

# Post-secondary Education and Rural Women Enrolled in Liberal Arts Undergraduate Degrees

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## ABSTRACT

The significance of post-secondary education is investigated for rural Newfoundland women enrolled in undergraduate liberal arts degree programs. Data collection for this research involved comprehensive, detailed semi-structured biographical interviews with rural women studying liberal arts disciplines during the 2006–2007 academic year at Memorial University of Newfoundland. The data analyses drew on theories of experiential and embodied knowledge, social constructionist theories of gender and place, and research on women, rurality, and post-secondary education. The findings indicate that, overall, a liberal arts degree is a part of a search for a new home for the women interviewed. Images and experiences of life as women in rural Newfoundland act as forces that push and pull the women to and from their homes, with varying impact. Although the women were very pleased with their choice of a liberal arts major, for most this choice did not dominate the significance of enrolling in university.

## RÉSUMÉ

Cette recherche a étudié le degré d'importance de l'éducation postsecondaire pour les femmes de Terre-Neuve habitant en milieu rural et inscrites au premier cycle universitaire, dans des programmes d'arts libéraux. La collecte des données de cette recherche s'est faite au moyen d'entrevues biographiques

approfondies, détaillées et semi-structurées, réalisées avec des femmes en milieu rural ayant étudié différentes disciplines des arts libéraux à l'Université Memorial de Terre-Neuve, au cours de l'année académique 2006-2007. Pour analyser les données, les auteurs ont employé des théories de la connaissance expérientielle et incarnée, des théories portant sur la construction sociale selon le sexe et le lieu, de même que des recherches effectuées sur la femme, la ruralité et l'éducation postsecondaire. Les résultats obtenus chez les femmes interrogées indiquent que, en général, pour les femmes qui étudient en arts libéraux, l'obtention de leur diplôme fait partie de la quête d'un nouveau foyer. Les images et les expériences se rapportant à la vie des femmes de Terre-Neuve vivant en milieu rural agissent comme des forces qui, soit éloignent celles-ci de chez elles, soit les attirent vers leurs foyers, avec des répercussions plus ou moins variées. Bien que ces femmes fussent très satisfaites d'avoir choisi de faire une majeure en arts libéraux, pour la plupart d'entre elles ce choix n'a pas dominé l'importance de s'inscrire à l'université.

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In Canada, there is a persistent gap between the earnings, wealth, and employment levels of women and those of men (Canadian Labour Congress, n.d.; Cranford, Vosko, & Zukewich, 2006; Drolet, 2001; Fox & Fox, 1986; Hadley, 2001; McMullen, 2009 Statistics Canada, 2007). In the province of Newfoundland and Labrador, where family income is generally lower than the Canadian average, the situation is similar (Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, 2005). Earning a university degree is believed to contribute to narrowing these income and employment disparities<sup>1</sup> (Canadian Council on Learning, 2009; Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, 2005; Hadley, 2001). Further, the subject of study may also influence the income-earning capacity of individuals (Adamuti-Trache, Hawkey, Schuetze, & Glickman, 2006; Lin, Sweet, & Anisef, 2003). Earning a degree in male-dominated fields such as applied and computer sciences, business, or medicine may make a greater contribution to narrowing income gaps<sup>2</sup> (Statistics Canada, 2007). Supporting these ideas about education and its relationship to employment, public opinion sometimes suggests dissatisfaction with the ability of higher learning in general to deliver a desirable income, with liberal arts disciplines in particular perceived as garnering lower economic earnings after graduation (Bright, 2008; Fulford, 2007; Grynepas, 2006; Kondro, 2001; Morgan, 2008; Rubenstein, 1999, 2000).

Although additional factors may mediate the relationship between education and earnings, including employer preferences and geographic disparities in the labour market,<sup>3</sup> the aforementioned findings provided the basis for the range of research considering the relationship of gender and geography to educational attainment and course choice (e.g., Andres & Looker, 2001; Anisef, Sweet, Plickert, & Tom-Kun, 2003; Christie & Shannon, 2001; Gaskell, 1992; Looker, 1993). Taken together, such research explored the educational decision-making and planning of rural students and women (among other groups) to determine the barriers that hold back students educationally and, subsequently, economically. This body of research, too large to fully account for here, painted a complex picture of the factors coming together to shape students' pathways to post-secondary education. It was not simply the economic contribution of post-secondary education that was important to students in their decision-making. Social and cultural factors, includ-

ing parental levels of educational attainment, parental income and encouragement, and distance from post-secondary educational institutions, as well as individual characteristics such as gender, all affected university enrolment and course choice (see also Berger, Motte, & Parkin, 2009; Frenette, 2006; Junor & Usher, 2004; Looker 1993).

The current study was undertaken to explore the social and cultural significance of liberal arts undergraduate education<sup>4</sup> for rural women from the island portion of the province of Newfoundland and Labrador, and it took into account public perceptions, the income disparities between men and women and between rural and urban individuals in Canada (Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, 2005; Statistics Canada, n.d., 2002), the debates around the relationships between education and such inequalities, and research on the factors associated with university enrolment and course choice. The word *significance* here indicates the importance and meaning (Soanes, 2001) of post-secondary education, including both social relations<sup>5</sup> and culture.<sup>6</sup> Rather than exploring why more women do not make what appear to be more profitable post-secondary education choices, such as enrolling in engineering or sciences, this research sought to explore the needs and desires of those enrolled in liberal arts degrees in an economically marginalized region of Canada.

### **RURALITY, GENDER, AND POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION**

This study of rural women and post-secondary education is timely, given recent statistics showing that post-secondary enrolments in Newfoundland and Labrador have been increasing faster than the Canadian average (Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, 2005). Consistent with university enrolment of women across the country (Christofides, Hoy, & Yang, 2009), women constitute the majority of undergraduate university enrolments at Memorial University of Newfoundland (Hussey, 2007), and they continue to be a majority in the Faculty of Arts (Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, 2005; Hussey, 2007; Thorne & Hussey, 2006). Rural student enrolments in post-secondary education also appear to be increasing, particularly for women, who tend to choose university over other post-secondary education options (Kirby & Sharpe, 2008). Despite these enrolment trends, there is limited research about rural Newfoundland women's perceptions of and experiences with post-secondary education. And as Corbett (2007a) pointed out, few studies have attempted to explain why women leave rural communities at a higher rate, and are significantly more successful in formal education, when compared to their male counterparts.

