

# STRUGGLING WITH A NONTRADITIONAL PAST

## ***Academically Successful Women from Disadvantaged Backgrounds Discuss Their Relationship with “Disadvantage”***

Pamela LePage-Lees  
*George Mason University*

This article reports findings from a qualitative study that explored the educational experiences of women who were academic high achievers and who were disadvantaged as children. An interesting result was that most participants, if not all, believed that one reason they were successful was because they never revealed their personal histories to education professionals. This article describes the participants' relationship to the concept of disadvantage and the process they went through to have a voice in a system that rewarded them for their silence. It also addresses the question of when it is appropriate to disclose personal information in educational settings. Some believe there should be a separation between the personal and the professional. Others argue that women and disadvantaged students need education that is connected to their life experiences. If this is true, we must ask how this connection can be made when people from disadvantaged backgrounds believe they must hide who they are to succeed.

College students often talk about their mothers' successful businesses, their fathers' jobs as professors, or their own academic success, but rarely do we hear students talk about their abusive fathers, their mothers' jobs at nearby fast-food restaurants, or their own experiences with drug abuse. Are there really no college students who have had these kinds of experiences? The answer to that question is “No.” This study focuses on women who achieved highly, but who also faced stress and poverty as children. Although some college

students, like those in this study, have dealt with stress, many are reluctant to talk about these issues (LePage, 1994; Tatum, 1992).

It is common today for students to be confused about their relationship with personal disadvantage and discrimination (Crocker & Major, 1989; Crosby, 1984; LePage, 1994). Research shows that people tend to deny personal discrimination (Crosby, 1984), and they are reluctant to talk openly about negative personal experience (LePage, 1994); however, they find it comforting to associate with stigmatized groups (Crocker & Major, 1989). Currently, the norms surrounding disclosure, disadvantage, and stigma are changing and people are confused about how to respond to these changes (Chase, 1990; Tatum, 1992). A number of factors likely to effect people's willingness to openly discuss certain types of personal experience have been identified.

### *Disclosure Issues*

Students are cautious about discussing personal experience because our society has governed self-disclosure with strict social norms that regulate this type of expression. For example, Chaikin and Derlega (1974) claim that it has been considered more appropriate to disclose information to a friend than to a stranger. Also, disclosing to a peer has been seen as more appropriate than disclosing information to someone of a different age, and disclosing information to someone younger has been considered least appropriate.

In a recent study involving an urban education class, students were hesitant not only to talk about their disadvantage, but also about their experiences as minority students (LePage, 1994). This finding was also reported by Tatum (1992) who claimed that in her course, which was specifically designed to address race, students often had problems discussing racial issues. Tatum concluded there were three reasons why students were hesitant to talk about racial issues: (a) race is a taboo topic, (b) people have been socialized to believe the United States is a just society, and (c) many students, particularly White students, recognize the impact of racism on other people's lives, but not on their own.

Research on disclosure has stemmed primarily from psychological settings focused on interpersonal relationships, for purposes of improving counseling and diagnostic efforts. For example, some psychologists have linked inappropriate self-disclosure with being psychologically maladjusted (Cunningham & Strassberg, 1981; Derlega & Chaikin, 1976; Neimeyer & Banikiotes, 1981). They believe that neurotic people are incapable of recognizing clues from their environment to judge when it is and is not appropriate to self-disclose.

Although some psychologists claim that self-disclosure can be detrimental, others claim that self-disclosure can be beneficial. For example, some believe that self-disclosure is necessary for mental and physical health (Ehrlich, 1980; Holtzclaw, 1983; Larson & Chastain, 1990; Pennebaker & Francis, 1996). In fact, some would go as far as to say that people need self-disclosure. Larson and Chastain (1990) found that self-concealment positively correlated with self-report measures of anxiety, depression, and bodily symptoms after controlling for many other variables.

*Denial of Personal Discrimination and Disadvantage*

Another reason that students may be hesitant to disclose what might be called “negative” personal experience is because, according to Crosby (1984), women often deny personal discrimination. She claimed it was easier for women to acknowledge that “women in general” were discriminated against, but many denied that they had personally experienced discrimination. Crosby suggests that there are many reasons for this:

1. elementary politeness makes it difficult to portray one’s own suffering, whereas group loyalty demands a sensitivity to the plight of one’s group;
  2. women are more likely to blame themselves than blame others;
  3. people experience discomfort in confronting their own victimization, because individual cases of suffering seem to call, psychologically, for individual villains;
  4. people are motivated to distort reality because of a need to believe in a just world.
- Crosby argues that denial of personal discrimination creates problems because it perpetuates an unfair social system.

*Associating with a Stigmatized Group*

Although it has been shown that students deny personal disadvantage and discrimination, it has also been found that membership in a stigmatized group may protect self-esteem (Crocker & Major, 1989). In fact, although many argue that “labeling” is detrimental, some people who have been “labeled” are relieved when their barriers are acknowledged. Associating with stigmatized groups provides confirmation that others have had similar experiences, and it provides evidence that failure is not always dependent on incompetence or personality flaws, but instead on prejudice and discrimination.

*Summary*

Why do people have complicated relationships with disadvantage? Research suggests that sometimes associating with certain groups and disclosing information is helpful and sometimes it is detrimental; sometimes it is a sign of neurosis, whereas at other times it is a sign of mental health; it can help a student get into a graduate program or it can cause them to be rejected (Chase, 1990).

This study explores women’s relationship to disadvantage, how they define their disadvantage, and when and how they disclose information about their disadvantaged backgrounds. The findings presented here represent one of five topic areas that emerged from a larger qualitative measure to examine how education assists women in their academic achievement or sets up barriers to their success (LePage, 1995). That study established that many participants had an interesting relationship with disadvantage: the way they felt, responded to, and disclosed information about their history was perceived as playing an important role in their achievement. Their comments in this domain were thus chosen for more in-depth examination.

