sensitive pedagogy which acknowledges the daily life experience of women, and recognises both cognitive and affective outcomes. Commencing college study is a major transition in women’s lives and it produces increased stress and lifestyle adjustment and changes. It is important to note that despite gender equality policies and legislation, the division of household labour has not markedly changed, leaving women to juggle multiple roles and responsibilities. This was a finding in my research and in many other studies (Home & Hinds, 1998; Baxter & Britton, 2001; Heenan, 2002; Inglehart & Norris, 2003). A ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach remains the institutions’ way of teaching, with an inflexible timetable, which results in the home-life of women who have family responsibilities having to be a separate realm from their college-life. This does not acknowledge ‘the daily experience of women’ or ‘affective outcomes’ (Hamburg Declaration, 1997: Theme four). Institutions of higher education might offer a structured programme for first year mature students to develop a set of tools or strategies to assist them manage the academic, social and personal challenges they are likely to face while studying. This would certainly have helped the women in my study to adjust to third level education. Another quite simple change would be for colleges to begin classes and lectures at a time that does not conflict with children’s school time, which is important in an era when teachers no longer supervise pupils prior to, or after class. To make educational institutions truly mother-friendly would require the provision of low-cost childcare services, which would offer a more equitable distribution of life chances to many women who wish to study.

8.5 Final Reflection

Two main ideas emerge from a final reflection on this study. The first reflection can be introduced by Clandinin’s (2007: 129) observation about narrative inquiry in terms of ‘the interactive relations between participant and researcher that lead to a mutual, collaborative telling and retelling of the stories of the participants’. The research process has provided a context for a special relationship with each participant, and it has been a privilege to be entrusted with the personal stories so willingly shared by the thirty women involved. I am in total agreement with Clandinin (2007) when she states that narrative inquiry leads to changes in practices and in the persons involved, both participant and researcher. She concludes: ‘This change and growth occurs for all participants for no-one emerges unchanged from this
process’ (Clandinin, 2007: 129). Hence, upon reflection I recognise that I have been changed by the research process, through my interaction with the participants, through the intellectual demands of completing the thesis and through my interaction with my supervisor and colleagues at work who have supported me in my endeavours. I endeavoured to make sense of the women’s stories and experiences in a meaningful way with a view to enhancing understanding at an individual and institutional level. Their experiences were emotionally significant and experientially distinct. I did identify with many of the experiences described in their stories, and to some extent this identification became a mirror. An implication of our social situatedness is that we experience and interpret the world from a particular perspective and we can never fully escape this subjectivity. Gadamer (1975) spoke of this in terms of horizons; we each have our own presuppositions, beliefs, predilections and these make up our horizon of understanding. For me in this research, I felt an overlapping of horizons quite frequently; and this served not only to help understand the other person, but to understand myself. Through awareness of my own thoughts and feelings about the research, I began to fully appreciate the nature of the investigation and its relationship to me personally and professionally. Personal experience can serve as a very powerful form of proof or evidence, and in this research it emerged as a truth, revealing the social, political and cultural elements that make up such experiences. I was aware of my own personal and political background which shaped how I re-storied the women’s accounts. The feelings I experienced during the journey included pride, anxiety, curiosity, fear, compassion, and an awareness of the close link between memory and emotion. Importantly, I believe that my research has ecological validity as the findings have relevance to real life.

The second reflection is specifically about the research participants: Annette, Frances, Rita, Katie, Julie, Donna, Carol, Brenda, Joan, Jane, Christine, Angela, Hazel, Dinah, Liz, Karen, Dolores, Amanda, Lisa, Nancy, Helen, Marita, Tina, Yvonne, Sheila, Stephanie, Nichola, Aoishe, Marie and Rosemary. The courage that they have demonstrated in their respective lives, evident in the narratives, is acknowledged. It is my wish that their participation in the research has been a validating experience for all of them.

In conclusion, to provide a sense of balance and fairness, similar research with male students of the same age group is necessary. I am also very interested in conducting research on women’s experience of ‘doing’ a PhD at midlife, as I believe, that while ‘doing’ it, I was
‘being’ it also. I am changed as a result of this in so far as I am more compassionate that before, more patient and surprisingly, more humble.
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Appendices

Appendix 1: Information Letter

Dear Participant,

I am a PhD student at Trinity College Dublin in the School of Education. The working title of my thesis is: ‘Challenges, Changes and Consequences: Women over Thirty and the College Experience’.

Thank you for your interest in participating in this study, for which the empirical work will take place in June and July 2013. This letter details the purpose of the study, describes the involvement required and your rights as a participant, and also how the data will be stored. The goal of the study is to find out the ‘Challenges, Changes and Consequences’ to your life, as a result of completing a Higher Education Degree. Simply, I want you to talk about your experiences of college, and the impact on your life. If you agree to volunteer for this study, you will be asked to participate in one focus group, followed some time later with one face-to-face interview with me, lasting about one hour. With your permission, I will make an audio recording of the interview so I can capture all that you say. The focus group will require visual recording as well as audio, to enable valid analysis and interpretation of each participant’s contribution. This will not involve a third party as it will be automatic.

