Transformative experiences and the search for meaning among adult full-time undergraduate returning students

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Transformative experiences and the search for meaning among adult full-time undergraduate returning students

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Iowa State University, 1994
Transformative experiences and the
search for meaning among adult full-time
undergraduate returning students

by

Wilber Michael Rapier

A Dissertation Submitted to the
Graduate Faculty in Partial Fulfillment of the
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Iowa State University
Ames, Iowa
1994
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One of the goals of adult education is to help students to achieve to their full potentials both in their educational endeavors and in their personal development. Adults are returning to higher education in ever increasing numbers (Boaz, 1978). While many adults do attend college to improve job skills or to obtain new job skills (Boaz, 1978; Solmon & Gordon, 1981; Anderson & Darkenwald, 1979; Lutz, 1978; Kuh & Ardaiolo, 1979), a great many of them are returning because of a need for personal growth (Kaplan, 1982; McGraw, 1982). The question then becomes, what is the relationship between returning to college and transformation?

What is this perspective transformation that some adults experience, and how does it manifest itself among returning undergraduate adult students? Mezirow (1991) describes perspective transformation as:

The process of becoming critically aware of how and why our presuppositions have come to constrain the way we perceive, understand, and feel about our world; of reformulating these assumptions to permit a more inclusive, discriminating, permeable, and integrative perspective; and of making decisions or otherwise acting upon these new understandings.

Transformation is frequently triggered by significant events such as dysfunction or disequilibrium. Triggering mechanisms may include events such as marriage, divorce, loss of jobs, need for retraining on the job, or the need to enter
or reenter into the job market or into the higher education arena after many years absence. Additionally, this awakening may be triggered by local, national, or international movements (Ferguson, 1980; Hart, 1990). Anything that disrupts the order of one's life, shakes up the old understanding of the world, or upsets the old priorities has the potential for triggering transformation (Ferguson, 1980). Brown (1989) feels that life events are essentially thoughts which are usually induced by some external force and which occur in conjunction with some change in behavior. These life events are important because of the way they "...match or mismatch with concerns of the individual." (p. 8).

But transformation can occur without being precipitated by sudden, critical, earth shattering events. Daloz (1986), Shainberg (1973), Sheehy (1981), Gould (1978), and Fingarette (1963) all describe the slow processes that sometimes lead to transformation. There is the slow drum roll, the vague feeling of needing to change (Sheehy, 1981), a trap door that one would open, slowly peek over the edge, pull back, and close the door (Gould, 1978), or the insidious process of growth and understanding which leads to transformation (Shainberg, 1973; Daloz, 1986; Fingarette, 1963). This slow process continues until the individual opens the door and enters the other side. To Paykel et al. (1971), life events are considered to be so complex that each individual will respond differently to even seemingly identical events. But
since transitions are like journeys with beginnings, middles, and ends (Schlossberg, 1989), these transitions can elicit changes in individuals which the individual or others may consider to be good, bad, or neutral. The onus is on the individual to make the appropriate changes.

In order for learning to occur, the learner has to be willing to interact with his or her own experiences (Kolb, 1984). Once the experience is grasped and dealt with, the learner is able to transform the experience into knowledge by integrating the newly acquired knowledge with prior knowledge and experience. This interaction, integration, and transformation of experiences provides for what Kolb calls differentiation. Kolb believes that this increased interpretation leads to increased levels of consciousness, which in turn leads to increased self-directedness. Maslow (1976), in his hierarchy of needs, calls this process self-actualization -- individuals accept themselves, are realistically oriented, and are independent and creative. To make sense of an experience, one has to make an interpretation of it. When one uses the interpretation to guide decision making, then the experience becomes learning (Mezirow, 1985). To Mezirow learning is a process which requires the ability to interpret and make meaning of new experience, which in turn guides subsequent actions.