## METHOD

### Description of Participants

Twenty-one women, who were academically high achievers, but who were also disadvantaged as children, participated in this study. They were recruited through fliers distributed at three universities in the San Francisco Bay area. To qualify as disadvantaged, the participants had to have these three experiences in common:

- they lived in either a poor working-class or lower class family as a child
- they were first-generation college students
- they experienced at least one type of familial dysfunction or traumatic childhood stress as children (physical and/or sexual abuse, alcoholism, drug abuse or mental illness, severe illness, death of a parent, etc.)

To qualify as high achievers, the participants had to have an advanced degree or currently be enrolled as an advanced graduate student with at least 2 years of graduate work completed. Eleven of the women had doctoral degrees. Four women were currently enrolled in doctoral programs. Six women had master's degrees. The women held degrees in the social sciences, business, architecture, education, humanities and physical science.

### Diversity

Although most of the participants were Caucasian, 4 of the 21 participants considered themselves to be part of an ethnic minority group. Two were Hispanic and two were African American. One other participant was Asian American, but she was the only person who was interviewed who ultimately did not meet the criteria; her interview was excluded from the final analysis. From the remaining group of White women, three of the participants described themselves as being disabled now or in the past. Also, one woman was Jewish and her father had emigrated from Israel. Another participant had emigrated from Germany as an adult. Finally, one woman identified herself as being a lesbian. The participants were also diverse in age. Ages ranged from 24 to 54. Six people were in their 20s, 11 were in their 30s, 4 were in their 40s and 1 was in her 50s.

### Instruments and Data-Collection Procedures

Data were collected in three ways: interviews, questionnaires, and historical records. When appropriate, the information from one data source was used to substantiate information obtained from another.



In-depth personal interviews were used to gather information about the educational experiences of each participant. The interviews lasted between 2 and 4 hours. The interviews were open-ended so that participants were allowed to discuss what they considered important about their lives and their educational experiences. To ensure a smooth and consistent line of questioning, however, an interview protocol was piloted with five women prior to the study. At the beginning of the interviews, I asked the volunteers about their current professional positions and their family history. Then, they were asked to discuss their school experiences chronologically from kindergarten through graduate school. Later, I asked questions that were more specific and expanded on the themes that emerged during the chronicle. I also had some specific questions in my protocol that I asked at the end of the interview when popular topics did not emerge naturally (e.g., What was your experience with standardized tests?). The interviews were audiotaped and then transcribed verbatim in preparation for analysis. The quotations used as evidence for interpretation were coded according to the transcripts, page, and line numbers.

After the interview, the women were asked to complete two questionnaires. One was a demographic questionnaire that provided additional information about their histories. Another questionnaire provided a second opportunity for the participants to express attitudes about their education in a completely different format. This questionnaire was developed before the pilot study and then revised according to the results of the pilot study. The questionnaire was a Likert scale that consisted of 101 questions. An example of a question that pertains to the results presented in this article is as follows: "Do you believe the word 'disadvantage' has negative connotations?" The participants had the choice of answering yes, no, or somewhat. For this particular question, 17 participants answered "yes," 1 participant answered "somewhat," and 3 answered "no." A few questions were included on the survey about attitudes toward disadvantage as these themes did emerge during the pilot study. Most of the questions pertained to other aspects of the larger study (LePage, 1995), however. These questionnaires were used only as descriptive data for comparison with the interview data. In other words, each questionnaire was kept with each participant's folder, and if a woman made comments in her interview (for example) that the word "disadvantage" had negative connotations, it was expected that she would also answer yes to this question when making a selection on the questionnaire. I used the questionnaires as a way to check for consistency. Also, the questionnaires often motivated the participants to continue talking about their experiences. When this happened, the audiotape was turned back on and the participants were encouraged to continue their oral testimony.

Finally, historical records were used as a third and final check for consistency. Participants were asked to sign a letter of permission so that the investigator could send away for transcripts from high schools, colleges, and graduate schools. The transcripts provided more than just grade averages. They also helped me to identify the types of classes taken by individual students, grade

levels in certain subjects, patterns of class enrollment and elements of transition from high school to college. Many of the transcripts included information on Scholastic Aptitude Test scores, academic awards, which colleges and employers had been sent transcripts, extracurricular activities, and parents' occupations.

At the end of the interview, some of the women were concerned that they may have omitted important information. For this reason, they were encouraged to call and continue the conversation by phone, set up a follow-up interview, or send back a follow-up questionnaire provided during the interview. Ultimately, two women asked for follow-up interviews. Six women sent back additional information sheets, and 11 women sent feedback after reading the final report.

### Data Analysis

The challenge of qualitative data analysis is to make sense of massive amounts of data, identify significant patterns, and construct a framework for communicating the essence of what the data reveal (Patton, 1990). For this study, transcripts were made from each interview and were analyzed with an inductive cross-case analysis. A cross-case analysis means that the information was grouped together according to answers from different people, themes, perspectives, or issues. Then, a content analysis was conducted that included the process of identifying, coding, and categorizing the primary patterns in the data. After that process, a case record was developed for each individual participant. Information was edited, redundancies were sorted out, parts were fitted together, and the case record was organized for ready access. Then the themes were again compared across participants. Information related to the topics discussed here may have been initially coded with "relationship to disadvantage" (RWD), and later coded again under more specific categories.

In the final step, the data were interpreted. Interpretation, by definition, goes beyond description. Interpretation means attaching significance to what was found, offering explanations, drawing conclusions, making inferences, building linkages, attaching meanings, imposing order, and dealing with rival explanations. For example, when interpreting interview data, the goal is to capture pieces of dialogue, organize these quotes, develop a theme, and then deduce a meaning from that theme.

