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THE IDENTITY OF LEAVE-TAKING: A MULTI-METHODOLOGICAL

QUALITATIVE SENSEMAKING EXPLANATION

A Masters Thesis

Presented to

The Graduate College of

Missouri State University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts, Communication

By

Janice Hersey

May 2016

THE IDENTITY OF LEAVE-TAKING: A MULTI-METHODOLOGICAL

QUALITATIVE SENSEMAKING EXPLANATION

Communication

Missouri State University, May 2016

Master of Arts, Communication

Janice Hersey

ABSTRACT

Many church organizations require women to adhere to a strict code of conduct and dress that affects every area of their lives. While some women choose to create a narrative that validates these guidelines, others choose to leave the church. The purpose of this study is to explicate how women who have left the United Pentecostal Church (UPC), a legalistic splinter group of Pentecostalism, make sense of that decision, redefine their language, and construct new identities in and through the leave-taking process. Current research on women in gendered faith-based organizations focuses on feminist theory and folklore, often ignoring the voices of those who have left. This study takes a multi-methodological qualitative sensemaking approach to explore the leave-taking process. The data revealed that women who have left the UPC make sense of that decision through a long process of questioning and honoring their past; redefine their shared cultural narratives as misogynistic, limiting, and embarrassing; and redefine their identity as a woman of faith as one who values relationships, welcomes difference and uncertainty, and lives in freedom. This study contributes a deeper understanding of the role language and narrative play in creating and recreating gendered faith systems and in the leave-taking process.

KEYWORDS: sensemaking, qualitative, women, faith, identity, narrative

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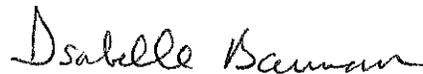
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THE IDENTITY OF LEAVE-TAKING: A MULTI-METHODOLOGICAL

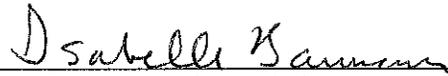# QUALITATIVE SENSEMAKING EXPLANATION

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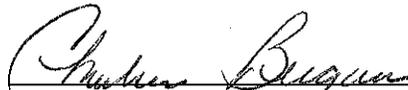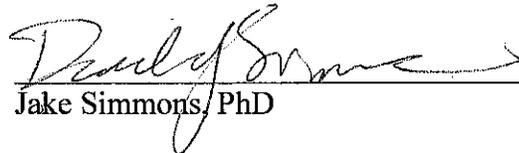For the Degree of Master of Arts

May 2016

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INTRODUCTION

As women in the United States fight for equality and women's rights, evangelical and fundamentalist Christian churches respond by teaching and promoting separate gendered spheres of influence for women (Ambrose & Payne, 2014; DeBerg, 1990). Prominent theologians, pastors and teachers encourage women to fulfill their God-given female role, which they define as the traditional domestic role of submissive wife, homemaker and mother (DeBerg, 1990). The church creates a culture that surrounds women with specific expectations and guidelines based on their sex. Women, thus, often construct their identity within this framework presented by their church organization.

This pattern is particularly true in legalistic churches. Although the Christian faith is based on the concept of grace, or the teaching that salvation is freely given through faith, some church organizations focus on rules and guidelines for achieving salvation (Bassett, 2013). Rather than looking at salvation as a free gift of grace, these organizations expect members to follow strict rules and offer harsh judgment for any members who fail or refuse to adhere to the agreed upon rules. These rules can include such prohibitions as not participating in sports, not watching TV or using the internet, and not dancing. This practice more directly affects women because often the rules are specifically directed toward women. Women are often required to follow a strict dress code and submit to male authority figures: i.e. husband, pastor. By requiring women to carry the standard of meeting all the criteria, church organizations can effectively limit women's sphere of influence and faith identities (DeBerg, 1990).

Although religious scholars have studied gender issues in legalistic organizations, they have not focused on women who choose to leave these organizations. This decision

to leave affects woman's lives in numerous ways. They experience severe recriminations and even shunning from former friends and family. They struggle to understand their faith and identity. As a result of this process, they face repercussions to these questions of faith that lead them to reconstruct their faith identities. Their voices contribute valuable insight to the conversation on women's identity and faith.

Communication scholars are uniquely situated to study this process of leave-taking through sensemaking. The sensemaking framework (Weick, 1995) offers a guide for understanding how women who make the decision to leave such a legalistic church make sense of their lived experiences. Through social interactions and narrations, women construct new understandings of their self and faith identities. Qualitative methods informed by ethnography and autoethnography provide a method for exploring both the gendered language of the church organization and the language of leave-taking (Hymes, 1962). This multi-methodological approach relies on a self-reflexive autoethnographic method to explicate the gendered culture from the researcher's experiences as a former member who chose to leave (Chang, 2008; Ellis & Bochner, 2006).

The purpose of this study is to explore how women who have left the United Pentecostal Church (UPC), a legalistic splinter group of Pentecostalism, make sense of that leave-taking and its repercussions in their lives, and to explicate how they change the gendered language learned as members to create a new identity. While some literature exists concerning women in Fundamentalist/Pentecostal and legalistic churches, most of it focuses on feminist theory or religious folklore (Bowers, 2009; Lawless, 1988). This communication study uses the sensemaking theory as a framework to understand how women reframe their faith identities after leaving the church organization.

In the second chapter of this thesis, I review the relevant literature informing this study. I will first explain legalism in the UPC. Then I will present the theoretical background for the sensemaking theory and for the research methods which informed the multi-methodological qualitative approach: ethnography of communication (EC) and autoethnography. The three research questions emerge from the intersection of these theoretical and methodological frameworks. In chapter three, I outline the qualitative methods used for each element of this study. I chose to divide the results into three chapters, each addressing one of the three research questions. Chapter four details the results and discussion on sensemaking. Chapter five explores and discusses language redefinition. Chapter six outlines and discusses the participants' identity construction following the sensemaking process. In chapter seven, I conclude by discussing the interconnections and implications of these results, limitations of the study, and future avenues for research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

I will first situate this study in relation to relevant literature on the history and development of legalism within the Pentecostal movement, and more particularly in the United Pentecostal Church. Then I will present the theoretical background of sensemaking and the fundamentals of the ethnographic and autoethnographic methods, focusing on the communication scholars that informed this study.

Legalism in the Pentecostal Movement

Pentecostalism grew out of the fundamentalist and evangelical movements in North America in the early 1900s. While women played a pivotal role in the early development of the Pentecostal movement, they were gradually relegated to the back seat (Ambrose & Payne, 2014). Eventually Pentecostals came to revere the 1950s ideal woman as the ultimate example of a Godly woman (Bower, 2009). In order to maintain this gendered position, church leaders constructed an elaborate list of conduct rules directed mainly at women. These traditions were initially passed down orally before finally becoming part of the written bylaws for a Pentecostal splinter group, The United Pentecostal Church (Manual, 2004). Although professing to hold to the traditional Christian doctrine of grace, the UPC has veered toward legalism. The legalistic works expected of members include gender specific guidelines called "standards."

Currently women who are members of the UPC follow strict standards concerning dress, hair, makeup, and conduct or are excommunicated and even shunned as rebellious sinners (Bower, 2009; Manual, 2004). Although local variations exist about specific rules, the following rules apply to all UPC churches: 1) women must have uncut hair, 2)

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women must wear skirts past the knee, 3) women must not wear makeup or jewelry, 4) women must dress modestly by covering legs, arms, and chests in non-revealing clothing, 5) women cannot serve in district, regional or national leadership positions outside of women's ministries, and 6) both genders must abstain from activities and entertainment deemed "worldly," such as TV, movies, ballgames, organized sports, and mixed-gender swimming (Bower, 2009; Manual, 2004; Haney, 1999).

Rather than attempt to change the gendered system from within, many women in the UPC have constructed a spiritual narrative for the standards as empowering to them as women. They contend that having long, uncut hair symbolizes submission, but more than that, it is a source of power. Ruth Harvey (2006), a prominent UPC author, wrote: "only eternity will reveal how many times your family was protected because of this promise of power on your head" (p. 22). The UPC encourages the belief that angels respond to the prayers of women who have uncut hair. Narratives based in this belief are frequently shared at women's meetings and conferences. Women will spread their long, uncut hair on the altar and ask God to answer their request because they have never cut their hair. The standards also dictate that women wear dresses because pants are traditionally men's clothing and that they refrain from using makeup or jewelry. Joy Haney (1999), the wife of a former UPC superintendent (the highest position in the UPC) wrote that "dress is much more important than affecting our appearance; it helps shape our character" (p. 136). She argues that refusing to abide by these rules is rebellion against God, which is considered to be the same as witchcraft.

Sensemaking

Questioning the standards is not encouraged or even allowed in most UPC circles since those standards are presented as the foundation of a woman's salvation. Therefore, when a woman faces life experiences that cause her to reject those standards, she goes through a period of extreme transition and insecurity. Areas of major transition based in unexpected life events are ground zero for sensemaking (Weick, 1995). After facing such surprising transitions, people work to make sense of the situation retrospectively (Weick, 1995). These situations disrupt normal actions and interpretations, which leads participants to seek normalization through sensemaking (Sandberg & Haridimos, 2015). Weick (1995) outlined seven main properties of sensemaking: It is (1) grounded in identity construction, (2) retrospective, (3) enactive of sensible environments, (4) social, (5) ongoing, (6) focused on and by extracted cues and (7) driven by plausibility rather than accuracy.

Weick (1995) described sensemaking as "grounded in identity construction" (p. 18). It is a collaborative process based in interdependent relationships (Tracy, Myers, & Scott, 2006; Weick, 1995). Buzzanell et al. (2005) looked at the transitions woman face resulting from motherhood through a sensemaking framework in order to explicate how they then make sense of work-family balance. Through that study, Buzzanell et al (2005) found that women made sense of their transition to motherhood and society's expectations of a good mother, by reframing their identity as a "good working mother" (p. 276). The sensemaking process facilitated their identity construction.

Tracy, Myers and Scott (2006) reported another example of identity work through sensemaking in a study of human service workers, i.e. correctional officers, 911 call-takers and firefighters. Human service workers are often in work environments that

threaten their identity (Tracy, Myers, & Scott, 2006). In order to affirm their identities in these circumstances, human service workers use humor as a sensemaking tool. Through humor the workers distanced themselves and expressed superiority over clients and relieved the tension of a high-stress workplace. Through this process they made sense of uncontrollable people and circumstances while "maintaining a preferred identity" (Tracy, Myers, & Scott, 2006, p. 302).

The culture surrounding gender roles in the UPC is an all-encompassing life identity. Because the guidelines affect every area of a woman's life, those guidelines construct her identity and role as a woman. When leaving the UPC, women have to make sense of their new identity without the cultural construct of the UPC identity, much as the women who re-framed their identities as working mothers.

Sensemaking is also retrospective. It is a constructive process where individuals attempt to make sense of past actions (Sandberg & Haridimos, 2015). Weick described this retrospective aspect of sensemaking with the question "How can I know what I think until I see what I say?" (Weick, 1979, p. 133). People act based on previously held assumptions and then try to make sense of the actions, which then influences future actions for sensemaking. This creates a loop of action and sensemaking that is seen in the enactment aspect of sensemaking (Sandberg & Haridimos, 2015; Weick, 1979). The purpose of this entire process is to return to normal functioning after the disruption caused by a transition or event.

Bute and Jensen (2011) argued that the lapse of time between an incident and the sensemaking process is vital. Particularly in narrative sensemaking, individuals interpret the lived events through the lens of present experiences (Becker, 1997; Harter, Japp, & Beck, 2005). Bute and Jensen (2011) found that when questioned about their experience

with formal sex-education, low-income women expressed satisfaction, regret, or uncertainty. The older women tended to express more satisfaction or regret, while the younger women tended to express more uncertainty. This finding supports the claim that a lapse in time aids in the sensemaking process.

Sensemaking allows individuals to tell their stories and narratives both to explain their experiences and to make sense of them (Bird, 2007; Rothausen, Henderson, Arnold & Malshe, 2015). Although sensemaking starts with an individual who experiences a disruption, it always then leads to social communication as part of the sensemaking process (Buzzanell et al, 2005; Weick, 1995; Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld, 2005). It is inherently social and happens through narratives shared and discussed with others (Bird, 2007; Hamel, 2009; Weick, 1995; Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld, 2005). Bird (2007) explained that narrative and storytelling have the power to help people interpret the world around and them and create "social reality" (p. 313). The social nature of sensemaking is exhibited both through external and internal conversations. Individuals can socially make sense of actions in conversation with others or through internal imagined dialogue (Weick, 1979; Weick, 1995). Organizational culture is created by groups in social interaction, but is carried individually (Harris, 1994).

Individuals in the organizational setting can make sense of their experiences through real-world or internal dialogues with co-workers, friends, or other connected individuals and groups (Harris, 1994). Employees interpret company policies through these dialogues in the sensemaking process. In a study on corporate philanthropy, Smith (2012) found that employees participated in corporate philanthropy based on their altruistic beliefs that were socially reinforced within the company community. Employees made sense of corporate philanthropy through internal and external dialogues

based in those altruistic beliefs. Although many corporations are moving toward a more strategic plan of giving that benefits the company, the studied employees, who enacted this philanthropy through giving and volunteering, made sense of the company's culture of giving in light of traditional altruistic values (Smith, 2012). Based on these findings, Smith (2012) suggested that organizations with a strategic philanthropy policy might need to reconsider or reframe their policy to better fit the philanthropic sensemaking socially constructed by the employees who will be enacting the policy. Their study illustrates how social interaction, rather than corporate explanations, guides sensemaking.

The ongoing nature of sensemaking generates actions or enactment, which then informs continued sensemaking. Gendered cultures are similarly created and recreated in an ongoing sensemaking process. Hamel (2009) explored gendered work spaces through the lens of sensemaking, focusing on how women make sense of career barriers caused by contract violations. Their sensemaking process influenced the decision to stay or leave the organization in order to overcome those barriers. Often leaving felt like the only option because the company culture deterred change. In a similar way, women leaving the gendered culture of the UPC often frame that decision through sensemaking.

Mills (2005) took a critical sensemaking approach to analyze the gendered work space at a North American utility company. While the company sought to change the gendered image of the company and stated their intent to increase minority hiring and opportunities, the enactment of these policies did not produce significant changes. Mills (2005) argued that those enacting the policies made sense of them based on past context. That sensemaking process caused supervisors and managers to enact the policies in gendered ways. Mills (2002) previously conducted a similar study of the gendered culture at Air Canada. In both studies, Mills (2002; 2005) found that the sensemaking process

served to reinforce prior gendered attitudes and opportunities. The company culture created a context that influenced the sensemaking and thus enactment of the corporate policies. The past culture served as an environmental cue.