As adults develop and go through life’s transitions they
have to learn to adapt to new circumstances and situations, and as they meet the demands of current life situations, they revise experiences of the past to deal with the current crises (Gould, 1978). With each new situation or event, there is an opportunity for what Noam (1988) calls critical qualitative changes. Bruner (1973) calls this process decentration -- the process of moving through successive transformations towards analyzing things from a new perspective increasingly removed from one's personal perspective.

How much of the desire to attend or return to higher education can be attributed to transformations among adult students who are twenty-five years of age or older and who have been out of school for three years or more? Why do these adults seek entry or reentry into the higher education arena? Are there significant events taking place in their lives, and do those events influence their desire to return to college? Does education have a role to play in helping adults make meaning of their lives? Most importantly, are adults who return to college acting on some previously experienced transformation, or are they viewing higher education as a medium for a transformation?

The research project will attempt to answer the question of whether adults who return to college are acting on some previously experienced transformation or whether they are viewing college as a means to transformation.
Problem Statement

Why do undergraduate adults who are twenty-five years of age or older return to college on a full-time basis at this time in their lives?

Assumptions

One of the assumptions underpinning this research is that adults who are returning to the classroom have experienced some sort of transformation and are now attempting to incorporate new meanings and experiences into their lives. Another assumption is that these adults are using their educational experiences as catalysts to help them to understand themselves. It must be assumed that educators and the education system are capable of assisting these adults in achieving their goals. It is important that adult educators have the tools to stimulate the adult learner to examine their culturally driven, context bound, and value laden environment, and to modify old assumptions and preconceived ideas which had guided their ways of thinking and acting.

Research Questions

Transformation is frequently triggered by some critical events that occur in the lives of adults. Many of these adults enter or reenter institutions of higher education after being away from a formal educational environment for many
years. How much of the desire of adult students to attend or return to college can be attributed to a transformation? Are adults acting on some previously experienced transformation or are they viewing higher education as a medium for a transformation?

This study will attempt to explain the reasons why adults decide to return to college at this time in their lives. In doing so, the study will attempt to answer the question as to whether adult students who attend college are acting on previously experienced transformation or whether they are viewing higher education as a medium for transformation.

Use of a Qualitative Methodology

In order to understand the reasons why adults return to college, it is necessary to present the data from the adult students' points of view. For this reason, the researcher decided to use a qualitative approach. Qualitative research provides a source of well-grounded, rich description and explanation of a process (Miles & Huberman, 1984). Additionally, it is "Superior in identifying those events that are truly stressful" (Gorman, 1993, p. 71). The qualitative research method will enable the researcher to describe and present events that were significant to the participants in the study; while at the same time, it will present their stories in a holistic and naturalistic setting. This approach
is ideal for presenting narratives about individuals and their transformations.

Significance of the Research

The number of adults returning to college has continued to increase. Christman (1987), Kaplan (1982), and McGraw (1982) have identified some of the barriers to learning that adults face, especially those adults who may be attending college on a part-time basis or who are only taking an occasional class to test their ability to handle class loads on a full-time basis. But adults who are returning to college on a full time basis are also having to face those barriers to education. Through the identification of these barriers, college officials will be better prepared to create classroom and campus environments that will be more conducive to adult learning.

This research will be of great assistance to adult educators at every level, and to adult students who are struggling to make sense of the dilemmas that confront them as they attempt to find themselves through the educational process. The questions that this research raise and the knowledge that is gained should provide insights into the needs of adult students who are entering colleges. Additionally, the information should be quite useful to adult students' counselling centers and admission offices that
provide valuable services to those adult students.

It is hoped that the information that is gained from this research will contribute both to the generation of hypotheses about the impact of the transformative process on the lives of adult students, and to the development of further theories on adult learning. This increased knowledge about the transformative process and its application to students, student counsellors, and educators, should impact quite significantly on the educational outcome of adults.