Newfoundland-based research has primarily considered formal education as part of larger studies of gender and rurality (Davis, 1995) or in relation to Newfoundland culture (McCann, 1988). Other studies focused on students have compared the post-high school plans of rural and urban and/or female and male high school students or graduates (Genge, 1996; Pinhorn, 2002; Tucker, 1999; Whalen 2000). These studies explored the place of education in the lives of students in relation to career plans or post-high school plans generally (Darcy, 1987; Genge, 1996). Similarly, Canadian research has compared the educational attainments of rural and urban high school students (Looker, 2008; Looker & Dwyer, 1998) and explored the career and life development of rural women (Shepard, 2004). Thus, further research is needed that focuses on the specific experiences and perspectives of rural women in post-secondary education.

Out of the small body of research on rural women's lives in Newfoundland, a contradictory picture of the place of post-secondary education emerges. According to Davis (1993), young Newfoundland women "are more likely to value education than their male age-mates. Using education as their ticket out of the community, young women are more socially mobile" (p. 470). Corbett's (2007b) research on rural Nova Scotia supported this claim, noting that the tendency to leave rural communities is linked to a lack of economic opportunities for women. Women who are able to find work in rural and resource-based communities tend to be most represented in positions that are undervalued socially and economically (Bates, 2006; Davis, 2000b; Durdle, 2001; Harrison & Power, 2005; Kelly, 2005). With the restructuring of previously male-dominated resource-based rural economies, women's economic roles in families have tended to take on increased significance, necessitating that many women work more, but in increasingly insecure, gender-specific jobs, including low-paying and even unpaid child care and service work. According to Davis (1995, 1999), some women, particularly those with families, therefore felt "trapped" in the rural locale, a feeling that helped prevent them from participating in post-secondary education.

In light of the earlier research, this study considered the place of post-secondary education in the lives of rural women, but not just in relation to career plans or post-high school plans. Instead, it considered the meaning and value of post-secondary education on its own terms, given the significant increase in the enrolment of rural women in post-secondary educational institutions. Rather than focusing on an assumed direct link between education and employment, this study explored other ways post-secondary education may be meaningful and valuable for rural women; it focused on understanding the processes involved in rural women's decision-making, to elucidate the meaning of such decisions.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The research was informed by Smith's (1987, 1990, 2005) standpoint theory, as well as by social constructionist theories of gender and place (Little, 1997; Massey, 1994; McDowell, 1999; Whatmore, 1991; Whatmore, Marsden, & Lowe, 1994). Consequently, the research prioritized women's embodied knowledge and experiences, which are shaped by the historical and cultural specificity of their lives and intertwined with and sustained by social relations and language (Burr, 1995; McDowell, 1999; Smith, 2005). Smith's standpoint theory — an "embodied sociology" — locates consciousness, thoughts, subjectivities, and agency in the body and in particular people's "local doings" (2005, p. 24). Thus, according to Smith, ideology, beliefs, concepts, theory, ideas, and so forth are seen as the product of actual people situated in particular sites at particular times. And although ideas are embodied, "They are no longer treated as if they were essentially inside people's heads" (2005, p. 24).

Following from the focus on women's situated and embodied perspectives and experiences, this research highlighted the importance of place and gender in constructing the importance and value of a liberal arts degree for rural Newfoundland women. In light of Smith's work, gender — different ways of being a woman and a man — was conceptualized as a symbolic meaning as well as a set of material social relations, which varies by locality (McDowell, 1999). Likewise, places are not fixed and bounded territories, but are contested, fluid, and uncertain, defined materially and culturally by social relations and practices at so-called global and local scales (Massey, 1994; McDowell, 1999). This research

also highlighted the ways in which socially constructed images and experiences of place combined with gendered social relations and perspectives to shape the way rural Newfoundland women engage with post-secondary education. Thus, the research addressed three questions: What is the significance of post-secondary education according to women from rural parts of the island of Newfoundland who are working toward a degree in liberal arts? According to these women, how is the significance of post-secondary education shaped by their experiences as women from rural Newfoundland? What are the policy implications of these questions?

## METHODOLOGY

Part of a master's thesis in sociology, this research was conducted by the primary author, Monique Bourgeois, in the 2006 fall and 2007 winter semesters. The research involved semi-structured face-to-face interviews with eight rural Newfoundland women<sup>7</sup> enrolled in the Faculty of Arts at the St. John's campus of Memorial University of Newfoundland. Although the sample of women was in no way representative of all women in the Faculty of Arts at Memorial University (or the rural communities of Newfoundland), their interviews began to fill a gap in existing literature. This study was therefore exploratory in nature. Neuman (2004) defined this sort of exploratory study as "research into an area that has not been studied and in which a researcher wants to develop initial ideas" (p. 356). Exploratory studies are a "first stage" and address "what" questions, such as "What is this social activity really about?" (p. 15). This study asked what meaning and value a liberal arts degree holds for rural Newfoundland women; it also suggests areas for further research. The primary author was not interested in obtaining a representative sample because the purpose of the research was not to explain the women's decisions, but to use women's accounts of their decision-making as a platform to explore the ways in which an arts degree holds meaning for them, and the ways in which this meaning was shaped by social relations extending beyond their immediate experience.<sup>8</sup>

The interview participants were recruited from third-year Arts classes. Interested students were given an opportunity to provide their contact information for the purpose of arranging suitable interview dates and times. To maintain confidentiality, everyone in each class was given a contact card and asked to return it to the front of the class, regardless of whether he or she completed the form.

Third-year students were chosen for this study because, by third year, students were assumed to have thought about the educational decisions they had made, as evidenced by their having chosen a major. Consequently, they were expected to provide rich data. The researcher wanted to explore liberal arts disciplines — namely, those associated with the Faculty of Arts at Memorial University's St. John's campus — because women continue to be highly represented in those disciplines, despite the association of liberal arts with lower economic earnings after graduation.

Eight women volunteered to participate in the project: Alicia, Cara, Colleen, Elizabeth, Jennifer, Joanna, Julie, and Marguerite. (To maintain anonymity, pseudonyms were provided for each woman and her home community.) The women interviewed ranged in age from 21 to 50. Joanna was the youngest of the eight, having turned 20 on the day of the interview, and Elizabeth was the oldest at age 50. Jennifer, Julie, Cara, and Alicia were all

in their early 20s, and Marguerite and Colleen were both in their 40s. Jennifer and Cara, like the older women, did not enrol at Memorial directly out of high school; they took a short time off before enrolling.

Three of the women were studying sociology (Joanna, Marguerite, and Elizabeth, who was majoring in anthropology and sociology), and one each was studying French (Alicia), folklore (Jennifer), English (Julie), psychology (Colleen), and classics (Cara). Two women were part-time students (Elizabeth and Colleen), and both women commuted to university from their hometown. All other women were full-time students who resided in St. John's during the school year.

