THE NEW BRUNSWICK WOMEN’S INSTITUTE: EXPLORING DIVERSITY IN WOMEN’S LEARNING EXPERIENCES

By

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research was to explore the learning experiences of women from the New Brunswick Women’s Institute (NBWI) organization, to better understand if their learning is more complex than the harmonious and collaborative nature that is represented in the literature. Semi-structured face-to-face interviews were conducted on six NBWI members within a narrative inquiry methodological design. The findings were analyzed using discourse analysis from a feminist poststructuralist and Foucauldian lens. Four dominant discourses emerged as a result: cost-containing discourses, neoliberal discourses, resistances and contradictions to dominant discourses, and adult educative discourses. I explored how these discourses are politically and economically imbedded to produce and reproduce knowledge and conformity. Visible in the findings were practices of rival discourses that challenged and resisted the dominant practices that had once silenced and subjugated participants’ voices.
DEDICATION

This research is dedicated to my grandmother, to recognize her courageous decisions in life that led her to live authentically and independently, and to raise her children while working tirelessly to make ends meet. Thank you for always being there for your grandchildren and great grandchildren and for your willingness to pass down your stories and memories—we are grateful to you.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To the women who graciously agreed to take part in this research, thank you for sharing your lives and experiences with me, and for allowing me to take this journey alongside you. I appreciate the relationships we have built together and hope they are long lasting.

To my husband who supported my decision to embark in this research that lasted many years, thank you. Your constant cheering and pep talks have helped immensely.

To my thesis supervisor, Dr. Melissa White, I could not have done this research without your encouragement and guidance. Thank you for living by a truly genuine adult educative framework in guiding me from the side.
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### ABBREVIATIONS AND NOMENCLATURE

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<tr>
<td>ACWW</td>
<td>Associated Country Women of the World</td>
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<tr>
<td>FWIC</td>
<td>Federated Women’s Institutes of Canada</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*NBWI</td>
<td>New Brunswick Women’s Institute</td>
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<td>*WI</td>
<td>Women’s Institute</td>
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Throughout this research I interchangeably refer to the New Brunswick Women’s Institute as “NBWI”, “the Institute”, “Institute”, “the Women’s Institute”, and “the WI”. These abbreviations were commonly used by the women in this research and these terms are common abbreviations in the literature to describe the organization.
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

For 30 years since the publication of *Women’s Ways of Knowing* (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986), the dominant thinking on women’s learning has been characterized by the idea that women learn through connection with others, especially to those who share similar life experiences, and by engaging in inclusive and open dialogue. The word feminine carries with it a relational connotation (Leblanc, 1999), assuming that to be woman is to learn by openness, collaboration, and in harmony. Feminine creates a set of normative expectations for women, detaching them from having power or authority (Young, 2005). For adult educators who organize their learning environments around techniques believed to be preferred by women, they have reaffirmed the generalization that these learning practices are gender specific and preferred. Although feminist nonprofit groups are significant to the development of learning and employment opportunities for women (English, 2006), when the literature represents women’s organizations—and the learning that happens as a result of that organizing—as collaborative, inclusive, and free from conflict, it paints a picture of an unrealistic organization and neglects its complexity. Similarities exist amongst women’s organizations, especially since they are for women and run by women, but we must not assume that these organizations—and the women that make them up—operate on one commonality. Despite the significant efforts that were made by women in the previous waves of feminist movements, gender ideologies and expectations about what it means to be a girl persist (Leblanc, 1999). Even though almost 30 years have passed since *Women’s Ways of Knowing* (Belenky et al., 1986) was published, and the contribution to
the gender and learning literature has grown, little is understood about the complexities in women’s learning experiences.

**The Research Problem**

Previous research about women’s learning experiences implies that for women, knowledge, identity, and self-concept occur as a result of collaboration, through their strong ties to relationships (Carfagna, 1995; Jordan, Kaplan, Baker Miller, Stiver, & Surrey, 1991) and connection with others (Corey, 2005; Fiddler & Marienau, 1995). Moreover, women’s moral decision-making is influenced by cooperativeness, fairness (Lyons, 1987; Carfagna, 1995), nurturance, responsibility, and care (Gilligan, 1982). The literature overemphasizes the value of building relationships and becoming part of a community as a central tenet to women’s preferred style of learning. We must be careful to not generalize these ideals about women and their learning journeys, for women are exposed to a multitude of experiences that differ based on race, social class, sexual orientation, able-ness, and variations of feminism (English, 2005).

While the majority of the literature on women’s learning aligns strongly with a connected way of knowing, some researchers have questioned the homogeneity of women’s learning and the subsequent impact of these generalizations (English, 2004; English, 2005b; English 2006; Hayes & Flannery, 2000; Flannery & Hayes, 2001). Very few researchers recognize the existence of power dynamics operating within women’s groups, and rarely do they acknowledge that learning can be complicated, complex, and involve conflict (English, 2004). Silence is deservedly referenced throughout the literature as an indication of oppression (Belenky et al., 1986); yet in recent research the concept of silence in learning contexts is multilayered and carries attributes of contemplation (Brookfield, 2004) and solitude (Hayes & Flannery, 2000). Hayes and
Flannery (2000) suggest that educators need to avoid prescribing women’s learning by one way of knowing, and instead recognize that women can be multiple knowers at any given time. By reinforcing the stereotype that women’s learning is influenced by characteristics of relationality, and refusing to recognize the myriad of complexities that make up women’s lives, we run the risk of perpetuating assumptions about women. These assumptions have the potential to dissuade women from expressing who they really are, and inhibit their ability to value their self by conforming to a cultural definition of femininity.

There is a need for further exploration into the lives, experiences, and contributions that women make to adult education training programs in the nonprofit sector in Canada in order to recognize their outstanding work and influences (see Butterwick, 1998). A noticeable gap exists in the literature with regards to women’s learning in Canada and that of rural women’s learning experiences (English & Irving, 2007). Moreover, the lack of attention paid to women’s non-profit organizations “further marginalizes and essentializes the learning relationships of women who work and volunteer in them” (English, 2004, p. 136). New Brunswick is the second largest rural region in Canada (Industry Canada, 2001), and studying its voluntary sector has the potential to elicit rich insight into learning experiences in community-based organizations. These findings justify exploring women’s learning experiences further in New Brunswick’s voluntary sector.

**The Rationale for this Research**

By exploring the lived experiences of women in the non-profit sector using qualitative approaches, we can gain first-hand accounts from women about their learning
experiences. Adult educators can better understand the dynamics of these experiences in an effort to reconstruct learning environments, and learners have the potential to break away from socially prescribed expectations about their learning that shape their behaviours. If we shift our thinking to see that learning is diverse and influenced by several facets, we can begin to uncover the idea that women’s learning is more complex than the stereotypical connected and inclusive style that the literature so readily presents. Moreover, this shift in thinking may redefine what it means to learn relationally. This research can help in lifting socially accepted beliefs about women’s lives, therefore allowing women to openly express identities that do not conform to socially and culturally constructed definitions of femininity.

The Purpose of this Research

The purpose of this study is to explore the learning experiences of women in the non-profit sector who are not typically described as experiencing conflict or exercising resistance. Central to this study is to understand how women learn, to understand if there are differences in how they learn from what the literature describes, and to expand on what those differences look like. This research will study the New Brunswick Women’s Institute (NBWI), a non-profit organization committed to “informing and educating women about issues and events of concern to them and their communities” (New Brunswick Women’s Institute, 2013, para 3). While acknowledging that women and men can learn through connection and in relation to others, this research seeks to understand if there are other aspects to women’s learning that is largely absent from the literature, with the intention to complicate the literature and contradict the stereotypes about women’s
learning that is described too often as harmonious and free from conflict (English, 2006). The following section provides a historical overview of the Women’s Institute in Canada.

An Introduction to the Women’s Institute

The late 19th century in Canada marked the country’s post-confederation age with its provinces joining as a national entity in 1867. During the wake of Canada’s newly appointed national identity, and amid the rampant industrial capitalism sweeping the nation, Canada was recognized as a “fertile ground in which social movements were born in response to social and economic needs” (MacKeracher, 2009, p. 25). It was at this time that rural regions gained considerable momentum in forming unions and organizations to unify their agricultural priorities and enhance their farming profession in response to the Federal Government-driven agrarian reform movement that promoted the modernization and industrialization of the farming industry. The province of Ontario was of particular focus during this period for its economic potential of enhancing food production from the region’s favorable climate and fertile country-sides; even remarked as incomparable to the rest of the world (Kechnie, 2003).

Growing out of the government’s plan to revolutionize Ontario’s agricultural industry that would see to introducing scientific experiment to the profession, the Ontario Agricultural College (OAC) opened in 1874 to encourage farmers’ sons to learn new techniques that would enhance food production. Opposed by many Ontario farmers who relied on methods based on generational wisdom and folklore, they found refuge in the National Grange of the Order of Patrons of Husbandry organization to oppose the government’s country reform objectives. This group, along with several other farming collectives, served to protect the authenticity of Ontario’s agricultural industry, and
provided farmers with educative opportunities and a unified voice to challenge the government’s agrarian plans. Over the years these groups would eventually dissolve due to changing priorities, and the United Farmer’s Union of Ontario organization grew out of necessity to revive these lost organizations (Kechnie, 2003). During this period, despite efforts from administrators of the OAC, their founding years saw unsatisfactory enrolments. To improve participation, the college started the Farmer’s Institute to bring education to farmers themselves, a familiar concept to the unions and institutes that had formed 30 years prior. The stark difference however from the farmers’ alliances that developed decades prior was that the Farmer’s Institute was a government extension, organized by the state. The Farmer’s Institute’s mandate was to operate in every district in Ontario to “carry on educational work among the farmers in the area” (Kechnie, 2003, p. 21). In return for the small membership fee, farmers received a government stipend. The state had therefore begun to infuse their ideals into an exposed and vulnerable industry.

The Rise of the Women’s Institute

The late 19th century was also marked by the emergence of several women’s groups in Canada such as the YWCA, suffrage collectives, the Woman's Christian Temperance Union, and the Women’s Institute. The influence of these groups was instrumental to Canada’s social movement origins, “Women epitomize the revolutionary nature of this period” (Welton, 2013, p. 24). The men of the farmer’s movement were foregrounded in history texts, and gained the majority of attention and support from public sponsors; but the women, who were integral to the success of these movements, were often rescinded to the background. This was the time when we see the emergence of
women redefining themselves (Welton, 2013). For the Women’s Institutes, their formation began when Erland Lee, the secretary of the Farmer’s Institute, attended a speaking engagement at the Ontario Agriculture College where Adelaide Hoodless presented about the necessity to educate women on advancing their expertise in the field of domestic sciences (MacKeracher, 2009). She believed that if men had the support and mechanisms to run a farm, women should be afforded the same skills and education for household management. Lee invited Hoodless to speak to the women in his community about household management and on a February evening in 1897, Hoodless spoke to a room full of 100 (and one man, Erland Lee) about the importance of domestic labor as a science (Stella, 2016). One week later, the first Women’s Institute formed in the town of Stoney Creek.

The WI organized as a means to educate rural women about safe food practices—a cause very close to Hoodless whose infant son died from contaminated milk years previously. Within a few short years of the first WI to form in Stoney Creek, the Institutes eventually extended throughout Canada into the provinces, and in 1919 the Federated Women’s Institute of Canada (FWIC) organized into a federal body to unify the provincial WIs. In 1933 the FWIC became part of the global women’s organization the Associated Country Women of the World (Darroch-Lozpwski, Crawford, & Ponti-Sgargi, 1996; Thompson, 1987). Today, the WI is recognized for its enriching adult education practices and its contributions to non-formal community-based learning (Ambrose, 2000).

The WI initially organized to educate rural women in the domestic sciences and to offer a social gathering for women who would often find themselves isolated on farms,
miles from other women. Their objectives expanded when the organization grew to include more social welfare causes. Their agenda spanned public administration training, educating families on safe food practices, community study clubs, and women’s rights activism (Stella, 2016). The Institute had a long-standing connection to their provincial governments and federally with the Government of Canada in passing forward resolutions, also known as proposals, for changes to policy and the development of new standards impacting communities. A non-inclusive list of the causes they led or supported alongside other groups include the Marital Property Act, blue-box recycling programs, nature conservancy, child welfare programs, citizenship, and raising the standard for women to become equitable members of society. It is highly unlikely to find a history book that defines the WI activism as involving protests or knocking on parliament’s door to resolve issues. Their activism focuses on partnerships and alliances with other women’s groups, and in many cases, with the provincial and federal governments in Canada to enact change.

**WI Structure**

The WI currently operates as a non-sectarian, non-partisan, and non-racial organization that organizes in accordance to a handbook of constitutions and by-laws. In preparing women for public administration, WI leaders equip members with the ability to “operate their local institute as a democratic (and bureaucratic) organization” (Perriton, 2009, p. 86). The Institute has learned to negotiate this binary of operating bureaucratically and remaining authentic to their purpose of promoting women, families, and communities (Stella, 2016). This balancing act is also prevalent in other feminist voluntary sector organizations in Atlantic Canada (see English, 2004). The Institute’s
organizational structure enabled them to operate at a level of equal stature to the state, and in turn, has helped them gain credibility and acknowledgement from their governments.

In Canada, the WI is organized at the local level in branches and these branches make up districts in each province. Together, the branches and districts comprise the provincial body. The provincial body consists of a board of appointed Institute members with a president, vice president, president-elect, directors, treasurers, and administrative staff. The districts and branches are structured similarly to the board, with the exception that select members represent convener roles. At branch and district meetings, conveners are responsible to present on topics that are related to their respective convener industries such as topics about citizenship, education, agriculture, and international affairs.

The Rationale for Studying the Women’s Institute

From a personal stance, my experiences and reflection of growing up in rural New Brunswick and the events that took place in my academic life are a strong motivation for this research (Bickman & Rog, 1998). Many women in my family were, and continue to be, members of the New Brunswick Women’s Institute. My great grandmother received a life member certificate in 1980, my grandmother and several great aunts are members, and my mother was a member of a 4-H club. I have an innate curiosity about their involvement with these women’s organizations. I was also encouraged to study the WI from one particular class I took during my university studies. Elizabeth Burge, a professor who was teaching a course on the history and philosophy of adult education, asked the class if they knew any members of a Women’s Institute. I spoke up about my family’s history, but could recall very little about the Institute: they started a community
garden; they make quilts and volunteer. What did I not know about my grandmother and the community where I was raised? Why was the WI a topic in my adult education program? My exploration of these questions led me to study the NBWI further.

The women of Canada’s adult education sector do not stop with the contributions from the Women’s Institute. Exploring the YWCA or the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union would prove valuable in keeping these histories alive; for the purposes of this research and given my rather recent learning about the WI’s connection to my family history, this research holds an exploratory purpose for me in connecting my family and its feminist roots. From an academic standpoint, this research is part of a growing body of research taking place in Atlantic Canada amongst adult educators like Elizabeth Burge, Leona English, Melissa White, and Amanda Benjamin. The motivation behind choosing to study the New Brunswick Women’s Institute is to contribute to this growing field of research and document the continued legacy of the pillars of Canada’s social movement heritage.
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature in the field of adult learning is influenced by several theoretical concepts amongst a myriad of paradigms. Selecting the bodies of literature to include in this chapter that captures the history and essence of women’s learning was an onerous responsibility and undertaking. I divided the literature for this research into three sections:

Section I: the scientific movement and its influence on human development

Section II: rooting adult education to its social movement heritage

Section III: a contemporary lens on gender and learning

Because the purpose of this research is to study women’s learning experiences in an effort to expand knowledge about the complexity that make up their lives, I begin with section one which explores the scientific movement and how it has contributed to shaping an understanding of women as deficient and inferior to men. These theories were selected because they highlight how gender is shaped by historical impressions through the lens of men that perpetuated the oppression of women. These works include psychosexual, social learning, and cognitive development theories that influenced the literature on gender development and learning. Within this section, I also discuss the field of feminist psychology that contributed to the study of women’s learning and development from the perspectives of women themselves. These bodies of feminist literature place emphasis on gender and power, and in doing so, have challenged psychology’s patriarchal stances over how women learn. From there, I move to section two that roots the practice of adult education to its Canadian social movement heritage. In this section I explore the historical social movements that laid the foundation for adult education in Canada, and
how these movements had an influence on the Women’s Institutes in Canada during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. I then explore contemporary social movement literature in Canada and its impact on our knowledge about the women who participate in these movements. I end the chapter with section three which highlights the bodies of literature that support a radical shift to the study of women’s learning. These findings draw attention to how women’s experiences and their knowledge construction are interdisciplinary shaped by social, culture, and economic factors.

Section I: The Scientific Movement and its Influence on Human Development

The field of psychology is identified in the literature as influencing the study of adult learning in North America up until the 1970s (see Cranton, 2013). I echo Cranton’s (2013) dissatisfaction with the literature overemphasizing psychology’s influence in that “it seemed that the social movements of the early 20th century were forgotten” (p. 95). What psychology has contributed to, however, is impressing upon women scientifically derived theories of development and learning. Because my research explores the diverse experiences that influence women’s learning contexts, I included the literature from prominent psychological theorists from the 20th century that informed a patriarchal opinion about women’s development, and subsequently, their learning. As a result, these theories form the historical basis of reifying a simplistic generalization about women’s learning journeys.

Throughout the 20th century, the dominant theories of human development were understood through the lens of psychologists. For the purposes of selecting the bodies of psychology literature that influenced an understanding of gender development, I selected the perspectives of Freud, Horney, Chodorow, Bandura, Kohlberg, Gilligan, Clinchy,
Goldberger, and Tarule. According to these varying theoretical stances, human development is espoused to occur either within a social, cognitive, physiological, or relational—and sometimes integrated—framework, and this development is facilitated by either stages, processing systems, activities, the environment, desires, behaviours, or our central nervous system. It was once believed that adults stop learning once they reach adulthood, and as a result, much of the early psychological theories of human development were predominantly focused on children. These bodies of research rarely studied girls or women, and when inferences were drawn about them, it was an offshoot from studying boys and men.

**Psychoanalysis**

The scientific origins of human development that had substantial influence over knowledge about girls and women’s behaviours, motives, and personality was Freud’s psychoanalytical theory. Although we now have more knowledge about women’s development due to the expanding nature of the field of gender and feminist studies, dominant thinking about women within the field of psychology in the 20th century resided in psychoanalytic theory (Lips, 2006). There have been deviations and expansions since Freud’s assertions, but his theory was the most controversial of all gender positions within psychology (Lips, 2006). Freud’s theory dates back to the 1880s and continued to be well recognized through to the mid-20th century. His theory is grounded in a model of personality development and an approach to psychotherapy (Corey, 2005). Freudian psychoanalytic theory espouses that humans are not entirely rational in their behaviours and that behaviour is regulated by “unconscious instinctual motives involving sex and aggression, and that human personality has its origins in early
childhood relations between children and their parents” (Lips, 2006, p. 125). Through psychosexual development, which occurs in the first six years of life, children move through three stages called oral, anal, and phallic, and it is at the phallic stage in which gender develops. During the first year of life, infants satisfy their need for pleasure by sucking at their mother’s breast. Without satisfying this basic need, Freud asserted that infants will develop greediness, or later in life, mistrust and rejection. The anal stage, which occurs between the ages of one to three years of life, is the foundation for personality development. This stage is marked by toilet training, and if too much fixation occurs, children can grow up learning to be rigid. During the phallic stage, which occurs between the ages of three to six, children develop a desire for the parent of the opposite sex. The female phallic stage is called the electra complex and for males, the oedipus complex. Accordingly, boys strive for their mother’s love and girls long for their father’s love and approval (Corey, 2005). In the phallic stage, which is the critical period for gender development, young girls learn to be inferior to males, and learn that their lack of a penis presumes a deficiency in their development (Lips, 2006). Girl’s inferiority stems from blaming the mother, who also lacks male anatomy, and this results in extreme jealousy towards boys. For boys, they go through a similar realization towards their father, but in resolving their rivalry with their fathers, they learn to identify with and incorporate features of their father’s personality (Lips, 2006). For decades, Freudian ideology claimed that children’s development is somewhat irrational, and when they develop into adulthood their personality is directly linked to the stages of development that occurred during their infant and adolescent years. Freud’s assertions prescribed women with an innate inferiority complex towards men, an outright disturbing deduction.
Although the theory is dated, it helps highlight how psychoanalysis has contributed to scientifically validating male dominance over women.

Karen Horney, who was an early supporter of psychoanalytic theory in the 1920s, had challenged Freud’s exaggerated assertions that girls were envious of the male anatomy and that women were inferior to men; she instead posited that boys were envious of the female reproductive anatomy, and that a girl’s psychosexual development centred on her own anatomy, not on males’. Her position opened the conversation about gender development and the concept of gynocentricity on the female womb. She recognized that in some cultures, penis envy was evident among girls, but in other countries, it was quite the opposite (Allen, 2006). Horney’s work centred on how cultural differences impact personality development, and through socialization, children’s actions are directly related to their socialization with their parents, friends, siblings, and teachers.

In the 1970s Nancy Chodorow expanded on Horney’s theoretical concepts about personality development. Chodorow claimed that girls relate more to their mother than boys do because of the early mother-child emotional closeness that forms in childhood (Lips, 2006). Chodorow believed that because women are the primary caregivers of young children, girls form a bond to their mothers and tend to identify more with their mother than their father. In adulthood, women try to continue this emotional and relational bond with their male significant other in an attempt to recreate the bond they once had with their mother. Chodorow suggested that women’s attempt to relate emotionally to their male partners proves emotionally frustrating because men have not experienced the same emotional tie to their mother as women have (Lips, 2006). Men in
turn, separate themselves from identifying with this female emotional bond and, in doing so, devalue femininity as inferior to their masculinity.

Horney and Chodorow’s theories highlight the impact that childhood experiences have on shaping personality in adulthood. Their research significantly contributes to the psychology of women by criticizing Freud’s overvalue on the male anatomy and his assertions that girls and women are deficient. Horney and Chodorow challenged the “masculine point of view [that] pervades science and most of European and European-American thought” (Allen, 2006, p. 111).

Social Learning

The 1960s saw the emergence of social learning theories with research from Albert Bandura who implied that learning was influenced by “modeling, imitation, and reinforcement” (Lips, 2006, p. 135). His theory is comprehensive and spans several frames of thought including cognitive, behavioural, and environmental ideas. Bandura believed that people learn because “they are thoughtful about the consequences of their responses” (Allen, 2006, p. 304). He theorized that behaviour is influenced by a person’s environment from modelling and imitation, and that people learn by observing others’ behaviour. Moreover, people place considerable value on the concept of awareness, and in doing so are capable of forethought and the anticipation of outcomes (Allen, 2006). Through observation, people are influenced by the behaviours and consequences (good or bad) from the actions of others.

As it related to gender identity development, Bandura theorized (Lips, 2006) that children internalize cultural messages about gender-acceptable behaviour and as a result, their gender identity is learned from social and environmental influences. Children learn
about their role in society and the rules governing gender by watching parents, authority figures, and media images, all of which imitate the cultural messages that shape children’s gender identity. For example, parents reinforce gender roles by complimenting girls on their pretty looks and boys on their athleticism. Social learning theory influenced the knowledge construction of gender development that is rooted in social, cultural, behavioural, and environmental expectations about what it means to be a girl.

**Cognitive Development**

Cognitive psychologist Lawrence Kohlburg moved away from theorizing about social influences on learning, and instead proposed that children learn about their gender identity through stages of intellectual development (Lips, 2006). Gender labelling is Kohlburg’s first stage of development, occurring between ages three and four. In this first stage, children learn that they are either a male or female, and they can easily identify girls from boys; beyond that, they know very little about the complexities of gender. Gender stability is the second stage of development for children around age five. They learn that their gender is constant over time. Cognitively they are developed enough to realize that their gender remains the same in adulthood as it was in childhood. Gender consistency is presented as the last stage of children’s gender development and occurs around the age of six or seven when children learn that gender does not change across situations. Kohlburg (Lips, 2006) writes “Gender is fixed and cannot be changed simply by adopting a different hairstyle, dress, or name” (p. 138). Kohlburg implied that children learn appropriate behaviours that are acceptable for their gender, such as girls proactively seek to embrace femininity, and that they tend to identify more strongly with their mother than with their father. This framework holds considerable emphasis on categorizing
gender into two simplified groups, and instilling pressures for women to fit into a pre-assigned category. Cognitive development theory has laid the groundwork on gender stereotyping that perpetuated a narrow understanding about how women should conform to unchanging and simplified gender norms.

**Feminist Psychology**

The 1980s were pivotal for providing an alternative understanding about women’s development within the field of psychology that was long saturated with patriarchal ideologies about human development. Feminist psychology advanced the study of women as a field of research about women that was led by women. These feminist theories placed “gender and power at the core of the therapeutic process” (Corey, 2005, p. 341). The period of time between the 1960s and the 1980s was considered the second-wave of feminism that “advocated activism as a goal but have differing views on the sources of oppression” (Lips, 2006, p. 344). Leading up to the 1980s, Carol Gilligan was instrumental in this second-wave for redefining the framework for understanding women’s moral decision-making. She daringly challenged the work of male theorists for their limiting views on women that failed to represent the complexity in their experiences.

…the men whose theories have largely informed this understanding of development have all been plagued by the same problem, the problem of women, whose sexuality remains more diffuse, whose perception of self is so much more tenaciously embedded in relationships with others and whose moral dilemmas hold them in a mode of judgment that is insistently contextual. The solution has
been to consider women as either deviant or deficient in their development.