Limitations of the Study

This study cannot be generalized to all students who have returned to college, since transformative experiences may be only a small part of the overall picture in the return of adults to school. Although transformation may indeed be a critical factor in the decision to return to college, it may be necessary to conduct a study of this type on a much larger scale to generalize the results to the adult population of reentry college students.

Although every effort was made to find a population that represents a cross-section of adults, it must be remembered that this study is being carried out at a midwestern university where the student population may not be comparable to other areas of the country in the size and ethnicity of the population.
CHAPTER II. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

A review of the literature provides not only the theoretical context for the study, but also presents an overview of research that has been done on adults who have returned to college. There are six sections to the literature review. The first section presents an overview of the concept of transformation, and helps to define the major themes which serve as a backdrop for this study. Sections two through six help to develop the review of the literature as it explores the research that has been done on adults who have returned to school, the roles of conflict in the transformative process, the stages of growth in this process, change as an active process, and the role of education in helping adults in their search for growth.

Overview of Transformation

To understand fully the theory of transformative experiences, one has to be cognizant of the process(es) that adults go through from the time that a problem is posed to the time that some action is taken. Knowledge of this process may be the key to understanding the meaning making that Mezirow, in *Transformative Dimensions of adult learning* (1991), says is "...the hallmark of reflection" (p. 110). A crucial ingredient in the transformative educational process is the
ability of adults to make meaning of their experiences. Jack Mezirow uses a model to help explain the process of making meaning through reflective action. Mezirow's model consists of a seven-step process ranging from the posing of a problem through the taking of some action (p. 109). Mezirow examines two types of action: those actions which he considers to be non-reflective and those which he considers to be reflective. In non-reflective action, adults review prior learning and experiences simply to assist them in arriving at or making decisions. There is no deliberate appraisal of prior learning, just a review. As Mezirow points out, "...we are not attending to the grounds or justification of our beliefs but are simply using our beliefs to make an interpretation..." (p. 107). Mezirow calls this action thoughtful but not reflective. Reflective action, on the other hand, involves the process of removing oneself from the picture and consciously and critically reexamining the reasons for one's behavior and mode of thought and action. Mezirow sees reflective thinking as the gaining of a critical awareness of the reasons why one sees things in a certain way, and then of using those new insights to reformulate new ways of thinking and acting. The key difference between reflective and non-reflective action is the ability to question pre-conceived ideas and beliefs and correct those ideas that may be distorted.
An important consideration, then, is deciding whether all reflective actions lead to transformative learning. In Mezirow’s model, one of the key differences in the process of reflective action is the form of the reflection. He describes three forms of reflection: content reflection, process reflection, and premise reflection (p.107). Content reflection is concerned with the "what" while process reflection is concerned with the "how". In other words, what does one perceive and how does one perceive it? Premise reflection, on the other hand is concerned with the "why" - why does one perceive things is a particular manner? While content and process reflections may simply help one to consciously examine and review prior learning, premise reflection assists in the critical assessment and reappraisal of one’s beliefs, values and biases. While process and content reflection may be helpful in the process of creating meaning schemes, it is the premise reflection which leads to a contemplative insight and ultimately to meaning making and perspective transformation. This theory of reflective action, as espoused by Mezirow (1991) will provide the theoretical basis for this study.

There is a great deal of literature on the growth and development of adults. These range from Levinson (1986) and Kohlberg (1981), to Mezirow (1978, 1991), Gould (1978), and Commons et al. (1989). The literature suggests that
transformation involves constantly changing processes — processes that progress from not knowing, to knowing, to making changes which lead to growth, understanding, and, eventually, to what has been termed by different authors as self-empowerment, individuation, and transformation.