The eight women came from different communities across the island. Three women were from the Avalon Peninsula of Newfoundland (Julie, Elizabeth, and Colleen). Julie was from Robert's Cove, a community of about 5,000, located approximately 90 kilometres outside St. John's and known island-wide for fishing and fish processing. Elizabeth came from Bell's Cove, located approximately 45 kilometres from St. John's, and known primarily as a tourist destination because of its picturesque scenery and proximity to the capital. Population data are unavailable for Bell's Cove, likely because of its small size. Colleen came from Holy Harbour, a settlement of around 700, known for whaling and migrant steel workers. Holy Harbour is approximately 70 kilometres from St. John's, making it within commuting distance for Colleen, who drove to work in the city each day.

One woman each was from the northeast coast (Alicia), west coast (Cara), and the southwest coast (Marguerite). Alicia came from Cod Town, a prominent fishing village of about 4,000, located approximately 300 kilometres outside St. John's. Cara came from Sawmillville, a town of over 6,000, and one of the communities on the west coast that housed a pulp and paper mill. The town is located a little over 800 kilometres from St. John's. Marguerite was from a tiny village called Forest Brook, about 500 kilometres from St. John's and just off the Trans-Canada Highway. This community was known primarily for logging and housed around 500 people.

Finally, two women were from central Newfoundland (Jennifer, Joanna). Jennifer came from Millbrook, a once-thriving logging town, the population data for which is unavailable, likely because of the low numbers of residents, and Joanna was from a large mill town of over 10,000 residents (Statistics Canada, 2008f) called Smallwoodville.

As for marital status and motherhood, two of the women were married with children (Elizabeth and Colleen), one was unmarried with a child (Marguerite), two were single with no children (Alicia and Julie), and three were partnered with no children (Jennifer, Cara, and Joanna). Most of the women had a number of siblings, except Julie, who was an only child.

Very few of the women were born to parents with post-secondary credentials. Marguerite's mother — a single parent — was a certified secondary school teacher, but she did not work often because she had a large family to care for. Both Colleen's and Elizabeth's fathers worked in the Canadian military and had university degrees. Both of Alicia's parents were university educated, her father holding a master's degree. Joanna's mother had some university education, but she dropped out to train as a hospital technician. Joanna's mother's immediate family, however, consisted of university-educated doctors. In contrast, Jennifer described her parents as semi-literate, having less than high school education. Julie's mother (a single parent) worked in a fish plant, but she had earned her

high school diploma (grade 11 at the time). Cara's parents had high school in addition to recently earned community college certificates.

All eight participants felt to some degree that their home communities were negatively affected by the restructuring of resource-based industries and/or the cod moratorium. Some women's interviews were marked by discussions of financial struggle, particularly for those from single-parent and low-income families (for example, Julie and Jennifer, and Marguerite, who came from a single-parent family and described herself as a single mother). These women funded their post-secondary education primarily through student loans. Other women came from more financially stable homes (Alicia, whose parents were both teachers, and Joanna, who had wealthy grandparents) and used the financial contributions of their parents to fund their post-secondary education. Still other women were older and able to use earnings to fund their degrees (Elizabeth owned a tourism business, Colleen was an administrator at a post-secondary educational institution, and Cara took time after high school to save for university).

The individual interviews focused on the women's lives in rural Newfoundland and their decision-making regarding post-secondary education, as well as their experiences in post-secondary education. Interviews were conducted in person at a time and location determined by each participant. Most interviews were approximately one hour, but some were almost two hours. Interviews were audio-recorded using a digital recorder and transcribed verbatim in their entirety.

The theoretical approach outlined earlier in this paper facilitated an analysis of language (Davis & Steiger, 1990) to understand the varied significance of rural women's education and identify their educational needs based on these experiences. Thus, the transcribed data were coded and analyzed according to themes — patterns in the language used by participants that explain or interpret their actions and beliefs (Boyatzis, 1998). The primary author was mainly interested in themes associated with the meaning and importance of post-secondary education, and this interest was explored through the women's accounts of how and why they came to choose a degree in the Faculty of Arts. Particular attention was paid to the women's embodied ideas and "doings," and the ways they were intertwined with the lives of others in different contexts. Themes were both latent and manifest or, in other words, implicit and explicit in textual data, and were identified inductively, as well as through the researcher's knowledge of theoretical literature and empirical literature, particularly earlier examinations of the relationship of gender and rurality to post-secondary participation (e.g., Alloway & Gilbert, 2004 Britton & Baxter, 1999; Brine & Waller, 2004; Corbett, 2007; Felt and Sinclair, 1995; Walkerdine, Melody, & Lucey, 2001).

### **FINDINGS: SIGNIFICANCE OF A LIBERAL ARTS DEGREE FOR RURAL WOMEN**

Three overarching themes were identified in the data, characterizing the significance of liberal arts education for the eight women: coming to university, choosing a major, and home and away. Sub-themes varied with age, socio-economic status, distance of home from school, and marital status, as well as whether the women were parents. Sub-themes were either "push" forces or "pull" forces; that is, facilitators of enrolment or barriers to enrolment. Although detailed and complex data could be reported, the findings presented

here focus on themes that were dominant in most interviews; they speak to the theoretical framework of the symbolic and relational aspects of gender and place. Overall, findings showed that enrolment in liberal arts degree programs was part of the women's search for a new home.

### Coming to University

#### University as expected.

Seven women spoke of post-secondary education as "normal/expected." There was variation in the nuances of this theme, however. Three women from more financially stable families (Alicia, Joanna, and Colleen) expressed the intrinsic value of higher education and the idea that everyone in the family is educated. The following statement from Joanna described the expectations surrounding the decision to enrol in university:

There wasn't really any question on whether or not I was gonna go to university. Like, I didn't even think that I wasn't at any point in time.... It just wasn't even spoke of...and if I didn't want to, like, my mother would never pressure me. It's that I never, ever, I never not wanted to go, like, you know? I — I really wanted to, so.... It wouldn't be, like, my parents never pressured either one of us to do anything. It's just we both [sister] wanted to leave Smallwoodville and go on and do other things, you know? And, like, my parents were financially, like, you know, steady. Like, they could provide for us to go, so there wasn't any problems with it. Out a — like, the majority of people in my family, like, my cousins and stuff, like, all of them have gone and.... My mom's family is really well educated. Like, my grandfather and all her brothers are doctors.

