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Article

## **Multiple Voices and Methods: Listening to Women Who Are in Workplace Transition**

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### **Abstract**

In this article, the author illustrates, through one participant's transcripts, the two-part method used in research that sought a deeper understanding of the perceived learning of female professionals during workplace transition. Five women participated in a 1-hour interview and a focus group. To give voice to each participant while also identifying common themes and learning experiences, the author used a two-step research method. The first step entailed individual interviews, which the author analyzed using a voice-centered relational method. The author chose the second step, the focus group, to facilitate women's learning from each other's experience.

**Keywords:** adult learning, occupational transition, outplacement, females, career, women's education

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### **Introduction**

In this article, I will develop the two-part method used in research that involved interviewing women who had been involuntarily displaced from their corporate workplaces (Balan, 2004). I will provide a brief background on the career literature with respect to adult learning, women's careers, and women's experiences in outplacement. I will also detail where this research addresses a gap, specifically, women's experiences of learning during workplace transition.

Next, I will explicate the feminist and adult learning theoretical frameworks employed, as well as providing information on researcher positioning. Following an overview of the research method, I will provide details on a sample of the member-checking (Padgett, 1998) package of interpretations, which was provided to participants, through an illustration of one participant's transcripts. In this example, I expand on how to implement the listening guide (Gilligan, Spencer, Weinberg, & Bertsch, 2003) method of listening to multiple voices, composing an analysis, and creating and interpreting the "I-poem" inherent in the method.

I will then proceed to a discussion of the focus group and provide some feedback from the participants concerning their experiences of this activity. In the final section of the article, I provide some reflections and conclusions about the learning provided through the use of this two-part method.

### **Career and transition literature**

#### **Careers and learning: Continuous change**

Careers and lives are in a constant state of change due to pressures from globalization, increased competition, and cost-consciousness in corporate policies (Mallon & Cohen, 2001). These forces make organizational downsizing a common reality (Nelson & Burke, 1998). A person's initial choice for career rarely continues with him or her through his or her entire working life (Foord Kirk, 2003; Mergenhagen, 1991).

Adults are more likely to seek out learning when they encounter life-changing events to mediate stress, and those with the most education tend to engage in learning as an option more frequently than do those with lower levels of education (Zemke & Zemke, 1988). Workplace transition is an event that can lead adults to additional learning.

#### **Women's careers and women's experiences in outplacement**

Over the past 10 years, women's participation in the global workforce has increased by nearly 200 million and represents 40% of the global workforce (International Labor Organization [ILO], 2004). With women's increased participation in the workforce comes their increased participation in workplace transition and outplacement (Phelps & Mason, 1991). Women's and men's experiences of job loss, transition, and outplacement have been discovered to be different. Phelps and Mason found that women tend to stay in transition 38% longer than men; experience more emotional fallout; and examine their life's meaning, not simply the meaning of their jobs; and that older women might decide to leave the corporate world altogether in favor of self-employment opportunities. Women, regardless of their search strategies, have lower job satisfaction, salaries, and quality of work life than men have (Eby & Buch, 1994).

#### **Previous studies of transition**

Studies have been done on the transition from school to work (Olsen, 1998; Wentling & Waight, 2001). Mercer, Nichols, and Doyle (1989) have studied transition in general for women (i.e., not specifically workplace transition) and suggested that the roles society places on women and men lead to different transitional paths. When examining women's experiences in workplace transition, many researchers have focused on women exiting the corporate world for entrepreneurial ventures (Korn/Ferry International, 2001; Mallon & Cohen, 2001) or because the corporations no longer aligned with their values or developmental goals (Brewster, 1999; Silverstein, 2001). Other studies of women in workplace transition include studies of women's experiences in midlife career transition (Gordon, 1997), and of women's voluntary (Brown, 1999) and involuntary career changes (Kubicek, 2000).

Although these researchers looked specifically at women's experiences of transition, their focus was not on women's learning per se. Chalmers (2001) studied learning of both men and women making the transition to a self-directed work environment. Finally, although Howell, Carter, and Schied (2002) studied women's training and workplace learning experiences, this study was with employed participants, not those currently in workplace transition. In the study from which this

article is produced, I sought to explore the gap in the literature concerning women's learning during workplace transition.<sup>1</sup>

## **Research context and questions**

### **Theoretical framework**

In the original research project, I took a feminist interpretative lens (Bloom, 1998), acknowledging postmodern nonunitary subjectivity (Bloom, 1998; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). This means that the traditional, Western, rational view of oneself is rejected. Instead, the self is viewed as having multiple selves or voices, in contrast and conflict with one another (having many subjectivities).

In addition, the research was set within an adult learning (Clark, 2001; Dirxx, 2001) and multiple ways of knowing (Gardner, 1985, 1993; Goleman, 1995, 1998) framework. As well, the orientation toward learning took a social constructivist approach, meaning that learners constructed their own knowledge through experiences.

### **Researcher positioning and research rationale**

The rationale for the study was both personal and professional. On the personal side, I am a woman who experienced involuntary workplace transition while on maternity leave from my middle-management corporate job. From a feminist research perspective, Reinharz (1992) has suggested that many research projects begin with, or are part of, the researcher's life and, in fact, that the personal experience is a valuable asset to the project. Reinharz continued, saying that by working on a project that concerns the researcher, he or she is able to merge the public and the private.

I made the conscious decision that if I were truly to employ feminist research practices, I should experience the 1-hour interview that I was requesting my participants to perform. In addition, I chose the position of participant-facilitator during the focus group. I shared my transition stories and moved through the same activities as the other participants did.

My initial hope for the research was that it would provide knowledge to assist women better to negotiate through their own transitions with enhanced success. Another goal was to ensure that each participant was given voice (Gilligan, 1982) while analyzing the data for common themes related to learning during workplace transition. The focus group was chosen to facilitate women's learning from each other's experiences through a social web approach to transformative learning (Brooks, 2000).

