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NONTRADITIONAL-AGE WOMEN GRADUATES FROM A DISTANCE PROGRAM:

CONTRIBUTORS TO CHOOSING PSYCHOLOGY AS A MAJOR

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to identify the contributing factors that led

nontraditional-age female college students studying in a distance format to choose psychology as

a major. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews, as well as short essays and

demographic questionnaires completed by the participants. The results were examined within

the context of Lent and Brown's (2013) social cognitive career theory (SCCT). The application

of SCCT led to the examination of how the women overcame real and perceived barriers to

degree attainment. Data analysis using the lens of liberal feminist theory exposed some of the

social constructs that existed as the participants pursued their bachelor's degrees. The following

primary themes were identified: (a) a sense of benevolence leads nontraditional-age female

college students to choose psychology as a major, (b) family and community support is critical

for degree attainment for nontraditional-age women who study in a distance format, (c)

nontraditional-age women choose a distance program because of its practicality and flexibility,

(d) specific skills and traits contribute to the success of nontraditional-age female college

students, and (e) nontraditional-age women who completed their degrees in psychology in a

distance program experience personal and professional transformation. Implications for theory,

practice, and research are also presented.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The number of adults entering or returning to college in the United States has increased rapidly over the last 20 years. The number of college students age 24 or older increased from 5.7 million in the 1989-1990 academic year to 7.1 million in 1999-2000; these adults accounted for 43% of undergraduate students (Donaldson & Townsend, 2007). By 2010, nearly 50% of college students were age 25 or older (Aslanian & Giles, 2010), and the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) has predicted that from 2010 to 2020 there will be a 20% increase in the number of college students who are 25 and over (NCES, 2013).

Aslanian and Giles (2010) found that adults returning to college or starting college may be prompted to do so due to a "specific trigger event that occurs (such as new job/loss of job, divorce)" (p. 2) and that these adults may be choosing to use "learning to cope with some transition in their lives" (p. 2). As a result of this transition and education, they will likely experience changes in their careers and jobs.

Because these adults primarily pursue higher education in career-related fields, it is important to explore the factors that influence their choices of returning to or beginning college, deciding on majors, and persevering to graduation (Aslanian & Giles, 2010). Social cognitive career theorists Lent, Brown, and Hackett (1994) explained how people form interests, make choices, and achieve success and satisfaction in their educational and career pursuits. Social

cognitive career theory (SCCT) accounts for a variety of factors in the career development process, including contextual, environmental, cultural, social, and economic variables. Many of these factors intertwine and impact adult students' success.

Primary interests likely lead people to choose careers in which they can further study and engage these interests (Lent et al., 1994). For instance, people with social interests are likely to pursue careers in which they can incorporate their social interests in their daily work environments. However, although innate interests may exist, Lent, Brown, and Hackett (2000) maintained that contextual influences and environmental factors impact whether these interests and goals are pursued. If progress is perceived to be "impeded by adverse environmental factors" (Lent et al., 2000, p. 38), it is likely that goals will be abandoned. Factors that can negatively impact progress include barriers that cannot be overcome and inadequate support systems.

Swanson and Woitke (1997) explored specifically the impact of barriers on women's career development. Their research focused on real and perceived barriers, both of which impact women's career success. These barriers, real or imagined, impede the career development process, both theoretically and practically. Women restrict their career aspirations and plans due to a variety of barriers. Lent et al. (2000) stressed the need for continued research into the phenomenological aspects of barriers, stating that "barriers—like beauty—lie at least partly in the eye of the beholder" (p. 47).

Coogan and Chen (2007) specified that the career development process for women is more complicated and complex than that for men. A number of internal and external barriers are unique to women, such as "early gender role orientation, employment inequities, and family responsibilities" (Coogan & Chen, 2007, p. 191). These barriers have the potential to impact the

accessibility of the education and training needed for women to succeed and to advance in their careers. For this particular research study, SCCT was used as a guide to identify the contributors that lead nontraditional-age women to choose to major in psychology in a distance program.

The number of bachelor's degrees awarded in psychology has increased steadily over the last four decades, and the major remains one of the most popular choices for undergraduate students. In 2008-2009, 1.6 million bachelor's degrees were awarded in the United States. With 94,271 of these graduates, the psychology major ranked fifth behind business (347,985 graduates), social science and history (168,500 graduates), health professions and related clinical sciences (120,488 graduates), and education (101,708 graduates; NCES, 2010). Halonen (2011) stated that the undergraduate psychology major "is typically among the top three choices nationally" (p. 2).

Since 1950, the number of female college graduates majoring in psychology has increased dramatically; in 1950, 37% of psychology majors were women, whereas in 2008, 77% of psychology majors were women (NCES, 2010; Ostertag & McNamara, 1991). Some of this rise can be attributed to the increasing numbers of women choosing to pursue bachelor's degrees; this strong increase in the number of women declaring psychology as their undergraduate major will impact psychology professions. Howard et al. (1986) predicted that the dramatic demographic gender shift in the field of psychology would have a significant impact on the profession.

Ostertag and McNamara (1991) stated that the changing gender ratio in the field of psychology will impact the profession both positively and negatively. Although there are potential advantages to an increased number of women choosing the psychology field (e.g., more research by women about women's issues), a primary side effect of the growing number of

female psychology majors is the psychology profession's "declining prestige and income" (Ostertag & McNamara, 1991, p. 366).

Need for the Study

Although psychology remains a popular major in higher education, no existing research provides information, theoretical or concrete, to explain the contributors that lead nontraditional-age women, in particular, to choose to major in psychology in a distance learning format. Women currently outnumber men in graduating with bachelor's degrees in psychology; it is important to understand the contributors that lead women of all ages in all educational formats to choose psychology as a major.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this phenomenological qualitative study was to discover and understand the lived experiences and meanings that led nontraditional-age women who completed bachelor's degrees through a distance program to choose psychology as a major. With no research existing to explain the contributors that lead to this phenomenon, the qualitative approach allowed women from this population to explain the contributing factors to their decisions. Using the lenses of constructivism with a feminist axiology, I asked participants to share the experiences that contributed to their choice of majoring in psychology in a distance program. In general, this research furthers the understanding of the essence of this population's lived experiences.

Research Question

A variety of questions led to my interest in this topic and the decision to pursue a study examining how nontraditional-age women enrolled in a distance program choose psychology as

a major. The primary question driving this research is *What are the contributors that lead nontraditional-age women enrolled in a distance program to choose to major in psychology?*

Definition of Terms

Some common terms that will be used consistently include the following:

1. *Nontraditional-age student:* a student 25 years of age and older.

2. *Distance program:* an educational format in which students and faculty members are not in the same physical location.

Assumptions

For this qualitative study, I made the following assumptions:

1. Research participants freely and openly agreed to participate.

2. Participants responded to the qualitative interviews honestly and to the best of their memories.

3. My biases and perceptions of this population of learners were acknowledged and processed.

4. All information gathered through interviews, essays, and questionnaires was compiled and reported honestly and accurately.

5. The research findings may not be transferable to all nontraditional-age women who are majoring in psychology in a distance program.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

In this literature review I focus on four distinct themes: the nontraditional-age female distance learner, SCCT, the characteristics of students choosing to major in psychology, and the recent phenomenon of the feminization of the psychology major.

The Nontraditional-Age Female Distance Learner

The study of adult students in general, including their needs and traits that lead to degree perseverance, has been marginalized in higher education research and literature. The difficulty in studying nontraditional-age students' experiences may be partly due to the challenges of controlling heterogeneity. Collectively, it is much easier to research traditional-age students who freely roam a campus and are easily accessible (Donaldson & Townsend, 2007).

Characteristics of Nontraditional Students

Contributing to the body of research about marginalized groups of adult students is critical, particularly because the number of traditional-age students is steadily decreasing. Cox and Ebbers (2010) stated that the number of high school graduates over the last 20 years has been relatively stagnant: The "number of 18-year-olds in the American population peaked in 1979 and has been steadily decreasing since" (p. 338). As this trend continues, it is important to gain a solid understanding of nontraditional-age distance students' experiences.

According to the NCES (2010), *distance education* is a formal education process in which the students and instructor are not in the same place. As distance and online educational opportunities have increased, students are entering higher education at all developmental levels (Borges, Richard, & Duffy, 2007). Although distance education numbers continue to grow for men and women, most of the bachelor's degrees awarded in the distance format are received by women. In 2002-2003, women earned 58% of all degrees awarded through traditional and distance formats; broken down by level of degree, women earned 60% of associate's degrees, 58% of bachelor's degrees, and 59% of master's degrees (NCES, 2010). Furthermore, NCES research indicated that in 1999-2000, women accounted for 55% of college students ages 18 to 23, 54% of students ages 24 to 29, 60% of students ages 30 to 39, and 62% of students ages 40 and older. Overall, nontraditional-age female students are "the fastest growing population in institutions of higher education" (Quimby & O'Brien, 2006, p. 451).

Due to the steady growth in female student enrollment, Carney-Crompton and Tan (2002) predicted that to ensure the success of these students, the staff and faculty of colleges and universities must work to "understand and accommodate the unique dispositional, situational, and institutional needs of nontraditional female students" (p. 140). Thus, college and university administrators must continually evaluate their services, including support services, so they are strong and marketed effectively to the adult learner. Faculty and support staff working with adult learners also must understand students' motivations for attending college, the factors contributing to their choice of major, and the support needed to persevere to graduation. An understanding of these factors will enable college and university professionals to serve these learners more effectively, thus contributing to success for both the students and the institutions.

Many researchers have identified characteristics of female distance learners. In a study of 63 nontraditional-age female learners, Carney-Crompton and Tan (2002) found that this group achieved higher academically and experienced no differences in their psychological functioning than traditional-age learners, despite having increased personal and professional responsibilities. Grades for the traditional-age women ranged from 54% to 92%, whereas the grades for the nontraditional-age women fell in a more narrow range of 74% to 90%.

In addition, the nontraditional-age female student typically occupies a number of other established roles. Padula (1994) found that many women beginning or returning to higher education do so after establishing family roles. Coser (1974) referred to family and education as greedy institutions, each of which requires a good deal of energy and time from the nontraditional-age female student. Padula found that children and the time demands placed on women in caretaker roles are major obstacles to many women in their pursuit of bachelor's degrees.

Dill and Henley (1998) determined that, in addition to the time demands due to nonscholastic responsibilities, nontraditional-age learners experienced a great deal of anxiety about their ability to succeed academically. Quimby and O'Brien (2006) found that women entering college while managing a number of additional roles are likely to place a great deal of importance on their individual academic success; however, they also found that "nontraditional women underestimate their abilities" (p. 323) to achieve academically. Lower self-confidence contributes to attrition most intensely with this population of students (Quimby & O'Brien, 2006). In addition, due to lower self-confidence levels, nontraditional-age women experience intense emotions about returning to or entering higher education (Padula & Miller, 1999).

Although research on psychological well-being as it relates to the academic success of traditional-age students is plentiful, information about the specific factors influencing the psychological well-being of nontraditional-age female students is thin. Identifying and addressing factors related to students' psychological and emotional well-being is critical, as "the absence of psychological distress was identified as the best predictor of academic persistence for nontraditional students" (Quimby & O'Brien, 2006, p. 451).

Because psychological and emotional well-being is critical to nontraditional-age students' success in higher education, it is imperative that counselors in higher educational environments seek to understand the unique needs of these students, just as they study to serve clients with differing cultural backgrounds, sexual orientations, mental illnesses, and the like (Chao & Good, 2004). However, nontraditional-age students are more likely than traditional-age students to utilize immediate support systems such as spouses, partners, children, and nonfamilial resources such as professional peer support and social support instead of support systems offered by campus offices (Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002).

In regard to support systems related to major and career choices, Creamer and Laughlin (2005) found that traditional-age students generally rely on parents for career-related advice. Nontraditional-age learners, however, need resources provided by their respective higher educational institutions to process career decisions that may impact their success as students and professionals. Because many of these women enter the higher education environment with predefined and well-established roles strongly associated with their individual identity, their career exploration process is critical to their academic success. Thus, it is important that nontraditional-age women are introduced to and utilize the institution's career development counselors and resources.

Retention of Nontraditional-Age Female Students

Retention of female students is crucial for colleges and universities, given that female learners are outnumbering their male peers in growing numbers. In 2006, the United States Department of Education predicted that the percentage of women pursuing higher education is expected to continue to grow faster than the percentage of men (Cox & Ebbers, 2010). Furthermore, Paulson and Boeke (2006) stated that after 2010, higher education institutions will experience a dramatic increase in the number of adult students—to the point that the number of nontraditional-age learners will grow faster than the number of traditional-age learners who enter college immediately after high school.

Due to the predicted growth of nontraditional-age students, the success of individual institutions' retention efforts is critical. Hadfield (2003) commented that although colleges and universities recognize the importance of serving this population, administrators have neglected to use methods that focus on retention; instead, a "one-size-fits-all" (p. 18) approach to services has been used and is failing universally to meet the needs of adult learners. Hadfield further stated that institutions serving adult learners can anticipate that 40% of these students will stop out or drop out in any given enrollment period. For many institutions, most of which are nonprofit, the potential loss of nearly half of their adult learners is disastrous when considering the fiscal budget for that academic year; in addition, if these students do not return, the tuition income is lost for years to come.

A number of researchers have examined the factors that led to the departure of nontraditional-age female students from higher education. Landry (2002) found that nontraditional-age female students' attrition is impacted more by "outside social forces than academic ones" (p. 5), such as child care and health care issues. Cox and Ebbers (2010) found

that other social challenges, including a lack of family support for their new role as a student and poor emotional, financial, and physical support, contribute significantly to nontraditional-age women failing to persevere to graduation. Because women face very different challenges than men in regard to social constructs, it is critical that higher education administrators, faculty, and staff thoroughly understand why adult women choose to enroll in or withdraw from their programs.

In general, retention rates in distance programs are lower than those in traditional programs (Wojciechowski & Palmer, 2005). The research that exists, however, has focused on male and female students without distinguishing the unique barriers confronted by women. Although nontraditional-age women are enrolling in distance programs at record rates, many administrators and faculty lack an understanding of their barriers to success and perseverance (Furst-Bowe & Dittmann, 2001).

Perhaps one of the strongest contributing factors to the increased number of nontraditional learners in today's higher education institutions is the advancement and integration of technological resources. The Internet and new and refined course management systems have evolved into tools that colleges and universities use not only to market their programs but also to offer classes in both asynchronous and synchronous formats. In 2004, more than two million college students in the United States were involved in distance education in some capacity (Desai, Hart, & Richards, 2008).

Because distance learners are adults of all ages, they enter the higher education arena knowing different things and they learn at different rates (Mendenhall, 2009). Institutions must respond to the unique needs of adult learners who choose to enroll in these distance programs. Faculty and administrators must be flexible about credit hours, the types of courses, and the

length of courses as they implement quality distance learning. Moreover, important areas related to quality distance education should include careful selection and orientation of faculty, promotion of well-being and learning, consistent interaction with faculty and staff, quick responses to students' concerns, adequate and appropriate counseling services, and efficient registration and advising systems (Muller, 2008).

Social Cognitive Career Theory

Many of the traditional career development theories were developed with "white, able-bodied, publicly heterosexual, and ethnically homogeneous" (Cook, Heppner, & O'Brien, 2002, p. 291) men as the target group. Women's career development process is much more complex than that of men (Coogan & Chen, 2007). Fassinger (2005) suggested that women often underestimate their competencies, talents, and capabilities, thus leading to the development of the strongest internal barrier to their career and professional successes.

Lent et al. (1994) developed SCCT in 1994 and have expanded on the theory several times over the last 20 years, most recently in 2013 (Lent & Brown, 2013). Since its inception, SCCT has been successfully applied to a variety of populations, including women, which might be "at risk for experiencing employment and career barriers" (Chartrand & Rose, 1996, p. 341). The SCCT cognitive constructivist framework is strongly based on Bandura's (1986) general social cognitive theory and is rooted in three building blocks: self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and personal goals. Bandura theorized that each of these three areas serves as a motivating factor for a person to pursue long-term goals, identify and understand future benefits, and perform the critical life tasks needed in order to succeed (Lapan, 2004).

SCCT examines how a person's academic and career interests develop and mature, how career choices are made, how a person is motivated to pursue these choices to make them a

reality, and (added more recently) the levels of satisfaction and well-being experienced as a result of these choices. Furthermore, SCCT considers how environmental and contextual factors impact career goals, as well as how and if these goals are pursued. The theory acknowledges that a career choice may result from a person's observations of and interactions with professionals in the field, media influences, and other experiences.

The addition of satisfaction to the SCCT theoretical framework allows for the exploration of satisfaction levels of educational and professional pursuits (Lent & Brown, 2006). Educational and career satisfaction is analyzed and understood by exploring a person's self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and personal goal planning and attainment.

Application of SCCT requires exploration of how previous learning shapes women's outcome expectations and self-efficacy and confidence about their career plans and choice of major. It is also important to identify the barriers that women experience as they pursue the education needed to transition into their chosen career fields. Gysbers, Heppner, and Johnston (2003) stated that it is critical to examine "person inputs such as gender, race, sexual orientation, level of ability or disability, and social class" (p. 38) and how these impact self-efficacy and confidence levels.

SCCT theorists believe that self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and personal goals have a unique and complex relationship that impact career and academic choices (Lent et al., 1994). The theoretical application of SCCT also allows for the exploration of how race and gender impact a person's exposure to academic disciplines and career choices, as well as the levels of satisfaction that are experienced as a result of these career choices.

Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy is the belief that individuals have about their ability to succeed while pursuing a goal or completing a given task (Gibbons & Shoffner, 2004). Primary sources of self-efficacy are "personal performance accomplishments, vicarious learning, social persuasion, and physiological and affective states experienced in given situations" (Lent et al., 1994, p. 102). In relation to an academic or career choice, people may form interests if they experience personal competency and positive outcomes in relation to a given academic area or career choice. Self-efficacy increases when success is experienced. In addition, observing others experiencing success in a career field can impact a person's self-efficacy in relation to that career field or profession.