Shenoy-Packer (2015) also used a critical sensemaking approach to look at sensemaking within the power structures of the workplace. While Mills (2002, 2005) focused on gendered power relations, Shenoy-Packer (2015) studied how immigrant professionals made sense of the microaggressions they faced in the workplace due to their immigrant status. In the context of this study, Shenoy-Packer (2015) defined microaggressions as "subtle, intentional or unintentional prejudicial and discriminatory words or behavior" (p. 258). Shenoy-Packer (2015) found that immigrant professionals made sense of discrimination in ways that did not blame the aggressors. Sensemaking allowed them to verbalize and acknowledge the discrimination, but maintain the status quo in the dominant culture. In another take on culture, Halualani (2010) looked at how university students at a multicultural university made sense of the intercultural interactions on campus. Just as Mills (2002, 2005) found that company culture influenced employee sensemaking, and Shenoy-Packer (2015) found that the dominant culture affected immigrant professionals' sensemaking, Halualani (2010) discovered that ethnic culture influenced student's sensemaking. "Intercultural interaction is conceptualized in culturally specific ways and in relation to their historical experiences as racial or ethnic groups" (Halualani, 2010, p. 305). Latino/a, Asian American, White/European American and African American students made sense of intercultural interactions in light of their own background. Each of these studies illustrates how environmental cues influence the sensemaking process.

Although sensemaking is an ongoing process that is informed by environmental cues such as culture, people also tend to make sense of situations based on their own experiences and understanding. Weick (1995) explained this tendency as being "driven by plausibility rather than accuracy." O'Meara, Lounder and Campbell (2014) stated that people use information they have or know to make sense of the unexpected or unknown. They found that often faculty will frame explanations for why other faculty have left a university in narratives that are familiar and expected. Often these explanations have nothing to do with the actual reason behind their colleague's departure (O'Meara, Lounder and Campbell, 2014).

While most of the studies using the sensemaking framework are based in business or academic organizations (see Ford & Locke, 2002; Gioia, Thomas, Clark, & Chittipeddi, 1994; Hamel, 2009), the same concepts can apply to experiences within a faith-based organization such as a church. For example, Wittberg (1997) studied newly-founded Roman Catholic groups that had rejected the secularization of modern Catholicism through a sensemaking framework to explicate their "deep structure" as influenced by cultural change (p. 239). Religious groups "have these longstanding cultures, ideological systems by which they explain their identity and purpose to themselves and others" (Wittberg, 1997, p. 240). Sensemaking helped members interpret these cultures in light of personal experience and cultural changes.

Conversely spiritual values and beliefs can provide context for sensemaking within organizations (Pratt, 2000). In an ethnographic study of Amway distributors, Pratt (2000) found that members made sense of the organization's structure and requirements through a promoted ideology. The religious values taught as part of the Amway lifestyle served as a means to maintain organizational control. When the enactment of the Amway

ideology did not bring the expected results, value-based explanations led distributors to make sense of the discrepancies in light of those explanations, which in turn, led to stronger belief in and enactment of the ideology (Pratt, 2000). The sensemaking process reinforced the company culture.

Ethnography of Communication

Firmly based in the sociocultural tradition of communication, Ethnography of Communication (EC) provides a research framework for ethnographers to analyze forms of communication used in a community in an attempt to understand the cultural meanings assigned to the communication practices by the community (Hymes, 1962). Originally founded by Dell Hymes in 1962, this research method was a departure from the formal linguistics of the time (Gumperz & Cook-Gumperz, 2008). Hymes proposed that language is more than linguistics: it is communication within the context of a community and a situation (Hymes, 1964). It is inherently social in nature. With this description, Hymes (1962) rooted EC in both linguistics and anthropology. In order to understand the meaning in language, the ethnographer must first know the context and understand the interaction between language and social life (Sprain & Boromisza-Habashi, 2013). The focus is "on the social use of linguistic forms in speaking" (Bauman & Sherzer, 1975, p. 97).

Hymes (1962) argued that communication is based on a shared code within a community, and he called a community with such a shared code a speech community. While linguists and anthropologists had always equated one language to one culture, Hymes (1962) reasoned that one speech community could have more than one language. The speech of the community is a system and that system should be the primary focus of study rather than a focus on one language and syntax. Members of a speech community

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share a set of rules for communicating and interpreting communication practices, which

are specific events or situations (Carbaugh, 2007). The ethnographer must first identify a

speech event or practice and observe that speech event to learn how that speech

community communicates (Gumperz & Cook-Gumperz, 2008). As a frame of reference

for study, a speech event is "the point at which speakers and means come together in use"

(Bauman & Sherzer, 1975, p. 108). In order to analyze these communication practices,

ethnographers can address a series of questions summarized by Hymes in the mnemonic

device SPEAKING (Bauman & Sherzer, 1975; Carbaugh, 2007):

- S – situation: Researchers observe the setting or scene of the speech event. What is the physical location, and what is the participants understanding of the scene?

- P – participants: Ethnographers then ask who is participating in this particular speech event. Who is present and what role does each participant play in the event?

- E – ends: The next question addresses the ends or goals of the communication practice. With this question, ethnographers look at the participants' goals for the speech event, as well as the actual outcomes of the speech event or practice. Communication goals do not always achieve the desired outcomes.

- A – act characteristics: What is the sequence of this speech event in social interaction? Ethnographers also look at the content and form when analyzing the act.

- K – key: The term key refers to the tone of the speech act or event. What was the emotional tone or feeling of the event? Ethnographers consider the overall key of the speech event and any tone changes throughout the event.

- I – instrument: Here ethnographers focus on the channel being used in the speech event or communication practice. While initially Hymes presented EC as the ethnography of speaking, referring primarily to speech, the research method soon evolved to encompass all forms of communication.

- N – norms: What are the norms surrounding this speech event in the community? Ethnographers look at both the habits of normal practices and the assumptions or expectations of what should be done. They focus first on the norms of interaction and then on the norms of interpretation. What practices or speech events does the

community interpret as fulfilling the norms or expectations concerning interaction?

- G – genre: Does the speech event in question fit into a genre of speech events or acts, such as riddle, proverb, folklore, small talk or apology?

While Hymes (1964) presented the SPEAKING model as a means of analyzing and interpreting observed speech events, he did not intend for the questions to serve as a checklist of separate functions for observation. Ethnographers must also consider and observe the interrelationships between each component of the SPEAKING model (Bauman & Sherzer, 1975).

Essentially, EC calls for the ethnographer to be a participant observer in a speech community for an extended period of time (Engstrom, 2008). Through this extensive fieldwork, an ethnographer can observe and interpret the systematic practices of communication within the context of the culture (Hymes, 1962). The SPEAKING model proposed by Hymes and later simplified to setting, participants, channels, codes, topics, events, and genres provides a framework for both etic and emic observation and study in a variety of contexts (Decolonial Ethnography, 2011; Duff, 2002). Etic observation takes an outsider approach to cultural study, in which researchers deductively impose theory as interpretation of the data. Emic observation takes an insider approach grounded in data emerging inductively from the participants.

EC in Cross-cultural Communication. EC naturally lends itself to intracultural, intercultural, and cross-cultural studies. With roots in anthropology and linguistics, Hymes (1962) initially presented EC as a method for cross-cultural study of speech. In support of this method, he referenced observations of Chinook and other Native American speech communities. In a similar EC study, Zenk (1988) studied jargon in one local community of Chinook. Members of this local speech community spoke more than

nine languages. The EC framework provided a way to observe and understand the shared jargon in such a diverse speech community (Zenk, 1988). Chumak-Horbatsch (1987) also focused on language in his study of the home language of the Ukrainian minority in Toronto. From an emic perspective, Chumak-Horbatsch (1987) used the SPEAKING framework to observe the Ukrainian home language with both audio recordings and in-depth interviews. Ethnographers in EC studies generate themes and conclusions grounded in their observations. For example, Zenk (1988) found that the Chinook took pride in speaking Jargon well, and Chumak-Horbatsch (1987) found that Ukrainian children in Toronto were speaking Ukrainian less and English more, even when raised by mothers who were committed to preserving their Ukrainian language.

Toyosaki (2004) used EC to research cross-cultural communication in a study of Japanese international students' accounts of US-American culture and communication. As a Japanese student in the United States, Toyosaki (2004) chose to research the cross-cultural difficulties that Japanese international students faced when trying to "be in and make sense of their experiences of the United States" (p. 159). He approached the group as a speech community with its own sense of meaning and language. Using the ethnographic methods of observation, in-depth interviews, and interpretation, he studied how Japanese international students understood US-American communication. Just as Toyosaki (2004) studied an ethnic culture within a larger, dominant culture to determine how the minority group made sense of the dominant cultural communication norms, Pitts (2006) studied American students doing a semester abroad in Paris. Rather than focusing the study on how the "sojourners" made sense of the dominant surrounding culture though, Pitts (2006) focused on the students' methods for coping and adjusting through discourse.

In another cross-cultural study, Carbaugh, Nuciforo, Saito and Shin (2011) sought to understand how Japanese, Korean, and Russian discourses described and interpreted intercultural dialogue. The researchers analyzed terms linguistically equivalent to the English word "dialogue" in their own ethnic language using an emic approach. They observed the speech acts and practices surrounding the terms to determine cultural meaning (Carbaugh, Nuciforo, Saito and Shin, 2011). As mentioned earlier in this review, coding and interpreting observations reveals themes that lead to a deeper understanding of a studied speech community. Through the EC study, Toyosaki (2004) discovered a recurring theme he described as "option talk" as an American way of speaking as perceived by the Japanese students. Pitts (2006) argued that the emergent theme of "everyday talk" which students in Paris used as a coping mechanism had practical applications for training and counseling students preparing for semesters abroad.

EC in Educational Contexts. While initially researchers used the EC framework to gain a deeper understanding of cross-cultural communication, in the 1980s, they began applying the EC framework to educational studies due to social issues in American schools (Duff, 2002). Studies in classroom settings using EC often elaborate on discourse between social groups in an effort to understand disparities affecting minority social groups (Rampton, Roberts, Leung & Harris, 2002). In one such study, Duff (2002) became a participant observer at an ethnically diverse Canadian high school. As an ethnographer, Duff (2002) attended a social studies course for six months and observed, recorded, and interviewed the students, a majority of whom were non-native English speakers. Duff (1996) previously conducted a similar ethnographic observation in English immersion classrooms in Hungary. In that instance, Duff (1996) periodically attended and observed a history class over a period of three years. In each case, EC

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offered a holistic approach to educational study even when the study focus and objectives were different. Duff (2002) focused on communication patterns in the Canadian classroom in the second study to better understand the interaction between non-native English speakers and locals and to determine the effectiveness of communication between the teacher and minority students. Using the same research framework for the first study, Duff (1996) analyzed differences in teaching methods of the English immersion classes as opposed to traditional Hungarian classes following political reform.

Braithwaite (1997) used EC as a framework to "describe and explicate Navajo educational communication practices as they were enacted at a Navajo community college" (p. 220). Taking EC a step farther than observation and interpretation, Braithwaite (1997) hoped to gain practical insight and application from this study to help improve educational outcomes for Navajo students in various educational settings. While these examples review studies of the educational system, there is a growing interest in EC as a pedagogical method (Green & Bloome, 2004). Students conduct ethnographic studies as a method for learning (Green & Bloome, 2004). In these instances, the EC study is framed and shaped by the academic agenda of the classroom (Green & Bloom, 2004). Egan-Robertson asked students in her writing club to study their own community (as cited in Green & Bloome, 2004). As ethnographers, the students conducted interviews with community members and learned the importance of community stories and narratives (Green & Bloome, 2004).

EC in Community Communication. Ethnographers have also applied the EC research framework to community communication, seeking to explicate communication between and within groups. Townsend (2013) completed a study on "engaging 'others' in civic engagement" (p. 202). In this study, Townsend (2013) addressed the issue of low

public involvement in public transportation planning through the EC framework. She viewed the planners and the transit-dependent public as two cultural groups. In an emic approach, local community college students acted as participant observers in their own neighborhood organizations and groups. They observed and interviewed local residents to discover their views on public transportation (Townsend, 2013). Townsend (2013) then used the revealed themes for strategic planning on the community level.

In a shift away from the interpretive ethnography cited thus far, the author of "Decolonial Ethnography of Communication" (2011) used the EC framework to do a critical ethnographic study of discourse in a minority neighborhood located in an urban American city. As a participant observer, the author lived in the community and gathered data through field observations and interviews. Participant observation of the community speech acts revealed themes of violence and fear and suggested the use of testimony as a speech genre (Decolonial ethnography, 2011).

While conducting an EC study of women's marital naming practices, Suter (2000) found that participant observation was not always possible. In order to observe the speech acts relating to women's marital naming practices, Suter (2000) had to form focus groups because the topic rarely arose in everyday, observable conversations. Suter (2000) described participant observation and fieldwork as the "backbone of ethnography of communication" (p. 1). In an attempt to replicate the natural speech situations for the observed speech community as closely as possible, Suter (2000) fit the focus groups into the speech community's norms of speech. For example, they met in homes, in groups that regularly met for conversation, and allowed free conversation. Suter (2000) argued that though this use of focus groups in an EC framework is unusual, it provided a means for her to observe discourse on a rarely discussed topic. Both Suter (2000) and Townsend

(2013) focused on discourse concerning a specific topic in a speech community, while the author of "Decolonial Ethnography of Communication" observed the communication practices of the speech community.

EC in Computer-Mediated and Media Communication. Just as EC can be an effective framework through which communication scholars can analyze speech practices in cross-cultural, educational, and community communication, EC can also provide valuable insight into computer-mediated and media communication. In a recent study, Carbaugh, Winter, van Over, Molina-Markham, and Lie (2013) sought to refine the human-machine interface in cars manufactured by General Motors (GM). Generally, GM would create a speech interface targeted to a major market, such as the United States. These speech interfaces were then translated directly from one language to another for use in a non-English speaking market. This process ignored cultural norms for speech and communication practices.

Carbaugh et al (2013) conducted a study based on EC to determine "cultural differences in not only uses but the recognition of languages including dialects, cultural differences in how errors were noticed then corrected, as well as cultural differences in the flow of in-car dialogue from task initiations to completions" (p. 196). The ethnographers approached the driving of a car as a communication act. They observed participants in the communication act to determine the cultural sequencing and norms for the communication act (Carbaugh et al., 2013). Gerber (2012) also focused on computer-mediated communication, but in a community setting, as opposed to the business setting of General Motors. Gerber (2012) observed small groups at a bar to explicate the rules for cell phone use during group social interactions.