The process of individuals progressing from being unaware of their circumstances, to becoming aware of their circumstances, and finally to doing something to remedy the situation has been discussed by many authors including Mezirow (1978), Gould (1978), and Stanage (1986). To some authors, there is a specific demand calling for a new behavior with change occurring only after a significant sorting out of the differences between current reality and past realities. Only after individuals identify and sort out these differences do they arrive at a clearer and more grounded understanding of the current reality (Gould, 1978). According to Gould, the reformulation of one's self-definition is a part of the dangerous act of transformation. Individuals periodically shed false assumptions marking the gradual shift to adulthood. During the periods of unrest, depression, disillusionment, dissatisfaction, and questioning, one challenges and modifies rigid rules and sees the world in a new way. As these individuals open up themselves to their intensely private feeling they are realizing truths that they have known but which they have not or cannot acknowledge (Gould, 1978). A
role change, then, to Gould is a self-definition change requiring an active search for meaning and a change of behavior. The result is self-renewal and growth.

The terms discernment (Boyd & Myers, 1988), problem posing (Freire, 1970), marker events (Levinson, 1986), self-articulation (Shainberg, 1973), and individuation (Saul, 1990) have been used to describe the processes that adults face as they go through different stages in their lives. But these dilemmas are keys to the contemplative insights which eventually lead to the increased capacity for further growth and development.

Transformation, then, can be viewed as a movement towards self-renewal and growth, or as Maslow calls it, self-actualization. As adults struggle to make meaning of their lives, and as they struggle to understand themselves and their world, these gnawing feelings continue to drive them towards some uncertain and unknown future. In confronting these struggles, many adults have turned to education to help them make sense of their world and to help them deal with their need for change and growth. The motivation and desire to move towards this growth requires mobilization of energy to make it happen (Dufresne, 1985). Dufresne believes that most Americans who study without being obligated to are adapting to transitions that have occurred, are in progress, or are anticipated (Dufresne-Tasse, 1985).
Adults are returning to school in great numbers. A review of the literature shows that many of these adults are indeed searching for meaning in their lives; and, while their motives for entering college may be different, it seems that many of them are seeking growth and understanding for the questions that as Laurent Daloz (1986) says keep them awake at night. The section that follows reviews the literature on adult students who have reentered colleges after having been away for some years. There is a great deal of literature on the reentry of women into the academic arena, but the literature has also shown that, although the experiences of male and female students are different in many respects, there are enough similarities to make the findings equally applicable to adult students of both sexes.

Returning Adult Students

The 1978 National Center for Education Statistics report entitled Participation in Adult Education: Final Report 1975 provides a summary and trend of participation in adult education between the years 1969 and 1975. The survey, conducted by the Bureau of the Census, consisted of 100,000 participants. While the report identifies an adult as anyone who is 17 years of age or older, and adult education as organized learning to meet the unique needs of persons beyond
compulsory school age (p.1), Solmon (1981) describes the non-traditional student as one over the age of 22.

According to the data, over the 6-year period of the survey (1969 - 1975), the adult population of the United States increased by 12.6 percent, or 2.0 percent annually. During that same period, participation in adult education by students who were not attending school on a full-time basis increased by 30.8 percent, or 4.6 percent annually, while those attending high school or college full-time grew by 4.0 percent annually. The increase, then, in participation by adults in adult education was much larger than the overall increase in the adult population of the United States.

Further analysis of the data demonstrates that the increase in participation in adult education was not restricted to the younger adult population, but that many adults who were 55 years of age or older were returning to school. The National Center for Education Statistics report shows that the increase in the population of those aged 17 to 34 was 24.4 percent, and the percentage of those in that age group who had returned to school grew by 38.1 percent. However, while the population of those aged 55 or older increased by 11.5 percent, the increase in attendance of those in that age group was 55.2 percent.