### **Research questions**

The questions to be answered during the individual interviews revolved around themes such as facilitating factors and barriers to learning, women's perceived learning during workplace transition, and women's experiences of workplace transition. For the interview, participants were asked three open-ended questions to begin the conversation. These questions were

1. Tell me a story of transition,
2. What have you learned? and
3. How or have these experiences been shaped by the fact that you are a woman?

I developed further subquestions under each of the three main questions to provide me with additional conversation and topics. As well, the individual interview process was flexible enough to allow for additional questions and clarifications beyond the main questions and subquestions. Although the interview with the pilot study participant was about 45 minutes in length, subsequent interviews ran within the 1-to-1½-hour range.

In the study, I adopted an emergent research design, and thus, the focus group questions emerged from the personal interviews, and the questioning route structure drew on the work of Krueger and Casey (2000).

### **Overview of the research method**

The research method involved a two-step process. The first step entailed individual interviews with participants, and these interviews were analyzed using the voice-centered relational method developed by Gilligan and colleagues (2003). Next, I conducted a focus group. The second step in analysis followed Spencer, Ritchie, and O'Connor's (2003) analytic hierarchy method for qualitative cross-sectional data analysis. This means that all data sources were indexed and coded and emergent themes were explored. The data sources included the individual interviews, the focus group transcripts, and the self-reporting exercise documents that participants created during the focus group.

In the first step, Gilligan et al.'s (2003) listening guide method, I explored each participant's nonunitary subjectivities (Bloom, 1998) by reviewing the participants' multiple voices within their transcripts. I took a feminist, psychological approach to the participants' voice(s) and selves (Bloom, 1998). This method had the following four steps:

1. listening for the plot,
2. I-poems,
3. listening for contrapuntal voices, and
4. composing an analysis.

Step 1 involved listening for the plot and the researcher's responses. When listening for the plot, I attended to the main themes, absences, contexts, and landscapes. The next stage was the creation of the I-poem, which involved moving through the text and underlining each "I" and verb and/or associated bit of text to construct a poem. The I-poem assisted me in the development of the overall interpretation. Step 3 involved at least two additional listenings for contrapuntal (multiple) voices. In some participants, more than two voices emerged. The final product used a feminist interpretive (Bloom, 1998) lens on each participant's perceived learning in workplace transition.

I chose the focus group to discover commonalities or themes among the participants. A feature of the focus group was the spontaneity that arose due to the social context of the method (Finch & Lewis, 2003). In addition, I chose the focus group in the hope of providing a method of reciprocity (Legard, Keegan, & Ward, 2003) for participants, as they learned from each other and, in so doing, reinterpreted their own transition processes (Brooks, 2000). In this respect, I was striving for research that was respectful and reciprocal, and accrued benefits to all (Tilley, 1998).

## **Methods**

### **Participant selection and transition experience**

All of the participants I interviewed were adult women who had had at least 2 years of professional work experience prior to the beginning of their workplace transition. This criterion of a minimal amount of work experience was intended to allow participants to provide their professional perspective to the transition experience instead of being in the midst of adjusting to the initial phase of becoming a professional (e.g., coming directly from university graduation). Participants were women who had experienced workplace transition within the previous 6 years (i.e., were laid off, saw their job eliminated, or chose to leave that employment position no earlier than December 1, 1996). This criterion was intended to allow for an experience that was still fresh enough for them to provide more description, meaning, and feeling to the research. The participants interviewed varied in their transition time (as described by the participants) from 1½ to 4 years.

I used a hybrid of convenience sample (Ritchie, Lewis, & Elam, 2003) and snowball sampling (Creswell, 2002) to select participants. Ciara (pseudonym), my pilot study participant, and Alexandra (pseudonym), a colleague in my adult education network, had been displaced from their workplaces and were eager to discuss their experiences. These convenience sample participants we asked to provide names of other people who may be interested in participating, thus providing a snowball sampling effect (Creswell, 2002). Of the 3 potential participants they suggested, none fit the criteria for selection.

While I had my pilot study participant, I sent out via e-mail and personal greetings (i.e., telephone and note cards) a general update to my network to obtain potential participants. Initially, I received no response. After completion of the pilot study and the interview of my second participant, I was contacted by a former colleague, who told me of a woman with whom I should speak. Unfortunately, this woman declined participation due to time constraints.

Dara (pseudonym), my third participant, heard through a mutual contact that I was doing research on women in transition and asked for more information. I spoke with her about the time commitments, and she agreed to participate. She also provided me with a potential candidate. I contacted Dara's colleague by phone, but she declined because of the time commitment and babysitting issues. My final participant, Samantha (pseudonym), was obtained through my business networks.

Following a feminist research method, I was interviewed (Schram, 2003). Samantha was gracious enough to take on the researcher role and tape my interview. I analyzed my transcripts in the same manner as all other participants and answered all focus group questions (after all other participants had a chance to voice their opinions). All participants chose their own pseudonyms, and as such, I also decided to take the pseudonym of Maya, which is how I refer to myself whenever I present data from my transcripts.

## The participants

All of the participants experienced involuntary workplace transition due to corporate restructuring, which was initiated because of the state of the industry or by a company takeover. All but one participant, Samantha, left their corporation. In Samantha's case, her workplace transition took place within the same corporation. As departments were restructured, dismantled, and recreated, her role was subsequently changed as well.

*Participant 1:* Ciara. Ciara is in her mid-30s. She has a bachelor's degree and additional certification and training. She worked her way up the corporate ladder within the technology and e-commerce field over 8 years and continued to pursue additional training and certifications. Her corporation was acquired and restructured, and massive layoffs occurred. During her transition time, she returned to part-time schooling to obtain an additional certificate. She is reemployed in a related industry.

*Participant 2:* Alexandra. Alexandra is in her late 40s to early 50s. She has worked in a variety of industries. She has specialized in adult education and is a highly skilled, bilingual, technology-savvy trainer. She has approximately 30 years of professional work experience to date and characterizes her transition as beginning 4 years ago. Her company at the time was restructuring, and she took the initiative to leave.