Similarly, Colleen, whose immediate and extended family members (with the exception of her mother) had post-secondary education, noted, "I wasn't aware that there was another option [besides university] because I was always told, 'You're going to university.' The teachers told me, my parents told me, so I went." The responses of these women alluded to the possible intrinsic value of education by stressing the importance of "being educated," "doing well," and gaining meaningful employment. Such views are associated in the literature with "middle class" family values<sup>9</sup> and families headed by parents who hold post-secondary educational credentials (Ball 2003, 2006 Walkerdine, Lucey, & Melody, 2001). The three women who spoke of this theme came from financially stable families with at least one university-educated parent.

Women whose parents were not university educated also spoke of university as expected. Jennifer, a 24-year-old folklore student, for example, indicated she "always knew" she would go to university, but her reasons for doing so were different from the women mentioned above. Jennifer's account could be categorized in part as one of upward mobility, a meaning associated with students and families of working class backgrounds (Archer & Hutchings, 2000; Brine & Waller, 2004; Britton & Baxter, 1999; Leathwood & O'Connell, 2003). Jennifer stated that she wanted to do something better than her mother and father, who worked in home care and seasonal adventure tourism, respectively. Jennifer said:



I think they, 'cause they know, well I guess they haven't been that well-off. Like financially probably 'cause, you know, raising two kids and just on their incomes is not the greatest. Well, yeah, I think they want me to be something more than they were, like, just, working, like, the fishery, or like home care. Like if I even tells Mom that I'm going to go and work as a part-time home care, she don't want me to [laughing]. She's like, "No, no, no." No, they want me to be something better.

For Jennifer, university is a way to become financially stable and to avoid working in occupations familiar to many rural Newfoundlanders.

Colleen expressed the idea that university was expected of her because of her family's legacy of enrolling in higher education, but her pursuit of a degree was not straightforward. The same can be said of Marguerite. Colleen had been attending university part-time for approximately 20 years with periods of dropping out, and Marguerite did not enrol until she reached her 40s, despite plenty of pressure from family to do so. There was a sense that these women were realizing a potential that had been unfulfilled in the past (Britton & Baxter, 1999). As Britton and Baxter (1999) noted, a key element of this theme of unfulfilled potential is the notion of "unfinished business" (p. 183). As Jennifer's interview highlighted, such a theme can have a socio-economic component, but there is also a gender component. Although Britton and Baxter's (1999) study suggested that older women who talk of unfulfilled potential described marriage and family as the "expected destiny for women" (p. 183), this study showed that older women with educated parents (regardless of socio-economic background) experience pressure or the expectation to enrol in university until they become parents themselves.

For example, Marguerite, a single mother who enrolled in post-secondary education in her 40s, spoke of feeling pressure from her family to become a "professional" and not a housewife. Marguerite said:

Um, well, my mother was a teacher. Her standards were very high. Very high. Um, my family, we had to kinda fight to survive. Poor family, you know, like. To beat the odds, you had to go on and do something with your life, like, you know. To be successful, you know?...You had to go on and make something of your life to be somebody.

Marguerite's account echoed Jennifer's account of upward mobility, in that university is a way for her to "beat the odds" and "become successful." In Marguerite's case, however, low self-esteem, coupled with the birth of her daughter, prevented her from returning to education for many years. Likewise, for Colleen, who became a single parent in the late 1970s as a teenager enrolled in her first year of university at Memorial, continuing with education became difficult. She repeatedly struggled with continuing her education while raising her children.

As we shall see in the following section, although the financial pressures Marguerite experienced were not present in Colleen's situation, the same gendered expectations about child care pervaded. It was not until these women began "wanting something more" that they sought a university education. This theme is linked to the next sub-theme: university as a time "for me."

### University as a time “for me.”

Three women who spoke of their degrees as a time “for me” (Elizabeth, Colleen, and Marguerite) delayed their university enrolment to accept primary responsibility for child care, indicating that gendered familial expectations and gendered work patterns, which led them to avoid thinking of themselves, kept them away from post-secondary education for a large part of their lives. Marguerite’s account exemplified this theme. When she enrolled in university, Marguerite felt the need to escape the stress of caring for her mother and daughter while working a low-paying service job in a town that she saw to be dying. She indicated that she was feeling exhausted and overwhelmed as a result of this combination of paid and unpaid work. With a partner who only worked seasonally, Marguerite regarded herself as the primary caregiver and labourer in her family. She said:

It was very hard because I was still working at the time. Um, being a mother and having my own home and my mom, and I’m working and I’m doing courses. It was very, very, uh, overwhelming at times. Very overwhelming. And, uh, I don’t know how to explain it. I don’t know if it was, uh, psychological or physical, but I started to have some physical problems as well and I was just drained. Really drained and I think it all just came in on me and I j — I was just — I got to the point where it was just total burnout. Just total burnout. And I was just like, “Okay, I just — I need out.” I — I tell people and I joke about it, but it actually is almost realistic that I ran away from home.

Colleen, like Marguerite, also spoke of the pressures of familial expectations about educational achievement and the stress of living life for others at home as motivators for returning to education. Elizabeth, on the other hand, described university as a “pastime.” She did not have familial expectations to live up to or a strong desire to change or begin a career. There was less pressure involved in her decision. However, when asked about how her husband felt about her coming back to university, Elizabeth indicated that her husband had to adjust to her being away. This change was difficult because they both worked outside their home. The other mothers who were interviewed spoke about family and community members’ explicit disapproval of their enrolment in university. For example, Marguerite stated, “Um, I felt like a traitor. I felt like, uh, like I was the worst mother ever. Like, you know...selfish. Very selfish, that’s how you feel, how I felt. And scared.” Marguerite also stated that many people she knew in her home community were very surprised by her decision to leave home. She felt that people in the community thought she would remain there working in a service position for the rest of her life. Colleen and Marguerite both stated that people in their home communities questioned their motives. Colleen’s husband and his family thought there was no need for her to enrol in university, particularly as she already had a full-time job. She said:

My husband thought that I — you know, “Why do you need to go to university? You have a job.” ’Cause that was his upbringing. You know, they thought I had some big fabulous job ’cause I wasn’t working 10 weeks and collecting employment insurance. I said, “Yes, but it’s not enough for me.” So he thought that this was part of my devious plan to get an education and then leave. Uh, it wasn’t, but those were his insecurities.

As university students, these women regarded education as a way to “find” themselves. As Marguerite stated, “I need more than the restaurant and not for the job or the status or anything else. I just needed something for me ’cause I’m not finding myself there.”