Faulty self-efficacy may cause a person to eliminate particular career options. Such beliefs can be altered through the application of SCCT by providing new experiences related to career choices and interests (Lent et al., 2000).

Outcome Expectations

Outcome expectations are the beliefs associated with the consequences of performing a behavior (Gibbons & Shoffner, 2004). Unlike desired outcomes, outcome expectations are those that a person believes are likely to happen. Outcome expectations are important to SCCT because they affect career choices by impacting the development of a person's interests, goals, and actions (Lapan, 2004).

As stated by Gibbons and Shoffner (2004), extrinsic reinforcement, self-directed consequences, and basic task understanding are all tied to outcome expectations, which are generally formed through past learning experiences and the perceived impact of these experiences. The greater the perceived barriers are to a desired career path, the less likely a

person is to pursue that career interest. These perceived barriers include those related to gender, ethnicity, age, socioeconomic status, or family constraints, which may create negative outcome expectations, even if a person has experienced success in the area (Gibbons & Shoffner, 2004).

Values are closely linked to outcome expectations. In relation to SCCT, values are those intrinsic or extrinsic academic and career rewards that motivate a person.

Personal Goals

Goals are a primary factor in a person's determination to engage in a particular activity or, as related to SCCT, a given academic discipline or career. Once a goal is identified, a person organizes and sustains behavior based on achieving this desired goal. According to Lent et al. (1994), setting goals helps people "to organize and guide their behavior, to sustain it over long periods of time, even in the absence of external reinforcement, and to increase the likelihood that desired outcomes will be attained" (p. 84).

Characteristics of the Psychology Major

Aslanian and Clinefelter (2012) found that the general psychology major ranked sixth in popularity in online programs. Although the number of psychology majors at the bachelor's level has increased, few researchers have examined the reasons why students are choosing to major in the field. However, the research that does exist identifies three main reasons for choosing the psychology major: a strong interest in the discipline's subject matter, an enjoyment of learning about and studying people, and a belief that the major serves as a strong foundation in preparing for graduate school. Psychology majors, as a whole, did not identify job preparation, a past experience, or a higher-paying job as influential in their choice of major (Marrs, Barb, & Ruggiero, 2007).

Researchers also have shown that students choosing the psychology major are likely to be more empathic than students enrolled in other majors (Harton & Lyons, 2003). Marrs et al. (2007) found that psychology majors had a variety of vocational and occupational interests and that these students had higher academic achievement than their peers. Harton and Lyons (2003) found that students majoring in psychology reported more "concern for others and a greater tendency to take other people's perspectives" (p. 22) than did students in other majors; this suggests that innate personality traits are a contributing factor in the choice to major in psychology.

Like other researchers, Gervasio, Wendorf, and Yoder (2010) found that students chose to major in psychology for a variety of reasons, including the desire to help others. This view of psychology as a helping profession discipline is in contrast with the view of psychology as a scientific discipline, and the debate between the two has been growing steadily over the last few decades.

As would be expected, the teaching and learning of psychology has adapted and shifted over the last 60 years. The Cornell Conference in 1950 has been identified as the first national conference on psychology as an undergraduate discipline. Conference participants advocated that the field of psychology "should be taught as a scientific discipline in the liberal arts tradition" (Brewer, 2006, p. 67). A recommendation from the conference was for the undergraduate psychology major to be taught using a model curriculum with an emphasis on methodology and laboratory exercises with a senior-level course in history and systems or personality. Conference participants also stated that "courses in personal adjustment and in applied areas with a vocational emphasis had no place in undergraduate programs" (Brewer, 2006, p. 67).

The support of psychology as a scientific discipline continued into the 1960s. As Brewer (2006) stated, the Michigan Conference in 1960 served as a follow-up to the Cornell Conference. The Michigan Conference confirmed that the recommendations made as a result of the Cornell Conference report led to a number of curriculum changes in the undergraduate psychology major. The Michigan Conference participants also identified psychology as a scientific discipline and stated that vocational training was not a primary goal of the curriculum (Brewer, 2006).

In 1991, the American Psychological Association (APA) sponsored the National Conference on Enhancing the Quality of Undergraduate Education in Psychology. Attendees strongly supported the psychology major as a scientific discipline, one that is designed to "teach students to think as scientists about behavior and experience" (Brewer, 2006, p. 68). Although psychology faculty and practitioners strongly advocate for psychology as a science-based discipline, Bartels, Hinds, Glass, and Ryan (2009) found that the perceptions of the discipline as a science are, at best, "tenuous, even among students with substantial psychology course experience" (p. 383).

In 2013, the APA released an updated pronouncement on the undergraduate psychology curriculum. The "promotion of psychology as a science" (APA, 2013, p. 6) sits atop these new guidelines; the organization firmly supports the psychology major as a science and, additionally, advocates for a strong emphasis of scientific principles in academic programs focused on the human services and helping-professions practice. In a shift from previous approaches, the APA's new pronouncement also encouraged faculty and staff to emphasize workforce preparation to undergraduate psychology majors; the hope is that these efforts will lead to psychology majors at the baccalaureate level becoming more competitive in the workforce.

Another primary learning goal outlined in the APA's release was the development of ethical and social responsibility behaviors needed to "strengthen community relationships and contributions" (APA, 2013, p. 16). A primary indicator of this learning outcome is the pursuit of "personal opportunities to promote civic, social, and global outcomes that benefit the community" (APA, 2013, p. 27).

The perception of the psychology field as a science discipline is important because, historically, women are underrepresented in the science fields. According to the American Association of University Women, male college graduates earn 80% of bachelor's degrees in such areas as physics, engineering, and computer science (Hill, Corbett, & St. Rose, 2010). Despite being recognized by the National Science Foundation as a science discipline, psychology is often excluded from the national dialog related to increasing the number of undergraduate majors in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) fields (APA, 2013). With so few women choosing science-based disciplines, it is ironic that the number of women choosing psychology as a major has increased so dramatically; this may indicate that women regard psychology as an applied practice rather than a science.

The Feminization of the Psychology Major

When defining a profession, the term *feminized* is used to describe "professional groups in which women substantially outnumber men" (Keyes & Hogberg, 1990, p. 104). Considering the predicted increase in the percentage of women who will pursue bachelor's degrees, it could be anticipated that a number of academic majors and professional careers will experience feminization over the next two decades. The NCES (2010) predicted that in 2017-2018, the number of bachelor's degrees awarded will increase 16% overall, with a slightly higher 18% increase for women. As women continue to outnumber men as psychology majors, increasing

numbers of women will enter professions in the psychology discipline. To protect the integrity and the value of the psychology profession, it is important to safeguard against the social and economic disadvantages that often accompany the feminization of a profession.

Historically, the feminization of a career is highly likely to lead to decreases in pay and status and limitations in career selection. Howard (1987) and Strober and Lanford (1986) found that those who enter feminized career fields are likely to experience limited choices in career options and decreases in income and status. According to research by Dey and Hill (2007), women make an average of 80 cents to men's every dollar. Lunneborg and Lunneborg (1991) stated that "one can safely say that every salary study has found that among psychology graduates at all levels, women earn less than men" (p. 159).

Metzner, Rajecki, and Lauer (1994) stated that psychology was the only discipline in which "differences in gender have widened" (p. 5). According to the NCES, the psychology major experienced a dramatic gender shift during a 20-year period. In 1975, the gender of psychology major graduates was evenly distributed. Twenty years later in 1995, 73% of graduates who earned a bachelor's degree in psychology were women (NCES, 1999). Marrs et al. (2007) also found that the number of women majoring in psychology continues to grow.

The gender shift in the psychology major between 1976 and 2008 was dramatic. Pion et al. (1996) theorized that the increasing number of female psychology majors during the 1970s and 1980s was due to more job opportunities in the subareas of psychology such as clinical, counseling, and school psychology. In addition, McDonald (1997) found that three factors could be attributed to the steady increase of women choosing a psychology major: "an increased awareness of job opportunities in applied settings, a greater demand for psychological services, and changes in the perception of psychology by students" (p. 25).

O'Brien, Martinez-Pons, and Kopala (1999) added that although the increased number of applied counseling positions available may have increased the interest in psychology for women, it simultaneously decreased male student interest, given that men are more likely than women to be drawn to careers in the sciences. Some men may assume that many careers in psychology are in the direct helping field and not in the scientific study of human behavior. Webb and Speer (1986) supported the assertions from Korn and Lewandowski (1981) that the psychology field suffers from clinic bias, or the belief that all psychologists are practicing clinicians.

Harton and Lyons (2003) also suggested that research conducted beyond 2003 should examine factors that potentially impact the relationship between gender and major choice. Examining personality traits, as well as childhood and adolescent experiences, may contribute to an understanding of the steady increase in the number of female psychology majors.

Given the relatively small number of women entering the STEM disciplines, it is intriguing that the number of female psychology majors has increased so dramatically. If psychology is regarded as a science-based curriculum, what factors contribute to women, particularly nontraditional-age women who graduated from a distance program, being drawn to the field in increasing numbers?

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

At its core, qualitative research provides information about how people establish meaning

from their experiences. According to Mack, Woodsong, MacQueen, Guest, and Namey (2005),

the qualitative method also gathers information about intangible factors related to the research,

such as "social norms, socioeconomic status, gender roles, ethnicity, and religion" (p. 1).

Just as therapists apply a theoretical orientation to guide them in their work with clients,

qualitative researchers must "navigate qualitative research design decisions" (Hayes & Wood,

2011, p. 288). Phenomenological methodology was used in this study. The phenomenological

approach to this study led to an understanding of the common social contexts and influences on

nontraditional-age female students' choice of the psychology major in a distance program.

Through data collection and analysis, I identified the essence of the experiences of the sample of

nontraditional-age women who decided to major in psychology in a distance program.

Philosophical Paradigms

Bogdan and Biklen (2007) stated that "a paradigm is a loose collection of logically

related assumptions, concepts, or propositions that orient thinking and research" (p. 24). A

paradigm leads to a basic set of beliefs that then guides actions (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

To gain an understanding of the experiences of nontraditional-age female psychology

majors who graduated from a distance program, my approach was guided by the constructivist

paradigm with a liberal feminist axiology. According to Creswell and Miller (2000), the

constructivist paradigm, also referred to as the interpretive paradigm, holds the belief that

"pluralistic, interpretive, open-ended, and contextualized perspectives" (pp. 125-126) form a

person's reality. Thus, each individual constructs reality using a unique interpretation only

available to that individual. The constructivist approach also ensures that the voice of each

participant is heard, as constructivists respect and embrace the belief that with multiple

participants there are multiple realities, because each participant's reality is individualistic. As

Denzin and Lincoln (2005) stated, the constructivist approach leads to a "more informed and

sophisticated" (p. 196) knowledge base, leading to a reconstructed reality from participants of a

specific population. Each of the participants generated meaning and reality based on her

experiences as a nontraditional-age female student majoring in psychology in a distance

program. The meaning was uncovered in the data-gathering process, thus illuminating the

experiences that led the participants to choose to major in psychology. The most effective

method to uncover the meaning of the participants' experiences is to construct that meaning from

their realities.

To supplement the constructivist paradigm, I also explored factors relevant to feminist

theoretical perspectives and the impact of these factors on the participants' experiences; these

include race, class, culture, ethnicity, power, sexual orientation, and other identities (Glesne,

2006). In addition, applying a liberal feminist approach allowed for exploration of the social

condition of women and the power dynamics in participants' experiences in a variety of arenas.

As stated by DeVault (1996), "feminists believe that women have been subordinated through

men's greater power" (p. 31) and that women experience oppression and exploitation, though the

degree to which each woman experiences this varies (Maguire, 1996). Specifically, the liberal

feminist philosophy emphasizes the belief that subordination of women "is embedded in legal, economic, and cultural constraints" (Enns, 2004, p. 60). Because the feminization of a particular career field has historically led to the monetary and social devaluing of the field, it can be concluded that society inherently believes that women's professional contributions are less important than those of men. The application of liberal feminist theory allowed for the underlying belief that society is socially constructed and that men and women "differ in their perceptions of life due to their social status" (Sarantakos, 1993, p. 55). The current study included a deliberate emphasis on the experiences of women by highlighting the essence of the meaning of their experiences.

An exploration of participant experiences across the four dimensions of SCCT theory (academic and career interests, choices, performance, and satisfaction) led to answers to the question of "why psychology?" as a major. Each participant had an opportunity to reflect on her personal experiences that informed her choice to major in psychology, and these reflections contributed to a more solid understanding of this population of learners, thus enabling higher education professionals to continue to serve them effectively.

Researcher-as-Instrument

Soobrayan (2003) asserted that a researcher conducting qualitative research must confront the issues of ethics, truth, and politics. The research instruments in this method are people who bring their own "fears, anxieties, needs, and sensitivities" (Soobrayan, 2003, p. 108) about these issues. Although the beauty of the qualitative approach lies in my unique lens that was used for data interpretation, a particular concern of conducting qualitative research was the influence, especially unintended influence, that I brought to the process. Developed by Edmund Husserl in the mid-20th century, the phenomenological approach mandated that I, as the

researcher, minimized my biases, both about the participants and about the information gathered (Wertz, 2005). Bracketing my experience, knowledge, and beliefs helped to minimize the biases I brought to the research process. As Hamill and Sinclair (2010) stated, through bracketing, I was able to "temporarily suspend" (p. 17) my knowledge of and opinions about nontraditional-age women who choose to major in psychology in a distance program. This approach allowed me to be as open as possible to understanding the meanings and experiences of each participant.

Rennie (2004) defined *reflexivity* as "self-awareness and agency within that self-awareness" (p. 183). In regard to research reflexivity, I examined my preconceptions about the participants before and throughout the study; these preconceptions were noted in a self-reflective journal, as well as discussed with my advisor during biweekly meetings. Denzin and Lincoln (2005) cautioned that what researchers know can potentially shape, "but not necessarily determine" (p. 510), what is found.

Self-disclosure and collaboration, which align with the feminist approach, helped to establish empathy and rapport with participants. Utilizing these skills helped to minimize perceptions of inequality between me as the researcher and the participants; I made an earnest effort to establish rapport and a comfortable connection with each participant by utilizing microskills such as reflection of feeling, paraphrases, restatements, and reflection of meaning.

I brought a variety of experiences, assumptions, beliefs, and biases related to teaching and serving nontraditional-age female psychology majors pursuing a bachelor's degree through a distance program. First, I taught in a distance program for 15 years and taught a number of courses in the psychology discipline. Second, I have served as a career counselor for dozens of nontraditional-age women, assisting them as they research their career options following completion of their bachelor's degrees.

I also brought to the research process beliefs based on my observations of students. In my previous work, for example, I have listened as a number of women described their attraction to psychology as a major. Several women credited positive experiences with professionals in the helping field. In addition, I have observed that women studying in a distance format are dependent upon a variety of support systems for their success. These support systems vary for each person but can include a spouse or partner, employer, children, friends, and extended family. I also believe that nontraditional-age students need and depend on support from people at their respective higher education institutions. This support is available from professionals, including academic advisors, faculty, and distance program staff members, as well as peers and support services such as career counseling, financial counseling, and peer tutoring.

Various social, cultural, and historical forces also may have shaped my interpretation of the information as a researcher. First, at 45, I am of a similar age as the average participant; the mean age of the 12 participants was 46. Second, at the time the research was conducted, I was an administrator and faculty member at the institution from which the participants graduated; knowledge of the institution's support services had the potential to shape my interpretation of the participants' version of reality. Third, my interest in learning has led to the pursuit of a master's degree and a doctoral degree. I have faced manageable financial and personal challenges while pursuing my educational and professional goals. This was a very different experience from some of the participants' experiences.

Assumptions and biases I had regarding nontraditional-age women who choose to major in psychology in a distance program included the following: (a) the women had a positive experience with a psychological services professional, (b) the women experienced emotional satisfaction after completing their bachelor's degrees in a challenging format, (c) the women are

proud of their educational accomplishments, and (d) the women have committed themselves to professional success in the field of psychology since graduation.

The subjectivity that I brought to this research was acknowledged and, as Patton (1980) provided permission for, embraced. However, by using a constructivist-informed approach, I was a co-constructor of meaning of the women's stories and experiences (Morrow, 2005), and therefore, I ensured that each participant's perceptions were transcribed and reported accurately. As Morrow (2005) stated, for a researcher to manage subjectivity is for the researcher to manage fairness throughout the process. Conducting and presenting the research fairly ensured that the reported findings are representative of the participants' viewpoints, rather than my own.

In an effort to minimize bias, manage subjectivity, and maintain reflexivity, I maintained a self-reflective journal. Journaling throughout the process created an ongoing record of my "experiences, reactions, and emerging awareness of any assumptions or biases" (Morrow, 2005, p. 254). The journal also included a log of all research activities. I examined issues articulated in the self-reflective journal during biweekly meetings with my dissertation committee chairperson. My committee chairperson engaged in challenging and critical discussion concerning the research and my interpretation of the data. These open conversations assisted in identification and management of my biases and assumptions in order to avoid misrepresenting the participants' stories and experiences. These strategies helped to minimize the influence of my experiences or opinions during data analysis. Furthermore, my committee chairperson provided guidance as I moved through the qualitative research process.

For auditing and debriefing purposes, an audit trail, which included the self-reflective journal and research-related activities, was closely managed. This information assisted an

auditor who examined the documentation and processes with the following questions, as

developed by Schwandt and Halpern (1988), in mind:

1. Were the research findings grounded in the data?

2. Were inferences logical?

3. Was the category structure appropriate?

4. Could inquiry decisions and methodological shifts be justified?

5. What was the degree of researcher bias?

6. What strategies were used for increasing credibility?

The analysis of these self-reflective data ensured that the data were analyzed with

minimal bias and that the meaning was constructed from the data and not manipulated to support

an unarticulated hypothesis (Schwandt & Halpern, 1988). A colleague served as the auditor. He

is a practicing psychologist and an associate professor of psychology who has extensive

quantitative and qualitative research experience. The auditor signed a confidentiality statement

(Appendix A) prior to reviewing and discussing data; any information transported to and from

the auditor was done in a sealed envelope. The auditor reviewed two of the participants' data

and the themes that I identified. Incongruences noted in our interpretations were discussed and

processed at length so that bias was identified and minimized in the data analysis.