*Participant 3:* Dara. Dara is in her early 30s and has been in transition for 2 years. She had worked her way up to an administrative job, reporting directly to the owner when the company restructured. This necessitated a major move across the country and a change in her career goals. She returned to school and took part-time work and various other jobs. She is still in transition and is moving towards her eventual career goals of a full-time permanent job in the emergency services.

*Participant 4:* Samantha. Samantha is in her late 30s. She has worked her way up the corporate ladder, focusing primarily within the technology field. While she was single in her early 30s, she pursued and completed her master's in business administration (MBA). She has always been career focused and describes herself as a "good corporate soldier."

Samantha has worked for several companies within the technology sector. The transition period that she speaks about in this research is her transition experiences within the same company in various departments and restructuring efforts. She has been in transition for about 3½ years.

*Participant 5:* Maya. I am in the 30s age range. I am trained as an MBA. As a career-oriented person, I worked my way up within the corporation prior to getting married and becoming a mother. I would describe myself as a "continuous learner." I began courses in adult education while still in the corporate world and have taught courses at the community college level. My transition began in early 2002, when the company restructured while I was on maternity leave.

## In-depth listening to participant voices

The listening guide method of analysis calls for "listening" to the transcripts rather than reading them, because this requires present and active participation (Gilligan et al., 2003). As Gilligan explained, "The need for a series of listenings arises from the assumption that the psyche, like voice, is contrapuntal (not monotonic) so that simultaneous voices are co-occurring" (p. 159).

An explanation of the four steps, plus the additional step that I undertook, will be explained in each section that follows. Samantha's transcripts are provided here as a guide and example of the analysis. This method was used with all participants, and I could have illustrated the method through any of the participant's I-poems (Gilligan et al., 2003). However, the intense affect that I felt during the interview, as well as the multiple voices, conflicts, and contradictions that came through in that face-to-face interaction between Samantha and me, is one reason why I chose Samantha's transcripts to highlight the method. In addition, my emerging strategy of creating a metaphor of transition developed directly from reading Samantha's I-poem (Gilligan et al., 2003). I felt "shell-shocked" and drained after the interview and again on reading her I-poem.

It is interesting to note that I found different numbers of voices within each participant's transcripts. With one participant, I found two voices, with two others I found three, and with the remaining participants, I found four multiple voices. Although not the focus of this article, analysis of the similarities, differences, and contradictions found within these voices provided a richness of context for my overall interpretations and findings.

### **Method Part 1: Multiple voices—Sample member-checking package**

#### **Member-checking package**

A package composed of the first reading and response, the full I-poem, a participant profile, the transition metaphor, my interpretation of learning, and my interpretations of contrapuntal voices, as well as verbatim transcripts was provided to participants to review. I also gave participants a summary sheet describing the concept of voice (Gilligan, 1982) and Women's Ways of Knowing (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986), so they could better understand my interpretations.

Below is the one-page sheet given to participants to explain my interpretations and their packages:

#### *Member-checking package*

##### *Creation of "I-poems"*

Reading through the transcripts, every "I" is underlined in black, with a verb and any additional words that are important at the time. Some interpretative license has been taken to underline "my" or "you" when the participant is referring to herself, if it adds to the context.

Please add, modify or delete words, phrases, or stanzas as you see fit.

##### *Profile*

This is a general introduction to each participant that will be included in the final thesis. If there are any words or phrases that you are uncomfortable with, or feel are too identifying, please cross them out of the text.

##### *Metaphor*

Please feel free to modify or add your own metaphor for your experience.

### *Interpretation*

These are tentative and initial and I look forward to your input and clarification.

### *Second and third reading*

These are underlined in two different coloured pencils and identify different “voices” that I have “heard” in the text transcripts. Your feedback and/or modification is appreciated. The second reading is done in red, the third in green, if there is a fourth reading it is done in blue, if there is a fifth reading, it is underlined in orange.

### **Samantha: A first listening—Reading for the plot and researcher response**

The first listening in the method contains two parts. The first part is to listen for the plot, and the second part is the researcher’s response to the listening. Listening for the plot means paying attention to the narrative being told, images and themes that are repeated, and the context and landscape of the entire transcript. In the second part, the researcher’s responses to the listening are attended to. As Mauthner and Doucet (1998) described their version of this part, the researcher notes her social location with regard to the participant and her emotions, connections with, and disconnections from the participant.

The section below is taken directly from my first reading response, which has been reviewed by Samantha:

The constant themes of upheaval and constant change within Samantha’s corporate environment seem to be at a frenzied pace. There is a feeling that the worst traits of human beings—greed, betrayal, manipulation, unethical behaviour—are exacerbated due to the technology implosion and its negative force upon the corporation itself.

Samantha is a well-trained MBA and expects a certain amount of competition. Certainly, she is not afraid of hard work. Her ideals include a certain amount of collaboration, ethics, fair play, and equitable consideration. What she doesn’t expect is the manipulation and the betrayal. Her most recent understanding of her situation, and its parallel to two other women in the organization, I think, has created a stream of reflections about the meaning of work, life, and herself.

My responses to the first reading were many. As a former corporate “soldier” with MBA training, I too bought into the corporate ideals of hard work and very little balance. As a single woman in my late 20s I also climbed the ladder of achievement, having no significant life partner at the time.

I understand giving your all, for I gave my all to my corporation as well. I share many of the same ideals of ethics, fair play, and equitable consideration. While I was not surprised by the financial differentials between male and female workers, I was shocked by Samantha’s analysis of the “set up for failure” of female executives. In many ways, my corporate environment was very benign compared to hers. Also, Samantha saying that her story was “not unique” struck me. My first response was, “of course it’s unique, it is your story,” but then I reflected on her impressions and view of not only the corporation but the technology environment as well, and how she mentioned that many people were hurt in the downturn.

