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The Literacy Practices of Working Class White Women

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The Literacy Practices of Working Class White Women

by

Jody Ann Fernandez

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
Department of Childhood Education
College of Education
University of South Florida

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Dedication

To all the little girls who read and think too much

and

To my children, Peter David and Elizabeth Ann.

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The Literacy Practices of Working Class White Women

Jody Ann Fernandez

Abstract

It is an accepted construct that literacy proficiency is vital to economic success in America. As well, research has shown that home literacy use, especially parental practices, is instrumental in the children's acquisition of literacy skills, and later, proficiency with school literacy tasks. While literacy research abounds regarding family literacy practice, especially that of low-income mothers and children, rarely is the concept of class specifically addressed as separate from race.

The purpose of this study was to investigate and describe the reported home literacy practices of nine white working class women residing in a neighborhood in the Southeastern United States. A semi-structured interview protocol ensured that all women addressed the same basic literacy areas while still allowing room for individuality and discussion. A phenomenographical approach, designed to obtain a better understanding of literacy practice via studying each individual woman's experiences and perceptions of those experiences combined with feminist informed narrative analysis was utilized to analyze the data. Field notes and a researcher's reflective journal added to the data.

Results indicated that the nine women participants used print based literacy in varying amounts for functional, social, and aesthetic purposes. These purposes were both public and private, and commonly, functioned as a tool to meet their needs in four areas: organization, information, communication and diversion. These results support the findings of other socio-cultural literacy researchers (Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Finn, 1999; Gee, 1996; Heath, 1983; Street, 1995) who contend that creating meaning is the driving force behind any act of literacy. A conclusion that can be drawn from this study is that there is a range of literacy practice within this particular population, white working class women, that has been heretofore unreported. Their perceptions of the functions of these practices are instrumental in their literacy use, and that of their children. AS working class represents a substantial portion of the American population (Teixeira & Rogers, 2000), this data may serve to inform future educational literacy instruction.

Chapter 1

Introduction

James Gee (1996) introduces the concept of *master myth* when he discusses shared assumptions or ways of thinking that have become so culturally prevalent that they seem to be inevitable, normal, even common sense. Several of these master myth constructs came into play as I searched for dissertation topics that would engross me and provide food for thought for literacy scholars. This sensibility, combined with the ingrained adage (and a master myth that I have bought into) to “write what you know”, and an affinity for qualitative research encouraged me. I looked to myself for ideas.

I grew up in the Midwestern United States in a white working class family who believed in the value of and practiced the adage that hard work pays off. However, I saw in classrooms how both students and teachers disdained certain students because of how they dressed, where they lived, what their parents, did or (not) for a living. I heard from fellow teachers that certain subgroups of the population were uneducated, were less, cared less about their children’s school success, but I knew from experience that this metonymy was erroneous. My experience was that people cared about their children, about education, and about literacy, but that working twelve hour days six days a week left little time for helping with school projects and buying food often superceded buying books. I

experienced a grandmother who wrote weekly letters to several out of town relatives, two and three pages long with articles of interest from magazines and newspapers enclosed. I had a mother who modeled reading, and I also had uncles who could not read much more than their names. What I lived at home about literacy, and what I experienced at school, as a student and as a teacher, were at odds. Both the master myth of “hard work always pays off “ and the metonymous image of “lazy, illiterate white trash” began to disintegrate.

Class theorists contend that class is a culture, and working class particularly (Devine, 1997; Dimock & Gilmore, 1994; Gibson-Graham, Resnick, & Wolff, 2000; hooks, 2000; Linkon, 1999). Like others who have managed to “cross over” from working class roots to a place in the academy, I am bi-cultural, living as both insider/outsider in both worlds (Tokarczyk & Fay, 1993). My days are spent in the middle class world of academia, working, reading, writing, studying, teaching. For the past eleven years, while working on my advanced degrees and teaching at both the community college and the university, I have lived in a white working class neighborhood. My evenings and weekends are spent here, still working, reading, writing, studying, teaching. Of the thirty homes on my recently paved road, eight are house trailers, and three are pre-manufactured, modular homes. One is a converted garage, while several are former weekend fishing cottages that have become year round homes. At least six homes have older model automobiles waiting for repair, some up on blocks, others covered in kudzu. There are no sidewalks, no streetlights, and more weeds than grass. Cats and dogs of all sizes and colors greet the children at the

bus stop and children play and skate in the road (now that's its been paved, roller blading has become quite popular).

The literacies I see practiced on my street are incongruent with the myth of the white working class adults who don't care about their kids, or school, or reading and writing. The literacies I saw growing up and the literacies I currently practice are also at odds. My attempts to reconcile my reality with the research were ineffectual. When I attempted to discern what the research said about what really goes on in the homes of the white working class and the literacies they practice, I was blocked. I found studies describing and discussing the literacy practices of African Americans, of the working poor, of English as second language learners, of mothers, of families, of adolescent girls but none focusing on what I knew to be a very real and substantial part of America.

Rationale

It is an accepted construct that literacy proficiency is vital to economic success in America (Scribner, 1998; Walsh, 1991). Occupations requiring sizeable amounts of reading and writing pay higher salaries than those requiring little or no literacy skill. While historically there existed certain well-paying careers such as specialized factory, agricultural, and service work that provided adequate economic benefits, changes in the structure of business and the American economy have eroded much of this job security. Automobile and steel factories are no longer the community bastions of economic stability. Union jobs that were once the bastion of working class job security are being moved so that corporations can cut production costs with cheaper overseas labor (North

American Free Trade Agreement," Microsoft® Encarta® Online Encyclopedia 2004). Family farms that once supported several generations have been bought up by large co-ops, streamlining production at the cost of American jobs and displacing workers from both homes and vocations. The evolving technology- and information-oriented workplace requires reading and writing skills beyond the basics to keep pace with societal literacy demands (Lankshear, 1997; Merrifield, Bingman, Hemphill & deMarrais, 1997). The link between literacy and economic success has been well investigated throughout Third World countries (Freire, 1998b; Iredale, 1999; Street, 1995; Wagner, 1999). The United States government has recognized the crucial link between literacy and jobs with the implementation of the Workforce Investment Act of 1998, which provides literacy education for displaced adults and low literacy youths (www.usdoj.gov/crt/508/508law.html; 1998).

In addition, research has shown that home literacy use, especially parental practices, is instrumental in the acquisition of literacy skills in children (Heath, 1983; Holdaway, 1979; Snow, C. & Tabors, P, 1996; Sticht, 1992; Taylor, 1983; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988; Teale & Sulzby, 1999). Children who regularly witness reading and writing in their homes, and those children who are read to by their caregivers, consistently achieve better on school based literacy tasks (Bus, Van Ijzendoorn, & Pelligrini, 1995; Durkin, 1966; Morrow, 1995; Strickland & Morrow, 1989). Superior school performance, then, leads to elevated college opportunities which in turn lead to more beneficial, in terms of compensation and benefits, employment levels (Children's Defense Fund, 2000).

Family literacy programs abound based upon the premise that upgrading parental literacy skills will provide two fold benefits – opening doors of opportunities for parent to get jobs and providing the necessary scaffolding for school success for their children (DeBruin-Parecki & Krol- Sinclair, 2003; Morrow, 1995; Paratore, 2001)

In America, women are traditionally the primary caregivers of children. Thus, the influence of women on children's uses and values of literacy is paramount (Ballara, 1992; Cuban & Hayes, 1996; Handel, 1998; Handel & Goldsmith, 1994; Luttrell, 1996; Sticht, 1992). Research surrounding family literacy practice abounds (DeBruin-Parecki & Krol-Sinclair, 2003; Handel, 1998; Morrow, 1995). However, the bulk of family literacy research focuses upon the practices of low-income women of color and their families (Arristia with Schwabacher, Betancourt & the students of the mothers' reading program, 1999; Clark, 1983; Handel, 1998; Morrow, 1995; Neuman, Hagegorn, Celano, & Daly, 1995; Torruelus, Benmayer, Goris & Juarbe, 1999). Studies purporting to investigate the literacy practices of working class families, or even more specifically working class women, primarily focus upon one of two areas: the practices of the middle class families of achieving students, or those of poor Black or Latino underachieving students (Delpit, 1995; Handel, 1999; Harris, Kamhi & Pollock 2001; Heath, 1983; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988; Wagner, 1999;). Ogbu (1980) reported that class structure and race also serve as differential motivators for literacy practice. Yet, while class is

oft cited as a category within this research, the fact remains that rarely is the concept of class either (a) defined or (b) separated from race.

Lacking, then, is research that focuses upon the literacy practices of working class white women, a group that falls between the two principally studied groups in terms of both class and race. Other research, especially in the area of women's studies, has shown that both class and race are mitigating factors in women's life choices and chances (hooks, 2000,1999; Lamphere, Ragone, & Zavella, 1997; Crompton & Mann, 1994, Skeggs, 1997). It is generally accepted that upper and middle class women have greater educational and economic opportunities than do working class and poor women; and that white women face fewer barriers to success than do women of color. As with the family literacy studies, research in this area often merges class and race together. Thus, by removing racial categories other than white I focused on the working class aspect of these white women's literacy practices.

My interest lies in investigating what specifically working class white women reported as literacy practices and the value they placed on these practices as they live in a society that is easily revealed as male-dominated and middle-class oriented. The influence of class on the value and acceptance/rejection of literacy as integral to success came into play (Ogbu, 1988). American schools are prime purveyors of middle-class values, serving to inculturate and even indoctrinate (Giroux, 1993; Walsh, 1991). Yet, many Americans deny the existence of a class system even as they continue to support it. What research that does exist on working class American women

“piggybacks” on the research on men, adding on the component of gender as if it is secondary and unimportant (Teixeira & Rogers, 2000). In America there is a plethora of research available concerning the importance of race, but it has been concerned primarily with describing race as other than white (Fine, Weis, Powell & Wong, 1997). There is little research that separates race and class – either on middle class persons of color or working class whites. But just as not all persons of color are of lower economic class, not all whites are middle class (Bing & Reid, 1996).

The meaning of literacy has evolved over the years, as have the types of practices associated with it. For the most part, literacy has been viewed and studied as it exists within the school environment or on the job, and not in relation to the daily home lives of adults. While literacy researchers are prolific in their attempts to investigate and improve children’s school based literacy practices, most skirt the issue of class, dealing with the more visible types of otherness, race and gender.

Purpose and Questions

The purpose of this study was to explore the home literacy practices of an under-studied group: working class white women. Qualitative inquiry, by definition, allows the research questions to emerge from the data collected rather than entering the study with a set of prescribed questions in hand. I entered this study with two guiding questions

1. What are the reported home literacy practices of working class white women?

2. What are the reported functions of these reported home literacy practices?

Design

This research of working class white women's literacy practice was gathered via individual interviews guided by questions on a researcher-developed interview protocol. This method allowed the participants to express in their own words what they considered to be literacy practices and how they used these practices while ensuring the researcher addressed the same areas within each interview. Phenomenography is a qualitative research approach whose purpose is to obtain a better understanding of a practice by a studying individual perspectives and experiences (Sandburg, 1997; Svensson, 1997). In this case, the literacy practices and experiences, and the perceptions of such, of working class white women were explored via their words and self-reported meanings. The analysis was meant to be both explorative and interpretive, and focused on description and on categories of description (Svensson, 1997). A feminist informed perspective was combined with phenomenography because both approaches assign central importance to experience. Feminism adds the dimension of valuing the importance of the women's participation and their gendered constructions of knowledge and experience (Conrad & Martin, 1997). A move toward reflexive inquiry in the realm of qualitative research (Ellis & Bochner, 2000) allows my experiences to become part of the data as well.

The audiotape-recorded interviews were reviewed four times, following the parameters addressed in a Listener's Guide (Appendix B) adapted from the work

of Brown & Gilligan (1992). This analysis focused the researcher's attention to specific aspects and details of each woman's descriptions of her experiences in attempts to locate themes and craft profiles. Transcribed data from each listening session was compared to search for patterns. Both field notes and a reflective journal were kept during the data collection to provide supplementary data sources and allow the researcher opportunity for cross checking. Information from each woman's interview was then combined to make a comprehensive portrait of her individual reported literacy practices and their functions. Finally, the data from each respondent was compared with the data from the others as I searched for emerging patterns and themes.

Significance and Limitations

The definition of literacy and what constitutes literacy practices has been and continues to be debated (Baynham, 1995; Lankshear, 1997; Gee, 1994; Street, 1995) and is discussed at length in chapter two. While for some, literacy practice are viewed in broad context that include things as reading, writing, speaking and viewing, for this study the definition was limited to text based literacy - consisting of reading and writing activities. Barton and Hamilton's (1999) work on the home literacy practices of the working class in England was instrumental in developing the design of this study, as were the definitions and categories of reading and writing developed by Heath (1983).

The significance of this study is two-fold as the focus upon the social context surrounding literacy uses of working class white women differs from any other American research. The voice given to this under-represented portion of

the American population articulated aspects of literacy in their lives that may have been previously assumed from their positions in race and class. I did not seek to determine cause and effect, nor did I wish to generalize the information gleaned to all working class, all whites, or all women. However, the information I gathered may lead to a better understanding of the literacy practices of a significant aggregate of the American population.

Second, for the literacy education field, this investigation has the potential to inform the arena of children's literacy, especially out-of-school literacy. As reported by Heath in 1983, and confirmed by Paratore in 2003, some students fail to perform well on school based literacy tasks because of the lack of congruence in school and home based literacy. An examination of working class white women's literacy practices can lead to better understanding of the literacy practices of working class white children. This has the potential to inform literacy instruction in the schools.

In the same way, due to design of the study, limitations are inherent. The study was designed to investigate a specific population and their reported practices. While commonalities were found within and across the data, they can serve only to provide support for research the universality of some literacy practices general.

Definition of Terms

For the purposes of this particular research study, certain expansive and multiply defined terms have been narrowed down and singularly determined. Without doing so, there would be no end to the interpretations and

generalizations that might be contrived from the data. As this is not the purpose of this research, I have defined certain terms prior to beginning my investigation. I am fully aware that my definitions may not match those of my informants, and I realize that adjustments may need to occur during the collection, analysis and reporting of my data. Thus, *a priori*, and with much consideration and review of current literature, I define the following:

- **Literacy practices, general:** Print based reading and writing practices such as, but not limited to, reading newspapers, advertisements, books, magazines, letters or writing of notes, letters, cards, journals, stories (adapted from Heath, 1983).
- **Literacy practices, home:** Print based reading and writing used in conjunction with self, family, and other personally affiliated groups (i.e. church, neighborhood or recreational organizations). This will not include any “work at home” practices related to current employment but may include practices related to pursuing an advanced personal formal education. These practices may be private (including for example, but again not limited to, writing diaries or self-reminders or reading books or personal letters) or public (writing notes to others, greeting cards or reading aloud to family members) (Heath, 1983; Merrifield, et al, 1997; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988).
- **White:** The participants will be self-described as white in an attempt to mitigate any purported differences due to race or ethnicity. The effects of the socially constructed category of race, especially African American and

Hispanic, upon literacy use and attainment have been discussed in depth over the years and while significant, are not under scrutiny in this particular study. It is not expected that issues of language/second language use will arise; if they do, they will be reported as needed.

- **Women:** For the purposes of this study, women are defined as females over the age of 18.
- **Working class:** Class, in America, is a rife with innuendo, and subject to interpretation and even denial. For the purposes of this study, working class was defined as performing a minimally valued, hourly paid wage job that requires no college-based educational credentials and over which the worker has little control (Linkon, 1999; Zweig, 2000). Self- admittance of class location was not necessarily be a defining component because, as will be delineated in chapter 2, most Americans aspire to and consider themselves to be middle – class.

Summary

The study has its foundations in sociocultural literacy theory (Barton, 1994; Gee, 1996, 2000a, 2000b, Mikulecky, 1990; Ruddell & Unrau, 1994; Willinsky, 1990). Inherent then are the intersections of race, class, and gender, in this case, white, working class, women, with the uses and functions of home literacy practices as they were reported through the voices of the study participants. Tape-recorded, semi-structured interviews combined with researcher field notes and a reflective journal described these practices and their

functions both individually and commonly. The resulting data contributes to the body of knowledge about this particular American population.

Chapter II

Review of the Literature

Introduction

The focus of this review of the literature is based upon defining and delineating text-based literacy practices as they pertain to and are intertwined with home lives of working class white women.

Certain broad concepts related to this study – specifically literacy, class, race, and gender must be explored and then delineated within the context of this study. A brief history of literacy and of what constitutes literacy practices will be followed by an exploration of the cultural constructs of class, race, and gender as they relate to white working class women. Finally, a review of the research specifically related to the literacy practices of working class white women confirms the necessity for this proposed study.

Literacy Overview

Literacy

Historically, the definition of literacy and what constitutes literacy practices has evolved from the minimal ability to read in Latin to the ability to read in one's native language (Graff, 1987, 1995; Venezky, 1990). In Medieval Europe, religion was of paramount importance, and literacy was important only because it allowed people to read the Bible. With the Renaissance, educational opportunities were

expanded for upper class males, but lower class males and females continued to be denied access to literacy acquisition (Graff, 1987, 1995; Riorden & Riorden; 1990). With the colonization of the North American continent, literacy continued to be equated with being able to read the Bible, and early American reading instruction centered on the word processing skills, or the lack thereof, of readers. Reading was simply a perceptual process, a translating of the written sounds of the author (Graff, 1987, 1995; Pearson & Stephens, 1994). The focus was upon decoding text, and good readers were those who could orate effectively. The ability to discern meaning was secondary to correct pronunciation. Writing instruction focused upon letter formation and grammar skills. Literacy tutelage emphasized the attainment of discrete, mechanical, and testable skills (Walsh, 1991). This narrow focus continued into the 20th century when Louise Rosenblatt (1938) put forth the idea that a reader's response to text was clearly influenced by his or her prior knowledge and experience. Building upon this, seminal literacy researchers have continued to explore the role that culture and context play in the practice of literacy. This body of work falls under the sociocultural literacy model.