(Gilligan, 1985, p. 481)

In Gilligan’s book *In a Different Voice—Women’s Conceptions of Self and Morality*, she reports on interviews with women about moral decisions that centred on whether or not to abort their pregnancy. Their decisions were influenced by the people in their lives, be it parents or significant others. If a woman was encouraged to abort her pregnancy because her parent’s expected her to complete university, for example, she felt a responsibility to satisfy the needs of her parents. Therefore, her decisions were influenced by the relationships in her life and her ability to preserve those connections. Gilligan (1985) found that it was morally problematic for women to weigh their own voice against these competing interests in deciding whether or not to terminate their pregnancy. The women in her study favored pleasing everyone else’s needs over their own in order to preserve relationships.

Gilligan’s (1985) findings challenged dominant thinking that women’s moral reasoning was inferior to men’s objective decision making, and reported that gender differences can exist with regard to morality. As an example, women can be more caring and responsible in relationships than men, and that women’s moral decision-making was based on preserving relationships versus men who act based on a right of justice (Gilligan, 1982).

Four years later saw a ground-breaking study from Belenky et al. (1986) in their book *Women’s Ways of Knowing*. Their research is referenced frequently throughout the literature on gender development and learning. Although their findings have been critiqued, defended, and remarked, their work has laid the foundation for psychological
models of feminist pedagogies (Tisdell, 1998) and an understanding of how women come
to know and learn (Tisdell, 2000). When reading other publications on gender and
learning, it is rare for authors to not honor Belenky et al.’s (1986) contribution to feminist
studies (see Tisdell, 2000; English & Irving, 2007; Hayes & Flannery, 2000; Lips, 2006).
In their study, Belenky and her colleagues interviewed women in the United States from
various socioeconomic backgrounds to understand the ways in which they viewed their
reality and how they made sense of their world. Based on the findings, the authors
situated participants’ ways of knowing into five themes: silence, received, subjective,
procedural, and constructed. These forms of knowing are described as follows:

Silence, as a way of knowing, was evident in women who thought of themselves
as powerless from years of listening to others who made them feel less than. Silent
knowers are dependent on authorities whom they view as holding all of the power and
knowledge. They go through the world engaging in very little conversation, and because
of this, their sense of self is limited, often trapped in the confines of their oppressor.

Received knowers are those ascribed to learning by listening to the voices of
others to guide their decisions. They have a dualistic worldview in that answers are either
right or wrong. These knowers typically sit back and listen to conversations and debates,
and are easily influenced by others. They have little confidence to voice their own
opinions.

Subjective knowers are split into two forms of knowing: inner voice and the quest
for self. The former type of subjective knowers relies on their inner voice and intuition
for knowledge. They typically go through a transition in life where they had at one time
relied on the knowledge of others to guide their decisions. As a result of becoming a
parent, for example, these knowers become more independent and therefore start to make decisions that are based on first-hand knowledge. The latter type of subjective knowers, those who seek out self-discovery, rely on experience, intuition, and a connection with others as a way of knowing. “Subjectivist women value what they see and hear around them and begin to feel a need to understand the people with whom they live and who impinge on their lives” (Belenky et al., 1986, pp. 85-86). Many of the women who identified with this form of subjective knowing had travelled the world, were spiritually enlightened, and were described as risk-takers (Belenky et al., 1986).

*Procedural knowers* gain knowledge by retaining some trust in authority in guiding their choices and by relying on and trusting their own decisions. They place value on the learning experience and are invested in obtaining and communicating knowledge. Two forms of procedural knowers, identified by Belenky and her colleagues, are separate and connected. The separate knowers in the study were made up of elite, liberal arts students who learned to integrate critical thinking into their world. They were “tough minded” (Belenky et al., 1986, p. 104) and usually looked for loopholes in other’s opinions, and were overly critical of their own ideas and the ideas of others. Conversely, connected knowers use procedures to gain access to the knowledge of others. Central to their procedure is empathy. Connected knowers listen to the experiences of others and place themselves in the story to try and understand the other person’s ideas.

*Constructive knowers* recognize that “knowledge is constructed, and the knower is an intimate part of the known” (Belenky et al., 1986, p. 137). These knowers understand that truth and knowledge are contextual and that they have a role in constructing and redefining their knowledge. Constructivists aspire to improve the quality of life for
others and in doing so, “integrate feeling and care into their work” (Belenky et al., 1986, p. 152).

One of the prominent themes to emerge from Belenky at al.’s (1986) findings was the value and importance that women place on relationships, on listening to others, and that the “care and empowerment of others is central to their life’s work” (Belenky et al., 1986, p. 48). The findings highlight that in all forms of knowing, the personal experience that women associate with their learning process almost always took precedence over the effect that formal schooling had on their learning. Among the women interviewed, many learned best in situations that facilitated affectivity, relationship, and rationality (Tisdell, 2000). The emphasis on these points make it difficult to think of women’s learning as anything but the result of collaboration and connection. The authors received criticism for their generalized conclusion that connection, care, and empathy are more particularly relevant for women than men in gaining knowledge. Although the findings were influential for many, they are also criticized for failing to highlight “differences among the women, particularly around such structural issues as race and class” (Tisdell, 2000, p. 164).

Section II: Rooting Adult Education to its Social Movement Heritage

“Canada has one of the most illustrious, experimental, and innovative traditions of adult education in the world” (Welton, 2013, p. 19), and yet many Canadians know very little about the discipline (Nesbit, 2013). Perhaps the pervasive field of psychology overshadowed knowledge about human behaviour and left little space for alternative disciplines such as adult education to expand knowledge about the development and learning of adults. Most of the theories illustrated in the previous section are
predominantly concerned with the development of children. These psychological theories paid little regard to learning in adulthood (Kidd, 1959) and yet, all the while and decades prior, Canada was enriched with the teaching of and learning by adults (Nesbit, 2013). It was not until the 1950s that Roby Kidd put Canada’s adult education sector on the map as a professional discipline (Selman, 1987) within a larger framework that was long saturated by the applied sciences. Frontier College, the Antigonish Movement, and the Women’s Institute are but a few examples of the pillars of Canada’s social movement heritage that laid the groundwork for Kidd to professionalize the discipline some 50 years later. Kidd was instrumental in developing domestic and international programs for marginalized groups, and for connecting the practice and study of adult education to its social and political relevance (Cochrane, 1986). He was the first educator to teach in Canada’s first academic adult education course at the Ontario College of Education.

Adult education subsequently appeared as an academic program at several Canadian Universities. Thanks to Kidd’s efforts, the organizations, unions, and movements that laid the groundwork for Canada’s adult education foundations gained popularity, and their methods for delivering education to learners continue to influence current adult education environments.

**Social Movement Learning in Canada**

Canada plays an active role in the field of adult education and social movements (Clover, Butterwick, & Collins, 2016) and adult education practices are widespread and diverse (Nesbit, 2013). Canada’s adult education history dates back to the 1800s with influences from Great Britain and the United States for causes like the Mechanic’s Institute, the YWCA and YMCA, cooperative movement, and labour unions.
Social movements are described as “privileged locations for the creation of new knowledge” (Hall & Clover, 2005, p. 1). Learning that happens within social movements occur as a result of the people who are involved in the movement itself, and by people outside of the movement, directly and indirectly effected by the actions or existence of the social movement (Hall & Clover, 2005). In this section, I explore the social movements in Canada that “evolved as Canadian endeavors… [and that] are still part of the ethos of Canadian adult education” (MacKeracher, 2009, p. 26). These social movements form the historical context within which the Women’s Institute’s educational practices developed.

**Frontier College.** Frontier College started as a literacy and gospel based education program that would later become an official adult education institution, created by Reverend Alfred Fitzpatrick at the end of the 19th century. Fitzpatrick was from Nova Scotia, and his work brought him to Ontario to carry out his goal of providing equal education to the frontier men who were often “uneducated, illiterate, and often exploited by their employers” (Historica Canada, n.d.). In his educational pursuits, Fitzpatrick travelled to frontier job sites to educate loggers, railway builders, and miners to further his mission to bring education to those marginalized groups largely comprised of immigrant laborers (Walter, 2003). He set up an extension reading camp in Northern Ontario to provide workers with access to evening reading programs. Due to the growing necessity of these camps, Fitzpatrick expanded these reading clubs to forty locations in only five years. University students were hired in the summers to run the camps in the evening, and in the day, would work alongside learners in the field. Although spreading the social gospel was one of the fundamental objectives of the program, when educators
began working alongside learners they discovered that the evening programs needed tailoring to better meet the needs of laborers, and to be less about teaching the social gospel.

The Women’s Institute grew up at the same time as Frontier College in the late 19th and through the 20th centuries. They shared a common goal of educating marginalized groups to strengthen living conditions. These movements encouraged collective social action within rural communities to enhance their standard of living. This idea of “knowledge for the people” (Welton, 2013, p. 24) was a common thread of both Frontier College and the Women’s Institutes.

The Antigonish Movement. Beginning in the 1930s, the Antigonish Movement was established by the extension department of St. Francis Xavier University, in the town of Antigonish, Nova Scotia, as a means to improve the social, economic, educational, and religious conditions of the community. After many years of unstable fishing and mining industries and deteriorating communities, Father Moses Coady and Father Jimmy Tompkins led the movement among many support personnel and extension staff. The movement was a success and “People wedded to the philosophy of the Antigonish Movement believed that through education and economic cooperation, people could enhance their own lives and create a more humane society” (Alexander, 1997, p. 78). A trademark of the movement was its study clubs that intended to “mobilize people for study and action” (Alexander, 1997, pp. 79-80). These study clubs were held in people’s homes where they promoted literacy development and the art of debating, among other things. Coady encouraged the community to step outside of their current situations and formulate strategies for change. Through these clubs, the concept of education for social
change flourished in Nova Scotia, resulting in the development of various forms of cooperatives that encouraged the community to invest locally and act collectively. Credit unions developed to finance the various cooperatives, the concept of cooperative housing developed to resolve housing problems, and women’s programs emerged that encouraged women to become active in community affairs. The movement eventually expanded to the rest of Atlantic Canada’s provinces, throughout North America, and internationally.

There are synergies between how the Women’s Institute organized their educational activities and those organized by the educators in the Antigonish Movement. The WI’s implemented study clubs in members’ homes and deservedly are recognized as a “rural women’s university” (MacKeracher, 2009, p. 28) that brought education to the people.

**The Women’s Institute.** What we know about the Women’s Institute is primarily absorbed by a history dedicated to celebrating the origins of the organization, their accomplishments, and their influences in education sectors around the world. We are grateful to the various historians and authors who documented the beginnings of the WI and their accomplishments throughout their first centennial. Currently, throughout the Women’s Institutes in Canada there are concerns with rising attrition rates, the need to identify innovative ways to attract new members, and an overall outlook that promotes “a future of rapid change and futuristic ideas” (Ambrose, 2000, p. 155). It is evident that the organization faces pressures to keep pace with the changing voluntary sector that is marked by fierce competition for resources and funding. Members echo these concerns at Institute meetings and conventions. The literature within the last decade does not, however, highlight these growing concerns.
There is a great deal of literature that documents the social movement learning and adult educative practices of the Women’s Institute during their founding years in the late 19th and throughout the 20th centuries (see MacKeracher, 2009; Ambrose, 2000; Thompson, 1987; Grey Otty, 1961; Perriton, 2009; Darroch-Lozowski et al., 1996; Varpalotai, 2000). The literature tends to overemphasize the WI’s educational activities as based on traditional gender-specific practices of domestic management, quilting, and volunteering. While the Women’s Institute’s traditional activities of volunteerism is central to the organization, and deservedly have not gone unnoticed, the women that make up the organization should also be recognized more accurately for their emancipatory education in influencing change that impact rural communities, the status of women, and human rights. In recent literature, the WI is not usually recognized for their social activism or educational activities (Langley, 2012), and unsurprisingly, is criticized for reinforcing gender roles (Varpalotai, 2000). But the Institute has come a long way from their founding years’ objectives, as is seen by their successful advocacy for a number of causes that include the passing of the Auxiliary Classes Act for students with physical and mental learning disabilities to enable them to attend formal schooling; lobbying for a Marital Property Act so that women had equal access to family assets; gaining public support for issues related to the destruction of habitats for wildlife at the local, provincial, and national levels; and supporting the development of a university in the Niagara region which would materialize in 1964 as Brock University.

**A Contemporary Look at Women as Social Change Agents in Atlantic Canada**

Canada’s social movements laid the foundation for the nation’s adult education heritage and women played a vital to these movements, yet the literature is criticized for
neglecting to recognize women’s contributions in social movements (see Stall & Stoecker, 1997; English, 2014; Burge, 2011; Butterwick & Elfert, 2012). There is some recognition of the contributions of women as change agents in Atlantic Canada as evidenced by Burge’s (2011) research that profiled 27 Atlantic Canadian elder social activists across Newfoundland and Labrador, Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island, and New Brunswick. She explored how these women learn about social change and their role in making that change happen. Her findings suggest that these women’s social activism were shaped by their personal and social relationships, through solidarity, collaboration, like-mindedness, and empowerment. Burge provides rich accounts of the contributions made by Atlantic Canadian women to their local, national, and international communities. Their profiles place value on the work that women do in the private and public spheres and explore how these women understand their learning experiences in contributing to change. This body of work enriches the literature on women social activists and values their diverse contributions to their communities.

Butterwick and Elfert (2012) analyzed Burge’s (2011) findings on women social activists in Atlantic Canada. Their research found that many of the women who were interviewed by Burge had situated their learning within their community activism work. Through community activism, some of the women learned to develop a better outlook on their self, they developed the skills needed to evaluate and critique their worldview and the skills for social and political action (Butterwick & Elfert, 2012). Other interviewees learned to speak up about issues that were considered private; issues related to the homeplace, neighborhood, and local community. One woman found the courage to break her silence and speak in a public forum. Speaking out in public can be an extremely
challenging situation for many, and even more uncomfortable for women. In North America, women are taught to be docile and unobtrusive; they are expected to keep the peace by staying silent, and to suppress attributes like assertiveness and spontaneity (Leblanc, 1999). I would take this analysis a step further and suggest that by speaking out and making issues public, these women exercised resistance to the voices that tried to silence them. Burge’s (2011) research, and the analysis from Butterwick and Elfert (2012) have contributed to the field of social activism in Atlantic Canada by honoring these women and valuing their experiences for what they are: powerful, relational, complex, social, and authentic.

Section III: Contemporary Lens on Gender and Learning

Since my research will explore the learning experiences of members from the New Brunswick Women’s Institute to expand the literature that tends to simplify and essentialize women’s learning journeys, this section will explore the contemporary literature that offers a much needed alternative to the traditional understanding of the ways in which women learn. Although the research on gender and learning has expanded over the course of 30 years, the literature on the diversity in women’s learning experiences remains scant (Hayes & Flannery, 2000). Since the 1980s, the literature on gender and learning states that women prefer to learn through connectedness and cooperation (Meinhard & foster, 2003), that women exercise an inclusive leadership style (Meinhard & Foster, 2003; Rosener, 1990), and that the value of relationships is integral to women’s learning (Belenky et al., 1986; Gilligan, 1982). From an early age, women are taught to please others, to be good girls, to not offend, and to maintain order (Davies, 2006). Belenky et al. (1986) are criticized for overemphasizing the relational nature of
women’s learning (English, 2005b), and although 30 years have passed since the publication of their research, these generalizations about women are still prevalent in the literature. Some researchers have begun to speak openly about the complexities of women’s lives that influence their learning experiences. English (2006) found that feminist non-profit organizations experience complex learning contexts, and Bracken (2007) reports that tension and conflict do exist. The trailblazing work from respected adult educators like Shauna Butterwick, Jan Selman, Elizabeth Tisdell, and Leona English highlight the complexities within feminist organizations. Their research expands the mainstream literature about feminist spaces as inclusive and free from conflict, and provides the field with an alternative inquiry of “reimagining feminist organizing” (Butterwick & Selman, 2003, p. 9).

Butterwick and Selman’s (2003) research about women’s learning in a feminist theatrical project in Vancouver, Canada complicates the literature on women’s relational ways of knowing by recognizing that women are diverse and can learn to work through conflict using non-traditional methods. Their findings reveal that feminist coalitions are significant sites for learning where women of various backgrounds, sexuality, race, and privileges are brought together to “work on issues of inequality and social justice” (p. 8). As a result, the elements of learning within this project were participatory, collaborative, and conflictual. Theatre was a tool used to challenge the discursive practices of traditional adult education learning sites that value sharing ideas and verbally expressing feelings. Instead, women performed in front of an audience to enable them to take risks, identify a new way of working with conflict, and “enrich and complicate our understanding of deep listening” (p. 8). Butterwick and Selman (2003) see past the
traditional approach of breaking silences to instead offer new techniques in the form of
theatre to *express* silences through performance, reflection, and the art of listening.

English (2004) explored whether or not women’s social action organizations in
Atlantic Canada had feminine signifiers, those identified as relational, connected, and
caring attributes, and if these organizations employed stereotypical feminine learning and
if they employed collectivist strategies. Interestingly, the findings show that these
organizations displayed hierarchal structures with directors, board members, and
volunteers all of whom had different decision making responsibilities. It might seem
unlikely that feminism and bureaucracy can coexist, but English (2004) suggests that
women can learn to negotiate this dichotomy. She further claims that the women she
interviewed were influenced by contradictory concepts of relational and bureaucratic
ways. The findings suggest that these feminist organizations did not follow the
stereotypical caring mandate that is expected from the literature on women’s learning,
and that complexity and conflict do exist.

As I learn about the complexities within feminist organizations and in women’s
learning experiences (English, 2006; Hayes & Flannery, 2000; Butterwick & Selman,
2003) I cannot help but think that the learning that took place within and as a result of the
Women’s Institute was more complex than the mainstream literature would lead us to
believe. If we are to understand diversity in women’s learning experiences, we need to
approach research with greater nuance than the generalized idea that connected knowing
is central to women. Hayes (2000) suggests that we need to question old beliefs and
assumptions that have tried to define knowledge about women’s learning, and instead
build new knowledge about their experiences. I accept the challenge from Brock, Raby,
and Thomas (2012) to “unpack the centre” (p. 4), a centre that is comprised of social standards that sustain power relations. Women’s learning that is defined by connection and collaboration is the centre that requires unpacking. We need to understand the layers that contribute to generalizing women’s learning in order to understand its complexity and recognize the barriers that limit our understanding of what it means to learn as women.
CHAPTER THREE: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

My research is framed by feminist poststructuralist theory and it makes connections with Foucauldian poststructuralism’s concept of power, knowledge, and discourse as it relates to learning. The theoretical underpinning of poststructuralism informs various frameworks, pedagogies, and research to highlight the “nexus of knowledge, discourse, and power” (English, 2006, p. 87). What feminism adds to poststructuralism is the interruption of any preconceived beliefs about gender, the idea that experience is impacted by gender relations, and the assumption that learners do not come to learning environments with equal standing to their peers, and for this reason, they encompass diverse life experiences. Feminist poststructuralists are concerned with the ways in which women are positioned in society and how they are governed by and resist different forms of power (Weedon, 1987). Feminist research underpins the work of feminist poststructuralism in that it places gender “as a basic organizing principle that profoundly shapes/mediates the concrete conditions of our lives” (Lather, 1992, p. 91). Feminist research studies the intersecting impact that gender, class, race, and sexual orientation have in constructing women’s lives. Moreover, feminist research is concerned with the “politics of knowing and being known” (Lather, 1992, p. 91). Drawing on feminist scholarship, I recognize that differences exist such as race, class, sexuality, and age, making it difficult and exclusionary to assume that mutuality in women’s learning is absolute. Gender is a constantly changing construction (Hayes & Flannery, 2000) that is culturally and socially imbedded, and influenced by interactions at the institutional and private levels. Gender is the central point of study in this research, as women’s learning
experiences were considered within a wider framework of their gendered social influences.

In understanding the differences that make up women’s learning experiences, framing my research in feminist poststructuralism will expose power relations and oppressions “associated with gender, race, class, able-bodied-ness, and sexual orientation” (Barrett, 2005, p. 89). Feminist poststructuralism exposes the practices that sustain assumptions and beliefs of oppressed groups and works to highlight theses injustices in order to create new knowledge and realities. Feminist poststructuralist research does not attempt to produce better knowledge rather it attempts to produce different knowledge (Barrett, 2005). Feminist poststructuralists are guided by four tenets in their research and pedagogy. The first is that they build on and critique structural theories in an attempt to “argue for the significance of gender with other structural systems of privilege and oppression such as race, class, and sexual orientation” (Tisdell, 1998). By building on and critiquing structural theories, we can better understand how women’s identity is shaped by the systems of oppression that have impressed upon us beliefs about women. The second tenet is that feminist poststructuralists disrupt the notion of truth. The concept of truth is a Foucauldian poststructuralism term described as “each society has its regime of truth, its ‘general politics’ of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true” (Foucault, 1980, p. 133). I describe Foucauldian poststructuralism in detail later in this chapter. Feminist poststructuralism is further guided by a third tenet that views identity as constantly shifting. When women, “examine the impact of social systems of privilege and oppression on their own identity, including their beliefs and values, the ‘discourse’ is
disrupted, thus shifting their identity” (Tisdell, 1998, para 11). The fourth tenet that guides feminist poststructuralist research and pedagogy is to deconstruct dominant discourses that typically carry assumptions about the people or contents of discussion (Tisdell, 1998). In doing so, feminist poststructuralists challenge the very category woman and feminism and “work to keep that category unstable and undefined” (St. Pierre & Pillow, 2000, p. 7). Although feminist poststructuralism is criticized for deconstructing the very category woman that so many feminists have worked tirelessly to construct an identity around, feminist poststructuralists seek to interrupt the assumptions and beliefs that define women, and instead offer alternatives that more accurately describe the realities of their lives (Tisdell, 1998). In my research I seek to interrupt the assumptions about women’s learning that are shaped by the mainstream literature that describes women’s learning as relational and inclusive and neglects to recognize its complexity. By interrupting the assumptions about women’s learning experiences we can highlight the complexities that make up women’s lives to expand our knowledge about women.

Feminist poststructuralists reflect on their own experience to initiate inquiry and, in this process, our private world is made public exposing us to an area of ordinary life that many researchers fail to explore (Steinberg, 2012). In reflecting on the experiences that shaped my feminist worldview, I realized that university enabled me to explore life through a critical lens. I paid little regard to the people and events taking place outside of my heteronormative circle until I began taking courses on feminism that I expanded my worldview. I often find myself trying to pinpoint instances in my past when I become aware of my positionality. My earliest memory was in grade four in the late 1990s when I overheard my 10-year-old friend questioning our teacher about why the girls in our class
were prohibited from competing in the 800 metre track and field race. The boys could compete in that race but the girls, for whatever reason, were not allowed. That was my first conscious encounter with sexism and the first time I understood that differences existed between how girls and boys are privileged. As a naïve, young adult in university, I became aware of the expectations of my gender and the lack of boundaries afforded to women and their bodies. I was an easy target for my statistics professor who inappropriately held my hand in his office during an extra-help session. I learned to normalize the situation and sweep it under the rug as though it never happened. My decision to suppress this event is embedded in cultural and social expectations about how women should behave. For women, we are “socialized to be ‘nice,’ to be ‘good,’ and to attend to other people’s needs” (Tisdell, 2000, p. 160). But my socialization to be nice and good prevented me from finding my voice to challenge a man of privilege.

Gendered beliefs and expectations for women create barriers that restrict their ability to openly and freely express themselves, and restrict their ability to challenge relations of power that sustain assumptions and beliefs about how women should behave. Feminist poststructuralists attend to examining “how social systems of privilege and oppression have affected their own identity, including their beliefs and values, their understanding and thus their identity begins to change” (Tisdell, 2000, p. 171). Feminist poststructuralism encourages the use of personal stories to facilitate women’s development and to highlight how gender, race, class, and sexual orientation are socialized and reinforced through dominant systems of power. By exploring the stories from women in the New Brunswick Women’s Institute, I intended to understand how their experiences were shaped by dominant systems of power. I turn now to Foucauldian
poststructuralism to highlight how knowledge, discourse, and power relate to influencing women’s learning experiences.

**Foucauldian Poststructuralism**

My research is also informed by Michel Foucault’s concepts of discourse, knowledge, and power. A goal of Foucauldian poststructuralism is to challenge universal truths to try and uncover what history has suppressed, covered, and disregarded. By studying discourses, we can uncover how they shape our social reality, our experiences, and our identity (Phillips & Hardy, 2002). Discourse creates the world in which we live. People learn through a combination of social interactions including their upbringing, the institutions in their lives, and from everyday learned experiences. People learn the rules that govern their behavior and this shapes their reality. Through discourse we learn not only about the content of discussion, but also about who gets to speak, who holds the power, and what information is conveyed to what audience (Whisnant, n.d.). Discourses usually reveal “patterns of power and authority in a society” (Brock et al., 2012, p. 46).

One of Foucault’s main explorations was the study of power and its relation to knowledge. To Foucault, power is “an always shifting confluence of manifold capillary streams, too dispersed and fluid to locate in individual or collective hands” (Popkewitz & Brennan, 1998, p. 318). For Foucault, power is not passed down in modern cities from an authoritative to a subordinate class, nor is it only used as a repressive agent; instead, power is learned and exercised in and amongst social relationships. Each person has the willingness to exercise power with an intent and purpose of creating an outcome of desire. Power does not find itself localized in the state, but “outside, below and alongside the State apparatuses, on a much more minute and everyday level” (Foucault, 1980, p.
60). Power is a source of strength that produces intended outcomes such as producing new knowledge or modifying the actions of others (Foucault, 1980). Power is exercised because it has a purpose to influence change and determine which knowledges become truths.