Reflecting on her transition story, and her emotional and physical draining, I am struck by how different I would have thought her work life was. In many ways, my social location as a graduate student, mother, and part-time worker is one of less power and privilege than her power, as an executive in a large technology corporation. What was taken from me—an exciting, high-power corporate position—was what Samantha held. She was living the dream that MBA graduates were supposed to dream: in the trenches, in the corporate world. I had been taken out of the battle because mothers could not fight the good fight.

On reflection, my assumptions of Samantha's powerful corporate job could not have been more incorrect. In many ways Samantha lost her agency during the downturn, she was moved about on the corporate chess board of work life, like a toy soldier, at the male senior executives' whims. Indeed, in Samantha's analysis, there seems to be a war strategy to which all female executive recruits are subjected.

### **The I-poem takes shape**

I created the I-poem by underlining and selecting every first person "I" within the transcripts and accompanying words that seem important. The sequence in which the phrases appear in the text are maintained. The I-poem picks up on the stream of consciousness of the first person voice (Gilligan et al., 2003) and might point to changes in voice or some meaning that is not explicitly stated.

I constructed the I-poem by reading through the transcripts after I had transcribed them, and underlining and cutting and pasting the phrases by computer into their I-poems. The stanzas were composed based on natural breaks in themes and voices. All "I's" and their associated words were underlined, copied, pasted, and placed into the poem. The number of words associated with the I's is a very subjective process. In some instances, I deliberately chose not to take additional words, to maintain confidentiality. Occasionally I also used "my," "me," "myself," and similar variations on "I" when the phrase was not specifically "I," because the participant was speaking of herself. Finally, to make the overall poem more understandable, I sometimes added an additional phrase to give some continuity to the flow and plot, which is a slight modification of the truest method but, I believe, makes the poem more readable and understandable. The I-poem produced was very much longer than I had originally anticipated when initially proposing the method but provided me with an additional lens through which to interpret the transcripts and made for an interesting reading after completion. Each participant's full I-poem was given to her to review.

The average I-poem was about 7½ pages long (single-spaced stanzas), with the shortest (Ciara's) being 4 pages and 2 participants having 10-page I-poems. Part of the difference was in the participants' transcript length but also in their frequency to refer to themselves throughout the interview, and in the natural falling out of stanzas and stanza length on analysis.

### **Samantha's I-poem: An excerpt**

An excerpt of Samantha's "I-poem" is provided here:

I decided  
I've been through  
I think I'm still going through

I worked  
I had  
I had been with them for about a year  
I was put into a role

I had had a friend and a mentor; I'll call him Sam

With the exception of myself

All of my colleagues left the company

I allowed, I was manipulated, I feel  
I didn't want, I wasn't qualified for, I didn't perform well  
I was earning about \$30,000 less than any one of my peers  
I think, relates to the fact that I'm a female  
I think, easier to manipulate  
I wanted to make up that gap  
I was, I allowed, I guess, I found myself in a competitive state  
I probably have a couple of more years of experience  
A couple more years older than he is

Finding myself in a state of competition with Frank, with really no support from Mike  
Feeling as if I was set up to fail, I realized I had pushed myself beyond  
I thought, my limits, I knew that my health was being affected  
I knew, stress level was beyond what I felt I could cope with  
I think I was, I was at the end of my rope  
I was not performing well

It wasn't clear to me at the time  
Manipulate me  
I found  
Mike had been, I guess, mentor to, to another young woman  
I'm sure at Mike's encouragement  
I spoke with her as she was transitioning  
I can't help but looking at the similarities  
Then subsequently me as well

I think, I think is different, I think because the "rising star" was a male  
I think the relationship is different, I would say he is still rising...

I think, I could have taken all the work  
I wouldn't have been compensated any more

If I, if I wanted to avoid feeling totally like a doormat  
The only way I would be compensated, the only way I would  
I was denied salary increases  
As I said, I take some responsibility  
I think, I think, but, I don't take full responsibility, I do feel  
I was, I was manipulated, I was set up, I was sort of thrown into the ocean

I'd been overworked and stressed and tired

I think my judgement was impaired, I don't think I was probably as clear

I don't have a lot of positive things

I still feel like I'm in transition

I'm now in, I'm finding, I probably need to transition yet again, if I want to stay

I don't feel that I, I can, I can leave, I'm probably looking at, at yet another transition.

I think this experience, taken more from me

I've, I've had medical issues

I think I've given far more than what I've gotten back

I learned for me what that line was

Came to me over time

I've, placed less emphasis on, on career, and more on home and happiness

I'm not a naturally competitive, aggressive individual

I was looking at money more as a way of wanting to be treated fairly and equitably

I wanted recognition for my contribution

I think for men every last dollar is recognition of their power

I still feel in transition

I can really say, I hope, I can look back and see that and find some positives in it

I hope I can.

### **Continued listening for additional voices: Additional readings for contrapuntal voices**

In this stage, I reread the transcripts over at least once to tune my ear to particular aspects of voices that I believed I heard. I then determined which voice was the loudest or occurred most frequently, and began to reread the transcript, underlining that section of the transcript with a red pencil crayon. Next, I identified another voice, went back through the transcript, and underlined this voice in green. If I felt there were other voices, I reread and underlined the next in blue, and if there was a final voice, I underlined it in orange. The method suggests listening for at least two voices, and this is the number of voices I heard for Ciara. For Alexandra's and Maya's (my) transcripts, I heard four voices; for Samantha's, I heard three.

### **Researcher's interpretation summary provided to Samantha: Contrapuntal voices— Readings 3, 4, and 5**

Each participant was provided with the multicolored transcript and the summary like the sample that follows:

I initially set out to do two additional readings, but another voice continued to come to me during those readings. In effect, I have picked out three distinct voices, as follows.

#### *Voice of silence (underlined in red)*

This voice is a disempowered voice, a voice that discounts herself, and her unique experiences and knowledge. In many ways it is a combined voice of silence and received knowledge (Belenky

et al., 1986), because this voice points to being subject to authority's whims but also invalidates her experiences.