Sociocultural Literacy Theory

Sociocultural theorists believe that literacy acts are constructed and that creating meaning is the compelling force behind any act of literacy. However, this construction is embedded within the individual's particular cultural and social background (prior knowledge). Thus literacy is personal and variable (Ruddell & Unrau, 1994; Barton, 1994; Gee, 1996, 2000a, 2000b; Mikulecky, 1990;

Willinsky, 1990). As well, literacy involves much more than the attainment of simple reading and writing skills emphasized in the past. Rather, the concept of literacy has evolved to include both the multiplicity of methods of communication and the importance of diverse cultural, social, and linguistic modes of being (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000).

The New Literacies

Willinsky (1990) describes the New Literacy as a social process where the students are the beginning sources of meaning. He states, "In this frame of mind, 'literacy' is nothing in itself. Literacy is understood as the working of language in its written form...and that work takes place in a setting which contributes to its meaning" (1990, p. 9). Thus, the New Literacy advocates teaching students to use literacy in ways that will best serve them outside the classroom context. It stresses that literacy is both personal and political, but most especially populist. In this context, literacy is no longer merely a skill, but a social practice (Barton, 1994; Barton & Hamilton, 2000; Street, 1995, 2000; Walsh, 1991).

The New Literacy Studies group frames literacy as a social practice imbued with values, attitudes, feelings, and social relationships. These practices are purposeful, historically situated, culturally embedded, and subject to change (Barton, 1994; Barton & Hamilton, 1998; 2000; Maybin, 2000; Street, 1995). Practices are defined as both specific, observable events and as patterns of behavior (Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Street, 1995; Tusting, Ivanic, & Wilson, 2000). Gee (1996,) terms these practices *discourses* and separates discourses into primary and secondary groups. Primary *Discourses* (Gee's capitalization) are

home cultural discourses. These are not learned, but realized as a part of living in a specific place and time. Secondary discourses are all the others, and include areas such as religion, school, and work. In the arena of literacy, if the home Discourse and the school discourse are at odds, students often have trouble meeting school literacy standards. Gee contends that discourses cannot be specifically taught or learned, only acquired; thus, the schools' emphasis on only one type of literate discourse is detrimental to those living outside that discourse. Street's (1993, 1995) arguments are consistent with the work of Gee. Street contends that literacy must be defined in relation to the other social aspects of life. He declares that there is no uniform model of literacy, and we must be wary of imposing our own cultural biases on others. For Street, literacy is a resource and a commodity.

From this work comes the concept of *multiliteracies*. The development of new systems of global production and marketing (Gee, 1996, 2000a, 2000b; Gee & Lankshear, 1997), the rapid advancement of computer technology and cyberspace talk (Luke, 2000), and the realization and acceptance of the significance of languages and cultures other than English (Cazden, 2000; Martin-Jones & Jones, 2000; Michaels & Sohmer, 2000) combine to extend the definition of literacy. Martin-Jones and Jones (2000) expanded the definition of literacy to include recognition of the different genres, styles, and types of texts associated with various social practices. Thus, for these researchers, literacy also includes practices such as computer literacies, television, and financial literacy (Meek, 1992), visual literacy, even audio sound effects, gestures, spatial, and multimodal

forms (New London group, 2000). Street (1995), however, warns us not to confuse literacy, which involves the social use of reading and writing, with competence or skill in a particular area. Unfortunately, Street's warning has gone unheeded, as indeed, even within the academic community, confusion between literacy and knowledge prevails.

Literacy as Power

Yet another perspective of literacy has served to shift the view away from skills based literacy. Freire's literacy work with adults in Brazil has placed the reader foremost in attempts at defining literacy. Freire's (1998a) basic precept of respecting the learners and what they already know has evolved into several maxims for literacy education. First, his exhortation that students "read the world before reading the word" (Freire, 1997; Freire & Macedo, 1987) speaks to the importance of prior knowledge and to the social and cultural contexts of literacy. Second, the banking concept of education that Freire so rails against speaks directly to the historical concepts of literacy as classical and functional – as skills teachers can deposit within their students which can be withdrawn at will (Freire, 1997, 1998a, 1998b, 1998c; Freire & Macedo, 1987). And finally, Freire insists that literacy can serve to empower and emancipate. By allowing students to bring their own realities into the classroom, they are able to integrate and utilize it to make sense of the world around them. This expansive view of literacy, however, must somehow be reduced to incorporate visible practices that can be viewed and discussed within the context of this proposed study.

Literacy Practices

Finn is but one researcher who worked to fuse specific literacy practices within Freire's framework. Finn, in *Literacy with an Attitude* (1999), contends that literacy is leveled, and these four levels can be allied with social class.

Performative literacy is the application of basic skills – sounding out words and writing basic sentences and is the lowest literacy level. Next, *functional* literacy refers to using the reading and writing skills necessary for daily life. *Informational* literacy is that needed and utilized in school situations. For Finn, the most important level is *powerful* literacy – the literacy that allows one to evaluate, analyze, synthesize, and *control*.

As opposed to discussing literacy practice as a singular concept, Heath (1983) categorizes reading and writing practices separately, with some overlap. Reading practices, named by Heath as types of uses, include *instrumental*, to accomplish specific goals; *social-interactional*, to maintain relationships; *confirmational*, to support existing attitudes or beliefs; *news-related*, and *recreational*. Writing is used as *memory aids* such as notes and shopping lists; as *substitutes for oral messages*; in *financial* ways such as checks and forms; as *social-interactional*; and as *public records* for church related activities. Heath's categories are thus all specific examples of Finn's functional literacy level.

Barton and Hamilton (1998), on the other hand, sort literacy practices into two categories, either *vernacular* or *dominant*. In line with Gee (1991, 1996a, 1996b), vernacular literacies can be viewed as primary, or home Discourses, and are those literacy practices primarily performed within the home and community.

Finn would consider these in the functional literacy level. In contrast, dominant literacy practices are those that are somehow sanctioned by power institutions and are Gee's secondary Discourses. Finn would categorize these as institutional.

In addition, literacy practices can be divided into where literacy occurs –at home, within the family, or in the workplace. Each of these categories requires specific, though often overlapping literacy use. Researchers generally concentrate on only one area of these literacy practices, trying to explicate fully the types of literacy practices used within a particular setting.

Literacy for this study – conclusion

For the purposes of this study of the singular setting of the home literacy practices of working class white women, I used the following definition to guide the beginning stages of the study.

Literacy, at the very minimum, is a fundamental, potentially empowering, social practice involving the use of print and the utilization of both reading and writing. The outward manifestations of this practice can be broadly categorized into functional, social, and aesthetic clusters. Functional practices are those necessary to navigate society or gain or give information. Social uses of literacy involve print related ways of connecting with friends and family. Aesthetic literacy practices are personal and affective in nature. Literacy is rooted within an individual's social and cultural milieu, and thus is personal and fluid. It is imbued with historical meaning, and its meaning and value are influenced by intangible factors such as class, race, and gender.

Class

As the concept of working class as a cultural construct is vital to the study, the following section will address issues relevant to the existence of and definition of social class as it exists in America.

The Existence of Class

Does class exist? Overwhelmingly, many would answer with a resounding “no”. Basing their argument on the strong words of the founding fathers -a wealthy, white, male minority- “all men are created equal”, there are many who contend that America is a classless society. Begun in part as a reaction to British rule in the 1700s, this *master myth* (Gee, 1996) continues today as we deny the existence of class divisions in our culture. Lipsitz (1997) contends that social class doesn’t exist because our shared social language about wealth, reward, status, and stratification encourages everyone to think of himself or herself as middle-class (See also Zweig, 2000 and Linkon, 1999).

Rather than attempt to prove that America is a classless society, some sociologists admit to the prior existence of class but contend that it is now dead. Part of the argument speaks to the issue of class awareness and identification (Lembcke, 1991; Wright; 1997). For these theorists, class no longer exists because Americans are unable or unwilling to self-identify with a class category. This, however, directly contrasts with the philosophies of two of the seminal class theorists, Karl Marx and Max Weber. Others, such as Erik Olin Wright (1997), contend that class location limits class awareness. Thus, one’s position in a classed society determines one’s awareness of the existence of class within that

society. In turn, class location limits individual class practices. That is, one's position determines one's actions within that position. However, one's class awareness also selects one's class practices.

In addition, say these theorists, when classes fail to act as an entity, they cease to exist. For them, at minimum, a definition of class includes an awareness of commonality from the participants (Pakulski & Waters, 1996; Wright, 1997). In addition, say Pakulski and Waters in *The Death of Class* (1996), class does not exist because it fails to explain 20th century economic development. The counter argument to this stance, Hogan (1982) supposes, is that the ingrained myth of American equality has limited the capacity to develop class based political institutions. Doing so, Hogan says, would be un-American.

Many of those who maintain that class is dead do admit to social stratification and status inequalities, and that the capacity to maintain high status lifestyles is dependent upon wealth, but maintain that class is not the sole dimension of stratification (Crompton & Mann, 1994; Pakulski & Waters, 1996). However, this is at best superficial. Defining stratification as an unequal location within a power structure (Breen & Rottman, 1995), with the sole other dimensions of stratification mentioned being race and gender does not account for all the differences in society. Class is left as the only other logical stratifying dimension, however much some resist admitting it.

In response to those who pronounce the death of class, other theorists contend class is alive and well. Central to their argument is that despite embracing equality, in individual perception and understanding, we arrange

things vertically and insist on crucial differences in value (Fussell, 1983; Mantsios 1996, 2000). By attributing poverty and wealth to individual merit, we value some people over others (Ehrenreich, 2001; hooks, 2000; Rosenbloom & Travis, 1996).

But class is more than money, even though it is structured by economic power. Zweig (2000) says classes are formed in the dynamics of power and wealth. Classes are more complicated, more interesting, and more real than the arbitrary income levels used to define class in conventional wisdom. They are more than money, in that they influence the way we work, live and think (hooks, 2000; Zweig, 2000). While people do possess free will, the shared location of class explains the probability of people making similar choices (Breen & Rottman, 1995). People, according to seminal class theorist John Goldthorpe, act in class ways even when they lack developed class awareness as a result of the opportunities afforded or denied to them by virtue of their class position (as cited in Savage, 2000; See also Crompton & Scott, 2000; Wright, 1997). Class shapes the interests, strategic capacities and experiences of people, via the complex ways in which their lives are linked through careers, mobility, voluntary associations and social ties (Wright, 1997). In fact, class identities, practices and experiences are vital components in the construction of class (Wacquant, 1991).

Thus classes can be seen as sets of common positions of social power and not solely as the individuals who occupy those positions (Breen & Rottman, 1995). Because shifting boundaries make it possible for Americans to move up or down this ladder of power, class demarcations are no longer as rigid as they

once were, indicating to some their demise (Aronson, 1999; Breen & Rottman, 1995; Green, 1999; hooks, 2000; Wright, 1997; Zweig, 2000).

However, hooks summarizes the evidence for the existence of class most succinctly when she says “ For so long everyone has wanted to hold onto the belief that the United States is a class free-society – that anyone who works hard enough can make it to the top. Few people stop to think that in a class-free society there would be no top” (hooks, 2000, p.5).

Theories of Class

Accepting then that the United States is a classed society, albeit a closeted one, how do we define class? The very process of classification forces us to be concrete about issues such as economics, status and discursive practices that contribute to defining a class and its members (Breen & Rottman, 1995; Linkon, 1999). Broadly, class analysis can be divided into Marxist inspired, Weberian inspired, and stratification inspired (Crompton & Mann, 1994; Crompton & Scott, 2000; Wright, 1997).

While Marx never really defined class (Breen & Rottman, 1995), the Marxist model is considered to be the “most elaborated and systematic theoretical framework for class analysis “ (Wright, 1997, p. 2). For Marx, class was a binary polarization. Class location was defined objectively in relation to production and exploitation; one was either bourgeoisie or a proletariat, (Marx & Engels, 1977). In the current study, a Marxist perspective would locate the participants firmly within the proletariat class.

Weber provides a more sociological view of class by contending that class is one aspect of the distribution of power in society (Breen & Rothman, 1995). Weber also considers class as separate from status although he acknowledges a close intersection between them (Crompton & Scott, 2000).

Weber and Marx share certain aspects of class analysis in that they both identify class with the relationship between people and resources, connect social relations to economic resources, and define class by its relation to other classes (Wright, 1997). In addition, and this is important to any formal study of class, Weber and Marx concur that people who constitute a class may not recognize that they do (Breen & Rottman, 1995). Thus, for the proposed study, the white women need not admit to being members of the working class.

The focus of stratification theory is the hierarchical positioning of people in society based upon power. Thus, class is defined by one's position rather than referencing a specific person (Breen & Rottman, 1995; Crompton & Mann, 1994; Fussell, 1983; Savage, 2000). In the United States, class is structured by economic power (Zweig, 2000) but doesn't stop there. Class operates in virtually every aspect of life because it can situate the nature of work as well as the quality of schooling available (Mantsios, 2000). It is a subjective perception of status arranged around property and authority (Savage, 2000). As such, class position here, unlike in the United Kingdom, is primarily political (Dimock & Gilmore, 1994; Zweig, 2000).

Much of the philosophy base of stratification theory is based on the work of Pierre Bourdieu and his metaphor of *capital* (1984, 1988). While capital is

generally used in reference to economic assets, Bourdieu extends the term to include other properties of power. In addition to economic capital, Bourdieu suggests that class location is also determined by social, symbolic, and cultural capital. Social capital is based upon group connections and location; symbolic capital is a context specific power relationship. Cultural capital, the most often referenced of Bourdieu's capital concepts, in my mind, envelopes the other three types. Cultural capital refers to the historical, social, educational ways of knowing and being that each individual possesses. It can be embodied, objectified, or institutionalized, but always exists in a valued, and this was important to Bourdieu, arbitrary relation to other forms. Individuals possess cultural capital both physically and symbolically. They then exist within *habitus*, Bourdieu's (1984, 1998) term for personal environments. *Habitus* is arbitrarily stratified, and accounts for the similarities found among members of particular social groups. For the current study then, the participants are located within a particular subgroup of working class white women that may share specific common literacy practices.

These three theories share a common thread of power relationships in relation to economic assets. They differ in the degree of focus placed upon economics versus power. Interestingly, when class is discussed in the United States it is usually in relation to occupation and income (Ehrenreich, 2001; Gibson-Graham, Resnick & Wolf, 2000; Jones, 1999; Teixeira & Rogers, 2000). Devine (1997) and Savage (2000) attribute this to the relative simplicity of classifying by income opposed to the difficulty inherent in categorizing cultural

variance. Yet nowhere does a seminal theorist assert that class is *only* a matter of economics. This omission is a contributing factor to the American myth of class. By denying the existence of differential power structures in American culture, and focusing only on the capacity to accumulate wealth, then the myth of the American meritocratic society sounds viable. Of course this ignores the possibility that people may work hard and still not accumulate their desired wealth, power and status. Rarely do individuals consciously choose to be poor and powerless. Instead they are limited by the opportunities denied or afforded to them by the current social system (Mantsios, 1996).

Working Class

Of particular interest for this study is the concept of the American *working class*. This class division is one often found in ethnographical literacy research and it is discussed as modes of behavior and value, yet defined, if at all, by way of income or occupation as exemplified in the seminal works of Anyon (1981) Heath (1983) Luttrell (1993, 1996) and Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines (1988). However, outside of literacy research, working class has been explored in other ways.

In exploring class in America, Ehrenreich (2001) used income percentages to define working class – the bottom 20% met her criteria. Zweig (2000), looking only at employed Americans and discounting the underclass, or extremely poor, estimates the American working class to be 62% of the population. Teixeira and Rogers (2000) contend that America's white working class comprises 55% of the population, and that the percentage of working class

is even higher among minority citizens. These numbers are formidable, yet they only look at economics.

For the most part, these constructions still treat class as an occupational variable (Gibson-Graham, *et al*, 2000; Jones, 1999) This approach assigns people to positions based upon their job or occupation, and then gathers these positions into an overall class structure. This approach is popular because it provides an easily manageable proxy measure of class. Yet, caution Crompton and Mann (1994), clusters of employment groups do not constitute classes. Class position, especially working class, gains some of its standing from the nature of the occupation. Working class people, says Linkon (1999) have hourly-paid jobs rather than salaried careers. These jobs, while often vital to the day-to-day functioning of society, are not under the control of the workers and are not highly valued (Linkon, 1999; Zweig, 2000).

Working class can also be seen as a modality or a lifestyle (Brooks with Cayetano, 1999; Ehrenreich, 2001; Hoggart, 1957; Zweig, 2000). Income has something to do with how working class people navigate their environment, but so do the shared concerns of paying bills, living from paycheck to paycheck, and access (or lack of) to childcare, health care, and higher education (Rubin, 2000). In fact, working class can be defined by what it is not, or does not have – private preparatory schools, and upper class colleges, debutante balls, social register (Higley, 2000). Hogan (1982) contends that shared class experience creates a working class culture. Culture consists of both day-to-day practices and meanings and the set of commodities produced (Apple, 1982); in other words,

culture is both the means of production and the products produced, both the how and the what. Looking at class in this way, rather than solely a matter of economic stratification, raises the question “ How does working class *habitus* influence the adult home uses of literacy?”

Socio-cultural literacy and the Big Three – Class, Race & Gender

A socio-cultural perspective of literacy asserts that literacy is inseparable from its context. Research has been conducted concerning the roles of gender and race in literacy usage, but little inquiry in literacy is undertaken about class alone (Gilmore, 1994). In fact, one often thinks immediately of class as synonymous with race (Brennan, 1997). Henwood (1997) agrees and contends that failing to acknowledge the difference between race and class leads to pitting working class whites against blacks. Hartigan (1997), studying whiteness and class, explores the “assumed (and generally accurate) equation between whiteness and social privilege” in part to emphasize that the image of urban poverty has been established and maintained as sociologists “ignore ‘poor whites’ while obsessively (over) emphasizing the conditions of blacks living in poverty” (1997, p. 43). The focus on the changing face of America that predicts that by 2010 nearly half of our students will be students of color (Banks, 1999) neglects to mention that population projections forecast that in 2050 56% of adults will still be white (Teixeira & Rogers, 2000).

