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Balancing Act: A Phenomenological Study of Female Adult Learners Who Successfully Persisted in Graduate Studies

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A study was conducted utilizing Cross' (1981) barriers to adult learning as a framework to better understand how adults successfully complete their graduate studies. Participants in the study were solicited via Facebook and LinkedIn. Three female adult learners who persisted in their graduate studies while balancing demands outside academics including employment and family responsibilities were selected. The study found the barriers identified by Cross 30 years ago – institutional, dispositional and situational – were still relevant for these female graduate adult learners. The phenomenological approach allowed the participants to describe how they made meaning of these barriers while overcoming them to persist in their graduate studies.

Sarah cannot wait to be finished with school. Approaching the midpoint of her master's degree, she reflects on her challenges in the program thus far. Returning to higher education twenty years after completing her undergraduate degree in business, she is married with one daughter in college and another in high school. Her class schedule often conflicts with her daughter's extracurricular activities. Her spouse works full–time and spends much of his time on the road traveling. Compounding matters further, her school costs come directly out of the family budget. She hopes her efforts to complete graduate school will be worth the sacrifices she and her family are making.

Sarah's pursuit of a graduate degree is driven by her desire to change careers from business management to education. After being advised to pursue a teacher certificate program when interviewing with the local school board, she attempted to obtain information from the local university. Following this guidance, she tried to contact the local state university to learn more about the process. Reflecting on that experience, she stated:

> I couldn't get anyone over there to talk to me, to give me a clear guideline of what I needed to do. And the reason I ended up (in my current program) was at least they had it in a format that I could read. They had a very small staff there, but they had a person that actually answered the phone. But it still wasn't very clear. If someone would have told me what I know now, I would have done something different. I know that.

Sarah also discusses her initial experience in the classroom after navigating the admissions process and enrolling in her first class in two decades:

> The first class I took was a winter accelerated class. So it was a whole class in one month. It only met five times. So every single time you met a

> major project was due. I was very overwhelmed not having been in school in over twenty years.

After attending the first week of class Sarah realized her academic pursuits were going to have a significant impact on her family. She talks about the impact of her decision to return to school on her family:

> (The family) had a little meeting about 'this is what's going to happen' and 'this is what it means'. (My daughter) is in college too, but she was away at college, so mostly it was going to affect (my youngest daughter) because (my husband) is out of town a lot. And so, she was going to have to pull her weight a little more I suppose. They knew on the front end that I was not going to be available, as I was before, and they were going to have to pull their weight.

Sarah also reflects on the impact of her academic schedule on her ability to attend her youngest daughter's cross country and track events. Her daughter finished in the top 15 in the state the previous year. However, in the upcoming semester, Sarah will miss many of her daughter's cross country meets due to a class that is on the same day as the weekly meets. In a frustrated tone she says, "I even have a class on the Saturday of the state championship…If you miss one class it's a letter grade (penalty)."

In Sarah's reflection, we can see evidence of barriers and obstacles that could prevent her from successfully completing her graduate studies. After a significant review of literature related to adult learning, Cross (1981) found there is "enough consistency in the findings to give a generalized picture of what people say deters them from participating in adult learning activities" (p. 98). She grouped these deterrents into situational, institutional and dispositional barriers, describing them as follows:

> *Situational barriers* are those arising from one's situation in life at a given time. Lack of time due to job and home responsibilities, for example, deters large numbers of potential learners in the 25– to 45–year–old age group. Lack of money is a problem for young people and others of low income. Lack of child care is a problem for young parents; transportation is a situational barrier for geographically isolated and physically handicapped learners. *Institutional barriers* consist of all those practices and procedures that exclude or discourage working adults from participating in educational activities – inconvenient schedules or locations, full–time fees for part–time study, inappropriate courses of study and so forth. *Dispositional barriers* are those related to attitudes and self–perceptions about oneself as a learner. Many older citizens, for example, feel that they are too old to learn. Adults with poor educational backgrounds frequently lack interest in learning or confidence in their ability to learn. (p. 98)

While some may argue the barriers described by Cross (1981) are dated, we believe they take on new meanings for adult learners in the 21st century. In Sarah's story, we can see evidence of these barriers that puts her educational pursuits as an adult learner at risk.

Role of the Researcher

The study of adult learner persistence has been the primary topic of Jeff's doctoral studies over the last five years. His interest was stimulated by his experiences working in corporate America. He has worked 22 years in a field – medical devices – that is heavily populated with professionals who have successfully persisted in higher education which demonstrates their respective academic abilities. Although it is typical for college graduates to have a higher socioeconomic status as a result of their education and professional roles, he observed that few of his colleagues had completed graduate studies. Worse yet, he observed that most demonstrated no desire to pursue graduate studies in spite of financial support in the form of tuition reimbursement programs from their employer. He did not understand why individuals – who had successfully persisted, had the financial means, and had support from their respective employer – were not interested in pursuing graduate studies; thus, his interest in the field of adult education and the topic of adult learner persistence in graduate studies. Using a postmodern lens, Jeff conducted this study as a pilot for his future dissertation work which will focus on the experiences of adult learners who successfully completed graduate school.

Barbara has been a professor in Higher and Adult Education at the University of Memphis for 18 years. She received a PhD in adult education from Florida State University. Prior to entering academic life she spent more than 20 years as an adult educator in various settings. Her expertise in adult education and learning was utilized to help Jeff to design his study and to review his findings from the interviews and data analysis. Her input and review served as a triangulation method to ensure trustworthiness and credibility of the data.