One recent innovative application of EC is van Over's (2014) study into the decay of a communication event. EC is generally applied in studies focusing on cultural groups or differences between groups, but van Over (2014) took a unique approach to EC by using it as the framework for analyzing the changes in one media event over time. He defined one media segment, the "Seat of Heat", from *The Daily Show* as a communication event, and then viewed that event over time through the framework of EC. Specifically, van Over (2014) focused on Hymes SPEAKING model as a method of observation and analysis. Through this framework, the researcher tracked the changes in the communication event that led to the show cancellation. His observations showed clear and evident changes to the act sequence, the key, the ends, and the outcomes. In concluding this study, van Over (2014) proposed the possibility for continued study in applying EC to single communicative events over time. EC provides researchers a method for explicating the norms of speech and interpretation within a speech community and a speech event. Autoethnography places the researcher in the study as a method for understanding self in relation to that cultural context.

Autoethnography

Autoethnography is self-narration that extends beyond a focus on the internal self to "cultural analysis and interpretation" (Chang, 2008, p. 43). It is the study of self within a cultural context, through which scholars can better understand the culture. Researchers connect the personal to the cultural in a process of research and writing (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, Whitinui, 2014). This process explores the deeper meaning in culture through the lens of self and the consequences of interaction between self, others and culture (Yarborough & Lowe, 2007). Hayano (1979) first presented the term autoethnography to

describe a method that would allow anthropologists to "conduct and write ethnographies of their 'own people'" (p. 99). Social scientists have traditionally focused on ethnography and have attempted to minimize personal bias (Ellis, 1993; Hayano, 1979). In an early "experimental" autoethnography, Ellis (1993) argued that some "experiences can be understood only" through self-reflection and connecting lived experiences to sociological research (p. 724). In that early study, she detailed her experiences of loss after her brother suddenly died, exploring her emotional reaction through the lens of research in the sociology of emotions. Hoppes (2014) contended that Ellis helped establish autoethnography as a recognized, rigorous form of qualitative study through this and subsequent studies. Social scientists continue to debate between the more objective ethnographic methods and subjective autoethnographic methods, which allow for self-reflexivity and interpretation (Chang, 2008, Ellis & Bochner, 2006).

Ellis and Bochner (2006) argued that autoethnography "was designed to be unruly, dangerous, vulnerable, rebellious, and creative" (p. 433). In an autoethnographic piece presented as a conversation, Ellis and Bochner (2006) outlined defining characteristics of autoethnography as a method. Autoethnography is essentially personal, emotional, evocative, narrative, self-reflexive, embodied, vulnerable, intimate, and artistic (Ellis & Bochner, 2006; Whitinui, 2014). Rather than focusing on providing definitive explanations for the world in general, autoethnography strives to evoke emotions and connections and to generate conversations about personal life (Ellis & Bochner, 2006). "Autoethnography shows struggle, passion, embodied life and the collaborative creation of sensemaking in situations in which people have to cope with dire circumstances and loss of meaning (Ellis & Bochner, 2006, p. 433). It opens a door for researchers to see relationships between self and others and between self and

community (Barnard, 2014). Autoethnographic studies "aim at transformation by means of their performative power" (Barnard, 2014, p. 3). Autoethnographic scholars explore the connection between autoethnography and performance studies in an attempt to reach this aim.

Autoethnography can be presented in many forms, including life histories, native ethnographies, and reflexive memoirs of ethnographers (Chang, 2008; Whitinui, 2014). In a life history, an individual or group of individuals share their life story or experiences surrounding a historical event with an ethnographer, who in turn records and interprets the stories (Change, 2008; see Welzer, 2008). Native ethnographies allow an ethnographer to study their own people (Chang, 2008: see Whitinui, 2014). Often anthropologists and ethnographers write self-reflexive field journals during an ethnography study, which they can then interpret and present as a reflexive memoir (Chang, 2008). The autoethnographic method also encompasses various methods. Autoethnographers rely on ethnographic methods such as self-observation and interviews, in addition to memory recall, discussion, drawing or visualization, reflection, timelines or family kinship maps, personal journals, photographs or letters, and family artifacts (Chang, 2008; Hocker, 2010; Hoppes, 2014).

Diverse Applications of Autoethnography. Autoethnographies have been a useful method of analysis in many spheres, including family; romantic relationships and gender; native cultures; loss; business leadership; religious ritual and theology; academics; and traumatic historical events. Although each ethnographer delves into differing arenas with differing autoethnographic perspectives, many explore concepts of identity and self. Hocker (2010) described her experience excavating family memories and defining her own identity when she went through all her family's old pictures,

documents, and family artifacts. Through that process, she found insight into her own identity and the cultural impact of family stories and secrets. Trujillo (2002) analyzed personal family stories from a critical perspective and sought to understand how family stories "reinforce and reproduce patriarchy" (p. 88). Trujillo (2002) argued that those stories formed gender role expectations. Faulkner and Ruby (2015) took a similar critical approach to analyzing feminist identity within a failed romantic relationship.

From another perspective, Whitinui (2014) explored his own heritage, ancestry, and people in an autoethnography focused on being a Maori academic. In this native autoethnography, Whitinui (2014) looked at not only his own identity and heritage, but also the academic benefit of native autoethnography and analysis of self as an "indigenous person" (p. 460). Sykes, (2014) also viewed his own native cultural identity as a Chickasaw through autoethnography and scrutinized how that cultural background influenced adult education. In each of these studies, the author clarified their own sense of self and identity and viewed that self through the cultural context and autoethnographic perspective.

Ellis (1993) narrated an autoethnographic portrayal of personal loss when her brother died. Through this process she grieved and found meaning in the grieving process, and she also offered a means for others to empathize and grieve their own loss. Narrating a story that resonated with others was what Ellis (1993) considered the "truth" of the story (p. 725). Although Yarborough and Lowe (2007) centered their study around leadership in business, they also presented the narrative so that the themes could resonate with other young business professionals. Through autoethnography Yarborough and Lowe (2007) came to terms with self-identity, over-arching life-goals, and the intersection of identity and business. Pursuing these common themes of self-identity

clarification and evolution, Barnard (2014) examined South African liturgical practices from a theological perspective in order to better understand his own religious and cultural background. Barnard (2014) felt that the rituals had to be experienced rather than just studied. "To feel the thumping drums and to experience the endlessly repeated rhythm physically in a worship service in an African indigenous church, is quite different from reading about it and theorizing about the place of music in traditional African liturgy" (Barnard, 2014). These three studies illustrate the autoethnographic perspective of scholars who value the transformative power and emotional connection in autoethnography.

Both Hoppes (2014) and Benozzo (2011) examined identity in academia through autoethnography. Through reflexive introspection and self-observation, Benozzo (2011) scrutinized his emotional reaction to taking an adult training course as an academic. Benozzo (2011) chose to look at autoethnography as having three components: auto – research of oneself; ethno – research of culture; and graphy – research writing. Because he wanted to gain a better understanding of the emotional impact on his own identity and then report his findings, he focused his autoethnography on the auto and graphy components. Hoppes (2014) also studied autoethnography in an academic setting, but as a tool to facilitate learning for undergraduate students. He argued that undergraduate occupational therapy students often struggle with understanding their identity and place in an academic world filled with sterile, objective answers that they memorize for college exams. Hoppes (2014) instituted the practice of autoethnography as a major objective in a capstone course for occupational therapy students. Through autoethnography, students were able to examine their question, fears, experiences, and emerging identities (Hoppes, 2014).

Limitations of Autoethnography. These examples of autoethnography illustrate both its application in culture and identity studies across a broad spectrum of autoethnographic perspectives and the divided definitions and perspectives on autoethnography. One of the limitations and critiques of autoethnography is its broad definition. Gingrich-Philbrook (2005) argued that autoethnography is more a "broad orientation toward scholarship" than a specific method. Even the definitions of autoethnography in this section represent differing interpretations on method, form, performance, and validity. Hayano (1979) used the term to describe an anthropological ethnography of one's own people or cultural. Ellis and Bochner (2006) focused on the emotional, evocative, and artistic nature of autoethnography as its defining characteristics. Chang (2008), on the other hand, pointed to the analysis and interpretation of culture as a way to establish the validity of an autoethnographic study.

These differences of definition are grounded in the epistemic and aesthetic demands of autoethnography. Social scientists criticize the epistemic authority of autoethnography, while scholars such as Chang (2008) point to the addition of cultural critique as a means to legitimize its creation of knowledge. Scholars such as Ellis and Bochner (2006) emphasize the aesthetic demand to create art through autoethnography. Gingrich-Philbrook (2005) described this tension as an epistemic/aesthetic creative double bind. Autoethnography must both create knowledge and create art. These two opposing demands pull against each other.

Ellis and Bochner (2006) called the writing of autoethnography a "craft" that separates it from other forms of scholarship and literature. Gingrich-Philbrook (2005) argued that it is this tension between the epistemic and aesthetic demand that leads to contradictions in the rhetoric defining and describing autoethnography. These

contradictions call into the question the validity of autoethnography as scholarship. He

theorized that autoethnographic scholars can and should embrace the unruly and

rebellious nature of autoethnography as an art, rather than striving to establish the validity

of autoethnography within the confines of academic scholarship.

Conclusion

Although sensemaking has generally been applied to corporate communication

studies, and ethnography is traditionally a method for studying ethnic groups, the purpose

of this study is to apply the sensemaking framework in a non-profit, faith-based church

organization and to use qualitative methods informed by ethnography and

autoethnography to explicate the culture and identity of leave-taking from that church

organization. In order to gain a more nuanced picture of the identity of leave-taking from

a gendered UPC church, this study combines a cultural analysis of the gendered speech

acts inherent in the religious culture with the sensemaking framework. Three main

research questions emerged from these theoretical and methodological perspectives and

from the intersection of ethnography and sensemaking:

1. How do women make sense of their decision to reject the gendered rules/roles
   of the United Pentecostal Church, Int (UPC)?

2. How does that rejection of the gendered system affect how the women speak
   about it?

3. How have the altered speech norms and the sensemaking process facilitated
   identity-construction after leaving the organization?

METHODS

I chose to gather the needed data to answer these three research question through a multi-methodological qualitative approach informed by ethnography and autoethnography. I analyzed personal writings, moderated one focus group, and conducted seven in-depth interviews. I then analyzed the resulting data through both the SPEAKING mnemonic and the theory of sensemaking.

Autoethnography

As a former UPC member, I chose a retrospective field note method of autoethnographic analysis as a means of explicating the UPC culture. While in the UPC, I served as a missionary and was well-known in that capacity. This recognition limited my ability to conduct a traditional ethnographic study based on participant observation in local churches. Instead, I compiled personal journal entries and emails written before, during, and after my transition from acceptance to rejection of the UPC's gendered system and viewed those as retrospective ethnographic field notes. These field notes included entries written in childhood as the pastor's daughter, while attending a UPC-sanctioned Bible school, and while serving in full-time ministry as a missionary to Russia. I conducted a thematic analysis of these field notes, considering each of the three research questions in the analysis. These written documents along with memory recall shaped the autoethnographic process. In light of the limitations of autoethnography, I chose to focus on the epistemic demand of autoscholarship as a means to establish validity and to integrate the results into the study framework. This apparent neglect of the

aesthetic demand arguably qualifies this analysis as more autobiographical than autoethnographic.

I viewed these written documents through the sensemaking framework to determine how I made sense of my decision to leave the UPC. I then analyzed my use of language in the context of the UPC culture, how that language changed throughout the sensemaking process, and how that process facilitated identity construction. I read through the written material, highlighting chunks relating to the research questions. Then I read through that data again to categorize potential themes. I completed these initial stages of autoethnographic analysis and coding before starting the ethnographic research process. This analysis informed my focus group and interview protocols. I then completed the thematic analysis of all the interview and focus group data before returning to the final thematic analysis for the autoethnography. In this way, I viewed the autoethnography data through the cultural context of the other participants' experiences. This comparative analysis supported and validated the thematic results that emerged through both the ethnography and autoethnography. I incorporated the resulting autoethnographic data into the results both as contextual interpretation and explanation of emergent themes and as supporting narrative.

Ethnography

From this insider perspective, I conducted one focus group and seven in-depth interviews with a total of eleven women who had previously left the UPC. This combination of a focus group and interviews allowed for both participant observation and deep narrative.

Focus Groups. Although focus groups are not a classic ethnographic method, I chose to have one focus group in which I could observe the collaborative nature of the sensemaking process through dialogue. Ethnography is grounded in participant observation, generally over a long period of time, and is set in the natural environment of the speech community (Hymes, 1962). Focus groups, on the other hand, are not considered to be a natural environment. However, in some research cases, access for participant observation is limited (Morgan & Spanish, 1984; Suter, 2000).

Morgan and Spanish (1984) argued that focus groups were a unique qualitative research opportunity when the research question could not easily be answered through participant observation. They wanted to study experiences with heart attacks, but conversations on that subject occurred rarely enough naturally as to make participant observation difficult. Participant observation allows a researcher to gather data that is volunteered by participants in group settings, while interviews allow for direct one-on-one questions from the researcher to the informant. Morgan and Spanish (1984) explained that focus groups exist in the middle. Although they are not as effective for natural group observation as participant observation or as effective as interviewing in targeting specific, deep content, they combine both group interaction and focused content together.

When studying women's marital naming practices, Suter (2000) formed groups based on the natural meeting patterns of the group she was studying. The women did not normally discuss their marriage naming practices in everyday conversation, but they were friends who met and talked on a regular basis. Suter (2000) followed the example of Morgan and Spanish (1984) in setting up focus groups in a familiar, natural setting so that she could observe the group interactions as naturally as possible. But the moderated focus

group format allowed her to direct the content of the conversation. I followed this model in planning my focus group.

Because sensemaking is a retrospective practice, women who have worked through the sensemaking process while leaving the UPC do not continue to discuss the process on a regular basis years later. This means that conversations about the rejection process and sensemaking would naturally occur so rarely as to make it almost impossible to document as a participant observer. In order to capture and observe these conversations and social interactions, I conducted one focus group in addition to the single-person interviews. Following the models for integrating focus groups into ethnographic research illustrated by Suter (2000) and by Morgan and Spanish (1984), I asked a good friend to recruit several of her closest friends who had often discussed their transition away from the UPC while leaving. She recruited three friends, all of whom I also consider friends. For the focus group, these four women met at her home, a place where they regularly meet to talk. This gathering of close friends, in a familiar meeting place, to discuss a topic they had often discussed together in the past helped create a comformtable environment for observation with little need for direction or control.

As the investigator, I asked only three broad, open-ended questions using *en vivo* language and then quietly observed the resulting conversation. I had originally planned to ask more questions, but found it unnecessary because the conversation naturally addressed everything I had hoped to discuss. The three questions were: 1) When you were part of the UPC, how did you describe the standards and expectations placed on women; 2) Describe how you felt when you first started making changes in your lifestyle; 3) How do you view your life and faith now that several years have passed since leaving the UPC? Because the women are such good friends, the conversation was free-flowing,

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spontaneous, interactive, and self-directed. They often completed each other's thoughts and sentences and were familiar with each other's stories. Occasionally someone drew me into the conversation as a friend because of shared stories and experiences that they were familiar with and referenced. I had initially asked the participants to review past journals before participating in the focus group, but found that most were unwilling to reread entries that returned them to such a difficult emotional place. The focus group discussion lasted for 90 minutes.