### Rigor

Within the positivist paradigm, a study's rigor is judged through measures of reliability and validity. Lincoln and Guba (1985) present a strong case against the use of these terms within a qualitative paradigm because the purpose of qualitative research is to further understanding without reference to causality. In response, Lincoln and Guba offered four alternative terms for determining

the rigor of an interpretive study: credibility, confirmability, dependability, and transferability.

To check for credibility, the interview data were cross-checked with information provided in the questionnaires and in the transcripts. Answers to specific questions were coded and then placed in tables to easily check one answer with other similar answers from different data sources. Also, the women in this study were all given a copy of the final report and asked to provide feedback on whether or not the results accurately reflected their voices. None of the women claimed that the report misrepresented their voices. In fact, the women who did provide feedback were positive and enthusiastic about the results. As an additional check, a chart was made that provided a visual representation of how many quotes from each participant were included as evidence for each section in the study.

In qualitative research, it is important to determine whether the findings can be confirmed by an outside observer. To check the interpretations of the women's interviews, two outside observers were asked to evaluate the interpretations. One of the outside observers was a male psychologist with 5 years of clinical experience. The second outside observer was a male computer consultant with a Ph.D. in engineering. I purposefully chose men who were likely to have different world views, both when compared to each other and the researcher. These two were asked to examine the dialogue quotes and other data to determine when interpretations were strongly supported by the data and when the interpretations went beyond the data. The clinical psychologist thought I was conservative in my interpretations. The engineer pointed out when my interpretations seemed liberal. They both provided excellent feedback, which is detailed in the longer report (LePage, 1995).

Dependability refers to researcher attempts to account for changing conditions in the phenomenon chosen for study. In this study, it was seldom necessary to make changes during the investigation. To account for dependability, overlapping methods were used. Interviews, questionnaires, and historical information served to corroborate and clarify data.

Finally, transferability refers to the applicability of the findings to other settings, contexts, and groups. The results of this study cannot be generalized. This was not its purpose. The point here was to use the detailed information gathered through multiple methods so that other researchers can explore the data and determine the applicability of the findings to their specific situations. Triangulation of methods through the use of multiple cases, multiple observers, multiple sources of data, and multiple theories strengthen the transferability of the results of this study (Lincoln, 1988).

### Study Limitations

For this study, it is important to discuss the problems associated with self-selection. Because participants were recruited from fliers, it is possible that volunteers were looking for validation. I did not get the impression that the

women simply wanted validation, however. These women were department chairs, deans, and successful business women. My impression was that this was a very new experience for all of them. If there was any self-selection problem, it was that these women really wanted to help others. A majority of the women were in helping professions and none of the women presented the view that people should pull themselves up by their bootstraps (the way they did). These women felt that they had a difficult journey and therefore wanted to make the journey easier for others in the same situation. This study could more accurately represent the perspectives of high-achieving women from disadvantaged backgrounds who were genuinely concerned about the welfare of others.

## RESULTS

### Defining Disadvantage

Many of the women questioned their status as disadvantaged. Often, when the women called to volunteer, most were overly concerned about whether they were truly qualified. This seemed an interesting contradiction because most of these women had experienced serious difficulties as children including poverty, sexual and physical abuse, mental illness, alcoholism, family discord, racism, sexism, and many other stressors. Still, some participants had difficulty categorizing themselves as disadvantaged.

Obviously, the word "disadvantage" had varied meanings to different people. This was further supported by the fact that the participants emphasized different aspects of their disadvantage. For example, some claimed they were disadvantaged as children because their families were poor. Others associated disadvantage with family functioning. Still others claimed to be disadvantaged because they had no guidance from their parents. In this study, these and other forms of stress and inequity represented different forms of disadvantage.

There are many reasons why the women in this study may have been hesitant to adopt the label of disadvantage. First, disadvantage is often defined according to some type of imaginary scale. It is inevitable that someone else is more disadvantaged than you. It can seem pretentious to claim that you have faced adversity. And, the participants were extremely modest.

Also, some definitions of disadvantage are associated with levels of functioning. In other words, some believe that a person can only be labeled disadvantaged if the stress he or she endures negatively affects another part of his or her life. Schools often adopt this definition and label students "disadvantaged" if they do poorly in school.

Finally, the concept of disadvantage may have been confusing because in the late 1970s and early 1980s it became unpopular to describe children as disadvantaged according to their family functioning because this classification was considered racist (Wilson, 1987). For this reason, the women of color were most cautious about claiming they were disadvantaged. They were less reticent

to claim that they had been oppressed or discriminated against, however. In fact, none of the women who belonged to ethnic minorities claimed to be disadvantaged because of their ethnicity. All four agreed that they had experienced some type of discrimination because of their ethnicity, however. This is an interesting contradiction because most would agree that discrimination puts people, especially children, at a disadvantage. This may reflect a wish to avoid being labeled as “victims,” with all the disempowering connotations of the term. Nonetheless, because of their personal feelings about the word “disadvantage,” they were uncomfortable describing themselves in that way.

The women of color in this study did not mention the historical abuse of the term “disadvantage,” but some of the older White women did. These women claimed that in their school experience, if you were White, you could not be disadvantaged. It is possible that this is because Caucasians have wanted to deny dysfunctions they have attributed to minority families in the past. Ultimately, the women of color in this study were suspicious and confused by the term “disadvantage,” and some of the White women were frustrated in that although they considered themselves disadvantaged, others were unwilling to validate their interpretation of their own experience. Listed below are examples of a few dialogue quotes that generated the interpretations described in this section.

### *Definitions of Disadvantage*

P2: My parents married in 1935 when the Depression was really serious and the family was threatened by starvation. So I'm not surprised that two babies died.

Interviewer: Do you think they died because of lack of food?