The Opportunity

Findings from a 10–year longitudinal study of learners who completed their bachelor's degree in 1992–93 indicate that only 40% of the learners had enrolled in graduate studies by 2003. These learners had an average delay of 2.7 years after completing their baccalaureate studies before enrolling in a graduate program. Additionally, at the end of the ten–year period following the completion of their undergraduate degrees, only 62% of the 40% who had enrolled in graduate school had completed their graduate studies (Nevill & Chen, 2007). Effectively, only 25% of the learners who successfully completed their bachelor's degree in 1992–93 had completed graduate school ten years later. Therefore, approximately 75% of this group of learners has not completed graduate studies and 60% had not enrolled in a graduate program. Based on the 10–year longitudinal study, a large pool of potential graduate school candidates is available.

Why is Increasing Adult Learner Participation in Graduate School Important?

It is widely known and accepted that higher levels of educational attainment have a positive effect on individuals, society and higher education (Bowen, Chingos, & McPherson, 2009; Nevill & Chen, 2007; Wendler et al., 2010). Income levels for individuals are positively correlated with educational levels; higher educational levels increase contributions to and participation in society; and participation in higher education benefits academies via increased enrollment rates and completion levels which has a positive effect on funding. And while money spent on education is typically viewed by individuals as an expense, Zakaria (2009) challenges this saying "in a knowledge–based economy, education functions more like savings – it is spending forgone today in order to increase human capital" (p. 201). Phillips (2005) reinforces this view saying that we are in a "knowledge era" whereby "the economy's base has moved from agricultural to industrial to intellectual" (p. 100).

Human Capital

It is important to encourage and support more adult learners to participate and complete graduate school because there is a *significant* opportunity to increase human capital in the United States. Human capital can be described as the combined knowledge, skills and abilities of individuals within an organization which in turn contributes to improving the productivity and profitability of an organization (Phillips, 2005; Society for Human Resource Management, 2006). Adult learners who successfully complete graduate school realize important learning experiences, increase professional development, and enhance leadership skills as a result of their graduate school experiences (Conrad, Duren, & Haworth, 1998). Human capital in organizations is developed and grown with such experiences. However, on a larger scale, it is important to increase human capital in the United States to remain globally competitive. Kazis et al. (2007) say, "The United States runs the risk of being hobbled economically by an adult population that is insufficiently qualified to meet the demands of the modern workplace" (p. 2).

For example, India and China have significantly increased their efforts to lure their human capital home from the United States to support their own growing economies. And they are investing significantly in higher education to retain talent as well. This puts the potential supply of human capital for the United States at risk (Zakaria, 2009). Bowen, Chingos and McPherson (2009) reinforce Zakaria's position, explaining the need to increase the pursuit and completion of advanced degrees. Based on data from the 2000 Census, they claim that approximately 50% of people who hold doctorates in the fields of engineering, math and science in the United States are foreigners. Due to the trends in higher education abroad and the globalization of the world economy, Bowen et al. insist that the United States must "do a better job of growing its own timber" (p. 7) by encouraging the pursuit and completion of advanced degrees among its own citizens.

Completing graduate studies and increasing human capital is critical for the future competitiveness of organizations and for the United States. And as indicated earlier, only 25% of the learners who successfully completed their bachelor's degree in 1992–93 had

completed graduate school by 2003. Based on this, a significant opportunity to increase the attainment of advanced degrees – and thus human capital – exists.

The Study

In the study presented here, Cross' (1981) barriers for adult learners were utilized as a framework for discussion with adult learners who have successfully persisted in their graduate studies while maintaining multiple responsibilities in addition to their academic pursuits. The reason for this approach was twofold. First, the study sought to determine if Cross' (1981) barriers to adult learning are still relevant, particularly for adult learners in graduate school. Secondly, the study was conducted in an effort to provide hope and encouragement to other adult learners in the midst of their graduate studies or adult learners who dream to pursue such studies.

Rather than conducting a study to identify barriers related to persistence for graduate adult learners, this study focused on better understanding how adults successfully complete their graduate studies in spite of the barriers. Instead of asking, "What are the barriers?" this study asks, "How do successful graduate adult learners persist in spite of barriers?"

This question assumes that graduate adult learners face some type of barrier in their academic pursuits. The literature is clear that undergraduate degree attainment is affected by socio–economic status (SES), race and gender (Bowen et al., 2009). It is reasonable to believe these characteristics and others such as increased family and professional responsibilities (Nevill & Chen, 2007) persist in graduate degree attainment as well. The authors also believe that graduate adult learners must still contend with institutional, dispositional and/or situational barriers described by Cross (1981) in their academic pursuits. Findings from this study may assist institutions of higher education in their goals to better serve graduate adult learners. In addition, this understanding and knowledge may provide hope and encouragement to adults who have yet to return to higher education to pursue graduate studies by focusing their attention on "how you can succeed" instead of "why you may fail".

Background of the Problem

The growth of the adult learner population in higher education is well documented in the literature (Kasworm, 2003a, 2003b; Lamdin, 1992; Lundberg, 2003; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Quinnan, 1997; Thomas, 2005). Yet, while this population includes adults who are returning to higher education to pursue graduate studies, the literature tends to primarily focus on adults who are pursuing associate and bachelor–level degrees or certificate programs. Quinnan (1997) said he "had a difficult time locating any research pertinent to adult education that did not succumb to overused arguments for skills development, literacy training, or technical preparation as primary themes" (p. 61). Polson (2003) claims this lack of attention may be because most graduate adult learners maintain other non–academic responsibilities and study on a part–time basis versus a full–time basis. Thus, there is a lack of literature focused on adult learners' pursuit of graduate studies.