Interviews. I chose to use in-depth, semi-structured interviews with seven participants in order to pull out rich narratives and thick descriptions of the sensemaking process (Tracy, 2010). I wrote the interview protocol based on my own experiences when leaving the UPC and on my research in sensemaking and ethnography. Each interview consisted of 15 main questions with multiple follow-up questions using *en vivo* language. Example questions included: 1) How did you decide to leave the UPC; 2) How did the UPC standards and expectations for women affect your everyday life; 3) How would you have described standards when you were following the rules; 4) What language would you now use to describe those standards and expectations that you experienced. Some of the participants answered the questions extensively with little need for follow-up questions, while others answered more narrowly. In those instances, I followed-up with questions specifically digging deeper into their responses.

Interview times ranged from 45 minutes to 90 minutes. I conducted two interviews face-to-face, one in a local coffee shop and one in the participant's home. Distractions included the noise and wait staff in the coffee shop and the participant's toddler and husband in the home. I conducted the other five interviews via Skype, FaceTime or phone. In each instance, I called from home, with my pets active in the

background, and each of the participants participated from home, often with children and/or pets in the background. The interviews via FaceTime were the most difficult due to slow internet connections that disrupted the transmission. Because of my insider status I easily understood the narrative forms used by the participants and did not need to follow up with clarifying questions about *en vivo* language or examples. Although my emic perspective created an easy rapport with the participants, it may have also influenced the depth of the narratives and explanations. An etic interviewer might have dug deeper into some comments that I simply accepted at face value. In some cases of this shared understanding, I only realized when going through the transcripts after the interview that part of an answer was unvoiced or not clearly explained in a way that outsiders would understand.

Participants

I spoke with a total of 11 women either in the focus group or in an interview. I initially recruited participants from my own social network as a former UPC member. I then used the snowball method to recruit participants' friends who had similar experiences in order to expand my participant pool. I had personally known all but three of the eleven women both before they left the UPC and during their time of transition.

Each of the participants identified as a Christian and as an active member of a Christian church. All of the women had been members of a UPC church for at least five years and most were members for 25 to 35 years. Two of the three women who spent less time in the UPC joined as adults. The other eight women were born into the UPC culture.

All 11 women were mothers or stepmothers with a least one child, and ten were currently married. Participant ages included women in their 20s, 30s, 40s, and 50s.

Education levels ranged from high school to master's degrees. Participants also had diverse backgrounds and had lived or now lived in numerous locations across the country. I did not specifically ask for ethnic identification, although one participant voluntarily identified as African American. The participants were each given a pseudonym to protect their identities in this study. In compliance with the IRB application and approval, each participant signed a research consent form (IRB-FY2016-117; Jan 1, 2017; Appendix).

Analysis

The focus group and interviews were all audio recorded, with the participants' consent. As the moderator, I also observed the setting, environment, and emotional responses of the participants. Upon completion, I transcribed the recorded data, documenting pauses, voiceovers and non-fluencies (Richards, 2005). This resulted in 245 pages of data.

I then conducted an interpretive thematic analysis of the data to identify categories and patterns emerging from the data. I read through each transcript and identified chunks of text with potential themes. I then read through all of the transcript data a second time to solidify and expand on the emerging themes. I used a highlighter, underlining, and margin notes to develop the themes and then copied all the potential categories and themes on notepaper. I used these memos to develop and compare the emerging themes. I drew flow charts and diagrams as an interpretive process for consolidating or discarding categories.

I developed and verified the validity of themes based on recurring phrases and ideas (Richards, 2005). I then viewed the themes through the sensemaking framework

and research questions to ensure that the emerging themes addressed each of the study questions. I wrote out the initial interpretive analysis in outline form and then talked through that analysis with colleagues and friends. Following this interpretive analysis, I read through the data one final time. I completed the final revision of my initial interpretive outline based on the verbal feedback and final look at the data.

Standards of Rigor

Tracy (2010) outlined eight standards or rigor specific to qualitative research: (1) worthy topic, (2) rich rigor, (3) sincerity, (4) credibility, (5) resonance, (6) significant contribution, (7) ethics, and (8) meaningful coherence. For this qualitative study, I strove to adhere to these criteria. A worthy topic is one that is "relevant, timely, significant, interesting, or evocative (Tracy, 2010, p. 840). A study that displays rich rigor, sincerity and credibility is solidly grounded in a theoretical framework, is reflexively open about the researcher's background and biases, and is filled with thick description. A qualitative study that meets the standards of rigor will also present data that is transferable and significantly contributes to the conversation, either theoretically, methodologically or practically. Finally, the study should be conducted based on "procedural, situational, relational, and exiting ethics" and based on methods consistent with the intent and purpose of the study (Tracy, 2010, p. 847).

The results of this study display this rich rigor and resonance. The next three chapters outline these results in relation to each of the three research questions. Each chapter addresses one specific research question, detailing the results and discussing the implications of those results within the theoretical framework of sensemaking. The results in chapter four address and discuss the first research question: How do women

make sense of their decision to reject the gendered rules/roles of the United Pentecostal Church, Int (UPC)? In chapter five, the results address and discuss the second research question: How does that rejection of the gendered system affect how the women speak about it? The results in chapter six answer and discuss the third research question: How have the altered speech norms and the sensemaking process facilitated identity-construction after leaving the organization?

SENSEMAKING RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

It seems like life just stays hard and nothing changes. It feels like being tied up and thrown down a dark hole. Is that supposed to be our whole life? Trying to struggle through things we don't want? Why am I drowning in a morass of depression? My hope has curdled, and I've become so cynical. I feel like I've completely lost my way and am reevaluating everything I believe.

When I wrote these words in my journal, I was just beginning to question the strict legalistic religious code that I had learned as a child and embraced as a young adult. I had not only obeyed the gendered rules I had learned in the UPC, I had fully committed to those rules as truth. Questions were not allowed. Christians should not be depressed. For me this depression served as a critical incident that sparked a period of questions, study, and sensemaking that eventually led me to reject the gendered rules I followed and to leave the UPC. Each of the eleven women who participated in this study engaged in a similar process of sensemaking that led them to reject the gendered system in the UPC and to eventually leave the organization.

As I interviewed the participants about their sensemaking process, I realized that some of the participants shared my past experience of being fully committed to the gendered rules, while others did not. This finding emerged unexpectedly from the data. Of the eleven participants, six women believed and followed the rules wholeheartedly, and five women never fully understood or accepted the rules. Often these five women did not strictly follow all the rules. All of the participants experienced the same major themes in their leave-taking and sensemaking process, but often differed in how they experienced or interpreted those themes. For the sake of this paper, I will be calling the first group all-in and the second group part-in. Using these terms, I will comment on any observed differences in the thematic analysis. Three major themes emerged from the data that

illustrate the participants' sensemaking process: 1) participants began to question following critical incidents; 2) participants rejected the rules in a slow process; 3) participants chose to honor their past experiences.

Critical Incidents Sparked Questions

Both groups of women, those who were all-in and those who were part-in, started their journey away from the UPC following one or more critical incidents that sparked questions. As detailed in the literature on sensemaking, unexpected life events that disrupt normal actions and/or interpretations force individuals to seek normalization through sensemaking (Sandberg & Haridimos, 2015; Weick, 1995). In the interviews, I found two main critical incidents affecting both groups: 1) concern about raising their children, particularly their daughters, in the gendered system, and 2) questioning the UPC culture created by the strict gendered system.

In addition to questions regarding their children and the culture, the all-in group was also influenced by negative emotional reactions such as depression and anger at God. The part-in group, on the other hand, was more influenced by a growing displeasure with living a double standard and by decisions made by their church or husband. Every incident, whether arising from kids, the UPC culture, emotional reactions, or church decisions, sparked questioning. Women who had never questioned the gendered rules and system began to question everything, and those questions motivated every participants' transition.

Children. The majority of women who participated in the study referenced some incident related to their kids as a critical moment in triggering questions. The four women who did not share this experience did not have any children when they started the

questioning process. Mothers who had daughters realized they needed to understand the reasons for the gendered rules in order to justify raising their daughters in that system. Jasmine never fully agreed with the rules and had often discreetly trimmed her hair, while outwardly adhering to the skirt rule. When her oldest daughter started questioning the rules they were following, Jasmine realized that she needed to be honest with her daughter and with herself. She had been adhering to the standards without completely understanding them or agreeing with them. Her daughter's questions challenged her to figure out why she was doing something that she did not believe was necessary.

Sally on the other hand was all-in. She believed that following the rules was the way to please God and never questioned her obedience or raising her daughter to obey. But as her daughter got older and the standards began to have more of an impact on her life, Sally would watch her walk into school, dressed in her UPC best, and instead of joy would feel despair. Just as Jasmine felt challenged to question why she was adhering to rules she did not agree with, Sally felt challenged to question why her feelings did not reflect what she believed.

During this time of questioning, Sally had a conversation with her daughter that brought her to a decision point. Her daughter was detailing her day at school one evening and mentioned who she always sat with at lunch time. As she listened, Sally realized that every one sitting with her daughter for lunch was in some way struggling with their identity and acceptance at school. She also realized that the only reason her daughter was struggling with these same issues was due to the standards for appearance that she had to follow.

> And I thought at that moment, I've got to make sure this is worth it. I've got to make sure this is what I believe because I'm not going to perpetuate this if it's not the truth. I'm not going to do it anymore…And that's the moment, I determined in

my mind to make it, I'm going to decide if it's right or wrong what we're doing. That's the moment I realized, I've got to figure this out for me, for us. (Sally)

Because of that critical incident with her daughter, Sally began looking for answers to her questions. While Paula did not have girls, her realization that she did not want girls was a critical moment of questioning. She stated: "When I found out I was having boys and I was relieved. I was like, well, thank God I'm having boys. And I just thought, that's nuts, I shouldn't feel that way. I shouldn't dread having a girl."

Although raising daughters to follow the standards became the critical moment of questioning for some of the participants, Amanda faced such a critical moment through her son. She has a son who was diagnosed with Autism. At the time, Amanda and her family attended a UPC church, and church members and leaders often reassured them that God was going to heal their son in the next year. Then another birthday would roll around, and he still had autism. She explained: "So for me, one of the few things, um, I remember about the UPC is this culture of um, fixing things that are not perfect."

Rather than support the family, members would become uncomfortable with the lack of change and imply that if only Amanda and her husband would pray more or do more that God would heal their son. "And that was one of the, that was one of the big reasons that we left. Was because there was no place for a child that was different. … Um, and that was one of the reasons I guess that we left because we didn't feel like our family fit in, um, to a UPC culture anymore." (Amanda) For Amanda and her family, the decision to leave had less to do with following gendered rules and more to do with the UPC culture and how that affected their family. This understanding of a UPC culture that prohibited any form of difference emerged from the data as a common reason for questioning and then leaving that organization.

Questioning the Culture. The gendered culture of the UPC is explained and maintained through cultural narratives. These narratives became critical incidents of questioning for many of the study participants. One commonly repeated narrative in the UPC culture is that standards are not a heaven or hell issue. In other words, when accused of legalism, church leaders will explain that following these rules is not something that will "save" someone or send them to hell either one. Abiding by the rules is a lifestyle choice that demonstrates love for God. Melissa recalled, "like the way that it was explained to me, someone was just like, oh well, you know, it's not a heaven or hell issue." This narrative became a critical moment of questioning for Emily. "I think, at least in my family, like, we didn't say or think that they were going to hell because of it. It was always kind of like, it's not a heaven or hell issue. Which then led me to ask, well, if it's not a heaven or hell issue, why am I doing this?" The cultural narrative meant to explain and justify a gendered system not in accordance with Biblical principles prompted participants to question the system itself.

Taylor began to question another UPC narrative following an incident in Walmart. She was standing in line behind a woman with uncut hair, whose tattoos indicated that she followed a Wiccan faith. Taylor noticed the uncut hair and thought, "so you mean just that one action makes her have the same power? Just because her hair is uncut? What?" With this thought she began to question the standard UPC narrative of women having access to some kind of supernatural power because of their uncut hair. When Taylor shared this incident in the focus group, Sally commented, "I've heard it preached, that even they [Wiccans] understand the power of the uncut hair." These narratives inspired questioning and critical thought rather than acceptance. Several participants referred to the same story of a woman who laid her uncut hair over her

husband when he was sick and God healed him. In referencing that story, Morgan

remarked, "well, you know what? God told my grandpa to put this cross over this man's

feet, he did, and the man was healed. He didn't go selling this cross for $9.99." Instead of

reinforcing belief in and obedience to the gendered rules, these cultural narratives caused

participants to question them.

In the focus group, several participants referenced an incident that collectively

sparked questioning and became a moment of decision for them. Taylor referred to a cult

in Texas that the FBI raided in order to rescue minors who were being sexually abused

and married to older men. That particular cult followed a strict gendered dress code very

similar to that espoused by the UPC. Right after the news media reported that raid, Taylor

was at a UPC ladies conference with her mother and several friends.

> And we walked into a Cheesecake Factory, and I heard these women at another table say, "those older women look like those women from that cult." And it was all over the news that week. And I was just like, oh my God, what kind of evil are we trying to avoid exactly? Because we're identifying with such evil. We're trying not to look like the world, but what's worse? Looking like crazy child molesters?

That similarity to a group that she considered to be morally wrong and evil led Taylor to

question the UPC culture that described the dress code as being separate from the world.

Everyone at the focus group remembered that news story and immediately chimed in

with similar responses. Paula quickly stated:

> That very news story bothered me a lot. Because we were kind of in that position where I don't think I'd cut my hair yet, but we were changing. We were believing something different, but we hadn't changed. And I told my husband, if one person asks me, **one** person asks me, I will cut my hair the next day. Whether we're ready for it or not. (bold text indicates verbal emphasis)

When remembering that initial questioning phase, Sally said, "I guess it's the first time in

my life I started asking questions, and I started trying to understand it better." This story

reminded me of my own moment of decision. Like Paula, I no longer believed the rules were necessary, but had not made any physical changes. I watched a news report that referenced a UPC church's beliefs and practices and immediately realized that I could no longer be associated with that doctrine. I cut my hair for the first time the next day.

All-in Group. Although both all-in and part-in participants began questioning through critical incidents with children and the UPC culture, some of the participants who were all-in also experienced depression and anger, which sparked further questioning. My own sensemaking journey started in depression caused by constantly attempting to be the right thing and never feeling that I measured up. I had questioned the standards as a teenager, but had eventually accepted them and was all-in. I believed that living by the rules was an expression of my relationship with God that protected and empowered me. I followed the rules faithfully and never tried to compromise or push the limits. Instead I stayed far to the conservative side of that line.