Participants

Selection Criteria

Wertz (2005) explained the importance of carefully and intentionally identifying

participants whose experience most related to the research questions. Therefore, purposive

sampling was used to identify participants. The purposive approach required that participants

met the preselected criteria relevant to the primary research question: Why did nontraditional-age women enrolled in a distance program identify psychology as their major?

The participants of this study were women 25 years of age or older who graduated with a bachelor's degree in psychology from a distance program. All participants graduated from the same private, faith-based, liberal arts institution in the Midwest; the institution is a pioneer in distance education, with the second-oldest distance program in the United States. Each participant was required to have completed a minimum of 60 hours at this institution, which ensured that they completed most, if not all, of their psychology major courses there.

Number of Participants

Wertz (2005) stated, "The nature and number of participants cannot be mechanically determined beforehand or by formula" (p. 171). Creswell (1998) recommended that a phenomenological study should include "up to 10 people" (p. 110). Twelve participants were interviewed for this study.

Participant Demographics

All participants graduated from the same private, faith-based, liberal arts institution in the Midwest. Participants ranged in age from 30 to 59, with a mean age of 46. At the time that they declared their major as psychology, five participants were in their 40s, five were in their 30s, and two were in their 20s; the mean age at the time of declaring a psychology major was 38. For three participants, psychology was the first major that they declared, whereas seven had chosen one major prior to switching to or adding psychology, and two participants had declared two majors prior to switching to psychology.

Eleven of the participants identified as Caucasian and one participant identified as African American; these numbers are relatively consistent with the institution's student

demographics. All participants lived within a 240-mile radius of the campus, with a mean

distance from campus of 85 miles. At the time of the interviews, the closest participant lived 5

miles from campus and the participant living the farthest away reported living 150 miles from

campus. For one participant, this institution was her first college experience, whereas eight

participants reported that they had attended one other institution and three reported that they had

attended two previous institutions. A summary of demographic information and participant

descriptions are outlined in Table 1.

Table 1

Summary of Demographic Variables

Pseudonym	Age	Age when declared psychology as major	Major(s) prior to psychology	Number of children caring for while enrolled
Amy	48	36	Theology	4
Angela	41	35	Education	2
Jennifer	53	49	None	3
Karen	59	48	Music Education	0
Kimberly	35	28	Business, Education	3
Lisa	38	32	Nursing	2
Mary	53	40	Child Development	3
Melissa	56	45	Business	3
Michelle	48	42	None	2
Patricia	38	32	Theology	2
Susan	51	39	None	0
Tammy	30	26	Surgical Technology, Elementary Education	1

Recruitment

Permission to access participant contact information was obtained from the institution's Institutional Review Board. The participants were identified using graduation information from the registrar, and contact information was obtained from the registrar and the alumni office.

Initial contact with the potential participants occurred through e-mail and, when necessary, the U.S. Postal Service mail. The initial contact included a description of the research and an invitation to participate (Appendix B). Because the participants were nontraditional-age college students at the time of their enrollment, the addresses and other contact information had remained relatively stable since graduation.

The research participants were secured through purposive sampling until a minimum of 12 participants were secured. The initial participant pool included only graduates from 2008 through 2012. Eight participants were secured from this initial pool. To identify additional participants, graduates from 2007 were invited, securing another two participants, and then 2006 and 2005 graduates were contacted; two additional participants were secured from the 2005 class, completing the participant pool at 12. Participants received an invitation to participate and responded via phone or e-mail to indicate their interest and intent to participate.

Procedures and Informed Consent

Women who expressed an interest in participating received an informed consent document (Appendix C) during our first meeting. The informed consent outlined the study's purpose and procedures, confidentiality guidelines, and procedures for data collection (interview, demographic questionnaire, short essay, and member checking), the potential risks, and additional information regarding their rights as participants. Each woman was also made aware that participation in this research was completely voluntary and that she could decline to answer

any of the questions and could withdraw from the study at any point. No incentives were offered

to participants and I covered any incurred costs, including transportation, soft drinks, and snacks,

during the interview.

The time commitment for the participants ranged from 1 to 2 hours; this included the in-

person interview on a mutually decided day, time, and public location. I traveled to interview

the participant. Following introductions and a review of the informed consent and research

procedures, the participant took 10-15 minutes to complete the demographic questionnaire. I

then conducted a semi-structured interview that was electronically recorded, with each

participant's permission, for subsequent transcription as indicated in the informed consent

document. Finally, the participant was given 15 minutes to type a short essay (Appendix D); this

short essay gave the participant an opportunity to provide advice to nontraditional-age women

enrolled in a distance program who are considering psychology as a major. This essay was

completed on a laptop provided by me; this computer-based format is similar to the format the

women used to complete their bachelor's degree coursework.

All 12 participant interviews were transcribed by me. Though time consuming,

transcribing the interviews enabled me to become intimately familiar with the participants'

unique responses and realities. Being intimately familiar with the research ensured that I could

navigate easily through the information during the data analysis process.

Participants were given the opportunity to review the data from the semi-structured

interview (Appendix E). A summary of the data and a self-addressed stamped envelope were

mailed to each participant through the U.S. Postal Service. Participants were given seven days to

provide feedback; all of the feedback received indicated that the data had been interpreted

appropriately.

All electronic transcriptions and essay submissions were stored on a password-protected computer. Following the study's completion, this information was removed from the computer and saved to flash drives that will be destroyed within five years of the completion date. While transporting the computer, electronic interviews, self-reflective journal, and demographic questionnaires, I locked all materials in a locked portable file cabinet in my car. They were removed immediately upon returning home and stored in a secure location in my house.

In the interest of preserving confidentiality, participant names and contact information were placed in a locked, secure location in a desk at my home. Also, each participant was assigned a pseudonym to further protect her identity; this pseudonym was coded on her interview recording and transcript, her demographic questionnaire, and her short essay. In addition, participant names and contact information were kept in my office at my place of employment; this was a locked location separate from that which held their identifying pseudonyms. Because the participants' pseudonyms are the only identifying information openly connected with the data collected, other people (i.e., committee chairperson, auditor) were unable to connect individual participants with data. Identifying contact information, as well as electronic recordings, will be destroyed within five years of the completion of the study.

Each participant was interviewed in the environment of her choice. Field notes were compiled during and after the interview process to include information about the environment, the sights, the sounds, and the participant's demeanor. The field notes led to richer descriptions of the participants and their environments (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). My reactions to each interview were recorded in the self-reflective journal, which helped to maintain reflexivity throughout the research process.

Sources of Data Collection

For this qualitative study, data were collected from participants using multiple methods (see Table 2); Creswell and Plano-Clark (2007) advised that a number of data collection tools be used in an effort to triangulate the data. Data collection methods included a short essay (Appendix D), a semi-structured interview (Appendix E), a demographic questionnaire (Appendix F), participant responses to member-checking invitation (Appendix G), and researcher field notes.

Table 2

Data Collection Methods

Methods	Procedure and purpose
Short essay	Following each interview, participants were given 15 minutes to write a short essay in response to several questions focused on advice that they would give to women who are considering majoring in psychology in a distance program.
Semi-structured interview	One semi-structured interview was conducted with each participant. The interview questions were developed by the researcher and were designed to encourage each participant to share her experiences related to choosing to major in psychology in a distance program.
Demographic questionnaire	A brief demographic questionnaire was completed by each participant prior to the semi-structured interview.
Member checking	Participants were invited to review and respond to a summary of themes that were identified during data analysis. Nine of the 12 participants responded to the summary by stating they had "no changes" to the identified themes; three participants did not respond.
Field notes	Detailed field notes were maintained throughout the research process.

These five information-rich pieces were chosen to create a rich description of the participants' experiences as they related to the research question. In conjunction with the demographic data, the stories revealed each woman's behaviors, emotions, experiences, and opinions, articulated in her words. This approach fit seamlessly with the applied SCCT, which provides a framework for exploring career interests and choices, emphasizing social cognitive variables. The SCCT is often used to explore gender and race differences within career choices (Lent & Brown, 2013).

Each piece of data collection focused on a different point in the participants' experiences as psychology majors in a distance program. The demographic questionnaire was included to collect concrete information about the participants at the time of their enrollment in a distance program. The interview provided the participants with an opportunity to reflect on and share their experiences as nontraditional-age women majoring in psychology in a distance program. Participants were invited to engage in the member-checking process by being asked to provide comments on a summary of the themes I identified based on their responses during the interview. The short essay, typed following the interview, was included to capture the advice that participants would provide for women who may choose to major in psychology in a distance program in the future.

The semi-structured interview was a critical method of data collection, as it gathered each participant's current thoughts and experiences about choosing psychology as a major. The semi-structured interview approach included a number of preset questions while also allowing for additional open-ended questions as needed during each participant interview. The interview questions were "directed to the participant's experiences, feelings, beliefs and convictions" (Welman & Kruger, 1999, p. 196) about choosing to major in psychology in a distance program.

I used a variety of skills to create a respectful, person-centered interviewing environment, including developing rapport, asking open-ended and indirect questions, and using reflection of feeling, reflection of meaning, and paraphrases.

I also maintained field notes by documenting observations while in the field interviewing the participants. These observations assisted in contextualizing the study and included sensory data such as sights and sounds.

Qualitative Data Analysis Procedures

Analyzing qualitative data requires that the data be studied "over and over again to see if the constructs, categories, explanations, and interpretations make sense" (Patton, 1980, p. 339). After transcribing each interview, all data were analyzed following the procedures outlined in the phenomenological approach. As Wertz (2005) stated, the phenomenological approach has a number of core traits, including the use of descriptive research, the use of phenomenological reductions, and the exploration of the "intentional relationship between persons and situations" (p. 170). The phenomenological approach also provided for the structure of meaning based on the participant interview responses in relation to their experiences.

I applied Moustakas' (1994) four-step phenomenological analysis model when examining the data:

1. Epoche: I reflected on my experience of the phenomenon and set aside or bracketed my beliefs, assumptions, and biases; this allowed me to understand the meaning of each participant's experience.

2. Phenomenological reduction: All nonrepetitive and nonoverlapping statements were clustered into themes. Each statement about the experience was given equal value. Individual and composite textural descriptions were grouped.

3. Imaginative variation: Invariant meaning units were identified to explore the meaning and depth of each interviewee's experience. Structural themes were developed and meanings clustered for each participant, as well as for the group of participants.

4. Synthesis: The composite textural and structural descriptions were used to develop the meanings and the essence of the participants' experiences as nontraditional-age female students choosing to major in psychology in a distance program.

In continuing to be mindful of researcher-as-instrument, I adopted an attitude of "wonder that is highly empathic" (Wertz, 2005, p. 172) during the data analysis. This approach ensured a complete and clear, and even magnified, description of situations and details without imposing value judgments from my frame of reference. Wertz (2005) stressed that the researcher must reflect on the psychological process of the interview and the participant: "bodily, perceptual, emotional, imaginative, linguistic, social" (p. 172), and behavioral. These reflective observations were noted in the field journal.

The phenomenon of how the participants chose to major in psychology was identified through the data analysis process. Although each participant described her experiences that led to her choice of major, I moved beyond the explicit and apparent meanings to more intimate and implicit meanings through appropriate and more probing questions and data analysis. Analyzing each theme in relation to others was critical in this approach. After studying the interviews intensely and thoroughly, themes were identified and coded, and the data were organized into categories.

When analyzing the data and identifying emergent themes, I used Dedoose, a web-based qualitative and mixed-methods research data analysis program (Lieber & Weisner, 2010). Dedoose features the following capabilities that assisted with data analysis:

1. Information is web-based so that data were accessed via login from any computer with Internet access.

2. Transparency allowed for in-depth examination of the data.

3. Data visualization led to a more understandable interpretation and presentation of the data.

The data were safely encrypted and protected in order to ensure confidentiality, and I am the only person who knows my Dedoose account login.

I also used the member-checking process with participants, through which participants determined the accuracy of my interpretation of the information shared during the interview. One advantage to this process was that participants were given an opportunity to add information they may not have shared during the interview; none of them chose to add or correct information so subsequent interviews or conversations were not needed.

Standards of Trustworthiness

Because Lincoln and Guba (1985) recognized the importance of ensuring quality and trustworthiness in the qualitative approach, they established criteria known as the "gold standard" for the evaluation of qualitative research. These criteria are transferability, dependability, confirmability, and credibility. Morrow (2005) added that rigor and quality contribute to the credibility of qualitative research.

Transferability

To ensure that the findings of this study can be transferred to other appropriate contexts, transferability was addressed in a variety of ways. For instance, the study's methods were outlined in detail so other professionals can determine whether the study is relevant to their respective research interests and needs.

To assist readers as they decide whether the research study is transferable, I have outlined in rich, thick detail all of the research steps and guidelines, including participant criteria, data sources, data analysis procedures, and research findings. This description will assist others in determining whether shared characteristics allow for application in their own settings.

Dependability and Confirmability

To address dependability and confirmability, a number of steps were followed to ensure that the research was conducted consistently, regardless of when and by whom the research was conducted and analyzed. An independent audit of at least two transcripts and identified themes was conducted. Biweekly meetings with my committee chairperson were also scheduled, and during these meetings a variety of data sources were examined, including my self-reflective journal, the data analysis documents, and the text of the dissertation.

The data-gathering techniques were systematic. All interviews were electronically recorded to ensure accuracy. An audit trail outlined the specific steps at each point in the research. Debriefing sessions with my committee chairperson and an auditor also occurred throughout the research process. All of these steps contributed to dependability and confirmability by ensuring that the research process was consistent and that all data were interpreted appropriately.

In addition, researcher reflexivity was met by recording my thoughts, reactions, and emotions throughout the research process in a self-reflective journal. These reflections focused on preconceived ideas or notions that I had about nontraditional-age women who have chosen to major in psychology in a distance program.

Credibility

Credibility ensures that a true picture emerges to discover the contributors that led nontraditional-age women enrolled in a distance program to choose psychology as a major. Only women who met the established criteria were invited to participate and, as they agreed, to complete the demographic questionnaire, participate in the semi-structured interview, complete the short essay, and provide feedback following the analysis of the data that they provided. Gathering such multifaceted data contributed to the study's credibility. Member checking ensured that the data were transcribed correctly and that the identified data themes accurately reflected what the participant intended to share. Lincoln and Guba (1985) referred to member checking as the most critical task for establishing credibility.

By using five data-gathering sources, I achieved methodological triangulation, which contributed to the credibility of the research findings. Although a certain level of subjectivity is anticipated due to the study's phenomenological nature, the data were presented objectively. A description of the data was outlined clearly; this detail assisted in establishing credibility of the research as well as enabling "readers to make decisions about the applicability of the findings to other settings or similar contexts" (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 129). Samples of the instruments used to gather information are included in the appendices. In addition, the data gathered using these tools are shared in depth.

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Limitations

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1. The results from the data are subject to additional or different interpretations than outlined in this study.

2. The findings from the data may only be applicable to nontraditional-age female psychology majors studying in a distance learning format.

3. With 11 participants identified as Caucasian and one as African American, the sample reflects the institution's demographics, as well as demographic data of online learners in general. The research findings could be transferable to institutions with similar demographics.

4. The research was reliant on the participants' recollections and memories of their experiences.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

This chapter covers descriptions of the major themes that emerged from the participants'
interviews, short essays, and demographic questionnaires. In addition to providing information
about why they chose to major in psychology, participants also focused on how they decided to
pursue this major in a distance program. Subthemes were identified under most of the themes to
provide more insight into the participants' experiences. Full and partial quotes are provided
from recipients to show evidence of each theme and subtheme.

Primary themes identified include the following: (a) a sense of benevolence led
nontraditional-age women to choose psychology as a major, (b) with support from family and
community members, nontraditional-age women persevered in a distance program, (c)
nontraditional-age women chose a distance program due to its practicality and flexibility, (d)
specific skills and traits contributed to the success of nontraditional-age female college students,
and (e) nontraditional-age women who completed their degree in psychology in a distance
program experienced personal and professional transformation. Table 3 provides a summary of
primary themes and Table 4 provides a summary of the participants' relationships with these
themes.

Table 3

Summary of Primary Themes

Themes	Subthemes
Benevolence	Helping others Understanding human behavior
Support	Family members Community members
Flexibility and practicality	Family realities Employment and financial situations Preference and phase-of-life realities
Personal attributes	Personal skills Personal traits
Transformation	Increased confidence Enhanced opportunities

Table 4

Participants' Relationships With Primary Themes

Themes	1	1a	1b	2	2a	2b	3	3a	3b	3c	4	4a	4b	5	5a	5b
Amy	×	×		×	×	×	×	×	×		×	×	×	×	×	×
Angela	×	×		×	×	×	×	×	×							
Jennifer				×	×	×	×	×		×	×	×	×	×	×	×
Karen	×	×	×	×	×	×	×	×		×	×	×	×	×	×	×
Kimberly	×	×	×	×	×	×	×	×			×	×		×	×	×
Lisa	×	×	×	×	×	×	×	×	×	×	×	×	×	×	×	×
Mary	×	×		×	×	×	×	×	×	×	×	×	×	×	×	×
Melissa			×	×	×	×	×	×		×			×	×	×	
Michelle	×	×		×	×	×	×	×	×	×	×	×	×	×	×	×
Patricia	×	×		×	×	×	×	×	×	×		×	×	×	×	×
Susan	×	×	×	×	×	×	×	×	×		×	×	×	×	×	×
Tammy	×		×	×	×	×	×	×	×	×	×	×		×	×	×

Theme 1 – Benevolence
Theme 1a – Helping others
Theme 1b – Understanding human behavior
Theme 2 – Support
Theme 2a – Family members
Theme 2b – Community members
Theme 3 – Flexibility and practicality
Theme 3a – Family realities
Theme 3b – Employment and financial situations
Theme 3c – Preferences and phase-of-life realitie

Theme 4 – Personal attributes
Theme 4a – Personal skills
Theme 4b – Personal traits
Theme 5 – Transformation
Theme 5a – Increased confidence
Theme 5b – Enhanced opportunities

Benevolence

A common theme that motivated many participants to choose psychology as a major was a sense of benevolence to contribute to society's greater good. Nine of the 12 participants stated that they declared psychology as their undergraduate major because of their desire to help others; three participants stated that they had an interest in understanding human behavior. Six of the women were employed in a helping profession before or while pursuing their bachelor's degrees in psychology; some of these positions included teaching assistant, case manager, caregiver, and student advocate. Four participants stated that obtaining a bachelor's degree enabled them to enter or advance in a helping profession.