In order to understand how power inserts itself into everyday relationships, we must explore the technologies of power (Foucault, 1983). Technologies of power are the practices of power or the mechanisms in which power is exercised. They are the tactics and strategies used to initiate some form of change. A technology of power is evident in non-profit organizations that rely heavily on government funding. Directors face tensions and pressures to work overtime to overcome the fiscal instabilities and the lack of resources. This lack of funding can create friction within the organization and have the effect of pressuring members to work long days. As English (2006) reports from her research, directors of feminist organizations exercised power over staff members in the form of guilt to work extra hours because of the lack of public funding. Alternatively, the use of learning circles which are common practices in adult education environments is another example of a technology of power that exposes how much (or little) knowledge a learner has on a given topic. The circle can create apprehension for those who are intimidated to participate in a closed group, or for those who may have little information to provide on the topic. Learning circles are a form of disciplinary power that makes learners feel as though they are being evaluated by their peers (English, 2006; Brookfield, 2001). The circle that serves as a technology of power facilitates the ability for power to operate within the circle by providing the opportunity for group members to evaluate those who are presumed loafers or lacking knowledge.
Just as individuals learn to exercise power for the purpose of desire, people learn to resist the exercise of power and formulate their own exercise of power in the process. With discourses shaping our reality, people have the power to resist dominant discourse and challenge socially constructed truths, thus developing new rival discourses. Foucault viewed resistance as the most appropriate entry point for understanding how and where power exists (Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1983). Power is not a tangible object, nor something that can be easily discovered. We have to look for resistance to find power. A common form of resistance that might be surprising to some is silence. But according to the literature, silence is most often associated with repression. Belenky et al. (1986) wrote about how victimized women learned to be voiceless and felt worthless. They suggest silent learners need help to find a voice. MacKeracher’s (2004) reflection of the work done by Belenky et al. (1986) recognizes that for some learners, silence is used selectively and deliberately as a mechanism to respond to authorities. In this way, women choose to silence themselves when they feel depressed and threatened, not suppressed (MacKeracher, 2004). English (2004) found that in many feminist nonprofit organizations, silence is not only a form of resistance but an exercise of power in resisting dominant discourses.

Because the literature has minimal information on women’s learning in the nonprofit sector or on ways in which women’s learning can be influenced by working through conflict and discord, the feminist poststructuralist perspective is beneficial in challenging universal truths that women learn best by collaboration and inclusive dialogue. Feminist poststructuralism grounds my research framework in concepts of
gender, power, knowledge, and discourse to help me understand the complexities that inform women’s learning experiences.
CHAPTER FOUR: METHODOLOGY

The intent of this study is to explore the complexities of women’s learning experiences to complicate what the literature says about women’s learning as inclusive and free from conflict. It is important to enrich the field with new positions of inquiry to expand our understanding of what it means to learn relationally. Although the literature is expansive on the Women’s Institute in Canada, there is limited research on the learning that occurs within this organization, and outside, as a result of the group’s contribution to their communities. I do not wish to contradict or criticize the findings of Belenky et al. (1986), but rather to show that although almost 30 years have passed since *Women’s Ways of Knowing* (Belenky et al., 1986) was published, the literature is limited in capturing the complexity in women’s learning experiences with few exceptions such as English (2004; 2005b), Hayes and Flannery (2000), Bracken (2007), Butterwick and Selman (2003) and Butterwick and Elfert (2012). My research intends to add further insight into the learning experiences of women who make up the New Brunswick Women’s Institute, which played an integral role to the history of adult education in Canada. The following research question will guide this study:

Do women’s learning experiences accurately reflect the literature’s account of how women learn?

Therefore, because I am seeking to gain a thorough understanding of current accounts of women’s learning experiences from New Brunswick Women’s Institute members, a qualitative research methodology is the best approach to answer the research question. Qualitative inquiry facilitates how meanings are formed and helps to discover, rather than test variables (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). A qualitative study is appropriate because it
allows for curiosity and discovery rather than the rigid and statistical implications of quantitative approaches (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The research question used in this study determines that qualitative methodologies are most appropriate because of their discovery nature.

**Narrative Inquiry Methodology**

In my search to explore if women’s learning experiences are more complex than how the literature tends to overemphasize their relational and inclusive nature, I turned to the methodological strengths of narrative inquiry to guide this research. A definition of narrative inquiry from Connelly and Clandinin (2006) is as follows:

Humans, individually and socially, lead storied lives. People shape their daily lives by stories of who they and others are and as they interpret their past in terms of these stories. Story, in the current idiom, is a portal through which a person enters the world and by which their experience of the world is interpreted and made personally meaningful. Looked at this way narrative is the phenomenon studied in inquiry. Narrative inquiry, the study of experience as story, then, is first and foremost a way of thinking about experience. Narrative inquiry as a methodology entails a view of the phenomenon. To use narrative inquiry methodology is to adopt a particular narrative view of experience as phenomenon under study. (p. 477)

Stories fill our lives with meaning from the moment the experience first happens to reflecting back on the event and retelling it when there is an audience. By engaging in the storying with participants and co-constructing research texts together, narrative inquiry becomes a relational practice. During research, narrative inquirers tune into what
Connelly and Clandinin (2006) term the three-dimensional space of narrative inquiry that comprises three *commonplaces*: temporality, sociality, and place. It is critical that inquirers explore these commonplaces in order to attend to the “social, cultural and institutional narratives” (Clandinin & Huber, 2010, p. 444) in which the inquiry is embedded. The three commonplaces are described as follows:

**Temporality:** The first dimension that inquirers attend to is the temporality of the experience. Inquirers acknowledge that the events and people under study have a past, present, and future. Clandinin and Huber (2010) suggest that our experience is in transit, recomposed and revisited as time goes on and as new experiences shape our lives. It is imperative that researchers explore the impact of the past, present, and future of events, experiences of participants, and people under study.

**Sociality:** The second dimension that narrative inquirers attend to is the sociality of the experience, which is marked by the social conditions that surround participants’ and the inquirer’s experience. Inquirers also attend to the personal feelings, hopes, desires, and surrounding influences of that experience. Furthermore, “These social conditions are understood, in part, in terms of cultural, social, institutional and linguistic narratives” (Clandinin & Huber, 2010, p. 439).

**Place:** The third dimension of narrative inquiry is awareness of the place in which the experience is embedded and the impact of that location on participants’ lives. Place played an integral role in this research. It was threaded throughout all of the participants’ stories and in many instances, the places that contextualized the inquiry with participants and myself were the same places that impacted an earlier period in participants’ lives. For example, many of the women who participated in this research had gained invaluable life
skills from growing up in rural New Brunswick. Their experiences of living on farms or
growing their own food, for example, shaped their beliefs and values. Incredibly, the
places where we conducted the interviews for this research were, in some instances, the
same location or not far from where participants were raised.

The relational nature of this research provided me the opportunity to immerse
myself into the three commonplaces that contextualized the inquiry in order to access the
complexity of participants’ experiences (Clandinin & Huber, 2010). Chapters five and six
provide detailed descriptions of the places I visited, the people who shared their stories
with me, and the settings in which the inquiry took place. In those detailed descriptions I
discuss the weather on the day of the inquiry including the temperature and the seasons.
All of these descriptors help to contextualize the narrative journey.

Rationale for Selecting Narrative Inquiry as a Methodology

The three-dimensional space is what separates narrative inquiry as a methodology
from other research frameworks (Clandinin, Pushor, & Murray Orr, 2007). Whereas
exploring one or a combination of the commonplaces may be common practice in other
research designs, the key difference for narrative research designs is that inquirers
constantly explore their research within the three commonplaces, never failing to attend
to all three in order to contextualize the inquiry. The rationale and justification for
choosing narrative inquiry as a methodology is guided by the principles of narrative
research that connect the researcher and participants to relationally immerse into the
inquiry, and by attending to the three commonplaces that shape our lives and experiences.
Therefore, I did not choose to design my study based on an ethnographic, grounded
theory, or phenomenological methodology. Ethnographic designed studies explore the
ways in which meaning is culturally constructed by a culture-sharing group; a group that embodies the same cultural norms. Ethnographic research intends to “develop a general portrait about a group” (Creswell, 2005, p. 435) and it is assumed that the group studied has shared patterns of thinking and behaving (Creswell, 2005). The purpose of my research is to understand how women learn, and to understand if there are differences in how they learn—not to understand if the Women’s Institute learns homogenously. Therefore, an ethnographic designed methodology is not appropriate for this research. Alternatively, grounded theory is concerned with extrapolating themes and codes from collected data and categorizing these codes to eventually arrive at new theory. Grounded theory is not particularly relevant for my research given that feminist poststructuralists seek to interrupt categories and any preconceived understanding about the contents and the people of that category (e.g. women) in an attempt to disrupt the notion of truth. I also did not wish to generate a theory about women’s learning and risk generalising and simplifying their learning journeys further. Finally, phenomenology as a research design is primarily concerned with studying one phenomenon and participants’ experience with that phenomenon. For this research, studying one element of women’s learning would work against and contradict the purpose of this research that of embracing multiplicity, diversity, and heterogeneity in understanding the dynamics of women’s learning.

As this research was designed to relationally explore the lives of Women’s Institute members, narrative inquiry was the most appropriate research design because it created an environment in which collaboration and relationships were infused to create a caring community where the researcher and participants could share stories and engage in the inquiry together. This relational feature of narrative inquiry fostered an environment
in which empowerment was promoted (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Narrative inquiry is
designed to bring readers and the researcher out of her or his comfort zone and explore
experiences that are not readily documented (Ellis & Bouchner, 2003). These narrative
principles guided my research, the selection of the research design, and influenced the
storying nature of finding some of the participants via word of mouth. The narrative
principles influenced how I composed the narrative accounts, how I selected the themes
in the findings chapter, and overall this research design shaped the relational nature of co-
constructing the interim research texts with participants.

Participants

Gaining access to and building trust with the New Brunswick Women’s Institute
(NBWI) took years to develop, and would not have happened without the crucial role that
family played. My great-grandmother was a lifetime member of the NBWI, and my
grandmother and my great aunt are current members. When I originally took an interest
in exploring the NBWI, my grandmother invited me to attend Institute events at the
branch, district, and provincial levels. This participation all happened before I formally
engaged in the research, years prior, in fact. My grandmother encouraged me to attend
events and doing so provided me an inside look at the Institute for about one year before I
officially started this research. My name had made its way around the NBWI, and I had
found myself invited to district conventions and branch meetings to discuss my interests
in studying the organization. When it was time to formally embark on the research, I had
a rather seamless entry to the group. Negotiating entry with participants is integral to
narrative inquiry and is “a negotiation of a shared narrative unity” (Connelly &
Clandinin, 1990, p. 3). I believe that I helped build trust with members by showing them
my sincere interest in studying the NBWI by attending various events and conventions before this research formally materialized. My hope is that participants genuinely believed that this research was a shared narrative unity in which their experiences were accurately expressed in a safe and collaborative space.

**Relationships and Conversational Spaces**

I interviewed six participants for this study who are members of the NBWI. Their age ranged from 57 to 89 years. The majority of the members that I spoke with had known each other for a lifetime; some of the women I interviewed were siblings, others were long-time friends, and two of the women were members of my family. I met the members, who were of no relation to my family, by attending NBWI conventions when I was either a guest or a guest speaker. The interviews took place over two years, and I met with each participant twice, in person. Meeting with participants on multiple occasions fits with the relational and collaborative nature of narrative inquiry research.

I originally planned to speak with 10 Institute members, those with at least 30 years of consecutive membership. Speaking with 10 members was intended to narrow the sample size to a manageable workload given there were 709 NBWI members in the province at the time of the research. As time progressed and as deadlines pressed against the realities of life, I made the decision to complete the research with six interviewees. In looking back at the experiences shared, I realize that six narrative accounts would actually lead to a more intimate experience for people reading the results of this research. In addition, as common themes emerged from the narrative accounts and as the interviews progressed, it became apparent that I needed to also include members who were newer to the organization as they might offer new insights to the concerns that the
original interviewees had voiced regarding the future of the Institute. I then changed the participant sample to include members with less than 30 years of membership, and I kept that range quite open.

The sites for this research took place in NBWI members’ homes, at their summer dwellings, their offices, and at cafes. I met with members at locations of their choosing which offered convenience to interviewees and fit with the literature on women’s learning in that researchers are encouraged to study women in settings outside formal education environments (Hayes & Flannery, 2000). The NBWI’s educational practices commonly occur informally outside of cities. Conducting this research in rural New Brunswick provided the social context for the inquiry. Choosing an urban location for the sites of the interview would have potentially caused interruptions in participants’ daily lives and may have unnecessarily extended the time to conclude this research.

**Sampling**

I sampled participants in the Eastern region of the Province. The towns where each member lived were located within one and a half hour driving distance from my home, and this helped with minimizing the costs and time of the study. In selecting the first cohort of four participants, those women who had at least 30 years of NBWI membership, I employed a purposive sampling technique. Purposive sampling is a technique to “obtain a sample of people who meet some predetermined criteria” (Cozby, 2007, p. 142). Purposive sampling enabled me to selectively choose the participants who I believed could offer insight that was particular to this research.

As noted above, when I completed the first four interviews I made the decision to include newer members to the research. The second cohort of participants consisted of
two additional members who were newer to the NBWI. The obvious technique to finding
the second cohort of two participants was through referrals; the original four participants
had often suggested and referred names of members for me to speak with, and this made
the selection rather simple.

**Limitations**

This research was not intended to speak for or represent a larger population of
women; it was meant to understand the nuances in learning experiences of members from
the NBWI against the backdrop of the literature on gender and learning. I am cognizant
of my position in society as a white, middle-class, young woman with access to the
resources to carry out this research. I was supported by an accredited and reputable
academic institution, and I had the means to gain immediate entry into the NBWI. My
position in society privileged this research, yet limited its ability to speak to ethnic and
cultural narratives that are representative of non-white minority women who are a
silenced and marginalized group (Hooks, 1984). Contextually, out of New Brunswick’s
2006 population of 719,350 people, 13,345 are visible minorities (Statistics Canada,
2009). The Women’s Institute makes up roughly 700 of New Brunswick’s population and
six of those members participated in this research. The women I interviewed were visibly
white and representative of various socio-economic backgrounds.

Two of the participants I interviewed were members of my family and three
others were in close relationship to my family through friendships and connections in the
community. Although this element added significant attributes to the study, it may have
limited the depth of experience that participants were willing to detail with me, for
various reasons. It is possible that these participants did not feel comfortable sharing
intimate experiences with me, or detailing private life events that may have influenced their learning.

The research was carried out relationally with participants through a narrative methodology, and, in doing so, the researcher and participants co-created and negotiated the narrative accounts that serve as the thematic findings in this study. The analysis however, was my independent interpretation. This independent interpretation exposes a reality that may differ from that of participants.

**Ethics**

In February 2014 the University of New Brunswick's Research Ethics Board agreed that the proposal for this research was compliant with the Tri-Council Policy Statement, 2nd edition and that there was minimal risk to participants. This research took over two years to complete, and although the ethics was approved before the research began, I made sure to attend to the ethics throughout the research (Clandinin et al., 2010). Ethics played an important role even past the completion of the data collection because of the bonds that formed with participants. I never imagined the friendships that would develop during the course of the study and after the research completed. Because these relationships extended past the course of the research, I needed to continue attending to the confidentiality and privacy of, and ethical implications for, participants.

The six women who agreed to take part in this research either read the informed consent themselves or requested that I read it aloud during our first meeting. The informed consent (see Appendix A) detailed the purpose of the research, the history of the literature on women's learning, the details of their participation in the research, how the data would be collected and confidentially stored, and that their involvement was
voluntary which meant that they could withdraw at any point during the research. Furthermore, I explained my level of commitment to ensure participants’ strict anonymity and that they had the opportunity to provide a pseudonym of their choice. Only the researcher would know the identity of participants.

Audio recordings of the interviews, and the hardcopy transcripts, were stored in a filing cabinet in a locked office. The digital copies of the transcribed interviews, and images were stored on a portable USB drive that was also stored in the filing cabinet in the locked office. As a backup to the USB drive, the digital copies were uploaded to DropBox.com, an online file storing and sharing system. DropBox protects the privacy of files by storing "file data using 256-bit AES encryption and use an SSL/TLS secure tunnel to transfer files between you and us" (Dropbox.com, 2016). The signed copies of the informed consent, which revealed participants’ identity, were also stored in the filing cabinet of the locked office.

Data Collection

The process of data collection for this research was divided into two stages. The first stage was the collection of data via interviews, and these comprised the field texts. The second stage of data collection involved developing the narrative accounts with each participant, and these comprised the interim research text. These narrative accounts were derived from the interviews and co-constructed with each participant. Using interviews to collect data proved a fruitful and collaborative experience. It helped build trust between the participants and myself, and opened up a vulnerability to exposing our lives and experiences that, at times, became emotional and liberating. For the second stage of data collection, each participant co-created her interim research text with me in the form of a
composed narrative account. Interim research texts are considered to be fluid in that they are open for the duration of the research to allow for participants and the researcher to make an unlimited amount of iterations. As the inquiry builds, so too do the narrative accounts. The women who participated in this research worked alongside me to co-compose their stories into the narrative accounts and this activity was the crucial moment when I realized the relational nature of narrative inquiry. Both detailed data collection methods are described in the next section.

**Step I: Interviews—Developing Field Texts**

The first step in the data collection was conducting the interviews. This method of data collection took the form of narrative, face-to-face, semi-structured interviews that comprised the field texts for this research. With written consent from participants the interviews were audio recorded. The interviews were designed for participants to reflect on pivotal events, learnings, and insight over their history with the NBWI as a way to understand how their learning has been influenced and shaped. The purpose of using interviews as a data collection strategy was to gather insight into participants’ experiences—something that cannot be easily observed or replicated from anyone other than members themselves (Merriam & Caffarella, 1991). In the interviews, participants often took me back to their early memories of their upbringing and their lives outside of the Institute that added context and depth to understanding their lives.

When I developed the original proposal to frame this research, I read various textbooks that offered different data collection strategies and various interviewing techniques. It was not until I imbedded myself into the research itself and experienced the nuances of interviewing participants that I opened myself to listen rather than conform to
a script. Subsequently, I learned to let the narrative journey guide me alongside participants. I had five questions planned for the interviews (see Appendix B) but I seldom referred to them as the conversations progressed. This approach offered depth and character to the narrative inquiry thereby allowing me to break down any interviewer walls that I may have subconsciously created, and the inquiry then became an enlightening experience. Directly after the interviews, I sought permission to take pictures of the landscape surrounding participants’ homes, and I immediately made notes about the weather, temperature, scents, season, time of day, and anything that would help frame the aesthetic of the inquiry.

The interview lengths varied. I met with each member twice, in-person. The interviews lasted between one and three hours. During follow-up meetings, the participants and I composed their individual narrative accounts together into interim research texts. In some cases, it took almost one year to meet participants a second time to compose the narrative account because of my schedule and work priorities. In other instances, the second meeting happened within weeks or months from the first interview.

**Step II: Composing the Narrative Accounts—Developing Interim Research Texts**

The second step for collecting data was composing the narrative accounts. Before meeting with participants to co-construct the narrative accounts during our second meeting, I had to build a first draft. In doing so, I transcribed the initial interviews verbatim into one electronic document for each participant. I spent several hours transcribing each interview and making notes digitally in the margins. In most cases, the notes in the margins shaped the structure and the contents of the narrative accounts. I then included the experiences from the field texts (interviews) to help build a picture of
participant’s life and the influences that shaped them. In some cases, I moved sections of stories to create coherency and flow since the stories were often not told linearly.

When I met with participants for the second time to co-construct the narrative accounts, one participant read the first iteration of the narrative account orally, and in all other cases, participants preferred I read the draft for them. Participants took an active stance in developing their accounts by making corrections, and revising and sometimes retracting statements that helped add clarity and new insights to their narrative accounts. Narrative inquiry elicited a vulnerability in me that I never anticipated welcoming to the research. By co-constructing the narrative accounts with participants, they were able to read about my feelings and reactions to the initial interviews which helped to solidify the authenticity of this research.

The Thematic Findings

Developing the Research Text

Originally I planned to analyze the interview data and then select the themes as a result of the analysis. I realized that I did not give credence to the necessity of letting the themes unfold naturally, and instead thought that the practical first step was to analyze the original interviews and the themes would emerge after the analysis. I soon realized that in practice, that approach was artificial. When the narrative inquiry began to unfold relationally alongside participants, most of the themes presented themselves immediately without interrogation. It was at this point that I adjusted the plan for the analysis and let the inquiry speak for itself. As such, I chose to list the themes in their own section which now makes up the thematic findings chapter, and then I applied discourse analysis to those themes instead of the reverse.
By living the stories alongside participants, I was closely linked to the emotions behind the themes and, in turn, to the implications of misrepresenting the experiences shared and the risk of breaking the trust of members and the Women’s Institute organization as a whole. I had to recognize there would be elements of interpretation in the analysis, but I was determined to reduce the level of misrepresentation as much as possible. In doing so, I read and re-read the narrative accounts, sought further clarity from participants, and co-wrote the narrative accounts with participants.

**Selecting the Themes**

Choosing to highlight themes from the data was a difficult task. Some of the themes had emerged quite effortlessly while others were harder to uncover. Each time I read and re-read the narrative accounts and the original interviews, I jotted down keywords in the margins of the page and colour-coded sections to help organize my thoughts and better make connections to related themes in the narrative accounts (see Appendix C). In selecting the themes, I relied on metaphors as a literary form to make connections with experiences throughout participants’ stories, and these metaphors worked alternatively to highlight uniqueness amongst experiences. Using metaphors, visuals, poetry, photographs, and collages are a supported methodological practice in narrative research (Clandinin & Huber, 2010). The metaphor from Kathleen’s story of *living off the land* helped guide this research text and make connections to stories from other members. As I spoke with participants after learning about the land’s influence on Kathleen’s life, it became apparent that this theme was threaded in several of the stories and connections from other participants.
Attending to the narrative commonplaces (sociality, temporality, and place) was another technique that helped me select the themes of this research. I was able to think narratively about members’ learning experiences by attending to the social and personal conditions of members’ lives, and of the temporal unfolding of these events. In many cases I visited members in their homes and on the land where they grew up; these were the same places that, in some instances, influenced their identities and value systems many decades prior. “A narrative inquirer needs to think through the impact of each place on the experience” (Clandinin, Pushor, & Murray Orr, 2007, p. 23). By attending to the commonplaces I was better equipped to choose specific experiences to include in the themes that had an impact on the lives of the women of this research.

Paying attention to the audience for this research was something I carried with me every step of the research, and this influenced which themes I selected to include in the research text. Balancing the different audiences and selecting content to include in the final research text is central to narrative inquiry as a methodology (Clandinin, Pushor, & Murray Orr, 2007). I was cognizant that this research would need to speak to various readers including the academic community and the Women’s Institute. This balance left me with a multitude of feelings and apprehensions. The themes were read against the questions of “will this offend the member?” “Is this accurate?” “Will this damage the relationships that the Institute has built?” “Will this be relevant and impactful to adult educators?” The intention is that this research will speak to the Women’s Institute while also maintaining the research’s scholarly integrity.
Data Analysis

Drawing themes from the negotiated narrative accounts allowed me to maintain the integrity of the experiences shared and to honor the voices of the women who took part in this research. Since narrative inquiry, as a methodology, is the study of experience, I did not want the analysis to supersede the experiences from the narrative accounts. As a result, I applied discourse analysis to the themes (instead of to the narrative accounts) to explore the ways in which the themes helped answer the research question about women’s learning experiences. In the simplest form, the data from this research was collected via interview field texts. I then drafted interim research texts into the form of narrative accounts and worked together with each participant to arrive at a final version of our narrative account. From there, themes were drawn from the narrative accounts and that served as the thematic findings. For the analysis, the themes were then read with a feminist poststructuralist lens guided by Foucault’s (1980) precautionary guidelines for discourse analysis to help me explore the diversity of women’s learning experiences in the NBWI.

Discourse Analysis

Discourse analysis is the process of identifying the dominant discourses that people use to describe their experience in order to expose how their language is constructed through history and by their relation to one another (Raby, 2013). Using discourse analysis enables researchers to take a step back from studying the individual and structural authorities of power, and instead study the discourses and practices that produce knowledge and power relations in a given location (Eyre, 2000). This type of analysis enables researchers to reveal the process in which participants’ social reality is
created through language and practices (Phillips & Hardy, 2002) and to how gender power relations are reproduced, contested, and constituted (Weedon, 1987). Discourses create a version of events for people, and discourse analysis enables researchers to explore the historical, social, gendered, and political forces that construct those versions of events. This research explored the complexity of women’s learning experiences in order to expand the literature that simplifies how they learn.

Discourse analysis was applied to the themes that emerged from the narrative accounts, and the analysis was guided by Foucault’s (1980) methodological precautions for analysis. I chose Foucault’s precautionary guidelines for this analysis because it provided a guide to exploring how power produces meaning through the use of discourses. In order to attempt to understand the practices that sustain beliefs and assumptions about women’s lives, I need to study the relations of power to highlight the injustices affecting women, and work towards creating new knowledge about women. These new knowledges will shift and redefine as further inquiry develops in the field of feminism. Foucault (1980) asserted that analyzing power (an action that produces an intended effect) can uncover new information and knowledge about what history suppressed. This research seeks to challenge the truths that women’s non-profit organizations are made up exclusively of one voice, and to instead uncover the complexities that shape women’s learning experiences.