In addition, there are class differences within other identities, especially gender. Zweig (2000), hooks (2000), Mantsios (1996), and Gilmore (1994) all concur that class differences have hindered the solidarity in the struggle for race

and gender equity. The study of class has been historically gendered, focusing upon males' employment, and placing women in classes based upon their husbands class/status (Crompton & Mann, 1994; Dimock & Gilmore, 1994; Teixeira & Rogers, 2000; Wright, 1997; Zweig, 2000). Perhaps this is because historically, for women as a group "social position was assigned by nature, not by the social division of labor" (Poovey, 1994, p. 47).

Regardless of the rationalization, what remains true about the socioculturally significant triumvirate of race, gender, and class, is this

The currently fashionable triad of American literary studies, race, gender, and class, a triad born of the dethroning of the white male largely Anglo-Saxon canon, contains its own tacit hierarchy and rests on its own unenunciated principals of exclusion and privileging. Disagreements abound over whether race or gender should occupy the top tier in the new cultural ranking, but about the subordination, even the effacement, of class there can be no doubt... no programs in class and its multifarious manifestations have entered college curricula to compete for students with women's studies and African-American studies. Class as a thematic or formal consideration, once the obligatory nod is made, usually recedes to the background, if it does not vanish altogether (Gilmore, p.215).

Race

There is little argument that race plays a major factor in virtually every facet of American life. "In the U.S. race is present in every institution, every relationship, every individual" (Omi & Winant; 1994, p.158). However, studies exploring race have historically focused upon people of color, working within the paradigm that white is the norm and anything else functions as the other (Carter, 1997; Hurtado & Stewart, 1997; Rosenberg, 1997). It has only been in the past two decades that researchers have begun whiteness studies.

First, though, Omi and Winant (1994) contend that racial studies can be divided into three approaches, or paradigms. The first and earliest, the ethnicity paradigm, arose in the early 20th century and viewed race as but one component of ethnic identity. However, this paradigm impinges the constraint of a monolithic race and, therefore, fails to consider the differences between members of a particular group – particularly within subgroups of the same race - i.e. cultural differences between African Americans vs. Caribbean Blacks or Haitians vs. Jamaicans. The third paradigm, nation, was prominent during the 1960s and also fails to consider within group differences, rather it pits culture against culture – Black against white or perhaps Chicano vs. White.

It is Omi and Winant's second paradigm that perhaps provides some insight to literacy research that discusses class as color. This approach attributes class, or economic level, solely to race. The paradigm then divides class into three areas that roughly parallel the earlier discussed Marxist, Weberian, and stratification theories. Omi and Winant recognize that this paradigm is no longer adequate and say, "It would be more accurate to say that class and race are competing modalities by which social actors can be organized" (1994; p. 32).

Being White

Whiteness studies have two major components: research on prejudice and research on comparative race studies (Kellington, 2002). The first is a reaction to American society where there seems to be an underlying assumption that affirming or identifying whiteness is linked with racism and social privilege (Chabram-Dernersesian, 1999). The focus here is that whiteness not the same

as white supremacy or racism (Giroux, 1997; Levine-Rasky, 2002). While Sleeter (1996) delivers a common argument that equating racism with individual prejudice or supremacy is a tactic that allows all whites to continue to reap the benefits of racism, this position conveniently ignores the fact that not all whites are equal. The power and privilege equated with whiteness is mitigated by social class and gender as well other positions in the social hierarchy (Levine-Rasky, 2002). Indeed, a focus such as Sleeter's "lack(s) reflection upon the fundamental assumptions about the meaning of social difference, race, gender, and equality" (Levine-Rasky, p.10).

Once the difference between whiteness and white supremacy is acknowledged, then say Omi and Winant (1994) "Racial formation theory allows us to differentiate between race and racism.... Race has no fixed meaning, but is constructed and transformed sociohistorically through competing political projects, through the necessary and ineluctable link between the structural and cultural dimensions of race in the U.S." (p. 71). Thus, the second component of whiteness studies – the social construction of whiteness becomes the focus.

Whiteness, as with all gender, class, and race identities, is socially constructed. (Chabram-Dernersesian, 1999; Frankenburg, 1993, 1999; Kellington, 2002; Omi & Winant, 1994; Sacks & Lindholm, 2002; Tatum, 1997; Thandeka, 2000). One component of this construction is economics – money. White identity is inextricably linked with middleclass economic position" (Twine, 1999, Brandenburg, Sacks & Lindholm, 2002; Kellington, 2002). In fact, says Kellington (2002) the existence, " ...of labels like 'white trash' points to the

gradations of white belonging...”(165). Thus, membership in a certain category of whiteness is limited to those who can afford it (Kellington, 2002). When we read white, we often assume middle-class (Wallace, 1993), yet quantitatively, the percentage of whites inhabiting the working class is well over 55% (Ehrenreich, 2001; Teixeira & Rogers, 2001; Zweig, 2000).

Finally, and important to this study, race studies have been built upon the proposition that white always functions as a position of privilege. Class and gender studies show that these two areas function to mitigate the power of whiteness. The three areas interact so that race privilege is not always existent especially in the lives of working class women (Hill, 1997; Davy, 1997; Frankenburg, 1993, 1999; Cohen 1999). White culture may be dominant, but not all of its members are privileged (Sacks & Lindholm, 2002; Frankenburg, 1999). Thus it may be necessary to begin to study whiteness not as a racial category but rather a cultural category. In particular white women have an ambiguous status – privileged by race and confined by gender (Frankenburg, 1993).

Gender

Feminist psychologists and sociologists have thoroughly documented the effect gender has on ways of interacting and viewing the world (Gilligan, 1982). *Women’s Ways of Knowing* (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986) effectively delineated the particular differences through which women see, learn and understand. With the work of womanists such as Collins (1991) Davis, (1981) and hooks (1989), the particular experiences of black women negotiating life in white, male, middle class world have been described and explored. Allison

(1988; 1995) explores class differences in essays and autobiographical novels as they relate to both Southern white culture and lesbianism. Thus, it is no longer possible to accept a singular essential category of gender (Roman, 1993). White womanhood, in particular, is located within a varying and malleable subject position (Kellington, 2002). However, the particular position of white working class women and their literacy practices has not yet been described or determined. As this group comprises a significant portion of the American population, research may prove quite telling.

Seminal Studies

Research on the home literacy practices of working class adults in America is scant. Concern for the literacy acquisition and involvement of adolescents (Fine & Weis, 1998; Finn, 1999; Gee, 2000) and children (Anyon, 1981 as a beginning) is one reason, and an attention to the literacy practices of ESL adults (Barton & Hamilton, 2000; Blackledge, 2000; Weinstein-Shr, 1993 among many) is another. Others might include the previously discussed denial of class system in this country and the resulting larger focus on race and gender—more visually discernable categories of otherness than class. A few researchers maintain that they are discussing working class, but skirt the issue by referencing only the economic status of their subjects, ignoring the subjective cultural complications that class location engenders (Weis, 1993). Even worse, others presume an implicit but shared definition of class, and attest to discussing the subject of class while never defining or discussing its parameters (hooks, 2001). The literacy practices of working class white women have been marginally

explored but never alone, always in conjunction, or as afterthought, but never as the explicit focus. Still, it is possible to glean some insights from published British research and American children's literacy studies.

Mid-Century Britain

In 1957 Hoggart published *The Uses of Literacy*, an account of working class British life and literacy. This is primarily a description of white working class men's lives although Hoggart does provide some quantitative data about periodical use towards the end of the book. It is difficult to glean the pertinent literacy information from the anecdotal, often stereotypical, representations of working class people that comprise the first two-thirds of the text.

What Hoggart did report, however, was that working class men often felt cynical and disenfranchised from the British middle- and upper-classes. This led to a distrust of the other classes and their values, particularly in the areas of education and literacy. Literacy, for Hoggart, is confined to reading, and its home uses for the working class are primarily functional. As an early study, Hoggart's work provides a starting point for a review although he fails to discuss specific literacy practices of women.

Mid-Century America

Heath (1983) spent the nine years from 1969-1978 studying the literacy uses in two working class communities in the Carolina Piedmont. While focusing primarily upon the differential cultural backgrounds that children bring with them to school, Heath also provided insight into the home literacy practices of the

working class adults living in the two segregated Southern communities, black Trackton and white Roadville.

Commonly, most of the adults in both communities have had little formal education. Literacy for the most part can be classified into social and functional purposes for these working class adults. It is used for specific reasons on specific occasions. Whether this can be generalized to larger populations is in doubt, as this was a small study of sixteen families residing in a unique area of the country. Heath's focus was on the children, so the reports of adult practices may not be representative of actual practices.

Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines (1988) followed Heath with a study of inner city family literacy. Again, while primarily a study of children's literacy environment and practices, Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines reported the types and uses of reading and writing that existed within the poor Black families studied and related these to Heath's categories. The Shay Avenue adults used literacy in ways very similar to the families of Trackton and Roadville – to gain practical knowledge, maintain social relationships and make plans, to gain information about third parties or distant events, to confirm facts or beliefs, and as memory aids and records.

Both the Heath and Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines studies are oft cited in sociocultural discussions when referring to the differential literacy cultures that children bring with them to school, especially as these cultures relate to race. Therefore, the information about adults culled from these studies must be considered as secondary data, and any conclusions regarding adult home working class literacy practices can only be inferred with reservation.

1990s Britain

In 1990 Barton and Hamilton (1998) embarked upon a comprehensive six-year ethnography of the literacy practices of working class residents in the Springside neighborhood of Lancaster, England. Two white female informants were among the twelve reported upon and discussed in-depth.

Building upon the categories reported by Heath and Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines, Barton and Hamilton identified six areas of adult literacy practice. These are organizing life, personal communication, private leisure, documenting life, sense making, and social participation. Because these vernacular literacies are informally learned and are often tied to use, they have a low cultural value. The users themselves often deny that activities such as reading the newspaper or filling in forms count as real reading or writing.

Barton and Hamilton's study is important because it provides insight into the literacy practices and the value that they have for these self-admitted working class adults. While the actual practices again can be broadly coded into the three areas of social, functional, and aesthetic literacy uses, the implications of valuing certain literacy practices over others cannot be overemphasized.

1990s/2000s America

Key's *Literacy Shutdown* (1997) provides some insight into literacy in the lives of six Southern women and the ways they describing using, and more significantly not using, literacy in their lives. However, the three white women described themselves as upper/ middle class as opposed to the three self-described rural poor African American women. The in-depth interviews were

thought provoking but leave a great deal room for further investigation into women's literacy practices.

Luttrell's (1996, 1997) study of mothers' literacy concluded that working class white women arrived at their identities in relation to working class white men. She reported as well that the societal dependence upon mothers to school their children focuses the blame if children fail to learn literacy skills upon the mothers. Yet the literacy skills are based upon the middle-class norm, thus resulting in a double bind. Additionally, Luttrell's primary focus was upon the school – both the working class mothers' early experiences and their children's current experiences. This proposed study will build upon this work by focusing on all working class women not just mothers and their current literacy practices.

Life at the Margins (Merrifield, J., Bingman, M. B., Hemphill, D. and deMarrais, K. P. B., 1997) provides ethnographical data concerning twelve limited literacy adults. There are a variety of profiles, primarily English as second language speakers. All are defined as living at the cultural and economic margins of a technologically oriented literate society. All purport to believe that enhanced literacy skills would benefit themselves. A singular white female is included - an Appalachian single mother of three who dropped out of school and works as housekeeper; however, her current literacy practices are not discussed.

Home and family literacy practices are the focus of Handel's (1999) study of literacy in an urban community. Of the seven women profiled here, one has higher education (law degree) and its accompanying higher income. Handel attributes a difference in the concept of literacy to this woman's higher social

class, but fails to explore the issue further. Again, all of the families are African-American.

Alvin & Cullum edited *Breaking the cycle: Gender, literacy, and learning* (1999), a collection of studies related to gender and literacy. Included were Arriastia's study of a mother's reading program that included working class women but no white women, as well as various studies of adolescent girls and literacy, that expands the work of Walkerdine (1990). Moss (1994) collected studies of cross-cultural literacy that included African American, Chicano, Hmong and Navajo, but no white working class,

Brandt (2001) interviewed eighty people ranging from age ten to age 98 for *Literacy in American Lives*, 54 of whom self-described as European American (white). Additionally, varied educational levels and occupations were represented, but there were no class descriptors other than the twelve who indicated incomes below poverty level. The intersections of literacy and gender were discussed within the interviews, especially with older women, but overall it was not an area of significance for this study. Brandt's interest lay in discerning the ways in which people acquired literacy, and specifically, how literacy was sponsored by significant others in the respondents' lives. Again, the relationships between class and literacy practices were not discussed per se, but insight can be gleaned from the responses. Brandt asserts that economic changes in America have served to devalue literacy achievement just as they require the development of new literacies (Gee, 2000; Gee & Lankshear, 1997). Often, the literacies of one working class generation are insufficient to support

the literacies necessary for success in the next generation. Current standards, as evidenced by proficiency tests, fail to take into account cultural and class differences, and serve only to reinforce the values of the dominant, middle-class society. Brandt's work provides specific examples of how the practices of American working class adults serve as functional literacies but fail to empower.

Hicks (2002) followed two working class children as they struggled through school and its associated literacies. She found that their working class backgrounds were a hindrance to traditional school literacy success. Hicks reported the family literacy practices that were related to the children and schooling, i.e. reading aloud, helping with homework, books in the home, but no mention is made of the existence of any other adult literacy practices.

Conclusion and Implications

The meaning of literacy has evolved over the years, as have the types of practices associated with it. The sociolinguistic definition of literacy has inherent within it the concepts and influences of race, class, and gender.

It is clear that the research pertaining to working class white women's literacy practices, especially in the United States, is sparse. What data is available must be gleaned from other studies focusing upon, race, ethnicity, ESOL, family, adolescents and children. Yet working class white adults comprise a majority of the American population, and their literacy practices and values significantly impact those of their children as well as the society they live in. By exploring how working class white women use literacy in their everyday home lives, we can then explore why they use literacy in these ways. This research

can lead to greater understanding of the ways literacy enhances or minimizes working class life in the United States, and finally, to inform literacy instruction as a whole.

CHAPTER III

Method

Introduction

This study qualitatively investigated the reported home literacy practices of working class white women via individual interviews. Specifically, the two questions guiding this study were:

1. What are the reported home literacy practices of white working class women?
2. What are the reported functions of these reported home literacy practices?

Semi-structured interviews were followed by a cross comparative narrative analysis to uncover any themes that arose as data collection proceeded. In a phenomenographic tradition (Sandberg, 1997), the researcher looked for commonalities in the reported data via a series of “listenings” to the tape-recorded interviews as informed by Brown and Gilligan (1992) along with reviews of the field notes and the researcher’s reflective journal.

Design

This study followed the qualitative tradition of induction. This “bottom-up” approach allowed for the project itself to dictate the flow, and the data to suggest the themes (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Kirk & Miller, 1986; Meloy, 1994; Patton,

2002; Seidman, 1998). The primary data collection method utilized semi-structured interviews to document the reported home literacy practices of white working class women. This structure granted the women the opportunity to voice the functions and ascribed meanings of their literacy practices. An adaptation of Brown and Gilligan's Listener's Guide (1992) was used in conjunction with a constant comparative data analysis to complete this feminist informed phenomenographical research study.

For this particular exploration of the literacy practices of white working class women, a qualitative investigation was needed to adequately examine the two questions. Qualitative inquiry is appropriate for use in situations of exploration and discovery that are attempting to contribute to fundamental knowledge or illuminate societal concerns (Patton, 2002). Qualitative research is based upon the view that knowledge is inherently subjective and rooted in context (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; deMarrais & LeCompte, 1999). Qualitative researchers accept the fact that humans have inherent subjective predispositions, and thus, so must be their hypotheses, conclusions, and knowledge. The incorporation of feminism adds another dimension. Feminist researchers, while a diverse group, share the perspective that research must work to explore the problems of gender, especially in the areas of power and privilege, and lead to social action to rectify these problems (deMarrais & LeCompte, 1999; DeVault, 1999). Harding (1987) defines feminism as a set of beliefs that problematize gender inequality and feminist research as any empirical study that incorporates or develops insights of feminism. Thus, as a

researcher interested in women's literacy practices and their functions and meanings, a qualitative exploration using a feminist perspective was a particularly suitable mode of inquiry.

Most qualitative research is considered interpretative research (deMarrais & LeCompte, 1999). As such, there are certain characteristics inherent in the study design as well as a distinct structure to the research process. Bogdan and Biklen (2003) spell out the five features that define qualitative research. First, it is often naturalistic in order to preserve the important factor of context. Second, the data is descriptive and even anecdotal, rather than being numerical and statistical. Third, the process of data collection is as important, if not more, than the final outcome of the study. Fourth, because researchers are primarily concerned with collecting and describing, data analysis is inductive rather than deductive. Finally, participants' perspectives are important to the final analysis. This proposed study will incorporate these five features throughout the data collection and analysis.

This study of the home literacy practices of white working class women was loosely based upon the four-phased structure delineated by Kirk and Miller (1986). This is an ordered sequence of invention, discovery, interpretation, and explanation. The first stage, invention, occurred when I determined the area of investigation and decided to proceed. The second stage, discovery, was entered once I began the data collection. Concurrent with as well as following the data collection, I entered the interpretation phase where I attempted to make meaning of the data, considered the areas of validity and reliability, and returned to

several informants for more data acquisition and clarification. Optimally, I would have left the field when I arrived at the saturation point, that is, when the collected data becomes repetitive and redundant (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). However, as this study was bounded by time and participant availability, the saturation point as not yet been reached.