The results of the study are significant in that it demonstrates that adults are indeed returning to college in
large numbers. But why are they returning to school? One of
the most significant findings of the study is the reason that
adults gave for returning to school. The study revealed that
the greatest growth in subject areas between 1969 and 1975 was
found in social life and recreation, and in personal and
family living. Social life and recreation is defined as such
things as hobbies and handicrafts, and sports and recreation.
Personal and family life is defined as home and family life,
and personal improvement. Although the main reason for taking
courses is still job-related (Solmon, 1981; Anderson, 1979;
Lutz, 1978; Kuh, 1979; Barton, 1982) there has been a
significant increase in the percentage of participants who
took courses for personal and social reasons (Durcholz, 1973).
The National Center for Education Statistics report show that
while the percentage of those who are taking credits towards
degrees decreased from 27.8 percent to 24.5 percent, the
percentage of those taking courses for non-credit increased
from 45.1 percent to 52.1 percent, and the percentage of those
taking courses for personal and social reasons increased from
19.8 percent to 27.7 percent. Durcholz’s questionnaire (1973)
of 245 undergraduate women revealed that 25.3 percent attended
college to facilitate personal growth, and 30.3 percent to
fulfill desires for achievement. Other research has shown
that many adults apply for admission on a part time basis so
that they could continue working while going to school

What are the experiences of these adults who are returning to school, and what motivates them to return? For some, the motivation is primarily related to employment (Anderson, 1979); but for many others, crises had precipitated their return (Durcholz, 1973). Jolley Christman in, *Making Both Count: An Ethnographic Study of Family and Work in the Lives of Returning Women Graduate Students* (1987), discusses the experiences of 12 women who had entered graduate school after having been away from school for a number of years. Over the course of an academic year, Christman interviewed each woman twice and observed four of them on at least two days. Christman identifies and discusses the interactions between women’s participation in family and work and the educational system. The effects of this interaction, Christman feels, impact significantly on the success or failure of these women as they deal with the graduate school system. As she develops the study, Christman explores these interactions as the women deal with their own feelings (hopes, fears, needs, success, failure), their family lives (support or lack of support from spouses and children), and their attendance at graduate school (institutional barriers, mentors, support systems).
The findings of Christman's study parallel those of authors such as Levinson (1986) and Kohlberg (1981) as these findings relate to adult development. Although Christman feels that the development of men and women may be different in many respects, she points out the commonalities of experiences that these 12 women share. She reiterates the theme shared by many other authors, that adults return to school as part of an on-going mid-life development. Christman also feels that the decision to attend school is not a single event, but instead is an on-going process which is tied to a developmental progression throughout adulthood. Educational experiences, then, change as life circumstances change. Each of the women in Christman's study had experienced some strong desire to change. Some of the events were described as slow and insidious, while others were abrupt and sudden. Events included death of loved ones, birth of children or adult children leaving home, and exposure to other women who had been successful in their chosen fields of endeavor.

Were these women acting on some previously experienced transformation, or were they using graduate school as a medium for a transformation? McGraw (1982) reviewed the literature on women returning to school and described the typical woman in that group as middle-aged, experiencing an identity crisis or mid-life transition, and having low self-esteem and low self-confidence. LeFevre (1972) interviewed 35 women aged 32
to 52 who were in graduate school at the University of Chicago. She noted that many of these women described the very powerful and profound transformations that had occurred during their course of study. Katz (1976) used questionnaires to collect data from 427 women and 154 of their spouses. Additionally, she interviewed 272 women, along with 84 of their children and 77 of their spouses. Katz reports that most women increased their self-esteem during their course of study in college. In one study (Durcholz, 1973), 55.5 percent of the women felt that the student role was very significant in their lives.

In 1982, Kaplan interviewed 25 women aged 30 to 56 to examine, among other things, their motivation for returning to school, and the identity changes that they had experienced. These women were all in advanced-level graduate or professional programs at the University of California, Berkeley, and the University of California, San Francisco. Kaplan asserts that "All the women used graduate or professional study as a means to change their identity and to develop a previously neglected part of themselves, whether intellectual or vocational" (p. 9). The data support the findings of Christman and McGraw by demonstrating that all of the women experienced some need to change whether through the development of intellectual abilities or through their disillusionment with previous life choices. In assessing the
changes in identity, respondents in Kaplan's study used words such as groping, agony, and chaos to describe earlier periods in their lives, but words such as metamorphosis, jumping off, emerging, and getting it all together in describing their present lives (p. 14).