**Analytical Precautions**

Foucault identified five precautions that researchers should attend to when analyzing data, and these precautions guided my data analysis. The first is that power should not be studied in the locations where one would expect obvious authorities to
exert control over others. Foucault asserted (Brookfield, 2001) that sovereign power, described as power from above or power from an authority, is replaced in society by disciplinary power which is exercised between people. Accordingly, power is not held rather it is exercised and produces intended outcomes. Foucault believed that sovereign power was over studied and that researchers should instead analyze power in the local places that facilitate its mobility so that we can understand how it manifests in every day practices. For this research, I explored the discourses within the New Brunswick Women’s Institute to understand the unlikely practices that create knowledge and sustain power relations, and the resistances to these dominant discourses.

The second element of the analytical precautions is to shift thinking from concerning ourselves with who exercises power (i.e. the government) to how power is exercised (i.e. cutting funding in the voluntary sector). Technologies of power are particularly important at this stage of analysis. In order to understand how power relations are sustained, we turn to the practices that mobilize its existence. Disciplinary power was common throughout my research into the New Brunswick Women’s Institute, particularly in the form of self-surveillance. Self-surveillance is a way in which people self-monitor to try and not “step out of line” (Brookfield, 2001, p. 9). A common example of self-surveillance is illustrated by the panoptican (Foucault, 1980; Popkewitz & Brennan, 1998). The panoptican was a type of prison design created by Jeremy Bentham in the late 18th century. The concept developed as a tactic within the prison systems to make inmates feel as though they were always under surveillance, “to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power” (Foucault, 1977, p. 201). The structure of the prison was designed
so that while in their cells, prisoners could not see guards in the watchtower, yet the guards had full visibility into every cell. This constant monitoring created a self-disciplined inmate who was never entirely sure when a guard may catch him doing an unlawful or immoral act. The panoptican prison design is an example of a technology of power that promoted compliance through self-surveillance.

The third precautionary guideline for analysis is for researchers to view power as always in motion, never localized to one person. Foucault (1980) asserted that power was fluid and moved in a net-like fashion between people operating through technologies of power. The exercise of power is reinforced from below, by the people and actions that perpetuate its existence. Because power is mobile and operates at all levels I included participants who held provincial Institute leadership roles and those who did not. In doing so, I was able to explore all levels of the organization to understand the different power dynamics.

The fourth precautionary underpinning of this analysis is to expose the political and economic benefits that perpetuate power relations and that make them strategically embedded in practice. Foucault (1983) highlighted that the practices of power were well thought-out with intended objectives and outcomes. Using a modern example, the exercise of power is evident when employers procure mobile phones for their employees as part of a benefits or incentive plan. While it is an enticing offer, employees may find themselves responding to emails or taking phone calls afterhours. Although this gesture seems harmless, it creates expectations for employees to stay connected at all hours, and employees may find themselves uncompensated for these extra hours, overworked, and burnt out. For my research, I have identified the dominant discourses that operate within
the Women’s Institute and I have attempted to uncover the political and economic benefits of these discursive practices.

The fifth aspect of Foucault’s (1980) precautionary analysis is to connect how power produces knowledge through discourses that create rules that govern behavior. When discourses are reinforced, knowledge is created. In this research, I focused on how knowledge developed as a result of dominant discourses and the reinforcement of those discourses that influenced conformity for participants. I used a feminist poststructuralist lens to highlight the instability of language by revealing the relations of power that socially constructed meaning for participants, and in doing so, I was able to identify the dominant discourses for the analysis. My framework allowed me to critique the discourses of women’s learning as collaborative and women’s nonprofits as representative of one voice in order to show how our generalized understanding of women’s learning is actually created through discourses that are socially, culturally, and historically embedded.
CHAPTER FIVE: THE NARRATIVE ACCOUNTS

This chapter explores the narrative accounts of each of the six participants from the New Brunswick Women’s Institute. The stories reflect the influences that shaped their learning experiences. These narrative accounts were developed from the data in the interviews and then composed into individual narrative accounts where I attended to the three narrative inquiry commonplaces of temporality (the past, present, and future of events), sociality (the personal and social conditions of the inquiry), and place (the physical spaces of the inquiry). I drafted the first iteration of each narrative account and then each participant read, edited, and co-constructed her final version with me. These narrative accounts were open texts for participants to reframe and reshape their points, to add clarity, and to see the stories unfold. The narrative accounts honour the lives and experiences of the women from this study and embody the collective and relational journey of building trust and gaining entry into participants’ lives, and the relationships that formed between the inquirer and participants. This chapter presents the narrative accounts with each participant.

A Narrative Account of Rose

As the tail end of summer 2014 iridescently transitioned to autumn, I pulled up the drive to Rose’s home, which is graciously surrounded by acreage of green landscape overlooking one of New Brunswick’s major lakes. Rose’s infectious love for animals was immediately obvious by a retired black Stallion in a nearby pasture, a rambunctious husky-mix dog roaming the yard, and a couple of cats that were no less bothered by my arrival. Rose’s house reminds me of where I grew up as a child. It has that kind of charm you can envision from an 1849 two-story heritage home.
Standing still in time representing a staple of New Brunswick’s rural history, a small red barn sat silently on Rose’s property. Fading in colour and easy to overlook, the barn is a remarkable symbol of life in New Brunswick. The experience it holds and the knowledge it has gained from weathering decades of changing environmental conditions is exactly what I had been searching for in conducting this research.

Rose’s husband sat quietly reading in the study adjacent to the front entry where we conducted the first interview. We met again in September 2015 on another sunny and crisp late morning to compose the relational narrative account together. As on my last visit, Rose’s dog and cat greeted me outside. Unfortunately, the pasture was quieter this time. I had learned that Rose’s stallion had passed since my last visit. During my second visit in 2015, I knocked on the exterior door to Rose’s home and waited a couple of minutes, knocked a few more times to no avail. I could smell that something was cooking inside and so I knew Rose was not far. I could hear a faint thud outside at the rear of the house. To my absolute surprise—though, in looking back, I really should have known—there was Rose in the back of a pick-up truck, hauling chopped wood with her husband in preparation for winter. When she saw me appear around the corner, she scooted off the truck and into the house. She made us herbal tea. Rose begins with reading my first draft of our narrative journey together.
I have known Rose for as long as I can remember. She is a dear friend to my grandmother, and is an integral member of her community. Heading into the interview with Rose in 2014 elicited feelings of intimidation in me, in part due to my insecurities and fears that I might come across as a young opinionated know-it-all. I kept rehearsing the interviewing dos and don’ts that I learned from adult educators who influenced me in my studies; echoes of which were replaying in my head: do not come across as an expert; do not carry an arrogance; watch for the power dynamics that often creep in between the researcher and participant. As we eased into the interview, I set my anxieties aside.

Rose begins her story reminiscing about the women in her life who were members of the Institute. Her grandmother, mother, and aunt all encouraged her to join. Through her early adult years, although not an active member herself, she was an invited guest speaker on a couple of occasions. A few years after completing university Rose officially joined Institute in 1970. Despite our age differential, Rose and I share similarities in life: we grew up in rural New Brunswick; we did not take an interest in the Institute immediately in our young adult years; the Institute was infused in our lives through our families but we both went our individual paths on to university and living outside of our communities before we eventually arrived back and began to show a greater interest in the organization.

The first half of the interview felt routine with questions like ‘tell me about your involvement with Institute’. Rose respectfully answered my questions but it was not until we began discussing her involvement with the Advisory Council on the Status of Women that the conversation started to feel connected. Since the 1970s, the Advisory Council on the Status of Women was important to many New Brunswick women. It offered a
platform to raise the standards for women and to provide them with an unfiltered political voice. The Council operated for several decades until 2011 when, though opposed by many, the government ceased all funding to the council and the organization became an extension of the Government of New Brunswick’s Women’s Issues Branch. Rose sat on the committee for five years through the 1970s and 1980s, and was reappointed a decade later. I sat anxiously as I braced myself for this opportunity to speak to a mover and shaker who lobbyed for women’s rights some forty years ago. Rose recalls her participation with the Council:

(Rose): About 1977 the first Advisory Council on the Status of Women was created under the Government Richard Hatfield. The members of that were made up of representatives from various women’s organizations from across the province and I was nominated as the WI person to serve on that group. I am sure part of that was through people like “WI member” (removed name) who had been provincial president and “another WI member” (removed name). Women that I knew and who knew that I was an activist I guess (laughs) is one way to put it, and so that was very interesting and enormously enlightening experience.

It [the Advisory Council] did a lot of very useful things especially initially because there were so many things that weren’t in place and this is something that you lobbyed for that we worked very hard to make happen. I think later on they were still doing amazing work but it wasn’t so extremely obvious to the general public that this is what happened. I know we lobbyed for things like the Matrimonial Property Act, which now everybody knows is just the way it is. But in those days it was not, you know a husband could die and leave his house and farm
to his son like it used to be in the old wills, “my wife can have the use of the house
as long as she remains my widow”. You know, that’s an extreme example but
that’s how it was. It started changing nationally; the first cases were in
Saskatchewan and gradually all governments went along with it.

In 1977 there were no transition houses. Violence within a family was just not one
of the things that they talked about, absolutely you know very seldom did this
come...and police departments didn’t even keep statistics on how many domestic
violence cases they dealt with in a year...we lobbied for what wasn’t in place.

Thanks to the efforts of Rose and her colleagues at the Council, women’s matters were
made public and their work resulted in establishing laws and regulations to elevate
women’s issues at the political and social levels. I wanted to know about her activism
inside and outside of the Women’s Institute and what influenced that activism. Rose did
not remember the Institute taking an active lobbying in the past but rather remembers
working alongside other groups on issues that affected women. I asked Rose what it
meant to be an activist:

(Rose): Getting out and doing it...I don’t remember us [the Institute] lobbying in
any real active way. We would write letters to say we would like this or we don’t
like this...Certainly through Institute we did manage to deal with current
questions of various sorts. For instance, in the early 80s’ with the Charter of
Rights and Freedoms, provincially the Institute had a grant and I think we
reached virtually all of the WIs in the province for the opportunity to have
workshops about the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, [about] how important it
was. The way the clause in the Charters of Rights and Freedoms says it all
applies equally to everyone, which initially wasn’t a part of it [the Charter] until women’s groups lobbied and Women’s Institute and churches were involved. You know, certainly some other things that we dealt with, things like literacy and poverty in terms of elderly women living in poverty, ageism of course, things like that.

Speaking with Rose was inspirational. I was listening to her stories and reflecting on how she has impacted my generation. I realized that Rose had participated in shaping history that allow me the opportunity to speak so freely about feminist matters nearly forty years later. How do you show gratitude for this opportunity? It then dawned on me: with new modern waves of feminism, are we doing enough to respect the accomplishments from our sisters who have paved our way?

(Katie): I find it interesting that in my generation, we have those transition houses, they are in place and they exist. The Marital Property Act exists. Women’s right to vote is in place, it exists. But my fear is that we’re losing touch with how it all started, you know and as part of the reason for doing this thesis is because I think the WI was so influential in initiating and informing about a lot of these issues, and one trend that I’m seeing is issues that impacted women in the early part of the 20th or late 19th centuries are issues that are impacting women today. It’s closing [the gender gap], but I don’t think we’re there.

(Rose): no I don’t think so either but at the same time, when I was at university there were actually two women in the engineering faculty, students. Now there are probably ten or more actually. It’s still not equal but it’s ah…in business admin, there were two women and now it’s about half [of men].
I held onto Rose’s response. Was I too consumed with criticizing the wrongdoing that perpetually places women at a disadvantage to men that I had not paid enough respect to the accomplishments of our former sisters? Have I passed over them, albeit subconsciously, in my determination to bring down the practices that sustain gender inequalities in society? It finally made sense to me when Rose reflected on how she interpreted the gender gap closing, by making reference to an increase in the number of women in engineering today versus when she was in university. I interpreted this as Rose’s way of communicating that change is happening and it is okay to recognize the successes. How does Rose feel about new waves of feminists? Are we confrontational at times? Have we lost grip with our history? Have feminists like me lost focus on the results that women such as Rose made happen? In speaking with Rose again in 2015, she shed light on this perspective for me:

(Rose): It’s one thing to talk about these things but it’s a whole lot more effective if we do things to get out and do it. Like those early women who ran for political office, when you go back to the first senator and back to The Persons Case that women were declared persons, allowed to serve in the senate, all of this has sort of taken place in my lifetime and now, you’re not amazed when in the provincial election your candidate is female. It’s just the way it is in some places. There are still barriers, there are still things to overcome [such] that women candidates don’t find it nearly as easy as the guys to get funding for instance. But there are people out there doing it and making it happen. That’s one of the things that is making the condition of women so much better that women are just going out there and doing it; they get to become doctors, and dentists, and lawyers, and
political candidates, and electricians, and plumbers, and working construction. If you look back to the 1950s, I doubt if there was a single woman as a flag person on the highway. It wouldn’t have been believable. When you think of it as part of a continuum, it’s been huge change and it’s still going on.

(Katie): I think it [change for women] also has to do with the things you’ve helped with as well. With the Advisory Council, it has helped put our issues and our rights at the political level.

(Rose): Oh sure, and the Women’s Institute has been instrumental in doing that. One of the sad things about it for various reasons because of social change is it’s become less relevant to the lives of women. We haven’t talked about sexual stereotyping, and sexual harassment for quite a long time because for most of us [in the Women’s Institute], it’s just not relevant. If we had a lot of young members some of those things would get on our radar and we’d be talking about it. I preface these remarks that young women are simply doing instead of lobbying for change or trying to identify problems and trying to solve them, they’re just going ahead and by example are making a lot of things happen.

It is reassuring that a social activist like Rose recognizes the ways in which newer generations of feminists are creating change. Perhaps my insecurities about our age disparity had blurred my perception about how I thought Rose might view younger feminists. It was refreshing to have been able to clear up these uncertainties.

**Activism and the Women’s Institute**

I was sure that Rose’s involvement with the Institute played an integral role in her learning to become an activist. I was very wrong. My assumptions got away with me and
I generalized the effect that Institute has on its members by assuming it had been the same experience for all members equally. Rose did not attribute her learning to become an activist to the Institute. I asked Rose if the Institute helped her develop new learning:

(Rose): No, not in my case. In lots of other things certainly and this was probably indirectly of WI. In the Advisory Council, and one of the things I knew already is that men don’t necessarily know what they’re doing you know with the idea that in organizations, people defer to men because presumably they know what’s going on. Don’t be afraid to speak up and say to do it another way. Another direct result of the Advisory Council is you talk about these things about equality, that’s only the first step.

(Katie): I think I assumed…I did think that everybody [in Institute] is an activist and it’s not the case. Some people are there for the social and that’s ok.

(Rose): Oh yes it was intellectually stimulating as well, the programs and things you know. And that’s not to be ignored, and especially when it was so much a rural organization there wasn’t the same opportunities that people have nowadays. If you want to know about something you go on the internet to find out everything there is to know about the sex life of porcupines or whatever (a lot of laughing between the two of us). It [the Institute] doesn’t serve the purpose that it did then as a way to educate people about all kinds of things [such as] when the department of agriculture would send somebody to teach you about home canning or you know about nutrition. It served a very important purpose.

I wanted to know if it was farsighted to find a connection to the advocacy work of the Advisory Council with that the advocacy work of the Institute. I asked:
(Katie): Maybe your role in the Advisory Council and the Women’s Institute is your way of getting involved. Would you feedback to the WI if you were a Convener of Citizenship? Is that one way of getting involved?

(Rose): Oh yeah, of course, but you know we celebrated the appreciation of a woman in supreme court and a women justice in supreme court, the first women lieutenant governor in New Brunswick was big deal. You know, we did celebrate all of those things in Institute, but (long pause), but I can’t really say Institute provided support for me to get out and do those things...

One of the other things about Institute, it is a training ground for many women on how to run a meeting, how to be a secretary, how to be a treasurer and certainly many women this was their first venture into public speaking and activity in office. They would go on to do other things, having done that, and they had gained confidence.

This was an enlightening moment for me. Not all women join the Institute for social activism, and not all women learn to be an activist through the Institute. I have had to change my interpretation of the WI organization’s impact on its members to respecting the individualized experiences for each member.

The Future of the Women’s Institute “We are Rather Running out of Steam”

The future of the NBWI is the large pink elephant in the room. The options are grim; disbandment is a likely outcome and perhaps an end to a well-fought struggle that has stood the test of time in rural NB. Rose provided her thoughts about this topic:

(Rose): The average age of women in WI has increased dramatically and now not that I think we’re all satisfied with the way things are, but we lack some of the
energy needed to change the world. Probably because we’re, well, we simply
don’t have the energy to lobby you know, or need to get involved, need to get your
voice heard. I regret to say that we are rather running out of steam (laughs).
That’s unfortunate and I don’t know exactly how we’re going to evolve into
something else with more commitment.

The future of the NBWI is a sad truth, one that members are not shy to discuss. I wanted
to get Rose’s insight on the Institutes in Canada that are sustaining, and what her
perspective is for the future:

(Rose): I’ve struggled with that idea for quite some time. What can we do that is
going to be relevant and that is going to seem important? So many young women
now are in the workforce and many of them have little kids as well some of them
are single parents too but so much of their energy and um so much of their
thinking is about the work and how they are going to manage to do all of these
things that are on their plate. They just don’t have the time or the energy or the
resources, should we say, to get involved in a campaign.

Feminism and the Women’s Institute

I felt comfortable enough at the end of our meeting in 2015 to muster the courage
and ask Rose if she would describe herself as a feminist. She responded:

(Rose): Oh yeah.

Perhaps my reticence to not probe the notion that feminism is sometimes viewed as
contentious led me to skirt past Rose’s answer and move on (quickly!) to talk about the
Institute’s feminist leanings.

(Katie): And what about the Institute?
(Rose): (long pause) I think it’s stretching it to call it a feminist organization. Certainly there are elements of feminism but it wasn’t specifically a feminist organization. They were interested in their motto ‘For Home and Country’ and they were interested in things that were important to the development of the country, to the development of their community. Certainly some of the changes that were made seemed awfully important to them, but ah, I don’t know, I could probably count on my hands the Women’s Institute that I know provincially that I can say are feminists.

(Katie): Ok, well it’s a fair thing to say. When I speak at the university that’s where I draw a lot of attention and critique asking if they really are feminist.

(Rose): They were and I reckon still are rural women, and in some ways the fact that they were rural women meant that they were doing a lot of things that feminists approved of. You know, they kept the books for the farm, they interviewed workers that were going to come [to the community], they did actual farm work, you know, they helped run the ranch. They were full partners in the businesses that were going on and a lot it was farming. They were involved in the decision-making in a way that perhaps urban women were not. I think there was a much sharper divide in urban areas where father would go to work and mother stayed home to bake cookies. I do think that urban women whose husbands worked outside the home didn’t have the opportunities and were much less active than rural women. The very fact that Institute was based on rural women meant that they were active in the life around them.
(Katie): Race and diversity, I don’t really see a lot of (pause) non-white people in Institute. Is that a representation of New Brunswick’s population?

(Rose): Yes it is, oh yeah of course. The New Brunswick Women’s Institute as far as I know have not reached out to First Nations women [to invite as members]. Or has never taken on the cause of these women. Maybe only a little bit back in the 70s’ or 80s’, the disenfranchisement of First Nations women with the marriage laws that you could be First Nations but if you married a white person you lost your status, you lost your rights and that got changed and the Women’s Institute was very supportive of that change because they felt it was a social injustice.

When you look at rural New Brunswick particularly in the past, there weren’t any visible minority people to invite. If there had been they would have been invited. I know our Women’s Institute reached out to immigrant women that came, but it just never entered the conversation. I felt confident that if a black family had moved into the community, she would have been invited.

At that we finished our conversation. I gave Rose a trinket of maple tea from a local market and thanked her for her time. We met again in September 2015 to rewrite and negotiate our narrative account, and, as we wrapped up the meeting, Rose chose her pseudonym. Significantly, she chose the name of one of her race horses. As I was leaving, Rose gave me tomatoes from her garden to share with my family.

A Narrative Account of Kathleen

I met Kathleen at a Women’s Institute district meeting in 2013 when she was the District President and I was an invited speaker. My grandmother had suggested to the group that I present on my interests in studying the Women’s Institute. Kathleen and I
met again in 2014 at a branch meeting where I was again an invited speaker and Kathleen was an invited Institute member from a neighboring branch. It was at that latter meeting when Kathleen expressed interest in participating in my research. A couple of phone calls later, I was sitting in her home ready for our meeting. I looked forward to this day because I thought she would offer invaluable information, given her district presidential title, which might offer insights into the dynamics of holding a leadership role. Seeing Kathleen in action at Institute events offered me a glimpse into her passion for driving change. I wanted to know how and why Kathleen joined the Institute and what was in store for the future of the organization. What choices did she make in life to effect societal change, and how was that knowledge produced?

Alongside the spectacular waterways that New Brunswick has to offer, winding around curvy back roads, passing acreage of fields and farmland, I made my way to Kathleen’s home on an autumn afternoon in 2014. Kathleen’s town offers a mixture of summer homes and cabins and quaint year-round dwellings. She welcomed me into her home. I was immediately greeted by a warm aroma, which led me through to the kitchen table where the interview was to take place. Kathleen had prepared homemade applesauce, turkey soup, and biscuits for us to indulge in after the interview. I met Kathleen’s husband who was in the living room, adjacent to the kitchen. Kathleen’s dog was in a back bedroom and I could hear his excitement with every bark. Her cat made an appearance from time to time throughout my visit, timid and careful as cats usually are. We met again in August 2015 to negotiate the narrative accounts together. Again in Kathleen’s home. This time the smell of homemade cookies met me as I entered her kitchen. As a ‘Maritimer’ the kitchen was a fitting location to host the interviews—a
place where so many memories are made and stories told. The background sound of the television commentators’ voices wore off as we began.

**Living off the Land**

Kathleen’s storying centered on the theme of living off the land. The land symbolizes purity; it is a site for learning and a site of resistance to and contention with modern impositions. The land’s aesthetic and its narratives mirror the Women’s Institute’s beginnings on the land. Kathleen begins her story as a young adult in rural New Brunswick in the 1970s and 1980s. She and her late husband made the informed decision to raise their three children in an old farm house with no electricity and no running water. She left a good-paying job in the city to get back to her roots and the things that mattered most. Kathleen speaks fondly of her upbringing on the land, the knowledge she gained from watching her mother manage the homestead, and the lessons she passed on to her daughter.

*(Kathleen): We started out with getting a few hens and a few goats and I learned to make my own cheese. We had our own gardens and we tried to live off the land as much as we could. I learned to make good goat cheese and that went very well with fruit which was good, and then we got the bright idea to go to a cow so we bought ourselves a jersey cow. I learned how to make my own butter from the cow’s cream.*

*I was a very shy backward person. I didn’t have a lot of confidence but I was good at what I knew I could do…I was like my mother. Every time I saw something, I thought what it would look like in a jar. It became a thing to see how many varieties of things that you could make throughout the year every time I*
came across something: a few bottles of raspberry jam, a few bottles of peach jam, a few bottles of blueberry jam and jelly, and strawberries and that.

My children grew up having to do their lessons by kerosene lamp. They grew up watching me and helping my husband and I plant the produce, weed it haul it and harvest it. This was 1978, 1979, 1980. So we all think we have it tough today when we have a, when we have a gas stove or an electric stove. I went to the barn with kerosene lamps and you know this was all by choice. What an experience you know that my kids saw baby goats been born, calves being born. We did it the old fashion way.

Kathleen’s reference to the old fashion way is embedded in the temporality of rural living that she saw necessary to raising her family in a pure and honest way. Kathleen’s experience was set in the 1970s and 1980s where lifestyles were rapidly modernizing. But Kathleen’s family made a conscious decision to live peacefully in a historical period frozen in time.

(Kathleen): There were people farming of course but they were not doing it without electricity and for the experience. Very few people left a good-paying, full-time job from the city. I was young, brave, and stupid. You didn’t think of the consequences.

It was not until we met a year later in 2015 that Kathleen and I spoke in length about her reason for joining the Institute. She told me that she had resigned from her paid job after having her first child, moved her newly growing family back to the land, and made a conscious effort to do so without the conveniences of modern-day living. Certain families passed judgement on Kathleen and her children:
(Kathleen): You have to realize the kind of place in society that we were, we were on this farm with no running water, no electricity by choice being looked at. They all had bets that we wouldn’t stay there the winter. We were perceived as a little off and different. There was a mentality that if you weren’t born here you don’t belong here. You had your elite people, you had the bootlegger and troublemakers—of course I didn’t know that when I moved. I didn’t buy my farm for those people. Tough! I didn’t care. I didn’t feel I had anything to offer and I just felt that you know society had shunned us because of the different things that happened. The people made a request that the kids [on our road] didn’t ride the school bus with their children…I was point-blankly told that my children and I were not welcome in the church because it was their [a family in the community] money in the church and the people from my road were not welcome in the church.