Helping Others

The nine participants who chose to major in psychology because of their desire to help others consistently revealed this passion through their responses. Some responses included the following: "I want to make a change in someone's life," "My goal is to do the best job that I can and help as many as I can," "I hate it when they talk about 'getting rid' of a kid—don't go there—I'll fight that much harder for that kid," and "I feel so much like I need to help them."

Half of the participants had already acted on their desire to help others, as they were employed in a helping profession at the time they declared psychology as a major. Mary provided an illustration of this theme. She had completed her associate's degree and was not required to complete her bachelor's degree in order to advance in her position; she was employed with the state as a case manager for many years and, when state regulations began requiring case managers to have a bachelor's degree, she was "grandfathered in." She was, however, interested in pursuing her bachelor's degree in psychology so she would be in a "better position" to help

her clients. As she advanced in her career, she became more familiar with the severe needs of

the families and children she was serving:

> It's like I went down the ladder of programs that headed more and more into abuse and
>
> tried to stop that from happening. That's how I wound up where I was at. But as I did
>
> that I realized that I didn't understand what was going on and I really needed the
>
> education. I didn't need a degree, I didn't need the piece of paper—I needed the
>
> knowledge that goes with that so I could help more.

Mary found that each of her courses in psychology helped her to serve her clients more

effectively. She stated,

> I also took some classes in addiction and that really helps me with the parents because so
>
> many times we wind up with these cases with the parents who have substance abuse
>
> problems, so therefore they are neglectful or whatever.

> When Michelle reflected on declaring psychology as a major, she stated that although her

interest in the clientele she would serve often shifted, the fact that she wanted "to help people has

never changed. That's what my life is about is helping others." At the time of the interview she

was working as a behavioral technician, serving teenagers whom many have a tendency to "give

up on."

> Patricia was drawn to the psychology major because she "wanted to counsel people" and

"wanted to work with people." She further explained that she "wanted to be able to counsel

people on everything." She strongly considered majoring in theology, a discipline also focused

on helping others.

> Participants who were employed outside of a helping profession still considered

themselves to be in a position to help others through their daily work, as well as their volunteer

or other avocational activities. Susan worked in the financial services industry as a sales assistant; she had been with her current employer for 18 years and was valued for her caring nature and her ability to assist clients during a variety of transitions in their lives. Although her position is not considered to be in the traditional helping field, she is the first contact for many of her employer's clients and views her role in establishing and maintaining quality client relationships as vital. She commented,

> If something big happens in their life—if they get a promotion or they are getting ready to retire or if they have a new child or a new grandchild we know about that. If they are getting married we know about that. And the same if they get divorced or have a death in the family. All of those life cycle kinds of issues. We're there for everything.

Susan experienced what she called a "come to God moment" as she was writing her application essay to apply to the college. Because of her experience in the financial services industry, she foreclosed her choice of major and decided to declare as an accounting major on her application. She struggled to balance the practicality of majoring in a business-related field with the reality of how she contributed to developing and maintaining quality client relationships. She commented,

> I'm sitting there thinking as an accountant and couldn't get the [application] essay to flow at all. I just couldn't get it to work. And then the next day at work I took three phone calls in a row. The first phone call was from an elderly woman who had lost her husband and never dealt with anything financial before. She really thought she was destitute, but in reality her husband had set up a really nice portfolio for her. So I talked her through that and walked her through the steps to process her husband's estate and dealing with how much she missed him. The next phone call was from a young woman who was

going through a very messy divorce. I mean a horribly messy divorce. And I'm usually the first contact for people before they get to the financial consultants, so we were talking about all of that stuff. The third phone call was from another woman who had three sons and her husband had died by suicide. So three very emotional phone calls in the space of an hour. And I'm thinking about this [application] essay and I'm thinking "why am I doing accounting when we don't do tax work here . . . we don't give tax advice." I think it needs to be more psychology because I deal more with the people portion of it. I sat down that night and wrote the essay, sent it off, and got accepted. It was just one of those moments—I call it a come to God moment.

Susan further explained that, since graduation, she has found the psychology major to be beneficial in her daily work:

> I wanted to be a better support staff member to our clients. I wanted to be able to help these people and that psychology degree supported that ambition for me. It was about making sure [the clients] feel supported and encouraged.

Karen decided to major in psychology because of her desire to transition into a helping profession. She stated, "I have always been told that I am good with people. And the thing is, I'm not a psychologist, but what I've learned is that sometimes all people need is an ear." She shared that she knew she needed to "do the people thing."

Melissa, a 56-year-old who worked as a bus driver, commented, "That's my thing. I like to help people." She volunteered to drive children with special needs, a route that other bus drivers avoided; this experience helped her to apply her education in psychology, particularly developmental psychology. She commented that when people ask about her degree in psychology, she tells them "I use it as a bus driver. I used to drive a bus for special needs kids.

Those kids have a hard way to go. I really liked working with them. That was probably the perfect job for me."

Amy, a 48-year-old mother of four boys, completed a double major in psychology and theology. Although she is employed at a Catholic church, she, too, is not in a traditional helping field; she currently serves as the coordinator of religious education at her parish. After declaring as a theology major, she decided to add psychology as a second major; she was drawn to add it because "psychology could also benefit people." In her position at the parish, she works "with all different types of people all day—different ages, different social backgrounds." She added that the psychology major has benefitted her "personally and I felt like it was benefitting my position."

Unemployed by choice as she was pursuing her bachelor's degree, Kimberly decided to major in psychology because she had a goal of entering the field of industrial and organizational psychology. She commented that she was drawn to psychology because others view her as someone capable of helping them:

> People flock to me. I hate to say that because it sounds egotistical and narcissistic, but by the time I go through the check-out line at Walmart the woman has already told me about her Aunt Suzy who has bipolar and her husband who's beating on her. I mean, it has always been since I was a kid my mother has always told me that I've brought home the strays. I've always wanted to help others.

Angela, a 41-year-old mother of two children, transferred her associate's degree in education to the distance program to pursue her bachelor's degree. She was working as a paraprofessional in the local school system, where she saw her desire to help others begin to take shape:

The more I worked in the schools the more experiences I had. And I thought my hands would be tied as a teacher so I wanted to go beyond that. I wanted to go into the world where these kids lived. To find a way to go into their homes, into their lives, to try to help them help themselves. To help them get out of certain situations if needed. To help them find resources to better their lives.

Understanding Human Behavior

Three participants shared that they decided to major in psychology because of their interest in gaining a deeper understanding of human behavior. Each of them also attributed her interest in psychology to helping others.

Lisa was working in a group home that serves adults with developmental disorders when her interest in human behavior was piqued. She shared,

In 1999, I started working at my first group home and there was a guy who was autistic. He couldn't speak but he could do anything you asked him to do. You could ask him to do one, three, four, or five tasks and he could go and do all of them. And he would come back when he was done. So it was obvious that he understood but he couldn't communicate. I remember, I can still see him standing in the doorway, and I just thought I wonder what his mind is like. I remember thinking about how fascinating it is—he could understand a process but could not communicate. That got me interested in human behavior and then things just compiled after that. I was just interested in why people behave the way they do, why do they act the way they act, [and] how you can have the exact same circumstances with two different people and get two different results.

Lisa continued to work in a group home environment as she pursued her degree in psychology. She added that her interest in human behavior continued to grow as she gained experience in the

helping profession: "Watching everyday people behaving. Some people acting crazy, some people reacting irrationally. And people reacting differently to the same situations. And noticing that they were the exact same situations. And wondering what made them do things differently."

Tammy, the youngest of the 12 participants at 30 years old, shared her story about deciding on a psychology major:

> When I started [my bachelor's] I came in with the thought that I wanted to be an elementary education teacher. As I'm going through my education classes I'm thinking to myself, "I don't want to teach. I'm interested in knowing *how* the kids are learning." So, when I started researching a little more I thought psychology is a good way to go because that field works to find that kind of stuff out.

Karen commented that her decision to major in psychology was a result of her interest in understanding the brain and human behavior. She commented,

> And the brain is so interesting. Why does one person get schizophrenia? What are the stressors that cause one person to get paranoid? Why do these people act out? I just wanted to explore it to understand why people act differently.

Support

All 12 participants consistently mentioned and gave gratitude to specific people or groups whose support and encouragement enabled them to graduate with bachelor's degrees in psychology. Support systems mentioned included partners, children, parents, college faculty and staff members, colleagues, and friends and acquaintances.

Family Members

Ten of the 12 participants credited their family members with providing emotional and concrete support during their time as students. Of the 12 participants, nine reported that they were married during their time as students, one was in a committed relationship, and two were single. Seven of the nine who were married credited their husbands with providing much-needed emotional and practical support as they were pursuing their degrees. Of the 10 who had children in the home while they were students, eight credited their children with being supportive.

Angela, married with two children who were teenagers when she was pursuing her degree, stated the following about her support system:

My husband and my daughter. Well, both of my kids were very understanding. When I said, "Mom needs time for homework now," there wasn't any debate about it. [My daughter] picked up laundry, did the dishes. My husband fixed dinner after his job. And all of my homework had to travel with me because I had a family, I had work. At ball games. My son still laughs about this. "You're the only mom that I know that would get out, take her lawn chair out to the outfield, watch my ballgame, but then be looking up and down in a book."

Patricia added that she could not "imagine doing this without a good support system." She credited her husband, whom she met during her one semester at the state university, with inspiring and encouraging her to pursue her degree. She stated,

My husband was the catalyst. I was a college dropout and he was getting an MBA and he was like, "You know whenever you want to go back to school, I know things are tight but we can make it work, just let me know." And when I decided he was thrilled. I had a family that really wanted me to be everything I could be, and to be successful and live my

dreams. If I had homework I needed to do, he'd say "I'll take [the kids]. We'll get in the car and go for a ride and go somewhere."

Jennifer, the only participant who identified as African American, was a single mother of three children while she was a student. She was also the only participant to begin the program with no transfer hours and was enrolled as a part-time student for 10 years. She received a great deal of support from her children. She commented,

My kids would always say, "Mom, you're doing a good job." They were just positive. Lots and lots of positiveness, letting me know that they know where I'm trying to be and that they were there to support me in any way that they can. They were always letting me know, giving me a pat on the back. "Hang in there." My daughter would come into the room and she could tell I was having a bad day. She would come in and lay her head on my chest and say, "Mommy, I know you're not having a good day, but don't quit." I really appreciated that because they are the reason why I'm at where I am today.

Mary supported this theme as well. She commented about her husband and three children:

My husband is a wonderful man. He was cooking meals, watching the kids, running to their games that I couldn't make it to. I have a very good husband who's very supportive. He had never complained, in all of these years he hadn't complained about anything. My kids were encouraging, too, especially when they [went to] college themselves.

Michelle's children and husband were also supportive while she was enrolled in classes. She commented,

[My husband] and my oldest daughter—I don't think I could have done it without them. At all. He helped fix supper. He did the dishes. He made sure the kids were behaving

while I had to do my homework. My oldest daughter. Major, major support system. She talks to me, she encourages me. She doesn't let me give up or quit or get tired of things. She's there to listen. She talks to me. She's my best friend.

Melissa, who had three children in the home while she was a student, commented about her support system: "My husband. If he had not done all of the things around the house, I wouldn't have been able to do it." Tammy also credited her husband with helping with housework and child care, which enabled her to devote more time to her studies. She commented on the variety of ways that he supported her: "My husband would put [our son] to bed" and "If I had a timed test I needed to take, he was there [to take care of our son]." Tammy also shared that her parents "watched my son a lot while I was finishing up homework" and "they were a big support for me." She also utilized her mother's Internet connection if her connection was down and she needed access to her online classes.

Amy and her husband were raising four boys while she was pursuing her bachelor's degree. She commented about the support she received from her husband: "My husband was very supportive. If I said to him, 'I have to get this paper done, I have to have some time,' he would take the kids and go do something for a few hours." About her additional support system, she mentioned her mother: "Probably the kids' grandma. She was very helpful with the kids. She loves having them so whenever she could get them she didn't mind. I could count on her."

Karen also received support from her husband. She commented,

Well, my husband was my number one cheerleader. I would get up at 4 in the morning and study for 2 hours and then I would get ready for work. My husband was working the night shift so he would just say, "You do what you need to do."

Although she did not receive a great deal of support from her husband, Kimberly identified another family member to be her most effective support system: "My mother. Definitely." Kimberly's relationship with her mother motivated her to succeed in the distance program, as she stated, "I didn't want to work at McDonald's. And I wanted to work. I never wanted to stay at home. I wanted to be that person my mother was to me." Amy shared that her mother passed away prior to her decision to enroll in the distance program; her passing, however, did not detract from Amy's belief that her mother would have been beaming with pride on her graduation day:

> I honestly believe, my mother, God bless her little soul, would be so proud of me. She took in all stray kids that had mental health issues. She would love what I'm doing here because I have all of the stray kids.

Community Members

All participants shared that support from the wider community impacted their ability to persevere. This wider community included college staff and faculty, work colleagues, and friends and acquaintances. Three participants also stated that limited peer interaction presented challenges for them.

All 12 participants commented that, despite the fact that they were not physically on the campus, their interactions with the college's faculty and staff were important in their success as an online student. Some comments supporting this theme were as follows: "They never acted like any of the questions I asked were stupid," "They remembered my name," "Everyone in the administration was so welcoming," "[My advisor] was awesome and encouraging," "I wasn't rushed through like a herd of cattle," "All of my support came from instructors," "The staff was

extremely supportive," "Everyone went over and above to help me," "My professors were always there for me," and "Everybody I worked with at the school was helpful."

Tammy credited the support she received from the faculty and staff with helping her to persevere to graduation. She commented, "Even though I was not on campus, people always made me feel welcome, which helped me to feel included, which made me feel important, which made me want to do well." Melissa added that she found the faculty and staff very encouraging: "I think they want you to achieve." Karen also supported this theme, as she commented that "the professors . . . wanted to help. . . . It was just great." Lisa, who received little support from her family, commented, "I could not have done it without this program and without the encouragement of the instructors and the staff."

Four participants credited their work colleagues with supporting them as they pursued their bachelor's degree. Karen stated, "My support system—huge. My coworkers were my cheerleaders." Susan also received a good deal of support and encouragement from her colleagues in the financial services industry, stating that "one of the financial consultants that I worked with here—he was extremely supportive." She also found support from her employer's clients: "[One of the clients] was so excited that I was going back to school. A lot of my clients were. They were very excited that I was doing this for myself." A double major in psychology and theology, Susan shared a story about an interaction with one of her clients:

> The last time I saw [this client] she asked how school was going and then she would ask me what I was majoring in. And I would tell her and she would say, "Well, that is just perfect for this office." I had never heard that comment before and she said, "Well, think about it. If the stock market goes down you can talk us in off of the ledge. If it really goes bad you can pray for us." So to this day I quote her because she said that.

Two participants credited friends and acquaintances with helping them to persevere. Susan received support from many close friends. She commented, "I had friends who were really, really, really supportive. They were just as excited as I was and let me talk about it and let me use them as guinea pigs [for assignments]." She also was supported by the librarians at her local library, where she would often go to conduct research. She commented, "I teased those librarians that I probably should move a cot in because I tended to study better in the library study rooms because there were no distractions. I'd just go there and they were wonderful. They were great."

Jennifer stated that she needed, and received, solid support from many friends and acquaintances throughout her 10 years as a part-time student and until her graduation day. She commented,

> I have so many individuals who I have to thank for my success. I would talk to my doctor about it and he would encourage me. There [was] just a mountain of individuals who were interested in me succeeding. I had a tremendous support system.

Two participants mentioned the support they received from their church families. Mary commented, "People at my church would constantly ask me how it was going." Amy, who was working at a parish during her time as a student and received a great deal of encouragement from her priest to begin her studies, commented, "The priest who was there was willing to work with me. He allowed me to take some hours off of my workday. That was great. I could not have asked for more."

Flexibility and Practicality

All 12 participants indicated very practical reasons that they were attracted to the distance program format. The flexibility and accessibility of the distance program made the format a

practical option for all participants, in light of their family realities, employment and financial situations, and preferences and phase-of-life realities.

Family Realities

As shown in Table 1, 10 of the 12 participants were caring for at least one child while they were pursuing their bachelor's degrees. Nine of the 12 participants were caring for at least two children; four of them were caring for three children and one had four children at home while enrolled as a student. In addition, 10 of the 12 participants were either married or in a committed relationship while they were students.

All 12 participants indicated that the distance program allowed them to balance their education with their family responsibilities: "I enrolled in this program because I could fit [school] around my work schedule and my responsibilities with my kids," "With my kids and my grandkids and my life—there's no way I could have attended classes," "I had attended college where I had to go to class and was not able to see my family—that was important to me," "[I enrolled] mainly because I'm married and have a family," "[The distance program] worked better for me with my kids' busy lives," "I had children," "I was 34 with two young children," and "That's what I wanted to do all along is stay home with my kids at the beginning and this program was perfect for that."

Three participants found the distance format helpful because they, or a close family member, were faced with health-related challenges. Michelle's husband has had serious health issues over the last several years, leaving him unable to work; she had to balance these with her desire to obtain her bachelor's degree in order to increase her earning potential. She stated that her husband, "with his emotional, physical, and mental disabilities, is very demanding."

Angela's husband suffered a heart attack while she was a student, and Tammy's father and father-in-law spent extended time in the hospital during her program. She stated, "I can remember being at the hospital in the waiting rooms doing my papers. I would not have been able to continue my classes that semester if I had [*sic*] to go to a class."