Gilbert, Manning, and Ponder (1980) compared role conflicts of male and female reentry students. They feel that, regardless of the reasons for returning to school, students of both sexes had difficulty adjusting to the new demands that were placed on them by schools. As with Kaplan and Christman, Gilbert et al. identify the barriers faced by reentry students. These barriers include inflexible course schedules, insufficient student personnel services, and negative attitudes by faculty and staff. The authors of that study believe that the sources of role conflicts for male and female reentry students were different; for, while male students' conflicts stemmed primarily from difficulties in combining work and study, female students had the increased responsibility of combining work and study with the role of spouses and parents. Many women were fearful of the educational process, and felt that professors and others in positions of authority saw them as lacking in ability (Houle, 1985). Additionally, many adults have to deal with not only the financial constraints that attending college...
entails, but also with the demands of the classroom which can seem to be quite challenging (Kuh, 1979).

Virginia McDowell (1978) developed nine case studies of adult development based on intensive interviews with men and women who had undergone what she calls substantial changes in their lives. Participants in this study were all members of the Cursillo movement, a Catholic-Anglican religious movement of the 1960s that was designed to relate Christianity to the modern world. The central theme of McDowell's book is the process through which individuals evolved from absolute obedience without questioning, through questioning, to challenging their preconceived reliance on externally defined values, to eventually determining as individuals what they considered to be true from false based on their own values. This acceptance, followed by questioning and new awareness, and the eventual changes that took place, is constant throughout McDowell's book. She saw the growth that followed when individuals decided to take an active role in transforming their lives.

The literature reveals that more and more adults are reentering college. Many of these adults are truly the nontraditional students, for not only are they older, but many of them are women (Aslanian, 1989; Hetherington, 1981; Hood, 1986; Badenhoop, 1980). What is the impetus that is creating change? What are the factors which influence adults to want
to make changes in their lives? As adults return to school, and as they strive to make meaning of their lives, many of them are confronting challenges such as institutional barriers, role conflicts, and age and sex discrimination. A factor that seems to be critical in creating these changes is conflict. What role does conflict play in the transformative process? In the section that follows, the role of conflict in the transformative process will be reviewed.

Conflict and Transformation

The role that conflict plays in the transformative process has been well documented in the literature. Transformation means change, and whether the change is active or passive, there are, for the most part, considerable losses and gains. As one explores the literature, it becomes quite clear that many authors agree that conflict has an important role to play in the transformative process. Daniel Goleman, in Vital Lies. Simple Truths: The Psychology of Self-deception (1985) observes that the willingness to "rock the boat" and expose painful hidden agendas is the essential quality that is necessary if one is to remedy delusions. Some argue that only when new situations challenge the present structure, or when taken-for-granted attitudes are made problematic and do not fit into the new paradigm, is change likely to occur or to develop (Irwin, 1991). At times, the shifting of paradigms
depends on a level of chaos in which the present paradigm can no longer adequately make sense of the world (Johnson, 1991), the occurrence of unexpected events shakes up the old order of things (Karpiak, 1978), or a particular plan does not seem important until a juncture has been met in the form of a major obstacle (Brown, 1989).

As adults deal with their dilemmas, there seems to be one certainty -- each adult must make the choice to grow and transform without force or coercion. Gould (1978), and Sheehy (1976), write about the intensity of these private personal struggles. Gould describes the difficulty that adults experience when they open up themselves to their intense inner struggles and turmoil with which they must deal. Sheehy sums up this private personal struggle by saying that when one reexamines all the things that one stands for, then one realizes that the greatest resistance to change comes from within the self, for, in facing the self, one realizes that one stands alone.