Now we had no running water, no phone and my kids went to school cleaner than most of the kids. My youngest daughter, before she ever started school dreamed of being valedictorian. Comes high school she had the highest academic standing grade nine, ten, eleven, and twelve. She was not the valedictorian. It’s a popularity contest. She wasn’t elite. She didn’t get nominated. I was at my daughter’s graduation in 1990. Well there is one true test here: whoever has the highest academic standing definitely gets the Governor General’s Award. The Governor General’s Award goes to the highest academic standing student in every school. So I said let that be something that is public!
Kathleen recounted that she originally joined the Institute in the 1980s for the social aspect. She knew that the Institute in her town was declining in membership, and as part of a branch recruiting drive she decided to join. Kathleen did not expect that she could offer much, but she joined anyway. I wondered if Kathleen joined as a means of resistance to the marginalization she faced from families in the community. Had some of those women been members? Was she joining to prove them wrong? Was she joining to reshape their thinking about her family?

The pressure to conform to the materialistic lifestyle happening off the land was very strong. Society was advancing at a rapid pace, and as time passed, Kathleen and her family experienced the pressures to subscribe:

(Kathleen): I knew that people were happy that lived off the land; that’s the way God intended for us to live off the land, work the soil and be close...I remember we got the hydro in 1986-1987...And you could see the other things creeping in once we had the electricity, oh you could see the difference. Well we had to have the fridge of course, we had to have a vacuum cleaner of course...A women came to my house and asked me if I would like to go to work in her bakery so of course I said yes. So then once I started making my money then of course we would have a VCR, then we would have our fridge, and then don’t you think it would be nice to have a deep freeze and don’t you think it would be nice to have a hair dryer, curling iron and wouldn’t it be nice to have games for the kids and all that?

We had the experience but we didn’t keep those same, I’m going to say values. It was so much easier to go and buy the corn from somebody else that grew it because it’s labour intensive. Once you’re working you don’t have the time.
Kathleen made several parallels between the Women’s Institute and her theme of living off the land. Through Kathleen’s restorying of her upbringing and raising her children on the land, she never speaks of the Institute as a separate experience. The Institute was woven through her stories as part of her identity and her value system. When something had impacted the community, the Institute experienced the pain. She described how the earlier Institutes from the 1930s and 1940s were paramount in identifying community problems and immediately implementing solutions. The earlier Institutes had the autonomy to make change happen immediately because there were no other options. As Kathleen recounts how the Institute and life outside of Institute has changed over the decades, her dissatisfaction becomes obvious. Structural institutions such as government regulation, impure values, the media and their access to information, and capitalism have impacted how communities are now shaped:

(Kathleen): We [the earlier WI] adjusted without any trouble because we saw the need so plainly. The kids are hungry down at the school, why don’t we go and make a pot of soup for them? Simple: no government regulation on what went into the soup; nobody telling you that you couldn’t make it; nobody telling you that because little Johnny is allergic to parsnips that you couldn’t make the soup. They [The earlier WI] were just experts at fitting their lives and their needs and other people’s needs together. And then came the 80s’ and I think everything flew to hell. I think technology was advancing so fast, people’s morals were going down the toilet. And another thing that I think a lot of people don’t think of 'she' said you know when your father was oversees we never knew even where he was. We never knew what battles they
were fighting. We never knew if that whole platoon was wiped out, but today we see that being nine times out of ten filmed, recorded live. It brings it right here, it’s in your face.

As Kathleen remembered how earlier Institutes operated compared to modern day Institutes, she and I shared a moment of enlightenment. We worked through the idea that newer generations of women may not be fully aware of the severity of issues that women faced in the past because youth are born with the rights that our former sisters had fought so hard for. Both Kathleen and I came to understand the ways in which our experiences shape our understanding of women in history compared to newer generations of women. Kathleen feels that women fight for so much now but they are giving away our history in doing so:

(Kathleen): Women you know you had two or three women globally, came with this idea fighting for women’s rights and I think we just lost so much there. We were so willing to give away our history and the things that we could do to effect change for something at the end of the day that didn’t mean anything.

I needed clarity from Kathleen on this point. I had explained that “I’ve been thinking about this a lot lately, issues that were impacting women let’s say in the 60s’, 70s’, [with] my generation...women have the vote, women are working, but we forget that we came from a place that we had to fight for so when I hear that younger women are not voting I think “do you realize what it would be like if you didn’t have that vote?””. The conversation goes deeper into understanding Kathleen’s perspective of past generations of feminist activists compared to newer generations:
(Kathleen): Yeah and in that process women did have to fight and I think in those earlier days they fought for things that did make a difference, but I find today they are fighting for things that don’t make a difference, just because they can. (Sighs) Oh I think there are a lot of examples. I know they shouldn’t be denied the chance to work on a job with men but it’s almost like putting a lot of poison into a pure lake of water. They win the right and they win the opportunity to do that job but what has it cost and then what is the initial gain? What can you say at the end of the day that you can say you actually accomplished? Then it becomes like a whole new set of rules for everything, a whole new set of agreements in unions, contracts, washrooms, hygiene you know it just took one issue that could have been dealt with and now there are ten issues and everything seems to evolve into getting out of hand. I don’t deny them the chance to go in the military, but they have to be prepared with what they’ll see. They may need to go to the bathroom in front of a man. Then you can’t say “I’m a woman, you can’t do that to me”.

We spoke a lot about this topic. I wanted to understand Kathleen’s words about how women have drifted so far. During our discussion, I doodled on the pages of our draft narrative account to visualize the dichotomy Kathleen had referenced in her response. The land is represented by the circle on the left; it signifies community, fairness, equality, and an earlier time both in Kathleen’s life and the history of the
Women’s Institute. Kathleen views the left of the circle as a subconscious fighting for change for the fair and equitable treatment of humanity. People on the left fight harder for change and they advocate for matters that are more integral to life than the advocacy that happens on the right. The right of the circle symbolizes greed, and the conscious fighting for “power, position, and status” (Kathleen). The right forgets about the turmoil that the left endured in their fight for change. The right side of the circle is a time when Kathleen worked off the land in a workplace that rewarded men by fast-tracking them into management positions. Kathleen led the management training for these men who were new community college graduates in her employer’s accelerated managerial program.

She recalls:

(Kathleen): So I taught these four guys and they went on automatically to their first level: management. I get the bright idea, if I can teach them to be managers why can’t I be one? So I started fighting subtly. Instead of accepting all these guys from community college, accept me. I’m already here and trained. I’m a woman, that’s the difference right? This was 1970. Women weren’t managers. So they [her directors] redid [reclassified] my job.

Kathleen was successful in her pursuit to work towards closing the gender inequality gap at her work, and got promoted to the highest classification she could reach. She describes her accomplishment:

(Kathleen): [At this company] you started there at a clerk class three, class four, class five, then class six. There was one job that was six for a woman that was there forever and I was reclassified as a level eight! I was going to train but I got pregnant. That was an accomplishment for me. I chose to stay home with my kids.
When Kathleen speaks of herself on the right, she remembers losing touch with her roots on the left. Although she was successful in her fight for equal opportunity in her paid work environment, moving back to the land was far more satisfying than the corporate lifestyle.

Kathleen often made reference to the WI in the past, similar to the left side of the circle. In her opinion, the Institute subconsciously made decisions for the community because there were no other options than to do it yourself. I asked Kathleen if she thought the WI lived by feminist values:

(Kathleen): *I think they did, they just did so many things out of necessity and need for the betterment of the community. They didn't consciously realize what they were doing. They didn't realize the effect they would have.*

**The Future of the Women’s Institute**

Effortlessly the conversation with Kathleen turns to the future of the Women's Institute. The topic is on many members’ minds within the New Brunswick chapter. Themes from our conversation emerge about why the organization, an aging member population, competition with other community organizations, lack of public service support, and a member mentality of resistance to change. Kathleen provides her understanding about why the Institute is declining:

(Kathleen): *I think what we’ve seen is the WI members that gave so much in those years ‘forties, ‘thirties, ‘fifties, ‘sixties. I think one of the reasons we are in the declining membership today is that those women reached a certain stage and it was too much for them to absorb, all the other things going on. I’ve heard this in my own WI over and over again with the Lion’s club being so close to our two*
branches. Well everything we did the Lion’s club does now so we’re kind of defeated before we start if we have that attitude...we’ve never given ourselves permission to go and say to a Lion’s Club “our two Institute’s what can we do in the community that you don’t have time to do or what can you do when we don’t have time for”? There never was a joining of the resources. Some of the women were just older and more tired and just didn’t have the energy to do that you know. So are we here because we have refused to change or are we here because we don’t know how?

Kathleen recounts the outcomes from a provincial convention and the discussion surrounding the future of the Institute. She does not feel prepared enough to implement the changes required to elevate the Institute. Internal hierarchy and historical practices lend to a power struggle between the branch, district, and provincial levels in effecting change. Even with Kathleen holding a district presidential title, hierarchy plays an impeding role in influencing change. Kathleen speaks about the limitation on members:

(Kathleen): I’m kind of limited in, I have a voice at the provincial convention but I can’t go to the provincial office or the board and say “we need to do this and this.” It’s hard for one person to effect that whole change. I still feel a distance there and I don’t know if it’s because I feel that I’m becoming stale because we’re not doing a whole lot in our branch, to make the same difference in society today as those women did back here. And they likely at the time didn’t think they were doing anything great. And it’s no great shakes to do it today if I knew what or how. I know there’s a lot of women’s issues but I feel very, very strongly that
these things have to come from the top down. It’s pretty hard for a branch to effect change that goes all the way to the top.

Structural Hurdles

The provincial convention is an annual WI event in place to provide an opportunity for teaching, learning, and knowledge sharing between Institute members. After one particular provincial annual convention, Kathleen got the idea to speak to the newly appointed president about creating a committee that would travel the province, visit the various districts throughout the year, and collect the strategies and challenges from each area with hopes of enhancing collaboration and strengthening the provincial WI. Excited and confident, Kathleen mentioned this idea to the president: “this is what we have to do! Get the board to appoint a committee, and let’s do some research and get in the field and do the work” (Kathleen). To Kathleen’s surprise, she recalls the president’s short reply: “no, my board will never agree to that” (Kathleen). She felt defeated and silenced.

Kathleen is resilient. While she feels limited in her ability to influence change at the provincial executive level, within her control at the district level she exercises resistance to the traditional ways of structuring the district meetings, and she takes an active and inclusive stance by inviting all members of all levels to her district conventions and meetings—everyone is welcome to join, not just the executives.

Kathleen explains her inclusive stance further:

(Kathleen): Your district meets once a year at an executive meeting with only the executives that go. One change right there! I invite! I said that you don’t have to be the president or secretary” [to attend those meetings].
Funding and Competition

Public funding is at an all-time low with the New Brunswick Provincial Government offering the Institute no more than $7 per member per year. I asked Kathleen “do you think you [the WI] would function as an organization without that $7 a head that you get [from the government]?” She replied:

(Kathleen): Likely never. That’s all they’re [the provincial government] contributing to. From what I heard and just rumbling at the provincial convention, I made the suggestion once I saw the budget “why don’t we ask the government why there’s never been an increase from $7?” I was likely not even a member when that was still $7 and I’ve been a member since 1986 or 84’ somewhere in there. So they never raised that. So I am politely told “do not jingle the chain” because we could just end up losing it if we speak up. At a provincial level the WI ranks very low because they don’t know what the WI has done, they don’t possibly know what it has done to date and they’re not willing to give it a break. The thing about the Women’s Institute is we came through all this hard stuff and we do have to change, but we’re just not able to make that connection, that transition that struggle, we miss that every time it comes around, we just don’t get on it, get the boost that we need financially, media wise.

With Kathleen formerly holding a district presidential title, I asked Kathleen if her leadership position in Institute afforded her the ability to interact with government officials. Pointedly Kathleen responded with “No, you don’t. Just the President”. Given that the Institute has had a century-long relationship to the provincial and federal
governments, I asked Kathleen if the government was influential or supportive as she would expect them to be. She responded:

(Kathleen): Absolutely not. Women’s Institute when it first started, it still is under the umbrella of the Department of Agriculture, but because agriculture was such a big part of society back then everybody grew what they ate and some to sell, but now it’s just reverse. Like the government basically is growing our stuff and selling it back to us so we have no real input...I mean, look at milk, milk producing, milk marketing board. Like you either go big or you don’t have any. It’s a business funded basically by the government. You basically sell your soul to the government for a quota and if you have too much you get a fine; if you don’t have enough you get a fine.

As Kathleen described the way the government has revoked autonomy from small food producers, I was immediately reminded of the WI in Canada dating back to the early 1900s, and the struggles they and the farming community faced with the government introducing technology to advance the agricultural industry. A century later, we see the privatization of food production and the fierce competitive market for food growers and consumers. Kathleen’s opinions about the government’s influence over agriculture are as follows:

(Kathleen): Yeah it’s taken agriculture right out of the hands say of you and I. You can have 199 hens but you can’t have 200 because if you have 200 that’s against the law for the egg marketing board because then you can be fined because you are influencing and throw the egg production off. What’s happening to the wheat marketing board? What’s happened to fisheries and oceans? You
either, like I say, you’re in debt to the government for millions in the milk producing or you just don’t farm.

**Solutions for the Future**

In understanding the solutions that are required for the WI to continue in New Brunswick, Kathleen believes that partnering with women in leadership roles is key. But she is dissatisfied with the lack of Women’s Institute interest from politically appointed women in New Brunswick:

*(Kathleen): Some of our women who were in positions of power have never taken on to be a liaison to help, or even form an association to be part of. We could be on violence against women’s boards, we could be on diet and nutrition boards, we could be on a fitness and health, children poverty, young girls [committee].*

When I asked Kathleen what is stopping the NBWI from joining these boards, she replied:

*(Kathleen): We are our own worst enemy. We don’t promote ourselves. We should be lobbying our government, we should be bugging our MLAs, and we could be writing letters…somewhere, somehow, someway, someone has to be interested in us. There must be one other person out there that will take up the cause. If we have the power of the women here (points to the figurative circle on the left: the land), if we had some of that, we wouldn’t be afraid to infiltrate poverty, drug addictions, family violence. So many branches have said “they [families] don’t need us. There are other services helping”.*

Kathleen’s restorying of her life exposed the stark coexistence between the developments that happen on and off the land with the ways in which the Women’s Institute has
changed over the years. Themes of globalization, class, and privatization bleed into the practices of everyday life and transform and monopolize the purity that once existed. Agricultural discourses are heavily regulated to govern food production. Public programs that were offered so plainly and easily now require rigorous bureaucratic processes and approvals. Life is complicated and change—though inevitable—becomes incessantly difficult to map out.

When I met Kathleen the second time in 2015, reading through the first iteration of the narrative account with her, I learned in that moment how powerful this research has become for the both of us. Kathleen got tears in her eyes when I read the beginning of the narrative account about life on the land, the lessons she learned from her mother and the ones she passed on to her daughter. More than ever, in this very moment, I realized how much this inquiry must be relationally embedded. I never imagined how powerful our interaction would be. Kathleen told me that because of our discussions she has new perspectives, and feels that she has words of encouragement to guide her participation forward in Institute. I had made a conscious effort to keep a distance from imposing my opinions and advice for change, so it was a special moment to learn that Kathleen valued and learned from our interactions.

When I left Kathleen’s home in 2014, I gave her local maple tea as a present and to say thank you for sharing her stories. Kathleen then gave me pickled beets and lady Ashburn pickles. During my second visit in 2015, Kathleen gave me a bag of homemade chocolate chip cookies and freshly picked tomatoes from her garden.
A Narrative Account of Sara

The interviews with Sara elicited strong emotions for me as a researcher. Sara is my grandmother, a veteran of Institute since the late 1970s holding former positions of Branch President, Treasurer, and Secretary. We got together at the end of winter 2014 for the interview and again in the summer of 2015 to compose the narrative account. As I sat with Sara in her living room in 2014 reading through the informed consent, I experienced mixed emotions of excitement and joy to hear firsthand about her Institute involvement. But I also felt worried that upon completion of the thesis, I might misrepresent the stories told and that I embarrass my family by holding views that they might deem extreme. Can I do damage to the community I identify with? Will I accurately represent the stories shared? Will I tarnish our family name that generations have worked tirelessly to establish? How will my family take the news that I am a feminist?

For nearly 25 years prior to this day I lived by the narrative of my grandmother as the stereotypical caregiver who would find herself baking bread and cookies, knitting mittens, volunteering, and attending church. It was not until I understood the history of the WI and her more than 30-year participation that I began living a different story, this time alongside my grandmother, a crusader in her own right. I was a young adult when I first identified as feminist. When I reflected on the women in my life that lived by feminist values, my grandmother always fit the profile. I admired her ability to get a divorce during a time when societal and familial discourses stigmatized those families as broken and blamed. She blazed through those norms and created her own narrative that would see—among many accomplishments—her raising two children, demonstrating a strong work ethic by working long shifts at a nursing home, and successfully obtaining a
driver’s license at the age of forty-one. I had longed for the answer to this one question I held for many years: is my grandmother a feminist? Deep down knowing the life she lived and continues to live and the decisions she had made, I knew the answer—but would she self-identify? My fear held me back from asking her the question during our first meeting. It was not until a year later in 2015 when I found the courage to ask. Towards the end of our second meeting in July, I was nestled on the couch of her summer camper. I braced myself with my white knuckles gripping the couch, took a breath and asked, “would you call yourself a feminist?” It felt like an hour had passed waiting for her response. To my absolute surprise she replied confidently with “yes”. I was elated and proud. This is a moment I will remember forever. Sara was calm and fearless in her response. Conversing with Sara has, in a way, allowed me to break the shell that hid my feminism from fear of shame and judgement. Although I did not think my grandmother would ever self-identify as feminist, her life time of achievements were instrumental in helping me shape my feminist identity. Our first meeting was in 2014 in Sara’s living room where we sat on adjacent sofas. The sun entered the room on both the southern and western faces of the house, making it a comfortable location for the interview. In 2015, we would meet in Sara’s summer camper that overlooks one of New Brunswick’s most prized lakes. Sara’s mother and father purchased the land when they immigrated to Canada in 1928. It is a farm with acres of property, some of which is water frontage. Now the water properties are sub-divided for family and Sara’s summer camper sits on one of those properties. This land holds memories for five generations of my family. As such, it
is an integral setting for this research. We begin the first interview in 2014 with Sara taking me through her forming years as a member. A friend suggested Sara join Institute and in the late 1970s, she became an official member. As a mother and career woman, supporting her two young daughters, she was motivated by the social aspect of the Institute. Her children were young and getting out of the house to be around relatable people was enticing. She recalls:

(Sara): I was living close to the WI hall at that time. My children were young and ah I think someone invited me to go to a meeting and I went. I enjoyed it because of the social you know.

While the social aspect [or socializing] was her main reason for joining, Sara soon discovered how informative and educative the Institute could be. She experienced new learning that enhanced her ability to conduct meetings, organize and manage events, engage in public speaking, and learn about the interworking of holding a leadership position. Sara eventually accepted the role of Branch President for a number of years. She reflected on the hard work and long hours required:

(Sara): I did get to be president for couple of years and that was very, very busy. Being president meant that you had to make all of the phone calls, you had to make sure the hall was ready, clean, prepared for all occasions, you had to make sure everybody was bringing what they were supposed to, doing what they were supposed to.

Sara never wanted to hold a leadership role outside of the branch at the district or provincial levels, and was content with working within the branch. When I asked Sara why she did not want to hold district or presidential titles, she responded:
(Sara): There’s too much driving. Oh you have to attend meetings in all of those locals. It’s too much driving. You have to be there for all of their conventions.

Sara remembered how there was never a shortage of responsibilities when holding a leadership role:

(Sara): Getting ready for the district convention was fun, we worked with the Institute. We had to make sure the hall was rented which I called to make sure. And then we had to make sure that we had table cloths. We had to have placemats and a little favour at each place you know, we tried to do it pertaining to the community that you’re living in. So we had strawberry jam in little jars, that’s what they usually have. And then ah you have to make sure that everything is organized that you have people do the flag and ah that’s decided at a meeting of the executives, the district executives.

Family Relations

Sara’s mother was a lifetime member of the New Brunswick Women’s Institute and her sister is a 61-year veteran. I wanted to know more about their family dynamic while Sara, her sister Yvette, whom I also interviewed, and mother were members. I imagined what it would be like if my mother and I were members. Did Sara feel comfortable to voice her opinion at Institute meetings with her family present? Did she feel pressure to make her mother proud? It was during our meeting in 2015 when Sara answered these questions. Sara never felt pressure to act differently for the sake of pleasing her mother. She was quite comfortable working alongside her mother and sister in the Institute. My great grandmother was a beautiful piano player and it was no surprise that Sara’s tone and expression lit up when she spoke of her mother’s talent when she
performed at Institute events. She described her mother’s motivation for joining the Institute:

(Sara): Oh I was in Institute when she was. That would have been in the early 80s’. And she still played the piano when she came.

(Katie): is she the one who got you to join?

(Sara): probably, she probably liked it that I did, I don’t think she encouraged, she wasn’t like that.

(Katie): did she enjoy the Institute?

(Sara): she enjoyed the social aspect because when she lived so far away from (home town name removed), she would enjoy meeting people. And years ago when people went to Institute they dressed up, I mean they dressed up. When they had lunch at a person’s house, they used their silver and their china cups and saucers. People had to dress up then.

Declining Membership

Sara has little optimism for the continuation? of the Institute in New Brunswick. The topic of disbanding the Institute is an undercurrent at meetings and conventions. Members are aging, and interest from young women is minimal. The NBWI is now 700 members. When I asked Sara what the next chapter is for the NBWI, her outlook was grim:

(Sara): I don’t know, people just get older and we’ll have to disband. With so few members and older members it’s dwindled off and there’s not the interest to do the program. I remember we used to have educational programs, it was very interesting, and now we might have a reading or we might just quilt on a quilt or
There’s just not enough members and whoever is there is just older and they just don’t have the interest.

In discussing declining membership, Sara made connections to funding matters. The two were inseparable:

(Sara): When they [members of Sara’s branch] asked who wanted to go to the Convention, nobody spoke up...it costs so much to go. Our funds are down to $1400 dollars so we got to sell tickets...I’ve gone two years. It’s interesting but if I went I would go on my own. I wouldn’t ask the Institute to pay. There’s not enough money...

When I met with Sara a year later, she confirmed that her branch’s account balance went from $1400 in 2014 to $600 in 2015. With declining membership numbers, the operating costs are becoming too expensive to afford. I sensed contention when Sara storied her experience of responding to other NBWI districts that have larger memberships and healthier savings:

(Sara): They [another district institute] have a large membership. They have lots of money...They said they thought we should pay $25 per capita...we pay $20...I think we pay one $170 to head office, then we support the home in Woodstock, the Institute Home.

Shortly thereafter we wrapped up our conversation and discussed the next steps of the research. I called Sara a couple of times after this last interview to clarify points of uncertainty. Throughout the year, we discussed the growing concerns over the closure of her branch and what might happen if they officially close. It seemed that the timing of
this research was optimal in speaking with what might potentially be the last remaining members of Sara’s branch.

**A Narrative Account of Yvette**

I visited Yvette late morning in the early spring of 2014 at her home in New Brunswick. Yvette is my great aunt, my grandmother’s older sister. Yvette’s home is exactly as I remembered: spotless, timeless, and full of heirlooms and family stories. I was delighted that Yvette was willing to participate in my thesis research. Yvette is recognized in our family for her abundance of knowledge about our family’s British lineage. For years I imagined how I might document my family history with Yvette’s help. Perhaps this narrative research was waiting for us all of these years to start exploring our heritage.

**The Beginning Years**

Despite my personal and familial connections to Yvette, I was eager to understand her experiences across her 61 years of Women’s Institute membership. We begin with how Yvette got started with the organization. Throughout Yvette’s story she discusses her childhood and the various milestones of life. Yvette’s narrative cuts across time and place as she relives fond WI memories that intersect other Institute members’ stories that I had met with during the course of this research. This intersection was a powerful experience for me, to have the opportunity of experiencing one moment in time told from two members’ perspectives. One of those intersecting moments was when Yvette described her beginning years with Institute and how her mother was a member who likely influenced her to join. Yvette’s sister Sara had told a similar story about joining the Institute. Yvette recalls:
(Yvette): There was a WI here and oh it were a few years after I got married...I joined Institute at 25. In those days, (husband’s name removed) would work at night. My mother belonged to it of course, so I joined I think it was 1953 and I have been going ever since...Most everyone belonged to it, so I said I’d like to, and then when I moved down here I was living right next to the church and that made it very easy for me to zip around...to Institute. All the people there belonged to it.

Yvette and Sara joined because of their mother’s affiliation to the WI, and for the convenience of joining a women’s group so close to home. The Institute has an influence on its connection to family as evidenced by Sara and Yvette joining because of their mother, and Rose who had knowledge of the NBWI from her grandmother, mother, and aunt’s affiliation.

**The Institute Now Versus Back Then**

Yvette referred to the Institute dichotomously throughout our discussion. She refers to the Institute “back then” as the organization’s prime in the early 19th century. Yvette believed that the Institute of old had purpose and was doing a lot for the community and for women farmers and their wives. She recalled, “I think it was a wonderful thing way back then”. At that time, the community was integrated because of the Women’s Institute. Conversely Yvette refers to the Institute ‘now’ as slow and dwindling and progressively declining. She believes disbandment is inevitable and attributes the attrition to the changing lifestyles of community members. Younger generations find purpose outside of the community and have little interest in joining:
(Yvette): It’s been going downhill because the people passed away and there wasn’t much people interested now, not at all... The way it is now people nip into town whereas before they wouldn’t go to a show. Once in a while something would come to the community, entertainment... now there is such a wide area to where people go, like Florida for the winter, and that was never heard of. People travel all different ways. I can see why the younger people don’t have interest in it.