Over the years, qualitative inquiry has generated more specific traditions within the overall umbrella term. While all share the ideological foci of being naturalistic and pluralistic as opposed to quantified and separatist (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Gall, Borg, & Gall, 1996; Grady, 1998), each has particular and distinct aspects that define it. Of particular applicability to my study are interviews and phenomenography.

Interviews

Qualitative research's focus on context and meaning suggests that interviewing becomes a primary method of learning people's stories and the meanings they make of said stories. Interviews give access to others' experiences and ways of knowing. With qualitative interviewing, the interviewer's role as a researcher instrument is recognized and accepted as valid and important (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Seidman, 1998).

A tape-recorded semi-structured interview protocol was viewed as the most practical means of exploring and contextualizing the reported home literacy practices of white working class women. These semi-structured interviews were designed to first establish the context of the experience, next to reconstruct the details of the experience, and finally to reflect upon the meaning of the

experience (Patton, 1990). While interviews were dependent upon rapport between the researcher and participant, they allowed for two-way communication, follow-up discussion regarding unclear questions or answers, and for the observation and interrogation of non-verbal behaviors that might clarify answers (Grady, 1998). Each interview lasted approximately sixty minutes, with follow-up interviews arranged, if deemed necessary, to explore the home literacy practices, their functions and perceived meanings, of white working class women.

Phenomenography

The term "phenomenography" first used by Ference Merton in 1981 to describe a research orientation aimed at describing people's conceptions. Svensson (1997) describes the general characteristics of phenomenographical research as including strategies that leave out the questions of right and wrong, that move to a subjectivist and relative view, and that are explorative and interpretive. Phenomenography then is dependent upon context and perspective and includes an emphasis upon description, and categories of description.

Phenomenography is an approach for identifying and describing qualitative variation in individuals' experiences of their reality. The primary purpose is to obtain a better understanding of, in this proposed study, literacy practice, by studying people's ways of experiencing literacy practices (Sandberg, 1997). While it is necessary to adopt the learner's perspective, as a researcher, my past, my values, my beliefs and the particular time of my life shape my analysis. However, the more faithful I am to the individual's conception of literacy, the

better able I will be to understand. Thus, this is truly a reflexive and reflective component of qualitative research.

Phenomenography is often confused with the more commonly used phenomenology. The two research practices share a concern for describing people and their conceptions of the world. However, while phenomenology focuses reality as it appears to individuals, the more specialized phenomenographical method focuses on the individual's conceptualization of reality (Gall, Borg, & Gall, 1996). Thus, in this particular study, I intend to follow the protocol common to both traditions - identifying a significant topic, selecting appropriate participants, interviewing participants, and analyzing the data. My phenomenographical focus will add a focus on investigating what white working class women think about their home literacy practices via a look at their conceptions of the functions of these practices.

Feminist informed research

Both phenomenography and feminist research philosophy assign central importance to experience. As phenomenography views learning as an interaction between self and what is being learned, the inclusion of issues such of women's participation in research, the gendered construction of knowledge, and the relation between affective and cognitive is necessary to a full understanding of the experience (Deats, 1994; Hazel, Conrad, & Martin, 1997). Harding (1987) says that qualitative methods fit with feminist goals because they give voice to women respondents, allow participation, and emphasize particularity over

generalization. In this study, the functions and meanings of literacy practice will be revealed in the participants' own voices.

Feminist research cannot be defined authoritatively primarily because a unified construct of what it means to be a "feminist" cannot be determined. However, several themes are common to most attempts at delineating feminist inquiry. Yancey (1999) describes it as " a self-explanatory enterprise, placing women at the center of our vision, using multiple, woman-informed lenses to frame what we see " (p.146). DeVault (1999) adds that because research is socially organized and shaped by context, gender is an inherent component. Feminist researchers embrace this when they attempt reflexive analysis of the knower and interpretative analysis of the interactive process people use to make meaning. According to DeVault (1999) two of the criteria of feminist methodology are that it seeks to minimize harm and control in the research process and that it leads to social action beneficial to women.

This study is grounded in the theory that the reported home literacy practices, their functions, and meanings, of this particular group of white working class women, can be discerned via feminist informed phenomenographical inquiry. This inquiry took the form of a series of semi-structured interviews designed to allow the participants to voice their practices and beliefs about those practices within the context of their lives. My role as the researcher was to collect this data and attempt to discern patterns and themes that may be interwoven in the women's reports in an attempt to document and better understand white working class women and the literacy in their home lives.

Participants

This study was a purposeful, criterion-based sampling of nine working class women recruited in two adjacent counties in the southeastern United States. For initial recruitment processes, the working class criterion for inclusion focused upon job prestige as defined by the Occupational Prestige section of the General Social Survey (NORC, 1989) and Zweig's definition

...working class people share a common place in production, where they have relatively little control over the pace and content of their work and aren't anybody's boss (2000; p.3).

Job prestige ratings of the participants' occupations ranged from a high score of 42 to a low of 22 of the rankings of 110 positions according to the NORC scale (1989). While three participants worked for the United States Postal Service in different capacities, all of the women's occupations varied: five worked fulltime, four, part time. Some jobs endowed benefits such as sick time, insurance and paid vacation while others bestowed none. All occupations were hourly paid.

The initial area of recruitment was a local restaurant that caters to and employs white working class women. LeeAnn and Marti, early participants from this locale were invaluable in referring others, a phenomenon known as "snowball sampling" (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Gall, Borg, & Gall, 1996; Patton, 2002). The primary means of communication for engaging volunteers was via word of mouth. While the researcher also provided a written explanation (Appendix C) for the rationale of the study, it was the oral description of the purposes of the study that gained access. The women were unknown to the

researcher prior to beginning the study so that possible perceived issues of power did not interfere with their participation. Volunteers self admitted to meeting the conditions imposed by the researcher in relation to race, gender, and occupation. All institutional review board stipulations for the recruitment and use of volunteers were followed, and the necessary paperwork signed. No monetary compensation was provided for the volunteers. Every effort has been made to ensure the confidentiality of the participants. For the purposes of this study, whiteness has been selected as a participant criterion. As the review of the seminal adult working class literacy practices research showed, rarely has class been separated from race. By limiting this study to white women, I hoped to explore class and literacy practice without the confounding variable of race.

Researcher

The researcher is a white female with a working class background currently inhabiting a middle class academic world. While in some ways this juxtaposition has been personally problematic, in ways first described by Hoggart (1957) and further explicated by others (hooks, 2001; Miller & Kastberg, 1995; Tokarczyk & Fay; 1993), I believe this class combination has served me well in this study. I am familiar with working class culture, and yet I have the theoretical background to view this in the larger context. In addition, growing up during the 1970s second wave of feminism (Tong, 1998) conferred upon me a liberal feminist bent. However, experiences teaching in a multicultural urban community college have since led me to adopt a more socialist stance, wherein I began to see the interplay between classism and sexism (deMarrais & LeCompte, 1999;

hooks, 2001; Tong, 1998). These positions lead to ways of knowing that may not be part of academic mainstream research (Fine, 1994; Ladsen-Billings, 1996; Merchant & Willis, 2001), but may indeed lead new understandings in the roles played by race, class, and gender within the practice of literacy.

It is from this merged middle/working class liberal/socialist feminist position that I approached the current study. Acknowledging this positioning is important, as it played a role in my selection of research agenda (Fine, 1994; Mehra, 2001; Merchant & Willis, 2001). I reported the data via the women's voices allowing their words to tell the story of how literacy is practiced in their white working class world. Because qualitative inquiries are based upon entering the lived experiences of others, distance and objectivity are not seen as productive goals. Untangling the relationship between the researcher and the participants becomes an important part of the data analysis (Crepeau, 1997; Fine, 1992). There is increasing recognition that the use of particular methods and procedures does not automatically confer objectivity, just as inclusion of analysis of one's personal subjective experience does not preclude it. (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). Thus, as subjectivity and bias are inherent in any research, admitting and accepting my stance prior and after data collection and analysis is vital to the reporting process (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Gall, Borg, & Gall, 1996; Merchant & Willis, 2001; Zurita, 2001).

Procedure

The semi-structured interviews of a purposeful sampling of nine white working class women documented the reported the uses of literacy of this particular population at this particular place and time. The sample was purposely kept small to allow for an in-depth analysis of the data collected. A checklist of themes and topics was used judiciously, as Seidman (1998) cautioned, to guide the initial stages of each interview and serve to attempt to ensure none of the areas of interest were inadvertently overlooked (Appendix A). Interviews were taped and transcribed. Following Brown and Gilligan (1992)(Appendix B), each tape was listened to four times, with the researcher focusing upon a specific detail with each listening. Transcription of the data was on going as a constant comparative analysis in conjunction with a narrative analysis was crucial in uncovering emerging patterns or themes. Descriptive field notes were taken to record details to supplement the taped interview with contextual information (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). In addition, I kept a reflective journal based upon my experiences interviewing the participants and designed to uncover any personal biases that may have affected my data analysis (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Merchant & Willis, 2001). All audiotapes, transcriptions, field notes and journal reflections were safeguarded to ensure the confidentiality of the participants. All IRB protocol were followed and the participants were afforded the opportunity to self- select pseudonyms.

Analysis

Narrative analysis is one qualitative means of interpreting the data obtained via the oral medium, in this case, interviews. Participants' own stories, told in their own words, are essential meaning making structures and researchers are cautioned to respect respondents' ways of constructing meaning while analyzing how this construction is accomplished (Riessman, 1993). Using narrative analysis of individual interviews may reveal social or cultural patterns (Patton, 2002).

One approach of narrative analysis is the Listener's Guide developed by Brown and Gilligan (1992) to code their research with adolescent suburban girls. This guide requires each taped interview be listened to multiple times, which each listening experience focusing upon a different aspect of the women's stories. An adaptation of this guide (Appendix B) was designed to enable me to explore each explanation of literacy, its function and meaning, so that I could document the experience.

Specifically, the interview data was analyzed via a series of four guided listenings. During the first listening, as I began transcribing the woman's words, I focused on listening for and documenting recurring language, metaphors and images. Transcription continued during the second listening with a focus on the language she used describing her personal relationship with literacy. The third listening focused on the woman's views and uses of literacy in relation to cultural norms, especially in the areas of authority and school based literacy practices. The final fourth listening finished the transcription while I looked for missed areas

in the above three areas of focus. Comparing this interview data with my field notes and reflective journal data, I then attempted to craft a profile of each participant (Seidman, 1998) as I looked for emerging themes, similarities, and dis-similarities, in the reported home literacy practices of each white working class woman.

This search for emerging themes common to all of the women's stories is essential to the phenomenographical tradition; therefore, cross case descriptive comparisons were employed. The profiles I crafted of each woman were analyzed for areas of recurring regularities whose patterns were used to develop categories which were grounded within the data (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2000; Patton, 2002). These categories were grouped and coded, compared and revised both within and across the data (Figure 1). The goal was to describe in an effort to enhance understanding and not to interpret causation.

FIGURE 1
Narrative analysis of WCWW data

WCWW	Recurrences	Voice	Functions	Meanings
Gina	Need to know Escape	Personal	Organize, inform, communicate, diversion	Essential Useful pleasure
Marti	Don't need to know/don't care	Useful on occasion	Organize, communicate	Communicate useful
LeeAnn	Don't care	Not personally Important	Information	Useful For others
Cassie	Lack of time	Not personally Important	Organization	Useful For others
Jane	To learn more to succeed	Success	Information /organization	Useful knowledge Escape
Sherry	Pleasure/ escape	Personal	Inform/ communicate/ diversion	Essential, escape, make sense, useful pleasure
Sara	To learn more to succeed	Important	Learn/organize/ communicate/ diversion	Hide behind, useful, pleasure
Denise	Don't care/ boring/no time	Not personally important	Organize	Useful For others
Valerie	To pass time/to get better job	Useful	Communicate/ diversion/ organize	Communicate Knowledge

Credibility

Whether or not research results can be defined as credible is dependent upon several things, most particularly validity and reliability. Validity can be defined as whether the researcher sees what s/he thinks s/he sees and thus is related to the researcher's interpretation. Reliability is the degree to which the finding is independent of accidental circumstances, or the consistency of the finding. Qualitative researchers take into account that humans do not simply perceive and interpret, but that they think and construct meaning within the

context of their own culture (Kirk & Miller, 1986). However, validity and reliability are essential to their research conclusions. I addressed this by transcribing the audio taped interviews. The data itself was viewed via a cross case comparative method to see which themes emerged. Participants were afforded the opportunity to review the transcriptions and analyses to ensure accuracy of content and intent through member checking. My descriptive field notes and journal reflections were reviewed in conjunction with the transcriptions to triangulate all of the available data involved with each interview and participant. The issue of reliability has been addressed by having two independent researchers review portions of the transcribed interviews and look for emerging themes, in the areas of recurring language, and literacy uses and relationships. The themes from the two independent researchers were then compared with those of the principal researcher for congruence. Via discussion, we determined the data regarding literacy practices fell into one of the following four areas of literacy use: organization, information, communication and diversion.

A final issue of credibility revolves around the data sources themselves – the working class white women who agree to participate in this proposed study. As a researcher, I am well aware of the possible difference between the reported literacy practices and the actual literacy practices of the respondents. However, as I visited each woman's home for the interview I was able to view literacy artifacts to support their reports. While I cannot attest with certainty to their reported practices, what I saw in their homes supports each woman's claims to literacy use.

Summary of Methodological Philosophy

The purpose of the study was to document the home literacy practices of white working class women through their individual voices. A feminist phenomenographical qualitative research approach using semi-structured interviews followed by a cross case comparative narrative analysis revealed the emerging themes. The specific questions addressed were:

1. What are the reported home literacy practices of white working class women?
2. What are the reported functions of these reported home literacy practices?

CHAPTER IV

Results

This chapter presents the results of interviews with nine working class white women regarding their reported home literacy practices and the reported functions of these practices. For the opening of this study, literacy has been defined as a fundamental practice involving the use of print and manifested into the broad categories of fulfilling functional, social, and/or aesthetic functions. An adapted version of Brown and Gilligan's Listener's Guide (1992; Appendix B) was used to guide the narrative analysis. From this analysis of these descriptions, patterns and recurrences in the types and functions of literacy practices emerged, providing descriptive data regarding women's current home literacy practices. In a phenomenographical tradition (Sandberg, 1997), the emphasis will be on describing, within her current context and with her own words, each individual woman's ways of practicing literacy at home. In addition, the researcher's positions as both confidant and expert will be explored in ways demarcated by Ellis & Bochner (2000).

Participants

The nine working class white women interviewed for this study were recruited from two adjacent counties on the west coast of Florida. The area is close to a large city, and its demographics are quickly changing from working

class rural to middle class suburbia. Initial contact was made via contact at a local restaurant that serves as a gathering place in this working class neighborhood. From this, access to other women “snowballed” (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Gall, Borg, & Gall; 1996; Patton, 2002) due to the enthusiasm and facilitation of two of the participants, Marti and LeeAnn. While all of the women shared a current physical location, living within a two-mile radius of one another, their current home literacy uses and literacy histories varied. LeeAnn, Denise, Marti, Valerie, and Cassie for example, used literacy in only the most functional ways; Sherry and Gina were categorized as extremely high literacy users, while Sara and Jane fell in the middle. None of the women have attended college, nor have any immediate family members. All say literacy is of high importance, yet only a few practice it consistently. In chronological order of the interviews, the subsequent thumbnail sketches provide an introduction to the participants in this study. (Figure 2 & 3) Each woman was interviewed privately in her home for times ranging from 45 minutes to 90 minutes.

Figure 2

Participant Childhood Demographic Data

Participant	Raised in	Household	Parents High school Diploma	Parents Occupations
Gina	New York	Mother Father 2 Brothers	Mother –yes Father –no	Mother housewife Father handyman
Marti	Florida	Mother 4 Sisters	Mother- Yes	Mother- retail sales Major department store
LeeAnn	Florida	Mother Father Sister	Mother high school diploma Father – Dropped out	Mother- housewife Father- construction
Cassie	Florida	Mother Father Brother	Mother-yes Father-yes	Mother- phone co. Father- elec. Co.
Jane	Indiana	Mother Stepfather(s) Stepsiblings	Mother- yes Others unknown	Mother-retail sales
Sherry	Florida	Mother Father Sister	Mother- yes Father- yes	Mother - Housewife Father- warehouseman
Sara	Florida	Mother Stepfather 1 brother 1 sister	Mother –yes Step father - yes	Mother – housewife Father- construction
Denise	Florida	Mother Sister	Mother- no	Mother-food service
Valerie	New York	Mother Father 3 Sisters 1 Brother	Mother –yes Father-yes	Mother – housewife Father- truck driver

Figure 3

Current Demographic Data

Participant	Current household	Self Education	Occupation	Benefits
Gina	Husband retired	High School diploma	USPS	Yes
Marti	Husband- Lineman for electric company 2 daughters 16, 14	High School diploma	Answers incoming Telephone calls	No Yes through husband
LeeAnn	Husband- roofer Daughter age 22 receptionist	High school diploma	Customer service	No
Cassie	Husband- phone co.2 daughters 13, 3 1 son 9	High School diploma	Part-time rural carrier USPS 1 day a week	No Yes through husband
Jane	Husband self employed 2 sons 10 and 13	High school diploma	2 part-time jobs – church secretary/choir director 35 hours week	No
Sherry	Husband – retired on disability from Railroad	High school diploma	Telephones late credit	Yes
Sara	Husband- auto painter 2 sons, 3 and 10 in In-laws home	High School diploma	Part-time truck rental co.	No
Denise	Boyfriend, Boyfriend's brother	No 10 th grade	Part-time health care	No
Valerie	1 daughter Age 16	No 11th grade	Food service	Yes

Gina

Gina is a sixty-year-old female currently employed by the United States Postal Service (USPS), working as a letter sorter at the main branch in Tampa, Florida. Born and raised in what she readily characterizes as a working class “melting pot” area of New York, Gina grew up in a two-parent household with her two brothers. Her mother, a high school graduate, stayed home while her father, who had dropped out of high school to help support his family, worked as a handyman. No one in the family attended college. Gina married at age 18 “to escape” and see the world. She began working outside the home in 1974 when her husband retired from the United States Air Force and her four children left home. Gina reports that she has always been a reader, more so than any of her family members and that her earliest memory of literacy is “reading the Sunday comics with my father”. In Gina’s home, books and magazines abound, and there are bookcases in every room – including a small shelf in the bathroom. Books are piled on floor as well as in the bookcases; magazines stored in a chest and stacked on the counter and coffee table (Field notes, September 22, 2003)

Cassie

Cassie, age 35, lives in a three bedroom, one bathroom manufactured home on a half acre of land belonging to her husband’s grandfather. The grandfather and Cassie’s mother also live in separate homes (single-wide trailer; small cement block cottage) on the same property, all sharing a common barn used for storage. Cassie grew up in a large Florida city with her brother and parents; both parents worked, her mother for the phone company and her father

for the electric company. She is a high school graduate whose husband works as a line installer for the phone company, an hourly paid, union job that offers benefits such as insurance, sick leave, retirement and paid vacation. They have three children, daughters, thirteen and three, and a son, eight. Cassie recently was hired as a substitute rural carrier for the USPS, where she works one day a week with no benefits. She hopes one day to acquire full-time status as a carrier. Cassie reports that she has little interest and “no time” to read, but that literacy is an important skill to have to “get ahead”. She has no memories of reading and writing in her childhood home, but says that her older daughter “reads constantly”. Cassie has a bookcase in her immaculate living room filled with children’s books from preschool on up through the Harry Potter series (Field notes, September 26, 2003).