### **The primacy of males in rural Newfoundland?**

Jennifer explicitly spoke of university as a gendered option for youth who are finishing high school: “My family pushed me to go to school, but...they didn’t tell my brother to go to school....Why would they tell me to go to school, but they don’t tell my brother to go to school?” This woman related that her brother ridiculed her for going to university, saying that it was a waste of time and a waste of money. Other women did not speak explicitly of this theme, but it became apparent that university may be an appropriate post-high school option for women more than for men in many of the communities from which the participants came. The families of these women were clearly divided along gender lines in terms of occupation, with many of the brothers and partners of the women working in traditionally male-dominated fields, such as the Canadian military, and in seasonal and manual labour. Although many sisters of the participants were university graduates, their brothers were not. This finding supported research on rural and resource-dependent areas, suggesting that males and females from these regions hold different views about the kinds of post-high school options that are valuable and desirable (Alloway & Gilbert, 2004; Corbett, 2007b; Pinhorn, 2002). Corbett (2007), in his study of the relationship between migration and formal education in Digby Neck, Nova Scotia, argued that rejection of education among males in single-industry towns fits into a long-standing male tradition of being “born and bred” for industries such as fishing. The power of this representation of male identity persisted even in the absence of a stable industry (Corbett, 2007b). Indeed, Jennifer knew of some young women from her home community who attended university, but no men. Literature indicates that this outcome is related to the kinds of work young rural men and women see around them as they grow up (Corbett, 2007b; Pinhorn, 2002). It is interesting that the appropriateness of post-secondary education for women in this study only applied to those who were unmarried and without children; once a woman was married and/or has children, she was expected to devote herself to family, even if it meant taking on additional unpaid and paid service work, and/or remaining personally and economically dissatisfied. These sorts of gendered expectations and relations can act as barriers for older women, and although this experience was something the three older women shared, the same gendered familial expectations and relations acted as facilitators, encouraging them into the university.

### **Why Liberal Arts?**

#### **Personal academic inclinations.**

Regarding their liberal arts education, the women interviewed felt that the public consensus was that such education was worthless and pointless. However, they strongly disagreed with this view; indeed, they felt very positively about their education. Despite this belief, only one of the women entered university with the intention of studying a liberal arts discipline (Cara, who studied classics). The other women did not plan their liberal arts major before enrolling; indeed, three of the women (Jennifer, Colleen, and Julie) switched from other programs into the Faculty of Arts.

The most cited theme with regard to the women's choice of major was "personal academic inclinations." Each woman rejected male-dominated disciplines, particularly math and sciences. They did so because they were uninterested in math, because of a continued interest in a subject traditionally dominated by women, or because of a negative experience with male-dominated subjects. All these themes were shaped by gender and place.

Alicia said that she had performed well in all of her classes during high school, but she simply did not have an interest in the sciences or math. Regarding her decision to study French, she stated, "I can't see myself coming in here and doing like a math degree....It must be an interest thing 'cause, like, I'm not interested in sciences enough to do that." The social constructedness (Burr, 1995; Montgomery, 2004) of these interests is evident in interviews with the other women who expressed not just that they were uninterested in math and science, but that they found these subjects to be academically challenging. In some instances, this position was related to their experiences growing up in rural Newfoundland and/or as older students. For example, Cara reported that she developed a dislike of calculus as a result of her perception of the difficulty her high school had in finding an adequate calculus teacher for her grade 10 class. She and her classmates ended up failing the course because of inadequate substitute instruction. This situation was consistent with literature on the differences in the delivery of education in rural areas that influenced how rural women engaged with post-secondary education (Press, Galway, & Collins, 2003; Dibbon, 2001). According to Press, Galway, and Collins (2003), recruiting and retaining both substitute and full-time teachers in rural Newfoundland was difficult, given dwindling rural populations and the provincial government's reluctance to dedicate funds to schools that were not seen to be economically viable (Dibbon, 2001). Thus, the restructuring of work spaces in contemporary capitalism, coupled with the provincial government's constructions of rural Newfoundland, means that rural schools may have difficulty recruiting and retaining suitable teachers. As a result, students' learning may be affected, and students discouraged from pursuing particular subjects.

Likewise, two of the women (Jennifer and Colleen) intended to enrol in courses other than their chosen major at initial enrolment. In their first year of undergraduate study, Jennifer failed a required course and Colleen almost failed one of her required courses. Jennifer attributed her difficulties in part to growing up with parents who were semi-literate, but both she and Colleen felt that their challenges were also in part the result of an inadequate education in rural Newfoundland. These women perceived their schooling in rural Newfoundland to be inferior in some ways to that offered in the city (that is, St. John's). For example, Colleen said, "We never — we hadn't done calculus in — in high school at that time...and I got a 65 and I did the homework and the practice and so, like, this was a huge blow to my ego. And then I thought, 'Maybe I'm not university material.'" As a result of such obstacles, these women found that academic work, particularly in math/sciences was a genuine struggle, at least initially. Other women who indicated their lack of interest in math and science included Jennifer, who noted that she was intimidated by large class sizes, and two of the older women — Marguerite and Elizabeth — who were nervous about possibly having lost knowledge from their youth.

## Gender stereotypes?

Some of the women spoke of their choice of an arts degree in terms of a continuing interest arising directly out of their experiences of living life as women from rural Newfoundland and/or based on gendered ideals. Colleen expressed being a caring “people person” from an early age, whereas Marguerite suggested that she wanted to help others based on her own experiences of struggle as a youth and as a single mother. Julie indicated that, after having switched programs three times, she finally decided on her choice of English because English was always a “passion,” one that developed as a result of her experiences of reading with her mother and aunts as a child. She said:

Mom has a, uh...our family's — is pretty big, but it's not real big. Um, her and a couple of our family members who are from other smaller communities, when they all go to my aunt's house, they'll all meet up, like, Sunday evenings. It's tradition to go to my aunt's house and have a cup of tea and when they go, they'll, uh, one of 'em will bring in a bag of books and that's what they do. They — they trade off books and then whoever's....It's like their own little private book club.

Just as English was a “passion” for Julie, all of the interviewees stated that happiness was a major priority in deciding what to study in university. Studying something that did not interest the women would not make them happy, and they were not willing to sacrifice happiness for an educational pathway they thought would get them a job quickly after graduation. The following statement captured this sentiment:

I just want to be happy....What makes me happy is learning. It's not like, buying designer clothes or going on big fancy trips or going out....I enjoy all that stuff, but I'm happy with just, like, a computer and a word processor and typing.