Kimberly chose the distance program because of ongoing health issues and also experienced a variety of severe health-related issues during her time as a student. These health-related issues also lengthened the time for her degree completion.

Lisa overcame a severe drug addiction after enrolling as a distance student. She stated,

I had some addiction issues that kept my attention more on those issues than on what I needed to do in order to be where I wanted to be. About a month after I started [in the distance program] I found a way to deal with those issues that seemed to fit all together with this whole experience.

Employment and Financial Situations

Eleven of the 12 participants worked full time outside of the home during the time they were pursuing their bachelor's degrees; Kimberly was the only participant who was unemployed by choice while she was pursuing her degree. All 11 participants who worked while pursuing their degrees stated that they had to keep jobs while attending college, leading them to pursue their bachelor's degrees through the distance format.

Some common responses related to employment as a factor in choosing a distance program were "I wanted to be able to get my bachelor's while I was working," "I couldn't actually go to class because I was working full time," "My husband works full time and I was working full time," "I had employment that was not negotiable," and "I decided to attend school when I was working full time so I needed something I could do from home."

Michelle and her husband struggled financially throughout their marriage; she knew that a bachelor's degree could help them financially. She stated, "We have struggled so much and it just wears you down." Michelle earned the only income for her family, as her husband suffered from health challenges: "[He] is on disability so our income is almost nil. I was just working part time and could barely keep the bills paid. I had to earn more money." She continued by stating that she chose the distance program because she "could not afford the gas to attend a college where I had to attend classes."

In addition to Michelle, Mary and Susan also discussed the cost of transportation and related factors in their decision to enroll in a distance program. Mary had completed her associate's degree and the nearest four-year institution was a 45-minute drive from her home. She stated, "I don't like to drive so to be able to do it in the distance format was important." Susan, who had nine credit hours at one other institution prior to enrolling in the distance program, drove "a good hour" to attend classes on Tuesday and Thursday evenings. She commented, "I was exhausted from being on the road and not getting into bed until midnight, 1:00 and then having to get up and go to work the next day."

Preferences and Phase-of-Life Realities

Eleven of the 12 participants stated that they simply could not have pursued or completed bachelor's degrees if not for the distance format. Lisa commented that she "could not have done it without this program." Jennifer embraced the idea of enrolling in a distance program, stating that she needed "the convenience of being able to complete my work from home." She further explained, "I'm cooking dinner and I have my book laying there on the table, and my tablet, and I can go back to the stove and finish cooking, all at the same time."

Mary, a 53-year-old mother and grandmother, also stated that she enrolled in the distance program because she could not imagine herself attending classes with traditional-age college students. She commented, "It would have been difficult to go sit in a classroom with a bunch of kids who had just gotten out of high school."

Karen embraced the idea that the flexibility of a distance program allowed her to "paint my own picture" by pursuing her degree through the distance format. She commented that when she discussed the distance learning program with an admission representative, she thought,

Wow, this is exactly what I want to do. I want to go at my own pace. And then she said I could paint my own picture. And, wow, I was in charge of my life. I was taking control of what I wanted to do and was able to use my intelligence, my personality, and my education to improve my situation.

Patricia, 38, who had failed and dropped out of a state school immediately after graduating from high school, stated that she "ran" to the distance program. She credited the program with saving her life:

Oh, I ran to it. That distance program and [that college] in general, it saved my life. I don't want to sound dramatic, but as a distance learner in particular it did. If I had to have gone to all of those classes throughout that four-year period, I don't want to say I wouldn't have finished, but I wouldn't have finished as quickly as I did. Had I not ended up there I wouldn't be doing what I'm doing today. I'm just sure of it.

Personal Attributes

All 12 participants agreed that they used personal skills and traits to help them to succeed as online learners. They credited specific personal attributes as important to their success in their coursework and helping them to maintain momentum to complete individual courses as well as

their bachelor's degrees. Specific skills mentioned included planning, organization, and writing, whereas traits mentioned included focus, self-discipline, persistence, and self-motivation.

Personal Skills

Eight participants discussed the importance of their planning and organization skills as distance learners. Jennifer, a single mother who was raising three children while pursuing her degree, commented, "You have to be really good with organization. You have to have really good organizational skills. You have to preplan and stay on track because it's really easy to fall off track."

Lisa was also a single mother, raising two children while completing her coursework. She said,

> I would plan one full day on a certain day that I would spend doing these two or these three assignments. And then I would try to fit them all in. Sometimes it didn't work out so well. So then I'd be hurrying around the next week to catch up because I needed to stay on track.

Michelle attributed her success as a distance learner to her organizational skills:

> Any time you are doing a distance program, let me tell you, organization. Organizational skills. You have to be organized. I would lay out my homework, this book, this notebook, books. Everything laid out on the table. On the top I would lay out my list of what I was going to work on that week and I would knock those off.

Mary, who attended part time for six years, also supported this theme, admitting that her organizational skills carried her through the distance program:

I am a very organized person, some say to a fault. But that organization helped me keep

on track. If I spoke to a new student coming in, I would definitely tell them to set aside a

study space in their home and keep their work organized.

As distance learners, the participants were expected to complete a number of writing

assignments while pursuing their bachelor's degrees. Four participants stated that their writing

skills served them well in the program. Amy stated, "I just love reading and learning and writing

papers."

Kimberly, who often studied late into the evening after her family members went to bed,

commented, "I write very well, I think. Some people may not agree, but I flow." Susan shared

that one of the factors that led her to choose a distance program was writing: "It was also a

writing-based program and I like to write, so that was important to me."

Tammy shared that her strong writing skills allowed her to succeed in the program, as

well as to be successful in her position as a case manager:

I had a very good writing background in high school. So the writing part was not so

difficult but I think it could have been for a lot of people. I knew how to write. My

writing ability helped me to do much better in school than I did the first time around. I

was able to market my writing skills to get my job as a case manager.

Personal Traits

Focus, self-discipline, persistence, and self-motivation were mentioned by eight

participants as being instrumental in their success as distance learners. Melissa reflected that, as

a student, she had to be very "time-focused" when completing her homework and it was difficult

for her to "catch up" if she was not. She also stated, "If you're not focused on it or dedicated

then you can't do it."

Jennifer commented, "It is very important to stay focused. There were times when I wanted to go other places and socialize but school work remained number one." She continued by stating, "Sometimes I had to be so focused that it was just something I had to do." She also stressed that staying focused helped her to "stay on track." Jennifer also commented that she had to remain self-disciplined and maintain boundaries around her study time:

Wow. There were so many times when I would be exhausted from working and doing school work. I had a friend who would call me on the phone and say, "Hey, let's go hang out." And you better know that I wanted to go hang out so bad but I would have to tell her, "No, I can't do it because I have this assignment I have to do." I'd get off that phone be like, "Wow. I sure did want to go." But I had to keep that perseverance. This is something that I want and I'm not going to let anything stop me from getting it.

Susan, who worked steadily while pursuing her degree over a six-year period, commented, "I had to discipline myself to get the work done and that discipline has carried over into the other challenges in my life." Lisa's self-discipline also enabled her to experience success in other areas of her life, as she marketed her traits of self-discipline and self-motivation during her job search: "I found that mentioning having done the distance program during a job interview gets prospective employers' attention, as it shows them the level of self-motivation and discipline their potential employee possesses."

As she reflected on succeeding as a distance learner, Amy stated,

That's the big thing is looking back. I guess I was just driven. When I have a deadline I'm going to meet it and it's going to be done right and I'm going to get it done. I think I was just driven. That's how I am at work, too. I set deadlines for myself and that's how I get it done. It takes discipline. Definitely. If you don't have the discipline to do it and

get it done, online will not work for you. It's kind of like a job—if you are allowed to

work at home you have to be disciplined. It's very easy to get home and turn the TV on

and start the laundry and think, "I'll do that later." It's very easy to do. I think there has

to be some discipline and commitment.

Susan continued by adding that she had to remain self-disciplined and set her priorities when

other temptations jeopardized her study time: "I had to stick with it. People would call and say

'Let's go do this. You can [study] this weekend. You can do that later.'"

Karen stated that she developed self-discipline as a result of the distance program: "It was

taxing. It was different. I knew I had to be very disciplined and that's something I never had

been. Being disciplined is not a bad thing." Mary said that her self-motivation enabled her to

avoid putting "assignments off until tomorrow." Mary also commented that her "personal drive

and determination" enabled her to succeed in the distance program.

Michelle also supported this theme, as she spoke about the traits that helped her to

succeed: "Focus. Definitely self-discipline. Structure [is] definitely a must in self-discipline. I

have the self-discipline, structure, and organizational skills." She continued by stating,

"Persistence, perseverance. You have to have those qualities."

Transformation

Eleven of the 12 participants had attended at least one other institution prior to enrolling

in this distance program, and three participants had attended two other institutions. All 12

participants indicated that completing their bachelor's degrees in psychology as nontraditional-

age students contributed to personal and professional transformations. These transformations

included increased confidence and enhanced employment and graduate school opportunities.

Increased Confidence

Nine participants stated clearly that they had experienced "increased confidence" in themselves after completing their degrees. Jennifer, the only African American participant, advanced in her career with the state after completing her degree. In her daily work, she corresponds with a number of other helping professionals, including psychologists, medical doctors, and case managers. When asked if these professionals began to treat her differently when they discovered that she had completed her degree, she stated, "Oh, yes, because people do not expect a Black woman to have a college degree." She continued by stating that "it's a good feeling knowing that you can now interact with people on the same level. It's easier for me. It's a really good feeling."

Amy shared that she was "scared when I started" and stated that completing her degree increased her confidence because "it gave me a better background to talk about things." She often consults with the parents of the children she is serving in her position at a church and, after completing her psychology coursework, felt more confident in her interactions with them. She continued, "I'm not a therapist or anything but people do come to me with needs and want to talk. The degree has helped me in that way." She reflected on the completion of her degree and commented that she often "wonders how in the world did I do that." She also stated, "The education that I received is mine. Even though I use it for other people, it is mine."

Mary, who chose to pursue her degree to help her in her daily work with clients, shared that her degree is "so much more than a piece of paper hanging on the wall." She continued by commenting that she has "so much more confidence in what I'm doing" and that she "reached the point where I have confidence and can accomplish what I need to in the hours that I'm [at work]."

By completing her degree, Karen gained the confidence needed to take control of her life. She stated,

> How did [my degree] change me? Wow, I took control of my life and I felt so worthy of being me. And that's really a big thing. To like yourself and for too many years I didn't. And I was codependent. Getting my degree was empowering. It's pretty exhilarating.

Michelle shared that "my education has really boosted my confidence." Michelle also commented that "having the psychology degree has been a life-changing experience." The confidence she gained with the completion of her bachelor's degree allowed her to believe that she could pursue a graduate degree. She continued, "Proud. Really proud. That I had accomplished it." Tammy, the youngest participant, shared that obtaining her degree made her "more responsible and also raised my self-esteem."

Regarding her work in the financial services industry, Susan commented that completing her bachelor's degree in psychology boosted her confidence in her interactions with her clients to another level:

> I took on more responsibility. More one-on-one client stuff. There are some things that I cannot legally do from a financial industry standpoint, but there's a lot of things that I can do—a lot of the histories, gathering information, talking to the clients, forming that relationship. [The degree] has boosted my confidence—this is what I'm supposed to be doing.

Susan went on to say that "majoring in psychology was the best thing I did for my life, not just my career, but my life as a whole. It enriched my life in ways that are too numerous to count."

Lisa, a 38-year-old who raised both of her daughters alone while she completed her degree, supported this theme:

> When I started at [this institution], I had already gone to two other schools and I was just
>
> failing all over the place. My attitude was why would this time be any different for me.
>
> It was just going to be one more time that I failed at school.

The opportunity to obtain her degree in the distance format proved to be successful; in her

previous two attempts in campus-based nursing programs, she struggled to attend class because

she was battling addiction. She commented,

> Well, when I walked up the stairs the last time to visit the distance learning office I
>
> immediately remembered going up the stairs the first time. And I just thought I just can't
>
> believe I'm the same person. I mean, I'm not, but still. I can't believe that I am where I
>
> am today.

> Other participants stated that, in regard to completing their bachelor's degrees, they had

"a lot of pride," "I learned to stand up for myself," "I gained respect," "[Getting my degree]

changed everything to some degree and I think that's of value," "It reaffirmed for me that if I put

my mind to something I can do it," and "It was something for me—besides my family, besides

my work."

Enhanced Opportunities

Completing their bachelor's degrees led to enhanced professional and educational

opportunities for seven of the 12 participants. Five participants experienced job promotions or

shifts after completing their bachelor's degrees in psychology. Three participants chose to

remain in their current positions after graduating; all three had been employed in these positions

long-term and chose to stay with these employers, who had also provided financial support for

their education. Two participants conducted failed job searches after graduation; they both

admitted that they could have expanded their options if they had chosen to pursue positions

outside of their given geographical preferences. One participant remained unemployed by

choice so she could pursue a graduate degree full time.

Karen, the oldest of the participants at 59, obtained a position as a director at a

transitional housing unit following her graduation. She commented, "The reason I have this job

today is because I'm the only [applicant] that had a degree in psychology. So many other people

wanted this job." She continued, "I went to the board of directors and made my statement about

why I wanted this job. This is what I'm supposed to be doing and the degree led me to it."

Michelle transitioned to a position as a job coach in an alternative education program

after completing her bachelor's degree. She credited her curriculum with providing her with the

opportunity to gain experience with this clientele:

> I did my internship with an alternative education program and that just clicked. I loved
>
> working with the kids. I was able to help them with their life skills and issues they were
>
> having personally that [prevented them from doing well in school]. So they ended up
>
> being better students because I was helping them in this area. That just really got me into
>
> it and gave me the experience I needed to move on.

Although her new position was later eliminated due to lack of funding, Tammy

transitioned from the medical field to a helping profession as a case manager after completing

her degree. She commented,

> Right after I graduated I got a nice little job working as a social worker. I was really
>
> enjoying that a lot and then that November the funding got pulled. Everything I needed
>
> to know I had definitely learned from school.

Lisa, who was employed at a social services organization, transitioned to a higher-paying

position with a different agency in the community. She stated, "I was able to get a job as soon as

I finished my degree. As soon as I completed my courses I started applying for jobs that required a bachelor's."

Jennifer has obtained two promotions since completing her bachelor's degree. She commented, "Well, since I've graduated I've been able to obtain promotions. I've actually obtained two promotions. Now being that I work for the state the salaries are not that lucrative, but I do pretty much enjoy what I'm doing."

Four of the 12 participants had continued their education by pursuing master's degrees. Two years after graduation, Tammy was accepted into a graduate program and started pursuing her master's degree in counseling and Kimberly was pursuing a master's in leadership development.

Michelle completed her bachelor's degree at the age of 48 and has since completed a master's degree in education in a hybrid format. At the time of the interview, Michelle was pursuing a second master's degree in clinical psychology and had recently accepted a position as a behavioral technician; she stated that her master's degree, coupled with her bachelor's degree in psychology, contributed to a career change within a helping profession.

Patricia, who withdrew from a large state university after one semester when she was 18, began pursuing her bachelor's degree through the distance format at age 30. She was accepted into a graduate program soon after she graduated with her bachelor's degree. She commented, "I went straight into graduate school. I went and got my school counseling license and that's what I've been doing since."

The themes and subthemes identified in this study indicate that women who choose to major in psychology in a distance program choose this major due to a sense of benevolence grounded in a desire to help others and understand human behavior. The support participants

received from family members, community members, and the institution's faculty and staff was important to their success as online students. The flexibility and practicality of the distance program allowed participants to manage successfully family responsibilities, employment and financial situations, personal preferences, and phase-of-life realities. The program's flexibility enabled the women to balance their academic pursuits with previously-established parenting and employment roles. The participants identified personal skills, such as the ability to write well and approach tasks in an organized fashion, as well as the traits of self-motivation and self-discipline as important to their success in the distance program format. Upon graduation, participants experienced personal and professional transformations that included increased self-confidence and enhanced job and graduate school opportunities.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to learn about and examine the contributing factors that lead nontraditional-age women who graduate from a distance program to choose psychology as an undergraduate major. As the literature review in Chapter 2 indicated, there had been no reported research focused specifically on this population of learners, their choice of major, and the factors that enable them to complete their bachelor's degree in a distance format. The results of this study are examined within the context of Lent and Brown's (2013) SCCT theoretical framework. Application of the liberal feminist theoretical approach during data analysis helped to expose the social constructs and assumed conditions that the participants confronted and overcame as they pursued their bachelor's degrees.

As confirmed in the results of this study, women bring unique gifts and perspectives to family, work, and educational environments. For women to realize their full potential, the gender differences between men and women need to be acknowledged and embraced. Once these gender differences are acknowledged, it is then possible to explore strategies to modify the social constructs that often inhibit women's opportunities and choices. The experiences of this study's participants indicate that when the traditional gender roles, which are often accepted and unnoticed, are altered, women are positioned to succeed. This success leads to personal and professional transformation.

Five primary themes were identified through data analysis. One theme, a sense of benevolence, indicates how this population of learners chose psychology as a major. Three other themes—support, flexibility and practicality, and personal attributes—provide insight into the processes and infrastructures that enabled this population to succeed in a distance education format. And, finally, the fifth theme demonstrates how degree completion transformed nontraditional-age women, many of whom were attempting college for a second or third time.

A Sense of Benevolence Contributes to Choice of Psychology

Participants in this study generally chose to major in psychology because of a sense of benevolence rooted in an interest in helping others and furthering their understanding of people and their behaviors. These findings are not surprising, as the socialization of women encourages them to be supportive of and cooperative with others. The research findings align with those of Marrs et al. (2007), who found that the enjoyment of learning about and studying people was one of three primary contributors to psychology as a choice of an undergraduate major. The current research findings are also consistent with Gervasio and colleagues's (2010) findings that a desire to help others is a primary reason why undergraduate students choose to major in psychology. Helping others and understanding human behavior also provides insight into the participants' value systems; values are closely linked to outcome expectations within the SCCT theoretical framework. Furthermore, liberal feminists believe that choices made by women should be foundational to their self-interests and value systems.