So, what about the adult learners who choose to continue their education in graduate school? Is this to say that it is not important to understand the issues associated with persistence of adult learners at the graduate level? Nevill and Chen (2007) discuss the importance of graduate school persistence to society while noting the effect of family and employment responsibilities on graduate school persistence for adult learners. How do adults, specifically those who work part– or full–time with family responsibilities as single or married parents, successfully persist? To strengthen the literature and to support these adult learners, higher education faculty and staff, industry leaders and adult learners new to graduate studies need to understand the how graduate adult learners successfully persist while maintaining multiple responsibilities in addition to their academic pursuits.

The Adult Learner

The discussion begins by asking, "Who is the graduate adult learner?" In terms of age, adult learners have been defined in the literature as being as young as 22 while others have claimed that students greater than 25 years of age should be classified as adult learners (Cross, 1981; Horn, Cataldi, & Sikora, 2005; Kasworm 2003a, 2003b; Lamdin, 1992; Quinnan, 1997). As a graduate adult learner at the University of Memphis, I was curious if my institution had a formal definition of the adult learner. I found that the University of Memphis (2010) describes adult learners in the 2010–2011 Student Handbook and Planner as follows:

> Our defined population of adult students is 25 years–and–older, usually attends school full or part–time, works full or part–time, may be married, single, divorced, or widowed. Adult students may have dependents or have other family responsibilities. An adult student may have started college some time ago, or may be a first time college student later in life. (p. 14)

Based on the traditional age of high school graduates (18) and the traditional length of baccalaureate studies (4 years), it is reasonable to conclude that most graduate students are 22 years old or older. Thus, one could argue that *most* graduate students are adult learners on the basis of age alone. However, while age was an important criterion for the definition of a graduate adult learner in this study, it was not the sole criteria for inclusion.

Rational for the Study

Identification and discussion of barriers that exist in the path of undergraduate adult learners are discussed in the literature extensively (Cross, 1981; Hensley & Kinser, 2001; Kasworm, 2003a, 2003b, 2008; Lundberg, 2003; Quinnan, 1997; Thomas, 2005).However, literature regarding graduate studies at the masters, first professional, or doctorate level is scarce. While Cross (1981) and Quinnan (1997) specifically raised concerns regarding barriers formed by institutions of higher education for adults at the undergraduate level, little can be found in the literature regarding institutional barriers for graduate adult learners. Is it assumed that this group of learners does not have problems

navigating within the halls of higher education? Expanding this thought to situational barriers, is it assumed that graduate adult learners do not have challenges in balancing family responsibilities and/or work demands in addition to their academic pursuits? Perhaps it is the notion that adult learners who have completed undergraduate studies possess an advantage – financially and dispositionally – in comparison to their counterparts pursuing undergraduate studies – that drives the imbalance in the literature regarding academic persistence for adult learners? Or perhaps it is simply the large number of undergraduate students who are pursuing baccalaureate and associate degrees or certificate programs in comparison to graduate students pursuing the masters or doctorate that drives this imbalance in the literature.

Wendler et al. (2010) insist that increasing educational attainment in graduate school is critical to the competitiveness of the United States in the global economy. They claimed that "graduate education goes beyond just providing students with advanced knowledge and skills – it also develops critical thinking skills and produces innovators" (p. 1). Conrad, Duren and Haworth (1998) found that "by providing students with the kinds of learning experiences, professional development experiences, and leadership experiences that enhance their ability and willingness to become leaders in their profession and in society, master's programs have become bridges between our colleges and universities and the large society" (p. 76). Given these views and the increase of adult learners in higher education, it is evident that more research on the experiences of graduate adult learners is warranted. This is the primary driver of Jeff's intended dissertation research on the topic of graduate adult learner persistence. This study served as a pilot study for his future research.

Research Focus

The intent of this phenomenological study was to better understand the experiences of adult learners who have successfully completed graduate school while maintaining multiple responsibilities. These adult learners transitioned from young adulthood through baccalaureate studies to a life inclusive of family, career or other duties, such as civic or volunteer services, prior to returning to school to pursue and complete their graduate degree. The study may provide hope and encouragement to other adult learners in the midst of their graduate studies or adult learners who dream to pursue such studies and thus support the growth of human capital. In addition, the study sought to determine if the institutional, dispositional and situational barriers described by Cross (1981) are still relevant in higher education today – particularly among graduate adult learners.

Literature Review

In spite of additional life demands faced by adult learners, they are driven by several factors to pursue graduate school. These include, but are certainly not limited to, things such as a desire to change their career paths which is often described as the "encore career" (Bank, 2007; Freedman, 2007; Wofford, 2008), economic reasons such as maintaining their marketability or competitiveness within the workforce (Go, 2008), or life changes such as the loss of a spouse via death or divorce (Kasworm, 2008). But

regardless of the source or magnitude of these motivations, adult learners often struggle to balance their academic desires and dreams with the challenges of family, financial, and/or work responsibilities. These demands and the resulting balancing act, in spite of prior academic attainment as evidenced by the completion of undergraduate studies at the baccalaureate level, weaken persistence at the graduate level for adult learners.