This prioritization of what makes one happy, according to some of the women, was a value passed down by parents. For example, Joanna adamantly stated that, although it was important that she eventually be able to get a job with her degree, she wanted to be happy in her job above everything. This outcome was also what would make her family happy. Despite recognizing the necessity of money for survival, all women spoke of happiness as a state that is achieved apart from material wealth, and one that was prioritized above all else in life. The accounts provided by the women reflected a rejection of material wealth that is part of pervasive ideas associated with the “simple” life in “real Newfoundland” and its stoic rural folk (see Overton, 1996, a meaning associated with ideas about the rural idyll (see Little & Austin, 1996). The importance of happiness may also indicate a gendered non-instrumental outlook on post-secondary education that transcends the images associated with the rural idyll, and again indicates gendered social relations and ideas about women's responsibilities in the home and men's responsibilities for paid employment (Montgomery, 2004; Tett, 2000). In any case, each woman's definition of what would bring happiness varied. For example, Joanna wanted to avoid a stressful career, Julie and Jennifer enjoyed learning and writing, and Marguerite wished to give something back to others. The women associated their values with their particular subject of study.

## Home and Away

### Leaving home.

As the previous sections of this paper indicate, most of the women did not seem to care what they studied when they first enrolled in university, just as long as they left home, or in the case of the commuters, as long as they were working toward a different life. Four women spoke of their education explicitly as leaving home, but to differing degrees. Joanna and Jennifer were very critical of their communities and the people who continue to live there. Joanna said that she had little desire to ever return to her home community, except to see her grandparents, who still reside there. A major problem that she experienced with her home community was the gossip she perceived to take place between the local people, coupled with what she saw as their “small town mentality”:

I don't like Smallwoodville. It's really...it's pretty crazy there. Like, uh, I don't know. Small town mentality, the people are kinda gossipy. Yeah, like, I've heard that there's kinda like a — they have a reputation for being...like, gossip central, I guess [laughing], but I don't know. I didn't particularly like living there, and as soon as I graduated, I wanted to go.

Regarding her hometown, Jennifer stated, “It's very small and everybody knows all your business.” Consequently, there was no question that she would be leaving the community after she graduated from high school. Both of these women perceived themselves to be different from those who still resided in their home communities, with gossip, substance abuse, and a lack of diversity as major problems. The impact of gossip on rural women's life and career development was supported by existing research in Canada and Newfoundland (Davis, 1988; Shepard, 2004). Davis (1988) argued that rural Newfoundland cultures of small-town gossip act as an informal type of social control, making community members' personal characteristics and life and family histories public knowledge — the “currency for public action.” Davis said that in rural Newfoundland, “Assertiveness of any sort is not allowed, unless it is conducted within highly conventionalized and limiting idiomatic forms” (p. 222). Freedom from gossip and the freedom to be and think differently appeared to have played a role in Jennifer's and Joanna's decision to leave.

In addition to the view that the people in the community were gossipy, small-minded, and homogeneous, some of the women expressed the view that there was nothing to do at home and, as a result, they saw no reason to stay. Jennifer stated:

Oh, I hated Millbrook. I always wanted to leave. So I knew when I turned 18, or when I got out of school, I was going to leave and I wasn't gonna come back and I've never went back. So I think that's why I study so much, 'cause I know that if I went home, like, what am I going to do? Like, just sit down all day and watch soaps? Like, I'm not going to do that [laughing].

Likewise, Joanna did not approve of the activities of those who remained in her home community, and she complained that there was nothing there for her anymore. Her comments implied that the only opportunity for young women in her community was to be-

come the wives of the men who also remain there, have babies young, work part-time at local shops, and drink for entertainment at the local bar with “old men.” Joanna said:

I don't know, the chicks I knew, like, pregnant and just like, doin' nothin' at home, it just burns me out. And, like, how? I — different strokes for different folks, you know what I mean? Like, some people wanna just live in Smallwoodville [laughing] the rest of their life and, like, marry the local hero. Like, I don't know, it's crazy [laughing]. 'Cause it's like, I can — I can't even fathom being there myself. But, like, lots of girls I know are still there and just workin' part-time at Canadian Tire, havin' boyfriends, and goin' to the local pub and gettin' drunk with, like, old men. Like, god. You know what I mean? Just really, really outrageous, like. I just can't imagine.

For this young woman, who said she wanted to help make the world better in her own way, such a role was not appealing.

In contrast to Jennifer and Julie, who expressed strong negative views of their home communities, Alicia and Cara were not quite so negative about home. Alicia indicated that she was simply “ready” to leave Cod Town. A lack of options for employment, however, coupled with few leisure opportunities was an incentive to go away. She stated:

There would have been no reason to stay there. It's not like — I could understand it if I had like a job that was full time or, like, throughout the year....I was ready to leave and...I don't know. You know, high school was over and you want something to do and, I mean, I'm not super, like, go out all the time, but it was nice to know that you were coming to a place where, you know, Friday night you can do something. Um, so yeah. I don't know, I was ready for it. I wasn't like one of those people who were homesick. I don't, like I said, I don't go home very often.

Likewise, Cara seemed to want to be on her own and away from the familiar people and environment of her community. Cara stated, “I wanted to come out here and kind of live on my own and...I didn't know anybody when I got here and I just was excited about that — not knowing anybody or knowing where I was.” There was a definite sense from all participants that rural Newfoundland is undergoing significant restructuring, leaving some — particularly the women in their 20s — with little desire to continue to live there. All the women who moved to St. John's to study expressed the belief that there may not be anything left in their home communities to which they could return.

### **Cutting ties and sacrificing time: The pull of home.**

Not all of the rural women spoke of leaving home in positive terms. The older women spoke of the difficulties of being a university student with a family. These difficulties depended on whether the women lived on campus or commuted. Marguerite, who decided to move far away from home and away from her daughter, struggled with the perceptions of her friends and family. She expressed sadness about the difficulty of leaving her home and family to come to university, and she missed them on a daily basis. This woman was the only student interviewed who articulated a strong sense of missing home, but half the women expressed some feeling of sorrow over their belief that they would likely not

be able to return to their home communities to work in the future. As Marguerite stated, “You have to do more. And then you do more. You’re not going to move back to rural Newfoundland. So you gotta be willing to give up everything.” Marguerite said that work opportunities in rural Newfoundland were not enough to survive on and that “you have to be willing to cut your ties and leave. This is probably why I didn’t return earlier because I couldn’t cut my ties. My daughter was too young.” Thus, in addition to feelings of guilt about having left home and feelings of missing home, Marguerite felt that it would be impossible for her to permanently return home.