Lifestyles are changing and family values adjust to the changing social norms and trends sweeping people’s lives. Fifty years ago women had different likes and interests and Yvette recalls community members dropping by to say hi to their neighbours, whereas today, television and mobile devices are occupying the interests of younger generations.

The family structure also changes over time. Yvette recalls the way multiple families would live under the same roof, supporting each other’s families as best they could. For Institute members back then having multiple family in the same house helped women attend their monthly WI meetings without their children. In more recent decades, changing lifestyles of women have consumed the time and space in their days making it almost impossible for leisure activity. Yvette explains:

(Yvette): You people are on the go all the time. A lot of you are working. When you do have time off you want to spend it with your husband, go shopping. What time do you have in the afternoon to see your neighbors? I don’t know how they do it.
**Reconnecting a Family History**

The conversation eases into a topic close to both our hearts: her mother, my great grandmother. Telling the story of my great grandparents is a memorable past time for our family. Often during family functions someone restories the trials and tribulations that Yvette’s mother and father endured when immigrating to Canada. They had lived a humble life in a small town in Wales in the United Kingdom. Yvette’s father served in the First World War and was a prisoner of war for two years. He returned safely back to Wales and was reunited with his wife, Yvette’s mother. During the 1920s, The Soldiers Settlement Board established campaigns to attract those British soldiers who served alongside Canada’s military to emigrate to Canada. Yvette’s father grew fond of the idea of what life could be like in Canada and in response to these immigration campaigns, uprooted his family and their lives for a promising future in rural New Brunswick in the winter of 1928. Little did they know how rough life could be in the dead of Canadian winter. They travelled by ship across the Atlantic Ocean surviving blisterly weather and battling the pneumonia suffered by their young son. Yvette was one and a half years old on that trip and joined her mother, father, and four-year-old brother. Ten days after arriving in Canada Yvette’s young brother died from pneumonia.

Canada was much different than what they had pictured. Yvette’s parents came from a home in Wales that was equipped with plumbing and running water, inside toilets, gas heating, a scullery, and the list goes on. Yvette remembers her mother telling her a story about adjusting to life in Canada in the 1920s and the onset of the immediate reality of their new life. When her mother first arrived she asked the woman who sold them the farm how she was going to bathe her children without running water. Yvette remembers
her mother mimicking the woman “Oh you’re to go to the well, and boil the water on the stove”. While I’ve listened to this story many times over the years, this time I heard it differently by connecting on an emotional level. I imagined the heartache and the lifetime of depression that my great grandmother must have faced. And yet it is apparent that Yvette’s mother had the strength to mask her despair in order to keep life moving along and not turn back to remember how life could have been. I really began to understand the emotional and physical pain that my great grandmother experienced. Her husband fought in the First World War when they lived in Wales. When he fought in the Second World War, their family lived in New Brunswick and were isolated from the family and friends they could rely on back in Wales. Here was my great grandmother in remote New Brunswick in 1940s, miles from her neighbours, running a farm and caring for six children, and trying to live this farming lifestyle without the necessities that were afforded to her when she lived in Wales. It is no wonder she joined Institute in 1946 shortly after the Second World War. Yvette remembers having to mature quickly as the eldest child, “I had to grow up awful quick when Dad went off to the army”. I imagined the power and strength a young daughter would learn from watching her mother endure these hardships. Yvette saw the challenges that her mother had overcome and experienced them herself: “you have to stop being a child. You didn’t have time to play. I was 13 when dad was in the army. You went to school, you had to hurry home”. When I invited Yvette to participate in my research on the Women’s Institute, I never imagined that I would experience a deeper connection to my ancestry. Yvette has given me strength to further explore my family lineage.
Yvette and I met a second time in the summer of 2015 to review and compose the narrative account. During this meeting I asked Yvette to create a pseudonym. She laughed and said that I should choose one for her. At the end of our conversation, I gave Yvette flowers to thank her for participating in the research.

A Narrative Account of Nellie

I have known Nellie from a very early age. My aunt and Nellie are long-time friends and as a young child I have a number of early memories of my aunt who brought me to community events with Nellie. Nellie and I met again when I began this research in 2014. If I can describe Nellie and her work in one word it is ‘dedication’. Nellie never stops. She never finds herself short of activities to engage in from spending time with family, volunteering in her community, or attending national and provincial Institute meetings. Nellie was comfortable with not selecting a pseudonym for this narrative account and was not bothered if I published her name. In keeping with ethical protocols and protecting her anonymity I chose Nellie’s pseudonym.

When I began attending Institute events and conventions in preparation for this thesis I learned that Nellie was the provincial president of the NBWI. She held this title for three years and I had the pleasure of seeing her in action at one of the annual conventions. From that point I was eager to invite her to interview. I called Nellie in the summer of 2015 and a couple of weeks after vacation schedules cleared we met at the provincial office in Fredericton. I was pleasantly surprised that the administrative officer, and the only paid office employee of the Institute, was joining us for the interview. The administrator worked quietly in the background and offered clarity and support to Nellie who would turn to her throughout the interview to fact-check. Nellie does not work from
the office, for the most part, but given that New Brunswick hosted the Federated
Women’s Institutes of Canada annual conference a couple of weeks before we met for the
interview Nellie had been spending much of her time in the office preparing for and
organizing the conference. The Institute office is managed by the administrator and is
equipped with the necessities for a fully functional operation. Like many offices there
was an endless supply of paperwork cascading along all sides of the room. Meeting in the
NBWI office provided me with a new reality of the Institute in which I could touch and
feel the existence of this group. We met a second time in late autumn 2015 in Nellie’s
home to compose the narrative account. When I arrived she was working on miniature
crafts in preparation to sell them at an upcoming annual Christmas market.

The interview with Nellie began by discussing Nellie’s position within the
organization and the current landscape of the NBWI. Nellie is Past President of the
provincial Institute and holds a dual role as Executive Officer representing the province
on the national board for the Federated Women’s Institutes of Canada organization. Prior
to these positions, from 2011 to 2014, Nellie was the Provincial President for the New
Brunswick Women’s Institute and before that she was the Provincial President Elect,
Vice President, Area Director, District President, Branch President, Treasurer, and
Secretary at the branch and district levels. Within her 33 years of provincial membership,
Nellie has held an impressive record of leadership positions. In addition to her provincial
NBWI activities Nellie participates at national and international levels with the national
Federated Women’s Institutes of Canada and internationally with the Associated Country
Women of the World organization.
Decline in Membership

The decline in membership in the NBWI is felt across all districts and branches in the province. Districts are amalgamating, members have become tired, and there is internal friction caused by depleting monies. By the time I interviewed Nellie I had already spoken to four veteran Institute members and I expected my conversation with Nellie would reveal the same themes as with the previous interviews. I was wrong. Nellie is optimistic, has a strong outlook for the Institute and has tangible plans for change:

(Nellie): There are some branches that are dropping so low that they’re folding so we’re losing branches and members. But there are other branches that have increased. A number of them have doubled their membership.

Now (branch name removed) was down in numbers and then they were going to fold. Now you have to have eight people to form a branch but you only have to have two people to maintain the branch, one to be the secretary and one to be the president. There were two members who said “we’re not going to let it fold. We’re willing to stay.” So most of the members stayed and they got three or four younger members who joined it. Now they’re becoming quite strong. They meet on Facebook some of the time, they post their minutes on FB, so they are connected every day.

(Katie): Why do you think the younger members joined?

(Nellie): I can tell you exactly. The four that were there wanted to do something in their community and they wanted to have a project so they...started a community garden, and these people came and started working with them in the community
garden and wanted to know who they were and what they were and decided to join because they now knew about it.

And that’s the branches that are getting younger members, giving them a reason to join. And they’re willing to accept the changes that they want to do in the interests that they have. Because most of the branches who aren’t succeeding, they don’t really want members. They want clones.

When I met Nellie for our second meeting to compose the narrative account, she noted that the branches that are folding are ones that do not want change. She offers pointed opinions about what is required to meet the goals of increasing membership for the NBWI. Attracting younger members is half the battle; meeting their needs, accepting new ways of thinking, and effective communication is the challenge. She feels that current members need to accept change and be willing to listen. Nellie referred to some member attitudes as “they want clones” and “some branches aren’t receptive”. Nellie further explains why membership is at an all-time low and offers strategies for improving participation:

(Nellie): Our membership is aging so they've gotten tired, and we're not attracting younger members because they don't even know who we are. So why would you join a group that you've never heard tell of? So we’re now trying to do things that we can interest people and get our name out and get the people who are willing to go out and do the work that we’ve always done. What can we do to make you be a member?
First of all, you have to give people a reason to join. People are inherently selfish. They’ve only got so much time and if they are not going to get something out of it, they are not going to join.

There is a new Executive Director [for FWIC] in Ontario, [and she] has started a branch. They have forty-three younger women all under the age of 35. They meet in a pub. I can imagine if we suggested that to some of our members to meet in a pub. People don’t seem to understand that. If you want them as members, you have to give them what they want. They get out…and talk about things. They get together, they don’t all make it to every meeting but they mostly do and they’re all connected. They have a website they are connected to if they don’t make a meeting and they’re going to make a difference and they’re have fun doing it.

Plans for Improvement

One of the greatest hurdles for the NBWI, according to Nellie, is the lack of communication internally between the different structural levels of the organization. There are negative perceptions about those at the top. She explains the lack of communication as:

(Nellie): That’s one of the things we’re talking about is restructuring because it’s a little cumbersome getting information from the board down to the area directors who are responsible for getting it out to the districts who are responsible for getting it out to the branches who then have to get it to the members.

(Katie): What’s difficult about the challenge?

(Nellie): Ah some of them aren’t good at doing that [communication]. Ah sometimes the branches aren’t receptive…even in my branch when I first joined it
was “the people in Fredericton, we don’t want anything to do with them. What are they to us?”

(Katie): Is ‘Fredericton’ referred to the board or the executive?

(Nellie): Yes.

(Katie): So there is a little structural/hierarchal tension?

(Nellie): I’m not sure that tension is the right word. Lack of communication, lack of realizing that we’re all together and that we need to communicate. It makes things easier for us if we know what a different district is doing because they may have something that really works for them. Like a lot of the districts and branches don’t know about (one of the earlier mentioned districts’ name removed) having done this project and got all new members.

The lack of communication between the structural levels restricts members’ learning opportunities. For without learning about how other districts have overcome their challenges, the organization is destined to commit to their old ways of operating, which, according to Nellie, results in “failing due to attrition”.

Nellie, however, is determined to increase membership. When I spoke with her, she planned to distribute flyers at a local military family resource centre to invite women who were new to the community. She admired the recruiting tactics employed by her neighbouring districts and by Institutes at the national level who were successful in attracting younger women. She has a positive attitude to make changes to the Institute, but she anticipates resistance from some members. The most recent example of resistance Nellie experienced was when she organized an annual district convention. In 2015, Nellie’s district joined forces with a neighbouring district in the province to host one
large convention. Nellie recalled that despite its success, some women who chose not to attend feared that the two districts would merge into one resulting in a loss of their district’s identity.

**Purpose and Mission:** “*When I get off the bus, I want everyone to know who we are.*”

Nellie has been exposed to learning opportunities within the WI that have brought her across Canada and most recently to India. In speaking with Nellie it was apparent that she made the most of the opportunities afforded to her as a leader in the NBWI. In the 1990s, Nellie was appointed by her district president to attend an FWIC national convention in British Columbia. This trip was a critical moment in her Institute career as she learned there was life beyond her local branch. Before Nellie ever thought about attending a national convention, she was an Institute member for ten years and she viewed her provincial office as a body that offered very little to its members. In fact, Nellie’s district sold their town hall and intentionally did not report the revenues to the provincial office because “if we let them know, ‘those people in Fredericton at the office’, they would want our money” (Nellie). She felt that the provincial executives during the 1980s were run like a secret organization and this left very little transparency about how the organization was spending its money. Nellie never imagined she would ever become a provincial executive given her experiences with the organization’s covert practices in the 1980s. It was during this national FWIC convention trip to British Columbia in 1991 that Nellie saw a need to disrupt the binary that existed in the province between members and the executives. A key influence for Nellie was a respected New Brunswick Institute leader who joined Nellie on this trip. Nellie restores her experience
with this Institute member during their FWIC trip in 1991 and how that experience launched her Women’s Institute career:

(Nellie): *We got on the bus to go into town and there wasn’t a person who didn’t know what Women’s Institute was when we got off that bus!* She told them all about the Institute, how it was formed, who we were, and what we did. So I’ve always tried to be like [her]. I’ve not quite made it. When I get off the bus, I want everyone to know who we are.

So then I went to the national conference in Truro three years later. And at that point, I’d never been to the provincial convention...and I thought “well maybe I should go to the provincial organization or convention. I’ve been to two nationals.” So then I haven’t missed a provincial convention since then.

Since her trip to the FWIC conference in 1991, Nellie’s leadership roles took off and she assumed district and provincial executive positions ever since. I asked Nellie if she thought she had transformed members’ perceptions about the executive board now that she has been an executive member herself for over nine years. She said that she really hopes she has made a difference but that she can never be sure how effective she has been.

**Global Opportunities**

The Institute’s broader purposes of structuring the organization with varying hierarchal levels was meant to give members an opportunity to learn from the executives who travelled to conventions and workshops afar. Upon their return, these selected executives would report back to members in their respective branches and districts about the knowledge or training they received. Nellie was able to do just that when she attended
the Associated Country Women of the World conference in New Delhi, India in 2014.

She recalls a powerful moment that changed her thinking of the world:

(Nellie): I didn’t know that people weren’t citizens of somewhere. When they tell you how many people live in the world, that’s not accurate. There are people who are born and die and never show up anywhere.

Apparently it’s because they’re having problems in BC because they have a lot of immigrants. Parents weren’t registering their children at birth and...they did research and realized this is happening especially with refugees. They have no idea how many people. Thousands and millions of people and they don’t exist.

They have no idea how many people are born there, how many people die there.

And when they took the vote to pass the resolution, the whole of South East Asia abstained from the vote, and some people were quite upset about that. But they said in conscious, they can’t vote in favour. They wouldn’t vote against it because they realize that it’s an issue that needs to be resolved but they couldn’t vote for it because if all the refugees in their country suddenly became citizens, their country couldn’t support it; they’d now have to take all of these people and be responsible for them and they can’t. They don’t have the economic stability, they don’t have the resources, they don’t have anything that they would need in place to look after these people.

This was an experience Nellie says she will never forget. It opened her mind to an entirely different way of thinking and viewing the world. Nellie was given access to an enriching advocacy space amongst 350 women delegates from around the world. She had exposure to a non-inclusive list of topics that promoted women as informed and active
citizens, the development of social policy, and the accessibility of maternal health services.

**Provincial Support**

Our conversation turned to the provincial Women’s Institute and the support from the government. I asked:

*(Katie)*: Do you think there is enough support from the government?

*(Nellie)*: There is and there isn’t. They could make things much easier for us. There are certain members at the government whose mothers were Institute members or their grandmothers, and they know who we are and what we do because of that. There are other ones who haven’t a clue who the Women’s Institute are and so they are just a bunch of ladies running around and yacking and we don’t want to pay any attention to them because they’re just gonna be a waste of our time. Um if you get a minister of Agriculture who knows who you are, it’s much easier to get programs through or help with.

*(Katie)*: When you were the President, how much time did you interact with government officials or even the minister?

*(Nellie)*: Not a lot, not probably as much as we should have. Partly our fault for not being there with them, we probably should have met with them more than we did.

*(Katie)*: Was there opportunity there for you to do that?

*(Nellie)*: There was some opportunity yes because we did on occasion meet with the Minister of Agriculture. I think we, in a whole lot of areas, got complacent...we have a liaison with the Department of Agriculture who sits on
our board with us and is in contact with us if we need information or need to know about stuff or need something done we contact her and then she acts through us. So as long as she is working and is our person we are not too badly off with the government.

(Katie): So you said that ah the opportunities were maybe there but were you too busy?

(Nellie): We didn’t think there was a need to. Things weren’t going along too badly. Hey we get $7 a member so we don’t want to rock the boat. Just don’t get them upset, don’t make them look at us too closely or they’ll take our money away.

(Katie): Is there a silver lining in that, let’s say the government phased out the $7 per member, is there an opportunity for more control, for you to own more control without government?

(Nellie): Their control over our organization is very, very limited. No, if we lose the $7 per member, we’re sunk probably. We need to be more financially stable than we are because we could lose it anytime, but we’re not. Unless we can increase our memberships, it’s not going to happen…we are probably in danger of disappearing for financial reasons only. There are still a lot of members who would fight for the Institute but if you can’t pay your bills, you can’t exist.

...for the provincial organization, we have to pay the national organization $5 per member. And some of our members don’t think we should be paying them anything. Well, we’re not a national organization if we don’t support our national office. They can’t exist on their own either and some people say who needs them
we could be by ourself. Well yes, we probably could for a while but how do we be in contact with BC and find out what’s going on with BC if we’re not a national organization and if we’re not a national organization we’re not going to be an international organization. And it costs us so much a member to be part of the Associated Country Women. If we got members and we’re apart of them, we got to pay our fees in order for them to exist. We really need to have a provincial office...Otherwise the information is not going to get filtered out to the branches.

With dwindling membership numbers coupled with a lack of financial support from the province, learning opportunities for NBWI members are affected. Area directors who represent the provincial board are required to participate at area conventions to learn about what is happening at the district and branch levels. At one time the districts funded the area directors to attend the area conventions but given a shortage in funding, these accommodations now come from the provincial NBWI budget.

Labels

(Katie): Would you consider yourself an activist?

(Nellie): Umm I, I, I don’t know that activist is the right term either. I’m not sure what I am (laughs). I don’t know if there’s a word. I guess I’m a “passivist activist” as opposed to a militant activist. I’m not big on confrontation and conflict. I don’t deal well with conflict.

(Katie): So not the overt activist, more under the radar?

(Nellie): Yes, yeah.

(Katie): and the Institute in general?
(Nellie): That’s where it is too and that’s part of our problem. I do, I understand that it’s a problem...it is because people don’t know what we do.

(Katie): Do you think that you learned to become this “activist” or this person who creates change because of Institute?

(Nellie): Probably. Between that and the Learning Disabilities Association. Cause I joined them at the same time. I was on the national board there as well as their adult representative. When I became the area director, I had the chance to go further on the Learning Disability Board or further on the WI board, and I thought I think I can make more of a difference with Women’s Institute than I can with the Learning Disability because I know my limitations and I’m not going to be able to make that much of a difference, there, on a national level. The Women’s Institute I can make more of a difference.

As we neared four o’clock I wanted to be respectful of the end of the work day, so we discussed next steps and agreed to speak in the coming months. I gave her a tin of local maple tea to thank her for her participation.

A Narrative Account of Emily

I have known Emily for about ten years. Her daughters were friends of mine in high school. Eight years after high school I saw Emily at an annual Institute provincial convention in 2012 around the time I was relearning what the organization was all about. We exchanged numbers, added each other to Facebook and reconnetced in 2015 for an interview. One key theme that emerged in my encounters with Emily was that in all forms of our communication leading up to our meeting and even thereafter, we used social media to connect. I had messaged Emily via a Facebook private chat to invite her
to participate in my research and we would further the dialogue in between the in-person meet-ups via Facebook.

Emily and I met for the first interview on October 31st, 2015 at a cafe located roughly 20 minutes from her home. We met again in January 20th, 2016 at the same café to negotiate the narrative accounts. The setting was much different than the former interviews I conducted in the homes of Institute members. Predictably, a noisy cafe did not offer the same solitude as an in-home interview but nonetheless I was excited to meet with Emily in a new, casual location. As we began the interview the coffee shop music and the whistling sounds from the steam machine faded into the background. We started the conversation with the current state of the Institute and the inevitable topic of attrition. Emily’s branch is an active group in the community and they have an optimistic outlook for enriching their membership enrolment. Their branch operates quite freely in that they are willing to waive the Institute’s membership requirements in return for new women to participate freely without commitment. Emily explains this point further:

(Emily): The older women are no longer able to attend so they’re [the branches] closing up. We’re trying to recruit younger women. Our Institute has four new women under the age 30.

But you know what, there’s a lot of people out there who will work with you when you have programs, who don’t want to join an organization because there’s a lot that goes on. Time, right, people need time. We’ve talked about doing a farmer’s market to bring people in to show them about how to handle food, canning, you know preserving all the stuff that you grow in your garden. A lot of people are doing their own gardens. But you have to get a license, you have to contact a
whole bunch of people. Trying to contact them is... “do this, do that, where are you going to be doing it, do you have an extra sink, are you registered?” ...people have to inspect. The girls wanted it to happen last year, but the people we contacted didn’t contact us back in time.

Because women have limited time and may not want to fully commit to joining the NBWI, Emily’s branch welcomes any and all types of participation.

Emily’s Institute History

Emily has been very active in the short eight years of her membership. She has held leadership roles for the majority of her Institute career. Emily is the Branch President and has been for the last six years. She also holds the role of District Vice President. Interestingly, the same techniques that attracted Emily to the organization eight years ago are the same practices she employs for eliciting the interests from new women in her community. She gives new members a reason to join and raises awareness by giving back:

(Emily): When we first moved here, there was a woman who always phoned up and said “can you come help us do this, can you help us do that?” and I said “not a problem”, [my husband] and I would help out. [She said] “it doesn’t cost very much to join so why don’t you join?” But our older women, women who were really the pillar of the women’s institute have passed away. Our oldest one is 93 or 94 and she doesn’t attend meetings anymore. So we just include her in on our nominal roll. We pay her fees for her even though she’s not actively participating.

(Katie): How many members do you have right now?
(Emily): Seven at the branch. As a district I’m not sure. There’s so many branches who have women, one or two, but then there’s other ones that have three women, but some are hard to get up and go in the winter you know. Who’s going to do their driving? We said we would come get them.

(Katie): In (town name removed), there are a lot of young women and families moving there. It’s not a desolate area.

(Emily): It’s just a matter of time. The more things we do for the community. Ball is big now where they have fifty kids coming in for ball. So our Women’s Institute bought helmets for them. Now they’ll know there is a community service out there.

Come out, come and join, see what we do.

Emily had no interest in holding leadership roles at the provincial level. When I asked her if she would ever consider the provincial presidential position she replied “No! It’s too much work. And people don’t like you”. She was unsure as to why that perception existed but nonetheless she was quite content with her district and branch roles. To that point I asked about her experience working with the Minister of Agriculture and how she felt about the government’s level of support:

(Katie): Do you have interaction with the Minister of Agriculture? Tell me about that. Is there a lot of support?

(Emily): Oh yeah we do. We celebrated our, I want to say our 90th birthday a couple of years ago and they came and they come all the time when we ask. And so does the MLA. He was in there.

(Katie) Was his mother a member?

(Emily): I think so, and I think his grandmother was too in NBWI.
(Katie): I’ve heard that’s where a lot of support comes from when the minister or the people in the office or MLA have family members who were members. For you to say that you’ve invited the Minister of Agriculture, and he’s attended, that’s great because he/she isn’t coming otherwise?

(Emily): If he doesn’t show up he sends his representative.

(Katie): What does that do for the organization?

(Emily): It creates awareness but it helps too when we send resolutions. He backs us. He reads it, comes back with feedback to us.

New Ways of Thinking

Another Institute member relayed to me how progressive Emily’s branch is and how they are increasing their enrolment numbers by meeting the needs of younger women. I was eager to learn exactly what those techniques were. Emily explained:

(Emily): We have a Facebook page but we have a meeting once a month too. First Tuesday of every month... [we are going to have] Facebook meetings so that we can have a conversation, everybody’s at home, a web conference, so that people can sit in their own house. There’s a lot of them who have children so like at seven o’clock in the evening that’s bedtime, that’s crazy time for them so if we meet at nine o’clock, we sit down and we have our meeting.

(Katie): Do you post the minutes online?

(Emily): Mmhmm.

Emily’s story was threaded with themes of innovation and disrupting the way that branches can often find themselves working in isolation from their peers:
(Emily): This year we joined with (district name removed) for the district convention and um we normally have ours in August but we did this in October. I think we’re going to do it again. We do a lot of different things than they do. So we’ll learn from them.

It was good because there were a lot of branches there. We all stood up, gave a two-minute spiel on what our branch had done for the year. We’re quite active and we do a lot for the community...

(Katie) It sounds like you’re really active.

(Emily): I think because we have younger age groups...last October we went to the other branches and it was like “oh my god, we got to do that.”

(Katie): I’m actually really excited about this...what you’re telling me is completely different to what I’ve heard elsewhere. It’s helpful. You’re bringing in newer members and you’re growing.

(Emily): New members have different ideas. We got to go with the 21st century. We can’t stay back with Adelaide; we have to move forward. Although, if it wasn’t for her, we wouldn’t be taking it forward.

Emily even participates in a WI pen pal program with a woman in New Zealand. New Zealand’s WI organization is thriving with 85 active branches. Although Emily’s branch does not have the funds and resources of the New Zealand Women’s Institutes, she enjoys learning about different WIs around the world and what they do differently. I had assumed that Emily, like the other women I spoke with, found it difficult to cope with the lack of public funding. But that is not the case with her. She speaks of her branch as fiscally stable:
(Emily): We raise enough money in one month to cover all of their expenses for the entire year. We have fun. We get together, we have some wine and do things.