In general, the participants' interests in helping others and understanding human behavior contributed to their decisions to pursue their bachelor's degrees. As nontraditional-age learners, their educational outcome expectations were to gain the skills and education needed to help others in their respective communities, through their daily work as well as their avocational

activities. These results are consistent with Lent and colleagues's (1994) SCCT theory in that

people are led to educational experiences and careers that allow them to explore their primary

interests more fully. The participants indicated that, although they wanted to help others and

understand human behavior, they were also interested in being better prepared and more

knowledgeable within their respective professional positions.

A sense of benevolence as a contributing factor to choosing psychology as a major is

parallel to Harton and Lyons's (2003) finding that psychology majors are likely to be more

empathic than students enrolled in other majors. Harton and Lyons found that women are likely

to "perceive themselves as high in characteristics such as empathy" (p. 24). Through their

responses, the current study's participants revealed a high level of empathy for others. This

empathic nature extended beyond their choice of major and their desire to succeed in a helping

profession. They displayed this empathy through their interest and determination in successfully

balancing and strengthening their multiple roles and relationships while also positively impacting

the lives of those with whom they interact in these relationships. An example includes the fact

that nearly all of the participants were caring for children during their time as distance learners,

and almost half of them stated that they were motivated to complete their degrees to ensure that

their children understand the importance of a college education. Mary supported this theme, as

she shared that her children were proud of her when she graduated and that "it's helped to give

them some drive; it's no longer 'do you want to go to college or don't you?'. They know they are

going to college."

The participants also proved to be committed to their employers and the clients,

colleagues, students, and customers they serve throughout their workdays. Nearly all of the

participants were employed while they were pursuing their bachelor's degrees; Kimberly was the

only participant who was unemployed. Moreover, half of the participants were employed in helping professions. Their employment experiences in helping professions and their subsequent choice of psychology as a major is consistent with SCCT, as experiencing success in a career field is likely to impact a person's academic and career choices (Lent et al., 1994). These findings differ from Marrs and colleagues's (2007) findings that psychology majors, as a whole, did not identify job preparation or a past experience as influencing their choice of a major. Although the Marrs et al. article did not include the mean age of their participants, Marrs (personal communication, February 4, 2014) stated that the sample was "fairly traditional age" and the research was conducted at a residential university with a high percentage of traditional-age students. This difference in employment and career-related experiences could be attributed to the differences in age and life experience in the two studies' participants.

Lent and Brown (2013) developed a list of adaptive career behaviors, outlined by career-life period and typical life roles during these periods. The developmental periods are growth, exploration, establishment, maintenance, and disengagement/reengagement (Lent & Brown, 2013). When aligned with these career-life periods, almost all of the current study's participants were established workers who were intentionally experiencing continuation of their exploration of career paths and advancements. Their maturity and experience in the field, in addition to their subsequent education, allowed the participants, as well as their employers and communities, to benefit immediately. Their choice to continue to acquire career-relevant experiences and skills allowed the participants to become immersed more deeply into the discipline of psychology and to fulfill their desire to help others.

Consistent with Aslanian and Giles' (2010) findings that adults primarily pursue higher education in career-related fields, most participants were employed in careers closely connected

with the psychology major. These work experiences enabled the participants to make direct connections from their academic training in psychology to their daily work responsibilities; they experienced immediate and concrete connections, which enabled them to see their education paying off in real-time. Lent and Brown (2013) stated that SCCT theory "views people as living within a social world, with ever-present opportunities to be influenced by, as well as to influence, others" (p. 2). According to Lent et al. (1994), observing others who are successful in a given field impacts self-efficacy levels. Because many of the participants were immersed in helping professions, the success they experienced, as well as the influence of their observations of other professionals in the work environment, likely contributed to increased levels of self-efficacy. The real-time application of coursework also could have increased the participants' self-confidence, leading to higher self-efficacy levels.

As Lent and Brown (2013) posited, people immersed in a social world influence those around them. The participants' sense of benevolence and desire to influence others in a positive way is a primary indicator of a key learning outcome outlined in the APA's (2013) most recent iteration of guidelines for the undergraduate psychology major. The learning outcome encourages faculty to infuse the "values that build community at local, national, and global levels" (APA, 2013, p. 27). It is the pursuit of "personal opportunities to promote civic, social, and global outcomes that benefit the community" (APA, 2013, p. 27) that indicates whether this learning outcome is met. This shift in APA's perspective recognizes the significance of psychology as an applied practice, in addition to being a science, and the role that the applied practice aspect of the discipline has within communities. Because women are socialized to care for others and are drawn to careers in the helping professions, this shift could result in a continued increase in the number of women choosing to major in psychology.

Nearly all of the participants planned to continue their work in helping professions after completing their bachelor's degrees; the types of positions that they held or desired to hold indicates their interest in the discipline of psychology as an applied practice that enabled them to serve people in their communities through their daily work. Although the interview did not include a specific question related to whether they believed the discipline of psychology to be a science or an applied practice, the flexibility of the semi-structured format enabled me to probe some participants more deeply on this topic. Half of the participants who shared their thoughts on psychology being regarded as a science or an applied practice believed the discipline to be a combination of both. In fact, they believed that one aspect of the discipline could not function fully without the other. Patricia's response indicated a degree of confusion about the delineation of science and applied practice: "That's a tough question. I could go either way. I see it as more of a science but I am a counselor. I do see psychology and [the applied practice] as two different fields but they definitely overlap." Kimberly's response indicated that had she thought of psychology as a science prior to declaring psychology as a major, she may have shied away from the field: "I was a little intimidated when I had to start taking science classes and there was a lot of science in psychology—biological psychology, biology, chemistry—any of those classes that I didn't do well in. Those things made me nervous and it wasn't what I expected."

The difference in opinion and the confusion around psychology as a scientific discipline supports the APA's (2013) recent revision of its guidelines and parameters for the undergraduate psychology major. As stated in the update, it will benefit the discipline to be clearly promoted as a science and strengthen its stance as a STEM discipline. Focusing aspects of the psychology curriculum on scientific inquiry will help undergraduate students develop strong skills that will allow them to interpret behavior, which proved to be a strong interest area for some of the

participants. At the same time, the guideline's revisions call for assurance that undergraduate psychology majors have an understanding of how psychology-based interventions are used in applied settings.

Given that half of the participants were employed in applied helping professions, they appreciated concrete experiences in their educational training that enabled them to begin to apply psychology-based interventions. Several participants attributed the Techniques of Counseling course as making an immediate impact on their daily work with their respective clienteles. Covering a variety of microskills techniques (e.g., paraphrases, reflection of feeling, active listening), the course equipped participants with concrete skills that enhanced their daily work. For example, when asked about particular classes that help her in her daily work, Amy stated, "Techniques of Counseling. That class has come in handy. Being able to just step back and just listen. I've found that a lot of times people just want you to listen." Patricia commented that her belief she could advance in a helping profession was solidified after completing several role-playing recordings for her Techniques of Counseling class.

The participants' desire to help others and to improve their communities through their daily work reinforces the APA's (2013) new recommendations for the undergraduate psychology major, which include an emphasis on ethical and social responsibility behaviors that will benefit communities. The participants' academic training, as well as their sense of benevolence and commitment to their families and employers, enables them to positively impact their communities and families.

Nontraditional-Age Female Students Benefit From Support Systems

All of the participants enrolled in the distance program after establishing family roles, and nearly all of them were caring for children in the home as they pursued their degrees. The

majority of participants were married or in committed relationships. This is consistent with

Padula's (1994) finding that nontraditional-age women start or return to the higher education

environment after establishing family roles. Bozick and DeLuca (2005) found that "getting

married and having children before or during enrollment in college has negative consequences

for degree attainment" (p. 774); one way to combat these negative consequences is for the

nontraditional-age student to have a solid support system. Nearly all of the participants enjoyed

strong and healthy relationships within their established roles and benefitted from their support

as they pursued their degrees. All of the participants credited their support systems with concrete

contributions that allowed them to identify and dedicate time needed to complete homework;

they also benefitted from the encouragement and moral support provided by their support

systems. These findings align with those of Cox and Ebbers (2010), who found that support

systems contribute to the retention of nontraditional-age students.

Lent et al. (1994) found that once a goal is identified, behaviors must then be organized

and sustained in order to achieve that goal. In addition to the participants committing to

behavior changes that would enable them to succeed as distance learners, it was also important

that those within their support systems were open to behavior changes and priority shifts. The

participants' support systems included their husbands (the majority of the participants were

married while pursuing their degrees), parents, children, colleagues, friends, and the institution's

faculty and staff members. The research findings identifying those in the participants' support

systems are congruent with Carney-Crompton and Tan's (2002) findings that nontraditional-age

students are more likely to use support systems within their social and professional realms. The

support they received from others helped them to overcome the struggles of balancing priorities

associated with their multiple roles and maintaining momentum over a number of years while pursuing their education.

Most of the participants recognized that support from their partners was critical to their success; all of the participants in committed relationships during their time as students were also raising children. With most of the women married while they pursued their degrees, the sharing of responsibilities related to housework and raising children aligns with the liberal feminist belief that women should have access to options and that personal relationships are fair and just in a variety of aspects, including daily responsibilities (Baehr, 2013). The participants revealed their appreciation of this support through such comments as "He would take the kids and go do something," "He was cooking meals, watching the kids," "He made sure the kids were behaving," and "If I was freaking out about getting an assignment done he would say, 'I'll take [the kids]. We'll get in the car and go for a ride. Go somewhere.' It was so helpful."

Some participants also shared that their partners were instrumental in encouraging them to enroll in college to pursue their degrees. For example, Patricia stated that her husband "was thrilled" when she decided enroll. These types of comments indicate a balance in the marriage and a move away from a patriarchal household; this equality is foundational to the liberal feminist perspective. Equality for women should be evident in a variety of aspects of the relationship, and autonomy, as it relates to decisions and access, must be allowed and encouraged. Additionally, this evidence of persuasion and encouragement from those in their social realm is consistent with SCCT theory, in which career interests and self-efficacy related to pursuing those interests often come from social persuasion.

Most of the participants were enjoying partnerships that extended well beyond the traditional gender roles that often limit women's choices. Again, it is important to consider that

the participants managed their multiple roles through to graduation; women in partnerships that

exhibit traditional gender roles may not have had the same level of support from their spouses

and would likely have not graduated, making them ineligible to participate in this current study.

Simply stated, the participants would likely not have persevered to graduation had they

not had strong support systems from a variety of areas in their lives. Consistent with Gibbons

and Shoffner's (2004) findings, this extrinsic reinforcement is tied directly to outcome

expectations; the participants needed this support to succeed as students. All of the participants

credited their individual course faculty members, their advisors, and the staff members in the

online learning office with playing a key role in their retention and success. I find it interesting

that only one participant mentioned a traditional student services office; Patricia credited the

career services office, but only in the context of an academic course that required job shadowing

visits within the curriculum.

Consistent with Carney-Crompton and Tan's (2002) findings, the current study showed

that nontraditional-age female students benefit when the institution is aware of and

accommodates their needs. As they reflected on their interactions with the institution's

employees, the majority of participants mentioned staff and faculty members specifically by

name. Their personal interactions with the institution's employees were instrumental in their

success and provided them with a connection to the institution. Whereas Furst-Bowe and

Dittman (2001) found that many administrators and faculty lack an understanding of

nontraditional-age students' barriers to success, the institution serving the current study's

participants was attentive to the needs of their nontraditional-age female students. As a women's

institution, this college founded the second distance program in the United States. The program

was designed specifically for women and was intended to address barriers they face, including

those related to economic, career, and gender roles. The study's participants benefited from the institution's commitment to serving women in a way that allows them to pursue their education while also balancing multiple, pre-established roles that are important to them.

Landry (2002) found that child care and health care issues can impact the retention of nontraditional-age female students. Participants raising children had strong support systems to help with the children, and only one participant, Kimberly, shared that she had severe health issues during her time as a student. The support systems, as well as a lack of health-related challenges, enabled the women to persevere to graduation. Mary attributed her ability to succeed as a distance learner to her good health during her time as student. As she reflected on personal attributes that enabled her to succeed, she commented, "My personal drive helped me to be successful. I was also blessed with good health. That helps a lot." In relation to psychological and mental health, none of the participants experienced identified challenges during her time as a student. This finding is congruent with Quimby and O'Brien (2006), who found that an absence of psychological distress is a strong predictor of academic persistence for nontraditional-age students.

Whereas a number of participants found their parents to be helpful in the process of obtaining degrees, Susan stated that her parents' lack of understanding and awareness may have contributed to her not continuing her education immediately after high school. Although she always had a "love of learning," her parents were unaware of how to help her apply to college: "Neither one of my parents graduated from high school so they had no clue how to guide me to anything beyond high school because of their experience." This is not surprising, as Choy (2001) found that first-generation students are less likely to enroll in college than continuing-

generation students. Susan was a first-generation college graduate at the age of 44 and was the only participant to earn all of her academic credits at one institution.

Flexibility and Practicality Lead to Choice of Distance Program

All of the participants in this study had pre-established family roles and responsibilities; in addition, most of the participants had pre-established employment responsibilities that they were unwilling or unable to alter during their time as college students. These family and employment responsibilities proved to be deciding factors as the participants chose to pursue their bachelor's degrees in a distance format; all participants chose the program because of its flexibility and practicality. These findings are congruent with Aslanian and Clinefelter's (2012) annual survey of online learners, which identified convenience and flexibility as primary reasons that adults choose online or distance programs.

For most of the participants, the successful completion of their bachelor's degrees came on their second or third attempts. Nearly all of them delayed their return to college because of established responsibilities related to family and employers. These research findings are consistent with Coogan and Chen's (2007) findings that barriers unique to women (e.g., gender-role orientation, employment inequities, family responsibilities) can adversely impact women's educational and career pursuits and advances. The participants needed this type of program because barriers, real or perceived, prevented the traditional college experience from being accessible to them.

Although nearly all of the participants had previous college experience, very few of them had previous experience in a distance format. This new delivery option could have contributed to altering faulty self-efficacy; SCCT theorists Lent and Brown (2013) posit that self-efficacy beliefs can be altered through new experiences. Their ability to succeed in this delivery format

led the women to a variety of experiences that allowed personal and professional transformation to occur.

Family Realities

The current study aligns with Padula's (1994) findings that nontraditional-age students enroll in college after establishing multiple roles carrying a number of responsibilities. This was especially true in terms of the participants' family lives. They placed value on being able to maintain these responsibilities, which led them to pursue their bachelor's degrees in a distance format.

Nearly all of the participants were caring for at least one child in the home as they were pursuing their degrees. In addition, most participants were working full time and needed to maintain employment to contribute to the family income; more than half of the participants reported a household income of less than $40,000 during the time they were pursuing their degrees. These salary figures are worrisome, given that most of the participants were working and contributing to the household income. Only one participant lived alone, and the majority of the participants were sharing households with at least two other family members.

Due to their strong support systems, each of the participants in the current study was in a position to balance her family responsibilities with those of being a college student. This finding is consistent with Coser's (1974) observation that family and education are both greedy institutions that require a good deal of energy and time from nontraditional-age female students; the participants credited their strong support systems with providing assistance with family responsibilities while they completed homework assignments. Many participants credited their spouses with absorbing some of their pre-established responsibilities (e.g., caring for children, cooking). Participants' comments about the contributions of spousal support are consistent with

Padula's (1994) finding that moving to more equal levels of household and family responsibilities was important to the participants' success, as children are often obstacles to degree completion. Although it is ideal that each family member has the ability to pursue plans and goals, nontraditional-age students face unique challenges when balancing existing social practices with their individual needs, personal values, and goal attainment (Gheaus & Robeyns, 2011). The participants' family realities were overcome as obstacles because of their support systems.

A fourth of this study's participants chose to study in a distance program because family members were facing health challenges. These participants needed the flexibility of the program so that they could maintain their roles as caretakers for these family members. The women appreciated having the option to complete their studies from a variety of locations, including hospital waiting rooms and at the bedsides of ailing family members. Tammy illustrates this theme, as she commented, "I remember being at the hospital in the waiting room doing my papers. I would not have been able to continue my classes that semester if I had to go to a class."

Employment and Financial Situations

Most of the participants stated that they had to maintain full-time employment in order to contribute to the family income. The flexibility of the distance program enabled the participants to continue working and contributing to the family's income. Their role as full-time employees further supports Padula's (1994) research findings that nontraditional-age students attend college after establishing roles in other areas of their lives.

Aslanian and Giles (2010) found that a triggering event typically prompts adult learners to pursue higher education. Several participants stated that they chose to pursue bachelor's degrees to increase their earning potential. The need to earn more income served as the

triggering event for many of the participants; this finding of a triggering event is consistent with Aslanian and Giles's finding. A study by the Pew Research Center (Taylor et al., 2011) demonstrated that college graduates earn two times the amount of money during their lifetimes than high school graduates. Half of the participants in the current study experienced a promotion or job change that resulted in a higher income following graduation; this finding aligns with the Pew Research Center's (Taylor et al., 2011) observations that degree attainment increases earning potential.

In considering how environmental and economic factors impact academic and career interests, some participants were experiencing financial hardships and, although they were contributing to their family incomes, they were earning minimal salaries. These low salaries were likely due to lack of bachelor's degrees as well as their gender, which is a well-documented, unfair restriction for women. In its most recent research on the gender pay gap, the American Association of University Women (AAUW) stated that women earned 77 cents for every dollar that men earned in 2012 (AAUW, 2014).

Although their salaries were somewhat minimal, most of the participants who were employed received support and encouragement from their employers and coworkers. Coogan and Chen (2007) found that unfair challenges in relation to earning power further contribute to the complex nature of women's career development. The complexity of the participants' career development processes was evident in their persistent efforts to succeed as college students while also managing and surviving on scarce economic resources. Liberal feminist theorists support the idea that women should have access to a variety of options, such as higher education, that enable them to live freely and experience personal autonomy (Baehr, 2013). Although the distance education format provided them with access to higher learning, most of the participants

added the role of college student to their previously established roles, which included holding

jobs in lower-paying positions. Liberal feminism theorists would applaud the findings that the

participants' employers provided emotional support and encouragement to their nontraditional-

age female employees who were pursuing bachelor's degrees. However, the women, their

families, and their communities would benefit greatly if individual employers addressed the

socially constructed gender pay gap.