When literature regarding persistence in graduate studies is located, it appears to focus primarily on doctoral candidates. For example, Roberts and Plakhotnik (2009) reflected on their experiences as doctoral candidates discussing the role of support systems in graduate adult education to aid in their persistence. Mentorship, formal support within the program and other significant relationships, such as family and friends, were discussed at length. However, Roberts and Plakhotnik made no mention of responsibilities outside of academics, which would mean they were adult learners on the basis of age (assuming they were not child geniuses as they did not disclose their respective ages). This means they may be classified as "students who work – individuals who saw themselves as students first, working to help pay expenses" rather than "employees who study – individuals who see themselves as workers first, taking college programs to help the improve their job prospects" (Kazis et al., 2007, p. 9). Thus, Roberts and Plakhotnik may not meet the more stringent definition of an adult learner utilized in this study which includes multiple responsibilities outside of academics.

It appears the dearth of literature on graduate adult learners maybe driven by the notion that they do not face the same barriers to academic persistence as those without previous academic attainment. Quinnan (1997) suggests this view saying "those who have established professional credentials and are pursuing more specialized degrees employable in the service of capitalism receive a remarkably different greeting than adults struggling to obtain a liberal education" (p. 59). However Polson (2003) challenges Quinnan's views, suggesting the services needed to improve or reduce graduate school attrition rates for adult learners with responsibilities outside of academics.

While it is likely that graduate adult learners do not face the same barriers as traditionally–aged students or even adult students who are pursuing undergraduate education, many graduate adult learners are professionals who have many responsibilities as full–time employees and family members while pursing their academic goals (Polson, 2003). And although many of these learners may have a higher socioeconomic status as a result of their undergraduate degree and professional position, these learners may still have to overcome situational, institutional and dispositional barriers as identified by Cross (1981) to successfully persist in their graduate studies.

For example, due to situational issues such as work and/or family responsibilities, graduate adult learners often do not have the time to socially integrate on campus with fellow students. While a lack of social integration has been demonstrated to have a negative effect on academic persistence (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005), Lundberg (2003) found that the role of relationships for adult learners was different from younger students. Specifically, she found that faculty–student relationships were more important and educationally related student interaction (peer teaching and peer discussion) was less important to adult learners in comparison to their younger counterparts. She concluded that the role of social integration "is one that is especially unclear for adult students….their lives often contain multiple off–campus responsibilities and relationships that may limit their time available for investment in social relationships" (p. 665).

Powell (1999) also discusses perseverance or persistence for professionals returning to higher education. His experiences with this group of learners indicate that the primary reason this group of learners fail to persist is a result of their inability to balance life activities and not due of their academic abilities. Kasworm (2008) points out that "college for most adults is not a physical separation from their past worlds. Rather, most adults continue their complex lives – with the added challenging role of student" (p. 27). Polson (2003) supports this stating that adult learners "find themselves without peers with whom they can relate easily; most have responsibilities to others that strain their time and their finances" (p. 60). Obviously, adult learners who have multiple responsibilities outside of academic pursuits have barriers to overcome to successfully persist.

Situational, institutional and dispositional barriers may take on new meanings for graduate adult learners 30 years after Cross (1981) proposed them. For example, it is commonly known that participation by females in the workforce and higher education has increased since 1981. Since it is not uncommon for females to be the primary caregiver of children in the home, the situation is especially challenging for female parents who attend graduate school. From an institutional perspective, the internet makes it more convenient to register and pay for classes and purchase books online in comparison to 1981. Therefore, it helps in overcoming situational challenges that may have existed in the 1980's. Dispositionally, it is the researchers' basic belief that graduate adult learners may have fewer dispositional challenges in comparison to undergraduate students. This belief is based on the confidence that graduate adult learners have gained as a result of successfully completing baccalaureate studies. However, as a word of caution, Polson (2003) found that if graduate adult learners do not feel supported by faculty, they may struggle academically and psychologically.

Methodology

Bhattacharya (2007) and Creswell (2007) said phenomenology is about the essence or experience of the individual or group of individuals, which is described by how they make meaning of the phenomenon they experience. Since the primary research question is focused on how successful graduate adult learners persist in spite of barriers, a phenomenological approach was employed. This approach allowed the researchers to focus on how the adult learners' made meaning of the completion of their graduate studies as they maintained multiple responsibilities outside of their academic pursuits. Data were collected via personal interviews. The interviews were transcribed and member checked (Bhattacharya, 2007) to ensure accurate representation of the participants' stories. Following completion of the interview transcripts, the participants' responses were analyzed for themes related to Cross' (1981) barriers to adult learning.

Institutional Review Board (IRB) Approval

Prior to collecting data, approval from the Institutional Review Board at the University of Memphis was requested. This request and approval was a requirement of Jeff's residency research project. The request included the purpose of the study, the proposed methods and procedures, a section describing how human subjects would be selected and handled, an assessment of the potential risks and benefits, and a description

of how confidentiality would be maintained. In addition, a copy of the Informed Consent Form and proposed interview questions were included in the IRB submission. After receiving approval from the IRB, the solicitation process ensued.