P2: Oh, I think it was. The family was really extremely poor. As I had mentioned to you before, this was the stress. Poverty was the stress. (T2P4L8)

P3: As far as the disadvantages you're looking at in your study, mine was that I had a highly stressed life. (T3P7L2)

P13: My parents were very traditional and we're still a male-dominated family. Ironically, it's the women in the family who have gone on, but we're still faced with that male domination. Then certainly a disadvantage—my dad is an alcoholic and so that had a big impact on me growing up. The other thing that I never considered a disadvantage until later was that I learned that I should try to be more White. So one disadvantage is that no one ever taught me to appreciate my own ethnicity (Chicana). (T13P7L6)

P9: Gay and lesbian people have some cultural disadvantages due to lack of role models, sex education, relationship practice, and understanding. (Additional information sheet from a woman who identified herself as a lesbian.)

### *Disadvantage Has Been Used to Describe People From Ethnic Minority Groups*

P2: The fellowships were for disadvantaged students first, but they were also earmarking these for ethnic minority students. I read the “disadvantaged,” and I made the

case from being a poor White student. They apparently accepted the application, but it was sent back and I was told that I was not going to be considered.

Interviewer: Do you think they consider you disadvantaged?

P2: They didn't consider White people ever disadvantaged. That's what I felt like. I felt that because I was White, they thought I couldn't possibly be disadvantaged. (T2P50L2)

### *Disadvantage is Defined by How it Affects Your Functioning*

P7: My dad was an extreme alcoholic and a gambler. So that's what I grew up with for as long as I can remember. But, I can't honestly say that was a disadvantage. I can't point to it and say, well, because of my dad, I've done poorly. I don't consider that a disadvantage in school at all. I can't honestly remember not turning in a homework or a paper because I was upset or up all night—which happened a lot. I never let it bother me that way. (T7P64L10)

### *Disadvantage Has Negative Connotations*

The results of this study clearly indicated that the women believed that being disadvantaged as children reflected on them negatively. In fact, very few participants felt comfortable talking about their background with anyone. Some were comfortable discussing these issues with friends and some went as far as telling a professional colleague, but this was rare. In fact, most women were quite steadfast in their belief that to succeed, it was necessary to hide their backgrounds.

Pretending to be someone else was quite simple. None of the participants mentioned the need to lie about their history. Because they were high achievers, people made incorrect assumptions about their backgrounds. Most of the participants simply allowed friends and colleagues to accept and then act on their faulty assumptions. The participants did, however, make some attempts to mimic people who were middle-class in style and appearance.

The women of color in this study faced more difficulty hiding their disadvantages. Their skin color usually identified them as part of an oppressed group. Although the participants from ethnic minority groups could not completely hide who they were, faulty assumptions were also made about the women of color in this study. Because they were doing well in school, it was assumed that they did not face stress at home and therefore did not need as much counseling and support as other students. Also, although the women of color in this study could not completely hide their backgrounds, all claimed that they were comfortable in both the majority culture and in their culture of origin. The importance of being comfortable in different cultures was supported in another research study that interviewed successful Hispanic women (Gandara, 1982). Gandara found that the participants were quite comfortable in both cultures and attributed part of their success to this comfort.

The data suggest that one reason why the women felt a need to hide their

backgrounds was because although difference was touted as being valued, they felt that people disliked and distrusted certain types of difference. Participants also mentioned that gender differences were not valued. Some participants felt that as long as they “thought like men,” they were accepted and even treated well in school and at work.

Finally, because these women felt they had to hide who they were to succeed, it is worth asking whether they themselves believed their disadvantages had detrimental effects on their personal and professional development. An interesting finding shows that many of them believed that although their backgrounds made the achievement process more difficult, ultimately their unique experiences helped them in their careers. Most claimed that their disadvantages made them stronger people, helped them to better understand others, gave them important insights about class and ethnicity, and motivated them to achieve. So, in essence, these women have been hiding what they consider an important and positive part of themselves because they believe society considers it a negative attribute.

#### *Disadvantage Reflects Negatively on a Person*

P4: I think America likes winners. And unless you really have accomplished a lot and can look back almost in pride and say, “well, I pulled myself up with my bootstraps,” it looks bad. America likes winners and we also believe that people are responsible for their own fate. So if you’re poor, you probably deserve to be poor. That’s the mentality. So it’s a negative. (T4P57L4)

P17: I think people do make judgments. As open and as qualitative as we all would like to claim we are, we’re not. We’re not at all. And the way people live isn’t okay. A lot of it isn’t okay even though it’s suppose to be okay. It’s where you came from and it isn’t okay. People do make judgments and they do hold things against you. When I went to Harvard, nobody knew I lived in East Boston. People do make judgments, strong ones. (T17P89L6)

#### *People Make Assumptions About Background Based on Achievement Level*

P12: People often made assumptions about me, especially at the Hebrew University. Since I was a person coming to Israel from the United States, people thought I was wealthy, had supportive parents—who were good Jewish citizens—who cared about religion, which is all untrue. I just let it happen. I decided to allow them to think that way. I was never comfortable talking about who I really was. It was oppressive, but later on, I learned how to be more real and honest and incorporate that into my writing. (T12P111L12)

Interviewer: You don’t feel that anybody has ever known you as a person?

P20: No. In fact, I saw your flier and got all excited. The other night my classmates were working with me, I said, “Look at this, this is really cool.” I was real excited about it and one of my friends said, “Why, you didn’t have any stress? What happened in your childhood?” I said, “Well, I think my childhood was a little stressful,” and when I explained everybody was surprised. (T20P62L22)

*The Need to Hide the Truth*

P2: I have never disclosed my background to anyone. Part of the reason I am successful is because I downplayed my background. In fact, it was disconcerting when I saw your message and I thought, ohh, I should have my say. Here's an opportunity for me to talk about this since I have never talked about this before to anyone. My background and my situation was an essential part of why I was not getting anywhere. So you have to get around that if you're going to get anywhere. One way that you can get around your background is to be like someone else. The way I do this is to not only mimic them in terms of their route, but also mimic them in the way that they are. So in a sense, I discard my past. I think it was necessary to let people believe things about me that were not true but were in keeping with where I had come to.