LeeAnn

LeeAnn lives with her second husband, a roofer, and twenty- two year old daughter in a thirty-year-old singlewide trailer across the road from Cassie and her family. Also a high school graduate and a native of a nearby large Florida city, 43-year-old LeeAnn has worked as a clerk for the USPS for the past fourteen years since divorcing her first husband. As a child, LeeAnn grew up in a traditional family with her two younger sisters, a construction worker father and stay-at- home mother LeeAnn reports that she has saved all of her childhood books (school and otherwise) as well as her children’s books and school papers in plastic crates stored away (field notes, October 3, 2003).

Marti

Marti, age 47, is a high school graduate who grew up in a working class neighborhood of a large Florida city. Her parents divorced when she was four, and she and her four sisters were raised by her single mother who worked in retail sales. She remembers her mother reading the daily newspaper while drinking her coffee, but has no other early literacy memories. Currently married with three children, a son aged 24, and sixteen and fourteen year old daughters, they live in what was originally a single wide trailer that Marti's husband has added on to and expanded to have three bedrooms and a family room with fireplace. Marti's husband is an electric company lineman while she works in customer service answering telephone calls. Marti reports that literacy is important for success, but she personally has little desire to read and write more than is necessary for her job (Field notes, October 7, 2003).

Sherry

Sherry is a 51-year-old mother of two and grandmother of five who works for a local credit union in the repossession department where she telephones people who are late on their auto payments. Her husband, a former railroad employee in the Midwestern United States, is disabled with bipolar disorder and post-traumatic stress disorder. Sherry is high school graduate originally from northern Kentucky, where she grew up with both parents and one sister who is fifteen years older. After her husband's disability was diagnosed she moved in with her daughter's family in a northern Florida city and then followed them to a small town in western Florida. When her daughter, son-in-law and three

grandchildren moved to California, Sherry and her husband stayed in Florida with their son's family. They recently moved to a small brick home across the street from Marti after the suicide of their son. Sherry was not a reader when growing up; she developed the habit when pregnant with her daughter. "It was that or go insane watching daytime television. I was on bed rest and was ready to put my foot through the TV after three days of soaps" (Field notes, October 13, 2003).

Jane

Jane is a thirty seven year old married mother of two sons, ages eleven and fourteen, who grew up in the Midwest and moved to Florida in 1987. Jane has always been a reader and a writer, in part to "escape the chaos of my life." Jane's childhood constants were her mother and grandmother; her parents divorced when she was young and both remarried more than once, giving her several stepparents and stepsiblings. A high school graduate, Jane works two part-time positions at her church – as secretary and as the choir director. Between the positions, she works approximately 35 hours per week and gets no benefits. Her husband, a former police officer in the US Virgin Islands, is self-employed as a private investigator. They live next-door to Marti and her family in a two bedroom stilt home formerly used as a weekend retreat by its previous owners. A bookcase of religious texts, Bibles and a few paperbacks sits in family/office area of the home (Field notes, October 25, 2003).

Sara

Sara is a 36-year-old graduate of a high school on the coast of western Florida. Sara characterizes herself as shy and says that reading and writing have

always provided her an outlet. She is married to an auto painter and has two sons, eleven and three. Sara works part-time for a U-Haul franchise located in an old trailer on a country road. Her job pays no benefits but allows her the flexibility she feels necessary to care for her sons. Sara is interested in real estate and has purchased the books necessary to begin studying for the Florida real estate exam, but has not yet begun to read them. She and her family currently live with her in-laws while they are building a log cabin on the lot next door. Sara investigated log cabins thoroughly, and they are having the home built free of charge in exchange for agreeing to hold “open houses” for the company on a regular basis (field notes, November 11, 2003). Her home is located down the road from Marti, Cassie, and Jane.

Denise

Denise lives with her unemployed boyfriend and his brother in a two-bedroom home converted from a garage across the road from Sara. The original family home of her boyfriend burnt to the ground 15 years ago and the existing garage was turned into living quarters. Her boyfriend works sporadically as a welder and Denise works part-time for a local agency providing in-home care to the elderly. Her boyfriend’s brother has recently relocated from North Carolina and lives with them while seeking employment. Denise grew up in the immediate area with her mother and sister. Her early literacy memories are all school related and revolve around being “forced to read things” and to write essays in which she had little or no interest. She quit high school her junior year and has

no children. Denise professes to have no interest in reading and writing. “It’s no fun” (Field notes, November 26, 2003).

Valerie

Valerie is a single mother of one daughter who lives in a two-bedroom home and works fulltime in food service at a local bowling alley. While this job provides minimal benefits such as medical insurance, Valerie is looking to change careers, perhaps going into real estate, to earn money for her daughter’s college education. Valerie has worked for company which owns the bowling alley for seven years, first in California where she moved after leaving high school her senior year, and then transferring to Florida to be closer to her mother and sister. Valerie grew up in New York in a two-parent home with her three sisters and one brother. Valerie feels that reading and writing are important for her sixteen-year-old daughter to “get into college and get a good job” (Field notes, December 8, 2003).

Reported Literacy practices

A search for themes of home literacy practices within and across the interviews via three and four focused listenings to the interviews resulted in the discovery of several common reading and writing practices (Figure two) First, I will discuss the reported home reading practices, followed by a discussion of reported home writing practices and finally, the reported functions of both practices within the lives of the nine white working class women.

Reading Practices

For the purposes of this study, reading practices consist of the visual use of print-based text. I developed an interview guide (Appendix A) to direct the initial stages of each interview. Common themes across the reported home reading practices of these nine working-class white women included the use of print to organize, to obtain information, to communicate and to amuse. The functional, social, and aesthetic use clusters discussed in chapter two were all represented at least once, as were the public and private uses of reading. As per the interview guide, I began each discussion of reading practices by asking about the use of flyers, advertisements, and catalogs. My goal here was to remind the women that reading practices consist of more than book reading (Heath, 1983).

Flyers/ Ads/catalogs

Print-based advertisements are ubiquitous in American society. They arrive within the newspapers and as part of the newspaper pages themselves. Bulk rate mail consists entirely of this category, as does email spam (unsolicited commercial email). Grocery and discount department stores, as well as other consumer-oriented businesses, depend on them to entice prospective buyers. Catalogs are also included in this category.

Gina, Cassie, and Jane report that they at least skim virtually all of the print-based flyers, advertisements, and catalogs that arrive at their homes.

Cassie: “As a mother of three I have a budget. Ads help me stick to that budget.”

Cassie uses these items as a tool to facilitate the management of her household. She has made it part of her routine to utilize written text to assist her in maintaining control of her limited funds. Marti and LeeAnn report a similar use of these ads, but read and take advantage only on occasion.

LeeAnn “ I look through ads only if I am looking for something. Like at Christmas. Or for my husband’s birthday. He wanted this tool, a saw, so I watched the ads and the sales so I could get it for him.”

Marti: “I pick up the flyer at Kash ‘n Karry when I go in just to see what’s on sale. I always shop at the same one so I get it on the way in in case there’s something good.”

Thus LeeAnn and Marti also depend on written text as money saving tools within the context of money and household management. In contrast, the other four women report that they never read the ads or flyers sent to their homes, nor do they pick them up at the stores they shop in.

Denise: “ I’m not really interested. I know what I’m going to buy and I just get it. Those are just junk and I pitch them right away.”

The information available to the women in the form of flyers, advertisements and catalogs is utilized by the women according to their perceived needs for the contents. Cassie values the coupons and sale information for their usefulness in managing her budget. Marti and LeeAnn access them for similar reasons as they see the need. The other participants find them unnecessary.

Newspapers

Two daily local newspapers and one free weekly paper are available for home delivery in the neighborhood, as are national newspapers. As well, boxes for the daily purchase for the two daily papers are located within walking distance of the women's homes, in front of the restaurant that serves as a neighborhood-gathering place. The interview guide provided an opening for the discussion of use of newspapers in the women's lives. Two women, Gina and Sherry read newspapers regularly.

Gina: " I read three newspapers every day. The *Times* and *Trib* are delivered every morning. I read them both because they cover different stuff. My husband picks up *The New York Times* everyday and I read that when I get home. I want to know what's going on and I need the different perspectives to make up my own mind."

Gina understands that written text can provide different angles while still reporting the same information. She uses these different stances to access information and proceeds to analyze what she has read to develop her own views. Gina's critical use of literacy is at odds with Marti's use of newspaper text

" I used to get the paper but I never read it. I ended up throwing it away still in the bag. I don't read it and I don't watch the TV news either. There's too much opinion. I just want the facts. I don't want to hear what those people think. I want to make up my own mind. Sometimes I listen to the radio in the car."

Marti, like Gina, wants to make up her own mind regarding what is

reported as news. She realizes that the text contained within a newspaper account may not be totally unbiased. However, she does not generalize possible reporter bias to the auditory reporting of the news on the radio. Marti feels that radio news to be more factually based due to its succinctness.

Finally, Cassie talks about one home delivered newspaper that arrives each morning:

“We get the paper and my husband reads it every night. He tells me what I should know.”

The women’s uses of newspapers to obtain information is related to their individual desire to learn more regarding the information contained within this format. Often the same, though possibly abbreviated, content is available in an auditory manner, such as the TV or radio news broadcasts, and for some women this structure suffices to provide them with the amount of information they deem necessary or important for their lives. While the news is in fact text, its mode of delivery is not via the women’s reading practice. For Marti, the radio broadcaster “reads” the news to her; Cassie’s husband does the physical reading of the written word and presents his account. Cassie is content to take his version as authority, in contrast to Gina, who critically analyzes several sources before forming an opinion.

Magazines

Magazines are available at most drug, grocery and discount department stores, or via subscription home delivery at a substantial discount. Their contents span virtually every subject matter imaginable. The women reported reading

magazines running the subject gamut of news, fashion, home décor and improvement, hunting, fishing, pets, crocheting, home and children, log cabins, music and entertainment.

Most of the women reported some contact with magazines, but the degree of this content varied. Gina, Sherry, LeeAnn, and Sara's homes all had magazines lying about on end tables or kitchen counters, and all four reported subscribing to home delivery of at least two and occasionally picking up others "while waiting in the checkout lane" (Sherry, Field notes, October 13, 2003).

Sherry: "We just moved in. The house belonged to a ninety year old man and nothing had been done. I'm looking for ideas of things that we can do ourselves to fix it up."

Sherry's use of magazine text is linked to her need for information. Her focus in this case is functional and situated within the context of improving physically and aesthetically her new house. Marti, LeeAnn, and Sara also reported viewing this type of magazine text regularly, while Sara subscribes to log cabin related magazines to better inform herself regarding the options available in her new home. Sherry, Sara, and LeeAnn also subscribe to magazines relating to their individual hobbies

LeeAnn "I get *Buck Master*, *Bass Master* and *Rack*. I love to read the stories. Real life stories. I save them up. I don't read them right away, but save them and read a bunch when the weather's bad."

In LeeAnn's case, the stories she refers to are narrative accounts, memoirs written by others who engage in hunting and fishing, LeeAnn's favorite past-

times. Reading these accounts when she is unable to participate in her leisure pursuits allows LeeAnn to connect vicariously to the experience, providing for the social need of connecting with others who share her interests, her aesthetic pleasure in the topic and also serving the function of informing her. Saving them to read when her schedule permits her to engage with them, shows that she does value them.

Jane and Valerie admit to picking up magazines and reading them “If I ‘m bored. At night if there’s nothing to do or when waiting at the doctor or something. But not regularly.” (Valerie, December 11, 2003). For them, the reading of magazines serves as a method, or tool, for passing time and not as means of gaining knowledge or connecting with others.

Thus while magazines are designed to appeal to specific interests, only some of the women interviewed purposefully use this mode of text habitually. Of the women participating in this study, those who profess to enjoy reading other materials make greater use of magazines tailored to their interests than do those women who state they find reading boring. Magazines function to provide them with specific information that they then use for a specific purpose, be it home improvement or enjoyment and relaxation. Magazines serve to fulfill functional, social and aesthetic purposes, providing information, recreation and entertainment.

Computer/on-line reading

Information accessibility has increased with the spread of the home computer. Virtually every Internet provider’s home page lists the new headlines

daily, and news providers such as CNN or CNBC offering breaking news information both in text and streaming video form. Weather and sports updates are readily available and the World Wide Web has made access to virtually every type of information within reach of every computer user. Six of the women reported using computers as part of their jobs, with seven reporting computer and Internet access and use within their homes, and four using this technological tool to gain information.

Sherry: “ When my son died, I went on the computer right away to find out about things like depression and suicide. I need to know why and I could look here in my home. I didn’t want to go out and I didn’t want to talk to anyone. I just wanted to find out as much as I could to try to understand. Then when my grandson was diagnosed I could learn about it.” (Sherry’s son committed suicide; Her grandson has Asperger’s Syndrome. Field notes; October 13, 2003).

Sherry turned to the Internet access provided by her home computer to provide gain the information necessary to aid her in understanding and processing significant life events. Her computer literacy allowed her access to text that might otherwise have been unavailable. Communication with others who had experienced similar events was facilitated by the existence of websites, chat rooms and listserves. Thus, reading on the computer enabled Sherry to gain knowledge.

Gina: “ I use the computer almost every day. I read the news to get others’ perspectives. I look up places I want to travel to – like I want to go to

France so I looked up different sites to get costs and things to do. I read about some place in a book and then I want to know more about it so I look it up.”

Gina’s computer use serves to reinforce her desire for information, seen earlier in her avid newspaper reading. Gina uses the information available through the Internet to fulfill her self designated “need to know” on a regular basis.

On the other hand, LeeAnn and Valerie access computer information only when they are searching for something specific, as do Marti and Sara.

Marti: “ I got the governor’s address and the department of education address from the computer.”

Sara: “When I began getting interested in log homes, the computer was the first place I went. I looked up companies and compared them.”

In contrast, Cassie leaves the computer use “To my kids. I don’t have time anyway” while Denise reports having little time and “no desire to mess with it.”

For the four women who regularly use the computer, it serves as a tool to obtain information about areas of interest or concern. The information available via the Internet is readily accessible through the text on the screen, allowing them to investigate unknown areas, explore new concepts, access specific information and generally expand their knowledge base. It provides a method, perhaps once served by asking experts or searching the library, that fulfills the functional purpose of literacy. The other three women use the computer primarily for social reasons or communicative purposes such as email and messaging rather for accessing information. While the reading of text is inherent in this

communication, I have placed the discussion of this literacy practice in the writing practice section of this chapter. Still, computer based literacy activities allow for both the private access to information as well as functioning to provide public, social communication contact.

Books

Reported book reading ranged from daily (Gina, September 22, 2003; Sherry, October 13, 2003; Sara, November 11, 2003) to “I can’t remember the last book I read” (LeeAnn, Field notes, October 3, 2003). Common reasons for reading included pleasure, escape, self-improvement and enlightenment, serving functional and aesthetic purposes as well as functioning to provide information and diversion.

Gina:” I generally have three books going at a time, two down here and one upstairs by my bed that I read at night. I also have a list of books I want to read next. There’s always got to be another book. I read every day. When my kids were little they knew. Every day I would have a cup of tea and read and they knew not to bother me then. I am usually reading a fiction and a non-fiction book. And the one upstairs is usually trash- you know, not real hard. One I don’t have to think about, just read and then go to sleep. I get books from the library and bookstores. I keep all the hardback ones I buy.”

Sherry’s home book reading practices are similar.

“ I am reading two books right now. One is fiction. One is Dr. Phil’s book on weight loss. Self-help. I always have a book going. At work we have a book swap in our lunch area. People bring in books you can take them

and read them and bring them back. I 've read books I wouldn't normally read that way. And if I start one and don't like it I take it back and get another one."

Both Gina and Sherry used the term "trash" to describe certain books, and I asked them to expand upon this term and category of reading in the interviews.

Gina: " I use "trash" loosely. It's books that I get at the drugstore or the grocery store. Not hard reading, just fun reading. I don't have to think about the plot or the meanings. I just read."

Sherry: " Well, there's good books – literature I guess, like we read in school. You know, like *Jane Eyre* or *The Scarlet Letter*. The ones you look for hidden meanings. Heavy books. Then there's light books, popular ones that don't make you think a lot. You just read them. They aren't really trash as much as not real literature."