This theme of the inner conflicts that individuals struggle with as they advance towards adulthood has been recognized by many. Both Jung (1958, 1964), and Habermas (1973) described the inner tumult that individuals experience in dealing with and overcoming conflict in their lives. To Jung, the process of individuation begins with a "wounding of the personality," or a call. Habermas felt that the
fulfillment of the self begins when value judgement proves to be incompatible with certain convictions.

This theme of a change of mind being precipitated by an inner conflict can also be found in the writings of Popper (1984), Goldbrunner (1956), Wildermeersch and Leirman (1988), Goodman (1979), and Laine (1989). These dilemmas, conflicts, or tumultuous conditions have been described as crucial change of mind by individuals for events over which they have no choice (Goodman, 1979); as contradictions, questions, discomforts, personal struggles, and variants which do not fit within the current scheme of things (Goodman, 1979; Goldbrunner, 1956; Petrie, 1981); and as awareness of the ruptures and influences in one’s life (Laine, 1989). McKeon (1990) sees the individual acting by instinct up until the time that he or she has a problem. When one has a problem, one raises questions, formulates alternatives, and acts on the most plausible alternative. To Karl Popper, in Berkson & Wetterstein’s *Learning from error: Karl Popper’s psychology of learning* (1984), there is a disequilibrium between expectations and newly observed facts. The individual then has to deal with something which is both contrary to and upsetting to the individual’s expectations.

The process of learning, then, consists largely in the correction of expectations that have been upset (Berkson & Wetterstein, 1984). The conflict leads the individual to
question the values, beliefs, and notions which had always governed the individual's life. The process of knowledge takes place when value judgements prove to be incompatible with certain convictions (Habermas, 1973), when individuals seek solutions which transcend their familiar action and reflective thinking (Wildermeersch and Leirman, 1988), or when life events become urgent and demand new evaluation (Schlossberg, 1978). To Goldbrunner (1956), self-education begins with disillusionment.

One can see that conflict of some sort seems to precipitate the process of transformation. The conflict may take many shapes and forms, but the result is usually the reflective thinking that Habermas (1973), Dewey (1938), and Mezirow (1991) have described. Individuals question the assumptions, conjectures, and values that had governed their lives thus far, and in so doing raise their awareness, which in turn may lead to transformation of some kind. The dilemma causes individuals to question their beliefs and values, and this in turn prods them into attempting to reformulate new ways of thinking and acting. This reformulation leads to further questioning, which leads to growth; and the cycle of growth, questioning, change and transformation continues.

Conflict, it would seem, leads to change. But is change always an active process or can individuals transform passively? Do all individuals heed the "call" to change?
What are the stages that individuals go through in this process of transformation?

**Stages of Transformation**

Laurent Daloz (1986) sees the process of transformation as having three stages. In the first stage, there is the old way, the garden of Eden. This is the way things have always been. This is followed by the second stage which Daloz describes as being full of chaos, confusion, and uncertainty. Daloz feels that, since one can rarely see ahead, the fear of the unknown may cause one to revert to the old ways in an attempt to avoid the difficulties that one may experience in this second stage. In Daloz's third stage, the individual is at the lowest point, the nadir, when the change or the metamorphosis occurs. The old ways are not necessarily abandoned, rather they may be adapted to fit into the new perspective.

As does Daloz (1986), Shainberg (1973), Mezirow (1985), and Barer-Stein (1987) propose that transformation occurs in stages. These stages have been described as being "incipient events" with each move building on the one before and eventually creating new behavior (Shainberg, 1973), to having five phases beginning with an awareness of an unfamiliar experience (Barer-Stein, 1987), to having ten elements which
range from the disorienting dilemma through reintegration with a new perspective (Mezirow, 1985).

The challenge, then, for an individual, is to attempt to make sense of the old and new paradigms and perspectives, to sort them out, and to blend in the old with the new so that the result is someone with a new perspective or perspectives and with a new range of experiences. In doing so, the individual develops the ability to make sense of life experiences, and is then able to grow and transform.