Participant Criteria and Selection

Earlier we defined the adult learner as an adult who had transitioned from academics to a life inclusive of family, career, and other duties such as civic or volunteer services. Based on these criteria, the study focused on the type of graduate adult student who would be described as "employees who study" versus "students who work" (Kazis et al., 2007). Therefore, criterion sampling (Creswell, 2007) was utilized for this study focusing on adult learners who persisted in their graduate studies while balancing demands outside of academics such as employment and family responsibilities. Participants for this study were solicited on Facebook (a social networking website) and LinkedIn (a professional networking site). The researcher posted requests for participants in the study asking for volunteers and referrals in his status updates on each website. Initial responses from both sites included males and females. Those who were interested were contacted via email or phone by the researcher explaining the criteria to participate in the study, the interview process and the time commitment required for the study. The males who had expressed interest in participating quickly faded from the scene. Others who did not meet the criteria of the study were thanked for volunteering but not selected for participation. Three females who met the criteria for the study were identified and selected. The lack of diversity in the participants suggests that other strategies may be required to solicit a more diverse participant pool for Jeff's future dissertation research. In addition, the lack of diversity limits the transferability of the findings of this study to non-female graduate adult learners.

Participants

The three participants were females in their forties, married, and mothers during their period of studies. The first participant, Alice, met the criteria of an "employee who studies" versus a "student who works" (Kazis et al., 2007) because her career is the primary focus of her day and higher education is pursued on a secondary, part–time basis. She is a full–time elementary special–needs teacher and her three children attend middle and high school. She completed her master's degree through on online program at a for–profit institution.

Betty has three elementary and middle school children. She worked multiple part–time jobs during her graduate studies. Betty completed her master's degree on campus at the public state university where she completed her baccalaureate degree. This required her to spend many hours commuting to and from campus while balancing work and family demands. The commute for Betty was a one hour drive each way.

Charla is the stepmother of a teen–aged son during her studies. Charla left full–time employment as a mathematics teacher to work as a teaching assistant through her graduate studies. In Charla's case, it may be argued that she was a "student who worked" versus an "employee who studied" due to her role as a teaching assistant. However, for the purposes of this study of adult learners with *multiple* responsibilities outside of

graduate studies, Charla was retained in the study. This was primarily due to the level of her graduate studies – the doctorate – and the issues associated with the addition of a teen–aged stepson to her household at the time of her studies. Charla completed her doctoral studies at a public state university.

Alice, Betty, and Charla each successfully persisted in graduate school while maintaining multiple responsibilities. Therefore, their experiences offer insight into how graduate adult learners overcome Cross' (1981) institutional, dispositional, and situational barriers. Each participant was interviewed to 1) gain a better understanding of the barriers or challenges she faced during her graduate studies; and 2) determine if the barriers described by Cross (1981) are still relevant 30 years later for adult graduate students.

Data Collection and Analysis

Prior to beginning the interviews and data collection, the study was explained to each participant individually. The purpose of the study was explained in detail in either a face–to–face meeting or via a phone conversation. After each participant confirmed they understood the purpose of the study, they were requested to read and sign the informed consent form prior to beginning individual interviews. The content of this form was discussed thoroughly to ensure understanding prior to participation.

The importance of maintaining participant and institutional confidentiality was discussed at length with all participants. As such, the participants and the institutions they attended were given pseudonyms to protect their identity. The interviews were recorded digitally and were transcribed by Jeff. The transcripts were supplied to the participants to ensure that their respective thoughts, perspective, and intent were accurately captured. The participants were encouraged to clarify and correct the transcripts to ensure their thoughts and feelings were accurately reflected in the data. The researcher also followed up with each participant via email or a phone call to ensure an accurate understanding of any changes submitted by the participant.

The interview with Alice was conducted in a local public library. Betty's interview was conducted in a shopping mall as her boys shopped prior to a scheduled doctor's appointment. Distractions were minimal since the interview was conducted mid–afternoon in the middle of the week. Since Charla resides in a different region of the country, her interview was conducted via a phone conversation.

Data analysis occurred simultaneously with data collection by the primary researcher. Significant statements and clusters of meaning were identified from the interview data. From this, textural (how) and structural (what) descriptions of the participants' experiences were developed. This led to the essence of the participants' experiences (Bhattacharya, 2007). The data was then compared to the three barriers to adult learning defined by Cross (1981) and themes were identified.

Each participant was given a copy of their interview transcript for review and to allow them to reflect and clarify any of their responses. This is a method of triangulation referred to as member checking (Bhattacharya, 2007). Also, findings from the interviews and data analysis process were reviewed with Dr. Mullins–Nelson. As discussed earlier, her experience in the field of adult education was utilized to ensure trustworthiness and credibility of the findings. Using another researcher's experience and expertise for data

verification is another form of triangulation that was used to verify data (Huberman & Miles, 2002). The last form of triangulation that was employed was the use of thick descriptions. Creswell (2007) says that a thick descriptions "creates verisimilitude and produces for the readers the feeling that they experience (the readers), or perhaps could experience, the events described" (p. 194).

Consistencies in the findings were evident between the participants. In addition, new themes were not emerging from the interviews, subsequent member checking process, and expert review. Based on these observations, data saturation for these participants had been reached.

Results

Although the study was not intended to identify motivations to pursue graduate school, motivations were a theme that emerged early in the interview process. It became evident that motivations to return to higher education for graduate studies were primarily centered on anticipated financial gain or career change for the participants in this study. For example, Alice knew that successfully completing a master's degree would result in a $4,000 pay increase. She said this was the primary reason that she chose to pursue graduate studies. Betty's return to school was driven by a sudden change in her employment status as her photography contract was not renewed by her employer. And Charla was motivated to advance her career from teaching in high school where she often had to deal with parents to a teaching position in higher education. Considering the motivations for Alice, Betty, and Charla, internal motivations such as a desired career change and external motivations such as the loss of a job or increased pay are evident.