I followed the rules so well, that one time a Facebook friend from another area of the country shared that her pastor had just used my picture in a sermon to their church on how to look like a lady. That pastor did not actually know me, but had found my picture from the conference when the organization presented me as a missionary. But while I was publically presented as an example of what a Godly UPC woman should be, I was internally struggling with a sense of failure. Inevitably that conflict led to extreme depression and unhappiness with my life, which sparked a season of questioning and searching.

Both Sally and Taylor experienced periods of depression because they were all-in. They believed that the UPC had the only way to salvation, but did not know how to reach the world with that truth. Taylor mentioned, "I would become so depressed for mankind,

thinking how are we going to tell the world, the whole earth." For them that depression caused them to become angry at God because the rules and limited doctrine did not make sense with the command to love people and reach out to everyone with the gospel. Sally said, "I didn't even talk about it much, but I started getting, I felt angry at God for a lot of things." Paula was angry about the limitations placed on her as a woman. These negative emotions prompted several participants to question the system further.

Part-in Group. The women who considered themselves part-in did not have similar emotional reactions like depression and anger. Instead they referenced being tired of living a double life and enduring judgment. Amanda initially lived a double life, wearing pants only in non-UPC settings and putting her hair up for church. Eventually she could not maintain the façade and began openly cutting her hair and wearing pants while attending a UPC church. She only left the organization completely when the pastor told her family they were no longer welcome because they did not keep the standards.

Although Emily grew up all-in, she began questioning the standards as an adult and eventually decided to not follow them. She also continued to attend a UPC church until feeling pushed out by the pastor's judgment. Morgan and her husband left the UPC mainly because of the judgmental environment. They pastored a church and followed the rules, even though they did not agree with them, but still could not measure up. Neighboring pastors kept accusing them of breaking rules that they were keeping. The final straw for Morgan came when only one person came to her first baby shower after she had faithfully attended all of their family celebrations. That judgmental attitude and lack of support became a moment of decision for her.

Most of the women from the part-in group also pointed to decisions made by their church as critical incidents. Many of these participants did not strictly follow the rules,

but chose to attend UPC churches anyway. Jasmine commented that she was always trimming her hair, and Brittany regularly wore pants on dress-down days at school. Not agreeing with the strict guidelines for standards did not initially push them to consider leaving the organization. They were still bought in to the UPC culture. For some the extra push came when the church they were attending began questioning the system and standards. When the church pastor and other members began discussing and questioning together, this prompted deeper questioning. Jasmine had already been questioning due to the incident with her daughter, but when the church began to transition away from the UPC, she felt that it "created the perfect moment for us to say, ok, do we go down this road or do we stick with what we know?" For participants who had not yet been considering the move, the the church transition put the decision before them.

Slow Process

Every participant in the study, indicated that they spent a long time in the questioning phase before making changes or leaving the UPC. This slow process consisted of sensemaking conversations and baby-step lifestyle changes. All-in and part-in participants experienced only one minor difference in the process. All-in participants expected negative emotional repercussions when changing their lifestyle, and part-in participants were relieved to drop the façade. Although everyone described the process as slow, the actual time spent in the process ranged from one to ten years.

Conversation. During that time of transition, everyone had someone with whom they discussed the changes and the sensemaking process. Participants would often question themselves and others, "am I doing the right thing?" All of the women talked

with their husband, if they had one, or with other immediate family members. Jasmine explained that it was critical she and her husband be on the same page with the transition.

Most also discussed the process with close friends. Susan described talking with her closest friends to get their reaction before cutting her hair the first time. Brittany would often ask her boyfriend, who is now her husband, if he thought it would be ok for her to make changes like cutting her hair. Jasmine mentioned frequent discussion with friends from church as they were questioning the culture and the rules. Weick (1995) described this social interaction as an essential component of the sensemaking process. Everyone explained that this social aspect of their journey helped them feel they were not making a rash decision or moving in the wrong direction.

Baby Steps. Spending time in the questioning and discussing process allowed participants to understand their beliefs and choices before making any lifestyle changes. But even after deciding to make changes, all the participants commented that they made the changes in small, baby steps. Most of the women remembered cutting their hair a "few inches at a time." Brittany, who had hair long enough to sit on, said, "so I did the first couple inches, so it was right above my butt. And I did that for a couple months. Then I did it a little shorter." Morgan pointed out that she "didn't do anything different for the first two years." Jasmine, who had always at least trimmed her hair, remembered that the hardest change was "not wearing a skirt all the time."

Participants indicated that the main reason for this slow change was a respect or concern for others. Both all-in and part-in participants did not want to hurt or offend their friends and family. Taylor explained, "we still have our family that is that and you don't want to be offensive." Sometimes participants were also avoiding expected judgment from others. Brittany and Jasmine both expected a negative reaction from their family or

church friends. Jasmine clarified that she worried more about her parents' approval than judgment from non-family. Most of the participants have continued these baby step changes for many years past when they actually left the UPC. More than one participant mentioned that they had only recently pierced their ears for the first time.

All-in vs. Part-in. The only difference between the all-in group and part-in group during this long process was in the emotions surrounding the initial decision to make lifestyle changes. Those who were all-in expected to feel upset or to sense a separation from God when they made a change, while those who were part-in felt relief that they could stop abiding by rules they did not believe. Sally described getting her hair cut for the first time and expecting to feel condemnation or guilt. Instead she said, "it felt amazing." Emily described it as "waiting for, like, the guilt to set in." Several women expected to cry the first time they cut their hair and were surprised when they did not. And the fact that they did not experience the expected condemnation reassured them in making changes. Sally thought, "oh, it must not be true," when she prayed for the first time after cutting her hair and realized that she still sensed the presence of God. The women in the focus group chimed in with agreement on how good it felt to realize they were not condemned by that action. Emily remarked, "I just felt, like, wow, I just did something I've never done before."

Rather than expecting condemnation, the part-in group felt relief to finally be able to publicly live what they privately believed. Brittany explained, "it was just like a relief, I guess, it was like, oh, I can do this in public." Amanda remembered that she and her husband were "just very ready to leave." No one from the part-in group mentioned similar expectations of crying or feeling guilt after making changes.

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Honor the Past

One of the main themes shared by all the participants was a desire to honor their past. They chose to make sense of their past experiences by acknowledging their parents' good intentions and by holding on to the positive experiences. While those who were all-in experienced more regret and anger concerning their history, all agreed with this theme of honoring that past.

Participants who grew up in the UPC felt that their parents had good intentions and raised them in what they believed to be right. Even women who came from rigid families that strictly followed all the UPC rules, did not blame their parents for negative experiences. Instead they chose to describe their parents as misled, but acting with their best interests at heart. When referring to her mother, Sally said, "I feel like she was doing what she thought was right." Taylor, Sally, Jill, and Paula agreed that people in that organization are just misled. Jasmine made the point that she is not angry with her parents because she "believes [her] parents were well intentioned and always wanted the best for [her]."

Each participant also expressed a sense of gratitude for positive experiences they had during their time in the UPC. The women in the focus group all agreed that God worked in their life while they lived in that system and that they started their journey of faith in that organization. When referring to being raised in a church that embraced emotional response and connection with God, Paula stated, "I have always enjoyed the presence of God. …and for all that, it's really worth it." Morgan described it as a rich faith heritage for which she is thankful. Emily pointed out that she survived high school without any major vices such as drinking, smoking, or wild parties because of her upbringing. Although the system required strict obedience, she also learned

independence. She explained, "it's kind of a paradox…you have to obey these [rules], yet somehow it made me more independent because I was used to living life outside of the culture norm." Taylor remembered the example she saw through her mother of a "real relationship with Jesus Christ." She described that example of a faith relationship as more valuable than any opportunity she might have missed due to lifestyle.

Although choosing to honor their parents and past positive experiences, those who were all-in also experienced regret and anger. Several women expressed regret over lost opportunities and self-limitations. And for some, this regret caused anger. Emily mentioned feeling regret that she went through school and started her career while living that limited lifestyle. Paula stated, "mostly, I feel like I was self-limiting, so that makes me angry at myself." On the other hand, those who were part-in seemed to feel fewer regrets and no one expressed anger. Melissa, Morgan, and Jasmine all mentioned not being bitter about the experience or angry at the religion. Melissa expressed some regret that it affected her so much while she was in college. "The strongest statement I could make about this is that I do feel like it stole a lot…like it stole a significant portion of my young adult years that I can't get back." Although feeling that her family and friends in the UPC are very misled, Jasmine explained that she had a good life that she could not regret. She described the gendered rules as "one piece that I didn't choose to take on with me into adulthood."

Discussion

The three major themes discussed in this chapter illustrate the process and properties of sensemaking as outlined by Weick (1995). For each of the participants, the journey of leave-taking began following a critical incident that challenged long-held

religious beliefs and traditions. Although the stories of remembered incidents are as varied as the number of participants, each incident resulted in the same outcome – questions. When the cultural narratives and beliefs no longer made sense, participants began trying to make sense of their feelings, reactions, and beliefs. In seeking normalization of their interpretations through sensemaking, participants enacted the properties of sensemaking (Sandberg & Haridimos, 2015; Weick, 1995).

The seven properties of sensemaking described in the literature review include: It is (1) grounded in identity construction, (2) retrospective, (3) enactive of sensible environments, (4) social, (5) ongoing, (6) focused on and by extracted cues and (7) driven by plausibility rather than accuracy. I will outline the results of participants' identity construction in the chapter titled Identity Construction Results and Discussion. Each of the other six properties can be seen in the themes of this chapter on sensemaking.

Participants retrospectively began sensemaking following critical incidents that sparked questioning. This retrospective aspect of the sensemaking process is especially evident in the length of time participants spent transitioning out of the UPC. As participants acted and enacted the sensemaking process, they made baby-step changes, tried to make sense of those changes, and then acted further based on that sensemaking process (Sandberg & Haridimos, 2015; Weick, 1979).

A perfect example of this enactment is the surprise participants felt when they did not experience guilt after making changes. They first made sense of their reactions to critical incidents by deciding that the gendered rules were not required by God. But when they acted on this belief, their prior assumptions caused them to expect retribution. When they did not experience this sense of guilt, they then made sense of that action and

emotional response by viewing it as affirmation of their changes. This sensemaking then led them to make greater lifestyle changes.

Participants enacted this slow sensemaking process socially with respect to and within the environment where they lived and worshiped, illustrating the social and sensible environment properties. Participants made sense of their transition through social interaction and discussion with the people closest to them, who were part of their daily environment (Bird, 2007; Hamel, 2009; Weick, 1995; Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld, 2005). Several participants mentioned transitioning away from the UPC together with a church family. Those who did not have a church environment that enabled the transition still went through the process together with their immediate family and often together with friends. In the initial stages of sensemaking, participants discussed the transitions frequently with those in their social circle. Through this social enactment in sensible environments, participants sometimes relied on plausible narratives rather than accuracy (O'Meara, Lounder and Campbell, 2014). The participant who felt that all the women in the UPC break the rules illustrates this tendency to make sense of experiences through plausible narratives.

This process also illustrates how participants made sense of the changes through extracted cues. As participants have continued to make sense of their leave-taking, they have interpreted that process through the lens of their present experiences in faith (Becker, 1997; Harter, Japp, & Beck, 2005). These present cues have helped participants interpret past experiences more clearly. That continuing process points to the ongoing nature of sensemaking. Although most of the participants left the UPC five to ten years ago, all indicated recent changes such as piercing their ears or finally accepting that they may never have all the answers. The next chapter on Speech Norms will explicate

participants' understanding of the speech norms and the resulting changes in language

participants eventually experienced through that ongoing sensemaking process.

LANGUAGE REDEFINITION RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The discursive practices of the UPC support, promote, and justify the gendered system. In rejecting the gendered rules and leaving the organization, women choose to also reject the discursive practices and to construct new narratives. For my second research question, I explored these discursive practices and how the process of leaving affected or changed those practices for the participants. Three themes emerged from the data for both the all-in and part-in participants: 1) women described the gendered rules by parroting familiar phrases based in fear and mysticism; 2) the language of fear and mysticism created a culture of blind obedience and outward display; and 3) participants reconstructed these narratives as misogynistic, limiting, and embarrassing through sensemaking.

Parroted Phrases

When asked to describe how they would have justified or explained the gendered rules of the UPC, all the participants immediately referred to shared cultural narratives and phrases. Melissa explained that these cultural narratives were passed around at group gatherings and women's functions as a way to reinforce and encourage acceptance of the gendered rules and system.

> It was almost like going to a Mary Kay party or something like that. Mary Kay's probably not an apt example since that's makeup and that was a sin, but it's like going to a Tupperware party, um, for Jesus together. … It would be like a Tupperware party where you're sitting and it's like, yay, and then it's time for the testimonials. Here's the Tupperware. Except that it would be like, here's my hair. We'd talk about our standards or whatever.

Amanda said, "I would have quoted what was quoted to me." Everyone mentioned the same verse or verses from the Bible and explained them using phrases that were almost identical across the interviews and focus group. Almost every interview included the response "men are supposed to look like men and women are supposed to look like women." The phrases and narratives repeated by each of the participants centered around two main ideas: 1) mysticism and 2) fear.

Mysticism. Many of the verses and parroted phrases spiritualized the gendered rules and system. For example, women in the UPC are expected to have long, uncut hair. Participants referred to a specific verse in Corinthians when describing how they used to understand and explain this rule. The passage in I Corinthians 11 refers to a woman's hair as her glory. It states that a woman should not pray with her head uncovered because doing so is the same as shaving her head, which is considered a shame. It then states that women should have this power on their head because of the angels. The UPC interprets this controversial and culturally-based passage to mean that it is shameful for women to cut or trim their hair in any way (Manual, 2004; Haney, 1999).

Every participant referred to this passage when describing how they had explained the rules while keeping them. Brittany remarked, "I don't know what that means, but that's just what people would tell me, so I would use that scripture." Jill explained that by keeping their hair uncut, women demonstrated their submission to their husband. Since uncut hair is a symbol of submission, then cutting the hair is seen as a symbol of rebellion. This narrative created a system that condemns anyone who does not obey. As described in the previous chapter, the standards for dress were generally not taught as a heaven or hell issue, but since disobeying them was described as rebellion,

anyone who disobeyed was rebellious and therefore sinning and rejecting God. This teaching was reinforced by the cultural narrative of spiritual power.

Many UPC members believe and teach that women have a special level of spiritual power when they have uncut hair based on the phrase, "power with the angels" in the Corinthians passage. Amanda referenced the UPC book, *Power Before the Throne,* by Ruth Harvey (2006) as the reason she thought she had "some kind of special power" through her uncut hair. Harvey (2006) wrote that angels will respond to the prayers of a woman who does not cut her hair, and she can ensure special protection for herself and her family through that symbol of obedience. Morgan and Melissa both mentioned the narrative of a woman who laid her uncut hair over her sick husband, and God healed him. Although both women were questioning the explanations for standards, the spiritualization of these stories led Melissa to adopt them.