This concept that some books are inherently better than others is not new, and it came up in book reading practice discussions with five of the women, Gina, Sherry, Jane, Marti, and Sara. In part, it stems from the women's educational experiences with "literature" and practices involved with deconstructing literary text within the high school context. The women who reported not reading, or finding book reading boring (Valerie, Denise, Cassie) inevitably brought up high school literary practices such as the search for author's meaning, looking for symbolism or metaphors, etc as part of the reason they disliked the practice. The women who reported enjoying book reading never mentioned that they do this, but rather talked about things like " experiencing new places"(Gina) and "Getting

lost in the story”(Sherry). It seems that the literary evaluation of literature is commonly practiced within the schools, as the women attended school indifferent parts of the country at different times, yet all report performing the same types of tasks while reading in school. For some, these practices, along with reading aloud “round robin” fashion have shaped their entire reading experience. All of the women reported participating in “round robin “ reading as part of their school literacy experiences and, as with literary evaluation, professed distaste for doing so.

Sara and Jane also report book reading daily.

Jane: “I used to read a lot of horror. I read every Stephen King. That kind of thing. Now I only read the Bible and religious books, I read the Bible every day. I have been trying to read the *Left Behind* series. It’s supposed to be uplifting. I want to read it but I just can’t get into it. But I read the Bible everyday because my life has changed directions.”

Jane is saying here that she values certain types of books over others due to supposed content and ideas. It’s interesting that while she places a higher value on the *Left Behind* series, she hasn’t been able to read it. Jane reported that her reasons for reading included self-improvement and acquiring knowledge about her religious and spiritual beliefs. The series she refers to, *Left Behind*, concerns the very topics she states she wants to investigate, yet her motivation has not been strong enough to permit her to follow through.

Marti has read one book in the last six months and her reason for doing so was most intriguing.

“ I bought this book for my daughter to read for school. Summer reading. *Great Expectations*. But she never read it. I was on vacation. I didn’t want the book to go to waste so I read it in a week. It was good. I bought it so it should be used and I did.”

Marti reported enjoying the book when she said it was “good”, and she ended up obtaining pleasure from reading it. However, her purpose for picking up and reading this particular book was not aesthetic, or diversion, but instead functional. Marti viewed the purchase of the book as a commodity, and its non-use by her daughter was considered a squandering of the physical item, like buying food and not eating it. Marti’s concern was not about the content or ideas within the book, its physical use by someone.

Commonly, the other women, LeeAnn, Cassie, Valerie, and Denise report they find reading books boring and time-consuming and have little or no desire to practice it.

Book reading with others

Book reading can be a social act as well as a solitary one. This is more than just the sharing of books as reported in Sherry’s workplace or with Sara’s neighbor, but also includes things like discussion and read alouds. Sherry’s workplace book swap provides her with access to a variety of reading materials, allowing her the opportunity to experience assorted genres that she wouldn’t normally inspect. Sara’s neighbor has introduced her to new authors and genres of literature as well. Their discussions generally revolve around critiquing the

book on an affective level rather than literary analysis as reported in high school experiences.

Differently, Gina reported reading aloud to her husband.

Gina: “ My husband and I will sit and read at night. He usually reads historical books or war stories or biographies. I read everything except science fiction. If we come across a fact or a phrase, we read it out loud. If it’s an interesting idea we like to share it. We also read those Griffin and Sabine books. And poetry too. Once on our anniversary he bought a book of poetry and we read them out loud every night. I still have it here, on the shelf with my special books.”

Gina pulled the book out from her “special bookcase” to show me.

The women who read books with others all report doing so as way of connecting with family and friends. The sharing of text provides a tool to reach out and communicate while sharing ideas and information. The social interaction provided by discussion and critiques affords the participants with the opportunity to relate to others.

Book reading with children

Only Denise is childless among the nine women. Marti, Cassie, Jane, Sara, and Valerie still have school-aged children living at home; LeeAnn, Gina and Sherry have grown children, and Gina and Sherry are grandmothers. All but Valerie reported reading books either with or to their children in the past. Current book reading practices with children vary, and fulfill functional, social, and aesthetic purposes while serving to communicate and entertain.

Sara: “ My son and I read every night. Sometimes we race to see who can get to the end of the chapter first. Mostly we just sit and read and if there’s something good we’ll read it out-loud.” Sara: “ I read every night. My son and I sit and read while my husband and younger son watch TV. I exchange books with my neighbor. He has got me reading mysteries now. Sometimes I read my son’s books to see what he is reading. I read all of the Harry Potter.”

In Sara’s home, she and her son read while other family members watch television. They use this reading time together to learn, to exchange ideas and to connect with one another. They are reading in a parallel manner, in which both are simultaneously engaging in the same activity but with different books or texts. Like Gina’s reports of reading with her husband, this book reading experience is solitary in that each is alone with his/her text, yet social when they share snippets of text for either information or entertainment. Of the nine women, only Sara reported this activity with her children.

Marti, Jane and LeeAnn report having read to or with their children when they were younger, but as Jane says, “ Now they just want me to leave them alone.” All three referenced reading with their children as part of helping with homework, thus as a function of their parenting duties, and not as an activity engaged in for pleasure or socializing. Now that the children have reached adolescence and /or adulthood, this function of reading has disappeared and not been replaced. Cassie’s current book reading practices with her son follow the same line.

Cassie: “ My daughter is a great reader. She doesn’t need my help. She loves to read. I don’t know where she gets it from, not from me. She always has her nose in a book. My son is not a good reader. His teacher wants him to read every night for fifteen minutes. So I sit by him and he reads out loud and I correct his pronunciation. He’s not very good at sounding out the words so I correct his mistakes.”

Cassie views reading with her child as part of her duty as a parent. This very functional view precludes either she or her son enjoying the event or the text.

A final book reading practice with children revolves around the popular Harry Potter series by author J.K. Rowling. Jane and Sara report reading the series and discussing it with their children, and Sherry has done the same with her grandchildren.

Jane: “We were one of those families when the last Harry Potter book came out. We went to Wal-Mart and waited to midnight to buy the book.

We bought three copies, one for each of us. We all had it read in a week.”

Sara talked about reading the books in the series after her son had completed each one and talking about the events. They also viewed the two films that have been made of the first two books and compared the reading with the viewing.

Sherry read the series after hearing her grandson talk about it. She reported.

“There was so much publicity I had to read it. It also gave me something to talk to him about. I did the same thing with my son when he read *The Hobbit* in junior high school. Back then, his history teacher said that book

was evil, the same way some people complain about Harry Potter. By reading it I know what it's about and I can talk to him. "

This shared reading experience of a specific book or series allowed the women to connect with their children and grandchildren and is a public use of reading. The experiences provided a common topic for conversation, providing a tool for communication and still serving the aesthetic purpose of reading for pleasure. Perhaps more importantly, this practice permitted the women to become sponsors of literacy (Brandt, 2001) for the younger generation.

Summary of reported home reading practices

The reported purposes of reading for primarily functional in that reading serves as a means of obtaining information and as a way of escaping. The extent of the reading practices both in quantity of textual material and time spent of these nine white working class women range in a continuum from high to low (figure 3). Gina and Sherry report daily reading of assorted materials and their homes reflect this. Both women had bookcases filled with a variety of books; magazines and newspapers were evident on counters and tables, even in stacks on the floor. In a lesser amount, but still visible and accessible, magazines and books were seen in Jane and Sara's homes.

The homes of the women who reported being low practioners of reading also reflected their words. No printed matter, not books, magazines, catalogs were evident in the homes of Marti, LeeAnn, Denise and Valerie.

Cassie had single bookcase neatly filled with children's books. This physical evidence of the importance of printed text in their lives continues when they report their home writing practices.

Figure 4

Reported Home Reading Practices

	Newspapers	Magazines	Ads	Computer	Books	W/Kids	W/Others
Gina	3 daily	Yes	Yes	Yes	3 current	Past	No
Marti	No	On Occasion	For Specific Purpose	No	1 in past 6 months	Past	No
LeeAnn	No	Yes	For Specific Purpose	For Specific Purpose	No	No	No
Cassie	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	No
Jane	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Sherry	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	2 current	Past	Yes
Sara	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Denise	No	No	No	No	No	N/A	No
Valerie	No	On occasion	No	For Specific Purpose	No	No	No

Views of reading

The women who found reading pleasurable practiced it more. Those who were unable to personally engage with text practiced reading only at its most basic level, what Finn (1999) might describe as performative or functional.

Cassie, Denise, LeeAnn Valerie all reported boring and time consuming and so practice reading not at all or when they have exercised all other available options. For them reading is seen as functional only – a tool to gain information or to while away time utilized only as a last resort. Social aspects of reading are reported by the women who read for recreational purposes (Heath 1983). These

aesthetic readers are reading for more than just obtaining facts or providing a diversion, but also for gaining pleasure or enjoyment. This may be through the gratification of obtaining answers to questions, as with Gina who “wants to know everything” or the sense of relaxation and escape from worry provided to Sara and Sherry when they escape into a compelling story.

Reported home writing practices

The reported home writing practices of the nine white working class women interviewed in this study, like the majority of reported reading practices, all cluster around what Finn (1999) categorized as functional literacy. Writing serves as a means of transmitting information for the purposes of remembering, documenting, communicating, and clarifying. The interview protocol included items noted as writing by Heath (1983) such the practice of list and note writing. As with the starting interview questions to the reading portion of the interview, this was researcher-designed to reinforce the notion that literacy practices are not necessarily very formal modes of written communication as practiced in schools.

Lists and notes to self

Commonly, all nine women reported writing lists or notes for personal use to function as memory aids or guides. These were generally very informal in nature, and included things such as from grocery lists on the back of envelopes and “To Do” lists which listed things to do, places to go, people to contact, etc.

Cassie said, “ I am definitely a list keeper and note writer. I have to do so to keep to my budget and run my house. I usually have three or four scraps of

paper sitting on my counter with reminders to myself. Since I went back to work one day a week I need them even more. I am very stressed and they help me to remember.”

Jane keeps a dedicated planner, which she fills in daily, crosses off as completed, and transfers uncompleted tasks to the following day.

Jane explains, “ I have this great planner with a calendar and room to write a journal and everything. In the morning I look at my list and add things. I cross them off as I go and then at night I start a new list with the things I did not finish from today. It keeps all of the old lists so I can look back and see when I did something.” Thus Jane’s writing, while serving to organize her tasks also functioned as a documentation of her accomplishments.

Additionally, Sara spoke of a very specific way of writing notes for herself

“ I joined Weight Watchers and one of the things is to write down everything you eat. I lost fifty pounds and even though I don’t go to Weight Watchers anymore, I still write everything down.”

All of the women reported writing to remember – whether it was a simple list of items to get for dinner that night or a reminder to pick a child up after school or a list of foods eaten, writing served in a very functional manner to organize their day.

Journal

Journal writing is a personal form of writing, serving to communicate one’s thoughts textually and privately. The writer is also the reader and conventions of

grammar and spelling rarely come into play (Routman, 1994). Unlike the other writing forms reportedly practiced, journal writing has no outside audience. Three women reported journal or diary writing within the last six months. Gina has a journal in which she writes several times a week.

“I use it more when I’m troubled or trying to work out a problem. Then I write every night. Sometimes I wake up in the middle of the night and write and write. I wrote a lot when my son died of cancer and I wrote constantly when I was having a problem at work.”

Sherry uses her journal in a similar manner,

“I’ve been writing quite a bit in my journal the last year or so since my son committed suicide. I use it to write my feelings. But I also write letters to him in it. Letters to my son about what’s going on, what he’s missing.”

Jane’s planner has section dedicated to journaling.

“I write down stuff, important stuff that happened that I want to remember. It’s in the family. Both of my grandmothers would write down on the little calendar block what happened everyday. Just little notes like weather or planting or visitors. My mom has those still. And my mom has always kept the most incredible journals. First she wrote them out but now she does it on the computer. She has pages and pages and we can go back to when to when I was a kid on a certain day and see what happened. I wish I could do that. I think it is so wonderful. But I’m lucky just to write important events.”

All three women who write in journals had mothers and/or grandmothers who exhibited the same behaviors. Of the other six women, only Sara had a model for journal writing in her life. Her mother wrote, Sara said, but she just has never made it a habit to do so. "I just keep things inside. I write lots of letters to people. I wish I did keep a journal. I admire it. But I just don't." (Field notes, November 11, 2003). Like Jane, who reported wanting to read the Left Behind series, but never actually did so, there is a conflict between what Sara reportedly values and what she actually practices.

Notes to family members

Seven of the women reported writing notes to other members of their household to communicate information, and in some cases good wishes. Marti leaves notes for her teenage daughters to find after school on her kitchen counter to remind them of chores or errands.

"The kitchen counter is where I leave them notes. Almost every day – like if I want them to start dinner or if they should do their homework early because we have to go somewhere later. Sometimes I just leave a note for them to call me at work. They know to look on the counter when they get home, but they usually go into the kitchen anyway for a snack when they get home."

Eight of the nine women reported having personal cell phones. Rather than using written text, LeeAnn and Denise rely on their cell phones to communicate.

“ Our cell phones also work as walkie-talkies,” said LeeAnn. “It’s easy to call, especially neither one of us usually comes straight home from work.”

Communicating with others, then, while an overarching theme can be accomplished in ways other than writing. The women participating in this study who rarely use text to obtain information also then rarely use it to transmit information to others. For LeeAnn and Denise, the choice to verbally communicate via cell phone precludes their need to write notes. Valerie reports to using both modes to communicate with her daughter, leaving notes as Marti does, for her daughter to find after school, but then using the telephone to clarify the written information. The immediacy of contact available via the cell phone has overtaken the necessity of writing notes. In fact, the advent of voicemail functions in the same manner, allowing the author/speaker to “leave a note” orally that the reader/listener can access at will/ as time allows.

Letters

Letters were used to communicate in both informal and formal ways by five of the women. Personal letters were reportedly sent to friends and family members to keep in touch, pass on information, and... Sara in particular, wrote both personal letters to friends and family as well as more formal letters to strangers and businesses.

“ I am a very shy person. I would much rather write than talk to people. I handwrite letters on pretty stationary to my friends and family often. There doesn’t have to be a special occasion. I think handwriting is much more personal. I only type letters on the computer for business. Like when I

wrote to these log home companies or wanted to find out about getting a real estate license. I didn't want to talk to any one face-to-face. I just wanted to find out."

Sara is the only woman to self-report that she used letter writing as a tactic to avoid personal discomfort in communication. Her written text facilitates communication, allowing her to obtain information in a social, yet formal manner. In the same way, Marti has used formal letter writing to her advantage.

"Writing letters gets things accomplished. When the school wouldn't do anything about the cheerleading coach I found out how much it works. I had been to the school at least four times to talk about this coach and they just wouldn't listen to me. So I wrote to the superintendent and I wrote to the governor. I heard back from someone at the governor's office in only a week or so. I thought it would take months, but they wrote me back and then they called me and took a report on the phone. And now the coach isn't there this year. I know it's because I wrote. After that, I wrote to the president of the company that I work for. Because there were employees at another office, not mine, but who I had to deal with, and they didn't know I worked there and their attitudes were wrong. And the policy was wrong. So I wrote the president of the company. And he wrote a nice letter back/ and now things have changed. I know that writing works."

Marti elaborated,

"The school wouldn't listen to me. They were all ganged up and looking at me like I was nothing. So I wrote the letter. And I gave it to my friend

and she looked at it and fixed some things. Cause I don't know all that stuff from high school any more. Then I let some of the other cheerleading mothers read it and they said they would back me up. So I sent it. Right to the governor. I know the school wouldn't listen cuz we are out here in Odessa and not like in one of the developments like Trinity where they have money. And it worked."

Marti was able to use formal letter writing to gain access to an audience she felt was not listening to her, due in her mind to her class positioning within the school and surrounding community. Her written text was shared with a friend and other mothers, providing her with an approachable audience through which she was able to vent her frustrations and ideas before solidifying for presentation to what she believed was a less sympathetic audience.

The detached nature of letter writing appealed to both Sara and Marti although for different reasons. Both women used the anonymity that written text allows them to communicate with people whom they felt would not attend to their messages if given verbally. In Sara's case, letter writing served as a shield to protect her. For Marti, it functioned as a mode of communication which allowed her words to stand alone, unclouded by what she perceives as classism, being judged by others in positions of power (school administrators) based upon the neighborhood she lives in. Her success using the letter as a tool led her to repeat it and again succeed. Marti was able to hide behind the shield of formal language. She replaced what she perceived as an eschewed positioning with a more esteemed persona by way of the letters. Written literacy for both Sara and

Marti functioned as powerful literacy (Finn, 1999), providing them with modes of communication that allowed them to accomplish their goals.

Email

The practice of sending email has become a commonplace form of communicating for those with computer and Internet access. Email allows for short, quick written communication to be sent directly to another's computer address and then accessed and responded to at will.

Denise does not have a computer, though her brother-in-law who lives with them does and he "uses it every day". Valerie's daughter and Cassie's family have computers that they use often, but neither Valerie nor Cassie, like Denise, expresses any interest in using them. For those women with computer access and skills, email has taken on a large role in communication. As Jane indicated, email birthday greetings have supplanted store bought cards or handwritten letters to congratulate her relatives. Indeed " Most of my writing occurs on email. With thirty choir members and 100 church members, email works to help me schedule practice or communicate church news. I am also the secretary of my local Sweet Adelines and write a newsletter to them with email." (Jane, Field notes October 25, 2003). The newsletter Jane writes consists primarily of the Sweet Adeline related activities and events, as well as reports of social occurrences within the group. Other women also reported using email to keep in touch with family and friends, especially those who live far away. Sherry, in addition to daily emails to friends and family, has begun to use the AOL Instant Messenger service. " Two or three times a week I get on and talk to

my ten year old grandson. I had to learn all that lingo and how to do all those smiley faces for him. We talk about school and friends and Harry Potter books. All kinds of stuff. It helps since I used to live near them and then they moved so far to Kansas. We can stay close and he needs me. He has Asperger's Syndrome and doesn't have that many friends."

