WOMEN OF VALOR: LITERACY AS THE CREATION OF MEANING IN THE LIVES OF A SELECT GROUP OF HASSIDIC WOMEN IN MONTREAL, CANADA

SHARYN SEPINWALL

Ph.D, Concordia University, Montreal, Canada
E-mail: sharynsepinwall@hotmail.com

Abstract - This paper is based on an ethnographic study of a group of Hassidic women and it inquires into the roles, uses and functions that literacy plays in transmitting and receiving information in three domains: the public(societal)the public-private (educational) and the private (familial, communal). I chose the interpretative ethnographic model as my methodological model because one of its fundamental epistemological assumptions is that social life can only be adequately understood from the point of view of the actors themselves. The participants in my inquiry demonstrate a range of information literacy which is situated in broader social relations, and their attitudes toward the acquiring of information often guide their actions. In defining new identities in the context of their education, these Hassidic women are continually negotiating and creating their personal meanings and transforming cultural practices and values. The ethnographic studies to which I refer in my paper suggest that researchers and educators are connecting notions of literacy to how people behave, understand and read their worlds in particular contexts. Focusing on my own study and objectives, I relate the function of literacy as the creation of personal meaning to Hassidic women who find themselves in a culture that has historically promoted and, in fact, praised women who are silent and deprived of information in the public realms of their lives. This inquiry has brought me to the understanding that the study of literacy isnot a means for describing what people read and write, but it is a means of seeing the ways in which they behave in the world.

Keywords - Literacy, Education, Ethnography, Religion, Hassidic Women