Participants felt empowered and attracted by this idea of special power resulting from obedience to the rules. Participants often referred to choosing a lifestyle that demonstrated their love for God and commitment to serve. Even part-in participants tended to repeat this phrasing referencing a deeper level of commitment to God. Most believed that their sacrifice and obedience brought them closer to God and often assumed that anyone not making this lifestyle choice had not matured to a deeper level in their relationship with God. Amanda and Emily both described this with the phrase "separate from the world." Melissa referred to it as a "higher level of discipleship."

Fear. At the same time, these cultural narratives encouraged a climate of fear. The shared cultural narrative defined living by the rules as a demonstration of love for God. But Jasmine pointed out that "you do it because you don't want to go to hell." Keeping the standards was so wrapped up in the language of commitment to God, that

both Sally and Taylor remembered a fear of not pleasing God as their main motivation for following the standards. Sally explained, "I really didn't want to go to hell."

The flip side of the spiritualized narrative justifying uncut hair was one of fear. Participants remembered shared stories of women who had cut their hair and then had lost their marriage because their husband "fell into adultery." This "fall" was attributed to the wife lifting the veil of angelic protection from her home by cutting her hair. Melissa referred to one such sermon as a reason she began keeping the standards after joining a UPC church. She was newly married and did not want her marriage to fall apart. When she first considered cutting her hair, Amanda worried that by doing so she would "put a curse on [her] family."

Similarly, God's action or inaction was often attributed to the effort of individuals who were praying. When Amanda's son was not healed of autism, people indicated that she and her husband must not be praying enough or doing enough or he would have been healed.

Several participants pointed out that women were held responsible for the purity of men. Wearing pants or seductive clothing would not only be immodest, but would entice men to lust. In this way, women would be causing their Christian brothers to sin. Melissa and I had both heard UPC ministers preach that pants point to a woman's vaginal area and are therefore lust-inducing. Because of these narratives, participants feared they would hinder God or others if they did not live the standards. Each church and pastor in the UPC can enforce the general guidelines for dress with differing definitions for modesty. The focus group discussed how this license for interpretation meant that at the church level, rules usually included extra guidelines for length of skirts and sleeves, depth of necklines, and acceptability of slits in skirts. Specific rules sometimes included

prohibiting wedding rings and requiring panty hose. They laughed when remembering that the first question about any new pastor was always, "how strict is he?"

All the participants shared a sense of never living up to the many expectations. Susan said, "there was never really any confidence. You didn't ever feel good enough." This caused some to live in a constant state of fear and questioning if they would go to heaven or be lost. Amanda stated, "you constantly feel like you've failed God." Sally never believed that she was "going to make it." In order to be pleasing to God, women had to look the part. By adhering to the dress code, women demonstrated their love and commitment to God. Accordingly, to question these rules was not encouraged or even allowed because it indicated a lack of love for God. Amanda felt that the culture "set you up for failure" because even "wanting those things is wrong." Anyone who questioned the standards was rebelling. Melissa felt that the system "stripped away your critical thinking." These narratives and parroted phrases created a climate where obedience was the only option for salvation, power, and protection, and where questions and mistakes were grounds for judgment.

Blind Obedience and Outward Display

Because the gendered rules and system were explained and justified through mysticism and fear-based narratives, women who wanted to belong in the UPC had to visibly obey these rules. Participants mentioned an often repeated phrase from the Old Testament, that "obedience is better than sacrifice." Since questions were not acceptable any time after the initial period of conversion, obedience was seen as the only option. Sally remembered, "I was really good at just doing what I was told." Both participants who were all-in and those who were part-in described their decision to follow the rules as

one of obedience. Participants who were all-in believed the cultural narratives of fear and mysticism and chose to obey because of that belief. Taylor felt that she was responsible to keep the rules because she had been taught them, and Paula just accepted them because she believed it was truth. Brittany described the faith culture as: "these are our rules. Let's follow these rules. Let's make sure that everyone else is following these rules. Don't just worry about yourself. Worry about everyone else and their lives." Faith involved both obeying the rules and ensuring that others were as well.

Since one of the main explanations for following the gendered rules centered on demonstrating love and commitment to God, church leaders and members usually assumed that anyone not obeying the rules was not committed to God. So if a woman came to church, but did not follow the standards, she was not able to be a member or to hold a position in the church. Melissa described this as being a "second-class citizen." Participants who were part-in never accepted or understood the explanations and cultural narratives, but chose to outwardly obey in order to fit in the church environment. Most attributed their obedience to the social pressure caused by this assumption that anyone not obeying the rules was not committed. They wanted to be involved in church activities and be seen as committed to God and therefore chose to obey. Amanda remembered thinking, "I'm just going to follow these standards, even though I don't believe in them." She saw it as playing by the "team rules." Morgan decided to "just do what [she] was supposed to do."

While all of the participants chose this path of blind obedience, many of them acknowledged that it was an outward façade rather than an inward identity. The majority, if not all, of the gendered rules were visible to others. And a woman's commitment to God was judged based on those visible rules. Brittany explained that if you visibly broke

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a rule you would "get in trouble." All of the participants shared a sense of being consumed with appearances rather than character. Jasmine explained that you could "still look the part" even while involved in unchristian living. It was all superficial. Brittany agreed that conversations about church always revolved around physical appearance and the standards. While in a UPC Bible school, Amanda realized the boys considered girls with hair down to their ankles the "most holy, the most beautiful women of God." Although the rule was specific to hair being uncut, these students judged women's holiness based on the length of their hair.

Particularly for those participants who were part-in, this focus on outward appearances created a climate of partial obedience. They could trim their hair, but still look like they were following the rules by putting it up and keeping it discreet. Jasmine remarked that she was "always trimming" her hair, just not giving herself an obvious haircut. Or they could wear pants if they did not wear them in places where they would meet fellow church members. Brittany described it as "living two different lives," because she could wear pants around some people, but not others. Amanda made the same point, referring to "living a double life." Morgan felt like most women were only partially and outwardly obeying the rules, and she only fully followed them while serving in a ministry position. At that point she felt that it was a way to grow in ministry and be obedient. On the other hand, Emily was hurt when she realized that many of her friends were not actually following the standards. She was all-in and thought that her friends were with her due to their outward display.

Reconstructed Narratives

As participants went through the sensemaking process, they rejected the parroted phrases and cultural explanations of the gendered system. While in the UPC, participants accepted their role and lifestyle. Those who were all-in believed they were pleasing God through their lifestyle and believed obeying the standards of holiness and modesty was beautiful. Although those who were part-in did not necessarily agree with all of the cultural narratives, they believed that God honored their obedience. Rejecting the parroted phrases and cultural explanations that no longer made sense forced the participants to reframe their cultural narratives and discursive practices. Three reconstructed narratives emerged from the data: participants described that faith system as 1) misogynistic, 2) limiting, and 3) embarrassing.

Misogyny. Since leaving the UPC all the participants now recognized the gendered system as misogynistic. Melissa remembered a number of instances when men refused to follow her directions although she was serving in a leadership role. She would often ask her husband to relay a request because others did not question him. Although some participants did not experience sex-based limitations to the same degree, they recognized and acknowledged the existence of female oppression in the system. Jasmine, for example, had a strong mother and a father who empowered her as a woman, but recognized the cultural ideal that women should be submissive, while men should lead. She mentioned that women were "definitely not taken as serious as men." Amanda noted that "you're expected to kind of walk two steps behind your husband." Because she did not embrace the standards and questioned them, people would often tell her husband he needed to "get control of his wife."

The double standard evident in the application of standards to males and females frustrated everyone both before and after leaving the organization. Paula remembered being angry that she was born a female. She did not struggle with gender identity, but felt that she would be missing out on opportunities and not able to achieve all she wanted because of the expectations for women. The women carried the weight of the standards, while men only had one or two non-restrictive rules. In the focus group, the women discussed how even those rules had been changed or removed through the years if men decided they wanted to, for example, grow a beard.

Growing up in the system, many participants equated this double standard with a restricted role for women. Paula felt that the women she observed in the church were "so boring," because they could not do anything. Jill agreed that they had few opportunities. Melissa and Jasmine described this system as a way of controlling women, although they did not recognize that while in the organization. Morgan and Amanda both referred to this lack of recognition as being "blinded by the system." Morgan compared it to an experience with post-partum depression that she did not recognize until it lifted. In the same way, while in the gendered UPC system, the participants shared similar experiences of not recognizing the issues that since leaving they see so clearly.

Although the UPC affirmed women in ministry, most participants explained that in practice women rarely served in ministry positions and then usually only in women's ministries. Melissa pointed out that women could teach at a women's conference, but rarely anywhere else. Amanda felt that "women obviously don't have a voice." She remembered conversations where friends in the UPC expressed incredulity that a woman could be a pastor. In my own journal entries and emails, I detailed my experiences while majoring in theology at a UPC Bible school. Women rarely studied theology and almost

never labeled themselves as a preacher. As a young woman studying theology who wanted to preach, I felt like I stood out like a sore thumb. I was the only girl in most of my classes.

Paula argued that one of the only roles for women in ministry was to marry a preacher and be a pastor's wife. The focus group participants agreed that even that role was severely restricted for women. Usually the pastor's wife had no career outside the church and had a limited sphere of influence in the church. She would become the enforcer of the standards, letting women know if their skirt was too short or their slit too high. Outside of that enforcer role, she could and should play the piano and sing, and/or be involved in Sunday School teaching children. Amanda said, "if you're on a platform, it's as a singer or as a musician. It's certainly not as a female preacher."

Because of this climate, marriage became the main avenue for service and position for women in the UPC. Beginning at age 18, I started writing in my journals about my desire to get married soon. Within the first two weeks of a new dating relationship, I would be wondering if my boyfriend was a possible marriage partner based on whether he wanted to be a preacher and if our ministries would be compatible. At the same time, I was frustrated that my best friend was so wrapped up in pleasing her new boyfriend that she had no time for anyone else. Church leaders reinforced these marriage-seeking patterns by telling me that my strengths and talents would be a blessing to my future husband in ministry. Paula, who later became a pastor's wife, never wanted to follow that route because she saw it as the only viable option for a woman in the UPC and refused to conform to that mold. All her friends wanted to marry a preacher because it was expected.

Limitations. While marriage was often seen as the only viable and expected role for women, the culture demanded that women only marry within the UPC. Several participants agreed that the UPC culture dictated who they would marry because their choice was limited to their church. When Amanda met someone outside of the UPC, he had to join the church and go through the three-step salvation process before they could date. Although many have since built strong marriage relationships, two women experienced early divorces. Both women now recognized that they would never have married that individual if they had a choice outside their home church. This recognition of the limitations placed on women and how those limitations ultimately affected them emerged as a major theme in all the interviews and the focus group. All the participants experienced these limits to their opportunities, but those who grew up in families with stricter limitations experienced more negative consequences.

All-in participants pointed to a restriction on sports and physical activity as one of their major limitations. Most of the participants who grew up in strict families in the UPC could not participate in sports. Amanda quoted her mother saying that sports were not lady-like and were difficult to do modestly in a skirt. She was told, "sports are more for boys." Although not everyone was interested in sports, participants who were restricted from playing described that as further isolating them from their social environment and other kids in school. Brittany remembered missing skating events and pool parties while in school because it was too awkward to participate in a skirt. Two of the women who converted to the UPC as adults mentioned the limits on physical activity due to wearing a skirt at all times. Melissa wondered if that limitation on her formerly active lifestyle contributed to the weight she gained at the time. Taylor and Susan both remarked that

they still do not know how to swim and are uncomfortable in the water because swimming was such a foreign thing for them growing up.

Many of the participants who had a part-in experience growing up participated in sports. Both Jasmine and Morgan wore a skirt and just put shorts underneath it. Although I was all-in and strictly followed the rules of dress, I was allowed more freedom as a young adult than many of the women who came from all-in families. Similar to Jasmine and Morgan, I ran track for several years in high school with shorts on under a skirt. That involvement in sports seemed to mitigate some of the regret, anger, and isolation that others experienced. All of the women who were given more latitude to be involved in activities such as sports used fewer negative words and descriptions of their experiences in the UPC than those who experienced stricter limitations.

The participants had all achieved varying levels of education from high school on up to a Master's degree. Other than the two participants who went on to a graduate program, most of the participants touched on the effect of the UPC expectations on their education. In the focus group, the women discussed going to a Christian school versus a public school. Several participants in the group and the interviews mentioned attending a Christian school. They attended because it kept them "separate from the world," but described the education as inadequate. Taylor, Sally, and Brittany all referred to their school as a joke. Paula felt that it was a way to hide from the world and so attended public school, but struggled to fit in. She was never part of the group at school because of her lifestyle and never part of the group at church because she did not attend the Christian school with them.

At least six participants commented that their parents did not discuss higher education options with them. Although some women wondered if this was due to the

culture of their area rather than the UPC, they all acknowledged that education was not emphasized. Jasmine went to a UPC Bible school because she had "zero direction". She explained that education was not emphasized because "the more you know, the more sin you're going to be exposed to." Melissa converted to the UPC as a college student and went on to finish her bachelor's degree. In her interview, she pointed out that her focus on a secular education was rare in UPC circles. Most young women either did not attend college or went to a UPC sanctioned Bible school. Her peers in the UPC were discussing having babies and decorating their homes. The two participants who earned a master's degree pointed to their family as a driving motivation in seeking an education. My family similarly valued education, which motivated me to pursue higher education after initially attending a Bible school.

Participants realized that the most common outcome of these limitations was a sense of isolation. Amanda, Susan and Paula all wondered how much the isolation they experienced due to their lifestyle affected their personality and ability to make friends even as adults. Each had struggled with making friends growing up because of their lifestyle. Amanda referred to this as being separate and remembered being misunderstood by other students. She never learned to make friends with anyone outside her church circle. Participants not only felt awkward and embarrassed by their outward appearance, but also felt hindered by their inability to take part in many activities. Most had few friends outside of church as a result. Only two participants, Jasmine and Morgan, did not experience this sense of isolation and difficulty making friends, and both attributed their self-confidence and ability to connect to an empowering relationship with their father.

Participants referenced a lack of confidence and self-esteem as the second main outcome resulting from the both the limitations and the isolation. Most of the participants

mentioned how the lifestyle and limitations, together with the sense of isolation, affected their self-esteem and confidence. Some of the participants described this effect as minimal, while others described it as more detrimental. All but one participant felt embarrassment at some point due to their dress or appearance. Most participants remembered how these feelings diminished their sense of confidence and self-worth. The two part-in participants who specifically stated that the lifestyle did not hurt their self-esteem, beyond an occasional sense of embarrassment, pointed to an empowering relationship with their father as the root of their self-confidence. For other participants, the dress code meant they never felt attractive. And for many, the isolation caused them to lack confidence.