Cards

Pre-written greeting cards were more likely to be used to communicate with family and friends than were letters. Five women used greeting cards as a means of connecting on personal events such as birthdays and holidays, as well as communicating thoughts of sympathy or congratulations.

Thus, while the practice of sending greeting cards is one that serves to facilitate the communication process by allowing ideas and wishes to be expressed without the author having to physically write. Perhaps the preprinted greeting on the cards allows the women to communicate their thoughts without having to go through the writing process. As well, only Gina admitted to sending post cards while traveling to keep in touch with those at home. The others relied on the telephone or waited until they returned to contact others.

Jane uses her computer to design personalized cards for friends and family for many occasions – most notably birthday and sympathy. Thus she has combined the new computer literacy with the more traditional card sending. However, these are really reserved more for those she is not close to. For those closest, birthday email greetings serve the same purpose, as they do for Sara. Cassie stated she makes a special effort to select the "perfect" card for the

individual, but never adds notes, just signs her name; Marti on the other hand makes it a practice to add a personal line to every card. Cassie allows the card author's text to communicate for her, perhaps again positioning another as the authority. Still, the care Cassie reports in selecting cards is indicative that she is sensitive to the needs of her audience, the reader/card recipient, as well as to how her card selection portrays her as the writer/sender. Marti allows the pre-printed text to convey her main message but adds her individuality and voice with her notes. Like Valerie and Denise, LeeAnn prefers to telephone greetings and not "waste money on cards or stamps. In fact, LeeAnn still has an unopened box of Christmas cards from 2002 waiting to be signed and sent (Field notes, October 3, 2003). Again, the availability of oral communication facilitated by telephones, cell phones and voicemail has moved from traditional communication into a new literacy.

Summary of writing practices

The primary purpose for writing has been functional in that writing is reported being used as tool, or means, to fill a need. However, while these needs vary, they can be categorized thematically. There are private uses of literacy such as the very basic lists and notes that serve as memory aids for shopping and chores. Journal writing, an extremely private use of writing especially for Gina and Sherry, fills a need for self-therapy. Public uses of writing fill the need to communicate. Notes to family members reportedly written by the participants are functional only –to give specific information and thus in several cases have been replaced by more immediate communication technology, the new literacies

of the cell phone, emailing and Instant Messenger. Letters are used in a social but still very functional manner – to communicate information to others either formal facts and problems or the more informal family news and greetings. For some, the informal communication to family and friends that was once the domain of the personal letter has been replaced by email and instant messaging. Emailing has also replaced the sending of cards to close relations; cards are generally only used still in a more formal fashion – holidays, sympathy or not close friends, when used at all.

Figure 5

Reported Home Writing Practices

	Lists/ Notes to Self	Notes To Others	Letters	Cards	Email/ IM	Journals
Gina	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Marti	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
LeeAnn	Yes	No	No	No	Yes	No
Cassie	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	No
Jane	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Sherry	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Sara	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Denise	Yes	No	No	No	No	No
Valerie	Yes	No	No	No	No	No

Views about writing

Writing for amusement or recreation was not reported in this study. All nine of the women reported disliking writing as children and this distaste remains.

“In school we always had to write about what the teacher wanted us to write about. I hated that. I only wrote as much as I had to,” said Valerie.

“My daughter still has to do that in school today and she doesn’t like it either.”

“ All the teachers worried about was spelling, or grammar. Who cares?” said LeeAnn.

“Even when we wrote poetry it all had to rhyme and follow that pattern, you know iambic something.” Sara remembered. “It was hard.”

No writing of fiction, or poetry was reported, although fiction and poetry were both reported as being read. The only three women who wrote for reasons other than communication were the journal writers. Journaling served two functions to keep track of important events for Gina and Jane and to work through personal problems with Gina and Sherry. These private functions of literacy, while they may have provided pleasure in that they allowed the women to feel either a sense of closure or completion (Gina and Jane) or functioned in a therapeutic manner.

Reported functions of literacy practices

The nine white working class women participating in these interviews reported practices that ranged from purely functional, as obtaining or giving specific information, to social as communicating and connecting with others, and finally aesthetic reading for pleasure or writing for self-clarification. Interestingly there was no one type of literacy practice that all of the women reported doing, but two of the women reported performing all of the types. The reasons, or reported functions for practicing these specific forms of literacy were addressed by the women when they responded to several questions during the course of

the individual interviews. These questions, pertaining to the perceived value of practicing literacy, motivations for use or non-use, and consequences of use or non-use, for both themselves and others, allowed the women to voice their outlooks on literacy.

All women said that literacy was important, but not necessarily for themselves. Literacy, they said, is needed “to learn” (Valerie, field notes, December 8, 2003),” to communicate” (Marti, field notes, October 7, 2003),” to move up in the world” (Cassie, field notes, September 26, 2003).

Listening to the interview tapes with the focus of obtaining a view of the women’s perspectives on the functions of literacy in their lives led to the development of four common themes within one specific category.

Overwhelmingly, the nine white working class women viewed literacy as a tool, as a means to an end or a method for getting something done. This final accomplishment varied, but generally fell within one of the four following categories: organization, information, communication, or diversion (Figure 3).

Organization

Literacy for organizational purposes functions both privately and publicly and was most evident in the reported writing practices of list making and note writing. Cassie used literacy to “help her run her household” (field notes, September 26, 2003) making private checklists and shopping lists as did Jane with her family, church work, and Sweet Adelines. Jane also used email for this purpose, using this form to schedule Sweet Adelines rehearsals (Field notes, October 25, 2003). This use of literacy is similar to the uses reported by Heath

(1983) in both Trackton and Roadville, and by Barton & Hamilton (1999) in Lancaster. This functional aspect, where literacy is serving as a tool the women use to organize and remember, can be seen as either a basic or performative level (Finn; 1999). All nine white working class women reported utilizing this practice.

Information

Literacy is one means for obtaining information as well as for passing it along to others. Literacy for personal learning was valued by for Gina, Sherry, Jane, and Sara. Gina's daily reading of three newspaper was fueled by her "need to know" (field notes, September 22, 2003) as was her non-fiction book reading, "When I read about a place, like Rome or Paris in a book I want to know more. So I get a book about Paris to find out. I don't stop until I know everything about it." Gina seeks to gather information until she feels personally satiated, and then uses this information draw conclusions or form opinions. This private use crosses over in her fiction and non-fiction reading as well as publicly when she shares what she is reading with her husband.

Jane reads for information because "As a church elder, people ask me questions. I read the Bible every day. I have a responsibility to be able to answer their questions. I want to know for myself, too. To live my life right." (Field notes, October 25, 2003). Her desire for information too crosses the public and private boundaries both in reading and writing. Jane writes emails and newsletters to pass on information.

Valerie has looked into the real estate books she needs to read to change careers. For her, she needs only to read to learn specifically for this proposed advancement, in the same way that her sixteen year old daughter must read and write at school (field notes, December 8, 2003). Her reading to learn is pragmatic, not personal in the sense that she is reading purely for private pleasure.

Literacy for advancement is tied to literacy for information (Fine & Weis, 1998; Morrow, 1995; Paratore, 2001). Both Valerie and Sara used reading to gain information in attempts to change careers and make more money. Sara also used writing to contact log home companies and arrange for the building of her new home. Interestingly, Cassie was adamant in her vocalization regarding the value of literacy for advancement “People need to know how to read and write to move up, to get good jobs” (field notes, September 26, 2003) yet she personally views reading and writing as “boring” and practices both very little.

Communication

One of the most common functions of literacy uncovered is the use of literacy as a tool for communication. Both reading and writing practices were evident in this use, and they were most often used publicly, that is in conjunction with others. Only Denise did not report this use of literacy, choosing to utilize her cell phone instead.

Marti’s letters served to change things at both her workplace and her children’s high school. Sherry used email and instant messaging to communicate with out-of-state family members, while Sara used letters writing for both formal

and informal communications, allowing her to avoid face to face or verbal interaction that she fears. For many of the other women, auditory and oral modes of communication such as TV or radio news or telephone conversations provided the same service and information. While the practice of writing to communicate seems obvious when the women wrote letters, cards, and emails, reading is the necessary counterpart to this action. Reading communication from others either before or after writing is integral to the communicative process.

Diversion

Finally, literacy functions as a diversion. On the most basic level, reading serves as a means of spending time or relieving boredom. Valerie reported reading magazines and books when she was “bored” (field notes, December 8, 2003) while LeeAnn stockpiles magazines. “I don’t read them right away, but save them and read a bunch when the weather’s bad.” (Field notes, October 3, 2003). For others reading is a scheduled part of the day serving as more than a pastime, but rather as an anticipated deliberate activity. They read for the enjoyment, for the images, the adventures, and the knowledge. As well, Gina, Sherry, and Sara report reading as means of “escape” (Field notes, September 22, 2003; October 13, 2003; November 11, 2003). Through reading, they are able to put aside every day concerns and move into other worlds. Writing can also function as a diversion. Gina and Sherry use journal writing in times of stress to help them think through issues and problems (Field notes September 22, 2003; October 23, 2003). When literacy was not reported as functioning as a diversion, it was because it was viewed as personally “unimportant”

(Denise, field notes, November 26, 2003) or “time consuming” (Cassie, field notes, September 26, 2003).

Researcher reflexivity and response

The researcher entered the study aware that she might face conflicts between her role as an insider, a working class white woman living in the neighborhood and her outsider role as literacy professional. It was for this reason that I kept reflexive journal to document my impressions, feelings, and reactions throughout the course of the interviews. Several situations came up where my insider positions came to the fore, most notably the emotional conversations with Sherry concerning her son's suicide. I was unable and very unwilling to stay detached, especially when commonalities between her reading experiences with her son and my own with mine arose.

Phenomenography (Sandburg, 1997; Svensson, 1997), the leading methodology behind this study requires the documenting of the experience from the participant's perspective. Hiding her pain would devalue it and its role in her current literacy practices. As well, feminist informed research (Addison & McGee, 1999; Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger & Tarule, 1997; Fine, 1992) privileges the parts where caring and concern overtake objectivity, especially when the experience is addressed and documented. Another place where this positioning became part of the data involves the discussions with Gina and her feelings of disenfranchisement a reader in world of non- readers, which echoed similar sentiments reported by myself as working class and others (Hoggart, 1957; Tokarczyk & Fay, 1993).

However, it was Cassie' account of her reading with her son where my dual positioning insider/outsider became personally problematic. While I did not want to jeopardize my place as a confidant/friend, the reader/educator part of me immediately bristled when she spoke of correcting his pronunciation. At the conclusion of the interview, after the tape was turned off I spoke with Sara about her son's reading. I shared with her that my own son had struggled with oral reading as a child. I acknowledged Cassie on the care behind her effort to help her son succeed, and on her very literal following of his teacher's directives regarding at home reading. I encouraged her to change her focus. I explained that oral reading was not a skill most people practice on a daily basis. I encouraged her to try to make reading more interesting and enjoyable by providing him with books and magazines on things he likes, emphasizing that in a couple of years he won't have to read out loud much in school. It's more important that he understand what it means than that he say it correctly. Cassie looked doubtful. In her experience, school reading had focused on two things: oral, "round robin" reading and later "literature" reading looking for literary elements. She did not want her son to be embarrassed when he read aloud in the classroom, but she thought it might be a good idea to get him a book about baseball, his current favorite sport. Later, I followed up with Cassie and learned she had not "had time" to obtain any supplemental reading materials for her son (field notes, February 7, 2004).

Summary

The conclusion drawn from this study, that literacy functions as a tool for the working class white women participants, supports the work of Barton and Hamilton (1998). These women used literacy in the same ways they used other tools, cell phones and computers for example, to get things done. Each chose the medium/tool that best served her needs to organize her life, gain information, communicate, or provide diversion. For some women, text-based literate modes filled that need, and served as that tool. For others, literacy was unnecessary and thus rarely accessed. This is important because it focuses on the women's literacy practices as being a means to an end, and not as an end to itself. These women used literacy to achieve their goals – to get a house – to get rid of a coach, to save money, to work through emotions.

Each woman has chosen to embrace literacy/to use literacy differently for the roles it played in her life. For the some, the quest for knowledge has led to a headlong dive into a life full of text (Gina). For Sherry, literacy serves to help her make sense of her surroundings, both physical and emotional. Sara's hides behind her use of literacy, letting it work for her. Literacy for Marti is empowering, while Jane uses it in her quest for insight. For LeeAnn, Cassie, Valerie, and Denise literacy is something to be utilized when needed and put away when not.

The literacy practices reported by the nine white working class women residing in this Florida neighborhood varied in type and quantity according to the importance each women placed upon them. Commonly, all of the women used literacy as a tool for meeting their needs. High literacy practioners, such as Gina,

Sherry, and Sara, deemed literacy a priority in their lives for organization, information, communication, and diversion. These women found literacy to be personally valuable. Median literacy users regarded the practice of literacy as useful in that it serves as a manner for organizing, informing, and/or communicating. Marti and Jane use literacy in ways that serve their particular needs. Minimal literacy use was reported by the LeeAnn, Cassie, Denise, and Valerie, all who have found other means for organization, information, communication, and/or diversion.

Chapter V

Results

This chapter first provides a review of the purpose, procedure and research questions related to the reported home literacy practices of working class white women. A summary of the findings leads to a connection of the results with research discussed in the review of the literature found in chapter two. Finally, a discussion regarding the significance & limitations of these findings and recommendations for further research end the chapter.

The purpose of this study was to document the reported home literacy practices of nine working class white women residing in a neighborhood in the Southeastern United States. Semi-structured, taped interviews were analyzed via an adaptation of Brown and Gilligan's Listener's Guide (1992) to discern commonalities and themes. A feminist informed phenomenographical approach allowed the women's voices to come through as they reported their practices and discussed the functions of literacy in their lives, as the researcher sought to uncover the meanings they made of literacy practice. The researcher's reflexive self-analysis throughout the course of the interviews and the guided repeated listenings to the tapes enhanced the scrutiny by directing her focus to particular areas of consequence.

The research questions for this study were:

- 1) What are the reported home literacy practices of working class white women?
- 2) What are the reported functions of these home literacy practices?

Summary of findings

Reported home literacy practices

For the purposes of this study, literacy has been defined as, at the very minimum, a fundamental, potentially empowering, social practice involving the use of print and the utilization of both reading and writing. The outward manifestations of this practice can be broadly categorized into functional, social, and aesthetic clusters. Functional practices are those necessary to navigate society or gain or give information. Social uses of literacy involve print related ways of connecting with friends and family. Aesthetic literacy practices are personal and affective in nature. Literacy is rooted within an individual's social and cultural milieu, and thus is personal and fluid. It is imbued with historical meaning, and its meaning and value are influenced by intangible factors such as class, race, and gender.

The nine working class white women interviewed for this study reported a range of home literacy practice that varied in terms of quantity of printed text utilized and quantity of time allocated. For the purpose of this study, home literacy practices were defined as print-based reading and writing used in conjunction with self, family, or other personally affiliated groups. These practices

may be either public or private and included such practices as reading advertisements, magazines and books to writing reminders, letters and journals.

Reading practices reported by the women ranged from extremely high – as in Gina who reports reading three daily newspapers, being engrossed in three books, and using the Internet to access information. Gina uses reading functionally, to satisfy her need to know; socially, to connect with her spouse; and aesthetically to gain pleasure. Conversely, on the low usage end, Denise reports no reading or writing at home, choosing to function via an oral rather than printed text medium. However, for the majority of the women, reading practices fell somewhere on the continuum between low and high extremes, with the reading of printed text being utilized both publicly and privately for functional, social, and aesthetic purposes.

These reading practices were employed to obtain information through advertisements, magazines and/or newspapers, to entertain or amuse with magazines and books, or to in a few cases to connect with others via the sharing of text. Jane in particular reads her Bible to “become more aware and lead a better life” (Field notes October 25, 2003). Gina, Sherry, and Sara all reported book reading as a tool to escape their current lives and immerse themselves in new places and ideas. Additionally, several women read magazines for both information and amusement.

Writing practices also spanned a continuum of use, and there seemed to be a relationship between reading practiced and writing practiced. That is, the women who reported reading print text also reported writing. The exception to this was

Marti, who reported minimal reading practices (all functional) but acknowledged the power of the written word and utilized it to her advantage to make change.

Two women, Gina and Sherry made use of the private aspects of writing by using journal writing as a mode to help them evaluate and analyze their personal needs. But, for the majority of the women, purposes of writing fell into the categories of functional and social, used primarily to organize and communicate both privately and publicly. Writing served as a tool for communicating, either with others or as reminders to self.

The primary purpose for writing has been functional in that writing is reported being used to as a tool to fill a need. Privately, lists and notes function as memory aids for shopping and chores. As for public uses, writing functions as a means of communication. Notes written by the women to family members are functional only –to give specific information. Letters are used in a social way but still in a very functional manner – to communicate information to others either formal facts and problems or the more informal family news and greetings. For some, the informal communication to family and friends that was once the domain of the personal letter has been replaced by email and instant messaging. Emailing has also replaced the sending of cards to close relations; cards are generally only used still in a more formal fashion – holidays, sympathy or not close friends, when used at all.

In sum, the written-text based literacy practices of the nine working class white women participating in this study were used both publicly and privately for specific purposes. Overwhelmingly, the women viewed literacy as a tool, as a

means to an end or a method for getting something done. This final accomplishment varied, but fell within one of the four following categories: organization, information, communication, or diversion.