Access to Opportunities

From speaking with Emily I understood that the way the provincial Institute is structured creates unequal opportunities for women who are at the executive level compared to those who hold membership positions. New Brunswick hosted the Federated Women’s Institutes of Canada triennial convention in 2015 and it provided New Brunswick members the ability to participate. When the federated convention is held outside of New Brunswick the provincial president is usually the only one in attendance because the provincial organization sets aside a travel fund.

(Katie): Do you have the itch to go [to more FWIC conventions]?

(Emily): No because it’s the women at the higher upper that attend. We’re the districts. I’d be forking out my own money. They [at the executive level] have a travel fund.

As we neared the end of our conversation, I asked, “What keeps you going? What keeps you involved?” Emily responded:

(Emily): I like doing things for the community. I don’t know, it just makes me feel good.

(Katie): Do you think there’s hope for the NBWI?

(Emily): I just think we have to work together. We can’t have differences. We have to pull our socks up.

At the end of our second meeting I gave Emily a bag of coffee grinds from the café as a thank you for participating in the research. We hugged goodbye and then she
asked that I give her the date of my thesis defense so that she could attend—albeit a little anxiously, I agreed.
CHAPTER SIX: THEMATIC FINDINGS

This section explores the themes that emerged from the data in the narrative accounts of the lives of the six NBWI members. The themes span the contexts of home, work, community, the NBWI organization. The participants’ experiences drawn from these themes were once lived in the present moment and are now experienced in the past through restorying and reflection. Some of the participant stories are infused with the possibility of a future with promising outlooks. These findings highlight how experience is in constant transition with “a past, present and a future” (Clandinin et al., 2010, p. 60), and that each participant’s experience was shaped by the places in which the experience occurred, and by the social events and personal feelings surrounding the inquiry. The themes that follow represent the temporal unfolding of the lives and experiences of women who participated in this research across two years of research in the social context of New Brunswick. The themes speak to the relational context of working alongside women who are intricately connected to their community, the people in their lives, the experiences that shaped their knowledge, and, in many cases, their identity.

Pseudonyms were used to conceal the names and identity of the participants. There are, however, detailed reflections in this research that beg the question of if participant’s stories could perhaps put them at risk of being identified. Given the relational nature of narrative research, I did member checks and received consent from participants to use their stories. The narrative accounts have all been co-constructed with participants, and I reconfirmed with each participant before the final narrative was completed.
The findings are divided into the following themes:

1. The Land
2. Negotiating New Ways of Thinking
3. Institutional Narratives
   a. Public Priorities
   b. Institutional Imbalances
4. Learning Narratives across Relationships, Time, and Place
5. Adult Educative Narratives

The Land

The land was a resonate thread in the narrative accounts that metaphorically spoke to the changing realities of the NBWI organization and its members. Of the three provinces that make up the Maritimes, New Brunswick is the largest in land mass, stretching its borders between the provinces of Quebec and Nova Scotia, and to the state of Maine in the United States. It is a province rich in natural resources with energy and related products as its largest major export. The province is famous for the highest tides in the world and its bays, rivers, and lakes are the backbone of this beautiful region.

Aesthetically, New Brunswick is an appealing place for quaint living. Economically and socially, the province is in a state of crisis facing a multitude of challenges. New Brunswick has one of the highest rates of child poverty in the nation and one of the highest unemployment rates. The province faces a declining industry and a displaced workforce. The provincial government over the last couple of decades were under public scrutiny and questioned by the public on a number of contentious subjects some of which have included the Province’s interests in exploring the idea of extracting natural gas.
through hydraulic-fracturing, and when the Province abolished the New Brunswick Advisory Council on the Status of Women. Rural communities are severely impacted by the government’s decisions, yet it is in these small communities where people collectively take action to combat these issues. The Women’s Institute is one of those trailblazing community groups responsible for passing resolutions to the government for the betterment of the province and their community. Despite the turmoil happening in New Brunswick, the towns that I visited, nestled in the eastern region of the province, offered a new attitude to the harsh realities felt throughout much of the province. Life in these regions is rich in solidarity. The region embodies sustainable living and a modest yet fulfilling life. Living off the land is a common way of life, here.

The concept of the land speaks to two of the narrative commonplaces of ‘place’ and ‘sociality.’ Place is described by the physical space wherein the participants’ experiences take place, and sociality combines the personal and social conditions that surround the inquiry. Five out of the six interviews took place in members’ homes, predominately in the kitchen area. The kitchen is fundamental to the Maritime lifestyle. The kitchen is a collective environment where memories are born and stories are told. The home and its immediate surrounding is a key piece of history that shaped many of the participants’ experiences. For Kathleen, the land was a site for learning from her mother when she was a child and, as an adult, the land was a site for teaching her children the value of gratitude and hard work. The land reminded Kathleen of a better time in her life when she worked for good intention and where she felt that she lived an honest life. When she worked off the land for a major utilities company, she invested her time in doing things that she did not think made a difference to the world. She lost touch with the
lessons she learned while on the land and after much consideration, made the decision to resign from her paid work and go back to her roots on the land. Sisters Yvette and Sara have fond memories of their upbringing on the farm. This land is the same location where I met with Sara for our second interview at her lakeside camper situated behind the family’s farm. Sara’s narrative was imprinted with influences of the farm. This land still very much serves a purpose in Sara’s life. The lake is a place of retreat and relaxation in her summers and a local spot for her family to gather and share memories. Yvette, Kathleen’s sister, recalls raising her younger siblings on this land beginning in the 1930s while her father was away at war. The land was the place where she learned to become an adult.

Metaphorically, the land is survival. Water is retrieved from, shelter is built on, and food is grown from the land. Even the gifts I received from many of the participants were all grown from the land: tomatoes, pickled beets, and pickles. These gestures are representative of the lands’ prosperity. The land used to be controlled by the people, but within the last century however, some participants noticed stricter governmental policies encroaching on their communities. As Kathleen described “the government basically is growing our stuff and selling it back to us so we have no real input…you basically sell your soul to the government”. The agricultural sector in Canada is exposed to impeding pressure from the federal government that strives to gain shares in the global marketplace, competing for economic and exporting rights. The land was once the communities to own but now within the confines of changing policy and increasing control.
Similarly, the Women’s Institute was a source of survival to the communities it served during their prime years in the early 20th century. Several of the long-standing members with whom I spoke made reference to a binary Institute and its influence ‘back then’ compared to its influence ‘now’. According to Yvette, the Institute “back then”, in the early part of the century “brought everyone together; people to know people; [it] introduced new people”. Sara stated, “I remember we used to have educational programs—it was very interesting, and now we might have a reading or we might just quilt on a quilt”. For Kathleen “they just did so many things out of necessity and need for the betterment of the community, they didn't consciously realize what they were doing. They didn't realize the effect they would have…I don’t think women back in the forties’ waited for something to show itself. I think the minute they were aware of it, they acted on it”. Resonating throughout many of these stories was how the Women’s Institute served a stronger purpose and acted immediately in the early 20th century. Like the land, the NBWI was pivotal to the survival of the rural community, but today according to some members, it is fading in history and presence.

Interestingly, the boundaries that defined the physical space of the NBWI—which was represented by the homes I visited on the land—had begun to shift ever so slightly when I spoke with newer generations of members. What became apparent when speaking with newer members was the shifting reality of the land and how this is reflective of the changing demographics of the Institute. I first met with Nellie in the NBWI provincial office, and Emily and I met in a café. This is a stark difference from meeting members in personal spaces such as their homes. During this research, the boundaries that defined the place of the Institute evolved from a personal setting to public one. These changing
locations speaks to the changing realities of the Institute and, subsequently, its members. New technologies are making it easier for Institutes in Canada to communicate and connect and are changing the ways younger generations work within the Institute. I heard stories from Nellie and Emily about other Canadian Institutes that are thriving and hosting their monthly meetings in pubs and posting their minutes via social media. These Institutes have gained attention from other Institutes for their willingness to accept change. The commonplace of ‘place’ speaks to the shifting realities of the WI. As Emily precisely put it, “new members have different ideas…We’ve got to go with the 21st century. We can’t stay back with Adelaide; we have to move forward”. The community that had once relied on the NBWI for its source of survival, no longer draws its strength from the organization. The NBWI has had to change its approach to help the community see its value once again.

Interestingly, participants did not remark about, nor seemed subtly aware of, the loss of control they felt over their land and how that ironically speaks to settler colonization (see Tuck, 2012) of Canadian Aboriginal communities. The very land that some of the participants felt a lack of control over is not theirs to own; the land is a result of settler’s destructive practices of subjugation and dislocation of Aboriginal communities. No First Nations women participated in the research and of the women who did, they brought with them to this research a white settler perspective. Their understanding of relation to the land is very much a colonial perspective.

**Negotiating New Ways of Thinking**

A common thread that resonated throughout the narrative accounts was the challenges of increasing NBWI membership and the subsequent future of the Institute.
Disbandment is a popular topic amongst members. Membership is dwindling and women are questioning the future of the organization. Rose believed that the decline in membership is due to an aging member population with older members “running out of steam”. In Nellie’s perspective, members have “gotten tired” and have lost our way…one of the main needs of the Women’s Institute when they first started was to promote leadership among women, and then I think we kind of lost our way because we didn’t have a specific goal that we could put our hands on and we become more social which isn’t a bad thing because that is very important too, but we didn’t have the concrete projects to do.

Changing social norms was another factor that participants noted as reasons for the decline in membership. More women are engaged in paid labour, single mothers cannot find the time or energy to participate, and lifestyles have changed. According to Yvette, younger women today have little interest in their small remote communities because they have easy access and purpose outside of the community. Noted by all of the interviewees was the difficulty in making the Institute appealing to younger audiences. In trying to employ new strategies for change, some members have faced considerable resistance from within the organization. According to Kathleen, members do not want to change. Nellie too believed that it is difficult to effect change when some members only “want clones”. Nellie recalls instances where new members of the Institute were received with a cold welcome by existing members. These new members had an unpleasant experience and, as a result, never returned to the organization. Many of the members I spoke with were caught in this middle ground between knowing the Institute’s potential, yet caught
unable to move forward for reasons such as a lack of funding, uncertainty with how to effect change, and a lack of people willing to accept change.

New members I spoke with represented a shift in thinking and had a new positive outlook for how the NBWI can employ strategies for increasing membership. Emily and Nellie recognize the realities of the state of the organization with its decline in membership each year, but their stories also speak to the potential of an optimistic future for the Institute. Emily increased the membership in her branch from two to seven. Recognizing the emerging movement to grow food locally in New Brunswick, Emily attended a food mentoring workshop and her branch decided to start a community garden as a result. The garden garnered interest from other local community groups who volunteered their time. Curious of who the WI was, two members from a local adult learning centre who volunteered at the garden project decided to join Emily’s branch. By starting an initiative that spoke to the interests of the community, Emily was able to successfully recruit two new members. Nellie informed me about Emily’s WI branch and their successful increase in membership. She notes, “that’s the branches that are getting younger members...giving them a reason to join. And they’re willing to accept the changes…” (Nellie).

Nellie, who holds leadership roles at the provincial and national WI levels gets an inside look at what other Institutes are doing across Canada by attending national conventions as a representative of New Brunswick’s provincial Institute. She recalls how one thriving branch in Ontario hosts their meetings in pubs. A casual environment like a pub defies the stereotypical bureaucratic environment of the WI. Nellie anticipates resistance with trying to bring that idea to New Brunswick:
They meet in a pub. I can imagine if we suggested that to some of our members...

People don’t seem to understand that. If you want them as members, you have to give them what they want…they’re going to make a difference and they’re have fun doing it.

Nellie identified strategies that have proven successful in other Canadian Institutes, yet the reaction she anticipates receiving if she were to suggest this to her provincial Institute impacts her ability to challenge the norm of the NBWI’s current traditional practices.

Emily’s branch is moving from in-person meetings to online through web conferencing technology. Emily’s branch has a lot of members who attend night classes and who have young children. As a result, they are going to pilot their monthly meeting online in the hope of better meeting members’ needs.

**Institutional Narratives**

Embedded in many of the participants’ narrative accounts were threads of challenges facing members that develop at the institutional level both inside the organization, and outside at the provincial level. There are themes related to funding concerns and the resulting pressures and emotions that ensue. Many of the members felt silenced when they drew attention at Institute events about the nominally low amount of public funding that the organization receives. Others felt guilty about asking the board for financial support to attend conventions. Some of the women I spoke with who were experiencing the financial burden felt pressure from districts in the province that were financially stable. These emotions and experiences are described further in the next section.
Public Priorities

Funding from the provincial government is very low for the NBWI and these fiscal troubles create tensions between branches and districts. Historically, the provincial departments of Agriculture funded all of the Institutes in Canada. Over the century however, public funding to the Women’s Institutes was removed in certain regions of the nation and many of the provincial WIs have learned to be self-sustaining without governmental financial support. In New Brunswick the Department of Agriculture, Aquaculture and Fisheries continues to sponsor $7 per member to the organization each year. With 700 members currently, that is nearly $5000 in public finding. According to Kathleen, Sara, and Nellie, the government does not do enough to support the organization. These concerns from members stem from the difficulties with stretching $5000 across the year. The NBWI have led integral campaigns and supported a number of programs over the decades. They have proposed a number of resolutions to the province that have impacted every woman and family in the province and, in return, receive only $7 per member of public funding.

The effects of the lack of public financial support are felt between members as well. People like Kathleen, who are strong proponents for change and to disrupting traditional ways of operating the Institute, have felt silenced in their pursuits. During a round table at an annual provincial Institute convention, Kathleen queried why the government had not increased their membership donation since before she joined the organization in the 1980s. Another member at the table told Kathleen to “not jingle the chain because we could just end up losing it if we speak up”. As a provincial president, even Nellie has felt restrained in pushing the boundaries:
I think we, in a whole lot of areas, got complacent...hey we get $7 a member so we don’t want to rock the boat. Just don’t get them upset, don’t make them look at us too closely or they’ll take our money away.

Sara and Emily’s stories also spoke to the implications of funding. When members of Sara’s branch were considering if they should attend one of the annual provincial conventions, she remembered thinking that if they attended they would have had to pay for travel and food expenses out of pocket. “It’s interesting but if I went, I would go on my own. I wouldn’t ask the Institute to pay. There’s not enough money” (Sara). New Brunswick hosted the FWIC tri-annual conference in 2015 and when I asked Emily if she would attend another federated conference, she explained that she would not attend because she would be responsible to pay out of pocket.

Financial insecurities also create tensions between branches and districts. According to Sara:

They [another district institute] have a large membership. They have lots of money...They said they thought we should pay $25 per capita...we [currently] pay $20...I think we pay $170 to head office, then we support the [Institute] home in Woodstock.

In the end, Sara and her district resisted the pressure to conform to the other district’s request to increase their per capita fees, and instead decided to keep the expenditures the same.

Rose had a different perspective for how the government has shifted their support to the Institute over the years. She states:
I think it’s probably helped in many of the things Institutes did with the Department of Agriculture and 4-H; it sort of in many ways validated what they were doing and trying to learn, etc. When our numbers were larger, I’m sure it gave some credence to the resolutions passed at conventions. There were people in government asking ‘what are the women in rural thinking?’ Some of the role of the Women’s Institute—I’m thinking in particular healthcare—has taken over by government in terms of baby clinics, ah, disease control, immunization and all of these things no longer need to be sponsored by a rural group.

Rose speaks about the shifts in Canada’s public policy on social reform. At one time it was the shared responsibility of community groups like the WI to carry out reformatory programs for rural regions in the province. In the early to mid-19th century, these programs elevated the WI’s credibility within the public sector because governments relied on their provincial Institute to represent the rural voice and speak about rural matters that deserved policy attention. The government now privatizes many of these services to third party entities, revoking responsibility from voluntary organizations (Meinhard & Foster, 2003).

Institutional Imbalances

A pillar of the WI is their democratic decision-making organized by a voting system that is equally weighted amongst members at all levels of the organization. When speaking with women at the local Institute, branch and district levels, there were contradictory stories of the democratic practices that are central to the Institute. Kathleen stories her experience of rejection from a president who immediately dismissed one of her proposals. This proposal was designed to help facilitate communication and
collaboration amongst the districts. Kathleen was met with resistance from the president who immediately voted against the idea. Kathleen remembered the then president responding with: “my board will never agree to that”. The president’s immediate decision was a breach of the democratic integrity that is central to the organization. With great despair, Kathleen felt weakened and defeated. When Kathleen spoke to me about this situation, she had not given up on her idea to co-develop a travelling district committee. Kathleen’s experience is in temporal transition. The president’s decision to dismiss Kathleen’s proposal was a past experience that left Kathleen feeling weakened, yet she intends to breathe new life into the proposal, reshaping that experience into a future event that she will back with determination and hope.

Nellie, a representative on the provincial board, admits there is a divide between executives and members. Nellie knows how difficult it is to disseminate information from the board to the districts then to the branches and on to members. She empathizes with members who feel at a distance to the board because she at one time held the same views. Since Nellie has served the Institute in provincial and national leadership roles, she can better relate to members and hopes that she can help narrow the perceptions about the executive board with her record of success as provincial president. Nellie has learned to negotiate the balance that comes with upholding leadership roles on the board (bureaucracy) with that of empowering members and empathizing with them (feminism). In listening to Nellie’s stories as a representative of the board, her solutions for better creating synergies between the levels of the organization are directly reflective of the solutions that Kathleen proposed to the then president. Ironically, if Kathleen’s proposal
had reached the executive board, perhaps other executives like Nellie would have enabled Kathleen’s proposal to be realized.

**Learning Narratives across Relationships, Time, and Place**

Learning narratives were embedded in members’ stories and in their relationships across time and across places. Many of the women I spoke with were influenced by their experiences outside of the Institute in forming their activism. Rose partly related her activism to her work at the New Brunswick Advisory Council on the Status of Women. Rose was part of the founding years of the council in the 1970s. The Council undertook significant work for women in New Brunswick and Rose was an integral change agent during her time on the Council. Similarly, Kathleen’s learnings were influenced externally from the Institute. Her learnings spanned the course of her lifetime, not from a book but from the value of her experience on the land. She relies heavily on religious beliefs of God’s intention for her to work the soil and live an authentic life on the land. She recalled, “The farther away we drifted from the land, the more we got in trouble” (Kathleen). The land taught Kathleen to be fair and equitable and to overachieve so that when she leaves this earth, she is remembered for her accomplishments and the good she brought to her family and community. Kathleen speaks fondly of her memories on the farm where she and her family had once lived. That land shaped Kathleen’s identity as a mother and a teacher to her children, and as a religious person. The land that Kathleen speaks so fondly of is also the place where she was ostracized and the subject of rumor in her community. This tumultuous period resulted from her community’s attempts to control her family because of their decisions to live differently—without electricity or plumbing—and because of her family’s socioeconomic status. Through these encounters,
Kathleen learned to think of herself as a “very shy backward person. I didn’t have a lot of confidence but I was good at what I knew I could do”. In attending to the three-dimensional space of narrative inquiry, temporality, sociality, and place specify the dimensions of Kathleen’s learning from the land. When Kathleen speaks about her late husband, to whom she willed the farm when they divorced, I sensed despair and tension when she thinks of that land now. Kathleen explained that the land had grown over and the farm was not the same place she once remembered. Kathleen’s experience on the land is in temporal transition. At one time the lifestyle that Kathleen built for her children and the positive experiences she remembers on the land had influenced her identity. Now that Kathleen has built new experiences away from the farm, the land that she now calls home represents her new life and her changing identity. By delving into the temporality of Kathleen’s experiences on the land, the land’s influence on Kathleen’s life was partly shaped by the social conditions (her community) that ostracized her family, and by her strong will and determination to prove those families wrong. Her identity changed over the years and her personal feelings about the land had shifted as a result of changes to her life.

For other participants in this research, their learning developed as a result of their membership with the Women’s Institute. Emily learned the value of collaborating and enhancing learning opportunities by coming together with other districts to host annual conventions. Sara learned about the administrative intricacies through holding the position of President in her branch. For Nellie, provincial leadership roles afforded her the ability to participate in national Federated Women’s Institutes of Canada conferences and internationally at the Associated Country Women of the World convention in India.
These experiences helped shape her knowledge about culturally imbedded issues that impact women. India opened her eyes to seeing the world differently and to the complexities and the magnitude of problems facing women in the world.

**Adult Educative Narratives**

Students and educators alike question me as to how educative the Women’s Institute really is in its current practices. I recognize that I come to the field of inquiry with a somewhat biased and privileged opinion about the Institute, and this is a fair question to ask given that the organization is typically recognized in the literature for its historical contributions to Canada’s adult education sector. In this section, I address the questions posed by social movement learning and emancipatory learning researchers like Welton (1993) and Foley (2001) to understand what people are actually learning and teaching in these sites. Foley remarks that the content of learning may be:

Technical (about how to do a particular task); or it may be social, cultural and political (about how people relate to each other in a particular situation, or about what their actual core values are, or about who has power and how they use it). The learning may be deliberate and formal (as in courses, training sessions and workshops), but mostly it will be informal and incidental. As people live and work they continually learn. Most of this learning is unplanned, and it is often tacit; but it is very powerful. (Foley, 2001, p. 72)

As a result of the inquiry into the lives and experiences of NBWI members, their learning experiences have spoken to many aspects of what Foley (2001) outlined. Sumner (2013) points to the integral role that food plays in community development, which brings people together for learning and community action. When Emily’s branch started a
community food garden, it encouraged a group collective and a site for informal learning and education. The strategies that Emily employed in her community were evident in the Antigonish Movement where cooperatives developed centering on local to local food collectives through informal learning and teaching activities.

Emancipatory learning is a type of adult learning that “free[s] learners from the forces that limit their options and control over their lives and to move them to take action to bring about social and political change (Imel, 1999, p. 3). Kathleen and her family have been impacted by the oppressive nature of the practices of the elite institutions in her community comprised of churches, schools, and affluent families. Because of their socioeconomic status, Kathleen’s daughter was not selected valedictorian despite her holding the highest academic standing in grades ten, eleven, and twelve. Kathleen learned about the complex relations of power and privilege that serve the interests of the elite class that resulted in the subjugation of her daughter’s academic achievements. To regain control over the school system that failed to recognize and reward her daughter’s academic standing, Kathleen found justice when her daughter won the Governor General’s Award for distinct academic standing. This public recognition amongst the people who tried to subjugate her family was a redeeming moment for Kathleen, for they could not control her daughter’s success. Emancipatory learning occurs when learners take action against the forces that control their lives, and in this process work towards social and political change (Imel, 1999). These experiences have partly shaped Kathleen’s value system to treat people equally and fairly despite status and privilege, and this is her way of taking action to bring about social change. While Kathleen did not experience this emancipatory learning by engaging in activities within her Women’s
Institute, the value of her experiences that occurred outside of the Institute and in her community adds to the diverse nature of the members of the WI organization. The experiences that inform members’ practices from both inside and outside the organization facilitates a culturally enriched organization that provides members with a platform to effect change.
CHAPTER SEVEN: ANALYSIS & DISCUSSION

The purpose of this research was to answer the research question that asked if the members of the New Brunswick Women’s Institute organization had learning experiences similar to the literature that tends to simplify and essentializes women’s learning journeys. I used narrative inquiry as a methodology to collect the data and identify the resonant themes that emerged from each of the six narrative accounts. From there, I applied discourse analysis to the resonant themes to help answer the research question. In narrative research, some researchers choose to analyze the narrative accounts that they co-developed with their participants and the outcomes of analyzing the narrative accounts results in producing a list of the common themes (see for example Clandinin et al., 2010). These themes can highlight gaps, dissonances, and silences across the lives of participants and serve as the analysis of the research text. For the purpose of my research, I did not analyze the narrative accounts but instead analyzed the common themes that emerged from the narrative accounts. The themes served to illustrate the common experiences shared across participants’ stories. The themes were read using a feminist poststructural lens and analyzed using discourse analysis to highlight the ways in which discourse shapes women’s learning experiences. Identifying the discourses that were embedded in the common themes made visible the power relationships across participants’ experiences (English, 2006). Identifying these power relationships helped with answering the research question.

Discourse analysis is a tool that allowed me to see the workings of power in an unlikely location of the New Brunswick Women’s Institute. The analysis enabled me to study the discourses and practices that produce knowledge and power relations (Eyre,
The analysis was guided by Foucault’s (1980) methodological precautions for analysis. These precautions guide researchers to focus on power in its local context where it is exercised, to the technologies that mobilize its existence. These technologies operate within a larger system that is not exclusive to one person who exercises power but to a net-like system that exercises power with an objective of producing knowledge.

Analyzing the narrative accounts of Women’s Institute members provided an inside look at the everyday practices of power and resistance. The literature on gender and learning describes women as organizing harmoniously and free from conflict, yet over the course of the two years of this research, it became apparent that there are other elements and complexities about women’s learning in the Women’s Institute that contradict the mainstream literature. The following section describes the dominant discourses to emerge from the thematic findings.