While the sample size was small and all female, perhaps it is representative of the higher participation rates of adult females in higher education. For example, data from the Organisation for Economic Co–Operation and Development (2010) indicates that 52 percent of females between the ages of 35 and 44 participate in formal and/or informal learning in the United States in contrast to 46 percent of males. This gap is even wider in the 45 to 54 year old age group with 54 percent of females participating versus 42 percent of males. Snyder and Dillow (2010) note an increasing trend in female participation in higher education as well. They claim that post baccalaureate studies increased by 61 percent in a ten–year period between 1998 and 2008 for females. During the same period, they indicate that male participation only increased by 30 percent. In addition to these participation trends, females have also demonstrated a higher educational attainment rate at the undergraduate level (Bowen et al., 2009). These trends and the method of participant solicitation described earlier may explain the all–female participation in this study.

Institutional

When compared to the time of Cross' (1981) writings, higher education provides more options for adult learners at all levels. These increased options may be driven by a better understanding of adult learners' needs or due to the ubiquitous nature of technology which has facilitated the growth of online learning options. Options include weekend, evening, online and blended programs that include a balance of online and

face–to–face courses. Additionally, the growth and success of cohorts for adult learners in graduate school has also been evident (Ellrich, 2010).

Each participant discussed her encounters with institutional barriers during the pursuit of her studies. Alice talked about a counseling program that she really wanted to attend. However, because the program was not online she would have had to commute to campus two to three days per week. She knew the program would not be feasible due to the ages and activities of her three boys and because her spouse traveled frequently for work. This resulted in her search for program that best met her need to maintain responsibilities outside of her studies. She chose an online program offered by USA Online University saying:

> The price was right. Global Online University was much more expensive – same type of program – and didn't have as good of a reputation. Town University I looked at but that was every Saturday for like 16 months and you know how Saturdays are. I mean you've just got kids going every direction. So I looked at those programs before I went with USA Online University…I looked at City University which I would have had to…they weren't all online so I would've had to driven down there and that would've almost been two years. And I looked at Suburban University but it was just so expensive and similar to City University and I wouldn't have been able to do everything online.

Alice realized the impact of her work and family responsibilities on her desired academic pursuits. She reflected on her decision to choose a program that fit her lifestyle and schedule saying, "It was put together for people like me that have full time jobs, that have families, have other things going on…I just kept that in my head."

Betty chose a more traditional, on campus program for her graduate studies. This choice was in spite of working part time, raising three school–aged children, and an hour long commute each way to attend classes. And she was fully aware that the classes were scheduled in a rigid manner that would affect her graduation date. She talked about one semester that required her to commute to class four nights per week while working and raising a family. She said, "I took 15 hours in one semester because I know that if I didn't take those 15 hours it's going to be another year and half to get my masters because of the way the classes fell."

Charla made the decision to pursue her PhD while teaching mathematics in high school. She left the high school to work as a teaching assistant at the university while pursuing her doctorate. Also during this time, she became a new mother to a 14 year–old stepson with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). She noted that the transition from her master's program where she was a "star student" to the doctoral program was extremely rough for her. She stated that institutional issues caused her to "feel hopeless" and she actually slipped into a "period of depression that lasted probably 3 or 4 months (pause) it was a period of time that I almost gave up." The institutional issues described by Charla sounded like institutional hazing to the researcher. In this case, the institutional issues (or barriers) resulted in a dispositional barrier (depression and loss of confidence) with Charla.

Charla explained what she thought were the drivers of her feelings of hopelessness and depression. She described an institutional environment that was contrary to her frame of reference regarding education. She said, "There was a real disconnect between my philosophy of what education was and what their philosophy of education was." She discussed the "dysfunctional" behaviors associated with competing factions in her college. She reflected on her doctoral studies saying that if felt like the faculty had an attitude that "if you weren't struggling it wasn't being done properly." She was aware that the pursuit of a doctorate was very different than the pursuit of a master's degree; however, she said, "A PhD student is still a student and if a PhD is different than a masters – which they were very insistent upon – then you kind of have to spend some more time telling people how it is different."

Dispositional

Each shared her thoughts or experiences related to dispositional barriers. On one occasion, this barrier was reinforced by institutional behaviors. Charla discussed her insecurity in her doctoral program saying she went "into a situation where I don't think they (the faculty) had a lot of confidence in me. And I certainly didn't have confidence in myself." She had these feelings in spite of her success at the master's level. Initially, the doctoral environment made her "feel like I couldn't do something that I otherwise knew that I could". Charla's insecurities caused her to consider dropping out of the program. She said, "I remember there being a couple of times where I would come home from school and I was actually shopping for U–Hauls (chuckling) to get us out of there."

Charla also discussed her status as a first–generation college student. Reflecting on her doctoral studies she recalled her thoughts that "maybe I don't understand the context of where I am?" Fortunately, she was able to develop relationships with a couple of her classmates with whom she could discuss her fears and insecurity. She said these relationships were pivotal in overcoming her dispositional barrier related to declining confidence. She elaborated saying:

> The biggest key to my success there was developing relationships with my cohort of students and realizing that we had this shared experience…we actually got to the point where we could reveal these insecurities which was not something that really happened in my department. So forming those relationships with other students that were going through the same thing were a really, really big help for me because it helped me to get some of my confidence back.

So while Charla had been very successful in her master's studies, her confidence was shaken during her doctoral pursuits which created a dispositional barrier. The informal support so critical to Charla's persistence is described by Roberts and Plakhotnik (2009) as social capital – resources that improve relationships between individuals and/or organizations. Roberts and Plakhotnick stress the importance of informal support in graduate school and to help graduate adult learners "to find new ways to stay focused and persevere" (p. 49).

Betty's confidence entering graduate school was tentative due her undergraduate experience. She said, "I didn't do that great in undergrad. Because it was a lot of busy work, it was a lot of 'high school' you know?" However, changes in her employment status, specifically the loss of her photography contract, caused her to question her direction. When her employment contract as a photographer was not renewed, Betty decided "it's time to change".

Prior to photography, Betty had been a teacher but she had no desire to go back to the classroom. However, guidance and counseling was interesting to her when she was teaching and she recalled thinking, "That guy (guidance counselor) has a really cool job…but I don't think I could ever go through all of that school to do it." But the changes in her employment status made Betty reconsider graduate school 15 years after completing her undergraduate degree.

Once in graduate school, Betty had a much better experience than she had anticipated. She expressed relief in the differences in graduate school in comparison to her undergraduate experience. She said of her graduate studies, "They weren't looking for perfection in graduate school." She described her graduate experience as being more "hands on" which she felt matched her learning style much better than undergraduate studies which she described as "read this chapter and we're going to have a test on it".

Alice did not allude to any negative dispositional barriers associated with her graduate studies. Instead, her reflections were more centered on events that positively impacted her disposition towards her studies. For example, she reflected on a grant proposal that she wrote and submitted while she was teaching prior to her decision to attend graduate school. She talked about her perceptions at that time regarding the perceived difficulty of the task. When her school received a grant for $2,300 based on the proposal that she wrote, her confidence was boosted. Smiling confidently, she reflected, "I think maybe that set the precedent to go back and get my masters." Quinnan (1997) pointed out the importance of success in helping adult learners to overcome dispositional barriers.

Alice said that she felt very satisfied in her academic achievement based on finishing with a 4.0 grade point average in graduate school. However, reflecting upon this she noted that she just "didn't stress as much" about her grades because of all of her responsibilities outside of the classroom. This was reinforced by a classmate who encouraged her persistently through the program. She did acknowledge that if she had "gotten some B's or C's on some papers, on some work, or some classes, I would've probably been freakin' out."

Situational

Of the three barriers described by Cross (1981), the situational barrier was the most evident in the lives of the participants in this study. Obviously, the situation created by caring for children, working, and maintaining a relationship with a spouse created an environment that required a delicate balancing act and priority setting. Nevertheless, several themes emerged during the discussions about situational barriers which included: 1) the importance of family support; 2) the ability to prioritize activities and tasks; and 3) the initially unforeseen benefit of attending school as an adult. And these themes are not necessarily independent from one another.

The importance of family support. Regarding family challenges and support, all of the participants acknowledged the pressure of balancing their academic pursuits with the demands of caring for a family. In essence, the family had to "participate" by making changes and adjustments in their way of life. For example, Alice talked about the increased independence of her children during her graduate studies. She said, "They had to fend for themselves. They had to learn to cook things. They've always been independent, you know?" Alice noted that she had to sacrifice other activities, in particular volunteer activities, during this time in order to prioritize her studies and her family.

Likewise, Betty talked about the increased demands her graduate studies placed on her husband. Although she worked as a photographer, tutored and baby sat prior to going back to school, her schedule was flexible enough to coordinate all of the logistics associated with having three active, school–aged children. Now that she was pursuing her master's degree which required an hour long commute to campus, her flexibility was severely restricted. "When I went back to teaching full time and going back to school full time, I mean he (her husband) had to learn…the kids have to be here, here and here…it threw his world more than it threw mine," she explained. In this case, gender role expectations had shifted. Her husband's willingness to take on a different role in the family was a key to Betty's success.

Charla's situation was distinctly different from Alice and Betty. Her 14 year–old stepson with severe ADHD moved in with Charla and her husband during her doctoral studies. His learning disabilities became a distraction. Charla explained:

> He had a lot of problems with school. So I was getting calls (pause) at least a couple of times a week from the school. Especially in that final year and it wasn't so much behavioral problems. It was academic problems specifically dealing with his disability. He wasn't paying attention in class. He wasn't turning in homework. He was distracting other students, but nothing (pause) nothing really severe but lots of little things that constantly had to be dealt with. So that really did impact my graduate studies.

In addition to the issues with her stepson, Charla was very aware of her husband's decision to "put his career on hold for us" allowing her to attend the school and program of her choice. Her husband's willingness to relocate with Charla provides evidence of the kind of sacrifices family members often make to support the academic pursuits of their loved ones. The issues with her stepson and the sacrifices of her husband accumulated into pressure that Charla felt during her graduate studies. This pressure is a good example of a situational barrier. Charla explains how she felt during her studies:

> Because my husband had put his career on hold for us to go to (Big Sky University) to get my degree, obviously the focus was on me getting done. And we all knew that we had made sacrifices and I had to get done…I had real pressure to get done quickly. And it wasn't external pressure. My family didn't put it on me. It was pressure that I put on myself knowing that we needed to move on with our lives.