Some examples within the text include "I was put into a role," "Politically I really had no choice," "I allowed," "I was manipulated," "I was set up to fail . . . just cast aside to try to prove results that were impossible to prove," "Ability of Mike in his role of vice-president to manipulate me," "I was thrown into the ocean without any form of life preserver," "There wasn't, there wasn't a choice," "I know my story isn't probably unique."

#### *Awakened voice (underlined in green)*

This voice is awake to the realization of her needs and wants. It is also a reflective voice that is awakened to the parallels between Mike and other women managers reporting to him. In some ways, it is also the voice of subjective knowledge, because this voice is intuitive and personal (Belenky et al., 1986). This voice is more empowered, because it realizes that it can no longer be cast about by the whims of upper management.

Some examples within the text include "I realized that I had pushed myself beyond what I thought were, were my limits," "I didn't want to do this anymore," "I can't help but looking at the similarities between that and how Mike managed our team and, and then subsequently me as well," "I do have a line," "I've placed less emphasis on, on career, and more on home and happiness," "I've rearranged my priorities," "That's the point where I said, um, I, I need to do something different," "Very gradual process of this coming to light in my own mind."

#### *Dissonant voice (underlined in blue)*

At first, I was thinking of characterizing this voice as a "disconnected voice," in the sense that her true values are not finding expression within the current corporate environment, and in this way, she is disconnected. And yet, on the flip side, the same voice also accepts and acknowledges some of the gender-based corporate (and cultural) ideas (e.g., acknowledging the pay differential between women and men, using the softer political approach of getting married to transition more smoothly into another role). In essence, I believe that this voice is really a dissonant voice, revealing the dissonance or tension between the acknowledged corporate values and her true authentic values. This dissonant voice is causing her to question her values and place within the corporate world, and to redefine work and career for herself and on her own terms.

Some examples in the text include "The corporate world in the last few years has become even more of a man's world than it was," "Money tends to be put on the table very blatantly as being the motivator and the driver and men are far more motivated by money than women are," "I prefer more of a collaborative, cooperative work style, I don't want to be combative," "I really don't see a long-term future in the industry," "I'd like to have . . . kind of career that I can contribute to and, and receive some emotional, and, and fulfillment from."

### **Explicating the analysis**

To provide an example of how I arrived at this type of interpretation, I have provided an extract from the actual transcript below, with the voice of silence, which was underlined in red, being italicized, and the dissonant voice, which was underlined in blue, being bolded:

*And I don't know how I can, how I can get out of this. I think I, I want to try and **keep, keep some kind of a role in this industry as long as I can, I don't see my future in this industry** as being of the long term at this point **but if I can pull this out for even another 2 or 3 years** so that my husband can get settled in his business, so that financially we can get to a point where I'm comfortable where we are with our home, that, that's really what I'm looking to do and beyond that, I'll sort of figure out my next move into something that, um, that I find a bit, a bit more enjoyable. *So, I think I've given far more to this industry right now, than, um, then, than what I've gotten back and that what warrants sort of how, how I've been treated.* Now, I guess in, in fairness, when, when this, um, business started to collapse, and it did, back in 2001, there was, there were a lot of people that were hurt in this industry, so I, I know that I'm not the only one and *I know that my story isn't probably all that unique.**

In the next extract, the voice of silence, which was underlined in red, is again italicized, and the awakened voice, which was underlined in green, is underlined in black below:

I really didn't put those pieces together until even the last few weeks, um, so, it's been a very gradual process of, of this kind of coming to light in my own mind. *I, I thought that I was being, right up until January 2002, as, as, stressed and tired as I was, and as sick as I was, I thought I was being a good corporate soldier.*

### **Composing an analysis: Connecting to the research question**

#### ***Interpretation of participants' learning***

The next stage of the method is to compose an analysis based on the research question. What I provided participants at this stage was my interpretation of their learning based on my understanding through the previous stages. In this analysis, I perceived a conflict between Samantha's life goals and the current corporate environment's goals. As well, I perceived that her health-related issues were manifesting themselves in bodily experiences, which were later reinterpreted as a potential reaction to stress.

#### ***The interpretation for Samantha to member-check***

My interpretation of Samantha's interview is provided below:

In many ways it seems Samantha's learning was primarily an increase in self-knowledge; understanding her vulnerabilities but also her strengths and preferred work styles. She seemed to ignore her intuitive understanding that taking the more sales-oriented role with the commission was perhaps not the best for her personally. By the same token, she understood the unspoken political context that told her she had little choice. On the other hand, her intuitive knowing is not being silenced and in some respects is causing her "redefinition" of herself, her career, and her life.

Reflection on the transitional period as a whole has been important, as it has clarified Samantha's ability to make meaning of her situation and of parallel women executives. Samantha's interpretation of women and the roles they play within the corporate environment suggests a perceived differential in treatment. On the flip side, she uses this gendered perspective to extricate herself from an unfulfilling role by telling her new boss

that she is planning her wedding and would like to explore other careers with less travel, etc.

While Samantha doesn't discuss learning beyond the cognitive realm, one could argue that her body was giving her signals until she couldn't ignore them anymore. Has this somatic experience turned into learning?

She is still within the transition process, and thus has not had the benefit of reflecting on it from a different space. When asked about facilitating factors to her learning, her lens of the negative aspect of the experience fed into her response when she replied that the state of the industry and the fear in senior ranks was a facilitating factor to making the transition so difficult. In essence, there were no positive aspects of the transition within the work context at all. She ends her interview hoping that she will eventually be able to have a positive outlook on the experience.

Her change in focus from career to family and happiness hints at a clarification of life goals and values. Would Samantha describe this as learning or not? And if so, what kind?

### **Samantha responds**

When Samantha member-checked (Padgett, 1998) these interpretations, she did not acknowledge the somatic experiences as learning (although she did not refute them either). With this in mind, I reinterpreted these from somatic learning to response to stress in the final thematic, cross-sectional analysis in Section 2 of the data analysis. For reasons of confidentiality, I do not go into more details on her potential responses to stress, but they have affected her abilities to function this past year and made her more dependent on others. When I discussed the interpretations with Samantha further, she agreed that stress from her job was a factor in her health issues and again reiterated that she had given far more to her career and corporation than she had gotten back. In addition, she agreed that there was conflict present in her values and life goals that were not matching what she perceives as the corporation's values. She stated that her change in focus was a clarification of life goals and values, and she was working toward trying to get a better alignment between those values and her eventual (next) job.

### **Emerging metaphor**

#### *Metaphor of transition*

When I reread the transcripts to begin this analysis, I was immediately struck with a re-creation of my response during the intense interview with Samantha. I felt "shell-shocked" and drained after her interview. She looked somewhat drained as well, and I made sure to speak with her after we completed the interview, to see how she was feeling, if she needed to be referred to anyone, or if she felt she was settled. She confirmed she was fine, in fact felt better being able to "get it off her chest" in its entirety.

I composed a metaphor interpretation. This is not part of the listening guide (Gilligan et al., 2003) method but an additional aspect that I included for all the participants.

#### *Samantha's metaphor of transition*

The metaphor interpretation for Samantha is provided below.

### *Metaphor: War Zone Casualty*

The metaphor that struck me to best describe Samantha's transitional period is that of war zone and Samantha as a casualty. Her repeated mention of competition, of pushing herself beyond her limits, of betrayal, of lack of choice, of manipulation paints a picture of constant upheaval and mistrust. Her longing for a collaborative environment is in contrast to the backdrop of the technology industry's bust that seems to be exacerbating the competitive, cutthroat corporate culture she finds herself in. The constant stress and her resultant health problems are not a surprise.

## **Method Part 2: Focus group learning**

### **Focus on the focus group**

Coming from a business background, I was familiar with the use of focus groups for market research, product development, and customer service improvement purposes. I had contributed to such a focus group while still in the corporate environment. I surmised that qualitative research focus groups were probably considerably different from those in the business world and set about reviewing some resources that detailed this approach. In the end, my focus group method could be considered a hybrid of both worlds.

Krueger and Casey (2000) provided an excellent and practical source in the development of the "questioning route" (appendix). I developed the questioning route following the sequence they suggested: an easy opening with introductory questions, moving to transition questions, to key study questions, to the ending questions. My guide included many of the typical questions suggested, such as a picture drawing question, a "think-back" question, an "imagine" question, a listing question, a "1-minute" question, and a section in which I summed up the information and asked participants if I had missed anything (Krueger & Casey, 2000).

This focus group of 5 participants was classified as a mini group (Greenbaum, 1993), which has essentially the same characteristics as a regular focus group (i.e., 8-10 people) but containing fewer participants.

As all of the participants came from a workplace environment, most were unfamiliar with terms such as perspective transformation (Mezirow, 1978) or adult learning terms such as critical incidents. Because I was interested in maintaining a collaborative, feminist perspective throughout the research, I used lay language whenever possible while maintaining a link to the theoretical foundations.

I arranged the circular table with the participants' pseudonym place cards around. The circular table was recommended for better eye contact between the moderator (me) and the participants (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990). Based on the individual interviews, I placed the most talkative individuals off to the side and the least talkative directly across from me, as Wells suggested (cited in Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990). Prior to beginning the focus group, I reread the purpose of the study, emphasized anonymity and confidentiality, and requested that my participants resign the confidentiality form specifically for the focus group content. I then suggested to them that all opinions were welcome and all experiences were equally important (Morgan, 1997). At the start of the focus group, I asked participants to introduce themselves (by their pseudonym). This allowed participants to become a bit more familiar with each other, as well as getting them used to speaking in the group (Finch & Lewis, 2003). To "break the ice," I decided to introduce myself and briefly explained my choice of pseudonym as it relates to my workplace transition. I

initially intended this as a small bit of self-disclosure to make everyone more comfortable (Creswell, 1998). Dara liked the idea so much that she jumped in and asked each participant to describe how she had chosen her particular pseudonym. This emerging strategy seemed to warm the participants up and get the focus group off to a good start.

In general, there was a good balance of participation throughout the focus group. One participant was a bit more dominant than others were, and I was polite at turning and requesting others' opinions on the topic (Finch & Lewis, 2003) when required.

The questioning route contained four questions that involved drawing, "thinking back," rating, or listing, and so participants were provided with a printed package with these exercise sheets. These are referred to as the "self-report" documents throughout this study and were used as data. All participants were asked to share only what they felt comfortable with in each question, and they could skip or "pass" on any question they wanted. On question 3, which was a "think back" (Krueger & Casey, 2000) question concerning any particular learning moment during transition, 2 participants chose not to share within the group.

I participated as both facilitator and participant. Prior to the focus group, I had put myself through all the questions: answering, drawing, "thinking back," and "imagining." This was for two reasons: to ensure reflexivity (Schram, 2003) and because of time factors. I figured that if I had my questions completed prior to the actual event, this would free me up to be more attentive to the responses of participants, to make field notes, and to pay attention to the other logistical and practical (e.g., taping) requirements. I told participants prior to beginning that I would be answering the questions as well but would answer only after everyone else had adequate time and space to present their voices and opinions. My thoughts were that I did not want to influence any participant's response by responding first.

At the end of the session, participants were asked if they felt comfortable to leave behind their "self-report" activity packages to add to the research. All participants chose to leave their full package with me. This provided another data source for analysis and coding.

The focus group "feeling" ended on a very positive note, with one of the participants expressing her thanks to all the participants for what she had learned from them all. Another participant mentioned that she had been asked by a colleague at work where she was "running off to" on a Friday evening. When the respondent mentioned a "focus group," the colleague said to the participant that she "always does the coolest things." These types of comments were most welcome. I was glad to know that some of the reciprocity (Legard, Keegan, & Ward, 2003) had in some small way been fulfilled with at least a few participants.

### **Focus Group Data**

Some of the questions from the questioning route (Krueger & Casey, 2000) allowed participants to draw their experiences of learning, or to circle the types of learning they perceived during workplace transition. These activity exercises formed the package of self-reporting documents that was used, along with the individual interviews and the focus group transcripts, for the second data analysis phase.

I used as my guide the analytic hierarchy (Spencer et al., 2003), which moved from data management (indexing) to descriptive accounts (sorting by themes, synthesizing data, establishing topologies, if applicable) to explanatory accounts (detecting patterns, developing explanations, seeking applications to wider theory). This method was not linear and is not

intended to be. Instead, one moves up and down the analytic hierarchy throughout the analysis phase (Spencer et al., 2003). I originally created 382 subindexes, which were synthesized to 85 subthemes. Further redefinition and refinement led to the collapse of 5 additional subthemes, down to 80. As I continued to contemplate the patterns and themes, the relationship to wider theory began to emerge.

The “self-reporting” documents also allowed other patterns to emerge. For example, Question 2 from the focus group asked participants to draw their learning before transition and their current learning (i.e., at the time of the focus group). From these drawings, participants tended toward two paths of learning: the goal orientation (Figure 1) or the growth orientation (Figure 2) (Balan, 2004, 2005). Further analysis of these learning paths led to tendencies in other experiences during transition (e.g., orientation toward learning, preference for formal or informal ways of learning, feelings of agency or disempowerment)

As well as two broad tendencies toward learning, each participant also tended toward a particular quadrant of transition (Balan, 2004). Other “self-reporting” document questions, such as Question 4 (Figure 3), allowed participants to identify the types of learning they perceived during workplace transition. For example, Figure 3 shows that one participant, who tended toward the growth orientation to learning, felt she experienced many forms of learning, including transformative, experiential, spiritual, and holistic learning. As well, she connected each of these types of learning together, adding comments concerning the “mind/body/soul.” These exercises gave further context to each individual’s experiences, as well as highlighting commonalities and differences experienced by each participant. Each participant was asked to member check (Padgett, 1998) the final summary of interpretations from the second data analysis phase, as well as the interpretation of learning path and quadrant.

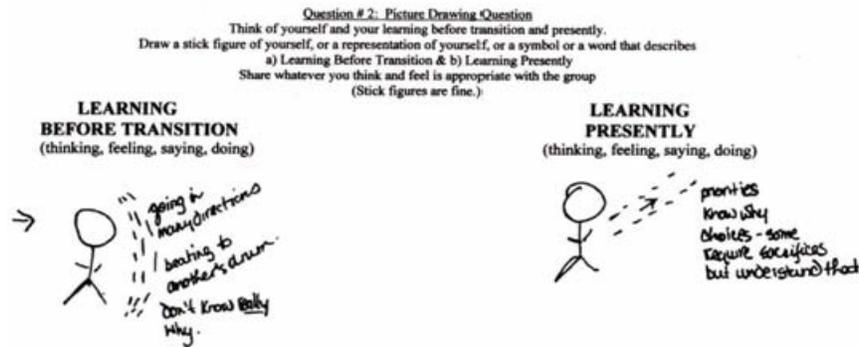


Figure 1

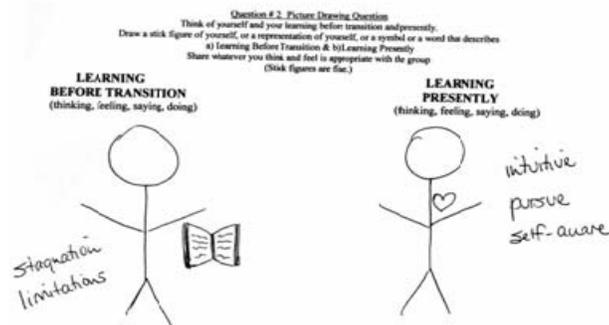


Figure 2

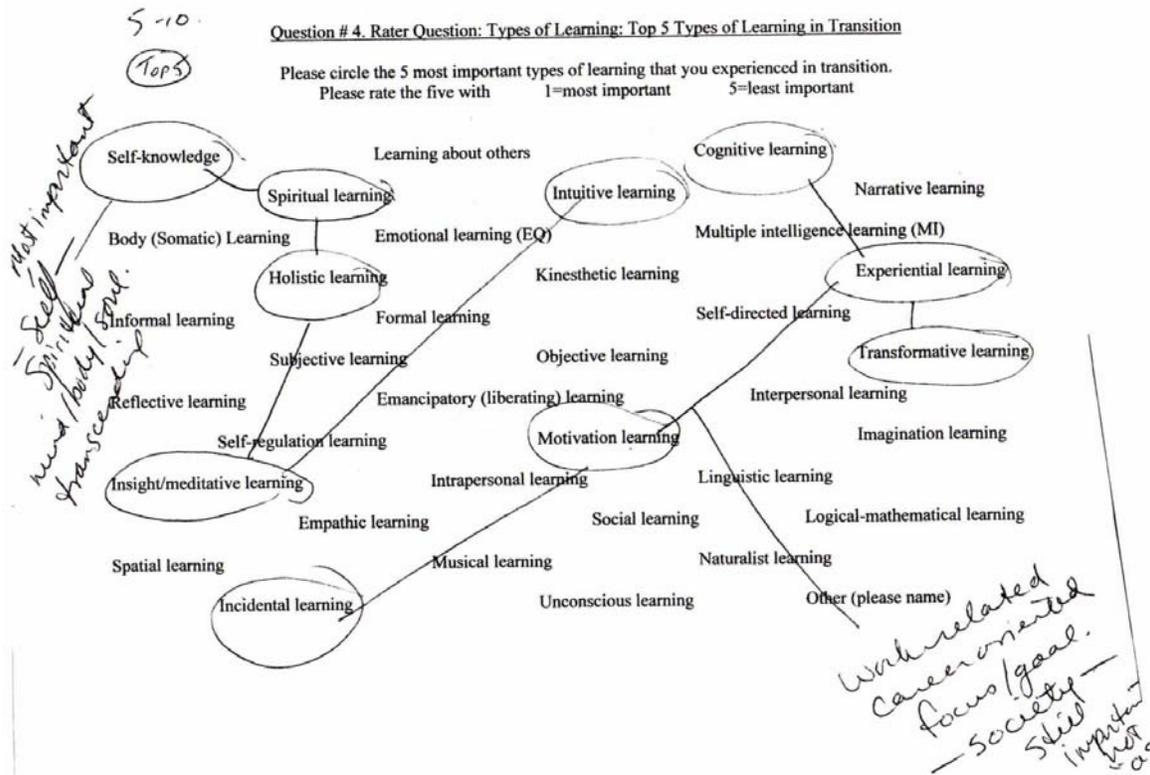


Figure 3

### Success of the methods as judged by participant feedback

When I first set out to complete the research, I hoped to ensure that I co-created knowledge with my participants, that they learned from each other, and that they felt they had received something for their time and effort. As another form of reciprocity, I had informed participants that a final copy of the report would be available to them, should they like to receive one (Lewis, 2003). All participants requested a copy, and I met individually with each of them to deliver the copy and highlight the main findings and analysis. I have subsequently met with 3 of the 4 participants, after they had had an opportunity to read the report in its entirety, to solicit their feedback. The 4th participant has been extremely busy at work and has not had time to read the final report (Alexandra, personal communication, March 30, 2005), although we met personally to go over the highlights at the end of 2004.

Dara thought the report reflected her transition appropriately. Ciara reflected on how accurately it described her thinking and learning during transition, and how it allowed her to see how she has grown since. Samantha provided me with the following feedback:

I thought it was wonderful! . . . I was very impressed with how you linked every observation and conclusion back to an established theory and how you weaved it all together. It was very enlightening to read more detail about the other women's experiences and how they came away from their transition. And I thought your insights and conclusions about my experience were

bang-on. In many ways, I hadn't even thought it through to some of the ends that you have. (Personal communication, January 5, 2005)

In a similar vein, Dara's comments following the focus group suggest that she learned from the other participants' experiences, and this assisted her with her transition, "I want to thank you guys for the insight I've gained from all of you and for sharing your personal experiences . . . I've learned a lot through doing this project with you."

### **Reflections on the two-part method**

I believe that I successfully accomplished my goals of giving voice (Gilligan, 1982) to my participants through the individual interviews, while rigorously exploring common themes, by using a two-part method. The listening guide (Gilligan et al., 2003) allowed me to approach the data from a variety of levels and views by virtue of the many steps inherent in the method. Although the many stages might have been time intensive, they allowed me to be sufficiently immersed in the data to facilitate my being able to see emerging themes, commonalities, and differences when I began to approach the data using the analytic hierarchy method (Spencer et al., 2003).

My goals from a feminist research perspective were also met, in terms of the focus group providing reciprocity (Legard et al., 2003) for participants. As evidenced by their feedback, they learned from each other as well as reinterpreted their own transition processes (Brooks, 2000). From my perspective, I believe the research provided respectful, reciprocal benefits to all participants (Tilley, 1998).

One reflection on the participant selection has emerged for me. The snowball method (Creswell, 2002) tended to break down when potential participants were mothers with child care responsibilities, especially if partners were not available. Although alternative child care arrangements or suggestions of interviewing participants with their children present were suggested, the time requirements and logistical arrangements expected of participants (i.e., individual interview and a subsequent focus group) were often too overwhelming for mothers in transition. The time required of participants in such a two-part method and its implications to specific population nonparticipation should be considered when applying this in future research. Coming from the location of a single mother myself, I feel the constraints (i.e., logistical and time) of this method inadvertently subverted by goal of providing voice (Gilligan, 1982) to mothers' experiences of learning during workplace transition.

### **Conclusion**

At the beginning of this research process, I did not fully appreciate the wisdom of my advisor, who suggested that the research process itself might help me to re-story my transition. Reinharz (1992) suggested that the researcher begins to learn about both her subjects and herself as the research progresses. Now, I see that I have come full circle, returning home (Estes, 1992) to the private.

## **Notes**

1. All references to the research on which this article is based refer to Balan (2004).

## **Appendix**

### **Focus group questioning route**

#### **Opening**

1. Please introduce yourself and tell us your time in workplace transition to date.

#### **Introduction**

2. Think of yourself and your learning before transition and presently. Draw a stick figure of yourself, or a representation of yourself, or a symbol or a word that describes (a) Learning before Transition and (b) Learning presently. If there is no difference between the two, that's fine too.

#### **Transition**

3. Think back to a particularly important learning point in your transition. Close your eyes and allow all your senses to relive the moment. Recall what the surrounding looked like, the people present, the smells, the sounds, your emotions, your assumptions and thoughts, how your body felt. Savor the moment and absorb everything. When you are ready, open your eyes and record your instinctual responses on the first sheet in front of you. [Allow each participant to describe the moment and their experiences]

#### **Key questions**

4. Rate question: Top 5 Types of Learning Sheet (If you feel there are more than 5, feel free to circle up to 10. If you would like to connect some of them, do so with arrows).
5. Relationships and learning in transition, what is your experience?
6. Female roles of wife, life-partner, mother, daughter, sister. What is the learning experience of the roles?
7. Fear of learning or your perceived ability to learn, what is your experience in transition?
8. Mentoring: What was your experience in transition?
9. Listing question: List Top 3 Facilitating Factors and Top 3 Barriers to Learning
10. Dream Come True Question: Magic Wand Exercise—If this magic wand could make your wishes come true regarding learning in transition what would it do/be?

### Ending questions

11. Imagine you are preparing a 1-minute talk on learning in transition to a group of young women just starting their careers. What would be your key points?

[Summary of the discussion thus far]

12. I'd love your feedback: Is this an adequate summary?

[Overview of purpose of study]

13. Is there anything we should have talked about that we didn't?

### THANK YOU AGAIN

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