Preference and Phase-of-Life Realities

With a mean age of 46, the participants experienced a delay in academic and career

exploration, attainment, and satisfaction. Two thirds had attended one other institution and one

fourth had been previously enrolled at two other institutions. Only one participant earned all her

bachelor's degree credits at one institution. These research findings are consistent with Aslanian

and Clinefelter's (2012) observation that "most online learners are older, have past experiences

with higher education, and have several responsibilities in life" (p. 16). Examples of their many

other responsibilities during their time as students include raising children (most of them had

children at home), employment (most of them were working and needed to continue working),

maintaining partnerships (most of them were in committed relationships), and caretaking (nearly

half of them were caring for a parent, partner, or other relative).

Lent and Brown's (2013) exploration stage of the career development process features a

variety of adaptive behaviors on the individual's part. These behaviors include developing job-

searching skills, exploring career paths, managing transitions, and gaining career-related

experiences and skills through education, jobs, or volunteer experience. Within the exploration

stage of development, many of this study's participants were gaining on-the-job experience in

helping professions while also managing transitions related to their respective phase of life

circumstances. The pursuit of college degrees was delayed due to contextual and environmental, social, and economic variables. Their first or second attempts at succeeding in college had been abandoned due to what Lent et al. (2000) referred to as "adverse environmental factors" (p. 38). For one participant, this factor was substance addiction, which contributed to her failing out of two other institutions; when she enrolled at this institution she believed that it would just be "one more time that I failed at school." Choosing this program during that phase in her life motivated her to overcome her addiction and succeed in obtaining her degree.

Due to the number of responsibilities and their current life circumstances, the participants deliberately chose to pursue their degrees in a distance program. Many of them viewed this opportunity as one more chance to complete an educational journey that had begun many years ago. The program's format, coupled with their respective phase-of-life circumstances, allowed them to maintain their responsibilities while giving college another try—a try that proved to be successful.

Personal Attributes Contribute to Success

All of the participants discussed the importance of the application of personal skills and strengths in order to succeed as a distance student. Most of the data related to this theme were identified from the participants' responses to the short essay. In the short essay, participants were provided with a laptop computer and given 10-15 minutes to type a response. The response was focused primarily on advice that they would provide for nontraditional-age women who are considering majoring in psychology in a distance program. Participants identified a variety of skills and strengths needed to succeed in a distance program. Some commonly mentioned skills and traits include self-discipline, organization, motivation, and focus. The consistent application

of these skills was critical not only to the participants' academic success but also to their ability to balance a number of previously established responsibilities and priorities.

The active application of key skills is consistent with results from a number of studies, including one conducted by Hong and Jung (2011) in which they grouped distance learner competencies into five clusters. The five clusters included study vision, cognitive and meta-cognitive skills, interaction abilities, identity as a learner, and management skills. Competencies within these clusters include study goals that fit a life plan, motivation to complete tasks, determination to succeed, regulation of learning processes, application of learning strategies, a recognition of the role of a student, belief in ability to succeed, and the management of resources (e.g., time), behaviors, and habits, and scheduling to meet due dates and deadlines. Participants in the current study attributed their success as distance students to all of these competencies.

The self-discipline, motivation, and focus needed to achieve academic success often meant delaying social activities with friends and family members. Many participants mentioned the difficulty of declining offers from friends and family who invited them to social gatherings that were scheduled during their planned study time. Jennifer illustrated this when she mentioned that she had to remain focused on her educational goals and she was not going to let anything, including a dinner invitation from a friend, prevent her from achieving these goals. Susan's comments also provide evidence of this theme, as she stated that when friends called to invite her to join them for social gatherings, she had to say no and "stick with it." This consistent dedication to pursuing their academic goals and honoring their identity as college students enabled the participants to maintain the discipline and structure needed in order to succeed in a distance format.

Self-discipline, specifically, was mentioned by most of the participants as a trait that was critical to their academic success. This finding is consistent with Gayton's (2013) observation that self-discipline is the top factor that impacts student retention in online programs. Amy illustrated the importance of self-discipline succinctly with her comment, "It takes discipline. Definitely. If you don't have discipline to do it and get it done online will not work for you."

Degree Attainment Leads to Transformation

As the participants reflected on their graduation accomplishment, all stated that they were satisfied that they completed their degrees. The majority of the participants experienced "increased confidence" and a transformation; this was revealed through their words as well as their body language and facial expressions during the interviews. They were experiencing academic and career satisfaction, the fourth dimension of Lent and Brown's (2013) SCCT theory. Furthermore, all of the participants actively engaged in moving beyond the status quo by choosing to pursue their education, which led to transformation. Their decision to enroll in college supports Enns's (1988) assertion that women should be active in changing factors related to "individual problems, environmental factors, socialization, and oppression" (p. 67).

This transformation could be attributed to a number of factors, most notably that of increased self-efficacy and self-confidence. The current study's findings are similar to Redsecker's (n.d.) study in which she explored the expected and unexpected outcomes experienced by 18 graduates from an adult completion program; 14 of the 18 participants were women. She identified 47 unexpected outcomes, 30% of which she categorized as "self." Much like the participants in Redsecker's study, my participants revealed that they experienced self-transformation. Furthermore, Quimby and O'Brien (2006) found that women managing a number of roles, including that of college students, place a great deal of importance on their

academic success. They found that "nontraditional-age women underestimate" (p. 323) their academic abilities. Although this disposition was not revealed in my study, it would contribute to the transformational process for participants to achieve the milestone of college graduation after studying in the distance format for an average of 7 years. For all but one of the participants, graduating from the distance program followed at least one previous failed attempt to obtain a degree.

One participant, Melissa, a 56-year-old who works as a bus driver, did not make a career transition after graduation and did not experience a job-related transformation; she was disappointed in her career options and gave up after discovering that most of the positions of interest to her required a master's degree or higher. In her initial response to the invitation to participate in the study, she stated that she would like to volunteer but "would not make a good participant" because she was dissatisfied with her job opportunities following graduation. Despite her disappointment, Melissa stated that she is applying her degree in her daily work. Since obtaining her bachelor's degree in 2007, she has kept her position as a bus driver and volunteered to drive children with special needs; this experience has offered an opportunity to apply her education in psychology, particularly developmental psychology.

The study included one participant (8%) who identified as African American. This percentage is close to the institution's demographics (4%), as well as the demographics of online learners (12%; Aslanian & Clinefelter, 2013; "College Data," 2013). Jennifer, an African American woman, responded with perhaps the most profound response when asked if those with whom she interacts on a daily basis in her work (i.e., psychologists, medical doctors, case managers) treated her differently after she obtained her degree. Her response was "Oh, yes, because people do not expect a Black woman to have a college degree." She experienced

increased confidence in her professional work. The impact of Jennifer's experience supports Collins's (1986) belief that a feminist analysis provides a unique theoretical perspective when studying the experiences of those who have experienced marginalization, in any setting. The marginalization and oppression that Jennifer experienced was apparent and magnified through her responses. Becoming more free from social and professional stereotypes and oppression could have contributed partly to Jennifer's transformation.

A third of the participants were accepted to graduate programs following graduation. Although none of the participants attributed their major choice to a desire for graduate school preparation, their postgraduation decisions are consistent with Marrs and colleagues's (2007) finding that preparation for graduate school was one of the top three reasons for choosing psychology as an undergraduate degree. Whereas many women foreclose on their own career goals to accommodate their spouses' career aspirations, Mary commented that her husband's unwavering support as she was pursuing her degree online led her to reject an opportunity to pursue her master's degree at no cost. Essentially, she felt that she and her husband deserved to have time together without the stress of coursework. At the time of the interview, Mary commented that this was the right decision for her and it was a decision that she made for herself, her marriage, and her family. She expressed her enjoyment of spending time with her husband, their three children, and seven grandchildren and that graduation has been "kind of freeing," as she is no longer maintaining her role as college student. She commented that "the way I spend my time has changed" and that her family is "more important than work." At age 53, Mary was beginning to manage her transition from work to leisure, as outlined in Lent and Brown's (2013) adaptive career behaviors.

The transformative process extended beyond the employment environment for the participants, as all of them experienced transformation as an internal process. Enns (1988) found that women often overemphasize employment as a means of independence and increased self-esteem. Although many of the participants were content in their roles as mothers, partners, children, and friends, their sense of benevolence was covertly heightened by work-related responsibilities and interactions; this aligns with Enns's findings. The participants who obtained promotions and monetary raises after completing their degrees were appreciative for these opportunities that contributed to their transformation. In addition, the participants experienced increased self-esteem, as the completion of their bachelor's degrees is leading to increased opportunities and more and different choices. It is also likely that the transformative process extends beyond the participants as individuals. Their perseverance to graduation has modeled that women can successfully attain academic and professional goals; this modeling could potentially impact female family members as well as the female friends from whom they received support.

Lisa shared what is probably the most life-changing transformation experienced by any of the participants. Having failed at two previous attempts to obtain her degree, Lisa was battling addiction when she enrolled in the distance program. Expecting to fail a third time, Lisa experienced a significant life transformation shortly after enrolling in the program; she focused on her studies and became motivated to develop a plan to overcome her addiction. This accomplishment, coupled with her graduation, led to a life change that includes a new job and an increased salary. Her transformation is now impacting others in her community, as she has advanced to a position as a case manager for the state.

Finally, the transformation experienced by the participants in this study enabled them to imagine and experience life differently on a variety of levels. This supports Baehr's (2013) essay in which she magnified the importance of opportunities for women that lead to personal and professional transformations. The option to pursue opportunities that lead to transformation and a better quality of life should be available and accessible for all women, regardless of age, race, past experiences, or social and economic barriers.

Limitations

Participants in this study were nontraditional-age female college students studying in a distance program; the mean age was 46 and most of them had pre-established and greedy multiple roles as they began to pursue their degrees, which, for most, were second or third attempts. They were studying in a distance program at an institution with a long history of commitment to addressing the unique needs of women in society.

The appropriateness of transferring the findings of this study to other programs that serve this unique population of learners will need to be closely examined. As the data were analyzed, it became clear that the demographic questionnaire could have been structured more effectively, allowing for a deeper analysis of the connections between the women's educational experiences and their economic realities and limitations. Although it was studied and explored to some degree, the impact of the economic realities faced by the participants and their families should be more prominent in similar studies. Economic barriers often prevent this population of learners from accessing educational opportunities as well as the support systems needed to succeed as college students. More specific and targeted questions related to individual and family income levels before and after degree attainment could yield helpful insight, not only about the economic

value of obtaining bachelor's degrees but also the specific economic value for nontraditional-age women who obtain degrees.

Only those women who persevered to graduation were included in this study; including nontraditional-age women majoring in psychology in a distance program who dropped out or stopped out could produce different findings, particularly in the area of support systems. In addition, because the women were invited to volunteer to participate in the study, those who responded may have had a positive disposition about their experience as nontraditional-age students majoring in psychology in a distance program. Melissa's initial correspondence indicated that she would not be a good candidate to participate because she was disappointed with her postgraduation experience. Although part of her reaction could be attributed to low self-efficacy, she acknowledged that she actively chose to remain in her current geographical location; this decision prevented her from expanding her job search geographically, which could have increased her number of opportunities. Melissa also acknowledged that she limited herself in her career exploration activities. As outlined in SCCT (Lent & Brown, 2013), fully exploring career options and interests is important in the career development process.

Implications

The implications of this study's findings span theory, practice, and research. With projected trends, it appears that higher education will continue to experience increasing numbers of female students and online learners. Expanding what is known about this population of learners and evaluating how they are supported and served is important as higher education administrators adapt programs and services that effectively attract and retain these women. In addition, those who are in positions to influence change should welcome the opportunity to challenge the systems and processes related to the perpetuation of traditional gender roles and the

quality of opportunities available for women. Individuals, families, and communities will benefit from an increase in the numbers of confident and educated women carrying out personal and professional contributions that are rooted in their sense of benevolence and their desire to help others. These women can be in a better position to succeed if more is known about them, if higher education professionals serve and engage them in meaningful ways, and if we continue to gather information about them through targeted research.

Theoretical Implications

Two theoretical approaches provided guidance for this study: social cognitive career theory and liberal feminist theory. Both of these theoretical foundations were appropriate to apply to the lived experiences of nontraditional-age female college students who chose psychology as a major. In addition, both of the foundations provided a unique lens through which to document and analyze participant choices, experiences, expectations, and outcomes.

Lent and Brown's (2013) recent addition of satisfaction as the fourth dimension of SCCT provided a dimension that proved to be important for this study's participants. The participants' transformational experiences were a highlight of all aspects of this research study. During the semi-structured interviews with the participants, most of them were visually and verbally excited to share their postgraduation promotions and job changes as well as their graduate school experiences. Further exploration of the satisfaction levels reached and experienced by nontraditional-age women who graduate with bachelor's degrees could be helpful in expanding what is known about adult women and the impact of degree attainment on career satisfaction. Personal and professional transformation and satisfaction occurs if nontraditional-age women are provided with and take advantage of opportunities to pursue higher education and persevere to graduation.

Nontraditional-age women who choose to complete their bachelor's degrees are unlikely to move through the career development process in a predicted order. Examining how and in what order nontraditional-age women might address and experience adaptive career behaviors can improve how employers and higher education professionals engage this population in opportunities to advance their academic training and professional positions. Such an examination would also help the identified support systems, particularly employers, as they would have a more meaningful understanding of the career development patterns of nontraditional-age women; this understanding would enable them to provide the support needed as the women moved through these stages.

The SCCT model is based on the assumption that people have some level of control over their own career development processes. As Swanson and Woitke (1997) found, there are a number of barriers, real or perceived, that impact women's career development. Gaining a better understanding of this population's perceived barriers and how these perceptions impact the career development process is important. This understanding might lead higher education professionals and employers to provide more appropriate and targeted activities and opportunities to nontraditional-age women.

Liberal feminist theorists emphasize that the subordination of women "is embedded in legal, economic, and cultural constraints" (Enns, 2004, p. 60). Participants in this study needed strong support systems in order to persevere to graduation, primarily due to economic constraints but also due to society's gender-related expectations in regard to family-related responsibilities. Most of the participants were in committed relationships with men as they were pursuing their degrees. The participants credited their male partners with providing support by taking a more active role in housework and childcare. A similar study with nontraditional-age male college

students could yield interesting results related to their perceptions of support from female

partners and significant others in their family systems. Continued research into the impact of

societal norms and gender-related expectations can be helpful as society works to bridge the

inequities and barriers that often prevent adult women from pursuing academic and career goals.

Practice Implications

Administrators, faculty, and staff at colleges and universities serving nontraditional-age

women in an online environment can implement a variety of strategies designed to help this

population of learners to succeed in the academic environment. These strategies include

integrating career-development activities into the curriculum, educating those in the students'

support systems about their roles in student success, and intentionally connecting students to

their peers and to the institution's faculty and staff.

During their work with future counselors and helping professionals, counselor educators

should emphasize the importance of the career development process for all clientele, but

particularly women, as their career development process is more complicated than that of men.

Section II of the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs

(CACREP; 2009) Standards include a strong focus on a variety of aspects of career development,

including the interrelationships between employment, family, and other life roles, as well as the

impact of multicultural issues in the career development process. All of these aspects of the

career development process were apparent in this study.

Career services professionals and discipline-specific faculty can play key roles in

providing career-related information and opportunities for nontraditional-age female students.

This population of students could benefit from intentional and structured career development

programming integrated into their major curricula. This study's participants, most of whom

were also employed while pursuing their degrees, were shifting between career development

stages, most notably the exploration and establishment stages. Given the intensity of the

multiple roles typically held by this population, curriculum-integrated activities related to career

exploration, professional networking, and internships and job shadowing will help the women to

make more intentional and informed choices related to their career and graduate school

opportunities. Networking could benefit the women in their goals to increase their earning

potential and advance their career paths more quickly. Stronger and targeted career

development-related activities would also support the APA's 2013 guidelines for the

undergraduate psychology major, which call for an increased emphasis on career development.

Furthermore, the career development activities would provide structured opportunities for the

nontraditional-age students to challenge ideas and biases they may have in regard to employment

possibilities for women. Career-related activities will require consistent connections with the

institution's career services department. Faculty will also need to remain current on job trends

and opportunities within the discipline to ensure that they are providing accurate and relevant

information to students.

In addition to career services professionals and faculty, other staff and administrators can

impact the success of nontraditional-age female students enrolled at their institutions. The

participants in this study were fortunate to have strong support systems throughout their tenure as

distance students. Most of them stated that they would not have persevered without the support

of their partners, families, friends, college faculty and staff, and other community members.

Higher education staff members and administrators who plan distance student orientation

activities might consider including the students' support systems in orientation activities, either

on campus or online. An orientation could help those in the student's support network to

understand the implications of their role in the student's success as a distance student. It is critical that the members of the nontraditional-age students' support systems be acutely aware of the impact and importance of their support. Providing information, strategies, and tips to those within the support systems could encourage and increase their involvement. Creatively designing intentional programming that connects the students' support systems to the institution could contribute to retention and degree completion for this population; an example is the use of social media to highlight tips and strategies specific to their roles as supportive partners, employers, friends, or family members.

In addition to staff and administrators designing programs to engage the students and those in their support networks, it is important to include opportunities for students to meet and interact with their faculty members, their student peers, and the staff who will be providing services (e.g., staff from the learning center, career services, information technology). All participants in this study credited the institution's faculty and staff with their success. The participants were required to attend an on-campus orientation prior to beginning their coursework, during which they met a number of faculty and staff members.