Interviewer: So people thought that you were middle class?

P2: They certainly thought I was middle class. At least middle class, and I let them believe that. They certainly thought that my family was college educated, had a little bit of money and so on, and I let them believe that.

Interviewer: And you think it would have gone against you if they would have known?

P2: Um-hum, I think it would have.

Interviewer: And you still think that's true today?

P2: Yes, well I don't know. I've thought about this. Has it changed any? I think at the time, I did it the right way. Now it's different. In fact, your dissertation wouldn't have happened 20 years ago. You wouldn't be here. I wouldn't be talking about this. Until I came to California no one invested in people like me. So I was not going to tell somebody that I was one of those people and then ask them to invest in me. Maybe it's changed for some people. There was a woman recently who was the graduate of the year who was talking about having come from a very disadvantaged family. She was doing this and being celebrated for it. I think there is that. On the other hand, she's Hispanic and I think that we might be doing this for some people from ethnic groups, but I don't know if we're doing it for White people. I think it still might be the same for White people. (T2P69L19)

P11: I'm not going to be extraordinarily closeted about my life. But at the same time, if I'm presenting something, I want it to be on the validity of the data. Like for my thesis, I have 400 references. I don't want people to think they're getting the authentic experience, which is related to the authentic Black experience or the authentic female experience. I'm probably reacting too much because if there's some question about Black people, then everybody will turn around and ask, "What do you think about that?" I'm not willing to speak for Black people. However, I also think that the way that White men transform their knowledge, their personal knowledge as well as their objectively derived knowledge, is taken for granted. And of course their personal experience is unfolded while they're doing their work, just as mine unfolded. But they're allowed to be intellectual about it. They're allowed to be professional about it. They're allowed to be "objective" in big quotes about it. But when a woman, a person of color, or someone who's used drugs comes forth and says, well, this is what's going on—then it must be from personal



experience because we are all little subjective-feeling lumps. I want to be taken seriously. (T11P102L1)

P21: People from Europe can't believe the way Americans disclose personal information. When my husband first came here, he thought everybody was crazy. He thought that they were completely out of control and that they were dumb because to him these people were at such a low level of development that they're still having emotions.

Interviewer: So he thought it was a developmental thing.

P21: Oh, yeah. He thought it was really childish, really dumb, out of control, crazy, and not something he would ever do.

Interviewer: Unprofessional maybe?

P21: Oh, absolutely! (T21P108L21)

### *What Happens When People Disclose About Their Disadvantage?*

P15: In a way there was a lot of separation between school and home, and in some ways that really worked for me. School was this secure place. I could be a different person at school than I was at home. I had the chance to be this highly functional person. Of course there were times when it would spill over, that was uncontrollable. Anytime I did have that spill-over, when I couldn't keep my image together, I got negative reactions. And that was bad. (T15P67L9)

### *Some Positive Outcomes from Experiencing Disadvantage*

P6: You asked about the influence of being Black and female, I think being Black and female has had positive influences on me as well. I think being disadvantaged makes you stronger, and it makes you work harder. (T6P20L15)

P9: I think being disadvantaged motivated me to do well, but there is a certain anger underneath it. Even though it's not conscious. There is this attitude that I'm going to show you that I'm a powerful woman. I didn't do well in school just because I love to learn. I have a drive to go where people say I can't go. (T9P45L14)

P17: At the same time, my disadvantages have made me a far more confident, more mature, more responsible, more motivated, even more self-actualized. I also think, I am more articulate and more able to look retrospectively at what has gone on and pick it apart. I can do all those things, and I can do all those things because really bad things happened to me growing up. (T17P107L15)

### *Consequences of Shaming Students from Disadvantaged Backgrounds*

As was mentioned previously, many participants questioned whether or not they were disadvantaged. As children, they had no idea that they were disadvantaged. Furthermore, those who belonged to ethnic minorities downplayed racial issues.

How women define and experience disadvantage and race can be important, especially if they achieve at higher levels when they are not aware of, or do not acknowledge, their barriers. One goal of this research was to explain why some women can achieve despite stress, but another goal was to understand why only a few women from this particular population ultimately succeed. What are the consequences of forcing women to hide their backgrounds? Did this attitude allow them to achieve at the level they now enjoy? Or did this attitude drain their energy, making academic achievement a difficult challenge that only a few strong, resilient women can accomplish?

It is possible that hiding their backgrounds caused these women to feel different. It is also possible that because they felt different they wanted to hide their backgrounds. Whether or not others experienced them or perceived them as being different, it is clear they considered themselves different. In fact, these women suffered from what has been described as an impostor phenomenon (Clance, 1985). They often felt they were deficient, especially in relation to their academic preparation, and they often attributed their achievement to luck. This has serious consequences for self-esteem because none of the women experienced this difference as self-esteem building. On the contrary, many experienced this difference as being deficient.

It is important to note that most of the women who considered themselves deficient did so for different reasons. Many believed they were not as academically prepared as others. They also believed they had an information deficit. In other words, they felt that other students knew more about "the system" than they did. In some cases they felt they did not dress, talk, or present themselves in as polished a way as those from the privileged majority. In fact, some believed they looked different because of their style, clothes, and hair. If they associated too closely with negative functioning in their family, they may have experienced themselves as being less intelligent, more emotional, less articulate, and less assertive. This caused many of them to feel that they did not belong in the educational institutions they attended. They felt that only students with certain backgrounds were really welcome.