Embarrassing. As they described the language used to teach and justify the gendered system in the UPC, many participants would stop mid-sentence to say, "it's so embarrassing. I'm so embarrassed." Others would say, "it's so stupid" or "it's just crazy." These epitaphs were continually repeated when the discussion returned to the cultural narratives. While discussing the climate of fear, Jasmine referred to "all these crazy rules." Amanda described the sense of never living up to expectations if you broke a simple rule or "something ridiculous." Later in the interview, when remembering the assumption that women with ankle-length hair were in some way more holy, she jumped in with, "that is so dumb. That's so stupid." Each now felt and expressed a sense of embarrassment and disbelief that they had once accepted and even believed these explanations. Stories that were once empowering, they now described as crazy. Melissa called it a "warped mind-set," saying that at the time she "didn't know any better." When referring specifically to the spiritualized narratives concerning hair she stated: "Like, it's so dumb to talk about it. Cause it's like, yes, my hair will do miracles. It's not the Holy

Spirit and it's not Jesus, it is the fact that my hair has a bunch of split ends and that's going to save somebody." While those who were all-in experienced more embarrassment over past belief than those who were part-in, all expressed these sentiments to some degree.

Discussion

In this section, I analyzed the data to answer the second research question: How does that rejection of the gendered system affect how the women speak about it? Based on Hymes' (1962) traditional ethnographic method, I focused on the shared discursive practices of the faith culture as a speech community. I sought to understand and explicate the norms of communication in the UPC focusing specifically on speech acts relating to rules and expectations for women. Through this framework, I compared the shared cultural narrative of the UPC with the narratives constructed by the women who chose to leave.

As a former UPC member, I interpreted the data through the lens of my own experience with and understanding of the UPC culture and discursive practices. As a speech community, members of the UPC culture share a set of rules for communicating and interpreting communication that is unique to that culture (Carbaugh, 2007). When asked to describe situations when they or others would discuss gendered rules, participants remembered shared cultural narratives, communicated in social gatherings, using *en vivo* language. I did not have to question or define this shared language because of my own background in the culture. The most commonly used terms relating to the gendered system include:

- *standards* – the dress code

- *holiness* – living in obedience to all the rules

- *the world* – any system or practice that is not based in UPC morals, values, and beliefs

- *worldly* – living like people who follow secular or non-UPC value systems

- *separation* – not looking like or living like worldly people

- *truth* – the Biblical interpretation of theology held by the UPC as opposed to mainstream Christian or secular beliefs

The cultural narratives shared in religious meetings and times of socializing within the church community served to teach, indoctrinate, and reinforce acceptance of the gendered system. These narratives were most often shared by other women while discussing standards with the intended goal of encouraging acceptance and obedience. Occasionally male ministers would preach public sermons based in these explanations and narratives, or women in ministry would extoll the benefits of living in holiness at women's meetings. The participants all remembered the same narratives, stories, and phrases because these narratives are continually repeated throughout the organization, both in oral retelling and in written literature. Through these shared narratives, the gendered system is spiritualized and described as empowering for women. The shared language and discursive practices create and recreate the gendered system.

Through social discourse in the process of sensemaking (Weick, 1995), participants redefined these narratives as stupid, crazy, and embarrassing. Rather than describing the system as empowering for women, participants now describe it as oppressive, limiting, controlling, and isolating. Although the participants reverted to the shared speech code of the UPC community when describing the cultural narratives, most

veered away from those terms and the shared interpretations in other parts of the interview. Participants still used words like truth, standards, and holiness, but no longer defined them according to the UPC norms. What they would have called holiness, they now refer to as superficial and consumed with self and appearances. In reconstructing the narrative, participants have redefined the words that once held a shared meaning. This redefinition illustrates the role of language and communication in the process of sensemaking and leave-taking.

IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

When critical incidents sparked questions concerning cultural narratives that no longer made sense, each of the participants rejected the narratives and constructed new narratives and definitions to make sense of their leave-taking experience. This reconstruction facilitated new identity construction as women of faith. The cultural narratives of the UPC defined a woman of faith as one who obeyed the rules, looked the part, and quietly submitted to the gendered system. In rejecting this definition, the participants redefined their identity. Three themes of identity construction emerged from the data: 1) a woman of faith values relationships over rules; 2) a woman of faith embraces difference and uncertainty; and 3) a woman of faith lives in freedom.

Relationships

Participants once evaluated their identity based on their obedience to the rules and never felt like they were measuring up to that ideal. The system they lived in resulted in fear, isolation, depression, and anger. As each woman rejected that cultural narrative of pleasing God through blind obedience, they redefined faith as relationship. Every participant agreed that an identity of faith is one of relationship with God and relationship with others.

Relationship with God. Relationships are built on communication, trust, and connection. While in the UPC, participants based their walk with God on following a set of rules and focused on those rules rather than on communication to build their faith. Susan described this focus on rules as being "almost like I was saving myself by following all these rules." When living by rules, they often struggled with fear and a

sense of failure. Amanda described it as "constantly trying to live up to a standard that's unattainable." Rejecting the cultural narrative of blind obedience allowed the participants to focus on trust and communication. Where once they lived in fear of going to hell, now they walk in grace, trusting that their relationship with God is not based on doing things the right way. Susan stated, "it kind of took away that safety net, so to speak, and forced me to really put my trust only in Jesus." Jill described the dress code as a "religious cloak" and leaving it behind left "just [her] and God." By removing the cloak of outward appearance, Jasmine felt that the relationship became more honest rather than surface level. For me, that honesty facilitated personal growth and change, as well as a sense of "consistency and stability."

Relationships do not crumble when someone makes a mistake if there is mutual respect and trust. In the same way, the participants now believe that they do not have to be perfect or measure up to some invisible mark to please God. Morgan stated, "well, if you love God, you know, hey, you're not perfect…here I am, just as I am, accepting grace." Amanda realized that even though she grew up attending church, she "never really had a relationship with [God] until [she] left the UPC." Participants now believe that they are saved through connection, communication, and trust in God. Taylor pointed out that in the Bible serving God is compared to both a father-child relationship and a husband-wife relationship. She described those relationships as the most "genuine relationships we have on earth." Those relationships are not based on outward appearance or what a person is wearing. She questioned, "how shallow would we think God is to care what we're wearing?" For Jasmine that focus on relationship rather than outward appearance changed her identity of faith. She explained, "I love the saying, 'I'm not

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religious, I'm in a relationship' because for 33 years of my life I was religious." She

described her current faith as a "constant conversation with God."

Relationship with Others. As detailed in the previous chapter, participants

experienced a sense of isolation as a result of their rule-driven life. Participants now

value encouraging and supportive relationships with others, both in their church network

and outside it. They described the cultural environment of the UPC as one of judgment

based on obedience to the rules. As detailed in the section on blind obedience, a woman's

obedience to the rules is outwardly visible. And it is each person's responsibility to not

only visibly obey the rules, but to also, observe and correct those who are not obeying the

rules. Brittany explained that there would always be immediate backlash if anyone

visibly broke a rule.

Although many of the participants remembered obeying without a spirit of

judgment, Sally explained that the lifestyle itself set them up as judgmental. It was hard

to ignore someone breaking the rules. For some participants this caused toxic

environments where nothing they did was enough. Morgan described her relationships

while in the UPC as more "acquaintances than friends – there was no closeness there."

Even when participants kept all the rules, people would sometimes condemn them.

Because Morgan experienced this toxic environment first hand, she has now found a faith

community that is loving and supportive. She explained that with the people she and her

husband "surround [themselves] and have accountability with, it's all about families, all

about encouragement." Participants now value building relationships that are supportive,

honest, and encouraging.

Amanda compared her life of faith in the UPC to her faith now: "I was doing

things, especially in church, because they were expected of me and not really because I

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wanted to, had a desire to, or had a passion to. But I feel like now, I really do want to do these things. … I really want to make those connections with people." Although many still struggle with connecting after years of isolation, they are now learning how to build friendships outside their church social circle. Emily described learning to relate to others as "crossing this wall" that used to separate her from others. Susan remembered that "it was just hard to make friendships outside of the church at all because nobody could relate to you and, um, you just felt so different." Paula also commented on this difficulty to connect because she felt so different: "I didn't try to fit in. I didn't try to have friends…I just existed separate from that." Much of this difficulty in building friendships outside the church resulted from the homogenous culture of the UPC.

Difference and Uncertainty

In the UPC, difference of any kind was not welcome or accepted. This intolerance for difference extended in many directions including doctrine, lifestyle, appearance, and behavior. The expected uniformity was seen in the climate of control and suppressing questions, as well as, in the dress code and style. Everything was black and white. There were rules and everyone was supposed to follow them. Participants all referenced this intolerance for difference and their rejection of it in some way. They now believe that a woman of faith embraces difference and uncertainty.

Difference. Through the critical incident involving her son, described in the section on sensemaking, Amanda realized that difference did not have a place at the UPC church she attended. The fact that her son had autism made people uncomfortable. They assumed that God should heal him because he was not "perfect" and felt that it must somehow be her fault that God had not responded as expected. Melissa experienced a

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similar sense of judgment because of her interracial marriage. In describing her experience, she stated, "they tolerated black people, but they were not ok with interracial marriage and interracial relationships."

All the participants described having groups of friends where everyone looked alike, dressed alike, and believed all the same things. Susan expressed some nostalgia for the sense of unity and belonging when in such a homogenous group. At the same time, she recognized that it caused them to be self-absorbed and isolated from others. In the focus group the women joked about finding a jean skirt for sale and everyone in the church getting that same skirt. Because of the dress code, the UPC had a uniform style unique to the culture. The style and dress code together made any group of UPC women look the same. Brittany pointed out that "a new person sticks out like a sore thumb … you never feel welcome."

Sally, Susan, and Taylor all indicated that they were only really friends with people in church. Emily also talked about having friends in church, but never learning how to connect with anyone outside of the church. If someone didn't look right, the only goal for connecting with them was to convert them. Susan remembered an instance when her brother was dating a girl from another Christian denomination. The girlfriend was a committed Christian, but because she did not look like a UPC girl, a visiting preacher told her she was not saved and tried to "pray her through." In another example, Brittany shared a story of preparing a skit with their young people for a convention only to be told that they could not participate because a number of the young people were not from church families and were not dressed according to the dress code.

For all-in participants whose circle of friends and family mainly included fellow UPC members, their decision to leave the UPC resulted in virtual shunning because of

this intolerance for difference. Most have managed to maintain their family relationships, albeit with less connection and closeness, but friendships have disappeared. Friends who acknowledged participants as best friends have since shunned them for leaving. Sally said, "it's like you dropped off the face of the earth." Paula pointed out that former friends have even unfriended her on Facebook as though she were "such a threat or such a betrayal that they couldn't even bear to look." Most of the part-in participants did not experience the same loss of relationships due to leaving. This difference could possibly be attributed to the tendency to form close friendships with like-minded people.

All the participants discussed the distinction made between "truth" as taught by the UPC and mainstream Christian doctrine. This distinction often led to a rejection of all other Christians and a diminishing of their faith and relationship with God. Melissa described how that attitude affected her in college when she wanted to be involved in campus ministries. Because she was in the UPC, she had to start something new rather than join in with other Christians in already established ministries. She felt isolated from even the Christians on campus. In keeping with the restrictions on questioning doctrine, Jasmine remembered feeling like she had to fight for her beliefs in any conversation. She could not have a dialogue between Christians with different viewpoints. Participants explained that this culture limited the gospel because they wrapped it in so many layers of rules and restrictions. Taylor felt frustrated that people could not go at their own pace in their journey of faith.

Participants identified this rejection of the homogenous culture as one of the most impacting and difficult identity changes they made. Each agreed that faith is no longer about looking alike. All the participants now welcome friendships and connections with people from many different lifestyles and beliefs. Most of the participants attend

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churches that are considered non-denominational and describe their church culture as one of inclusion and diversity. Brittany loves the fact that "literally anyone can come" to the church she attends. She used to be embarrassed to invite people to church and now feels like she can "invite anyone and not feel awkward." Jasmine related her experiences in a small group with members from many different denominational backgrounds. She has open discussions about beliefs with group members who do not agree with her, and they maintain their friendship. She stated, "my faith should be strong enough that I can hear other opinions."

While most of the participants have not changed their core Christian beliefs, they now value loving people and building relationships over convincing others to conform. Morgan mentioned a conversation in which her sister, who is still in the UPC, indicated she would be uncomfortable sitting beside someone who lives an alternative lifestyle in church. Morgan laughed and said, "we have couples in our church that live an alternative lifestyle….they're sitting down the row next to me." She now embraces a church environment where no one looks the same. Brittany pointed out how much she loves attending a church where everyone is so different from one another. Conversations that used to center around appearances now focus on what God is doing and how people are growing in faith. Participants explained that this change in church culture was harder to adapt to than any of the personal lifestyle changes they made, but they value it more than any other change. In the focus group, Sally, Taylor, Paula, and Jill all commented that although they are thankful not to have to follow the dress code anymore, they could have continued if they believed it was necessary. On the other hand, they consider attending a church that welcomes everyone and living a faith that they can freely share without judgment as the true gospel.

Uncertainty. The homogenous environment of the UPC created a climate where beliefs were uniform, set in stone, and non-debatable. The scriptural interpretations of the UPC were the only truth, but if you followed those guidelines to the letter, then you could be completely certain that you were saved and right with God. Melissa explained, "we thought we were the only people, we had a monopoly on the truth." Although several participants admitted to a feeling of nostalgia for that sense of certainty, everyone agreed that they would not go back to it. Emily explained, "believing a lie and feeling safe in it is worse than, you know, knowing the truth and feeling insecure." While it was nice to feel certain, they now realize that it was a false sense of security and certainty. Jasmine explained that she has learned that it is ok to be wrong and try to figure things out.

This understanding led the participants to embrace uncertainty and questioning as a part of their identity as a woman of faith. Emily felt that "if you don't have questions…you're not going to seek, and I think God wants us to seek." Where once they did not feel free to question doctrine or Biblical interpretation, all the women now actively question, study, and seek for understanding. Paula stated that the transition "made [her] want to ask every question imaginable and want to know it for myself and believe everything for myself." Participants feel empowered to voice their ideas and discuss scripture with family and friends. Amanda voiced how this realization that she can question things has given her the confidence to discuss the Bible with her husband and not simply defer to him.

Particularly for the all-in participants, the process of completely reevaluating their faith left them with more uncertainty than those who were part-in. The part-in group equally values questioning and seeking answers for themselves, but did not voice as much uncertainty. Through the sensemaking process they did not have to reevaluate their

entire belief system since they had not fully bought into the cultural narrative. Melissa pointed out that it was easier for her to separate her faith from the gendered system because her faith was not connected to that system. For those women who were all-in, that separation was more difficult, leading to more uncertainty. But they have learned that being certain does not always mean that you are right.