Staff, administrators, and faculty can also help new students begin to form connections and relationships with their peers. I found it interesting that all participants in this study stated that they had very little interaction with their student peers throughout their academic careers. None of the participants credited their peers with playing a role in their experience and success as distance students. Three participants mentioned the challenges that came with having no consistent interaction with other students. Mary commented,

> If you're a traditional college kid it seems like it would be harder to drop out because of
> the other kids around you encouraging you to keep going. With distance learning there is

no competition. It's you. You have to set your own goals and have that drive. You don't

have the people around you in daily classes who you are keeping up with. If you need

peers around you to help you accomplish your goals, this format isn't the answer.

Tammy also mentioned an interest in the status of her peers. She stated, "I would get my papers

back and think 'Wow, I wonder if everyone else is doing this well?'" She continued, "It was

interesting though to take online classes because a lot of times I didn't know where I stood in the

class." Melissa also stated that she "missed the companionship that comes with taking classes

with others."

Very early in the life of online education, Kearsley (1998) stated that "the single most

important element of successful online education is interaction among participants" (p. 3).

Connecting students with their peers through meaningful academic activities and assignments,

social networking sites, or community service opportunities could contribute to an improved

student experience and increased retention for nontraditional-age students. A connection with

students who share similar academic and career interests would provide the students with an

opportunity to develop a shared meaning around the common experience of being a

nontraditional-age student majoring in psychology.

Administrators might also consider adapting policies to address the unique needs of

nontraditional-age students navigating and balancing a number of life roles. For example, as part

of its criteria for identifying institutions as "military friendly," Victory Media considers policies

related to flexibility for military students; this is defined as "policies for military students

removed from school due to deployments and PCS [permanent change of station] orders"

("About Military Friendly," 2013, para. 7, http://militaryfriendly.com/methodology/schools).

Policies addressing the unique needs of nontraditional-age students could help with the

recruitment and retention of these students, as they are often balancing their coursework with family and employment obligations. Clear policies emphasizing flexibility in scheduling as well as payment options could potentially provide these students with the protection and options they need as they manage unpredictable life circumstances.

In the area of curriculum development, faculty and administrators could consider implementing first-year experience courses that include assignments designed to encourage nontraditional-age students to identify, explore, and develop the skills needed to persevere in a distance program. The participants in this study emphasized that attributes such as self-discipline, focus, and motivation contributed to their success. Challenging adult students to identify and utilize skills that are important to their success could enable them to begin to develop confidence about their abilities as new, nontraditional-age students enrolling in college for a second or, for some, a third time.

Finally, it is important for higher education administrators and faculty to understand the personal and professional transformations that nontraditional-age women experience when they persevere to graduation. Redsecker (n.d.) challenged higher education professionals to identify "ways to nurture and prepare our adult students for the very real possibility that, in addition to a better job, they will emerge from their degree completion experience with a transformed sense of self that empowers their future" (How to Support Adult Students, para. 7, http://www.wihe.com/viewArticle.jsp?id=18391). Experiencing academic and career satisfaction, as outlined in the fourth dimension of SCCT, is life-changing in a number of ways for this population, given that many of them considered degree attainment or job advancement elusive after a number of false starts or because of low self-efficacy.

Research Implications

Whereas this study was focused on contributing factors to choosing psychology as a major in a distance format, it would be helpful to explore contributing factors to other majors chosen by nontraditional-age women studying in this format. This study's participants benefitted from support from a variety of areas, including their partners, family members, and friends and the institution's faculty and staff members. The participants chose the distance learning format because of its accessibility, which allowed them to continue to manage a variety of responsibilities, particularly those related to caring for children and family. Future research could determine whether nontraditional-age men and women choose distance programs for similar reasons. It would also be helpful to research the support systems that nontraditional-age male students need in order to persevere to graduation.

A larger sample size that includes students who dropped out or stopped out could be helpful in expanding the research on why nontraditional-age women choose to major in psychology in a distance program. Hearing from those unable to persevere to graduation could provide information that could lead to individual and institutional changes that may contribute to this population's success in the online learning environment.

Two participants in this study chose to couple their major in psychology with a major in theology; one additional participant considered a double major in psychology and theology but did not feel that she was "holy enough." It could be helpful to conduct research that explores the nontraditional-age female students' interest in psychology and theology as a double major, particularly at faith-based institutions. In addition, it could be beneficial to conduct research with women who attend non-faith-based institutions to see if they choose to major in psychology for reasons similar to those identified in this study.

A number of participants voluntarily shared the challenges that they faced as they completed the mathematical and statistical course requirements for the general studies curriculum and the psychology major. With the current national movement to explore alternative discipline-specific math requirements, it could be helpful to conduct a study that correlates the attrition in those individual courses with the retention of nontraditional-age female students studying in online programs. An awareness of the unique needs of women as related to their struggles in the math discipline is important, as math can be a barrier to degree attainment.

Because the participants benefitted from strong support systems, a qualitative study focused on the experiences of the people who provided this support could be beneficial. Their voices could provide strong recommendations on how to support nontraditional-age students who are pursuing their educational goals while balancing previously established roles and responsibilities.

With the APA's (2013) recent recommendation for undergraduate psychology major programs to strengthen their focus on professional and career opportunities, research focused on how this intentional programming impacts academic and career interest development, choice, persistence, and satisfaction will be beneficial. Specific research on how career development-related programming impacts nontraditional-age women will ensure that this population's experiences are studied and improved as needed. As found in this study, nontraditional-age female graduates typically choose to remain in their geographical locations due to family commitments and responsibilities. Engaging this population of learners in career-related activities will help to connect them to networks of professionals within their communities. These communities, in turn, will benefit from the meaningful contributions of these women who have a strong sense of benevolence and an interest in helping and understanding others.

Finally, only one participant in the current study identified as African American.

Research focused on the lived experiences of nontraditional-age African American women

enrolled in a distance program could be helpful. Future research on the lived experience of racial

and cultural minority students would support Molina's (2008) plea to avoid perpetuating

oppression on this population by ensuring that their stories are heard and their experiences are

shared. We learned from Jennifer that African American women are not perceived as a

population that pursues higher education. Because of this powerful unspoken oppression, it is

important to know more about African American women's experiences as online learners, as

members of this population could benefit from additional resources that may contribute to their

success as students and graduates.

The five primary themes identified in this study provide insight into important factors

related to how nontraditional-age women studying in a distance program choose psychology as a

major, the processes and infrastructures that enabled them to persevere to graduation, and the

personal and professional transformations they experienced upon degree completion.

Nontraditional-age women who choose to major in psychology in a distance program choose this

major due to a sense of benevolence, particularly a desire to help others and understand human

behavior. With strong support systems that enabled them to maintain important pre-established

roles, participants persevered to graduation. Following graduation, the women in this study

experienced personal and professional transformations that resulted in increased self-confidence,

job promotions, and graduate school opportunities.

Administrators, faculty, and staff responsible for the implementation and structure of

online programs should ensure that students are provided with opportunities to interact with their

faculty and peers in meaningful ways, as these relationships are a source of support and

important to retention. Career services professionals need to connect intentionally with nontraditional-age women; their career development process can be complicated, as many of them are pursuing career goals while also balancing other responsibilities such as parenting and full-time employment.

The nontraditional-age women included in this study were grounded in their communities prior to enrolling in a distance program and many of them were employed in a helping profession. As these women experienced personal and professional transformations upon degree completion, their families, their clientele, and their communities enjoyed immediate benefits. With higher education, the participants became more confident and secure in their daily work and experienced an increased level of respect from their peers. These women are cornerstones to our communities; it is critical that they have access to higher education, have the support needed to pursue this education, and be encouraged and cheered on to degree completion.

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APPENDIX A: AUDITOR CONFIDENTIALITY STATEMENT

I, _____, in the capacity of auditor, agree to maintain full confidentiality in regards to any and all audio recordings and documentation received from Jacqueline Fischer related to her dissertation research on nontraditional age females who chose psychology as a major in a distance learning program. Furthermore, I agree:

- To keep all research information shared with me confidential by not disclosing, discussing, or sharing any materials or information in any format with anyone other than the researcher.
- To store all research information in any form (e.g., recordings and transcripts) in a safe and secure location while it is in my possession.
- To return all research information in any form (e.g., recordings and transcripts) to the researcher upon completion of the research tasks.
- To erase or destroy all research information in any form for this research study that is not returnable to the researcher (e.g., written or typed notes) after consulting with the researcher.
- To not make copies of any audiotapes or computerized files.
- To hold in the strictest confidence the identification of any individual that may be inadvertently revealed during the auditing process.

I am aware that the unauthorized release of confidential information may subject me to civil liability under applicable federal and state law. I recognize that my obligation to maintain confidentiality and safeguard research information continues after my work on this research study has concluded.

_____
Printed Name of Auditor

_____   _____
Signature of Auditor   Date

_____
Witness (Printed Name)

APPENDIX B: INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE

Hello _____,

I hope you are doing well since your graduation from XXXX College in _____.

I am currently a doctoral candidate in Counselor Education at Indiana State University and am conducting a qualitative research study for my dissertation. My research is being conducted with nontraditional-age women who have graduated from a distance learning program with a psychology major. The objective of this research is to examine the factors and experiences that contribute to a nontraditional-age woman's decision to major in psychology in a distance learning program. In order to participate in this study, you must be a bachelor's-level graduate from a distance program, a psychology major, and at least 25 years of age. You must also live within 240 miles of the XXXX campus. I am contacting you because you meet the criteria for participation in my research.

If you volunteer to participate in this study, you will be asked to do the following:

- Complete a written survey of basic demographic information.

- Complete a short essay on a laptop computer provided by the researcher.

- Commit approximately 30 minutes to complete the written and typed exercises.

- Consent to be audio-taped with a digital recorder.

- Commit approximately 1-2 hours to participate in one interview with the researcher.

- Commit approximately 30 minutes to review a summary of your interview transcription.

- Commit to an approximate 2-3 hours of total time of participation.

Your participation will be at no cost to you, other than your time to participate. I will travel to a location of your choice to conduct the interview, as well as administer the questionnaire and short essay. Your identity and participation will not be disclosed and any information that you share during this study that can be identified with you will remain confidential. The risks associated with participating in this study are minimal and no more than the risks encountered in the activities of everyday life.

My faculty advisor for this research is Dr. Michele C. Boyer; Dr. Boyer is professor emerita of Counseling Psychology at Indiana State University.

I look forward to hearing from you regarding your interest in participating.

Sincerely,

Jackie Fischer

XXXX@sycamores.indstate.edu

(XXX) XXX-XXXX

APPENDIX C: CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

Nontraditional-Age Women Graduates From a Distance Program:

Contributors to Choosing Psychology as a Major

You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Jackie Fischer, a doctoral candidate in Counselor Education at Indiana State University. This study is being conducted as the culminating dissertation requirement for Jackie Fischer to complete her doctoral degree in Counselor Education. This research is being conducted with nontraditional-age women who have graduated from a distance learning program. Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Please read the information below and ask questions about anything you do not understand before deciding whether or not to participate.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The objective of this research is to examine the factors and experiences that contribute to a nontraditional-age woman's decision to major in psychology in a distance learning program. In order to participate in this study, you must be a bachelor's level graduate from a distance program, a psychology major, and at least 25 years of age. You must also live within 240 miles of the XXXX College campus. If you do not meet these criteria, you will not be able to participate in this study. If, for whatever reason, you participate in this study and it is later found out that you do not meet these criteria, you will not be able to continue to participate in this study. The minimum number of participants will be 10 and the maximum number will be 16 participants.

PROCEDURES

If you volunteer to participate in this study, you will be asked to do the following:

- Complete a written survey of basic demographic information.

- Complete a short essay on a laptop computer provided by the researcher.

- Commit approximately 30 minutes to complete the written and typed exercises.

- Consent to be audio-taped with a digital recorder.

- Commit approximately 1-2 hours to participate in one interview with the researcher.

- Commit approximately 30 minutes to review a summary of your interview transcription.

- Commit to an approximate 2-3 hours of total time of participation.

POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS

The risks associated with participating in this study are minimal and no more than the risks encountered in the activities of everyday life. The risk of a breach of confidentiality is minimal. Any information obtained in this study that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will not be disclosed without your permission or as required by law.

POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO SUBJECTS AND/OR TO SOCIETY

The information that you provide about your experiences will help me understand the contributors that lead to nontraditional-age women choosing to major in psychology in a distance program. The information collected in this study may not benefit you directly but may contribute to the larger body of limited knowledge about nontraditional-age college women enrolled in a distance program and the contributors that led to their choice of psychology as a major.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Any information obtained in connection with this study that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law.

Confidentiality will be maintained by means of assigning pseudonyms to label individual surveys

and interview information. I will create a master list of participants' names, identifying

information, and pseudonyms. This list will be stored separately from all other materials in a

locked file cabinet. This information will only be used if you need to be contacted for

rescheduling purposes and will be destroyed within five years of the completion of this study.

Your participation is completely voluntary. You will be informed of your pseudonym, and if you

decide to withdraw after data is collected, you may contact me and request that your information

be withdrawn from the study using your pseudonym. Your name will not be connected to the

data collected.

Information collected electronically, including the electronically recorded interview, will be

stored on a password-protected computer; following the completion of the study, all information

will be removed from the computer and saved to disks. The disks will be destroyed within five

years of the study's completion. Information that is recorded digitally and written survey

information will be kept in a locked filing cabinet immediately following the interview. Only this

researcher, a faculty supervisor, a peer auditor, and a transcriptionist will be able to access the

information from the interviews.

PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL

You may choose whether or not to be in this study. If you volunteer to be in this study, you may

withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind. You may also refuse to answer any

questions you do not want to answer. There is no penalty if you withdraw from the study. If it is

determined that you do not match the criteria for this study, I will withdraw you from the study.

IDENTIFICATION OF INVESTIGATORS

If you have any questions or concerns about this research, feel free to contact me at

(XXX) XXX-XXXX or XXXX@sycamores.indstate.edu. The faculty advisor for this project is

Dr. Michele C. Boyer, Department of Communication Disorders, Counseling, School, and

Educational Psychology. Dr. Boyer can be reached at (812) 237-7602 or

michele.boyer@indstate.edu.

RIGHTS OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the

Indiana State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) by mail at Indiana State University,

Office of Sponsored Programs, Terre Haute, IN 47809, by phone at (812) 237-8217, or by e-mail

at irb@indstate.edu. You will be given the opportunity to discuss any questions about your rights

as a research subject with a member of the IRB. The IRB is an independent committee composed

of members of the University community, as well as lay members of the community not

connected with ISU. The IRB has reviewed and approved this study.

I understand the procedures described above. My questions have been answered to my

satisfaction, and I agree to participate in this study. I have been given a copy of this form.

Printed Name of Participant _____

Signature of Participant _____

Date _____

Professionally,

Jackie Fischer, M.S.

Indiana State University

XXXX@sycamores.indstate.edu

APPENDIX D: SHORT ESSAY

You will have 10-15 minutes to complete this exercise.

As a nontraditional-age female student who graduated with a bachelor's degree in psychology from a distance learning program, you are in a position to offer firsthand advice and guidance to women who are considering a similar path.

What would you say to a nontraditional-age woman who is considering majoring in psychology in a distance program? What did you wish you knew at the time that you know now? What would you like for them to know about being a graduate with a psychology major?

APPENDIX E: SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

The following questions were used in a semi-structured interview:

1. Tell me what your life has been like since completing your bachelor's degree.

2. Tell me about your decision to enroll in a distance program, instead of a campus program.

3. Talk about what it was like for you to be enrolled in a distance program.

4. Talk about how you decided to major in psychology.

5. What types of personal experiences generated your interest in psychology?

6. When you decided to major in psychology, what types of academic experiences did you believe you would have as a student? What types of professional experiences?

7. What was it like to be a psychology major?

8. What were your plans after completing your bachelor's degree in psychology?

9. What types of personal support systems were important to you as you progressed in your studies?

10. What is like for you now as a psychology major graduate?

11. What types of support systems from the institution were helpful as you progressed in your studies?

12. Some students may select psychology as a major because of an interaction with a helping professional, such as a psychologist, counselor, or other helping

professional. If that is true for you would you be willing to share general

information about your impressions of that professional and your experiences

during your interactions with that professional?

13. How satisfied are you with your choice to major in psychology?

14. What other additional thoughts do you have that are related to your decision to

major in psychology in a distance education format?

APPENDIX F: DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE

Participants completed a demographic questionnaire in a handwritten format. The questionnaire contained the following questions:

1. Name

2. Address

3. Current age

4. Age range while enrolled in the distance learning program

5. Ethnicity

6. Religion

7. Distance in miles from campus

8. Number of hours completed prior to enrolling in this distance program

9. Number of institutions attended prior to enrolling in this distance program

10. Age at time of declaration as psychology major

11. Major(s) prior to declaration of psychology major, if applicable

12. Relationship status(es) during time as a distance learner (circle all that apply):

    o Married

    o Widowed

    o Divorced

    o Single

    o In a committed relationship

o   Other (please explain)

13. Number of children under your care during time as a distance learner

14. Employment status during time as a distance learner (please circle all that apply):

o   Unemployed by choice

o   Unemployed and searching

o   Working full-time

o   Working part-time

o   Other (please explain)

15. Average annual household income during time as a distance learner (please select

one):

o   <$15,000

o $15,001-$20,000

o $20,001-$30,000

o $30,001-$40,000

o   >$40,000

16. Average number of hours per week involved in community activities during time

as a distance learner (please select one):

o   0

o   1-5

o   6-10

o   >10

17. Final cumulative grade point average

- o 4.0

- o 3.5-3.99

- o 3.0-3.49

- o 2.5-3.99

- o 2.0-2.49

- o <2.0

APPENDIX G: INVITATION TO REVIEW DATA

Thank you for your willingness to continue to participate in my research study. At this

point, I have compiled the data from your interview and would like to give you the opportunity

to check the data. This process will help to ensure that the information that you provided on

(date) has been interpreted correctly. Your interview was recorded and transcribed, and major

themes have been identified. If you would like to provide feedback on these data, please review

the enclosed document and note any changes or comments; you can make these changes and

edits directly on the document. Please return your comments to me in the enclosed self-addressed

stamped envelope by (date). If you do not have any changes, please e-mail me at

XXXX@sycamores.indstate.edu to indicate that you have no changes or edits to the document.