When people from diverse backgrounds hide who they are to fit in, this gives an illusion that everyone is the same and is competing on an equal basis. One participant said that all the other students in her program had parents who were professors. This may or may not be true, because others may also be hiding the truth about their backgrounds. Even when the participants recognized (on some level) that they had to face more barriers than other students, this realization was ignored, by them and by others. Ultimately their efforts were invalidated.

It should also be mentioned that just as privileged people may not understand what it is like to be disadvantaged, those who face barriers do not always know what it means to be privileged. Although many women believed that everyone else was privileged, they did not seem to understand exactly what that meant. The women in this study believed that although everyone else was privileged, for some reason, these people still faced serious problems. None acknowledged

(at least on the surface) that some children grow up in supportive, loving families, with parents who provide for their needs and pay their way through college. In essence, many women believed that everyone was privileged (which meant they were less equipped than other students), and at the same time, they believed that everyone faced problems (which meant they were not less equipped than other students). This characterizes a type of denial. These women believed they were different, but did not fully understand (or want to understand) the dimensions of that difference.

Another consequence to reinforcing the myth that everyone is the same and competing equally is that ultimately the women blamed themselves, rather than the system, for their failures. This finding has been documented in other studies as well (Gandara, 1982; Kanoy, Wester, & Latta, 1990). The women in my study had extremely high standards for themselves and saw achievement as completely dependent on their own abilities, not on the school, and not on their family. So, if they failed, it was a reflection on them and not on their parents or on an educational system that discourages achievement among certain populations. This attitude can be helpful if it encourages women to believe they have control over their lives and motivates them to take responsibility for improving performance. It was also found that the women in this study did not take credit for their successes, however. This observation has also been documented in other studies (Gandara, 1982; Kanoy et al., 1990). If these women take responsibility for their failures (with no regard for alternative explanations) and do not balance this responsibility by crediting themselves for their achievement, it is no wonder the academic process is unpleasant. In addition, when women blame themselves for their difficulties, they often expend an enormous amount of energy to prove themselves. Once again, this can ultimately motivate students to do well, but it makes the process very tiresome.

Finally, another consequence of students hiding negative personal experience is that lack of trust makes it difficult for school officials (or anyone else) to help them. Ultimately schools expect students to ask for assistance, especially high achievers. If students are doing well academically and do not ask for help, they are often ignored. The women in this study did not disclose information to school officials because they had little confidence that school officials would handle the information appropriately. They did not want to destroy the image of being smart and special they had managed to create for themselves. They had little confidence in the school's ability to alleviate their problems.

### *Feeling Different in Academic Preparation*

P17: I think when you go to college, you automatically rate yourself on a continuum of the stories that you're hearing. And although I had more radical experiences, they had more of the valued stuff like economics and statistics and things that I can't do. And they had confidence. They believed that they could get that job at USAID because they could do a regression theory. I have this self-doubt that a lot of them didn't seem to have. Now, they may all have the same self-doubts. They may be thinking "look at her, she's a founding mother of special education

in Tunisia and I'll never get to do that." And if that's true, I wish they would verbalize that because it would make me feel better. (T17P81L15)

### *Feeling Different Because of Class and Race*

P1: People now think the only issue is ethnicity, and I still think that economic level is an important issue regardless of ethnicity. Economics doesn't explain everything, but it explains a lot. I'm reading that book right now, *Blacks at Harvard*, and one of the things that's clear is that some of the people who are writing essays about their experiences at Harvard come from families where their parents and the parents before them all went to elite Ivy-League colleges. (T1P127L4)

P11: In most of my classes in physiology, I was the only Black person. By then there were a fair number of women, but most of the women were either White or Asian, and I mean it was real clear that this wasn't something Black people were supposed to be doing. At least it was clear to me. (T11P117L9)

### *Feeling Different Because of Appearance*

P20: It seems to me—there's this certain subtle look about people who have come from a different place, like hairstyle, way of dressing, way of speaking—it's a little more polished. Often I feel like I'm not polished. I'm a very rough stone. So I can't tell you if I've ever had an experience where I've obviously been discriminated against in that way. But I have certainly felt insecure and it's edited my behavior. (T20P74L2)

### *Identity Issues*

P17: When I went to Harvard, the first 3 months I was walking around panicked thinking, what am I doing here? I can't believe I'm here. I think the difference with Harvard for me was the name. I felt I had leaped some huge barrier. I was a *them* now. (T17P46L13)

P20: Well, sometimes I feel like I'm here at this school and I'm surrounded by people who have gone to very prestigious universities and who come from families that are well-to-do, and sometimes I think I'm not as good as they are. I've had that feeling before in high school and throughout my life, feeling like I'm not as good as people around me. I think people are better equipped than I am. (T20P14L3)

### *The Impostor Phenomenon*

Interviewer: Do you feel comfortable going and talking with professors?

P12: I never did. It terrified me.

Interviewer: Why?

P12: I always felt like they would just see a stupid person—that they would find out. I felt when I was in class, I wore a big mask and if they saw who the real me was, they would see through it all. (T12P90L8)

P11: Well, I had some bad experiences in graduate school, but it wasn't a function of anyone trying to make me feel that I didn't belong or that I wasn't any good. Most of my stuff was internal because it was a struggle for me to feel like it was okay for me to be doing this. Like before I took my orals—when I was reading my stuff and writing my stuff and thinking my stuff, I was fine. But every time that I was in a position where they could finally say, the emperor really doesn't have any clothes, I would just be terrified. I don't remember my orals. I was so terrified. (T11P79L1)

*People Who are Disadvantaged Think Everyone Else is the Same*

Interviewer: So you feel that other students had money—had professional parents?

P2: That I was an unusual one? I felt that way. Of course another thing, it just occurred to me that there may have been others like me there. I wouldn't have known about them though would I? We were hiding from everybody. (T2P72L2)

P20: I don't really talk about my disadvantage—never to a professor.

Interviewer: Do you feel like it would be helpful?

P20: I think it would be good. I think that it would be good because people assume you're here, you're good, you're qualified. I think it would be nice if people acknowledged that people do come from different places. Some people take longer routes, or have had more diverted routes. It would be helpful to be able to talk about that, to get recognition for that, and maybe get some support for that. (T20P64L8)

*Fear that Schools Will Not Provide Appropriate and Helpful Intervention*

Interviewer: Did you ever tell the school about your problems?

P11: Of course not! Why would I want them to know? Maybe I'm "of course-ing" you too much but I can't understand why I would want them to know that I'm an absolute wreck. That seems a little self-defeating. Everybody is patting you on the back because you're doing well in school. I was getting all the positive strokes for not being a suicidal maniac. Why change that? Things were good. Things were okay the way they were. (T11P37L8)

P15: I think it made me more sensitive and more vulnerable and it put me in a situation where I didn't want to expose any weakness because it was so threatening. If I was to get negative attention about my problems, I would have just been devastated. Even if I did have a problem, I wouldn't tell anybody. I didn't want to take the risk that I was going to be hurt. (T15P79L15)

## DISCUSSION

The data in this study suggest that women from disadvantaged backgrounds believed they had to hide their backgrounds to achieve. This study also suggests that although hiding their backgrounds may have helped them to succeed, these women faced psychological consequences from hiding their true identity.

Thus the norms surrounding self-disclosure and the attitudes toward unusual histories create bias in our educational system that places nontraditional students at a disadvantage. The hypotheses generated from this study in relation to disadvantage include:

1. Just as some people make negative assumptions about a person's potential based on their disadvantaged history, people also make positive assumptions about a person's history based on higher achievement levels.
2. Women who have achieved highly in academics do not always see themselves as disadvantaged, even after experiencing extremely stressful childhoods. This may reflect the idea that people can only be disadvantaged if their barriers negatively affect their functioning.
3. Women often believe they need to hide the nontraditional side of their personal history to be successful.
4. The need to hide unusual personal experience is as much related to society's norms as it is to personal psychology.
5. It is helpful for professionals in education to address children's disadvantages if they do not have negative attitudes that prejudice them against these children.
6. Allowing women from disadvantaged backgrounds to integrate their history into the learning process will validate their experiences and improve achievement among this population.

### Implications for Education

Why is it important to discuss women's relationship to personal disadvantage? One implication of hiding the truth is that adults are not the only people affected by our social norms and expectations, children are also affected (Saarni, 1979). If adults hide their histories to adapt to social norms, it is inevitable that children similarly will hide who they are. Children might not understand the complex pressures associated with their behavior, but children quickly pick up on behavioral cues. It is also possible that children do not tell others about their situations because, as a society, we have set up a system in which disclosure can have negative consequences. The women in this study believed that hiding their families' situations helped them to succeed as adults and as children. If adults are hesitant and incompetent when dealing with the disclosure of family problems, they could make the situation worse for children who face stress at home. Children who sense hesitation may not understand that adults simply do not know how to handle the situation; they may interpret adult hesitation to mean that they don't deserve help or don't really need help. Children might also sense that once they disclose personal information, judgments will be made about who they are. Research has demonstrated the negative effects of low teacher expectations on a child's educational achievement (Jussim, 1993).

Another consequence of hiding personal history is that it precludes children and adults from connecting their learning with personal experience. Some investigators emphasize the need for women and disadvantaged students to connect new knowledge with personal experience (Bartolomé, 1994; Clinchy,

Belenky, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1985; Terenzini et al., 1993). At this time, it is still difficult for women to relate their learning to positive personal experience, let alone negative experience. For example, Tarule (1988) outlines the problems associated with women bringing their experiences into the learning process:

In classroom discussions, women often join the dialogue starting with long stories that detail what seems relevant from their lives. They ground their learning and understanding in their experience, while the listeners, students and instructors alike, squirm, unable to hear the logic of connection, and therefore the essence of the idea. The listeners are simply mortified by an apparently inappropriate sharing of life experience. They roll their eyes, the instructor tries to figure out how to break in, and the speaker begins to perceive that her presentation of the ideas, as well as the way she thinks about them are wrong.

Bringing personal experience into the learning process is difficult for everyone, but it is even more so for women from disadvantaged backgrounds. Even those professionals who advocate a connection between learning and personal experience often inadvertently send subtle messages about what experiences are acceptable. This is an outgrowth of the trauma inflicted on ethnic minorities as a result of the deficit model, which characterizes minority children as having deficient educational experiences due to negative environmental factors (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Because of this injustice, teachers have had to fight negative stereotypes that present ethnic parents as dysfunctional and their children as deficient. Therefore, many do not want to hear about negative experiences that might feed into damaging stereotypes.

An example of a well-intentioned teacher subtly influencing people from disadvantaged backgrounds can be identified in a recent article by Bartolomé (1994). In her article, Bartolomé describes problems associated with the deficit model. She believes that a child's past should be incorporated into the learning process and that teachers should value what these students bring to the classroom. Unfortunately, as she presents this important message, Bartolomé is also subtly communicating which experiences are acceptable and which are not. In her article, Bartolomé gives an example of a teacher who was prejudiced against Hispanic children. After the teacher spent a semester getting to know this Hispanic child, she discovered his "loving and sunny" personality, which changed her attitudes toward Hispanic children. Bartolomé provides an example of the student's writing that turned this teacher's negative attitudes around. In that paragraph, the student praises his father for the hard work he has done and explains how his father has pulled the family out of poverty by sheer determination. If this was the student's experience, that is wonderful; however, what if the student had written a well-thought-out description of how his father's abuse had changed his life by inspiring him to become a lawyer and fight for children's rights? The question is, after reading this slightly different version, would the prejudiced teacher still think of the student as loving and sunny?

Many are still not willing to accept students who are different. They are obsessed with trying to prove that we are all the same, and that "the same" means perfect. What Bartolomé is suggesting from her example is that once a teacher learns the truth about "these" children, their ugly stereotypes will drift away and the teachers will recognize that all parents are perfect and that problems only really exist in the stereotyped image of minority children. Bartolomé says that we need to value and use what students bring to their educational experience; this is true, but we must value not only soft fuzzy experiences that convince others that deep down we are all angelic, but also our negative experiences as well. Our negative and our positive experiences make us all part of the human race and truly similar. By pretending that dysfunction doesn't really exist, we may be protecting parents and convincing outside observers that certain groups are not as bad as they have been portrayed in offensive, prejudiced descriptions, but we are also invalidating the experiences of children who face stress.

This article describes women's relationships to the concept of disadvantage and the difficulties they encounter in a system that rewards them for silence. It also addresses the question of when it is appropriate to disclose personal information in educational settings. Many argue that students need education that is connected to their life experiences. If this is true, we must ask how this connection can be made when we force children from disadvantaged backgrounds to hide their true identity. Also, it was suggested earlier, and it seems an important point, that denial of personal disadvantage not only affects the educational experiences of children and adults, it can perpetuate an unjust social system (Crosby, 1984).

*Initial Submission: September 24, 1996*

*Initial Acceptance: January 14, 1997*

*Final Acceptance: March 14, 1997*

## REFERENCES

- Bartolomé, L. I. (1994). Beyond the methods fetish: Toward a humanizing pedagogy. *Harvard Educational Review*, 64, 173-194.
- Bronfenbrenner, V. (1979). Beyond the deficit model in child and family policy. *Teaching College Record*, 8, 95-104.
- Chaikin, A. L., & Derlega, V. (1974). Variables affecting the appropriateness of self-disclosure. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 42, 588-593.
- Chase, G. (1990). Perhaps we need just to say yes. *Journal of Education*, 172, 29-37.
- Clance, P. (1985). *The impostor phenomenon*. Atlanta, GA: Peachtree.
- Clinchy, B. M., Belenky, M. F., Goldberger, N., & Tarule, J. M. (1985). Connected education for women. *Journal of Education*, 167(3), 28-45.
- Crocker, J. & Major, B. (1989). Social stigma and self-esteem: The self-protective properties of stigma. *Psychological Review*, 96, 608-630.
- Crosby, F. (1984). The denial of personal disadvantage. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 27, 371-386.
- Cunningham, J. A., & Strassberg, D. S. (1981). Neuroticism and disclosure reciprocity. *Journal of Counseling Psychology* 28, 455-458.



- Derlega, V. J., & Chaikin, A. L. (1976). Norms affecting self-disclosure in men and women. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 44, 376-380.
- Ehrlich, L. (1980). *The pathogenic secret: A response to discrimination*. Paper presented at the Speech Communication Association, November, New York. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 194 939)
- Holtzclaw, L. (1983). *The importance of self concept for the adult learner*. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 236 307)
- Gandara, P. (1982). Passing through the eye of the needle: High-achieving Chicanas. *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences*, 4, 167-179.
- Jussim, L. (1993). Self-fulfilling prophecies: A theoretical and integrative review. *Psychological Review*, 93, 429-445.
- Kanoy, K. W., Wester, J., & Latta, M. (1990). Understanding differences between high- and low-achieving women: Implications for effective teaching and placement. *Journal of College Student Development*, 31, 133-140.
- Larson, D. G., & Chastain, R. L. (1990). Self-concealment: Conceptualization, measurement and health implications. *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*, 9, 439-455.
- LePage, P. (1994). When do education students talk about personal experience? An analysis of classroom discourse. *College Student Journal*, 28, 179-191.
- LePage, P. (1995). The role of education in women's resiliency: Factors that promote achievement? *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 56-10A, 3850.
- Lincoln, Y. S. (1988, July 10-12). Naturalistic inquiry: Politics and implications for special education. *Proceedings of the Research in Education of the Handicapped Project Director's Meeting*. Washington, DC. (ERIC Document Reproduction No. ED 212 773)
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Neimeyer, G. J., & Banikiotes, P. G. (1981). Self-disclosure flexibility, empathy, and perceptions of adjustment and attraction. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 28, 272-275.
- Patton, M. Q. (1990). Qualitative analyses and interpretation. In M.Q. Patton (Ed.), *Qualitative evaluation and research methods* (pp. 371-425). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Pennebaker, J. W., & Francis, M. E. (1996). Cognitive, emotional, and language processes in disclosure. *Cognition & Emotion*, 10, 601-626.
- Saarni, C. (1979, March 15-18). *When not to show what you feel: Children's understanding of relations between emotional experiences and expressive behavior*. Paper presented at the Biannual Meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development, San Francisco. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 171 396)
- Tatum, B. D. (1992). Talking about race, learning about racism: The application of racial identity development theory in the classroom. *Harvard Educational Review*, 62, 1-24.
- Tarule, J. M. (1988). Voices of returning women: Ways of knowing. In L. H. Lewis (Ed.), *Addressing the needs of returning women: New directions for continuing education* (pp. 19-33). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Terenzini, P. T., Rendon, L. I., Upcraft, M. L., Millar, S. B., Allison, K. W., Gregg, P. L., & Jalomo, R. (1993). The transition to college: Diverse students, diverse stories. *Research in Higher Education*, 35, 57-73.
- Wilson, W. J. (1987). *The truly disadvantaged: The inner city, the underclass, and public policy*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.