The ability to prioritize. Although family challenges and support were evident in the interviews, another theme became evident as well. Each participant talked about her ability, as well as her family's ability, to prioritize and "not sweat the small stuff". Alice said, "A lot of things just got cut out...I didn't worry about the small stuff." She also spoke about the requirement to be more organized to meet the multiple demands of work, family, and school. In hindsight, Alice mused that she may have actually functioned better with multiple demands of her time because it forced her to be more aware of her time.

Betty discussed how her household was impacted during her graduate studies. Although she worked before and during her graduate studies, Betty took care of the domestic chores in the household which included groceries, laundry, cooking, and cleaning to name a few. Regarding these tasks she said, "A lot of that goes by the wayside. The laundry doesn't get caught up as much, the floors aren't vacuumed. But hey, you're eating and you're still going on." She said her ability to "just not letting everything, even though it's piled up, overwhelm me" was the key to her successful persistence in graduate school.

The benefit of attending graduate school as an adult. During the interviews, each participant talked about the effect of age and maturity on her studies. Betty did not believe she would have been successful in graduate school at an earlier age in spite of the additional demands of family and work at a later age. She pondered, "I think the older you are sometimes the better. This is because you kind of realize 'I have to make time'…if I were younger, if it was 10 years ago, I probably wouldn't have gotten through it." Charla talked about the effect of her non–academic responsibilities on her studies saying, "It kept me more grounded than other students. I think I had more purpose than other students." Alice reflected deeply on her decision to pursue graduate studies later in life:

> I think I got more out of it at the age I was with the experience of being home with my kids and getting back into the program. I think – looking at my life from a distance – it made more sense to do it the way that I did it than to have graduated from college and being burned out from having graduated from college wanting to get out. If I'd have gone back for another year and gotten a master's (degree) I wouldn't – (pause) – it wouldn't have meant as much to me. You know, because I already had that knowledge but I didn't have any experience…I think having had some experience in the classroom, having been at home with my kids … that's the best experience anyone can have – to be a parent.

Limitations

This study served as a pilot study for a larger study related to Jeff's intended dissertation topic. Seidman (2006) provides excellent guidance on conducting interviews as a form of research and his work was used as a guide to the collection of data. After confirming the subject matter of the interview via email and phone conversations, a single interview with each participant lasting between 60 and 90 minutes was conducted.

This approach was highly preferred by the participants due to their time restrictions. However, for the dissertation, the researcher prefers to follow Seidman's three–interview process.

The sample size in this study was small; however, the researchers believe that data saturation was achieved with the participants. And since all of the participants were white females pursuing graduate studies in education, the findings may not be transferable across gender, race or program of study. Given the lack of literature on the experiences of graduate adult learners, the study contributes to this literature specifically for white, female graduate adult learners. Other studies could focus on other groups as defined by gender, SES, race and/or program of study and make contributions to the literature as well.

We believe further research in methods of successfully addressing the situational barriers faced by graduate adult learners could significantly improve graduate school completion rates. In addition, findings in this area could improve enrollment, support persistence and increase completion rates in graduate school as "family responsibilities, such as those associated with being married or having children, may impose limitations on graduates' time and their likelihood of applying to, enrolling in, and completing a graduate degree program" (Nevill & Chen, 2007, p. 2).

Discussion

The three interviews with Alice, Betty, and Charla suggest that the barriers identified by Cross (1981) 30 years ago are still relevant for graduate adult learners. However, it appears that institutional barriers may be less of an issue than at the time of her writings due to more learning options for adult learners due to advancements in technology. For example, Alice was able to take advantage of an online program to complete her graduate studies. However, Betty still had to succumb to inflexible course schedules in order to complete her graduate degree. This was a result of her choice to attend an on–campus program at the same university where she completed her baccalaureate degree. While Betty may have been able to complete her degree via an online program and mitigate the barriers associated with the inflexible course schedule and commuting, her comfort level with a familiar setting – the campus, faculty and administrators – took precedent.

The institutional barriers that Charla encountered began to form a dispositional barrier related to her confidence level and created doubts in her ability to persist. While Alice may have had some slight hesitation regarding her abilities to complete a master's degree, it was quickly surmounted when she successfully completed her first major assignment. Choosing to attend the same university where she completed her baccalaureate degree gave Betty a sense of comfort that enabled her to overcome her initial concerns with the perceived rigors of graduate school. Like Alice, Betty's initial experiences in the classroom made her more confident and comfortable with graduate studies.

Interview data related to the situational barrier provided rich material for understanding how graduate adult learners successfully persist and complete graduate studies. As most graduate adult learners will surely have to balance family and work with their academic desires, keys to successful persistence can provide hope and

encouragement. The keys to overcoming situational barriers included the importance of family support, the ability to prioritize activities and tasks and the unforeseen benefit of attending graduate school as an adult.

While improvements in educational attainment at all levels is key to the improvement of the global competitiveness of society (Bowen et al., 2009), improving educational attainment of advanced degrees across these characteristics is critical to human capital development in the United States (Wendler et al., 2010). Therefore, more research on the experiences of successful graduate adult learners could help improve the attainment of advance degrees. Research should include an identification of the different barriers that may exist for the graduate adult learners. This research could be based in a phenomenological approach or it could be driven by case studies of graduate adult learners. Such research could consider different characteristics such as the effects of gender, SES, race, and/or program of study.

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