**Cost-Containing Discourses**

The provincial Department of Agriculture, Aquaculture and Fisheries in New Brunswick supports the NBWI by sponsoring $7 per member each year. This funding has remained the same for several decades and it has caused concern for a number of the participants with whom I spoke during the study. There have been annual strategies from the government of New Brunswick to resolve their fiscal debt and implement plans to eliminate redundancies in spending. These cost-containing discourses have reinforced complacency for a number of participants to remain silent and refrain from questioning the government’s financial contribution. These cost-containing discourses have also created internal competition within the NBWI, between branches and districts.
In the instances where Nellie and Kathleen were silenced by their NBWI colleagues for asking why the government have not donated more funding to the organization, silencing is a discursive practice that reveals how power is chain-like, linked to all levels of society and in constant transit, never exercised by only one person (Foucault, 1980). In this example, power flows from the provincial department’s cost containing measures and then circulates to all corners of the NBWI organization. Disciplinary power ensues when members look out for one another by advising against asking any questions about funding for fear of seeming ungrateful, and for fear of losing funding altogether. Members learn to stay silent through this consistent reinforcement of hushing their Institute colleagues when they question a contentious government topic. This continual practice of ‘advising against’ is a technology of disciplinary power (self-surveillance) that creates a method of supervision over others and oneself. Self-surveillance becomes reproductive in that it produces new knowledge for members who conscientiously monitor their own behavior so as to not make the mistake of questioning the government’s sponsorship; somewhere and somehow, a government official may learn that the NBWI is ungrateful for their public funding.

Power’s capillary nature flows to all levels of the organization with the lack of government funding that creates pressures and feelings of guilt amongst some of the members I spoke with. Many of the women I spoke with could only attend the provincial convention if they could afford it at their own expense. As a result, members were left with choosing between missing conventions that offer learning and development opportunities versus funding it themselves. Sara, for example, felt guilty to ask the board to pay for a member of her branch to attend the provincial convention.
Because of the cost-containing measures employed by the provincial government, competition ensued between neighboring NBWI districts. According to Sara, she felt pressure from another district that wanted to increase annual membership fees. Sara’s district is on the brink of disbandment with very few dollars in their district bank account. This other district, according to Sara, had enough financial stability to increase membership fees. Sara was displeased that the other district would even suggest that all of the districts increase their membership fees. In listening to Sara’s story, I envisioned that the NBWI had felt the effects of a neoliberal competitive system in which members themselves will soon be (if not already) “persuaded to freely accept responsibility both for themselves as individual and for the success of their workplace [or in this case, NBWI organization]” (Davies, Saltmarsh, 2007, p. 3). Through this new economy of operating, the NBWI may soon discover that they are part of a larger ecosystem that is embedded with competition and individualization, and that the government is reducing its role in taking any responsibility for the NBWI’s success. Instead, members view the success of the NBWI as their responsibility and take measures into their own hands as is the case with Sara feeling pressured to increase her district’s membership fees.

**Neoliberal Discourses**

The move towards public policies that privatize social programs has influenced the services that rural communities can offer. Neoliberal discourses which place value on individualization, competition, and the marketplace shape learning contexts (Gouthro, 2009). Learning becomes more about skills and training to facilitate work entry or re-entry, and less about the personal, social, and political change that are central to adult education (Benjamin, White, MacKeracher, & Stella, 2012). In this light, education
becomes less about the citizen’s right and more about economic advantage: “Driven by economic crisis and global economic competition, governments have transformed education from a citizen’s right into an instrument of economic policy” (Foley, 2001, p. 80).

Over the years, the NBWI experienced the effects of neoliberalism with changing governmental priorities and a shift in responsibility for delivering community programs. Following World War II, the voluntary sector formed part of a wider social welfare system that was responsible for delivering a variety of social services to their communities (Meinhard & Foster, 2003). The Institute was one of the groups responsible for food initiatives and literacy programs in their communities. According to Rose, the NBWI’s responsibility for delivering these programs to their communities validated their cause. Non-formal community-based adult education programs in New Brunswick are now removed from the NBWI’s purview and have become the responsibility of joint initiatives between the government and regional adult learning committees. There are 12 government-funded regional adult learning committees in the province of New Brunswick and these committees deliver learning services to the public in various formats on diverse subjects. These subjects include computer based training, skills development, GED training, and software and hardware training (Benjamin et al., 2012). Aligning with New Brunswick’s neoliberal skills-agenda, these learning centres are designed to increase the number of New Brunswick residents in the workforce. The Province’s adult education objectives promote education for a knowledge economy, one that is skilled and prepared for employability. New Brunswick’s education agenda fails to uphold Canada’s rich adult education heritage that was built on educating for social change. These quasi-
governmental community adult learning centres serve the interests of the government in controlling the teaching, learning, and curriculum of adult education in the province. Power shifts, or so it seems, from what was once the government’s responsibility to ensure the delivery of public adult education, to now the responsibility of community-government partnership groups to deliver adult educational programs to rural communities. The responsibility for delivering quality education in communities that may otherwise not have the same access to urban centres with strong educational resources is left to the guises of these community adult learning centres. These centres become politically and economically useful because the government can keep an arm’s length distance, far enough that the centres are responsible for their own success, and failure. Revoking social and educative responsibilities from educational groups like the NBWI further displaces women’s issues from the public forum and devalues the contributions from women’s groups and adult educators alike.

The effects of neoliberalism discourses are also experienced in the private world, through the lack of people’s leisure time. Young women may find it difficult to participate in the Women’s Institute given their lack of spare time. As Yvette explained “You people are on the go all the time. A lot of you are working. When you do have time off, you want to spend it with your husband…What time do you have in the afternoon to see your neighbors? I don’t know how they do it.” Menzies (2005) questioned this phenomenon by asking “whatever happened to the leisure society?” (p. 52). Menzies (2005) equates the decline in leisure time with the new economy that is driven by globalization and competition. The Canadian workforce has shifted in the 2000s to facilitate people working longer hours for less pay compared to previous decades.
(Menzies, 2005). Many sectors outsource their administrative functions to offshore business providers or pay minimal wages if they hire domestically. With fewer stable jobs in Canada, employees tend to work longer hours to show their loyalty to their employer (Menzies, 2005). Because of neoliberal discourses that infiltrate both public and private worlds, the NBWI is impacted by a decline in members due to a lack of leisure time for young women.

**Contradictions to Dominant Discourses**

The Women’s Institute is well known for its democratic sites for teaching and learning but findings reveal where these practices were contradicted and then challenged. Democratic sites for education embody a “genuine sharing of power among learners and teachers” (Foley, 2001, p. 74). Nellie and her branch resisted the operational discourses from her board when they collectively chose to not disclose their earnings after selling their branch’s WI hall for fear that the board would take their profits. This speaks to the micro-practices that are prevalent in the Institute with local branches forming their own identity and finding unique ways to circumvent the rigid organizational bureaucratic reporting policies. With continual fiscal insecurities and depleting resources inside the organization, it creates an environment of protection over territory and assets. Members learn unique ways of controlling and reporting their finances. Nellie and her branch’s decision to withhold their earnings from their provincial office contradicts the dominant discourses about women’s voluntary organizations that suggest they are free from division and discord (English, 2004).

Similarly, Kathleen’s story about how the provincial president rejected Kathleen’s proposal for a travelling district committee without taking the proposal to the board for
review is one filled with an imbalance of power. One might argue that the president exercised a sovereign form of power as the leader of the NBWI overshadowing a hierarchal and divisive influence over Kathleen; however, from a poststructuralist standpoint (Foucault, 1983), the president does not hold power—she exercises it to produce intended outcomes. The president’s immediate decision to dismiss Kathleen’s idea without taking it to the board for review is a mechanism of power that serves to circumvent the institutional democratic decision-making narratives and teach Kathleen that her visions are subjugated and discouraged. Conversely, in knowing about the fiscal struggles facing the organization, perhaps the president’s decision was economically situated in reducing the board’s workload given their depleting resources. When there is an exercise of power, immediately close by is an exercise of resistant (Brookfield, 2001; Foucault, 1982). For Kathleen who felt comfortable sharing her story with me, this is a form of resistance to the discursive practices of the president’s decision that had once silenced and subjugated her ideas. It is interesting to note that resistance does not have a time limit. It can be exercised months and years after a person experiences the effects of power.

Despite the literature that paints women’s organizations as non-hierarchal and non-bureaucratic (see Fondas, 1997), Nellie has learned to negotiate this binary by working within the rigid confines of running a nonprofit organization (bureaucratic) and working alongside members to advance women’s needs (feminism). Moreover, examples of contradictory discourses were evident in Emily’s and Nellie’s experiences when their two separate districts worked together for their annual district convention. Nellie faced resistance from a couple of members who chose not to participate because of their mixed
feelings and apprehensions that a formal amalgamation might happen between two districts due to their declining membership enrolment. These members feared losing their district’s identity. In some ways, the members who chose against participating in the amalgamated convention created contradictory discourses to the collective practices that underpin the Women’s Institute. These decisions contradict the dominant discourse surrounding women’s nonprofit groups as representative of one voice and operating harmoniously (English, 2006).

**Discussion**

The New Brunswick Women’s Institute organization seems an unlikely group in which to study the effects of power, knowledge, and discourse given the literature’s description of women’s learning and women’s organizations as inclusive and free from conflict. The findings suggest that the NBWI is an enriching site for learning opportunities for members and communities alike. The participants’ learning took many forms including incidental learning as described in the example of starting a community food garden and how that unintentionally elicited the interests from other community groups. Participants’ exhibited informal learning through experiencing the intricacies of working in leadership positions, attending conventions, experiencing democratic decision-making, and learning about their role in shaping social policy by proposing resolutions to their provincial and federal governments. For other participants, learning fell outside the remit of the Women's Institute and their identity was influenced by their involvement with feminist coalitions and other community organizations.

The findings further suggest that the NBWI is not exempt from producing knowledge through discourse, nor are they passive to resisting dominant discourses and
producing rival discourses. Through the production of discourse, some participants learned to be complacent, while others learned to resist and develop new discourses. The women who took part in this research told stories that contradict dominant thinking about women’s organizations and the women who make up women’s groups as working together harmoniously. While these characteristics of inclusiveness were evident in many of the stories, there were additional experiences shared that highlight the complexity in these women’s learning experiences, and that knowledge, power, and resistance can play a part in shaping those experiences.

**Resonant Themes**

Across the six narrative accounts, there were resonant themes that emerged that reflect the changing environment for the New Brunswick Women’s Institute. The land and its changing landscape was a resonating theme throughout a number of the narratives. Some of the participants’ stories pointed to how the land metaphorically represented the ways in which people have little control over what happens in their communities and how political forces have revoked responsibility and governance over people's well-being. Of the women I spoke with, there were mixed feelings about how political influences impacted the NBWI. For some of the women I interviewed, they thought the NBWI was once thriving and doing integral work for their communities in the early and mid-20th century; in the Institute’s current practices, they believe the organization is losing its stride. Other participants negotiated new ways of thinking about the future of the Institute. The drive to attract younger members to the organization and disrupting traditional ways of operating gives the organization new hope for a prosperous future. But that prosperous future will not come without struggle. The NBWI are not immune to
experiencing the pressures that the voluntary sector faces concerning funding, a lack of communication between the different levels of the organization, and a lack of resources. A number of participants’ spoke of how they were unable to attend important NBWI conventions because their branch was financially unstable, unable to support travel and lodging expenses. In other instances, the women I spoke with felt they were silenced by other members when they asked contentious questions, or, they avoided proposing new ideas about changing how the Institute operates for fear of resistance from members.

**Power, Knowledge, and Discourse**

The women who participated in this research are not passive recipients of discursive practices and attempts at subjugation; instead, many of the women exercised resistance to dominant discourses that tried to control their actions. In some cases, participants persevered until they believed their voices were heard. Other women produced rival discourses by finding unique and creative strategies to circumvent the Institute’s rigid reporting revenue policy. Exposing the discourses that were threaded in participants’ stories showed how knowledge is created through language, particularly in how discourses are used to control members’ behaviours. Some of the participants felt silenced when they asked a contentious question about the lack of government funding. Expanding on what the literature says about silence as a form of oppression (Belenky et al., 1986), the findings suggest two implications about the how members responded to silencing practices of power: complacency and resistance. In a number of instances, members silenced other members as a way to protect them from looking ungrateful about the government’s fiscal contributions. In this instance, silencing members was productive in that it created knowledge that questioning contentious topics related to the government
are not acceptable. These silencing practices created complacency and members learned to monitor their actions and behaviours. Executives were not outside of experiencing the effects of power. Nellie and Kathleen, who both held leadership roles, experienced the effects of self-surveillance when they were silenced by their Institute colleagues—they fell complacent to not interrogate further why their provincial government had not increased their NBWI funding in several years. In other instances, where silence was practiced as a form of power, members learned to resist these practices and instead produced new discourses to challenge and produce rival discourses. Interestingly, the findings show that in one instance, resisting dominant discourses does not have a time limit. For example, as a result of engaging in this research, Kathleen experienced empowerment by collaborating with me and sharing her stories. She believed she found a voice to resist and challenge a decision that subjugated her ideas, and she found her voice many months later.

In instances where silence was exercised as a form of power, it was practiced and sustained at the micro-levels of the NBWI. This supports Foucault’s (1980) notion that power is omnipresent, exercised by people in the masses in their everyday lives. Highlighting the power that members’ unlikely exercise in “obscure and hidden ways” (Brookfield, 2001, p. 3) is intended to recognize our unpredictable practices, and work towards reshaping our thinking and behaving. These findings support a contradiction to dominant thinking about women’s organizations—and the women who make up these groups. Women are breaking feminine ideals that their learning is free from conflict and that they only learn in harmony.
Implications

I came to this research with assumptions about the Women’s Institute that members are comprised of women who identify as activists, and that their intentions for joining are to enrich the lives of women. These assumptions were challenged by participants in several instances. Rose did not equate the Institute with influencing her activist identity. For Kathleen, learning to become a change agent was directly impacted by her experiences on the land, outside of the WI. Moreover, I had envisioned that members joined the Institute for an educative experience, yet Sara and Yvette joined the Institute for the social aspect. Their learning about the Institute’s educative causes were secondary to the social enrichment from the organization. By coming into this research with assumptions about the value of the WI, I failed to see the social enrichment and arts-based learning that is integral to the organization. Future research that explores the different forms of learning within the WI, such as quilting circles and arts-based learning workshops, would enhance and enrich the literature on arts in adult education (see Clover, 2005).

Choosing to study women’s learning experiences places value on and honours participants’ lives and opens the field for researchers to build new knowledges about similarities and differences in learning contexts. Feminist poststructuralism helped shed light on how knowledge, power, and resistance work together in often subtle and unexpected ways. For this reason, I hope the stories in the narrative accounts offer new exploratory grounds for researchers to continue the dialogue away from essentializing and simplifying women’s learning experiences. The findings from this study helped disrupt traditional assumptions about the New Brunswick Women’s Organization, and
about the complexity that makes up the experiences of women. In taking a similar approach to Burge (2011), who interviewed elder social activists in Atlantic Canada and invited Butterwick and Elfert (2012) to revisit the stories and further the field of inquiry to better understand social movement learning, I invite inquirers to listen to the stories of the six women who participated in this research and further the field of adult education, social activism, feminist research, and women’s learning experiences.
CHAPTER EIGHT: CONCLUSION

This research grew out of a need to enhance the literature on gender and learning that places considerable emphasis on women as connected, inclusive, and collaborative in their learning journeys. While these attributes are influential and central to women’s learning experiences, they fail to capture the complexities of women’s lives within a wider context of social, political, and economic influences. The research sought to answer the question “do women’s learning experiences accurately reflect the literature’s account of how women learn?” This research was guided by feminist poststructuralism to expose the practices that sustain assumptions and beliefs about women, and work to highlight injustices in order to create new knowledge and realities for marginalized groups. Feminist poststructuralists focus on the ways in which women are situated in society and how they are governed by and resist different forms of power (Weedon, 1987). Using narrative inquiry as a methodology, I interviewed six New Brunswick Women’s Institute members using a semi-structured interview format, and explored their narratives to understand the complexities that influence their learning experiences to help answer the research question. These women came from various backgrounds and life histories, and their learning was influenced by a multitude of institutional, social, political, and economic factors. There were similarities across participants’ learning, but more evident was how their learning was in temporal transition, fluidly influenced and redefined by the different relationships and places in their lives. The five themes that emerged from their stories were explored by attending to the narrative commonplaces of sociality, place, and temporality in order to understand the cultural, institutional, and social narratives that were embedded in participant’s experiences (Clandinin & Huber,
I applied discourse analysis to the five themes to help me explore the ways in which discourses produced knowledge, and how the women of this study disrupted those dominant discourses to create new rival discourses and new knowledge.

The land was a common theme in the narrative accounts that metaphorically spoke to the changing realities of the NBWI organization and its members. The NBWI was a source of strength to their communities during the 20th century where the community, the greater public, and the provincial government relied on the NBWI's causes. Like the land, the NBWI was instrumental to the survival of the rural community, but according to some members, the NBWI's presence today is fading.

Negotiating new ways of thinking was another common theme throughout participant’s stories. Unanimously, participants' opinions about the future of the NBWI was grim. The topic of disbandment was on all participants' minds, but how they combat these attrition challenges differed greatly amongst participants. A couple of the participants thought that overall, the majority of members in the NBWI do not want to change. Others were unsure of how to move forward and encourage new women to join. While there was a common thread of pessimism in speaking with participants about the future of the Institute, two of the women I interviewed negotiated a new way of thinking in predicting the NBWI's future success. These members described strategies they employed for increasing their local branch's membership and the strategies that other Institutes in Canada are doing to increase participation. They experienced resistance from within the organization when proposing new ways of operating, but through persistence, they were successful with implementing new strategies for change.
Institutional narratives were a common theme in which many of the participants that I interviewed faced similar challenges at an institutional level both inside the organization and outside at the provincial level. Lack of funding was a major concern that made it difficult operationally, and also created tension between branches and districts. Many of the participants felt silenced when they drew attention at Institute events about the lack of public funding that the organization receives. Other participants felt guilty about asking the board for financial support to attend conventions.

Learning narratives across relationships, time, and place was a common theme throughout participant stories. Some of the women I spoke with referenced how their learning was influenced by their experiences outside of the Institute, by participating in feminist committees or from life experiences from growing up in rural New Brunswick. Other participants spoke about the influence of the NBWI in shaping their learning.

Adult educative narratives were the last theme found in the narrative accounts. In speaking about how adult educative the NBWI actually is in its current practices, I turned to the stories from participants that related to encouraging community collectives through starting a food garden, and the informal learning and teaching that resulted. Emancipatory learning was evident in instances where members learned to take action against the forces that controlled their lives, and worked to achieve social justice.

The Dominant Discourses

Discourse analysis is the process of identifying the dominant discourses that people use to describe their experience in order to expose how their language is constructed through history and by their relation to one another (Raby, 2013). Using discourse analysis enabled me to study the discourses and practices that produced
knowledge and power relations in a given location (Eyre, 2000) of the New Brunswick Women's Institute. The discourses that I identified as a result of analyzing the thematic findings (common themes) were cost-containing discourses, neoliberal discourses, and contradictions to dominant discourses.

Cost-containing discourses: Because of the minimally low public funding from the Government of New Brunswick to the NBWI, a number of the stories from participants highlighted the power and influence of cost-containing discourses. These discourses resulted in complacency for a number of participants to remain silent and refrain from questioning the government’s financial contribution. Power's chain-like nature was evident when power was exercised from the government who has not increased their funding to the NBWI in many decades, to members then exercising disciplinary power of surveillance over oneself and each other to not question the government's contributions. Members felt guilty about asking for more funding, others felt pressured to do more with less.

Neoliberal discourses: The NBWI experienced the effects of neoliberalism with the way the government changed who is responsible for delivering community programs. The NBWI was once responsible for health and educational programs for the public. These responsibilities have either shifted to private enterprise or quasi-governmental community groups. These quasi-governmental community adult learning centres remove the teaching and learning plans from community educators to the responsibility of government extension groups. Revoking social and educative responsibilities from community groups that had once delivered these programs, like the NBWI, further displaces women’s issues from the public forum and devalues the contributions from
adult educators. The community then becomes responsible for delivering these programs and ensuring their success.

Contradictions to dominant discourses: The NBWI, like their sister Institutes in Canada and globally, are built on a foundation of democracy. The findings from this research revealed there were contradictions to dominant discourses about the Institute's democratic practices in a number of participants' stories. One of the participants produced rival discourses when she found a creative strategy to circumvent the Institute’s rigid reporting revenue policy. Others reflected on the imbalance of power within the NBWI and how they had to learn to navigate and resist the structural imbalances.

The findings of this research echo English’s (2008) assertions that there are no absolute truths to women’s learning but that of attending “to who they are as learners” (p. 117). We need to listen to women regardless of their roles and titles, despite the neighborhoods they identify with, or their educational achievements. Within the New Brunswick Women’s Institute, there are discursive barriers that create division between members and stripping down these barriers will help to encourage dialogue with members who work at all levels of the organization. It is important to recognize the knowledge and intuitive ideas from members who are based in non-executive roles. They are enriching their communities and creating change by disrupting the traditional ways of running their branch and district. Some of the women who participated in this research felt trapped behind bureaucratic barriers from the government’s cost-containing priorities that limit their participation in social learning opportunities. Other participants were motivated to effect change but did not know where to begin. This calls for the NBWI to
encourage collaboration at all levels, foster open dialogue, and advance learning and education opportunities for members.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION LETTER & INFORMED CONSENT

Date __________

Title: The New Brunswick’s Women’s Institute: Exploring Diversity in Women’s Learning Experiences

Name of Researcher: Katie Stella

Invitation to Participate_Informed Consent

Hello _______.

My name is Katie Stella, and I am a graduate student at the University of New Brunswick, completing a thesis towards a Master’s in Education. You have been referred to me as someone who may be interested in participating in my research. I am inviting you to participate in an interview that I am conducting to help me understand the ways women learn in the New Brunswick Women’s Institute. The research is intended to: (a) gain first-hand accounts from women about their learning experiences, (b) help adult educators better understand the dynamics of women’s learning in an effort to reconstruct/redesign their teaching/learning environments, and (c) help women to openly express identities that may not conform to social and cultural constructed definitions of femininity.
There are several publications that describe women’s organizations, and the learning that happens as a result of that organizing, as collaborative, free from conflict, and harmonious. I believe that further research is needed to better describe the challenges that women’s non-profit organizations face both internally and externally, and subsequently, the learning that takes place as a result of those challenges.

Your participation in the study would consist of discussing your experience as a member of the New Brunswick Women’s Institute. I would like to ask you questions about your experience with facing challenges both internally in the organization, and externally, and how you would describe your learning during those times.

In completing this research, I will be conducting approximately ten individual interviews. It is hoped that these interviews might take place in person but that may not always be possible. When it is not possible, an asynchronous email interview exchange can be arranged. With your consent, the interviews will be recorded.

Strict anonymity will be maintained with regard to all the data collected. You will not be identified by name, and every effort will be made to avoid identifying information in reporting the comments or information you supply about your experience. You will be assigned a pseudonym or number and we will use that when citing any comments and or information you provide. I will provide a copy
of your transcribed interview for you to review so that you can confirm your comments but also so that you can consider whether you feel any part of the interview might compromise your anonymity.

Participation in the study is voluntary and participants can withdraw from the study at any time. The interviews will be taped and transcribed as part of the data analysis process. The recordings and transcriptions will be securely stored until the completion of the project when they will be destroyed.

If you would like to receive feedback on the results of the study, I would be happy to provide a copy of the project report. You can indicate your wish to receive feedback on the informed consent letter that will be presented for your signature prior to the interview.

Should you wish to contact my thesis supervisor, who is supervising my research, to confirm or inquire further with regard to this research, you may contact Dr. Melissa White, Associate Professor, Faculty of Education, University of New Brunswick, 506 453-3545, Melissa.White@unb.ca. Should you wish to contact the Associate Dean of Graduate Programs, please contact Dr. David Wagner at 506-447-3294 or dwagner@unb.ca.

I am looking forward to conducting this research and to your potential participation in this study. Should you have questions or concerns, do not hesitate to contact me either by telephone, 506-476-2731 or email h7wwz@unb.ca.

Sincerely,
Katie Stella,
Graduate Student, Master’s of Education, University of New Brunswick

*****

Informed Consent

I am willing to participate in a research study undertaken by Katie Stella
(Graduate Student, University of New Brunswick) between (DATE) AND
(DATE).

I understand that:

1. The purpose of the study is as described above.
2. Strict confidentiality will be maintained by the researcher. However, given the small number of participants, their positions and the nature of the research, I may not be able to guarantee complete anonymity.
3. Interviews will take place during working hours and/or at the convenience of the participant.
4. Interviews will be taped for use by the researcher only as a means to analyze the information.
5. I can withdraw my participation at any time during the project.
6. I have read the letter of information

_____________________
_____________________
Participant Katie Stella
I wish to receive feedback on the project and request a copy of the final report:

___ or an executive summary: _____
APPENDIX B
INTERVIEW GUIDE

1. Let’s start by telling me about the Women’s Institute and your experience with the organization.

2. Describe the political landscape during the time you joined and your time with the WI.

3. I’m sure there have been topics that have interested you with regards to resolutions, guest speakers, events, etc. Tell me about that.

4. You must have faced some challenges over the years in your activity around issues that mattered most to you/the institute. Do any stand out for you? Let's begin with the first challenge you mentioned:

5. Describe a contentious issue in which your opinion was different than other members.
APPENDIX C

ORGANIZING THE THEMES

Katie Stella
Learnings

Katie Stella
Declining membership

Katie Stella
Declining membership

Katie Stella
Declining membership

Katie Stella
Declining membership

Katie Stella
Declining membership

Katie Stella
Declining membership
CURRICULAM VITAE

Candidate’s full name: Katheryn (Katie) Elizabeth Stella

Universities attended: Bachelor of Arts, St. Thomas University, 2008

Master of Business Administration, University of Phoenix, 2011

Publications:


Book Chapter:


Conference Presentations: