2014

African American Female Narratives and Identity Development: A Case Study of Language, Literacy, and Identity Development in the Beauty Salon

Felicia C. Smith
University of Kentucky, fcumingssmith@gmail.com

Click here to let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Recommended Citation
https://uknowledge.uky.edu/edc_etds/8

This Doctoral Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Curriculum and Instruction at UKnowledge. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses and Dissertations--Curriculum and Instruction by an authorized administrator of UKnowledge. For more information, please contact UKnowledge@lsv.uky.edu.
STUDENT AGREEMENT:

I represent that my thesis or dissertation and abstract are my original work. Proper attribution has been given to all outside sources. I understand that I am solely responsible for obtaining any needed copyright permissions. I have obtained needed written permission statement(s) from the owner(s) of each third-party copyrighted matter to be included in my work, allowing electronic distribution (if such use is not permitted by the fair use doctrine) which will be submitted to UKnowledge as Additional File.

I hereby grant to The University of Kentucky and its agents the irrevocable, non-exclusive, and royalty-free license to archive and make accessible my work in whole or in part in all forms of media, now or hereafter known. I agree that the document mentioned above may be made available immediately for worldwide access unless an embargo applies.

I retain all other ownership rights to the copyright of my work. I also retain the right to use in future works (such as articles or books) all or part of my work. I understand that I am free to register the copyright to my work.

REVIEW, APPROVAL AND ACCEPTANCE

The document mentioned above has been reviewed and accepted by the student’s advisor, on behalf of the advisory committee, and by the Director of Graduate Studies (DGS), on behalf of the program; we verify that this is the final, approved version of the student’s thesis including all changes required by the advisory committee. The undersigned agree to abide by the statements above.

Felicia C. Smith, Student
Dr. Janice Almasi, Major Professor
Dr. Mary Shake, Director of Graduate Studies
African American Female Narratives and Identity Development: A Case Study of Language, Literacy, and Identity Development in the Beauty Salon

DISSERTATION

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education in the College of Education at the University of Kentucky

By
Felicia C. Smith

Frankfort, Kentucky

Director: Janice F. Almasi, PhD

Lexington, KY

2014

Copyright© Felicia C. Smith 2014
ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

AFRICAN AMERICAN FEMALE NARRATIVES AND IDENTITY
DEVELOPMENT:
A CASE STUDY OF LANGUAGE, LITERACY, AND IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT
IN THE BEAUTY SALON

This four-month case study explored the connections among language, literacy, and identity development of five African American women as they shared narratives within a beauty salon context. The questions that guided the study were: (a) What language and literacy practices are enacted in the beauty salon? (b) In what way do African American women narrate their experiences? (c) What stories are shared by African American women in the salon? (d) What are the effects on the listeners of the narratives shared in the salon? and (e) How are social and cultural identities (co)constructed and performed in the narratives?

The narratives were analyzed using Reissman’s (2008) dialogic/performance analysis approach. The Identities in Practice framework applied, situated the work in relation to the four contexts for identity development (figured worlds, positionality, spaces for authoring, and making world through serious play) outlined in Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, and Cain’s (2008).

The findings supported previous findings that storytelling events and the use of narratives were the primary means for African American women sharing their lived experiences in the beauty salon. This corroborated with findings from Richardson (2003) and others focused on African American female language and literacy practices. Three themes emerged from the narrative data, which reflected challenges the women experience in their social, racial/cultural, and gendered conversations and experiences. Additionally, two focal participants’ narratives were examined to explore the ways identity was performed through their use of language in the narratives. The analysis indicated Kelly and Pam were strongly affiliated to social and cultural identities that included identities about motherhood, gender equity, and activists in the Black community.

The importance of this research is to continue to explore the ways African American women build and shape their identities through language. Schools across the nation are neglecting the power and uses of language to build up the language and literacy resources of children that arrive to school with a history of oral traditions. Presenting school contexts as a space of authoring would undoubtedly create greater
equity and access for others to learn about their lived experiences that make up a part of their educational experiences.

KEYWORDS: African American Females/Language practices/literacy practices/narratives/Identity

Felicia Cumings Smith
STUDENT'S SIGNATURE

May 8, 2014
DATE
African American Female Narratives and Identity Development: A Case Study of Language, Literacy, and Identity Development in the Beauty Salon

By

Felicia C. Smith

Dr. Janice Almasi
DIRECTOR OF DISSERTATION

Dr. Mary Shake
DIRECTOR OF GRADUATE STUDIES

May 8, 2014
DATE
Dedicated to
Shane, Olivia, and Josh
My loving parents, Lamar and Loletha Cumings, and
My strength and my refuge
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to my:

husband, Shane, and daughter, Olivia for the sacrifices you have made in order for me to complete this journey.

mother and father for instilling in me the value of education. Historically they have paid the price for me to receive the education I have been granted.

siblings for encouraging me to persevere so that I may be number one in the eyes of our parents.

network of friends I have called my balcony friends. Each of you have encouraged me along the way.

chair, Dr. Janice Almasi, who has “stood on the wall” beside me through good times and bad and for creating a space where my voice can be heard.
## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Tables</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Figures</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Chapter One: Introduction</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose of Study</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational and Cultural Significance</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Definition of Terms</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Chapter Two: Theoretical Framework and Review of Literature</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theoretical Framework</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culture and Language</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Narrative Theory</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identity Development: A Practice Theory of Self and Identity</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black Feminist Thought</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Review of Literature</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language Use and Narrative Texts of AA Women and Identity Development</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identity Construction in Sociocultural Spaces</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Chapter Three: Methodology</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose of Study</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Design</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Role of the Researcher</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Research Site</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selection of Participants</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Sources and Data Gathering Procedures</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observations and field notes</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semi-structured interviews</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Analysis</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phase one analysis</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phase two analysis</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Establishing Credibility</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
LIST OF TABLES

Chapter 4

| Table 4.1 Participant Narratives, Content, and Purposes  | 75   |
| Table 4.2 Kelly’s Narrative Involvement                | 98   |
| Table 4.3 Pam’s Narrative Involvement                 | 100  |
| Table 4.4 Story Element Contribution for Pam          | 100  |
| Table 4.5 Social and Cultural Identities in Practice in the Beauty Salon | 104  |
# LIST OF FIGURES

## Chapter 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Figure 2.1</td>
<td>Culture and Nature Model</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 2.2</td>
<td>Culture and Language Model</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Chapter 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Figure 3.1</td>
<td>Graphic Representation of Beauty Salon Floor Plan</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 3.2</td>
<td>The Front Room in the Salon</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 3.3</td>
<td>Artwork in the Front Room</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 3.4</td>
<td>The Second Room in the Salon</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 3.5</td>
<td>Picture of Madam C.J. Walker</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 3.6</td>
<td>Shampoo Area in the Salon</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 3.7</td>
<td>Drying Area in the Salon</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Chapter 4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Figure 4.1</td>
<td>Pam’s Narrated Event in the Storytelling Context</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter One: Introduction

“Stories are social artifacts, telling us as much about society and culture as they do about a person or group (Riessman, 2008).”

The stories we tell are often shaped by a broader societal discourse that may or may not affirm one’s position in society. Individuals may choose to re-voice other people’s words and live out negative images or they may disrupt the broader discourse in order to tell a new story. This study begins by looking at the grand narratives told, as a part of a broader social discourse in America, that construct images of African American (AA) women in today’s society. This study aims to describe how AA women construct social and cultural identities through their own narratives. The (co) construction of narratives through storytelling events depicts the social and cultural ways that language is used in everyday contexts. The role of language in shaping identity among AA women is pivotal to how women make meaning of themselves and the world around them.

Particularly relevant to this study, the broader social discourse of Black womanhood is represented oftentimes by what Hill Collins terms “controlling images,” that are stereotypes used to subordinate African [or African American] women (Collins, 1991, 1998). These socially constructed, images have influenced mainstream discourses and narratives that have in turn shaped the consciousness of a White America and a system of brutal patriarchy and chattel slavery (Hull, Scott, & Smith, 1982; Lanehart, 2009; Royster, 1994). Furthermore, Sims (2001) stated:

I expand this discussion by arguing that proslavery intellectuals created three specific images – the “mammy”, the “Jezebel”, and the “mule” – as
preeminent features of the dominant ideology that justified their exploitation of female slaves and that contributed substantially to the social construction of African women’s gender (p. 880).

These images have been difficult to overcome for AA women. This is evidenced in the way African American women are portrayed in film, media, and literature. As Dixon and DeCuir-Gunby (2009) wrote, the images of Black women have unfortunately transcended time and what was once associated with negative black female images due to slavery (i.e., Mammy and Jezebel) have now been re-cast to more contemporary negative images associated with socio-political challenges for Black women in society (i.e., welfare queen and Black lady). For example, images of Black women related to physical characteristics such as big lips and nappy hair are now articulated in messages about “nappy headed hos,” as referenced by Don Imus in 2007. Images such as these constructed as social, political, and cultural views, have presented barriers for AA females and have cast the lives and experiences of Black women in the shadow (Royster, 1994).

These deeply-rooted, “controlling images” have distorted what it means to be Black and female in America. I would argue, the futures of many AA women have been constrained as a result of this broader discourse. Almost 30 years ago, Ladner’s (1972), Tomorrow’s Tomorrow: The Black Woman, articulated how these images impact the identity construction of AA women and when unexamined, she denoted there are real consequences psychologically and academically that can be damaging to AA females. Through Ladner’s sociohistorical look at Black womanhood, she examined the impact of institutional racism and the survival-oriented Black women in negating these images portrayed by the mainstream population. Hence, Black women have had to strategically combat such images over time in order to literally survive,
protect the home and psyche of the AA family in order to maintain a sense of identity. One might ask, how do many AA women combat the grand narratives representing the negative images set within the broader social discourse in order to ensure these images are not deterministic for them in defining their identities and futures?

Language and literacy in the AA community has always been a powerful tool for transformation (Foster, 1992; Gasden, 1993; Harris, Kamhi, & Pollock, 2001). The language and literacy practices of AA women have been a central mechanism in disrupting this broader discourse. Smitherman (1977; 2000), Royster (1994), Heath (1983), Richardson (2003), Majors, (1998, 2001), and Lee (1993) are among many scholars who have provided examples of how language and literacy practices are enacted and manipulated as social and cultural practices in the AA community. Many aspects of the language and literacy practices within the AA community are located in performative and oral traditions/responses. The practices of storytelling, signifying, steppin’, manipulation of silence and speech, dancing, and quilting all serve as cultural examples distinctively used to maintain a positive social and cultural identity (Smithermann, 1977).

Researchers examining the social and cultural nature of literacy (Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Heath, 1983; Street, 1984) have presented examples of how language, ideologies, and practices can reshape the futures of various sociocultural groups. Luke (2003) and Purcell-Gates (2007) have challenged researchers engaged in this line of inquiry to further examine the language and literacy practices, including the linguistic resources, of sociocultural groups (who have traditionally been marginalized) within various contexts. Additionally, Barton (2007) suggested “we need to know more about how meanings are made in different situations, both with and without the written word” (p. 181). Connected to this call to action, Perry (2008)
articulated a need to identify “the variation of storytelling practices within communities, and the implications this variation may have for literacy education” as this knowledge may add to our understanding of the complexity of storytelling, as a language and literacy practice (p. 354). Hence, this study is designed to document the language and literacy practices enacted, in a particular context, by AA women. The analysis of the narratives of six AA women will be presented to illuminate the way they share their experiences in order to (co)construct social and cultural identities. Examining the relationships among culture, language, and literacy practices, specifically narrative construction, and identity development in a sociocultural context supports the work of theorists who have studied AA language and literacies and who argue that narratives and storytelling are one mode of discourse where Black people share their special knowledge and ways of being in the world (Collins, 1991, 1998; Gilyard, 2000; Harris, Kamhi, & Pollock, 2001; Richardson, 2003; Smitherman, 1977). This study, situated in the field of literacy, will build upon recent research tying language and literacy to identity development as a meaningful and transformative practice, especially for women of color. Additionally, the study will provide a macro-and micro-level analysis of such language practices in storytelling events.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this ethnographic case study is to examine language and literacy in use in the AA community. Cazden and Hymes (1972) stated, “Language should be studied…in its social contexts, in terms of its organization to serve social ends” (p. xviii). By studying language in this context it will be possible to determine what language and literacy is and what it does for people. Richardson (2003) stated, “Storytelling remains one of the most powerful language and literacy practices that Black women use to convey their special knowledge” (p. 82). Stories are abundant and free-flowing in the beauty salon because the women in the salon feel a sense of
community. A variety of language and literacy practices are enacted in the salon including reading, writing, and storytelling. Real conversations occur as a result of real life experiences for the AA women in the salon. This, inherently, presents a level of authenticity in storytelling that could not be captured in just any context where AA women voluntarily come together. The beauty salon in this study serves as but one gathering place accessible to women to share their experiences, (re)frame their identities, and “try on” new identities to assist them in responding to the broader discourse that they may encounter daily. Hence, this study examines narratives enacted in the salon to provide a microscopic view of the strategies used by AA women in defining, sharing, and negotiating their experiences in today’s society. The analysis should provide some implications for the diverse ways linguistic resources are used and organized to serve social ends such as border crossing and disrupting the discourses that negatively portray “controlling images” of AA women. Collins (1991, 1998) stated that Black women today have to rise above these images in order to maintain a positive social and cultural identity. In order to determine how language and literacy are used in this culturally-rich context, this study is framed by the following question:

What language and literacy practices are enacted in a culturally-rich, community context?

Additional research questions guiding this study are:

1. What language and literacy practices are enacted in the beauty salon?
2. In what ways do AA women narrate their experiences? What stories are shared by AA women in the salon?
3. What are the effects on the listeners of the narratives shared in the salon?
4. How are social and cultural identities (co)constructed and performed in the narratives?

From a theoretical stance, the questions will expand our current understandings of the theories associated with literacy as a social practice and for deepening our knowledge about AA female literacies. In paraphrasing Richardson (2003), she claimed our concepts for literacy among AA females are undertheorized (p. 76). In a more practical sense, these research questions will yield very specific examples of the multiple uses of language in a beauty salon context. A corpus of narrative data will provide snapshots of the ways that AA females narrate their experiences and how these stories shape their identities.

As an AA female literacy researcher, I take up an agenda that examines culture, language, and identity to stretch the field’s perspectives on language and literacy as social and cultural practices. The participants in this study are uniquely positioned to tell their stories that are so often not represented in mainstream literacy journals. This study is designed to contribute to the growing body of literature examining language and literacy practices and identity development process; however, it fills a gap in the literature focused on a specific sociocultural group – adult AA females rather than minority youth. It also examines these constructs in a culturally-rich, community context.

**Educational and Cultural Significance**

Communication, and more specifically the use of language, is a critical 21st century literacy skill for students. Broadening the notion of literacy is essential in acknowledging the diversity within American classrooms. The instructional implications for determining how classrooms accept and build on the communicative and language resources and practices students
bring from their home environments (Anderson, Kendrick, Rogers, & Smythe, 2003; Cazden, 2001; Florio-Ruane, 1997; Heath, 1983; Moll, 2002) is essential in encouraging student success. Understanding how literacy is used in various contexts can facilitate opportunities for increasing student engagement and motivation to participate.

Duranti (1997) stated, “Today, culture is used to explain why minorities and marginalized groups do not easily assimilate or merge into the mainstream society” (p. 23). Furthermore, a lack of understanding the cultural and social ways that language and literacy are used in a variety of contexts, including the beauty salon, presents challenges for sociocultural groups. This study brings language and literacy to the fore as cultural practices in order to gain greater insight into the patterns of language and literacy-in-use. The two assertions outlined below provide explicit connections to this study and classroom practice(s) that suggest its educational and cultural significance.

Assertion 1: Schools and classrooms privilege some language and literacy practices over others. This privileging typically denies access for multiple languages and literacies to be engaged. African American students bring important cultural resources (linguistic competencies) to school that should be valued. Establishing instructional practices in schools and classrooms that honor these cultural repertoires of practice would enhance student learning, achievement, and motivation. Instructional approaches such as peer discussion groups (Almasi, 1995) would present contexts where students could engage in familiar language practices, such as storytelling, and provide similar experiences for AA students as what are enacted in their home and community contexts. In peer discussion groups, students are engaged in mini-narratives that reveal aspects of their lived experiences resulting in how they enact social and
cultural identities. A closer examination of how social spaces in and out-of-school are used to affirm particular language and literacy practices is critically important.

Assertion 2: Classrooms, similar to beauty salons and other community contexts, are inherently social spaces where language and literacy practices have the potential to shape and reveal students’ social, cultural, literate, and subject-related identities. There are a number of researchers who examine discourse (language and literacy practices) in the classroom who have identified the importance of paying attention to teacher-student and student-student language in supporting identity development and the performance of identity through narratives (Bloome, Champion, Katz, Morton, & Muldow, 2001; Cazden, 2001; Leander & Sheehy, 2004; McCarthy, 2001; Moje, 2004; Wortham, 2006). Classrooms should be constructed as sociocultural spaces where free and safe discourses are nurtured consequently allowing students multiple opportunities for “trying on” new identities. Then curricular decisions would provide opportunities for students to challenge and critique mainstream discourses that have traditionally perpetuated negative images of various sociocultural groups, including AA children.

This study is situated in a line of research that foregrounds cultural and social practices of literacy. Literacy researchers (Delpit, 1995; Gasden, 1993; Jimenez, 2000; McIntyre, Rosebery, & Gonzalez, 2001; Lee, 1993; Lee & Smagorinsky, 2000; Perry, 2008; Purcell-Gates, 2007; Richardson, 2003; Tatum, 2006) have laid the foundation for studies such as this dissertation in order to challenge and confirm existing theories and findings related to the diverse ways language and literacy practices are enacted in various sociocultural groups, in and across multiple contexts. Additionally, the examination of identity development through the use of language in school contexts is related to the concepts of this study. The findings from this study
should extend the conversations so that educators have a critical discourse, aimed to (re) evaluate the value placed on certain language and literacy practices in today’s classrooms.

**Definition of Terms**

Many of the theoretical constructs and terms used in this dissertation study are complex. In the section below, I discuss the terms presented in this study.

**AA/Black:** The reference to AA or Black is used to describe a group of individuals, in this case women in the salon participating in this study, who are of African descent. The participants in this study have self-identified as Black or AA. Throughout this study, the terms AA and Black are used interchangeably.

**Discourse:** For the purpose of this study, discourse is defined as the text and language that are used to define who we are as individuals. Additionally, our actions, gestures, clothing, and talk make up how discourse is defined in this beauty salon context. This definition is informed by Gee (1996) and Bloome, Carter, Christian, Madrid, Otto, Shuart-Faris, and Smith (2005).

**Identity/Identities:** Identity is defined by the ways in which one perceives, performs, and personalizes who they are and how they want others to view them. While this construct has been examined from a number of disciplines, the term identity is used in this study to describe the “self” or one’s personhood. Identities are constructed by various social, cultural, historical, and political contexts and the language used within these contexts. Additionally, this study defines identities as plural and dependent upon the various social and cultural roles we play in multiple contexts. A plural self is supported by recent research denoting we have multiple sites for the self (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998).
*Language practices:* Language practices extend the notion of a language event and are rooted in the line of inquiry examining the ethnography of communication (Hymes, 1974). Building on the work of Hymes (1974), Bloome and his colleagues (2008) defined a language event as “any social event in which language is nontrivial to the event” (p. 10). Therefore, most events in our lives are language events and the everyday, on-going talk within the salon represents the language practices of the AA females in this study. Language events involve an exchange of ideas/thoughts between a speaker-individual and/or audience. Furthermore, the language practices enacted by a particular group of individuals or community reveal the norms, rituals, and cultural knowledge enacted in the language-in-use. This notion is closely related to Gee’s (1996) concept of Discourses – “ways of being in the world, or forms of life that integrate words, acts, values, beliefs, attitudes, and social identities, as well as gestures, glances, body positions, and clothes. A Discourse is a sort of identity kit that comes complete with the appropriate costume and instructions on how to act, talk, and often write, so as to take on a particular social role that others will recognize” (Gee, p.127).

*Literacy practices:* Literacy practices are an extension of who we are and how we engage in practices that include reading, writing, listening, speaking, and observing. Literacy practices from this perspective are informed by how we use literacy to accomplish political, social, cultural, and historical goals. This definition goes far beyond a definition of discrete skills of reading and writing but take into account the social, cultural, political, and ideological factors including literacy. Based on the previous work of Heath (1982), Street (2001), Barton and Hamilton (1998), and Purcell-Gates (2007), literacy practices reveal our values, attitudes, feelings, and social relationships including the everyday uses of literacy in and across contexts.
Literacy practices can be inferred by the various literacy events that are mediated through written texts (Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Street, 1993).

**Narrative(s):** Narratives in this study, refer to the stretch of text (or stories) that are told orally, and are descriptive of personal experiences of the individual(s) sharing the stories or related oral texts. Sifting through the multiple perspectives that make up the definitions of narrative(s), this study lands in the middle, defining narrative(s) as extended stretches of talk where the speaker shares lived or perceived experience (Riessman, 2008). Storytelling events that are made up from narratives are but one form of oral communication where narratives are (co) constructed and performed. Grand narratives refer to the narratives held and are representative of the dominant, mainstream thinking. This broader narrative can represent certain ideologies of the mainstream that are oftentimes influenced by historical, political, social, and cultural aspects.

**Sociocultural group(s):** The AA women in this study represent a group of individuals who share common experiences, specifically evidenced through their storytelling events. Purcell-Gates (2007) defined a sociocultural group as “groups of individuals who share common beliefs, values, social structures, norms, activities, and discursive practices” (p. 17). Among the demographic ways that these groups may be identified are: age, gender, race, ethnicity, language, class, geography, and other dimensions (p. 17). How sociocultural groups are associated may also be defined in and across various contexts and individuals may participate as members in various sociocultural groups.

**Summary**

This chapter has presented the context and background for this study. As a literacy researcher, this study is set within a research agenda that examines a broad, complex view of
language and literacy use in a community context. Specifically, this study intends to explore the construction of narratives and storytelling, as sociocultural literacy practices that shape the identities of AA women. This research agenda further extends the study of narratives and storytelling and how these practices reflect our knowledge, beliefs, values, and identities. Language [and literacy practices], as cultural practices, carry histories and represent political ideologies as articulated by macro-level discourses (Bakhtin, 1981, 1986; Gee, 1996, 2001).

Studying language use and literacy in and across varied contexts is not new to the field of literacy. Many of these salient studies have informed this present study (e.g., 1983; Ochs & Capps, 2001). The contribution this study intends to make to the field is to extend the dialogue focusing on AA female literacies and the relationship to the construction of social and cultural identities. Additionally, this study applies a complex theoretical frame, practical use of ethnographic methods to examine a case, and a multi-faceted analytical approach to narratives and identity development. The braided strands of theories framing this study, which are presented in the next chapter, reveal a deliberate representation of how language and literacy are viewed in relation to the identity development of AA women. Such a representation is critical for the field of literacy so that the emphasis of the study brings the readers to a better understanding of the cultural and social practices of language and literacy. This ethnographic case study of the narratives of five AA women will attempt to document and examine language-in-use, as transformative, in the construction of social and cultural identities.

Copyright© Felicia C. Smith 2014
Chapter Two: Theoretical Framework and Review of Literature

Introduction

This chapter is divided into two sections that will present: (a) the major theories used to frame this study and (b) a thematic review of the related literature that examine the use of language and storytelling events to identity development in a variety of sociocultural contexts. This ethnographic case study explores the narratives and identity development of AA females and presents an interdisciplinary approach linking studies from a variety of disciplines including the ethnography of communication, sociolinguistics, linguistic anthropology, and literacy. Over the past two decades, literacy researchers have gained great insights applying an anthropological lens to the study of language and literacy as everyday practices in communities. This has provided a unique contribution to literacy education in order to create a fuller picture of the social and cultural aspects of language and literacy practices. This study builds on previous research agendas that have examined narratives and storytelling as sociocultural [literacy] practices that are dynamic, interactional, and changing over the course of time (Perry, 2007). The use of language as a process of narrative construction in storytelling events is inherently social and represents cultural practices that contribute to the sharing of knowledge, beliefs, values, and construction of identities (Edwards, 2009; Gumperz, 1982; Mishler, 1991; Ochs & Capps, 2001). The theories outlined in this section are used to help explain the intricacies of AA female identity development through the everyday uses of language.

Section one presents three theories that are used to frame this study. Theories of culture and language, narrative theory, and identity development are complex theories that provide a unified framework for this study. Each is presented as distinct theory but will be interwoven, like a braided strand, for the purpose of this study. The braided strand metaphor is intended to explain
the relationships among theories as strands of a braid come together to form a unique representation of hair design.

When studying the interlocking systems of race, class, and gender and how these constructs relate to identity development it is critical to consider the worldview of the participants. In order to address this essential facet of this study, a critical perspective – Black Feminist Thought – is applied for sharing the experiences of AA women in this study. The data gathered, interpreted, and analyzed are done so through this critical lens. Black Feminist Thought (Collins, 1991) challenges a Eurocentric perspective and acknowledges the shared experiences and challenges facing AA women, as a sociocultural group. The narratives (co) developed and performed in the salon in this study provide examples for how AA women use everyday experiences and language, through storytelling events, to further define themselves and make meaning of the world around them. This lens is used to tie the theories together as a band is used typically at the end of a braid to hold the braided strands tightly together.

Section two presents a review of the literature relevant to this topic. The rich oral tradition of AAs has been studied for decades (Baugh, 1983; Etter-Lewis, 1993). This study will extend this body of research and primarily focus on the oral narratives constructed as artifacts of the cultural practices enacted by AA females used as a major component of an identity-building process. Rather than examine these narratives focusing on the various linguistic features and modes of communication of AA females, this study explores the (co) construction of narratives as a sociocultural [literacy] practice, specifically highlighting the dialogic aspects of the construction of narratives that contribute to a self-authoring process. In order to create a space for this study and its contributions, I reviewed a broad base of literature from a variety of disciplines.
The goal of this chapter is to provide an overview of the theories and literature that build a case for further exploration of how narratives of AA women, constructed in a community context, serve as an integral part of an identity building process. While a growing body of research in literacy education has focused on the social and cultural practices of language and literacy in use, this study addresses the identity development of AA women through narratives in a specific sociocultural context. I support the claim that by studying the language and literacy practices of varying cultural groups literacy researchers can gain a deeper understanding for the multiple, social, and cultural aspects of literacy in communities (Harris, Kamhi, & Pollock, 2001; Purcell-Gates, 2007).

Theoretical Framework

The theories presented in this section intend to foreground culture, language, and identity development as constructs most critical to explaining the practices enacted in the beauty salon. Each theoretical perspective is complex and has been debated within and across disciplines. I review and explain theories metaphorically as a braided strand of hair. Presented this way, I am attempting to show the connections and how each will be woven together for the purpose of this study. Tying together these theories represents an intricate process similar to the practice of the hair stylist while “doing hair” and that of identity development. A brief discussion of each of these theories is presented in the following section.

Culture and Language

Defining and explaining culture has been a long, heated debate for anthropologists for many, many years (Keesing, 1974; Levinson, et al., 2000; McCurdy, Spradley, & Shandy, 2005). Rather than explore the various aspects of culture from one end of the spectrum to the other, this
study enters into a dialogue about culture that defines culture as the things we do every-day that are shaped by implicit and shared knowledge and representative of a meaning system (Levinson, 2000). I propose, this study of the everyday uses of language, specifically narratives and storytelling practices, is a study of cultural practices that are carried out in communities. This study makes explicit an assumption that language is a cultural resource and speaking [as a part of storytelling] is a cultural practice that in turn has the ability to shape and define social and cultural identities (Duranti, 1997; Gumperz & Cook-Gumperz, 1982; Purcell-Gates, 2007). In order to explain the cultural practices of AA women and their use of language and narratives, I draw upon theories of culture where language plays a significant role. Duranti (1997) identified six theories where language plays a prominent role in defining culture:

**Culture as distinct from nature.** This view of culture brings forth the notion that culture is learned and transmitted, or passed down, from generation to generation. The significance of language in this theory of culture is that language is, and can be, acquired. The thought is that language socialization is how culture is learned. Boas, a German-born scholar, brought this notion of culture to American anthropology and insisted that culture could be defined as the “totality of the mental and physical reactions and activities that characterize the behavior of the individuals composing a social group collectively or individually…” (Boas, 1969, p. 149 as cited in Duranti, 1997). Furthermore, language in this sense is a part of culture by its ability to categorize the natural and cultural word. An intent focus is placed on the lexical distinctions in language that assist in establishing a system of abstractions that articulate a class of objects, actions, properties, relationships, events, and ideas and thoughts.

**Culture as knowledge.** A view of culture as knowledge assumes that culture is learned, and if learned rather than inherited, culture represents one’s knowledge of the world. This view
of culture has been known as a cognitive view of culture and is associated with the organization of material phenomena such as things, people, behavior, or emotions into the models in that these are perceived, related, and interpreted (Goodenough, 1964 as cited in Duranti, 1997). Language is related to the type of knowledge – propositional and procedural – that individuals bring to a given situation, that also acknowledges their ability to participate fully (or not) in a particular communicative or language encounter. Related to this view of culture is the notion that knowledge is socially distributed. Based on this notion, Duranti (1997) explained that if “cultural knowledge is socially distributed it means that (a) the individual is not always the end point of the acquisition process, and (b) not everyone has access to the same information or uses the same techniques for achieving certain goals” (p. 31). Given this idea, what a person needs to know to be a proficient member within a community is not solely reliant on propositional knowledge.

**Culture as communication.** A view of culture as communication represents culture as a means for communicating one’s view of the world. That through this communication, a system of signs, represents the way one makes sense of the world. Specifically, Duranti (1997) referenced this theory as the “semiotic theory of culture” (p. 33). This theory is built upon Jakobson’s linguistic theory of acquisition to sounds and translates the theoretical assumptions to that distinguishing culture and nature. Levi-Strauss is credited for this theory of culture as culture is understood as a system that communicates through social actors. The cultural products that are communicated by people are actually how culture is communicated. These products have the ability to establish symbolic relationships among people, groups, or species (Duranti, 1997). Figures 2.1 and 2.2 represent Strauss’ (1965) original method for talking about cultural transformation of nature through a culinary triangle metaphor and my perspective of applying this metaphorical aspect to the narrative data of the beauty salon.
Figure 2.1: Culture and Nature Model

![Diagram of Culture and Nature Model]

Figure 2.2: Culture and Language Model

![Diagram of Culture and Language Model]

The beauty salon figure proposes the multi-layer approach to analyzing data for this study in understanding language use, narrative construction, and identity development of AA women. The top point of the triangle (unelaborated) is a direct interpretation of a narrative shared within the salon. This initial interpretation is based on what is said and/or how it is said. The bottom
points of the triangle (elaborated) represent the (co) constructed and performative aspects of narrative shared within the salon. These points move from individual to collective responses that may create elaborate responses to narratives shared. These points on the triangle take into account the dialogic environment acknowledging the social, cultural, political, and historical facets of dialogue constructing the performances of social and cultural identities.

Furthermore, Geertz (1973) extended this semiotic concept and brought forth an interpretive approach to understanding human cultures that then would help explain the interpretive process that characterizes human experience. His contributions, aligned to this theory of culture, frame culture as a product of human interaction – a product that is public and not existing in someone’s head that is both created and interpreted by people. Central to this notion, Geertz viewed culture as coordinated behaviors of people and that it is through this culture that worldviews are produced, including notions of the self [identity] (Duranti, 1997).

Storytelling and the (co) constructed narratives shared and performed in the beauty salon represent the cultural products referenced in this particular theory. The AA women in the salon are the social actors that communicate the various experiences and relationships that represent culture. The performative aspects, such as the behaviors enacted, are all a part of the storytelling event that also present cultural artifacts for making sense of one’s social and cultural identities.

**Culture as a system of mediation.** The ability and use of tools as objects to mediate is presented in this view of culture as a system of mediation. According to this view of culture, tools mediate between humans and the environment and culture organizes the use of tools in specific activities (Duranti, 1997). Language, in this view of culture, includes the material objects and the ideational objects such as belief systems and linguistic codes. This theory is close
to the theory of language as a mediating system where language has the ability to “do” things in
the world. In this case, language and culture as systems of mediation break down traditional
notions of culture and imply that language is an instrument for action. Specifically, in this theory,
“language is a guide to social life because it stops us from acting in a certain way…that is it
suggests and implements alternative ways of relating to objects and people” (Duranti, 1997,
p.43). The salon narratives, then present opportunities to serve as a guide for others in reacting
and responding to everyday experiences as Black women in one community. The narratives
mediate the interactions AA women have with others assisting in their ability to make meaning
of their experiences. As a part of this process, the narratives mediate the identities performed in
any given context. The responses and reactions to individuals are related to the way AA women
make sense of these encounters and the (co) constructed narratives can provide alternative ways
to respond or react to any given situation – pleasant or not. I reference this learning in this way in
order to negate assumptions that the experiences of Black women are the same in other countries,
societies, or communities. Interview data from the participants in this study will reveal the
effects of the narratives on the listeners indicating how language is used in the salon to guide
social ways of being, possibly shaping a new social and cultural identity.

**Culture as a system of practices.** As a part of the poststructuralist movement, culture as
a system of practices is a relevant view applied in this current study. Bourdieu’s (1990) notion of
*habitus*, a system of dispositions with historical dimensions through which novices acquire
competence by entering activities through that they develop a series of expectations about the
world and about ways of being in it is essential to this theory of culture. Language, from this
perspective, is a system that is activity defined by the sociopolitical processes that means it
[language] is not an autonomous system. Consequently, language is not only representative of
the words or the grammatical rules but it is also representative of the “forgotten struggles over power within particular systems” (Duranti, 1997, p. 45). Language as a set of practices can create or perform an action. Individual acts through the use of language, then, can be linked to a larger notion of community where language is intended to be used a certain way with a desired and “agreed upon” result in action. Before further elaborating on this view and the current study I present the fifth view of culture and language.

**Culture as a system of participation.** Building on the previous theory, culture as a system of participation uniquely states that any action in the world is linked to language and then is inherently social, collective, and participatory (Duranti, 1997). Speaking and the use of language can allow us to participate in, and contribute to, a larger world. Within this theory of culture as a system of participation, we become members of a community of ideas and practices through our use(s) of language. Additionally, it is important to recognize the cognitive component of language in any given participation or exchange of ideas because of the very need to retrieve information and extend through processes. Hence, participation using language requires a sharing of resources in order to fully participate within a given situation or community (Duranti, 1997).

Given the previous two views of culture and how language is used, it is possible to see how these views begin to blend the practices of the AA women in the salon with the activity of (co) constructing narratives to shape social and cultural identities. Storytelling as a sociocultural [literacy] practice is representative of the everyday uses of language in the salon. This participatory activity builds community among its members. However, the beauty salon as a culturally-rich community has a set of “rules” or dispositions established for appropriate behavior or conversations. This, representative of a habitus, establishes how AA women interact
within the salon context. The salon, as a culturally-rich research context, presents data that are reflective of the larger sociocultural environment and how AA women engage in this environment with social actors in and across contexts.

This dissertation study primarily draws upon the last two theories highlighted above that foreground language as set of cultural practices that are inherently social and participatory in nature (Duranti, 1997). Within the beauty salon, the participants engaged in the (co) construction of narratives in storytelling events that is explained by this notion of a “give and take,” or jointly-created approach to developing meaning, beliefs, values, and social and cultural identities.

This study examined the narratives of AA women, as dialogic activity, to provide a greater sense of the ways AA females create, challenge, and affirm various identities. In turn, through the examination of these narratives, I intended to shed insight on the worldview and shared knowledge and experiences of five middle-class, AA females today.

In summary, theories of language are infused in the theories on culture mentioned above. While the last two theories focus on language as: (a) a set of practices that have current and historical meaning attached and (b) a social, participatory process; I want to also bring attention to the notion that language as the moment-by-moment, everyday and social activity that mediates action (Halliday & Hasan, 1989; Wortham, 2001). The storytelling events and narratives within the beauty salon reflect the participation and routinized practices that the women have, in order to transform who they are and what they represent – their identities. Each visit to the salon, for the participants, served as another opportunity to practice social and cultural identities. This concept is critical to this study in order to understand the relationship among culture, language, narrative construction, and identity development.
Narrative Theory

The second strand forming a theoretical braid that frames this study, is narrative theory. Overall narrative, as defined in this study, helps examine language in everyday use as a social and cultural phenomenon. Bauman and Sherzer (1974), Gee (1990), and Schieffelin and Ochs (1986) have all applied this same type of theoretical stance to previous research. Different disciplines have used narrative for a variety of purposes. For example, in sociology and anthropology narrative has been used to represent the character or lifestyle of specific groups in society defined by race, gender, and religion (Cerulo, 1997; Gumperz, 1982; Phillips, Steele, & Tanz, 1987; Scollon & Scollon, 1981; West & Zimmerman, 1987). In developmental psychology and sociology, studies have focused on cognitive and social development of children, typically, in various age groups (Nelson, 1989). And in clinical psychology, narratives have been used for the purpose of therapy, and is viewed essential to the core process of healing (Epston, White, & Murray, 1992; Mishler, 1990). Given this diversity, Clandinin and Connelly (2000), posit narrative theory is a type of study intended to explore and understand experience as told in lived and told stories. “It is the line of inquiry, that examines the ways in that human beings make meaning through language” (Casey, 1996, p. 212). Narrative theory uncovers diversity in thought, action, and language and literacy experiences. For the purpose of this study, as a literacy researcher, I intend to examine narratives as a means to determine how language is used to construct social and cultural identities in a community context.

Mishler (1990) noted, “narrative and other discourse genres, are social acts” (p.xvi). This study explored the social and cultural aspects of narrative construction to extend the body of research linking narratives and identity development. In recognizing the situatedness of narrative construction, it is important to consider the context in which narratives are created.
Understanding the relationship between context and the narratives constructed can aid in developing an understanding of what the narrative may be trying to accomplish – a particular social or political act – that then can reveal the underlying notions of power and struggle within a larger context (Riessman, 2008). It is for this purpose, narrative theory represents a second theoretical strand in the braid woven to frame this study.

In order to provide a consistent representation of narrative theory, I draw upon a common depiction used by Riessman (2008) to advance the notion of narrative as a continuum for understanding. Narrative theory on one side of the continuum is represented in a restrictive and pure sense used most often by social linguistics. Narrative from this perspective is the “discrete unit of discourse” that is produced by a research participant and is topically centered and temporally organized” (Riessman, 2008, p. 4). In this example, the use of narrative is representative of a specific kind of response that may be analyzed for a specific purpose.

On the opposite side of the continuum, narrative may represent “an entire life story, woven together from a thread of interviews, observations, and documents (Riessman, 2008, p.5). This narrative is constructed and created for the research participant who did not necessarily state or respond to an interview in this form. From the mix of responses, the narrative is constructed by the researcher as an interpretation of what is said, heard, and captured in the study. This perspective of narrative establishes the researcher as the storyteller connecting and creating the story for the participant involved in the research.

Both of these aspects of narrative are important to this study. In the middle of the continuum, narrative is defined as “long sections of talk” (p. 6). In this case, the research participants have opportunities to share detailed accounts of their personal experiences, which
are captured in and across multiple research interviews, observations, and documentation. The
“long sections of talk” represent the stories individuals share about themselves, others, and
reaction to lived experiences (Wortham, 2001). The experiences and stories of AA, particularly
AA women, have been “untold,” raising many questions about representation including
examining questions of power and authority (Collins, 1991; hooks, 1994). Examining
storytelling as one form of narrative that has been recognized as a major mode of communication
and use of language in the AA community, can remedy this research dilemma (Banks-Wallace,
2002; Heath, 1983; Smitherman, 1977). The data represented in this study are reflective of the
stories told and performed by AA women. “Narratives provide us with access to people’s

Ochs and Capps (2001) claim narrative activity, as a type of discourse, is also a tool for
collaboratively reflecting upon specific situations and their place in the general scheme of life (p.
2). Similarly, I intend to bring into focus the social and conversational nature of narrative to
highlight its dialogic nature in describing how social and cultural identities are created and
performed. This concept is related to the concepts of narrative as texts as well as performances
(Bloome, Champion, Katz, Morton, & Muldrow, 2001). The narratives (co) constructed in this
study are context-dependent and dependent on the purpose and situation in that it is told and
performed.

Narrative texts also have a performative aspect to them as Bloome (2003) and Langellier
and Peterson (2004) stated, “telling a story is a performance. As human communication practice,
performing narrative combines the performative “doing” of storytelling with what is “done” in
the performance of a story” (p. 3). Goffman’s (1981) idea of performance theorizes that social
actors stage performances of desired selves to preserve “face” in situations of difficulty. Bauman
(1986) and Bauman and Briggs (1990) extend the notion of narrative as performance by examining narratives performed by children. This link among narrative, storytelling, and the construction of identities is critical to this study. The narratives performed by the AA females in this study are performances that allow the audience (or other clients in the salon) the opportunities to interact and build shared understanding of their experiences collectively or individually. These narratives are performing identities that are very situated and context-dependent. Narratives in the beauty salon should be viewed through this lens in order to provide a more complete explanation of the texts constructed and performed resulting in various social and cultural identities.

Narratives, as noted by Bloome and his colleagues (2001), help children [and adults] make sense of themselves and the world around them that individuals live through jointly constructed narratives. Freeman (2002) made a simple observation by stating that, “narratives, as sense making tools, inevitably do things – for people, for social institutions, for culture and more (p.9). This reiterates the social acts and performance aspects of narratives that will be explored in this study.

**Identity Development: A Practice Theory of Self and Identity**

Identity development has been researched from a variety of perspectives and across a number of disciplines. While this study could have addressed identity from an ecological systems perspective by applying Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory (1979) to help explain the macro-micro and community interactions that impact development and identity, or Spencer’s Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory (PVEST) (1997) that builds upon Bronfenbrenner’s model, but extends this perspective to include the interactions/risks of people of color, specifically AA individuals, I chose to examine identity development from an
anthropological, cultural perspective. As culture, language, and identity are linked in this study as practices that change over time, I draw upon a Practice Theory of Self and Identity presented by Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner and Cain (1998). This theory of identity development is grounded in practice and activity theories, that extends the work of L. Vygotsky (1896-1934), draws heavily upon the work of M. Bakhtin (1895-1975) and Bourdieu (1930-2002), and locates identity on a more flexible, fluid plane where identities are formed and reformed in and across contexts (p. x). The dense interconnections between the private and the public realms of social practice are inherent in this perspective on identity development (p. 270). Viewing identity as a socially-constructed activity is in direct opposition to Western perceptions of identity development that typically are associated with a more autonomous, independent self (see Erikson, 1968 and Hall, 1996). Emerging theories suggest that identity is mediated by the powerful discourses representing various social, political, cultural, and historical ideologies and their artifacts (Holland, Skinner, Lachicotte, & Cain, 1998). This theoretical stance will be further displayed in this study of AA female narratives.

Relevant to this theoretical perspective on identity development, “practiced identities” are constructs that are realized in and across several contexts of activity (p.271). It is critical to elaborate here on these contexts of activity to provide a connection to these contexts and how they are evidenced in the beauty salon where social and cultural identities are (co) constructed. The first context of identity is the “figured world.” Many social science disciplines articulate a notion of “cultural,” “intentional,” “virtual,” or “imaginary” worlds, that serve as frames of meaning where interpretations and imaginations mediate behavior and are realized (p. 52). Within a figured world, characters and actors are recognized and actions are valued or not, given the situation. Through continual participation in the practices and activity within figured worlds,
one can embody senses (see, hear, taste, touch, and feel). Consequently, artifacts are a meaningful tool and serve as a means for how “figured worlds are evoked, collectively developed, individually learned, and social and personally powerful” (p. 61). The beauty salon represents a figured world where Black women come together to create a free and collective world where they are not oppressed, devalued, inferior, or seen as the “Other.” This figured world brings about a social and personal power that is a result of the knowledge distributed and shared as a part of storytelling events. The narratives that are (co) constructed based on the everyday experiences, activities, and events of AA women, contribute to an evolving sense of identity that is articulated over time and space. The beauty salon as a figured world has narratives as the cultural artifacts of the world that serve as an instrument and collective remembrance for the participants (Holland, et al, 1998). Identities are important outcomes of figured worlds and are formed in process by the activities the actors or characters are engaged in as a part of the figured world (Lancaster, 1992).

The second context within this frame is “positionality.” Holland and her colleagues explain this context as going beyond one’s position in simplistic terms – one’s location - and link one’s positional identity to power, status, and rank (p. 271). It is through these ideas where this perspective problematizes the notions of categories, that provide divisions within society such as one’s race, gender, class, sexuality. One’s social position can lead to entitlement, a variance in respect, legitimacy, and privilege in society (for a deeper analysis of social positioning see Harré & van Langenhove, 1992). Positional identities are enacted in varying degrees given the particular figured world in that one is engaged. For example, when the women in the beauty salon (figured world) enter and participate, they confront the “traditional” social positions ascribed to them as a part of the mainstream discourse (what society and the social media says
about them) through their narratives. Their engagement in the (co) construction of narratives presents an opportunity to reject or recreate a more agentive positional identity that they then may carry with them to the next figured world (that may include work, home, or their son’s or daughter’s school).

Positionality, among the AA women in the beauty salon, at first glance, happens to appear to be neutral. However, experts emerge, gaining status and power depending on the topic of the storytelling events and narratives told. For example, if a client shares about a recent and negative experience with her son or daughter’s school there are a few individuals within the salon who gain power and status because of their knowledge and experiences working as educators. These individuals provide insights and avenues for changing one’s position as less-knowledgeable mom interacting with school personnel, to one with more knowledge and information. Although the expert is providing insights based on their knowledge and expertise, it is done in order to assist or nurture the narrator’s positional identity and not to disenfranchise others. Ultimately, positional identities are negotiated and repaired in the salon in order to provide AA women a “space for authoring.”

The two previous contexts mentioned are critical to build an understanding about this theoretical frame for identity development, but the following contexts will be of primary interest when discussing identity development in this study. The third context, the space of authoring, draws upon the salient work of Bakhtin who indicated that “the meaning we make of ourselves is the site at that authoring occurs and is a space defined by the interrelationship of differentiated “vocal” perspectives on the social world” (Holland, et. al, 1998, p. 173). Simply stated, Bakhtin’s contributions to this work shape a theory of identity development that is grounded in a dialogic approach. This dialogic activity is a defining principle in that Holquist (1990)
articulated, “the figured world of dialogism is one in that sentient being always exist in a state of being “addressed” and in the process of “answering” (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner & Cain, 1989, p. 169). Words and language within this frame of meaning are inherently representative of the social, historical, political, and cultural experiences of people and oftentimes may be in conflict with an emerging identity. One’s identity is constantly unstable because of the pre-populated “voices” that are encountered as a part of the activity in the space of authoring. The struggle to accept or reject these “voices” is at the crux of identity development. The (co) constructed narratives told in the salon are the space of authoring for the AA women because the “voices” are answered, in most instances, collectively shaping and molding the narrator’s social and cultural identity. This process, that appears to be a private activity, is actually one that goes back and forth from private to public spheres. This public and private engagement reveals the voices, that represent one’s worldview, values, beliefs – discourses.

The fourth context, making worlds through “serious play,” is also critical to this study in that this context provides the freedom to experiment with new figured worlds and identities. Play, as a central aspect of Vygotskian theories, is critical to how imagination becomes embodied and experienced. This context, where the imagination is nurtured, creates new identities, that are “tried on” and “acted upon.” This play may or may not be evident in the narratives constructed in the salon, but may transfer to a different figured world – not obvious to others within the salon. The clients, however, have an opportunity to “try on” new identities given the narratives told. One may choose to imagine oneself in a “different light” representing a “fanaticized self” to build a more agentive self. While this context is more difficult to identify within the beauty salon context, it may be present within a storytelling event as participants “act out” certain responses or reactions to the narratives shared. Specifically, if the audiences say,
“well you could have done this or said that” there is an attempt to “play” and “try on” new identities as a result of a given narrative. Given that this context is set within one’s imagination, the activity within the imagination of individuals is hard to capture.

This identity development theory represents the third theoretical strand of the braid forming the framework for this study. Culture, language, and identity development theories provide a complex picture of a complex notion representing the phenomenon examined in this study.

**Black Feminist Thought**

The last section, presented here, represents the band that wraps around the three previously mentioned theoretical strands of the braid. This band holds the theories together and binds them to shape the overall theoretical framework for this study. Black Feminist Thought (Collins, 1998) intends to serve as this wrap-around facet when interpreting the approach and findings of this study.

Qualitative researchers grapple with the art and politics of interpretation as a part of the writing process (Denzin, 1998). Researchers face complicated decisions when re-creating the text for the stories of the real world that was studied. The outgrowth of this process presents an opportunity to apply an interpretive stance on sharing the experiences of the participants oftentimes not represented in the mainstream. As an AA female researcher, studying AA women, I intended to insert the voice of my participants into the mainstream discourse to “disrupt” the narratives often crafting the social and cultural identities of women of color.

Denzin (1998) associated *Black Feminist Thought* with critical and emancipatory theories (Fanon, 2004). He acknowledged, “critical and emancipatory texts as multivocal, collaborative,
naturalistically grounded in the worlds of lived experience” of the experiences of the participants (Denzin, 1998, p. 332). The narrative data presented as the focal aspect of this study address critical issues facing middle-class AA females; provide an opportunity for self-authorship that can be presented as a “freeing” act building a more agentive self; and are multivocal in the sense that the narratives are (co) constructed and represent immediate conversation, but also historical conversation that is pulled in to address the past, present, and future. As the previous theories served as three cords of a braid woven together, this perspective wraps around the theories, like a rubber band, holding the braid (theories) together tightly.

Collins (1998) conceptualizes Black Feminist Thought as a perspective that casts a new humanistic vision on the experiences of women of color. This perspective pushes back on a mainstream worldview that is typically defined from a male, Eurocentric perspective and that represents a matrix of domination using race, class, and gender as interlocking systems of oppression. Black Feminist Thought acknowledges Black women as agents of knowledge capable of reconceptualizing their communities, power relations, and their identities (Collins, 1990). Within this perspective, AA women engage in a sphere of influence where they are nurtured and use power creatively for the good of the community.

Black Feminist Thought applied within this study is two-fold. First, in order to understand the language use and narrative construction of AA women, it is necessary to articulate these experiences from a Black female’s standpoint. The narratives shared in the beauty salon share the everyday experiences of what it means to be young, Black, and female in the United States. A second consideration for the use of this perspective is related to the notion of the significance of dialogue within the AA community. Storytelling has strong roots in the African (and AA) community. It is possible to see the tensions, challenges, and possibilities of
an on-going internal and public dialogue in the identity building process given the narratives produced in the salon. This interplay between Black women’s oppression and Black women’s activism is worked out through the (co) construction of narratives and the creation of social and cultural identities, which assist in various contexts. It is for this purpose, I present this perspective as critical to the current study in every hope to create a space for this research in literacy education.

In summary, this section has presented a complex view of the theoretical considerations and perspectives applied in this study. This braided presentation of theories should provide a preliminary explanation for the cultural phenomenon studied. The following section will present a thematic overview of the related literature on this topic. The studies included, apply some of the same theories mentioned, but reveal the need for further investigation on narrative construction with AA females in determining its relationship to identity development.

**Review of Literature**

A thematic review of the literature is provided in this section. Given the diversity of thought represented in this study, there are studies included from a variety of disciplines. Educational research must continue to explore literature from other disciplines in order to continue to innovate and complicate issues for varying sociocultural groups. Positioning this research in the field of literacy required an initial search for studies published in the top tiered journals in the field, as well as an exploration of studies from other leading journals from anthropology, sociology, psychology, and communications. The studies included were selected based on the similarities in research questions, methodological designs, population, and most importantly the application of a similar perspective on the topic. Furthermore, I included studies
that addressed the language use and narrative texts of AA women and identity development and studies that explored an examination of the construction of identity development in various sociocultural contexts. The research presented within each theme assisted in shaping the argument for this study that sought to examine the everyday uses of language in a culturally-rich context. As previous researchers have called for, this study examined how language is used, how it functions as a mode of communication, how it is used to get things done in the world, and how it varies from context to context to support identity construction (Kutz, 1997).

**Language Use and Narrative Texts of AA Women and Identity Development**

Smitherman’s (1977) seminal work, *Talkin and Testifyin: The Language of Black America*, provided a rich and in-depth look at language use in Black America. Her work provided a comprehensive view of the historical contributions and evolutions of Black vernacular English by setting this study in a larger context of Black culture and lifestyle. While a primary outcome of this text was to bring a greater awareness to the public, schools, and the educational system regarding the importance of teaching Black students the ‘language of the school’, it also provided a laser-like, sociolinguistic view of language identifying four modes of discourse used within the AA community. The four modes referenced in her text include: call-response; signification; tonal semantics; and narrative sequencing (that highlighted the rich storytelling tradition in Black American culture). While this study did not specifically focus on the language and literacies of AA females, it is among the scholarly research that launched a dialogue about language use and literacy practices in the AA community (Labov, 1972). This review of modes of discourse made her work a springboard for others studying AA rhetoric and ideologies about language use. While there is a group of researchers committed to extending such a research agenda, there remains a gap in the mainstream literature in fully exploring the
language and literacies of AA women. The following studies represent scholarly work that has sustained a focus on AA women’s language use and literacies; however, far more empirical research is needed in order to represent AA female narratives as a real outcome of language and literacy practices.

Royster (1994) sought to bring together what “we” [the field of literacy] know about literacy and what “we” know about AA women in her study that focused on the ways and means of literacy as a communicative practice. Through a historical ethnographic approach, she examined the written narratives of AA women, one type of literate practice, as a means for developing a fuller understanding of their expression of self, of society, and of self in society. Uniquely, this study focused on the early groups of AA writers, as essayists, and included the elites of the nineteenth century. This contribution sheds insight on the first “cadre of well-educated women” representing communities that valued education (p.6). Through the analysis of the written narratives within this text, Royster found that the written narratives of these AA women provided evidence of the rhetorical, historical, and ideological views of the women linked to their literacy practices during that time. Furthermore, the narratives provided a thick description of the experiences of AA women in the nineteenth century. This study presented a case where written narratives begin to be examined describing the specific practices of AA women. Within this study, the power of language through written narratives is explored that examined how narratives can be used as a viable avenue for social and political change within society.

Roliston (2011) conducted an empirical study focused on the out-of-school literacy and literacy practices of African American undergraduate female students and how their literacy practices aided in their literate identities in the 21st century. Framed by Afrafeminist theory,
similar to this study, she examined the written statements and interview data of the 10 participants in her study. Her findings indicated the women felt empowered by the use of their literacy practices and enacted literate identities of empowerment. Furthermore, their identities allowed them to restrain and deny negative images of Black women because of their literacy uses. Roliston’s use of theory focused on the explanation of African American female experiences is similar to the current study and will serve as a window into the lived experiences of the African American female participants in this study.

Contrasting the study of written narratives, the study of oral narratives of AA females has also presented an opportunity for researchers to examine the language use and literacies of AA females. Nelson (1990) examined the significance of code-switching and other contextualization cues in the oral life narratives of AA women to identity. The narratives told in this study highlighted the relationship between speakers in any speech event and the contextual and cultural meaning within AA language use. Nelson’s findings represent the power of private and public discourses and the linguistic hegemonic challenges that AA women face in everyday encounters. While this study highlights the linguistic aspects of AA women, the present study examined this aspect of AA language use, but further elaborated the performance and dialogic aspects of the oral narratives shared.

Scott (2000) examined Black women’s language use and how the use of their language indicated the need to cross cultural borders. The cultural borders in this study are referenced as times when Black women must switch their language to enter or engage in a mainstream setting or context, or one with speakers not of African American descent. The use of language in every day talk focused on their language markers for identity but also signified a collective identity among African American females. Scott particularly highlighted the use of “girl” and “look” in
individual and group interview data. This work extended Nelson’s work previously mentioned in this section and highlighted a “way of being in the world” for African American women. The present study examined Black women’s everyday talk as well, but used the narratives as the guide for describing how language use reveals identities in practice.

Etter-Lewis (1991) examined the oral narratives of educated, AA women that shed insight on the perils and triumphs of being black and female in America. The purpose of this study and the current study are similar. The focus of Etter-Lewis’s study examined what narrative patterns of AA women revealed about their lives, and how their unique experiences influenced the manner in that they told their own life stories. This study elaborated on the sociolinguistic information gleaned from the narratives, which provided additional knowledge about the narrator’s verbal performance and views of self and the world while examining the connection of language and social class. Her findings identified three distinct oral narrative styles in unedited narrative texts: unified, segmented, and conversational. Additionally, this study intentionally called for more innovative conceptions, methodological approaches, and analyses of scholarly research on Black women’s lives and viewpoints. Using the oral narratives of her participants provided an option for moving this research toward broader acceptance about language use, knowledge, and identity. The proposed study presented a similar analytical approach to this study. Examining narratives from a dialogic/performance analysis presented additional information to an approach for interpreting AA female narratives.

Similarly, storytelling as studied by Williams (1991) was examined as a resource for Black middle-class mothers and their children as a bridge to literacy. While the findings of this study were from a larger ethnographic investigation of personal storytelling in five communities, it presented a pragmatic perspective of language and how language is used in interaction.
Williams’ findings indicated that the mother’s storytelling represented the literate voices for her children, who then appropriated this literate voice. The storytelling opportunities in school and church, as literacy institutions, presented opportunities to access socializing experiences that helped groom the children into a “way of being” and embracing a literate self. The current study presented another context where storytelling was used for developing identity and a “way of being” in the world. On average, Williams found that 7.6 stories were told per hour, and preliminary content analysis of the stories indicated a range of topics, including family interactions and relations, within-family responsibilities, and social comparisons. As this study provided a view of the types or topics shared, the current study tied topics and opportunities to identity development.

The range of topics in storytelling events and the process in that storytelling as a (co)constructed activity revealing much of one’s identity was examined in Majors’ (2001) examination of the stories told in an AA beauty salon by AA female participants. Majors gathered her data from the beauty salon using ethnographic field notes that revealed the power of reflexivity as a special consideration when conducting ethnographic case study research. Among the data, a stream of stories emerged making the communicative characteristics and discourse structures of AA females visible. Additionally, the cultural meanings the participants brought to the fore represented their shared worldviews, articulated their beliefs and values, while engaged in a cultural genre of talk, “shop talk,” that capitalized on the attributes of AA English discourse. While the contributions of this study assisted the field in developing a deeper understanding for the role of narrative as a viable option for revealing the lived experiences of AA females, it also examined the methodological practices and use of field notes as critical to solidifying the research endeavor. While there are several similarities between Majors’ study and my current
research, I intend to build upon this research agenda by adding an intentional look at the (co)construction of narratives as everyday uses of language and literacy, and tie this process to an identity building process for AA women.

Another related study by Richardson (2007) examined the discourse practices in the hip-hop culture of AA females. Using semi-structured interviews after viewing rap videos and commentary sessions, Richardson gained the input of her young AA female participants (ages 17, 18, 19) as a means to address many of the social and cultural issues, specifically social inequalities such as racism, sexism, classism, and capitalism. The participants used AA language and practices, such as the ‘whitey voice’ (Alin, 2004) to consider different identities and worldviews separate from the dominant discourses that were presented in the rap videos. This demonstrated the intentional ways AA women must encounter hegemonic discourses and gender and sexist ideologies that are a part of their everyday lived experiences. Richardson posited that examining the everyday language and literacies of AA female youths could present opportunities for creating the first steps in facilitating societal change (p. 807). While this study examined the practices of youth, the present study examined how adult women use everyday language in a similar way.

Prior to the previous study, however, Richardson (2003) had already begun to examine the literacy practices of AA females. Her contributions to literacy education further the development and understanding of the importance of studying AA female literacies from an AA methodological approach. Specifically, this literacy study is differentiated because of its focus on the sociological variables that bring about a clearer perception of the acquisition of literacies for AA women. The study’s analysis and synthesis of the centrality of mother tongue literacy in AA female culture and literacies is its greatest contribution. Richardson posited the suppression of
mother tongue literacy is detrimental to the development of literacy and identity development of African Americans. She extended the work of Street (1984), Gee (1990), and Martin-Jones and Jones (2000) by defining literacies as social practices and AA literacies as “vernacular resistance arts and cultural productions that are created to carve out free spaces in oppressive locations such as classrooms, the streets, the workplace, and the airways…” (p. 678). Her study presented a case that included an AA-centered approach to writing instruction. Through this study, AA females were able to manipulate language to free them and present their identities that were bounded tightly to their literacy practices. The present study supported this methodological approach by applying Black Feminist Thought as an AA-centered approach to examining narratives and literacy practices.

Bringing these studies together in this thematic review suggests this topic has been well-documented in previous literature. The studies represented in this section do not represent the breadth and depth of all studies on this topic but are those critical to shaping an argument for continued research on the uses of language and literacy practices among AA women. Particularly, the studies presented only provide a glimpse into the unique lived experiences of AA women and suggested methodological approaches to be used when including AA women as participants. These studies do not represent how the (co) construction of oral narratives can shape the social and cultural identities of AA women. The current study intended to focus on oral narratives in storytelling contexts to shed greater insight on how narratives constructed through dialogic activity can be transformative. Furthermore, the focal participants of the current study were middle-class, adult AA females engaged in everyday uses of language-in-use shaping identity development.
Identity Construction in Sociocultural Spaces

While the previous set of studies highlighted the research on language and identity development of AA women and how oral and written narratives were used to reveal what is known about this topic, the following section presents a thematic review of cross-disciplinary studies examining the importance of context in the identity development process. Given the cultural lens, theoretical and methodological perspectives, and analytical frame applied throughout this study, it is important to examine the context in which language is used to shape identities. Halliday and Hasan (1989) suggested that language is the essential element in the ability to make meaning in a social context. It is this social context in which identities become outcomes of participation through the language use (Holland, et. al, 1998). In this study, the activities are the storytelling events where narratives serve as the artifacts for the beauty salon. This study sought to determine how identities of AA women were (re)shaped by the local context and participants. Furthermore, the analytical approach took this dialogic context into account as a meaningful aspect of the research location – the beauty salon. This culturally-rich, community context set the stage for fostering the language use as an essential element in the development of social and cultural identities. Riessman (2008) indicated, “Narrative has a robust life beyond the individual. As persons construct stories of experience, so too do identity groups, communities, nations, governments, and organizations construct preferred narratives about themselves” (p. 7). While the focus of this study is on the identities of AA women enacted in the beauty salon, it is important to note identities are fluid and may, or may not, be performed similarly in varying contexts. This study, however, does not attempt to examine the influence of narratives and participants’ identities across varying contexts.
Therefore, the significance of culture, language, and identity are intertwined and are a part of a meaning-making process. Addressing “Who I am?” in one context may be different than the response the same question yields in a very different space. The studies referenced in this section are related to this notion, which highlights the significant roles of the social and cultural aspects of a particular space. Several studies have examined the link between language use and identity development, in particular sociocultural contexts. The section below presents a discussion of the literature from across disciplines that reveal the diversity in sociocultural contexts where identity building processes occur as a result of the language and discourse practices enacted in school, home, and community contexts.

DeFina (2008) studied the unique ways narrative activity in a community context, an Italian American card-playing club, were shaped by, and shaped the process of storytelling and identity development. Specifically, the study examined the situatedness of storytelling in daily life and the connections between micro and macro level social processes. Narrative activity, as a part of social relationships, is central among groups’ symbolic practices and through observations, notes, audio and videotaped sessions, DeFina gathered data to examine the micro and macro implications of how collective identities were constructed, maintained, and repaired. This study was conducted over the course of a year in an all male card-playing club. Through her examination of the micro level processes, analyses revealed how topics of stories grew out of the participants’ experiences and how the stories revealed aspects of how meaning was made of particular personal experiences. Further analysis of the macro level relationships in the stories shared in this context revealed the power relations and struggles participants experienced in a wider societal context. Findings from two specific narrative data sets showed that, in both cases, the main point of a story was not necessarily to recount the unusual events, entertain, or present
past events, but to create opportunities to seek out explanations and reflections of images, identities, and related cultural struggles. Furthermore, the study’s examination of the micro and macro implications on storytelling and identity construction is relevant to an identity-building process in a social-cultural context. The narrative activity was embedded in local activity that provided an array of functions and purposes for the stories told in this context. The participants, as members of an ethnic group, were able to use the narratives to dispel stereotypes and find ways to construct new and positive identities. Similarly, the beauty salon participants used storytelling in this way. The present study, however, applied a dialogic/performance analysis of the narratives shared to not only determine how the stories represent AA female experiences, but also through a performance analytical approach, a second level of analysis revealed the sociopolitical aspects underlying the narratives. Linking the narratives to identity development through this examination presented a strong approach to analyzing AA female language and literacy practices.

Martinez-Roldan (2003) examined the role of narratives in bilingual literature discussions in a 2nd grade classroom. As DeFina (2008) examined the narrative construction of an ethnic person and how the narratives were used to construct new identities, Isabella, a Mexican born girl, was the focal participant. Martinez-Roldan’s critical discourse analysis of her narratives as texts shaped by her discussions of texts, represented as dialogic activity, in order to create a positive literate identity. The identity building process is captured through her interactions with others. The literature group established resembled a culturally-specific context where she was able to build on her past experiences and use language and literacy to enhance her development. The researcher found that Isabella was “building worlds” through narratives where she was negotiating and illustrating various aspects of her academic and cultural identity. Her
performances in this specific context enabled her to be reflective, engage in safe discourse practices, and “try on” new identities. The beauty salon context presented a similar culturally-specific context for building worlds. This phenomenon is similar to the present case. A study of the dialogic activity in the beauty salon allowed the AA female participants a similar experience. This freedom to explore her identity in context was similar to the exploration of identity development in the beauty salon and in more technology-based contexts, as presented below.

Sutherland (2005) conducted a similar study of identity development in a classroom context as a part of small group discussions. The participants, Black female adolescents, read texts and connected to the texts within an “identity” unit as a part of an honors English class study. The purpose of the study presented an opportunity to examine the complexities of identity development through a social positioning approach. Data included interviews, field notes, and student artifacts that were analyzed through a constant comparative analysis (CCA). The findings suggested the AA female participants were well aware of their positions related to their complex identities. The use of the literature and the participants’ responses presented various boundaries encountered by being black and female. For example, the participants used scenes from the literature to describe the “ways of being or acting like a Black girl” as a prescribed boundary for their identities. This study examined social positioning, a critical notion of AA female identity development. Consideration to social positioning is essential when studying AA female identities because of the cultural and social barriers that may (or may not) impact AA female ways of being in the world. This theoretical consideration is a component within the identity framework that was applied. While Sutherland’s study used literature groups as the space for interaction and adolescents as participants, the present study analyzed oral narratives and identity development in a small group context outside of a classroom or school setting with adult AA females.
Langellier and Peterson (2004) further extended the research on identity and performed identities in a weblog context. This study links to the current study in the examination of narratives as performed identities in sociocultural contexts. The researchers explored the digital reproduction of narratives as it took the place of “living speech” for participants. The discursive practices practiced in this environment were highlighted and presented to show how the performance aspects of discourse can be structured in this particular context to create identities. This performance aspect was captured in the weblogs of the participants. Langellier and Peterson presented an example of narratives as performances in a unique context. This provides a similar examination of narratives through a performative lens that is an aspect of the present study. Langellier and Peterson highlighted the importance of context in repairing and creating new, more positive identities. The authors noted, “weblogs offer marginalized groups one possibility to intervene in existing social and political relations by changing and ordering of cultural content and tasks…(p.186).” Thus, the weblogs offered a space for authoring and for “strategic intervention” in mainstream cultural forms (this may also be referenced as the macro-level processes). While the weblog is a digital context, the authors viewed it as a cultural innovation that refigured or transformed storytelling in an age of digital reproduction. This consideration is significant in understanding how identity in various contexts, can be seen as a cultural innovation facilitating the transformation of identities and realities such as that in the beauty salon context.

The studies outlined in this section provide examples of how identity is developed in social and cultural spaces and how language and storytelling are used within these contexts. The studies present a blend of intellectual perspectives on identity development in varied contexts. The deliberate inclusion of these studies highlights the macro-micro linkages as promoted in Bourdieu’s work on habitus, which is central to Holland et al.’s (1998), Practice Theory of Self
and Identity framework, applied in the present study. The participants within these studies engaged in making meaning of self, others, and their communities and the language and discourse practices used in and across a variety of contexts examined helped shape the social and cultural identities of the participants.

The present study examined the use of language in a sociocultural context, the beauty salon, where African American women gathered to share their stories and (co)construct narratives to shape identities in practice. This study acknowledged the significance of the community context as a safe space for cultural activities where women can learn and share with one another. Applying Riessman’s, dialogic/performance analysis to this study presented a natural way to examine the dialogic nature and performative aspects found in group construction of narratives and identities.

In summary, the intent of this chapter was to provide an overview of the complex theories and methodological approaches used to date when studying a similar or related topic. The relationship between narratives and identity construction, in and across community-based contexts, is well established. This study brought together an interdisciplinary approach to the study of language and identity development. This complex and “braided” theoretical approach is supported by Bloome’s (2006) comments on what counts as evidence in spoken and written discourses. Acknowledging his contributions is critical and is represented in this chapter to strengthen the frame for this study. He stated, what counts as evidence in researching spoken and written discourses “is based on the definitions, theoretical frames, and epistemologies woven to create a relationship of literacy to spoken language, thinking, thought” and I would argue identity (p.143).
The importance placed on this phenomenon in the field of literacy is driven by the need to better understand the social and cultural aspects of language and literacy in community contexts, as a rich resource for understanding how people make sense of self and life. By focusing on AA women this study brings one additional contribution to the field in that when under-represented groups are the participants in research an opportunity is presented as a means to acknowledge varied experiences and uses of language and literacy of that particular group. As noted by Holland, et. al (1998), “Identity, as the expressible relationship to others is dialogic at both moments of expression, listening and speaking” and this study was designed to examine narratives to uncover the ways in that storytelling, a sociocultural literacy practice, shaped social and cultural identities of AA females. The methodological considerations to accomplish this study are outlined in the next chapter.
Chapter Three: Methodology

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the language and literacy practices of AA women in a beauty salon context and how these narratives are a part of an identity-building process. Small-scale studies, such as this case study, can assist the field in developing a deeper understanding of the links among culture, language, and identity development. Five African American women engaged in this research endeavor, opening up their lives to share their lived experiences of being Black and female in their community. Individual and group storytelling narratives served as the primary source of data. The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What language and literacy practices are enacted in the beauty salon?
2. In what way, do African American women narrate their experiences? What stories are shared by African American women in the salon?
3. What are the effects on the listeners of the narratives shared in the salon?
4. How are social identities (co) constructed and performed in the narratives?

Research Design

This dissertation study took a case study approach. A case studies represent a specific, complex, functioning thing (Stake, 2005); hence, they are typically referred to as a “bounded system.” In order to answer the research questions, this study examined language and literacy practices in one AA community. Examining language and literacy practices enacted in a beauty salon brought greater focus to the ways AA women use language and literacy. This social space established one boundary for this study as it represented a unique context where everyday language and literacy was used in a dialogic and performative manner. One goal of this study
was to uncover patterns around the research interest (Bromley, 1986; Stake, 2005; Yin, 1994). The salon, set within an AA community, was a hub for sharing real experiences in real ways. The use of language in this cultural context revealed the intricacies of what it means to be Black and female in this community.

The participants in this study were AA women who were active storytellers. They represent a distinct speech community as referenced by Scott (2002). The participants were a small sample of the number of women who regularly visit this salon.

Ethnographic techniques were used in this case study in order to highlight the relevance of the cultural context and to provide a cultural interpretation of the language and literacy practices in use. Wolcott (2001) specifically articulated a difference in qualitative studies that are influenced by an ethnographic approach and those conducted as ethnographies. The most obvious distinction is the former (i.e., influence on a study) implies similar strategies for methods typically associated with ethnographies. For example, this dissertation study used fieldwork techniques necessary to describe “in detail” the (co)constructed narratives enacted in the salon and how these practices shape the development of social and cultural identities. In order to fully represent the beauty salon context and activities that surrounded the everyday language and literacy use of the AA women, “thick descriptions” (Geertz, 1973) were provided. Thick description has traditionally been used in ethnographies and ethnographic research to elicit images, document events, quotes [and narratives], and to study the complexity of the phenomenon in its natural setting (Geertz, 1973). Furthermore, an emphasis on context and culture were highlighted as key aspects in this study as traditionally found in formal ethnographies.
**The Role of the Researcher**

I entered this study as an AA female interested in the dynamic ways AA females use language to shape or construct their social and cultural identities. The study represented who I am and how I view the importance of the role of language and literacy in the day-to-day interactions of creating, counteracting, or embracing narratives that shape identities.

I am an AA female researcher and literacy educator. As Clandinin and Connelly (2000) stated, “Our research interests come out of our narratives of experience and shape our narrative inquiry plot lines.” (p. 121). My interest in the language and literacy practices set within the AA community are grounded in my desire to assist all educators in developing a more complex view of language and literacy-in-use for AA learners. I revealed how narratives (co) constructed and performed in one context can assist in our understanding of how language and literacy connect to one’s world view and how identity is shaped and influenced by others’ use of language. As a result, this study was designed to contribute to the body of literacy research examining language and literacy as social and cultural practices.

I provided an insider, emic view, of the language and literacy practices in the salon. I have been a client of the main informant’s for over 15 years and know many of the women well in this salon. I have participated in past storytelling events and contributed to the (co) construction of the identities of the women who have frequented this salon. Fully aware that the narratives have an impact on my identities, my goal was to determine how other AA women use language through storytelling events. My intent was to go beyond the story on the surface to look deeply at how this culturally-rich community setting can contribute to language, literacy, and identity development. The methods employed in this study allowed for a close examination of
the unique nuances of the language and literacy practices of AA women enacted in the salon in relation to identity development.

As in all qualitative research designs, the researcher serves as the primary instrument for collecting and analyzing data (Merriam, 1988; Spradley, 1979). Acting as a participant observer, I moved fluidly from participant to observer. I participated in the development of the narratives, at times particularly only when the participants drew me into the (co) construction of a narrative.

The Research Site

This study was conducted in a large urban city in a southern state. Given my previous involvement as a client of this salon, access or gaining entry to the salon for this study was fairly easy to attain. Having an intimate awareness of this research site gave me an added advantage of knowing what to look for and how to interpret the storytelling events as a regular part of salon activity. The clients knew me well and trusted me as a researcher.

The Dollhouse Salon (pseudonym) is owned and operated by a young, AA woman. The salon is a refinished house that was built in the late 60s. Quaint, warm, and cozy, describe the salon that sits approximately 10 feet back from the edge of a major highway in the southwestern part of town. The outer appearance of the salon was well-kept. The yellow and white siding, on the house, provides a very clean, soft appearance. During the spring and summer seasons there are pots of beautiful flowers on the porch. A small gravel parking lot provided space for approximately 5-10 cars in the front of the salon. Clients and stylists enter the salon through the main entrance, the front door.

The salon’s physical arrangement was quite spacious and the different rooms served a clear purpose for salon activity. A diagram of the salon is provided below (see Figure 3.1).
Figure 3.1. Graphic Representation of Beauty Salon Floor Plan
As you enter the salon, the first room is arranged as a waiting area. This area represented a social space for gathering. It was decorated elegantly with wingback business-like leather chairs and a large leather couch for client use. The walls were painted in a rich, mustard color with a hint of brown accent. The front room had a sophisticated feel that was also reflected in the artwork adorned on the walls. The picture of the women in the styling chairs below hung in the front room of the salon.

Figure 3.2: The Front Room of the Salon

Figure 3.3: Artwork in the Front Room
The second room in the salon was where most of the activity occurred (see Figure 3.4). This room provided space for the stylists’ stations where clients sat and got their hair done. Five stations were located in this space and each had a comfortable leather chair for client use and a desk station for products and other materials for the stylists’ use. This space was the hub of activity where lively conversations and stories were told. There was a large screen television mounted on the wall for client convenience and often the programs on the television served as an impetus for storytelling events and conversations.

Figure 3.4: The Second Room in the Salon

Another interesting piece of artwork that hung on the wall in this space was a picture of Madam C. J. Walker, who at the time of her death (1919) was known as the wealthiest AA woman and the first self-made, female American millionaire. The significance of her life was directly related to hair products and maintenance. She introduced the world to black hair and beauty products through her early home remedies and experiments with various products to maintain black hair.
Figure 3.5: Picture of Madam C. J. Walker

The other two rooms in the salon served as the shampoo (Figure 3.6) and drying areas (Figure 3.7). These rooms were painted with deep colors, reds and blues. These spaces did not serve as prominently as communal areas because the majority of clients were phased in and out of these spaces at varying times. Due to this fluidity and movement, the majority of client activity in these spaces were done independently. Most clients read silently or watched television while sitting under the dryer. A picture of these two spaces is provided below.
In a previous pilot study the clients and stylists in the salon stated the following describing their perceptions and relationship with their experiences in this salon.

“…to me it’s just a place where we all have a bond…when black women get together and just talk, you know we have so much in common…it’s like one person from the east or
west end meet and then it’s like they’ve known each other their whole lives…” , Kelly, 2/08

“I see it [beauty salon] like being with your family…so, like it is a home away from home ‘cause I see so many familiar faces, it’s always a warm environment with lots of talking and discussing and you know we can be who we are and there’s no men around so we can laugh, cry, debate…”, Rita, 3/08.

The history of this neighborhood had evolved over time, similar to the ever-changing idea and notion shared through the language and literacy practices in the salon. This area of town was one of the oldest areas of town and is called “home” for a diverse group of people. Many of the people living in this neighborhood were young couples starting a family or older, retired women and men. In the 1960s the area was predominantly a white neighborhood where “colored” people were not allowed. Today, the area represents a balance of AA and European American families. The socioeconomic status of the majority of individuals and families in the area is within the middle-to-low income status.

**Selection of Participants**

This research study applied ethnographic sampling procedures, including criterion-based sampling (Schensul, Schensul, & LeCompte, 1999). Ethnographic sampling represents the most current practices used in the selection of participants. Over 150 clients visited the beauty salon and studying every client was not the intent of this particular study; hence, I selected a sample of participants in order to generate a small group of clients who were representative of, and engaged in, the events of this study. Criterion-based selection grounded the study to ensure the participants matched the intended goals and outcomes of the study. Given the study’s focus on
language and literacy practices of AA women, the participants were selected by this cultural/ethnic marker and were of AA descent who self-identify in this way, or by identify themselves as Black. I selected a community space, the beauty salon, where I was confident I would have participants participating in the narrative activity. Additionally, I used criterion-based selection strategies such as reputational case selection and chain referral selection (Schensul, et. al, 1998). Both of these strategies allowed me an opportunity to collaborate with the community experts and allowed participants to identify other participants who were appropriate for the study. In this case, the main informant, Kelly, referred me to several other clients who she felt were interested in participating in the study and who were vocal in sharing stories with the regular clients in the salon. The selection of clients who participated in storytelling was essential to this study. Kelly assisted in identifying four women for the study who all attended on the same night as a means of capturing a strong “flow of conversation” during their visit.

I selected five focal participants for the study. Patton (1990) recommended researchers identify a minimum sample size when conducting research. A brief description of the main informant is below.

**Kelly.** Kelly (pseudonym), the main informant in this study, is the lead stylist and the owner of The Dollhouse Salon. She is a first-time business owner and has always dreamed of owning her own salon. She drives to the salon from almost the other side of town where she lives in what many locals call an affluent area of town. Kelly has a high school diploma and has attended specialized professional training in order to become a hair stylist. Kelly is 44 years old and has three children and one niece she recently “took in.” Kelly was the “gatekeeper” in the study and gave me access to people, histories, and other pertinent information for the study’s
success. From the onset, Kelly shared with all her clients that the salon was taking part in an on-going research study attempting to document how language and literacy are used by AA women.

Four other participants were selected for this study. The women identified to participate were selected purposefully applying the following criteria:

- Client of the salon who has been coming to the salon for at least one year,
- An AA female, and
- Someone who contributes regularly to the stories shared in the salon not necessarily identified as a shy client.

A brief description of the other four participants is outlined below:

**Pam.** Pam (pseudonym) is married with two children. She is 43 years old and earned a Bachelor’s degree in criminal justice. She works at a juvenile detention center in the downtown area of the city. She attends church regularly and indicated that she loves to spend time with her husband and children.

**Kenya.** Kenya (pseudonym) is 43 years of age and has four children and one grandchild. She indicated that she grew up in a house full of girls and is the oldest in her family. Kenya indicated that she is very opinionated and enjoys laughing and having a good time with her friends and family. She is married and owner her own business a few years ago. She and Kelly have worked together, as colleagues, for over 15 years.

**Bridgette.** Bridgette (pseudonym) is single and has been a client of this salon for over 20 years. She is 43 years old and does not have any children. Bridgette described herself as quiet, shy, and a “loner”.
**Paula.** Paula (pseudonym) is 53 years old and has never been married. She has two children and 1 grandchild. Her son lives with her and is scheduled to graduate high school next year. She has a Bachelor’s degree and works in the salon as a nail technician. She has lived in the area all of her life and attends the same church as Pam and Kelly.

At first glance, the participants in this study would appear to represent a homogenous group; however, the opposite is true. The group of women who came into the salon were as diverse as the various hairstyles created within the salon and as complex as the practices for taking care of or maintaining Black hair.

**Data Sources and Data Gathering Procedures**

The data sources for this ethnographic case study included observations/field notes, semi-structured interviews (elicitation prompts), and the collection of various artifacts (e.g., books, magazines, photographs) relevant to the beauty salon context.

**Observations and field notes.** One extreme difference in this study and one that would qualify as a formal ethnography was that the duration in the field included multiple site visits as an intentional method for saturating the data. For this study, eight ethnographic observations were conducted in the salon over four months. During the first two visits, observations provided broad descriptions of the language and literacy practices within the salon. Broad descriptions of the context were gathered in the first month of data collection in order to provide an overview of the social and cultural activity surrounding language and literacy enacted in the salon. (Spradley, 1979; Schensul, et. al, 1998). The first two observations of the study took closer to 4 hours each. I wanted to stay in the salon long enough during these first visits to observe behaviors of all the
participants that entered into the salon. Across these initial observations, I was able to observe each of the participants engaged in the salon activity. During these two observations, five narratives were captured of which one was used as a focal narrative. The remaining narratives were captured in subsequent observations (observations three through eight).

Subsequent observations were more focused and selective. These observations provided an intimate description of the storytelling events, and the narratives as the primary source of data. One observation per month, beginning the second month of the study, was video and audio-taped and transcribed. Researchers examining narratives or storytelling events, have several decisions to make when transcribing data. Lapadat (2000) noted, transcription decisions should depend on the purpose, theoretical stance, and analytic intent. Hence, I chose to provide the precise words spoken of the narrators in order to prevent a misinterpretation of the stories shared. I included overlaps, pauses, emphasis, repetitions, and markers of final intonation when I transcribed the narratives. This decision was made to allow the participants to be the speaker for themselves and their experiences. This, according to Riessman (2008), allowed for a closer examination by the researcher and reader of the language used throughout the study. In order to transcribe narrative data in this way; however, I took into account references to the context specific to each narrative, when appropriate. Hence, this inclusion ensured the analytic procedures used matched the examination of the dialogue and performance aspects of the narratives captured in the salon (Riessman, 2008). For the majority of narratives captured within this study, I captured the content with some context references to highlight the topics/stories shared among the participants. This information is noted typically at the beginning of the focal narratives where appropriate. Not all participants were engaged or present for each narrative. Typically, the individuals mentioned in the narrative were the individuals in the salon at the time.
of the observation. This was a positive facet of the study because it provided focus on just the primarily participants rather than having to sift through and differentiate between individuals within the same context.

I captured these data through the use of a flip camera and only captured up to 30 minutes of narrative activity. The audiovisual strategies enhanced the ethnographic methods and provided an opportunity for in-depth analysis of the intricate aspects of the verbal and gestural activity in the narrative construction and storytelling events. As previously mentioned, this type of data assisted in revealing the performance aspects of the use of language and literacy traditionally found in the AA community.

Field notes were taken during or immediately after each site visit. A two-column format (Appendix B) was used to capture field notes with the intent of identifying patterns over time. This tool was designed so that some space at the top of the field note recording form could be used to capture physical aspects of the salon including where the storytelling event occurred (i.e., specific room) and where the participants were positioned in the storytelling event. For example, the narrative activity always occurred in the main room of the salon where the styling stations were located. Narratives typically did not move from room to room but were initiated and ended in the main room. This contextual information was critical in the interpretation of the data. Within the two-column format, the left side was used to capture the specific descriptions of the environment, observations related to the clients, behaviors and the language of the group and individual narratives. Specifically, a detailed, descriptive account of the storytelling event was captured. For example, there were typically no more than five women in the salon at one time. Contributing to the detail of each account, specific language, quotes, and gestures were included. The right-side of the column was designated space for my initial thoughts, comments or raw
reactions to the storytelling events. In similar studies, researchers have used memoing (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) as a source of data and this section was used in this manner.

These field notes were used to form questions for subsequent interviews. Field notes were organized by date and, where possible, time intervals were captured. Two site visits a month occurred and lasted approximately 3 to 4 hours per visit. A total of eight site visits and approximately 32 hours of observational data was collected. The observation data and my field notes were used primarily to help answer questions 1, 2, and 4.

I kept a field work journal where I captured “sketchy” notes about my field observations, questions related to the research theories and literature on the topic, meaningful quotes from participants, and pictures from the beauty salon site. I reserved pages in the journal for opportunities to “free write” which provided a space for beginning analysis.

**Semi-structured interviews.** Formal and informal interviews were conducted with the participants and were audio-taped and transcribed. A semi-structured interview protocol was used to capture the reactions, effects, and perspectives of the participants about the narratives shared in the salon. During the interview process, elicitation prompts (Peterson & McCabe, 1983), a particular approach to collecting narratives, was used. These prompts were designed to further engage the participants in storytelling as a part of the interview process. The questions below were a part of the interview protocol.

1. Share with me your immediate feelings or reaction to the story (name of participant) shared in the salon about (major topic within the story).
2. Why do you believe (name of participant) told this story? What do you believe others could learn from this story?
3. What do you believe that story tell us about (name of participant)? How she defines herself, what she cares about, how she views the world?

4. Has anything similar ever happened to you? If so, how did you respond? Was it similar or different from (name of participant)? Would you share about your experience?

5. What social and cultural perspectives get affirmed or alternatively envisioned as a result of the narratives shared in the salon?

Participants were asked to provide interpretations of selected narratives shared in the salon, hypothesize about the storyteller’s intent and purpose of the narrative(s), and describe how the narrative(s) impacted them personally. During the interview sessions, participants had multiple opportunities to share common experiences or additional background information relevant to the focal narrative for the interview session. More specifically, the interview sessions were designed to provide an opportunity for the participants to elaborate, connect, and respond to the stories shared in the salon. Interview data based on the questions above assisted in answering the broader research questions 2, 3, and 4 for this study. Interviews lasted no more than an hour and were audio-taped. Participants were interviewed at least once. All interviews were conducted at the salon and this was based on the preference of the participants.

Data Analysis

Research studies that examine narrative texts fit into a diverse family of analytic methods. Some social scientists examining narrative focus primarily on thematic and structural aspects of language (Labov, 1972; Gee, 1985; Scollon & Scollon, 1981). Narrative studies, however, have the potential to bring a variety of details to the fore specifically going beyond how and why a particular event is storied but to the potential outcomes or accomplishments for why a story is shared in the way it is shared. Riessman (2008) suggested, “a good narrative
prompts the reader to think beyond the surface of the text, and there is a move toward a broader commentary” (p 13).

Analysis was conducted in two phases for this study. The first phase of analysis was two pronged. The first element of analysis in this initial phase examined the language and literacy experiences enacted in the salon, capturing the typical uses of language and literacy, and how the women in the salon engaged in storytelling activities. The second element, or prong, within this first phase of analysis was to analyze the narratives at a macro level in search of determining categories for narratives based on the content of these narratives shared in the salon. This assisted in answering the questions related to how AA women shared their life experiences.

Analysis began at a very descriptive level examining the observable data. Following a process pioneered by Michaels and Cazden (1984) and further elaborated by Gallas (1994, as cited in Riessman, 2008), I began by capturing extensive notes from the first viewing of observational data or interview data. This first step provided the contextual data to be included within any initial considerations of the narratives. Following this step, the transcript was created based on exact language. The language was captured verbatim for each participant.

A second level of analysis was conducted in order to look more closely at the social and cultural nuances of language used in the salon. This deeper level of analysis was designed to interrogate how meaning was (co) constructed through the narratives shared by and for the participants. It is during this level of analysis when markers related to social and cultural identities were uncovered. This was accomplished by a second and third reading of the transcriptions highlighting particular instances to further interrogate the narratives.
I analyzed the data in two phases. The initial phase of analysis provided a broad interpretation of the language and literacy practices enacted in the salon. Additionally, I examined the observational data, field notes, and interview data from a more traditional narrative approach – examining for thematic and structural categories. The second phase of analysis applied a more intensive narrative approach, dialogic/performance approach in order to “move beyond the text” and explore meaning of the narratives and perceptions of the narratives as determined by the participants through interview data. A more detailed description of this process is outlined below.

**Phase one analysis.** The first phase of analysis identified thematic and structural aspects of the data. Since oral narratives are less likely to be rehearsed and lack clear boundaries for beginnings, middles, and ends; the narratives were re-transcribed from their original paragraph state to create textual boundaries (Ochs & Capps, 2008; Riessman, 2008). This process occurred in order to analyze the narratives structurally. Understanding the complexity of establishing boundaries of spoken language, I adapted Labov’s (1972) analytical approach as outlined and adapted by Riessman (2004). Systematically, I approached the transformed narratives and coded the texts for the following narrative elements: abstract (AB), orientation (OR), complicating action (CA), evaluation (EV), resolution (RE), and coda (C). At this level of analysis, the focus was on the narrative, the bounded unit of speech, not the narrator, context or audience. Labov’s model was selected because of the historical work done on African American language. This approach meant I retained several narratives to use to analyze and then excluded other narratives because the narratives did not meet the criteria of having the form outlined above.

Focal narratives, selected from the data were identified for a greater level of analysis. I re-examined the narratives with the intention of highlighting key words or phrases. These words
and phrases represented early categories for content or thematic analysis identifying what the participants note as “worthy” of storytelling. I noted the specific references to social issues or cultural aspects relevant to the stories that described the (co) constructed meanings for the experiences of AA women. The intent and purpose for telling the narrative became very important in this level of analysis.

**Phase two analysis.** In order to accomplish this level of depth, bringing to light the particulars of the experiences to be shared in the narratives of the clients in the salon, data was analyzed adapting a narrative approach of dialogic/performance analysis (Riessman, 2008). Informed by aspects of literary theory from Bakhtin (1981) narratives are multi-voiced and carry meanings from the past. This narrative framework examined “talk” among speakers as stories are (co) constructed and performed as narrative (Riessman, 2008). Applying this approach meant the narratives can be examined not only for theme and structure, but also for context where performances occur. The performance aspects of this approach are grounded in the work of Goffman (1969, 1981) and further elaborated by researchers interested in performance and narratives such as Langellier (2001), Ochs and Capps (2001), Bauman (1986), and Solsken and Bloome (1992). The performances in the salon were represented in narratives where the audience (other clients) contributed and participated in the construction of the narratives. A dialogic/performance approach to analyzing narrative allows for researchers to interrogate “the ways in which structures of inequality and power – class, gender, and race/ethnicity – work their way into what appears to be “simply” talk about a life…” (Riessman, 2008, p. 115). The research context of the beauty salon was representative of a small-scale version of the larger sociocultural environment. Language embedded in every-day social situations was foregrounded.
The language of two particular participants was used for further analysis in this second phase. Kelly’s and Pam’s narrative and storytelling activity was selected for this second level of analysis. These two participants were the most vocal within and across the narratives. I also selected these two participants because they were more likely to be engaged in narratives initiated by themselves but also by others.

**Establishing Credibility**

Qualitative studies are based on the perceptions and activities of participants in their natural setting. A variety of techniques are used by qualitative researchers to ensure credibility is established and maintained throughout a study. For this study, detailed descriptions and member checking were used.

Several sources of data were used to triangulate data and to create rich, detailed descriptions of the context and narratives for this study (Geertz, 1973). Providing rich descriptions of the various narratives shared during storytelling events created a real sense of the context, performance aspects of the storytelling events, and how the narratives represent language and literacy practices enacted in the salon linked to the identity building process. This is evidenced in the data that follows in chapter four. Additionally, including the actual quotes and language of the participants in the descriptions created a more authentic and holistic picture of the social and cultural aspects of language and literacy-in-use.

Member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) was another technique used in establishing credibility. Stake (1995) suggested, researchers should allow participants to examine the rough drafts of writing in order to check for accuracy and appropriate representation. Kelly, the main informant, served as my primary person to conduct this member checking. After I transcribed the
various narratives I asked her to read the narratives to determine if the data were represented accurately. She, at that time, had the opportunity to provide feedback and make suggestions for revisions. The focal narratives within this study were identified for use, jointly, so that the storyline would reflect the voices of the participants. Kelly spent several hours looking through narratives, reflecting on how the narratives were told, and writing in her own diary/notebook to capture her thoughts about particular narratives shared. Kelly and I were in full agreement when determining which narratives to share within this dissertation.

**Summary**

In sum, this chapter provided a description of the methodological procedures and decisions made for this dissertation study. Significant to a study of language and literacy practices and identity development was the level of intimacy among the various processes for conducting a study. Data collection, analysis, and interpretation were difficult to tease apart and each occurred as an iterative practice in this study.

For the purpose of this dissertation study, I examined audiovisual data collected through observations, field notes representing the individual and group narratives that were produced and performed in a collaborative, dialogic manner, and semi-structured interview data. The interviews were specifically designed to supplement and triangulate these data in order to gain a deeper perspective and interpretation of the narratives and the relation of these narratives to the identity building process.

The data were analyzed applying a narrative approach. Two levels of analysis occurred. First, data were analyzed through a more traditional narrative approach in search of content and structure. This initial analysis presented themes captured in the narratives relevant to the
narration of AA female experiences. A critical second level of analysis occurred and focused not
only on “what” was said and “how,” but on “who” spoke and “how” the narratives were
interpreted by other participants. In a dialogic/performance analysis the audience and context
were critical to interpretation and representation of the phenomena under study. Riessman’s
dialogic/performance approach presented a new option for examining narrative data that
highlighted the (co) construction of how identities are shaped and enacted in the salon.
Specifically, adhering to the theoretical frame within this study applying this
dialogic/performance analytic approach assisted in determining what meaning was accomplished
for the participants through the narrative performances and link this to the self-authoring and
identity building process.

Qualitative research is complex and time intensive. This study was characterized by these
facets by delving into the everyday social and cultural language and literacy practices of a
particular group. Researchers must remain cognizant and sensitive to the ethical considerations
when interpreting and representing the experiences of others. These notions for conducting
research were not taken lightly as methodological decisions were made carefully and
purposefully. Complicating this a bit more, a researcher’s orientation and interest are embedded
in qualitative research. Dyson and Genishi (2005) stated, “Researcher’s data gathering, analysis
and indeed, eventual write-up of others’ experiences are mediated by their own lives” (p.81).
This was true in my experience as a part of this study. Traces of my experiences as an AA female
are related to and inherent in the narratives of the participants in this study.

Copyright© Felicia C. Smith 2014

70
Chapter Four: Findings and Discussion

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to examine the language and literacy practices of African American women and explore how these practices construct their identity development. This study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What language and literacy practices are enacted in the beauty salon?
2. In what way, do African American women narrate their experiences? What stories are shared by African American women in the salon?
3. What are the effects on the listeners of the narratives shared in the salon?
4. How are social and cultural identities (co)constructed and performed in the narratives?

While I had expected to see literacy practices throughout the study to answer the overarching question (What language and literacy practices are enacted in a culturally-rich, community context?), I was not able to capture any data to substantiate any claims about these practices. As in the case of ethnographic studies, the researcher must be aware of his or her influence on the natural setting while conducting research. I contend my presence may have interfered with the research site and the participants adapted their practices throughout the study period. Prior to the beginning of the study, the five female participants – Kelly, Bridgette, Pam, Paula, and Kenya – engaged in conversations about the various texts including books, magazines, or other printed materials. These discussions, as noted in my field notes, were nonexistent once I moved into the field.

As a result, the focus of this study was slightly adapted. I turned my attention more closely to examining the language practices of the participants shared in the salon. The data indicate these
practices were primarily in the form of narratives. The narratives, co-constructed by the participants, were the primary means for how the women shared their life experiences with one another. These everyday storytelling events performed in the beauty salon resulted in rich and vibrant narratives that serve as the unit of analysis for describing the lived experiences of African American females today. Furthermore, the transcripts of seven focal narratives are presented in this chapter to serve as exemplars from the data set.

In this chapter, I organized the findings into two sections based on the two levels of analysis associated with Riessman’s (2008) dialogic/performance approach to narrative analysis. This approach to narrative provided a broader and more interpretive lens so that I could interrogate the narratives in order to respond to the second and third questions for this study, outlined above. The first section presents a thematic and structural analysis of how African American women narrate their experiences. Three categories emerged across the narratives capturing the topics and interests narrated by the participants. The categories uncover the language of inequity and power in the everyday experiences of the participants. Language markers used within and across narratives assist in the development of these categories for the narratives.

Additionally, this section highlights the co-constructed nature of the focal narratives by applying Labov’s structural and coding scheme for determining “who is saying what,” “to whom,” and for “what purpose.” This analysis examined the abstract (A) and orientation (OR), conflicting action (CA), and evaluation (E) statements of particular participants across the focal narratives. I used the field note and interview data to enhance the analysis, which provided a means for triangulating the data against the narratives. The following research question was answered through this analysis, (In what way, do African American women narrate their experiences? What stories are shared by African American women in the salon?).
Section two of this chapter, further extends the dialogic/performance analysis to highlight the nuanced uses of language within the narratives that connect to the performances of identities in practice in the salon. In order to provide a deep analysis of these narratives, I chose to focus on only two participants—Kelly and Pam. I also borrowed Wortham’s (2001) graphic representation of narratives in order to display the collaborative nature of narrative construction connected to identities performed with in and across the focal narratives. In order to provide a deeper understanding of the identities in practice through the use of narratives, I triangulated the data through the use of my interview data and field notes.

In the summary section, I highlight the intersections among the use of language, culture, and identity development across the four theoretical components of the identities in practice which were evidenced (or not) in the beauty salon.

**Level 1 Analysis: Narratives of Gender, Race, and Social Class**

The participants in this study were all skillful in sharing and performing narratives. The skillfulness of the women was represented in their ability to listen carefully, draw upon their personal experiences, and express an opinion or knowledge claim about the topic presented in the various narratives. Knowledge claims, as referenced in Black Feminist Thought practices, are representative of the specialized knowledge of African American women based on their lived experiences. These knowledge claims make up the contributions in the dialogic/performance activity within the storytelling events. Knowledge claims from a Black Feminist Thought perspective represent connectedness among the participants and a collective community (Collins, 2000). Fortunately, all the participants were active members in the storytelling events, which assisted in the (co) construction of the narratives. The dialogic nature of the narratives was
challenging to transcribe but I present the narratives as they occurred showing the various turn taking, interruptions, and non-verbal gestures, which are important to the performance aspects of the storytelling events. The narrative transcripts also present direct speech from the participants, asides to the audience, repetition, expressive sounds, motions and gestures, conversational historic present, and switches in verb tense and other features. These features outlined above are commonly found in performance narratives (Wolfson, 1982).

For this study, narratives are defined as the representations of extended, stretches of talk, primarily within the storytelling events. These narratives are dialogic in nature. However, another set of narrative data was captured to compliment the analysis for this study. Interview data solicited stories from the participants. The narratives from the interview data were fairly traditional; where each participant responded to a set of questions which elicited an extended story response. The narratives shared within the storytelling events and interview data capture a range of personal experiences that Pam, Kelly, Bridgette, Paula, and Kenya face at work, school, or in various social contexts. Table 4.1 shows how the narratives were categorized by content and intended purposes. The narrative titles in bold are presented as focal narratives within this chapter. These narratives were selected for deeper analysis. By selecting a few narratives for deeper analysis, I was able to focus and create meaning that applied across the narrative set, assisting in developing a more complete understanding of the participants’ lived experiences.
Table 4.1

*Participant Narratives, Content, and Purposes*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Narratives</th>
<th>Content</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kelly</td>
<td>Boys will be Boys</td>
<td>Gender Expectation</td>
<td>Inform</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dark and Light Skinned</td>
<td>Skin tones of Blacks</td>
<td>Inform</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Angry Black Women</td>
<td>Attitudes</td>
<td>Affirm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pam</td>
<td>Birth Control</td>
<td>Sexuality</td>
<td>Affirm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Stand your Ground</td>
<td>Racial differences</td>
<td>Persuade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>in the judicial system</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bridgette</td>
<td>Denied Right Away</td>
<td>Cultural names</td>
<td>Persuade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Celebrity Breakups</td>
<td>Public breakups that have</td>
<td>Inform</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>gone badly</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Story Toppers</td>
<td>People who have to “out do” others</td>
<td>Affirm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paula</td>
<td>Lip Stick, Finger</td>
<td>Social and cultural</td>
<td>Entertain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Finger waves, Now</td>
<td>trends transcending borders</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Our Men</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Do Teaches Really Care</td>
<td>Student behavior and teacher</td>
<td>Inform</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>reactions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Come As You Are</td>
<td>Church interactions and people attending church</td>
<td>Affirm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kenya</td>
<td>Neighborhood Schools</td>
<td>Local options for schooling</td>
<td>Inform</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>School Referrals</td>
<td>Questioning school practices</td>
<td>Persuade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Health Care in America</td>
<td>Benefits to minorities</td>
<td>Persuade</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The focal narratives were the most complete in narrative structure based on Labov’s six basic elements of storytelling. These elements include: an abstract (A) which tells how the narrative begins, an orientation (O) which explains who or what is involved and when, a
complicating action (CA) which describes a sequence of action or turning points within the narrative, an evaluation (E) which expresses the commentary to the complicating action, a resolution (R) which resolves the plot of the narrative, and a coda (C), which ends the narrative. By examining the structural features of the narratives in this way, it is possible to see how the narratives provide evidence of how the participants encode meaning based on their lived experiences. The expression of meaning of the world as shared and performed by the African American female participants in this study, provided critical evidence for how identities were performed in the beauty salon.

Applying this structural scheme, I attributed narratives (in the table above) to a particular participant based on the participant’s role in initiating the narrative in the salon. I used the abstract (A) and orientation (O) statements of each narrative to determine the appropriate attribution.

The intended purposes identified across narratives fell into four categories. The narratives were performed to inform, persuade, entertain, or affirm the lived experiences of the participants or those they shared about their children. Narratives identified with the intent to “inform” were typically those performed to share an event or experience that the narrator wanted the other participants to know about because of the surprising or interest in the topic. Persuasive narratives were grouped as such because the narrator wanted the audience to agree with the initial abstract or primary content in the narrative. Narratives performed to entertain were “lighter” in tone and content. The content typically solicited a joke or laughter from the audience as they participated in the storytelling event. The participants also shared narratives in search of affirmation. These narratives began with a definitive statement made by the narrator as if to present a strong opinion.
about a particular topic. The narrator would then seek input from the audience that would attempt to gain overwhelming support about the original claim that was made.

Across the data, the women in the salon revealed their everyday experiences. Riessman (2008) highlighted the importance of using the dialogic/performance analysis and building on thematic and structural analysis in order to uncover how the larger social structures get situated in everyday narratives. Hence, as a part of the analysis the thematic analysis served as a starting point for categorizing these narratives but the structural analysis presented an opportunity to look closer at the language use and markers in how African American women shared and performed their lived experiences. Three categories emerged from the focal narratives (bolded in Table 1). The categories were determined based on specific quotations across the narratives that yielded a rationale for each category. In the section that follows, the focal narratives were selected as exemplars to highlight the language and uses of language to explore the participants’ experiences with social, racial, and gender inequalities as a part of their lived experiences.

**Gender Narratives**

Gender inequities surfaced in the narratives of the participants and in each narrative the audience provides an explanation that may or may not be fitting to a resolution supportive of equality between the sexes. Gender narratives were defined as such based on the content and its relationship to the gendered struggles represented in the narratives. Specifically, as female identities are formed and shaped within the narratives, the contributions of the participants appear to push back on traditional or societal views of gender expectations and behaviors. The focal narratives grouped in this category represent the struggles these women face in combating gender stereotypes.
In the transcript below, entitled “Boys will be Boys,” Kelly initiated the narrative explaining an incident that upset her and her daughter about a little boy’s behavior at school. Kelly presented this narrative in order to send a message and inform the audience about her strong convictions regarding acceptable and unacceptable behavior of boys. Her narrative clearly explained acceptable boundaries for gender expectations.

**Focal Narrative: “Boys will be Boys”**

01  Kelly  y’all anit gonna believe this, the same little boy that told Kelsy to suck

02  his d*** said that he told Kelsy she has nice titties. Kelsy came home  AB/OR

03  and told me.

04  Kenya:  I had one (my son) that was hitting girls on their butts, and I just told

05  him he needed to watch that.  EV

06  Pam:  I told my daughters to tell guys like that to kiss my ass and get right

07  back with ‘em. Girls need to stop that behavior and make boys know

08  they can’t be doing that stuff.  CA

09  Kelly:  disrespectful little boys grow up to be disrespectful men and I feel like

10  we should tell our boys now so that they will grow up to be respectful

11  men.  EV

12  Others:  (in chorus)… should have talked to the assistant principal  CA

13  Kelly:  talked to the assistant principal because he handled it ok last year and

14  that she feels like it was peer pressure and that the boy was just hanging

15  around the wrong people. The assistant principal said little boys don’t

16  know how to channel their energy. And, whatever, but I don’t feel like

17  my daughter should have to be responsible for how he channels his

18  energy because this is sexual harassment. The school said she talked to
both of the parents and let them know that it was getting to the point
given it happened last year and that it c.ould be charged as sexual
harassment and bullying

Pam: they don’t know how to channel it but they need to be taught and I’m
not sure if that’s something the school should have to teach. I mean
they should have to reinforce it but this all begins at home with
parents and if there aren’t any parents, well…I suppose the churches
should be doin’ something to help these young men.

Kelly: I never had that problem with my two boys and so I feel like they are
probably getting it from home, but they are being taught this and they
need to be taught that it isn’t.

Kenya positioned herself, in lines 3-4 in the narrative, in support of “playful behavior” of
boys alluding to the notion that some behaviors, such as what was expressed in the narrative,
should not be taken too seriously. She appeared to downplay the incident through her example of
how she discussed a similar matter with her son, telling him to “just to watch that.” This phrasing
does not satisfy Kelly’s appeal to the audience to understand the ramifications of playful
behavior that shows disrespect of women. Kelly stated, “disrespectful boys grow up to be
disrespectful men” which expressed her concern for stopping certain behaviors early before the
issues become more serious in manhood. She provided a call to action by requesting the audience
recognize these gender inequalities and she encouraged them, in line 8, to “tell our boys now so
that they will grow up to be respectful men.” She called for a shift in behavior that could
promote a different outcome a different future lived experience for you African American girls
and women.
At the close of the narrative, Kelly’s message is clear to the audience that she may be considered an expert given her personal experiences in raising two boys. This role, self-identified, was not questioned by the other listeners in the audience in the salon. Her tolerance for disrespect was limited and she presented a call to action for the audience to shift the expectations and course correct disrespectful behaviors to support strong male development.

The reference to “our boys” in line 10 of this narrative presented another striking use of language about who is (or is not) impacted by these types of gender expectations. It was assumed by the audience and the researcher (in my field notes) that she applied the “our boys” phrasing to young black boys. Similarly, this use of language is also grounded in Black Feminist Thought practices. Collins (2000) highlighted the use of “family language” in the dialogue and narratives of African American women. This family language is talk that is about all children as our children showing their shared responsibilities of a collective Black community. Kelly’s comments are representative of this type of language because she indicated she expects a higher standard for not only young Black boys or men but for all boys and men. During the interview, she stated that boys’ behaviors need to be corrected early on because she knew a lot of men who may have always gotten away with inappropriate behaviors that have led them to disrespect women, a phenomenon she believes is growing more rapidly in our society today.

This narrative links to another focal narrative about gender expectations and behaviors, entitled Birth Control, initiated by Pam. Pam shared her open dilemma she was experiencing with her daughter about dating, sex, and appropriate choices pertaining to abstinence. Prior to launching the narrative the participants were viewing a commercial that had aired about HPV vaccines. The ensuing narrative presented a dilemma faced by many mothers and daughters. Pam seeks affirmation from the audience about her decisions with her daughter during the narrative.
Focal Narrative: “Birth Control”

01 Kenya: you have to trust them…

02 Pam: It’s not about trust it’s about protecting yourself and kids are going to be kids and girls are going to make their own mistakes but I just want her (speaking about her daughter) to make better choices for her life.

06 Paula: And, they won’t tell you everything

07 Kenya: Some parents say they want their kids to tell them but then the parents flip out and that’s not good because then next time they won’t want to tell ‘em.

10 Kelly: But what age is a good age to talk with them about birth control?

11 Pam: What’s wrong with teaching our girls that our bodies are a temple and that’s one gift you can give your husband so why teach them protection and to wait…but I know our girls just run up against the right guy and the right guy could undo years of work and some girls may be stronger but you can’t put yourself in any kind of position that it could lead to that but once you are a woman you could probably control it more.

18 Kelly: Well, I haven’t decided how I’m going to do that with Kelsy (who is ten years old).

20 Paula: If you talk with them about birth control is that like you are giving them permission?

21 Kenya: But they are just thinking they are in love and the hormones are going crazy
This collective narrative represented the type of distributed knowledge and expertise among the participants. No expert arises in this narrative because all the women have encountered this as a personal experience in their past relationships with their mothers. What became evident in the narrative was Pam’s positioning about the critical decisions girls (and women) have in make given their choices about their bodies and the relationships they may have with boys or young men. Her references, in lines 11-17, are grounded in the language representative of religious values and perspectives on the topic. This was important to Pam as she argued that women should see themselves and their bodies as sacred. Represented in the language of Pam’s narrative, she is performing a narrative that is representative of that of Black motherhood. Black motherhood, as referenced in Black Feminist Thought practices, presents an avenue for Black women to express and share the importance of the power in self-definition and actions (Collins, 2000). Captured in this experience, Pam highlighted the importance of valuing and respecting oneself. Pam’s contribution from this perspective is a critical aspect of the wisdom inherent in African American female lived experiences that push beyond knowledge and awareness of various struggles affecting the African American female community.

While the topic is a very serious topic for many mothers in trying to educate their daughters, Kenya chose to lighten the mood within the narrative in line 22. Humor in the midst of a heavy topic is characteristic of African American female discourse. As Collins noted, “In the
comfort of daily conversations, through serious conversation and humor, African American
women as sisters and friends affirm one another’s humanity, specialness, and the right to exist (p. 102).” The audience laughed as a result of Kenya’s contribution to the narrative, signifying a point in time when the audience related directly to a past experience or a time when they have had to make a decision to abstain or “just think they were in love”. Contradictions or varying viewpoints within the narratives occur because the salon serves as a ‘safe space’ for African American women. Traditionally, safe spaces within the Black community often serve as a place where Blacks could go and freely discuss the issues that concerned us. As noted by Collins (2000), safe spaces serve as a strategy for exclusion with the underlying purpose for creating greater inclusion of Blacks in society (p. 110).

Pam’s conclusion in the narrative, however, was to remain committed to her parental involvement where she earnestly expressed that she would tell her daughter to “save herself.” She recognized she would rather take this path and wait and see how her daughter would respond rather than presenting birth control as her option or preference. Pam is reflecting a sense of empowerment that she desired her daughter to experience.

Gender narratives, in this study, have inherent qualities salient to the dialogue represented by the African American females in this study. The gender narratives, as evidenced in this section, conceptualize a process for defining and redefining African American female social and cultural identities. The performed narratives have a political undertone that push back on traditional gender stereotypes for women. Furthermore, the participants’ narratives bring about action. Similar to the findings from Royster (1994), the narratives of the participants in this study present an avenue for embracing social and political change within society. The narratives shared and performed intended to present an alternative identity that has the power transform social and
cultural identities for African American females. The space of authoring within gender narratives is as Bakhtin noted, “defined by the interrelationship of differentiated “vocal” perspectives on the social world (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, and Cain, 1998).” Both narratives project a different future for young Black girls that resist historical, gendered identities related to oppression and submission. The gender narratives represented the new, social and cultural identities the participants expressed in the salon.

**Racial Narratives**

As gender stereotypes have oppressed females, over the course of history, so have racial stereotypes in the African American community. The racial narratives shared by the participants reflect the social and cultural barriers inherent in the lived experiences of African American females today, as referenced in chapter one. Racial tensions highlighted in the narratives are represented in the everyday experiences of the participants. Therefore, the focal narratives categorized as racial narratives within this section are done so as a result of the racial undertones represented in the content of the stories. These narratives are the artifacts of current issues involving racism for the participants. Specifically, the narratives in this section present the day-to-day obstacles and challenges of racism lived by the participants.

The following narrative began as a story about naming a child born into the African American community. The narrative turns into a story about the impact of cultural names and hiring practices. The participants involved in this narrative problematize the racial implications of ethnic names in various contexts. This narrative is an example of Riessmann’s (2008) statement that, “stories are social artifacts telling us as much about society and culture as they do about a person or a group.”
Context: One of Kelly’s clients came in the salon to pick something up.

01 Bridgette: I found out on the streets, the streets are talking.  

02 Client: The streets aaaaarrrreee talking?

03 Bridgette: Yep, and why didn’t she tell us she was pregnant with twins? What is she planning to name them because she needs to have some names that are you know, (pause) alright…

04 OR

05 Client: I think, she’s thinking Ella and Ethan…

06 Bridgette Oh I like that, that’s cute yeah that is cute and I’ve been thinking about Ella.

07 Kelly: I like Ella and I really like that…(Interrupted by someone soliciting at the door and the other client leaves the salon).

08 EV

09 Bridgette: You have to be careful these days because some names will outright get your resume denied.

10 CA

11 Kelly: A lot of that might have to do with racism, I mean I think there’s racism that happens when people are looking at applications and stuff.

12 EV

13 Bridgette: I don’t know, I don’t know…but I know there are some names that just move you to the second stack.

14 CA

15 Kelly: Because you associate certain names with prejudices...

16 EV

17 Bridgette: Everybody has prejudices…I don’t know, I don’t know.

18 CA

19 Kelly: I think this came with our culture.

20 Bridgette: I don’t see anything wrong with it (referring to naming your child an
uncommon name) but it gives people a complex or disadvantage depending on certain situations. Like if you are a teacher, they will be like “Oh my God”, what is this child’s name?, but you just never know how that might turn out for them in the classroom.  

Kelly: And as far as prejudice if you see Shaquita and then you see Beth over here, what do you think people think?  

Bridgette: Do you think it would stop you and do you think that the names will just get you placed in the no pile?  

Kelly: Yep, I think that it does because I’ve heard it before and I’ve heard it from people who do the hiring.  

Represented in this narrative are the struggles many African Americans encounter as a result of institutionalized racism. Bridgette initiated this narrative and then complicated the storyline, in lines 11-12, when the conversation shifts to hiring practices in the workplace. This strong caution by Bridgette is taken up by Kelly as an issue not only about identifying an appropriate name for a child but more importantly about the lasting impact a name may have on one’s career opportunities and choices. The dialogic activity between, Kelly and Bridgette, enhanced the co-construction of this narrative and represented their awareness and knowledge of the social issues and practices grounded in racial mainstream stereotypes. Bridgette extended the notion that name prejudices show up in various other social institutions, such as schools. Specifically, she acknowledged the issues facing teachers in a school context when they encounter ethnic names on a classroom roster.
Despite the risk in giving a child an ethnic name, Kelly provided a twist on the issue and indicated that “our culture” may have perpetuated this issue by identifying names that are unique. Phinney (1990) indicated this parental responsibility is related to a developing ethnic and racial identity within the African American community. The uniqueness of a name has been attributed to the need to have a deeper connection to one’s cultural roots. Kelly’s reference to the Black community indicates a collective responsibility for decisions that may have an impact on the individual’s future. Bridgette responded, in the next lines (20-24), indicating the parent choices that are made that should not be frowned upon by society. Interview data indicated that Bridgette felt passionately that names do represent one’s identity and that the challenges presented by racial stereotypes should be encountered to defend one’s racial and cultural sense of self.

The concluding statements within the narrative revealed Kelly’s stance on the issue and validated her special knowledge as an African American female. She transparently expressed her lived experiences knowing that these types of hiring practices occur because she was aware of employers who exhibited and maintained this type of institutionalized racism within the workplace. While neither woman explicitly stated the race of the employer who may implement such hiring practices, the use of the particular language markers within the narrative reveal this practice as one barrier for African Americans.

A related racism and ethnic dilemma within the African American community is that of skin tone. Historically, issues of color and hair texture have been associated with standards of beauty. Collins (2000) and Featherstone (1994) emphasized the deeply embedded nature that colorism has in the U.S. context and its association with racism in America. Defining beauty has traditionally been polarized, leaving Black definitions of beauty rejected by the mainstream.
Prevailing standards of beauty typically place African features such as dark skin, broad noses, and full lips and figures at the opposite spectrum of the typical mainstream standard. The conflict of a negotiated color hierarchy with White and Black as polar extremes is represented across color lines and communities. The dialogue represented in the following narrative, Dark and Light Skinned, reveal how early these discussions emerge in and across communities. In the narrative, Bridgette and Kelly share early childhood memories of their family conversations that represent how colorism is discussed locally. Both women are self-identified light-skinned, African American females.

**Focal Narrative: “Dark and Light Skinned”**

01 Kelly: Growing up my family made me feel like something was wrong with me, I mean I know they love me but they would also say I was...  
02            adopted and that I was from another family.  
03 Bridgette: Yeah me too because I had family that had dark skin and they would  
04            joke and laugh because I was light and my hair was lighter.  
05 FCS: How did that make y’all feel? I mean did that hurt your feelings any  
06            time?  
07 Kelly: Well, yea sometimes especially if they said it and other people were  
08            around…you know people not in your family but I knew my family  
09            loved me so it wasn’t like something serious.  
10 Bridgette: But, did your family ever call you dirty white girl?  
11 FCS: What!  
12 Bridgette: Yeah, they called me dirty white girl and that used to make me really
Kelly: No, as a young person I was asked if I was albino and that’s what made me want to marry someone darker because I wanted kids with some color…I didn’t want them asked all the kinds of stuff I was and I just think darker skin is more beautiful.

Bridgette: I mean sometimes when you are lighter skinned people think you have it easier or something. People think you are stuck up and all kinds of stupid stuff… that’s what I’ve experienced.

Kelly: And it spills over into your life even more like now some women think that the only that the only reason why I’m getting a lot of clients is because I am lighted skinned. Like my skills don’t have anything to do with it. That’s what makes me crazy.

As the researcher, a client of this salon, and an African American female I found myself more engaged in this narrative. The skin tone discussion that emerged in this narrative is one that is undoubtedly encountered by African American women at some point in time in their lived experiences. Girls and women come face to face with standards of beauty in various ways. In this situation, a family exchange occurred; however, most often African American women experience this type of encounter when faced with feeling like the Other in a more social context.

The narrative, as performed by Kelly, in lines 15-18, identified Kelly’s intent for redefining the standards for beauty. She claimed that her life choices in selecting a mate were a result of how she defines beauty. Interpreting her language revealed how she articulated various
notions of colorism and how she acts to reject a mainstream perspective. She indicated the need for coupling her definition of beauty with the need for “more color” for her offspring.

While on the surface, this narrative may be a bit disturbing because of the family members’ jest, the women felt very comfortable sharing their most intimate childhood memories within this narrative. The safe space of the salon and their shared experiences (co) constructed the social and cultural identities enacted. Both women agreed that their family interactions as shared in this narrative were based out of jest and playfulness however both indicated these conversations helped them when they encountered racism in their adult life. While they felt their family members were joking they also indicated when their members had “crossed the line.” Public display of such behavior angered both women as shared in lines 8-10 and 13-14. As evidenced in the data, Bridgette noted when she “used to get really mad” when she was called “dirty white girl.”

The racial narratives within this section reveal the racial and ethnic tensions within and across communities as experienced by the participants. The participants narrated and performed their social, cultural, and racial identities within these narratives. The way language was used within the narratives provided examples of the cultural assumptions about racial and ethnic challenges facing African American women. The participants’ words to one another (and the audience) reveal Bakhtin’s (1981) concept of “openendedness” which makes the self known to others by the use of their words. Identities emerge as a result of this process, particularly exposing the private and public responses to racial barriers.
Social Class Narratives

Thus far, issues related to social class have been implicit in the gender and racial focal narratives. The interconnectedness of the complexities of gender, race, and social class are more prevalent in this section. Social class narratives are defined in this study by the participants’ views on the role of education as a means for elevating or maintaining status within society. The narratives within this category indicate the participants’ value of education and the need for equitable educational experiences for young Black children. The words and language from the participants carry history and represent collective experiences within the African American community in relation to access and opportunities to education and social mobility.

The narrative below, *Do Teachers Really Care*, sets the stage for describing the perceptions the participants hold related to the role teachers in educating young Black children. Questions of fairness and equity emerge as well as the role of parental involvement (or lack thereof) in learning is explored.

**Focal Narrative: Do Teachers Really Care**

01 Paula: Can y’all believe I had a customer came in and she told me that her son was failing? and she blamed it on the teacher…She said, “them teachers don’t care about the kids and I tell the teachers don’t call me”, what about that! Can you believe what she was sayin’?

05 Kenya: And… (long pause)… what are they supposed to do if you don’t want them to call you?
Paula: And, comes to find out that the child acts out and back talks in school.

but she felt like the teacher should have worked with him more.

Kelly: She got 25-30 kids in the class and put those kids aside to take time

with your child because he is acting up. She’s there to teach not there
to raise your child! You can’t tutor somebody being bad.

Paula: But I think that when kids are acting up, acting up also means that the

child might try to take attention away from the other kids and it’s not

fair to the other kids because you now have to focus on that particular

child.

Kelly: But they have special classes for students that need additional help and

if he has just failed three tests in a row but when it’s time for math he

should go to a different math class where it’s like 7 kids in the class

and the teacher…

Kenya: Do you think classes like that are designed to poke fun at kids?

Kelly: No because Kelsy had some more one on one time and support to help

and thank God for my husband because I can’t do math. So when she

comes home he helps her because I don’t do math. So I would have to

depend on tutors and special math classes for my child.

Paula: It starts at home.
Kelly: Yeah! She’s just so anti-teacher and she doesn’t understand that the teacher shouldn’t have to stop to deal with so many behavior problems at the expense of other kids.

Paula, Kelly, and Kenya (co) construct this narrative that detailed their concern for misbehavior of children in classrooms (lines 9-11), their expectations of teachers in supporting the learning of all children (lines 12-15), and their perception of the role of parents in educating their children in partnership with the school, as a social institution (lines 18-21). While there appeared to be great agreement among the participants in this narrative about the role of education, Kenya questioned the institutional support for some children, in line 20. Implicit in her knowledge claims are the years of history when Blacks were not granted equal access to educational opportunities. Her suspicion of the special classes reflects her beliefs about the decisions educators make in supporting all learners.

Interview data and the following narrative, Neighborhood Schools, validated Kenya’s distrust in the educational system. Her words, as a concerned parent, reveal her worries about a social institution that is designed to maintain a status quo for Black children. While a debate surfaced between Kelly and Kenya, they both recognize the advantages or disadvantages social class has on education opportunities and one’s life trajectory.

**Focal Narrative: Neighborhood Schools**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Line</th>
<th>Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>01</td>
<td>Kenya:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>02</td>
<td>Kelly:</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
(Narrative shifts and the conversation moves to one of Busing)

04 Keny: I don’t think my son should be bused out by the white schools
05 because if something happens then can’t get to ‘em.          AB/OR
06 Kelly: people get everywhere else they want to go either it be the mall
07 and they can always do a phone conference. I mean your
08 situation may be different and all but that’s how I feel. Our kids
09 need to see other stuff and be around people who don’t look like
10 them or talk like them and that would be taking us back 50
11 years. I’m not sure they see education as the key. Do we place
12 value on education? Do we stress education at home? And, ]
13 learning starts at home. Like a girlfriend of mine said she’s not
14 worried about teaching her child how to tie their shoes because
15 they would learn how to do it at school and I think that was so
16 amazing to me that she would but think like that. I think, think
17 that it has anything to do with color your social economic class.
18 But with your kid, like a mother and father with your kids you
19 should take care of that at home.                              EV
20 Keny: I think they are more concerned about working if they have to
21 where if you are in a different social class then you have a
22 college fund set up and have more options (in other words) and
23 then it is what you are taught, when you get a certain age, you go
24 to work. Well, I still feel like my child shouldn’t be bused out to
25 other schools.                                               EV
26
Kelly: I realize in this conversation that I don’t want my kids on the bus for more than a half an hour. It’s sad it’s an issue, why every school can’t be taught at the traditional level because all schools should be taught like traditional schools but they aren’t

Pam: I know some kids it might not be for them, traditional is just not for everybody because my oldest daughter breezed right through it but my youngest daughter struggled. Parents take a bigger role in the traditional system and it starts out with a lot of structure.

Bridgette: I went to traditional schooling and I really don’t know that it made a difference for me the structure didn’t really bother me because I was kind of quiet… (Silence)

Kelly: If all the schools were taught at the same level this really wouldn’t be an issue.

Clients: Uhmm, Uhmm…(Nods in agreement)

In lines 17-20, Kenya linked her words to her personal experiences providing even greater context to her positioning within the narrative. Her follow up interview reiterated the importance of her past experiences and how this influenced her contributions to the narrative. The interview data excerpt below connects Kenya’s comments to her awareness of social class and her personal and professional trajectory. She stated,

“I knew when I was gettin’ out of high school that I had to go straight to work. I mean my parents didn’t have college fund set up for me like some white parents do for their kids. All my friends went to school and got out to go straight to work. That’s just how we were brought up. School was just something I did and I knew I had to… but as soon as I
could stop going I did. So right after high school I went into cosmetology to become a hair dresser. I’ve worked my entire life and it’s paid my bills.”

Kelly asserted the need for quality educational experiences that are dependent upon the role of parents as critical partners in education. This perspective, traditionally owned by middle-class parents, revealed her social and cultural identities within this narrative. A sub-narrative initiated by Kelly in lines 14-20 exposed her frustration with other parents that do not engage in their child’s learning experiences. Kelly made visible her expectations of the Black community in preparing young children for entering school, as a social context. Her language and practices relate directly to the ethics of caring and personal accountability found in Black Feminist Thought and related studies (Collins, 2000; Houston & Davis, 2002).

Social class narratives presented an opportunity to analyze the collective histories of African American females that were shared and performed in the everyday talk within the beauty salon. These narratives intersected the gender and racial themes and represented the continued struggles of African American parents in search of equity and access to rigorous educational experiences for their children. Pam, Kenya, Kelly, Bridgette, and Paula all value education as a social outcome leading to a more secure future and recognize their contributions in reconciling issues facing young Black children today. The activism that emerged among the participants is characteristic of African American female dialogue in developing a future where African American females are empowered (Collins, 2000; Etter-Lewis, 1991; Williams, 2991).

Summary

The gender, racial, and social class narratives provide evidence of how the African American women used language to express their lived experiences. Storytelling, as a language
practice, revealed a space where the women could share narratives for the purpose of providing information, persuading one another, entertaining, and affirming decisions or beliefs from the participants about particular situations. What appeared to be simple talk in storytelling events, turned out as a complex but eloquent display of the way structures associated with power weave into dialogic activity. This section explicitly addressed the first and second research questions, (What language practices are enacted in the beauty salon? In what ways, do African American women narrate their experiences? What stories are shared by African American women in the salon?). Additionally, the first level of analysis began to shed insight on the third and fourth question within this study aimed at determining the effects on the listeners and how the social identities are (co) constructed and performed within the narratives. The following section will further elaborate on these two questions in order to provide a more comprehensive view of the data and how language, culture, and identity development intersect in African American female narratives.

Level II Analysis: (Co) Constructing Meaning and Identity Development through Narratives

As the previous section focused primarily on the narratives, the analysis in level two turned attention to the participants. In the next section, I focus on “how the story is coproduced in spaces between teller and listener, speaker and setting, text and reader, and history and culture (Risessman, p. 105).” In order to connect the narratives to the (co) construction of meaning and identity development, I build upon the previous analysis by extending the use of the structural coding and elements of the story to examine the responses of two focal participants. Kelly and Pam were selected for this level of analysis in detail to determine how they created meaning and identities through their engagement in the narratives.
I selected these participants for very specific reasons. Kelly and Pam both surfaced as meaningful contributors to the narratives. While the frequency of their participating in the narratives was differed, their contributions were interpreted as critical to the salon environment as evidenced by their peer’s responses to their involvement. These data were validated by my field notes and reflections on my memos during ethnographic observations. In order to make meaning of the world through narratives, one must be involved in the process, hence their ability to share their experiences as examples with the audience. For an explicit example, the table below shows Kelly’s involvement through the narratives and where her contributions were made based on Labov’s story elements (outlined earlier in this chapter).

Table 4.2

*Kelly’s Narrative Involvement*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Narrative Name</th>
<th>AB/OR</th>
<th>CA</th>
<th>EV</th>
<th>RE/Coda</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Denied Right Away</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Birth Control</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do Teachers Really…</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Angry Black Women</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boys will be boys</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
It is obvious that Kelly was highly involved in the storytelling events from Table 4.2 above. Kelly’s most frequent contributions were made when she was pushing the narrative forward by complicating the action (CA) or by reacting to what another speaker said in the narrative (as evidenced by the number of evaluation statements).

There are a few reasons this may be the case. Kelly is the owner of the salon and she is the person clients are there to see, primarily. As owner, she carries more responsibility in making the clients, not only through her work as a stylist but also in listening to them as they share their stories. Since storytelling is the predominant means for sharing in the salon, she emerged in a role to support and nurture storytelling among the participants. Her active role also highlights her need to “have the last word.” The data indicated a higher frequency in Kelly’s ability to resolve the narrator’s plot of the story and close the story before moving to another topic or narrative. The participants do not appear to be bothered by Kelly’s level of involvement but actually turn to her as a credible source or “expert” for assisting in developing meaning in complicated situations. This social identity that emerges for Kelly is based on her active role in everything she does. She embraced social and cultural identities reconciled to her abilities to be an effective mother, knowledgeable member of the community, and an advocate for equity given gender and racial differences. Her language in narrated events previewed her views on the world and how she intended to challenge the thinking of the audience on given topics.

Pam’s involvement, however, is less participatory but consistent when examining her contributions across the focal narratives. Her primary contributions were made as evaluations (E) and resolutions (RE) and endings to a narrative (CODA) to the problems shared within at least two focal narratives as shown in Table 4.3 below.
Table 4.3

*Pam’s Narrative Involvement*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Narrative Name</th>
<th>AB/OR</th>
<th>CA</th>
<th>EV</th>
<th>RE/Coda</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Birth Control</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boys will be boys</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neighborhood Schools</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Pam’s participation, while less frequent, is full of language, behavior, and cultural assumptions that help explain how she makes meaning of the world and her lived experiences. Her evaluations within the narratives yield insight into how her lived experiences permeate the dialogic activity as she self-authors within the storytelling events. This is captured in the data below in Table 4.4.

Table 4.4

*Story Element Contribution for Pam*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Narrative Title</th>
<th>Story Element Contribution</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Boys will be Boys “I told my daughters to tell guys like that to kiss my ass and get right back with ‘em. Girls need to stop that behavior and make boys know they can’t be doing that stuff.” (CA)

“They don’t know how to channel it (their energy) but they need to be taught and I’m not sure if that’s something the school should have to teach. I mean they should have to reinforce it but this all begins at home with parents and if there aren’t any parents, well, I suppose the churches should be doin’ something to help these young men.” (RE)

Neighborhood Schools “I know some kids it might not be for them, traditional is just not for everybody because my oldest daughter breezed right through it but my youngest daughter struggle. Parents take a bigger role in the traditional system and it starts out with a lot of structure. No pants hanging down your tail.” (EV)

Birth Control “It’s not about trust it’s about protecting yourself and kids are going to be kids and girls are going to make their own mistakes but I just want her (speaking about her daughter) to make better choices for her life.” (OR)

“What’s wrong with teaching our girls that our bodies are a temple and that’s one gift you can give your husband so why teach them protection and to wait…but I know our girls just run up against the right guy and the right guy could undo years of work and some
girls may be stronger but you can’t put yourself in any kind of position that it could lead to that but once you are a woman you could probably control it more.” (EV)

“Well, I’m just going to tell her what I believe that she should wait and save herself and we’ll just see how she responds.” (CODA)

The interpretation necessary for this analysis is rooted in asking questions about the relationships among the audience and the narrator and how she believes these participants will respond to her identities in practice. This process of where Pam positions herself to be “addressed by” and “answer others” is a central facet of Bakhtin’s (1986), authoring the self. It is in this space that the varied perspectives and language assist in identity development.

To assist with this analysis and show the (co)authorship that occurred in the narratives, I used a model by Wortham (2008) in Figure 4.1 below, to show the complexities of the storytelling and narrated events. The dialogic nature of the narratives in the storytelling event represented Pam’s interaction and need to answer or respond to the audience in the storytelling event. Her responses captured in the storytelling event box below provide a window into how she is performing identities in practice in relationship to the audience contributions to the narrative.
Figure 4.1

Pam’s Narrated Event in the Storytelling Context

You have to trust them

What age is a good age to talk about birth

Is that giving them permission?

They think they are in love and their hormones are going crazy

What’s wrong with teaching our girls that their bodies are

Not trust but protecting

Hard to figure out for young girls

Wait and save herself

Storytelling
While the intent Pam had for sharing this narrative was to affirm her decisions as a parent, she was encountered by divergent ideas by the listeners, within the storytelling event, that presented a conflicting opinion about her initial thoughts. Pam’s social and cultural identities performed in this narrative are reflective of her religious affiliations. Woven within her language are her beliefs and core values represented in the narrated event.

Listeners engaged in the storytelling event are constantly adding to and bringing forward new perspectives, (co) constructing meaning given the plots within the narratives. These exchanges and how the narrators respond reflect the local contextual meanings, which assist in the (co) construction of identities in practice in the salon. The following table presents the types of identities Kelly and Pam performed through their use of language across the narrative set.

Table 4.5

*Social and Cultural Identities in Practice in the Beauty Salon*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Kelly</th>
<th>Pam</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>African American female</td>
<td>African American female</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activist defining Black beauty</td>
<td>Faith-based person</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black Motherhood</td>
<td>Black motherhood</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Active parent in the education community</td>
<td>Teenage/Young mom</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Woman of respect</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Identity development is recognized as a dialogic activity within the beauty salon. The participants’ identities are (co) constructed along the continuum of contexts of activity realized
in Holland, Skinner, Lachicotte, and Cain’s, *Identities in Practice Framework*. Three of the four contexts of activity (figured world, positionality, and space of authoring) for identity development are embedded in the salon storytelling activities.

The figured worlds set within the context of the beauty salon represented worlds where African American female identities were in gendered beings with confidence demanding respect, racial beings that sought justice within mainstream practices, and social beings that longed for equal access and opportunity to social mobility through education. These worlds performed in the beauty salon were a result of the language used by the participants, their performances during storytelling events, their thinking, speaking, and beliefs revealed as a part of their dialogue. The figured worlds carried dispositions, social identification, and personification of the African American female experience.

According to Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, and Cain (1998) the notion of positionality refers to the “hereness” and “thereness” of people and is related to the expectations and privileges (or not) that are ascribed to our lived experiences. Throughout the narratives the women position themselves given the activity in the storytelling event. An example in the narrative, Denied Right Away, is obvious when Bridgette explains the caution of giving a child an ethnic name that may not be widely accepted in the mainstream. The mainstream serves as the figured world and Bridgette explains the type of positioning that occurs for African American people with ethnic names. The workforce became a part of the figured world when Kelly described the division that occurs as a result of racism inherent in institutional systems. Another example in the focal narratives surfaced when considering Pam’s position as a religious mom trying to teach her daughter about abstinence while living in a social environment that promotes other options openly.
Spaces of authoring are contingent on the participants’ abilities to author collectively. Authoring is a social activity and is responsive to the answerability of the participants at any given moment. Spaces of authoring were dynamic and unrehearsed, which allowed the participants to author in the midst of a narrative. The example when Kelly realized she did not want her child on the bus for an extended period of time to go to a white school, she began to shift her understanding while she provided a response.

The final context for identity development, making worlds through serious play, was not observed throughout this study as it would need to present additional opportunities for developing new social competencies and trying them out in a genuine format. Opportunities for the participants to try on new identities were not evident in the salon.

Summary

In this chapter, I presented the language practices of five African American women. The participants in this study shared and performed narratives, as a part of storytelling events that reflected their lived experiences. These narratives served as the primary set of data concerning the major findings from this study.

Based on the dialogic/performance analysis approach applied throughout this study, seven narratives were established as exemplars. These narratives were identified as focal narratives. This analytic approach occurred in two phases where the data could be examined on multiple levels for a couple of purposes. Specifically, the first level analysis focused on a thematic and structural approach to narrative analysis, which examined the content and structural aspects of the narratives. This initially produced three categories for the narratives shared by the participants. I found the narratives commonly shared were about gender, racial, and social class challenges and expectations evidenced in the lived experiences of the participants (or their
children). Not surprising, these categories have emerged from various other studies of the African American female experience (Houston & Davis, 2002; Lanehart, 2009). Additionally, I examined the purposes for each focal narrative, which highlighted the intent and action related to the telling of a narrative in the salon. Each participant initiated at least one narrative. The analysis across narratives revealed the fact that narratives were typically shared for the following intended purposes: to inform, persuade, affirm or entertain.

While the (co)construction of the narratives represented the dialogic nature of the stories shared by the participants, the first level of analysis presented an opportunity to examine the structural features of the narratives. A premier approach to structural analysis typically includes the use of Labov’s six elements of a story. Through the use of this coding scheme, I was able to examine each participant’s use of language in the narratives to explore the ways that the narratives were being interpreted by the participants. The effects on the listeners, questions three of this dissertation study, appeared during the narratives in the form of complicating action (CA) and evaluation (E) statements. The participants’ interview data provided meaningful context to the narratives, such as to explain why one participant might share a specific story in a specific way for the purpose of supporting one another in navigating challenging circumstances in life.

Building on this analysis, the second level focused on the links between the narratives and the (co)construction of participants’ identities within the salon. The language within the narratives often implicated carried the histories of each participant and how their experiences helped shape their social and cultural identities. The dialogic/performance analysis presented an opportunity to uncover broad interpretations of the social, cultural, historical, and political challenges within the narratives. I argue these African American women experience life considering how they will answer or be answered in and across various social contexts.
I examined the narratives of two participants, Pam and Kelly, more closely to present a graphic representation of how the language used by both assisting in revealing their social and cultural identities in practice. The act of the (co) construction of these narratives created a space for authoring for the participants.

Pam and Kelly perform a strong affiliation to being a mother. This social identity is evidenced in their language across the narrative data. There are multiple instances where both speak out about the decisions they have to make to protect their children, the guidance and counseling they provide, and the struggles in determining when to intervene on behalf of their children or not. They also present their beliefs about the role of a parent in molding social and cultural experiences for young people. This was exemplified in the narratives focused on schooling and equity in access to rigorous learning opportunities.

Kelly’s social and cultural identities as an involved mother and advocate for gender and racial equality surfaced and were evidenced in how she engaged in the storytelling events. As an involved mother and parent within the state’s largest urban school district, she was committed to ensuring her children (and other people’s children) received a quality education. She was vocal and transparent about her thoughts and opinions across the narratives. She also assumed the role as expert on several topics, often resolving the plot of a narrative initiated by others.

In conclusion, the following chapter will present the conclusions draw from the findings in this chapter, the limitations of this study, and implications for future research and practice.
Chapter Five: Conclusions, Limitations, and Implications

Introduction

This study aimed to examine the language and literacy practices in use in one African American community context. The research questions guiding the study were: (a) What language and literacy practices are enacted in the beauty salon; (b) In what ways do African American women narrate their experiences? What stories are shared by African American women in the salon?; (c) What are the effects on the listeners of the narratives shared in the salon?; and (d) How are social and cultural identities (co) constructed and performed in the narratives?.

Theoretically, the study was woven together through the use of theories focused on culture, language, and identity development. Two of Duranti’s (1997) theories on culture where language plays a prominent role were applied to this study. Culture as a system of practices highlights the importance of language creating or performing action. This was evident in the type of storytelling and narratives told within the salon. The narratives in the salon were shared to inform each participant about educational, political, and social experiences. The focal narratives were shared for a variety of purposes as highlighted on Table 4.1. Each narrative had a function and purpose to create some type of action for the narrator to investigate. For example, in the Birth Control narrative, Pam is encouraged by the listeners to talk to her daughter about birth control. The action performed in this narrative is based on Pam’s decision to talk to her daughter on her own terms promoting abstinence. Similar examples emerged from the other focal narratives.

Culture as a system of participation was another critical theory used. The African American women relied on their participation to (co) construct narratives and identities within
experiences of five Black women and how they make sense of the world (and their communities) from a unique perspective which takes into account how their lives and histories are shaped by social, cultural, political, and historical accounts over time. Per this overview, the final chapter draws conclusions from the findings, identifies limitations, and provides implications for practice and future research.

Conclusions

The following section provides a summary of the conclusions for this study based on the findings related to the research questions that guided this study. Overall, I found that storytelling was a primary language and literacy practice of African American women enacted in the beauty salon. Although I expected to see additional literacy practices, the data did not support traditional literacy practices typically associated with the use of written texts. The literacy practices typically associated with print texts disappeared as data collection and gathering occurred. This may be a result of the intrusion of the study on this context; however, the study adopted Richardson’s (2008) perspective on literacy practices of African American females. Richardson stated, “For people of African descent, literacy is the ability to accurately read their experiences of being in the world with others and to act on their knowledge in a manner beneficial for self-preservation, economic, spiritual, and cultural uplift.” This study reveals such literacy practices through the narratives of the participants. Additionally, visual and audio texts were evidenced as sources of data, through observations, which prompted narratives based on topics of interest. However, the storytelling linked to these texts was limited. Consequently, the data in this study focused on the focal narratives of the participants that were (co) constructed and linked to identity development.
The women narrated their experiences to reveal the various social and cultural challenges they faced as a part of their everyday experiences. They shared and performed stories about gender, racial, and social barriers still facing African American women today. In chapter four, Table 4.1 highlighted the titles, content, and intended purposes of these narratives. The narratives within this study evolved over time and showed evidence that there are particular rituals, values, and guiding principles within the African American community and culture that shape the stories shared in the salon. In summary, one ritual evidenced in this study is the coming together regularly in the beauty salon as a segregated community. The salon represents a safe space and this ritual is grounded in the historical context of people of African descent in the United States. Today, this segregation may not represent the type of segregation forced on Black people as it was in the days of slavery but it is similar in the sense that the Black community opts to segregate in many instances to maintain and nurture its community and culture. Values expressed in the narratives link to the importance of education and religion in one’s life. Consequently, the women in the salon relied on these values, as represented in their everyday talk to invoke a more just and equitable society. And, two guiding principles are revealed in the focal narratives from this study. First, it is evident that the talk in the salon represented talk of personal pride and political awareness of one’s situation. The women are very aware of their local challenges and need to transform their circumstances through an informed and sometimes political approach. The notion of personal pride in self and others in the Black community is essential in maintaining a collective identity that refutes negative images. A second guiding principle within the narratives is the importance of participation in the storytelling practices. Women come to the salon to share their experiences and this was evidenced in this study. Storytelling presented an
outlet for this type of safe dialogue and the talk is generated to inform and educate one another. This created a space for authoring new identities and for affirm other identities.

As researchers have noted, narratives do things for people, for social institutions for social acts (Freemann, 2002; Gumperz, 1982; Ochs & Capps, 2001; Wortham, 2001). The women of this study were no different in their efforts to call out injustice, face it head on, and work together to problem solve for productive solutions toward an issue.

The dialogic activity within the narratives created performances of narratives representative of the way African Americans communicate in various situations. As noted by Banks-Wallace (2002), the immediate storytelling context may have an influence on what stories are told and the way stories are shared. As a result, the beauty salon context is also important to determining how the listeners in the salon responded to the narratives. The listeners felt empowered by the (co) construction of the narratives. The participants were engaged culturally with every opportunity to participate as full members of the community. Their participation provided an entry point for making meaning of the self and the world. Their contributions were based on their lived experiences which influence the language and actions of others; impacting their social and cultural identities in practice. The solutions presented in and across the narratives were either validated or refuted by the listeners within the salon. In some instances the listeners solicited a performance among the participants. The transaction that occurred within performances in the narratives addressed historical, political, and social definitions for Black female identities.

While the majority of the narratives represented a high level of exchange and dialogic activity, as referenced on Table 4.4, there were instances when the listeners became the experts
in the construction of a narrative. Listeners were poised to respond given their lived experiences and knowledge claims that validated being Black and female in the United States. This even distribution of knowledge, wisdom, and power emerged within the salon based on the listeners’ reactions and responses to the narratives. As previously noted, this guiding principle to participate in the dialogue is critical to the storytelling events in the salon. It is represents a departure from their mainstream experiences where African American women are often silenced. Within the salon, the listeners were a part of a shared community based on wisdom and knowledge claims, special to African American female experiences (Collins, 2002).

The use of language as a cultural and communicative, literacy practice served as the foundation for the identities in practice within the salon. Social and cultural identities became more apparent when analyzing the data from across narratives. In particular, Kelly’s identity as a strong, Black mother emerged throughout her stories as she shared about the importance of (a) passing along cultural information to her daughter, (b) taking care of the educational needs of her daughter and other children within the community, and (c) standing up for respectful behaviors to avoid gendered stereotypes that could inhibit opportunities for young Black women. Likewise, Pam’s space of authoring revealed more about her private, cultural identities. Pam’s values were represented in her language, which linked her to a cultural and social identity where her spiritual or faith-based affiliations were more evident. Collectively, the women in the salon performed identities related to those of social and cultural activists. This conclusion is validated by various other studies that show how African American women have used their experiences to transform social and cultural justice in the United States (Orbe, Drummond, & Camera, 2002; Royster, 1994; Troutman, 2001). While the salon is a public space it was a safe space and figured world where the women could explore identities that would assist them in mainstream conversations.
Identities developed through language in this social space were unstable and evolving, in response to the ways in which each participant would interact with the dialogue and performance of others. This process is captured as the essence of the identities in practice theory noted by Holland, Skinner, Lachiotte, and Cain (1998).

The conclusions for this study, woven together like a braid, revealed the intersections among the use of language, in culture, to form identities in practice. Meaning of the world and self emerged in the narratives, which resembled Rosenblatt’s transactional theory. The texts in the salon were the narratives shared by the participants. While the texts are not autonomous they carry social, political, historical, and cultural contexts right beneath the surface. The transaction in the dialogic activity is like the three strands of the braid coming together; where meaning emerged. In order to find Kelly’s interpretation on her lived experiences it is critical to interrogate her language across narratives shared within the salon. This interrogation would be necessary for each participants’ narratives in in order to reveal how each makes sense of their experiences and those of others. Being black and female in the United States has meaning of its own and the participants in this study expressed their meanings based on their experiences through the focal narratives.

Limitations

The following section outlines four limitations for this study. First, the study was limited by context by only capturing the data in the beauty salon. In studying identity development over time, it would have been advantageous to follow the participants into various social contexts to determine if the identities that were (co) constructed in the salon transferred to different contexts. By focusing the study on the activity in the salon, I was only privy to the identities within that
context. While I was able to observe the language use of each participant on multiple occasions, I
was not able to see how any of the participants internalized the language and transferred its use
and action to the context that presented the initial challenge or barrier. As a result, this study
must be presented as a unique case focused on the narratives, identities, and lived experiences of
African American women set within the beauty salon context.

A second limitation of this study is focused on narrative transcription. Riessman (1993)
noted transcription is one of the most critical aspects of a narrative study. For the purpose of this
study, it was a bit challenging. Group narratives that are (co) constructed are difficult to
transcribe because they are presented as other narrative data produced from interviews. While the
transcription process used for this study was sufficient, it was a cumbersome task and required
multiple transcriptions of the narratives in order to capture the overlapping nature of the text
shared and performed by the participants. I landed on a more linear presentation of the narrative,
but used table 4.5 as a model of the dialogic nature of the narratives.

Another limitation of this study was the initial analysis of the focal narratives. The
categories that emerged for the narratives were appropriate categories, but the narrative data
were coded to only one of these categories. Additional strategies for double-coding the data may
have presented a unique picture of the narratives that addressed more than one category. My
decision to single code the data was primarily a way to manage the data and to keep the process
simplified.

Finally, some research communities would argue my insider view, as an African
American female, studying African American females as a limitation. While I recognize the
challenges inherent in researching one’s own community, I employed various techniques
throughout the study to address reflexivity in this study. Furthermore, the participants were engaged in member checking and identified the focal narratives to be shared within this study. This was essential to maintaining trustworthiness and researcher bias. I also kept field notes as a means of capturing my personal reactions and thoughts about the narratives, contexts, and themes that emerged from the data. These strategies have been used by other researchers to elevate the participants’ contributions and voice.

**Implications**

**Implications for Practice**

Given that I have positioned this study to link back to the education community, I reiterate Wortham’s (2006) challenge to our profession, which stated, “we need to conceptualize the goals of schooling and confront the fact that it is a moral enterprise (p. 286).” As a moral enterprise it should present opportunities for all children to engage, debate, celebrate, and defend positions and academics over time. Schools reflect the social and cultural values of society and as our country becomes more and more diverse it is essential all students find their place and build positive identities through their schooling experiences. The implications for practice in this section relate to implications for the educational community.

Studying African American female language and literacy practices present an opportunity to delve into the unique contributions one culture may bring to a communicative environment. Classrooms today provide varying opportunities for students to engage in dialogue about their lived experiences, literature, or current events. If meaning is made in these contexts, then it would seem to be advantageous for the education community to build greater opportunities in for talk and dialogue to learn from and about one another. Unfortunately, Black females have been
characterized in one of two ways, either as the “loud Black girls” or “those that are silenced and often overlooked as they move through the system” as noted by Wortham (2006). Both of these characterizations could present polar cases for African American females to engage in their learning experiences. Hence, the education community could present opportunities to engage in deeper dialogue in classroom settings to respond to these negative images. This could create a space for authoring for young Black girls that may present a more positive space to rebuild and reframe their social and cultural identities.

Likewise, new standards for English Language Arts have identified the importance of listening and speaking as a critical life skill for becoming literate. Placing greater emphasis on the uses of language in the classroom would allow many African American students an opportunity to highlight this strength of storytelling. Typically, there is a mismatch between academic language and practices and those that are celebrated in local communities. If schools could present greater opportunities for measuring listening and speaking through alternative means for assessment, such as storytelling, this may privilege young Black females and their use of language to support their learning.

**Implications for Future Research**

The limitations presented earlier in this chapter, create opportunities for future research. Specifically, more studies need to be conducted on the lived experiences, narratives, and identities of African American women. Recent studies have been conducted on Black adolescent females and I contend more research is needed to reveal a more complete picture of the uses of language, in culture, and identity with a different age group, women in a different social class, and in rural areas rather than suburban or urban areas. This opportunity may shed greater insight
into the types of challenges and barriers African American women experience in these settings and how their identities are nurtured or not given the spaces of authoring available to them. Furthermore, as an African American female in a leadership role in the education policy community, I would find great interest in examining the narratives of AA women in leadership roles and how they would share narratives that told the histories of their experiences as they matured to adulthood.

Additionally, following participants across contexts would present another added value to the field for examining identities in practice and how language is an enabling construct to supporting identity development. In chapter two of this dissertation, I presented a graphic representation of how identities may carry across contexts, this presentation and the proposed contexts could serve as another bridge to building a deeper understanding of African American female literacies.

In conclusion, this study sought to reveal the everyday uses of language of five African American women and how their stories reveal who they are. As their identities evolved, so do those of our larger communities. The power of language and story are undeniable in shaping who we are and how we make sense of the world around us. While I carefully considered the writing and telling of this story, I recognized that my writing is situated based on my experiences as an African American female. As a scholar, I am reminded of the words from Richardson and St. Pierre (2005) which stated, “all writing is written from somewhere by someone, and no writing can ever be purely objective (p. Xxx)” Hence, I end with a quote from Maya Angelou, “there is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside of you.”

Copyright© Felicia C. Smith 2014
### Participant Demographic Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Participant</th>
<th>Family Context</th>
<th>Additional Descriptors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participant 1: Kelly</td>
<td>Married, 3 children, “bread winner” of the family</td>
<td>Close knit family; very close to cousins and aunts and uncles who live in the area;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 2: Pam</td>
<td>Married, 2 children, loves spending time with her family</td>
<td>Teenage mom; attends church regularly; close to family and friends</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 3: Kenya</td>
<td>Married, children and grandchild</td>
<td>Very outgoing, laughs a lot and enjoys conversations with friends</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 4: Bridgette</td>
<td>Not married, independent, views the women at the salon as her “family” members</td>
<td>Enjoys to read, shy, independent and self-supported</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 5: Paula</td>
<td>Never been married, 2 children and 1 grandchild, very close to cousins</td>
<td>Active in the community, involved with son in schooling career</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix B

Field Note Recording Form

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date:</th>
<th>Time:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Create picture of context, include some or all of the following information:

Locate participants and clients

Identify room for storytelling activity

Relevant materials/documents/artifacts in the salon

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Column one</th>
<th>Column two</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Transcription of narratives shared include observations, behaviors, language, quotes, etc. of the storytelling event</td>
<td>Researcher’s comments, thoughts, ideas</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
References


meaning through collaborative activity. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.


VITA

Felicia C. Smith

Academic Background

University of Louisville

M.Ed. Elementary Education, Degree conferred, 2000
B.S. in Ed. Elementary Education, Degree conferred, 1996

Certifications/Endorsements

Reading Specialist endorsement, 2000
Elementary Teaching Certificate, 1996

Presentations

National:


State


**Professional Organization Memberships and Committee Work**

**International:**

International Reading Association (1997-present)

**National:**

National Reading Conference (2005-2007)

**State:**

Kentucky Reading Association (1999-present)

- President (2006-2007)

**Publications**


____________________________________________________________________

Felicia Cumings Smith