For a long time, Paula struggled with wanting to know every answer before coming to the conclusion that it is a "faith walk." She said, "I just got to the place where I said, God, you know, I'm going to keep trusting you because even after studying this, I realized that even among Christian theologians everyone has a slightly different take on that. And it's all a faith walk whether you understand it completely or you understand it hardly at all." This quote from Paula is now how each of the participants views their walk with God. It is one of faith. Emily also expressed the wish that "[she] had more answers," but has decided to walk in faith and trust that God will "work the rest out." Through the uncertainty and questioning each participant ultimately chose to walk in the freedom of faith.

Freedom

After years of following rules, feeling like they could never measure up to the ideal, and then struggling to make sense of their leave-taking, each participant now describes her life and faith as one of freedom. At some point in their interview or focus group, most of the participants voiced the realization that they no longer even think about standards, the gendered system of the UPC, or their experiences in leaving. They related this sense of freedom both to their everyday lifestyle and their faith.

Lifestyle. In describing their lifestyle changes, participants mainly pointed to the comfort and ease of not having to live by an arcane dress code. They repeated words like comfortable and relaxing. Susan said, "it just feels really normal now." Taylor referred to the "liberty to throw on a pair of sweats" and run to the store or to work out without getting dressed up. Sally responded to this comment in the focus group with the addition, "and comb and pile up your hair." Any outing used to include an appropriately UPC outfit and hairdo. Now they can wear what is convenient for the occasion, comfortable to wear, and readily available to buy. Jill specifically referenced how much she appreciates being able to wear comfortable shoes. Only certain shoes look decent with a skirt, which limited her choice before. Now she can wear any shoes she wants.

More than just the comfort of wearing appropriate attire for the activity, participants valued the freedom from judgment based on their clothing. Paula commented, "I feel very much more liberty." Participants no longer feel the need to look the part or focus on their outward appearance. They can just be who they are. Brittany just stated, "I love it…this is so good." Jill explained that it is "such a good feeling" that she is the first person to seek clarification if her employer mentions a dress code of any kind. Paula affirmed that statement when she said, "I value that freedom, and I feel like I'd be very hesitant to put myself in a spot with anyone or anything that limited my freedom." For most of the women, this freedom to be themselves has increased their confidence.

Faith and Confidence. The cultural narratives of fear and mysticism described in the previous chapter led most participants to feel they could never be good enough or do enough to please God. Through the ongoing sensemaking process, the participants have all left behind this climate of fear and judgment. As I read through past journal entries, I

was amazed at the roller coaster of condemnation and self-judgment evident in my writing while in the UPC. When I mentioned this discovery in the focus group, Paula immediately responded that her journal entries read the same. Reading those past entries made me realize how much leaving the UPC has changed my life and my confidence. Jill agreed that, "there's no condemnation." In a more recent entry, I labeled this freedom from condemnation as a "sense of peace deep down in my soul."

Referring to her own change, Amanda said, "I can stand confident in who I am. I can stand confident in what I know. This confidence has helped her "find [her] place in the church" where she can use her talents and passions. She does not have to make herself fit into an expected mold. She can pray and be confident that God will hear instead of fearing that she "hadn't done enough to be worthy." Brittany also referenced confidence in prayer. She had never felt confident enough to pray with someone who asked for prayer because she might not say the right thing. But now she said, "I just feel like I can." Morgan described it as "just more confidence in [God]." Jasmine finds confidence in the fact that her belief is now based on personal study rather than parroted phrases and narratives.

The women in the focus group agreed that their faith and confidence are in the love and grace of God. Sally spent her whole life feeling like she was "never going to make it to heaven." She explained that she is thankful not only that she no longer has to walk in that fear and condemnation, but also that her children will never have to see God in that light. Taylor agreed that she "always felt guilty," and Susan pointed out that there "was never any confidence – you didn't ever feel good enough." Understanding God's grace helped her feel "more secure." Brittany pointed to confidence as the "biggest feeling" she experienced after leaving the UPC.

Through this faith and confidence, Amanda recognized, "I am valid and appreciated and respected. I don't think that I always felt that way before." Susan and Brittany both remembered never feeling attractive. Many of the participants experienced similar experiences with low self-esteem. In an interesting paradox, the UPC narrative told women that it was vain to think about their appearance and yet fostered a climate where a woman's identity was tied to her appearance. In leaving that system, participants expressed the freedom to be confident as women, but at the same time, to not judge their value based on appearance. Brittany explained, "[I] definitely feel more like a lady now." This change is helping participants who struggled with confidence and self-esteem gain a greater appreciation for who they are.

Discussion

In this chapter, I sought to answer the third research question: How have the altered speech norms and the sensemaking process facilitated identity-construction after leaving the organization? Through sensemaking and language redefinition, the participants in this study, reframed the identity they had been taught in the UPC. Weick (1995) wrote that identity construction is "the core preoccupation in sensemaking" (p. 20). The participants had been taught that a woman of faith obeys the rules, looks the part, and quietly submits to the gendered system. The cultural narratives of the UPC support obedience to the system by defining women who reject the rules as rebellious, sinful, and lost. The participants in this study made sense of leaving the UPC and the cultural narratives surrounding that action by reframing their identity as a woman of faith. They now define a woman of faith as one who 1) values relationships over rules; 2) embraces difference and uncertainty; and 3) lives in freedom.

As discussed in the chapter on sensemaking, each of the participants went through a long, slow process of sensemaking both before and after actually leaving the UPC. They left the UPC because of critical incidents that brought them to a moment of decision. But they continued to retrospectively make sense of that decision for many years after leaving (Sandberg & Haridimos, 2015; Weick, 1979). Participants in the interviews and focus group acknowledged that they continue to interpret their past experiences through the lens of current life circumstances and cues (Becker, 1997; Harter, Japp, & Beck, 2005). The identity construction discussed in this chapter did not happen overnight, or even within the first year of leaving the UPC.

In their study on formal sex-education, Bute and Jensen (2011) found that the lapse of time between an incident and the sensemaking process aids in sensemaking. The identity construction process in this study supports that claim. All the participants welcome difference and uncertainty as part of their identity as a woman of faith. However, most of the women did not articulate difference as a value initially. As mentioned in this chapter, most of the participants felt that adapting to a culture and identity that values difference was the hardest part of their transition. Participants value their freedom and the comfort that comes with that freedom. But the women all remembered frequently questioning that freedom and their lifestyle changes in the first year to two years after leaving the UPC. Participants began to value the identity themes outlined in this chapter after a period of time.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to explore how women who have left the UPC make sense of that leave-taking from a communication perspective. That communicative focus yielded a unique understanding of the role of language and narrative both in creating and sustaining the gendered system within the UPC and in the sensemaking and identity construction process.

As illustrated in the chapter on sensemaking, participants made sense of critical moments of questioning through a long process facilitated by social dialogue and language reconstruction. In the speech norms chapter, I further described that process of redefining language by explicating the language and narratives of the UPC and by detailing how participants redefined UPC narratives and shared meanings through the sensemaking process. Finally, in the chapter on identity construction, I detailed the language participants now use to describe faith and how that language both illustrates and facilitates their understanding of their own identity.

I approached this study from an emic perspective, as a former UPC member who chose to leave the organization, and allowed the findings to emerge inductively from the participant data. The dialogue in the focus group and interviews contributed to my own ongoing sensemaking process. I was familiar with all the narratives, and I recognized my own sensemaking process in the participants' stories. As participants mentioned the baby-step changes they made to their appearance and lifestyle, I recalled cutting my own hair for the first time. I only cut off about two inches, but I felt like I had taken a monumental step. I also remembered sitting in those "Tupperware parties," listening to the women talk about hair, clothes, babies, and decorating. Meanwhile I wanted nothing more than to go

join the men's conversation. Each emergent theme resonated with me as I realized that I too went through this same process and reconstructed my identity with these same values. Through the findings in this study, I clarified my understanding of my own journey and identity.

Implications

The findings in this paper contribute to our understanding both of faith cultures and gendered systems with a deeper understanding of the role language and narrative play in creating and recreating those systems. The parroted phrases and cultural narratives shared by participants in the chapter on language redefinition not only shaped their understanding of the faith system, these narratives also reinforced participants' belief in and obedience to that system. Further, the results illustrate the importance of language redefinition in leaving a gendered system and in reconstructing identity.

Mills (2002, 2005) explored gendered work spaces and discovered that employees made sense of non-discrimination policies through the company culture and enacted those policies in gendered ways due to that sensemaking process. This study builds on that sensemaking explanation of gendered organizations. The results outlined in this paper indicate that these gendered systems are created and recreated through language and narrative and that changing (leaving) those gendered spaces requires language redefinition. Communication scholars have a unique opportunity to further explore the impact of language and narrative in faith cultures and gendered systems. Faith-based organizations can use these findings to proactively create and maintain a culture of inclusion and grace through language and cultural narratives.

This study contributes a deeper understanding of the sensemaking process over a period of years. Individuals interpret past events through present experiences and environmental cues (Becker, 1997; Harter, Japp, & Beck, 2005). Bute and Jensen (2011) argued that this interpretation would thus be impacted by a lapse of time in the sensemaking process. In keeping with their argument and findings, the results of this study indicate that participants only fully redefined their identity after a lapse of five to 10 years. In the initial sensemaking process every participant experienced uncertainty, questioning, concern, and hesitation. Participants now value many of these qualities as part of their identity, but they only reached that interpretation several years after leaving the UPC through ongoing sensemaking.

The results also portray how women are individually affected in gendered faith systems. Although these qualitative results are in-depth and personal, rather than generalizable, they point to a possible correlation between a restricted, gendered environment and a woman's sense of self, confidence, and esteem. As many religious groups still maintain gendered systems established in previous decades or centuries, these results illuminate an issue that needs addressing. If such groups choose to restructure their system, they can potentially facilitate change through the ideas and themes that emerged in this study. For individual women who have experienced a gendered system, this data can support their sensemaking and identity construction process through the shared narratives of the participants.

Limitations

I initially planned to conduct this study as an ethnography. In the process, I realized that with my background, I could not feasibly attend a local church as a

participant observer for a period of time. Not only would I not be welcome as a researcher since I had rejected that lifestyle, I realized that emotionally I could not place myself back in that environment, even in a limited research capacity. Because of this limitation, I chose to use autoethnography as a means for presenting, interpreting, and commenting on the UPC culture. I viewed my journals and emails as retrospective field notes of an ethnographic study. Although this perspective allowed me to further explicate the UPC culture and compare the participants' sensemaking process with my own, it morphed into a self-reflexive qualitative analysis rather than a true autoethnography.

I attempted to adhere to my proposed ethnographic method in the focus group and interviews, but as the participants shared deep narratives and stories, I recognized the need to expand that method. I did not want to limit the results inductively emerging from the data by focusing on the SPEAKING mnemonic and excluding the narrative analysis. Based on these methodological modifications, I now describe the study as a multi-methodological qualitative analysis informed by ethnography and autoethnography, rather than as a classic ethnography.

Because of my shared cultural background, I understood participants' *en vivo* language, as well as, the shared leave-taking and language redefinition process. I interpreted participant language and narratives through the lens of my own experience. This interpretation is not so much a limitation of the study, as a self-reflexive analysis of my own connection with the participants and their stories. While it is possible that my own sensemaking process colored my analysis of the data, it is also possible that an outsider to that system would not have pulled deep narratives and connections from the participants. Participants freely discussed not only their experiences, but also their emotions, thoughts, and beliefs because of our shared background and understanding.

Due to the time constraints of this study and the snowball method for recruiting participants, half of the participants attended the same UPC church and left the UPC together with that church. Although this connection facilitated a natural discussion in the focus group between friends who went through the sensemaking process together, the shared history may have impacted the data. Because they all experienced leaving together with their church, their similar process of sensemaking may not relate to other women who left individually or with a different church. In this study, the major themes were shared by all the participants, both by this group of friends and the women from different locations and backgrounds. But a broader cross-section of backgrounds and participants could more clearly illustrate any thematic differences between women who leave together with a church and women who leave individually.

Future Research

The results of this study spark many questions for future research and analysis. During the interviews and focus group, several participants mentioned friends who share similar leave-taking experiences from different legalistic and gendered religious organizations. It would be beneficial to broaden the scope of this research outside of the UPC and explore leave-taking from any gendered or legalistic religious organization. It would also be interesting to expand the participant field to both sexes. Most of the participants in this study left the UPC together with their husband and family, which causes me to consider how the gendered, legalistic system affected the men, why they chose to leave, and what their sensemaking process has been. Have men who left the UPC or other such gendered religious organizations made sense of that decision with a

similar process of sensemaking and language redefinition? Has leave-taking been similar or different for individuals from differing ethnicities, backgrounds, or lifestyles?

Another possible avenue for further study, which would require quantitative analysis, emerged from the data. After realizing that the participants' sensemaking process was affected by their initial belief in and acceptance of the gendered system and the cultural narratives supporting it, I conducted the thematic analysis for the all-in and part-in groups both separately and together. This analysis allowed me to more fully explicate the major themes and how the interpretation or explanation of those themes differed between the two groups. Throughout the study, I detailed any differences that emerged from the data. During the thematic analysis, I realized that participants from the all-in group generated many more negative thematic categories than those from the part-in group. I noted one and a half times as many possible categories relating to negative experiences in the UPC for the all-in group. The data from both groups produced an equal number of positive categories relating to new identity construction. I detailed some of this finding in the section on sensemaking. Women from the all-in group used more emotionally charged language with negative connotations in reference to their experiences, such as anger, despair, and regret. To further explore this finding, researchers would need to both broaden the participant pool and conduct a quantitative analysis. They could then determine if there is a significant correlation between the extent of restrictions experienced in a gendered system and the negative emotional, psychological, and spiritual implications.

Although the majority of participants felt that their past experiences in a gendered system had negatively affected their self-esteem, two women did not experience a similar impact. They both attributed their self-confidence to an empowering relationship with

their father. This finding sparks another possible research question for quantitative analysis or possibly a mixed-method of quantitative and qualitative. How significant is a father's influence on daughters raised in gendered system? How much do family dynamics and father/daughter relationships mitigate gendered systems and experiences?

Summary

Many church organizations are grounded in gendered, legalistic traditions and cultures. The UPC is just one example of such an organization, which has taken that gendered, legalistic culture to a more extreme position. The eleven participants of this study demonstrate how these gendered systems negatively affect women and how the leave-taking process requires years of ongoing sensemaking and redefinition of shared language and cultural narratives. These participants likewise demonstrate the potential for positive change and identity reconstruction after this leave-taking process. These women all chose to reject a system that limited their voice and opportunities, but in that rejection, they chose to hold onto the positive experiences of faith. The implications of this study illustrate the need for further research exploring gendered, legalistic faith systems and the role of cultural narratives and language in creating, maintaining, and leaving these systems.

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APPENDIX

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Title: An Ethnographic Sensemaking Explanation of the Identity of Leave-taking

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