Functions of the reported practices

The literacy practices reported by the nine white working class women residing in this Florida neighborhood varied in type and quantity according to the importance each woman placed upon them. Commonly, all of the women used literacy as a tool for meeting their needs. High literacy practitioners, such as Gina, Sherry, and Sara, who used literacy daily and for all four functions, deemed literacy a priority in their lives. These women found literacy to be personally valuable and used it in as a tool for organization, information, communication, and diversion. Note writing and list making were used to organize while the reading of newspapers, magazines, and books functioned to obtain both knowledge and pleasure. Writing of letters, emails and journal entries to organize, communicate and synthesize.

Median literacy users were those women who reported using literacy for particular purposes at particular times. They reported weekly use of at least two of the functions of literacy as tool for organizing, informing, and/or communicating. For example, Marti and Jane use literacy in ways that serve their particular needs. Marti writes notes and letters to communicate and Jane uses email in the same vein. Jane reads for knowledge as well. LeeAnn, Cassie, Denise, and Valerie, use literacy minimally, primarily for the purpose of organization. They utilize the more traditional oral forms to gain information,

communication, and/or provide diversion, although this occurs through a newer technology, the cell phone.

Socio-cultural constructs and literacy

That there are relationships between reported literacy practices and the socio-cultural triumvirate of race, class, and gender were an underlying presupposition in this study, based in part upon earlier research. While the researcher had consciously chosen to concentrate her study upon a particular subgroup of the American population, working class white women, for reasons delineated in chapter two, these three cultural areas were not the primary focus of the study or of the interviews. Still, these constructs need to be addressed as the concept of class, particularly working class, was brought up in all nine interviews by the researcher after her investigation into personal home literacy practice. The participants were asked if the terms 'social class' or 'economic class' brought any thoughts to mind and then if they felt there was any relationship between literacy practice and class. Responses to the first question, as well as the elaborations of some respondents, Cassie and LeeAnn in particular, supported the concept that while class is rarely discussed in American society, when it is specifically addressed, strong feelings emerge. Cassie and LeeAnn were vehement in their contentions of worthiness. Both perceived that they were looked down upon, as did Marti, by virtue of where they lived, though Marti and Valerie were equally adamant in their responses that they were not working class, but middle class as evidenced by their cars and other possessions. This locating of class positioning in geographical location or as a

virtue of objects is not unusual (Zweig, 2000; Linkon, 1999). In a lesser manner, others such as Sara, Gina, and Jane reported the concept of class as being one her parents had dealt with but which was of minor importance to her (Wright 1997).

Overall the women reported similar attitudes to those of the majority of Americans who have accepted what Gee (1996) termed the *master myth* of American classless equality. That is, if one works hard enough, one can overcome class positioning. They agree that literacy, or the ability to read and write, is a crucial tool to moving up (Ehrenreich, 2001; hooks, 2000). Not one woman seemed surprised, uncomfortable, or unable to answer the class inquiry.

All of the women were self-described as white. The neighborhood where they all live is overwhelmingly white working class. The schools they attended and which their children now attend are 90% white middle class. Due to demographic, race was never addressed, and this was not surprising to me. Research has shown that whiteness for whites functions as the norm, rather than the other (Carter, 1997; Hurtado & Stewart, 1997; Rosenberg, 1997). Because the women rarely encountered or interacted with people other than whites, there was little need for them to address what for them are non-existent issues.

Marital status was not considered a factor for selection for participation in the study. As it turned out, seven women were married and had been for periods ranging from 7 to 35 years. Denise had been living with her current boyfriend for a little over one year. A single mother for all of her daughter's life (sixteen year) Valerie reported little interest in dating or relationships at this point in her life.

Aside from Gina and Cassie, little mention was made by the women about the men in their lives, either in general or literacy related. Marti, Jane, and Sara talked about how their husbands did not enjoy reading; in fact, Sara reports her husband struggles with reading. Gina's husband functions as a partner, sharing the reading experience each evening reading parallelly, and sharing passages and poems and discussing ideas, Cassie's husband reads the newspaper for her, providing her with information he filters as important and I see room for further investigation and analysis here. Sara's book sharing neighbor is male, while Sherry's book club is comprised of "the ladies" at work.

Connections with previous research

Gee's (1996) conceptions of home literacy discourse and Barton and Hamilton's (1998) vernacular literacies are particularly applicable to this research. As evidenced in the reported practices of Gina, Marti, Sherry, Jane, and Sara, some of the women were able to move beyond their home discourses and master the broader secondary discourse, what Gee defines as "literacy". By using print to read and write for information, these women became literate.

Barton and Hamilton's work in Lancaster, England reported in *Local Literacies* (1998) was a major impetus for this study. Barton and Hamilton found six areas of vernacular literacy practice in the lives of the their study participants in England, and this American study provides supporting evidence for those practices of organizing life, personal communication, private leisure, documenting life, sense making and social participation.

Many of the categories of functions of literacy developed by Heath (1983) were represented in the reported practices of these nine white working class women. Heath's types of literacies included the reading practices deemed instrumental, social-interactional, confirmational, news-related and recreational. Her categories of writing included the functions of memory aids, oral message substitutes, financial, social –interactional and public record. These are similar to the four categories of organization, information, communication and diversion, with only the writing category of financial going unreported in the current study.

Finn (1999) theorized four levels of literacy, performative, functional, informational, and powerful, and all were evidenced in this study. Even minor literacy users such as Valerie and Denise demonstrated both performative and functional literacy levels. Finn's informational level of literacy was the one most often utilized by all of the women. Powerful literacy, the ability to synthesize, analyze and evaluate was demonstrated by the high literacy users such as Gina when she accessed several newspapers for sources of information and then constructed an opinion based on her analysis and synthesis. Marti too utilized powerful literacy when she gathered her data, presented her facts and wrote letters that produced changes.

Street's (1995) concepts of multiliteracies emerged with the striking use of computers and cell phones. The researcher entered the study with the mistaken assumption that technology would not play a large role. This was based on her presumption that the women might not see the purchase of home computers or cell phones as a high priority. Instead, all of the nine women reported home

computer access and seven reported some use of this mode in their reading and writing practices. While this was a small sample of the seven women who used home computers six also used computers in the workplace. This workplace use may have lead to a comfort level that encouraged them, combined with the school needs of their children, to invest in home computers. For whatever reason, the seven women reported at least some computer use for reading and writing, be it navigating written text to read information or composing and communication via email and instant messenger. As well, the availability and use of cell phones affords the women with the ability to communicate orally virtually at will. Even if immediate contact cannot be made, voice mail replaces writing for communicative purposes. Heath's (1983) category of writing as a substitute for an oral message has been superceded by the new literacy of voice mail technology.

Hoggart (1957) provided one of the earliest reviews of reading practices and the working class. While his work dealt entirely with men in Britain, two similarities between his findings and these arose. First, both Hoggart's men and these women reported using home reading in primarily functional ways. Second, reported feelings of disenfranchisement, or not belonging, occurred in high readers, particularly Gina, but also Jane and Sara. In ways similar to what Hoggart reported, the three women who practiced literacy daily from childhood reported feeling "different" from their family and peers. Testimonies of "not belonging" (Gina, September 22, 2003), "being alone" (Sara, November 11, 2003) and "not fitting in" (Jane, October 25, 2003) because they willingly read for

pleasure were reported. As Gina put it, half in jest and a bit defensively, “Only nerds read.”

Key’s (1997) concept of literacy shutdown comes into play for the women who discussed literacy only in terms of their school experiences with reading and writing. Like Key’s participants, all nine women reported negative literacy related school events. Cassie, Valerie, LeeAnn and Denise talked of the embarrassment and dislike for reading out loud in school reading groups. Writing to prompts was also reported as instilling a great distaste for writing in general by LeeAnn, Jane and Sara. It’s possible that this form of school writing has led the women to shut down, or not to practice writing in any form as adults.

The portion of Brandt’s (2001) work relating to literacy sponsorship is also validated by this study. Jane and Sara reported they had modeling and support for practicing literacy as children. Cassie blamed her non-reading in part on lack of sponsorship when she said, “If my mother had read more, maybe I would” (Field notes September 26, 2003). While her comment can be viewed from many angles, indeed it is rife for deconstruction, it is indicative of a commonly held belief that mothers are responsible for literacy learning and practice of their children. This supports Luttrell’s (1997) findings of literacy as part of women’s (mothers) care work. As well, it corresponds with the basis of most family literacy programs and their focus on mothers responsibilities regarding children’s literacy learning (Morrow, 1995; Paratore, 2001). Along these lines, Sara’s son, and Sherry’s children and grandchildren have benefited from the women’s sponsorship of their literacy individual practices. By encouraging reading and

discussion of books, Sara and Sherry are the white working class female sponsors of the literacy practice of another generation. They are also examples of the influences women, particularly mothers, can have on literacy in children's lives (Ballara, 1992; Heath 1983; Lutrell, 1996; Taylor & Dorsey- Gaines, 1988). Home literacy use in relation to parental duties was well represented in the reported practices of the eight women who are mothers.

Limitations

Nine white working class women volunteered to participate in the study and freely described their individual literacy practices. While a range of practices and functions emerged from the data, a replication study using a larger sample size may find more themes, or serve to confirm this researcher's findings. A second limitation occurred in the range of ages of the women participating. All of the women ranged in age from 30-60. While three women between the ages of 18-29 were contacted and initially agreed to participate, their participation failed to come to fruition. Thus, the voices of this age group, whose needs may vary (i.e. less time on job, younger/no children/ spousal /significant other issues) are missing from this analysis.

Finally, the focus of this study was on literacy practice and not upon literacy skill. Again, this was intentional as was the small sample size, but an investigation into the literacy skills of the participants could provide information regarding their use/non use of literacy at home. Some assumptions regarding literacy skill can be assumed by virtue of the literacy tasks require for their jobs (i.e. the USPS requires passage of a demanding written timed test for

employment). The researcher purposely avoided any testing of the participants or discussion of skill as to keep the focus of the study on practice.

Recommendations for further study

Based in part upon the limitations other study, several avenues for future study arise. First, replicating the study with a larger participant number could serve to prove or disprove as well as to develop new themes. Second, a purposeful sampling of younger women (18-29) who were not included could serve to illuminate other issues.

Eight of the women involved were mothers and eight also were living with husbands or significant others. The effects of these two things as to time, commitment, and attitude could be important when researching the literacy practices of white working class women as a whole. Also, is it significant that the women who talked about reading with children, all talked about reading with their sons? I don't know and there is room for further investigation here.

Gina and Sherry have embraced literacy on their own and serve as models of high literacy practioners. In-depth case study research in this area may provide clarification as to how and why they became such without the sponsorship of others. As well, Cassie serves as an example of Luttrell's (1996, 1997) reported white working class women's identity development in terms of their husbands. Cassie, as well as allowing her husband to act as the guardian/transmitter of information through his reports of what was important in the newspaper, prefaced many of her answers with "my husband thinks..."(field Notes, September 26, 2003). When I asked her what she thought, she stated she

agreed with him on all counts. She, and others like her who defer literacy to authority figures are enticing subjects for further research.

Significance and conclusions

The areas of interest were literacy practices and functions, specifically as situated in the lives of white working class women. The researcher's positioning within this context led to the initiation of this study because, as a working class white woman, I was aware that of the range of practice within the population that was not reflected in the literacy literature. This small study was designed to provide a more in-depth look at a sample of population that represents a large portion of America, 55% according to Teixeira and Rogers (2000).

For educational purposes, the data reported by these white working class women serves several functions. First, the misconception that literacy is rarely practiced or valued by this specific subgroup of the American population is laid to rest, particularly by the words of Gina, Sherry, Jane and Sara. Literacy is practiced daily by these women, and all four served as sponsors of literacy for their children. Second, and more importantly, the negative effects upon literacy practice – both for themselves as children and as adults- resulting from an school based literacy emphasis that values practices such as writing to prompts and binary literary analysis over more personal writing and literature response should serve as a warning to educators world wide. This emphasis, still true today in an American educational system that values testing over individuality, serves not to increase literacy practice, but to decrease it. Without exception, each of the women reported these school literacy experiences negatively. The results clearly

show that these experiences did not serve to improve home literacy practice – it was the literacy sponsorship of that served to make these women literacy practitioners. In fact, these practices were more likely to lead to literacy non-use, or shutdown. This shutdown, then, caused some women not to practice literacy, and thus not to be role models for their children. If these same children are subjected to the same school based literacy practices, and respond in the way reported by all the women, they too will fail to practice literacy at home. With no role models, or sponsors, the cycle will continue. Thus, the task of educators is more than teaching the literacy skills necessary to write to prompts or pass tests. Rather, if the cycle of non-literacy practice in the home is to be broken, educators need to focus on teaching how literacy can be utilized and enjoyed. Students who see real value in literacy practice outside of tests taking and essay writing will use literacy to enhance their lives.

A conclusion drawn from this study, that literacy functions as a tool for the working class white women participants, supports the work of Barton and Hamilton (1998) in England. These women used literacy in the same ways they used other tools, cell phones, for example, to get things done. Each chose the medium that best served her needs to organize her life, gain information, communicate, or provide diversion. The types of literacy practices vary, the functions of the practices fulfill vary and the importance of literacy practice varies for each woman. For some women, literacy functioned daily; for others, it was rarely accessed because it wasn't deemed needed. This is important, though perhaps heretic, because it focuses on literacy as being a means to an end, and

not as end to itself. If literacy as a tool does not function, if its not worth the effort because needs are met in other ways, then people will leave it in the tool shed. For some literacy professionals this may come as a douse of cold water. Accepting the fact that that literacy for working class white women might not be viewed might not be the potent life changing experience full of wonder and power for everyone is a departure from the seminal precepts put forth by Freire (1997) and others (Fine & Weis, 1995; Finn, 1999; Weis, 1993), and squarely in line with the new literacies group who see literacy as a purposeful social practice imbued with culturally specific value (Barton, 1994; Barton & Hamilton, 1998, 2000; Gee, 1996; Maybin,2000, Street, 1995; Willinsky, 1990). The words of these women show that literacy is a tool they utilize as needed. It may be more necessary for some than for others but it certainly not valued as indispensable in everyone's life.

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Appendices

Appendix A Interview Guide

Demographic information

Date and place of birth?

Parents' education and occupation(s)?

Who lived in your house during your childhood?

What is your level of education?

What is your current occupation?

Are there any benefits associated with this job? Example; paid vacation, health insurance, paid sick leave.

What is your spouse/significant other education and occupation(s)?

Who currently lives in your household?

Class

When I use the term "social class", what comes to mind?

When I say "economic class"?

Does either of these terms bring up any memories or associations?

Do you believe you fall into a class category?

Why?

Literacy

What does the term "literacy" mean to you?

Current home uses of reading and writing (within the past year)

PUBLIC

Peers

Notes, letters, cards

Family

Children

Other family

Appendix A (Continued)

Organizations

- Church
- School
- Other i.e. clubs

Household uses

- Notes to self
- Shopping lists
- Sale papers/ads/catalogs

PRIVATE

Personal

- Reading books
- Reading magazines
- Reading newspapers
- Writing fiction/poetry
- Writing journal or diary
- Other writing – record-keeping/contests
- Self-improvement (formal or not)

Do these vary from past uses?

Value of literacy practices

Relative importance of literacy

- In general
- Personal

Motivation for use or non-use

- In general
- Personal

Consequences of use or non-use

Meanings of literacy practices

Do you have any specific childhood memories related to literacy use?

Tell me about a time you remember...

Appendix B

Adapted Listener's Guide

One approach of narrative analysis is the Listener's Guide developed by Brown and Gilligan to code their research with adolescent suburban girls. By the authors' definition, it has "...built in it, the space for a girl to speak in her own voice..."(1992, p.15). I have adapted it to apply to this study of the reported home literacy practices of white working class women as follows:

- ❖ Listen or read the transcript of each woman's interview four times.
- ❖ The first time I will attend to recurring words, metaphors, and images. During this first analysis, I, the researcher, am cautioned to reflect upon myself as a person of privilege and power and to maintain awareness of my thoughts and responses to the narrator and her story. Of particular importance here is my position as a white middle-class woman. My gender does not automatically make me an insider and power inequalities will still exist (DeVault, 1999)
- ❖ The second time, listen for the self – the voice of the other, the voice of the speaker. I must now attempt to know her on her own terms through her own voice, whether it is strong or weak, loud or soft. Her recitation of literacy practices may be straightforward, but their functions may not.
- ❖ On the occasion of the third and fourth listenings/readings, I must be mindful of the ways that she talks about the meanings of literacy. Here I will look for ways that she either digresses from or capitulates to cultural norms, in this instance, specifically as related to the literacy practices of reading and writing.

Appendix B (Continued)

The guide is designed to enable me to explore each explanation of literacy, its function and meaning, so that I may be able to begin to document the experience. I will then attempt to craft a profile (Seidman, 1998) as I look for emerging themes, similarities, and dis-similarities, in the reported home literacy practices of each white working class woman.

Appendix C

Can you spare one hour?

Female USF Graduate Student Looking for Women to Interview Regarding
Reading and Writing

I am beginning a research project into the kinds of reading and writing women do as part of their daily lives. I am interested in interviewing all women – regardless of whether they consider themselves to be good readers or writers and regardless of the amount of time they spend reading and writing. The purpose is to discover and document the reading and writing real women do every day.

If you are willing to help me with this project, please contact me at:

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974-1032

About the Author

Jody Ann Fernandez earned a Bachelor of Science in Education from The Ohio State University in Columbus, Ohio in 1982. She received a Master's degree in Reading Education from the University of South Florida in Tampa, Florida in 1997 and began her doctoral studies there in 1998.

Ms. Fernandez taught developmental reading and writing at Hillsborough Community College's Ybor and USF campuses from 1993–2002. While a teaching assistant at the University of South Florida, she taught courses in children's literature, reading assessment, and writing instruction as well as supervised interns in field placements. Additionally, she served as graduate assistant to the editors of *The Reading Teacher*, Priscilla Griffith and Marguerite Radincich.

As a graduate student, Ms. Fernandez presented her research at regional and national literacy education conferences, including the Eastern Educational Research Association, the American Educational Research Association, the National Reading Conference, the College Reading Association, and the International Reading Association.