The two married women interviewed commuted to attend university. Even though they commuted nearly an hour by car several times a week (in one case every day), they both appeared to prefer the commute over leaving their homes. They liked the lack of crowds, privacy, quiet nature, close family, and the safety for their children. Colleen noted:

I like the outdoor aspects of it and the simplicity of life there. It’s quiet, you don’t have busy city streets, you didn’t — I didn’t have to worry about my children.... There’s a swimming area there that’s actually a waterfall, and it’s just quite beautiful. It’s very relaxing being there.

Elizabeth similarly articulated a strong attachment to her home community and to the kind of slow-paced life on the outskirts that she was able to lead there. Again, images of the rural idyll (Little & Austin, 1996) were present in these accounts. Despite the benefits of staying home, however, there were also difficulties. Colleen spoke of the time constraints and stress she experienced trying to balance all of her multiple duties during the day. Most of her time was spent on school, work, family care, and her commute:

I’m always struggling with the time.... I’m either working at work, I mean, I enjoy spending time with my family, but it’s usually that they need me to be with them.... There’s no soaking in tubs, there’s no going to a spa...and I’m not complaining about that, but it’s healthy to have that and when you don’t it does create some, you know, extraordinary stress levels at times.

As a result of the amount of time spent on work, school, and her family, this woman noted that she had very little time for herself and found herself at times exhausted.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

By taking the approach of Smith’s embodied sociology (2005), emphasizing the perspectives and experiences of women, this study explored the ways in which gender norms and relations and constructions of place shape the meaning and value of post-secondary education in the lives of rural Newfoundland women. The eight rural women interviewed drew from their experiences of living life as women in rural Newfoundland to formulate their decisions about post-secondary education. They spoke passionately about their experiences, goals, hopes, and plans. In this way, their talk was not simply language existing in the women’s heads; rather, their beliefs, ideas, representations, and so forth referred to their actual bodily experiences, which were shaped in the context of changing rural Newfoundland (see Smith, 2005).



The rural women who participated in this study were of various ages and stages of life and originated from various parts of the island of Newfoundland. Consequently, their experiences and perspectives were both complex and varied. Here, gender and rurality combined to produce nuances in the meaning of post-secondary education for different women enrolled in liberal arts degrees. The impact of gender and place depended on age, socio-economic background, marital status, and parental status, as well as the educational levels of the women's parents. The rural place, and associated constructions and social relations of gender, acted as push and pull forces on these eight women. Gendered work and family relations, shaped by representations about what kind of life is appropriate and desirable for rural Newfoundland women, make post-secondary education something that is expected of the women who participated in this research, regardless of their socio-economic background. Gendered academic inclinations, bolstered by negative experiences of schooling and gendered activities growing up, led women to reject math and sciences in favour of liberal arts disciplines. And representations of the rural place and its possibilities for women shaped the experience of being a university student for the women interviewed.

Many of these findings are supported in existing literature. For example, the findings are consistent with research on rural and resource-dependent areas that suggests males and females from these regions hold different views about the kind of post-high school options that are valuable and desirable. They do so because of the kinds of work they see around them as they grow up (Alloway & Gilbert, 2004; Corbett, 2007b; Hamilton & Seyfrit, 1994; Pinhorn, 2002). The findings point to a persistent gendered division of labour in rural Newfoundland supported by literature suggesting that women's paid and unpaid work has taken on increasing significance with the closure of primary industries (e.g., fishing, forestry) and a lack of quality elder care (Bates, 2006; Durdle, 2001; Felt & Sinclair, 1995; Harrison & Power, 2005; Kelly, 2005). Taken together, this research challenges the notion that gender identities and relations have been reorganized in line with changes to rural Newfoundland economies (see Bates, 2006; Davis, 1993, 2000a). Women may still perform the majority of child care, and they may still work in traditionally female-dominated, low-paying jobs. Although the research under discussion in this paper suggests there is an increasing expectation that some rural women will attend university, regardless of socio-economic background and parental education level, the research does not indicate this trend is because of a levelling of gender-based inequalities in rural Newfoundland communities. Rather, some women are being pushed out, whereas others are being pulled back.

The data discussed here might not be exclusive to rural Newfoundland women, and similar findings may be identified in research on students from diverse backgrounds. For example, students from many backgrounds might see post-secondary education as a way to achieve upward mobility. This point is an important limitation of the work. However, the study does begin to fill a gap in existing research by focusing on the place of a liberal arts degree in the lives of rural Newfoundland women and on the meaning given to post-secondary education in the words of rural women themselves (Smith, 2005). Such a study has not been done before, despite the knowledge that rural Newfoundland women are an increasing presence in undergraduate programs on the island, and despite the fact that women continue to enrol in liberal arts degrees even though those degrees are often portrayed in public opinion as economically worthless.

The major finding of this study is a theme that cuts across all the interview data: a university degree is part of a search for either a new home or, at least, a new kind of life for this small sample of women. University for such women may be partly a way to break out of the dominant rural constructions of womanhood and social relations that confine women's place to the home, family, and community, or confine them to low-paying service work in economically unstable communities. But rural gender relations acted as a "push" for the young women experiencing gossip, for example, and acted as a "pull," keeping some older women with families in their communities. Likewise, the rural place acted as a "push" for young women who saw their communities as offering them no future, whereas it acted as a "pull" for older women who valued the quaint surroundings their home communities offer. For most of the women interviewed here it matters less what discipline they study, at least when they initially enrol in university, and more that they simply enrol to begin with.

The above findings may not be particularly surprising, or applicable solely to rural women studying liberal arts degrees, but they do begin to fill a gap in the literature. Most importantly, however, this research suggests some areas for further research, the most urgent of which should be a study of larger numbers of rural Newfoundland women across disciplines and at both campuses of Memorial University. Rural women attending other institutions outside the province could also be studied. This type of research could shed light on the meaning and value of a variety of degrees for women from a variety of rural backgrounds. A sample of women more representative of rural Newfoundland communities would determine the extent to which gendered social relations and representations, as well as restructured work environments, push and pull women out of and into their home communities as they formulate their educational and career-related goals. Such a study could explore in greater detail than was possible here the role of "happiness," for example, in rural women's engagement with post-secondary education: Is this priority a gendered non-instrumental approach to post-secondary education and/or a reflection of ideas associated with the rural idyll? A focus on the divergent needs of women based on age would be necessary, as the needs of older rural women differ from those of younger women. Future studies could also include males, exploring in greater detail the ways in which men and women from rural Newfoundland diverge in their views and experiences of home. Further research is also needed on the impact of provincial rural education policy and curriculum on rural students' experiences of schooling and the ways in which these experiences shape their engagement with post-secondary education.

Although the small sample size and limited scope of this paper presents challenges for policy recommendations, some tentative suggestions can be made, the first of which is to explicitly recognize what may be a gendered social environment in rural areas. Such acknowledgement could be the first step for any education or economic development policy to help overcome some of the barriers preventing rural women — and men — from continuing their education and/or pursuing certain kinds of post-secondary studies. Governments and university administrations could engage with community initiatives, providing non-traditional gender models to rural students, and could encourage family participation in these initiatives to address students' experience with more traditional family patterns in rural areas. Additionally, government officials should be concerned with the delivery of math and science in local schools, at early levels of education, and particularly in rural

areas. The interviews discussed here reveal that experiences of schooling in math and science strongly influenced some women's lack of preference for and lack of confidence in these subjects. More resources could also be put into place to help students explore what majors they might like to study and what their choices might mean for their life and career development. However, as the interviews discussed here suggest, it might be the case that women are completely happy with their decisions, even if their earnings after graduation might be lower than those who study male-dominated disciplines. Moreover, if students must take out loans to finance their post-secondary education, governments might provide needs-based grants for students, which might allow them to return to their home communities without being saddled with enormous student debt.

Additionally, if government officials wish rural students to enrol and be successful in university, more attention needs to be focused on promoting post-secondary education and retaining students, as well as the connections with place characteristic of rural students. Policy-makers can support the work of universities in addressing promotion and retention by providing access to distance, outreach, or extension-type programs that allow some students to stay in or near their communities to study if they wish to do so. Alternatively, governments could provide access to funding for students attending university to travel home more often so that rural women seeking a degree will not have to relocate if they do not wish to. Interestingly, but perhaps not surprisingly, in this study it is the older women and women with families who are most affected by the need to leave rural communities to attend school. Older women, who have made a life for themselves and their children in rural areas, feel the "pull" of home. Their needs and concerns are different from those of younger women, and so, necessarily, should be the response. ♦

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Data collected as part of Statistics Canada's 2006 Survey of Labour and Income Dynamics show that those who hold university degrees are most represented in the highest earnings category in Canada (McMullen, 2009). There also appears to be a 40% income premium for earning a university degree as compared to only completing high school (Canadian Council on Learning, 2006).
- <sup>2</sup> Christie and Shannon (2001) found that the highest-paying field of study for both men and women was engineering, followed by health (non-nursing), math/physics and social sciences for men, and math/physics and education for women.
- <sup>3</sup> Recent analyses (Adamuti-Trache, Hawkey, Schuetze, & Glickman, 2006; Canadian Labour Congress, n.d.; Drolet, 2001; Lin, Sweet, & Anisef, 2003; Maritime Provinces Higher Education Commission, 2004), however, pointed to the difficulty of assuming a direct correlation among these variables. Taken together, such research suggested that much of the financial inequality between women and men and between fields of study is not easily explained by subject choice alone. For example, the *utilization* of graduate skills — namely, employer preferences for degrees labelled "vocational" (Lin, Sweet, & Anisef, 2003), coupled with their possible cultural assumptions about gender (Canadian Labour Congress, n.d.) — appeared to play a significant role in shaping income after graduation over and above that of subject choice. Moreover, those with higher levels of formal education in general may sometimes face challenging econom-

ic circumstances in rural communities (Corbett, 2007a, 2007b). Indeed, as McMullen (2009) has pointed out, living in Newfoundland and Labrador is a determining factor in explaining low income among university graduates. Other factors, such as the differing career aspirations of students (Adamuti-Trache, Hawkey, Schuetze, & Glickman, 2006), are also important considerations.

- 4 Although the definition of liberal arts education is disputed and changing on an ongoing basis (Axelrod, 2002), this research project considered these subjects to be part of the Faculty of Arts at Memorial University of Newfoundland. The sample consisted of students enrolled in programs considered liberal arts subjects (subjects not directly related to a job) and those that not are vocationally oriented (see Lin, Sweet, & Anisef, 2003). In contrast to a liberal education (which can be seen as advancing and disseminating knowledge, and facilitating personal growth and development), vocational education “aims to provide specific skills for certain professions” (Lin, Sweet, & Anisef, 2003, p. 56).
- 5 The concept of “social relation,” according to Smith (2005), implies how work (or other activity) is articulated to and coordinated with others. Smith stated, “Social relations are embedded in sequences of action that implicate other people, other experience, and other work among institutions and elsewhere” (p. 158).
- 6 The concept “culture” is not monolithic and has been problematized by a number of social scientists (e.g., Cowan, Dembour, & Wilson, 2001). This study adopted Winnicott’s (1974) conceptualization of culture as “not some kind of ready-made, omnipresent composite of habits, meanings and practices that are located *in* the individual or *in* the environment, but a *potentiality* that is realised and experienced variously in the course of our interactions with others, as well as our relationships to the everyday environments and events in which we find ourselves” (cited in Jackson, 2005, p. xiv).
- 7 Defining localities as “urban” and “rural” is problematic. Places are not static, homogeneous, and bounded entities; they are mutually constituted through sets of material social relations that are continually in flux (Hughes, 1997; Massey, 1994; McDowell, 1999). However, the notion of “rurality” was retained here as it allows for consistency in comparisons. This study used the White Paper definition of rural areas, which comes from the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador’s *Beyond High School: Follow-up Study of June 2001 High School Graduates*. This definition of urban areas included “the cities of Corner Brook, Mount Pearl and St. John’s and its surrounding communities, including Conception Bay South, Paradise, Portugal Cove-St. Phillips and Torbay” (Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, 2003, p. 13). These areas constituted the regions in Newfoundland with populations of over 20,000 residents. By default, rural communities were those located outside the bounds of these major centres and with fewer than 20,000 residents.
- 8 Their accounts were compared with a provincial post-secondary education policy document, *Foundation for Success: White Paper on Public Post-Secondary Education* (Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, 2005). It was beyond the scope of the present paper to discuss in detail the comparative analysis of interviews with rural women and the provincial White Paper on public post-secondary education. Thus, this paper focused on interviews with rural women.
- 9 Here the term *middle class* is used not to refer to a homogeneous and bounded entity, but to indicate shifting and dynamic sets of relationships that produce particular iden-

tities, ways of living, sets of perspectives, and further relationships (Ball, 2003). As Davis (2000a) argued in her study of one rural Newfoundland community, the permanently employed, including schoolteachers and health and welfare service workers, represented the elite in changing rural Newfoundland communities.

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