The recording of both focus group and interview will then be transcribed by me and printed in written form for analysis and interpretation. Names will not be included in the written transcripts of the interviews and focus groups, or in the final paper. You will be invited at a later stage to meet me to read over the transcripts of your experiences. This will most likely take one hour. At this meeting you can make any changes to your ‘story’ so you feel that it truly captures your experiences.

A feminist phenomenological methodology will be employed in order to accurately express the lived realities of women from a certain cohort, who completed a third level degree. This requires open-ended, in-depth interviews to facilitate the telling of personal experiences. This
qualitative study will give ‘voice’ to women’s lived experiences of higher education and its impact on their way of knowing and understanding of their world.

This research has met the requirements of Trinity College’s School of Education Research Ethics Committee (www.tcd.ie/Education/ethics). Informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity and the right to withdraw are ensured; the only caveat being that I may request that the findings to be included in post-doctoral publications. The data will be stored securely for two years in adherence with the Data Protection Act.

If you agree to participate, please contact me no later than June 12th, 2013 to set up the focus group discussion and interview. I can be reached via email at cosullivan@carlowcollege.ie, or by phone at Carlow College (059 9153221), and on my mobile at 085 8313003. My supervisor is Dr. Aidan Seery, Director of Research, School of Education, Trinity College Dublin.

Thank you again for your time and I look forward to meeting with you.

Yours faithfully,

____________________________________________________________
Catherine O’Sullivan BSS (TCD), MSc (UCD), PhD (candidate, TCD)
Programme Board Chair of the B.A. in Applied Social Studies Carlow College
Lecturer in Sociology, Research Methods and Advanced Child Care
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Appendix 2: Informed Consent Form

Please complete if you are happy to take part in the study.

Title of the study: Challenges, Changes and Consequences: Women over Thirty and the College Experience
(A qualitative-phenomenological and feminist exploration of experiences)

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the research information sheet for the above study.

2. I have spoken to the above researcher and understand that my involvement will involve being interviewed individually and participation in a focus group.

3. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason.

4. I understand that any data or information used in any publication which arises from this study will be anonymous.

5. I understand that all data will be stored securely and is covered by the Data Protection Act.

6. I agree to take part in the above study.

________________________________________
Name of participant

________________________________________
Signature and date
Appendix 3: Interview/Focus Group Discussion Protocol

Domain one: Life Trajectories

- Early experiences of education
- Parents’ level of education
- Career ambition
- Early adulthood fulfilment, employment and family
- Choice v. lack of choice in decision-making

Domain two: College student at a mature age/multi-roles

- Motivation to go to college
- Challenges as a college student
- Challenges to relationships
- Managing multi-roles and transformation

Domain three: Women’s ways of knowing and understanding

- Socio-economic status and education
- Influence of college experience on knowing
- Ambiguities
- Dissonance

Domain four: Challenges, Changes and Consequences

- Recognition
- Admiration
- Self-discovery
- Losses/gains
- Life experience now
- Opportunity
- Social and cultural development
Appendix 4: Interview Protocol: Personal Notes

Domain One: Life Trajectories

• Early experiences of education
  Prompts: teachers; parental involvement; friend; school environment; motivation.

• Parents’ level of education
  Prompts: attitudes to education; cultural capital.
• Career ambition
  Prompts: home and school influence; encouragement; accomplishments; barriers.

• Employment and family
  Prompts: work satisfaction; family obligations; marital experience.
• Choice v. Lack of choice in decision-making

*Influences on decision-making; retrospective thoughts.*
Domain Two: College student at a mature age

- Motivation to go to college
  *Prompts: unemployment; marital separation; adult children.*

- Challenges as a college student
  *Prompts: finance; time; assignments; college environment.*
• Challenges to relationships
  *Prompts: partner; children; friends.*

• Managing multi-roles and transformation
  *Prompts: changing perspectives; self and others.*
Domain Three: Women’s ways of knowing and understanding

- Socio-economic status

  Prompts: understanding of correlation between class, education and status; gender; empowerment/disenpowerment of education.

- Influence of college experience on knowing and understanding/ambiguities and aspirations included

  Prompts: changes in epistemology; ontology; influence of theory.
Domain Four: Challenges, Changes and Consequences?

- General discussion/advice to others/ life now/hopes
Appendix 5: Promise of Confidentiality

Focus Group Discussion
June 2013

You are being asked to sign this form in order to protect the confidentiality of what is said by members of this focus group discussion during the course of this study. Please read the following statement and sign your name indicating that you agree to comply:

*I promise that I will not talk about information discussed during the course of this focus group with anyone other than my fellow focus group members and the researcher.*

Name:__________________________________________________________
Signature:_______________________________________________________
Researcher Signature:____________________________________________
Date:_________________________________________________________