Change as an Active Process

Since transformation signifies change, then the question becomes, is change always an active process? For transformation to occur, individuals have to be engaged in active rather than passive processes (Shainberg, 1972), there has to be a high enough level of dissatisfaction with the existing system and the individual has to actively pursue it (Johnson, 1991), and adults have to make choices actively rather than passively accepting things the way they are (Goodman, 1979). Paul (1992) encourages adults not to accept passively what occurred; rather, he feels that they should question the assumptions that their experiences are unbiased. Mezirow (1991), in his definition of reflective thinking, stresses the importance of actively questioning preconceived
ideas and suppositions, and reformulating those assumptions into new perspectives.

Although change can and does occur through a passive process, it would seem that when adults are faced with conflict or dilemma that require some action, then the active process of "doing something about it" causes an increased level of satisfaction. Some individuals do refuse the call, preferring instead to maintain things the way they are (Daloz, 1986), while others, through a combination of events or circumstances fail to advance beyond a certain point (Sheehy, 1976). In fact, many adults are content to live in the present even when their lives are filled with frustrations and disappointments (Brown, 1989).

From the above, it would seem that all adults do not always actively pursue changes even when conflict or critical events are forced on them through life's circumstances. The process of transformation becomes a very private personal affair, with each individual advancing or retreating at her or his own pace and time. Some individuals may aggressively pursue changes while others may follow the slow and insidious process that Daloz and Gould described. But change will occur, and as adults confront the changes that are taking place in their lives, they may turn to education to help them make sense of their experiences. Since the question that this research is seeking to answer is whether adults who return to
college are acting on some previously experienced transformation, or whether they are viewing higher education as a medium for a transformation, it is necessary to examine the role that education plays in helping adults deal with their experiences.

Education and Transformation

The educational experience does seem to have an important role to play in helping individuals who are struggling with the questions that arise from their new experiences. The educational exposure helps adults to put a handle on the misconceptions, preconceived ideas, and assumptions that had governed their lives. It helps adults to explore the questions that were unanswered, and, in so doing, education helps individuals to raise new questions. This questioning or challenging, the new awareness that arises, and the dilemmas that are produced, keep the individual moving forward, always inching towards a more discriminating perspective.

One of the roles of education is to provide direction and support for individuals, because although individuals must desire to change, for it to occur they have to believe that they will have direction and support (Irwin, 1991). Individuals convey and interpret meaning in their own unique way, but group interactions and discussions play very critical
roles in helping those individuals to analyze new information and to achieve new levels of understanding (Johnson, 1991).

The examination of different perspectives from various sources, and the new insights that are gained when adults open themselves up to new experiences lead to what Commons and Arnon (1989) call a cyclic chain of events which results in continued growth. This examination and restructuring of ideas, and the interaction with other people, results in not only significant changes (Arlin, 1975), but also in the transformation of defects into something new and better (Kotre, 1984). According to Hart (1990), the group process helps each individual member to validate his or her personal experiences, and, through the stimulation and facilitation of education, to put those experiences into a contextual relationship with that of the group. The experience then becomes relevant to each learner and to the group as a whole.

Many adults see the goal of education as providing more than just job skills. Rather, adults hope that their educational experiences would help them make sense of their lives (Daloz, 1986), deal with prejudices and stereotypes of all kinds (Minis, 1990), assist in their advancement as maturing adults (Bergevin, 1967), and aid them in shaping experiences and fitting fragmented pieces together (J.R. Kidd, 1976). Adults, then, examine their values, beliefs, and behaviors in an educational environment; and,
through the stimulation of thoughts and questions that the environment elicits, the learners are able to make sense of their lives (Brookfield, 1985). Brookfield suggests that the learning that occurs in this environment is often quite significant. As R. D. Laing (1969) notes, adult education could be used to precipitate and reinforce perspective transformations.

The educational experience has an important role to play in helping adults search for answers to the questions that their transitions elicited, and educators, as mediators of the culture (Kotre, 1984), should raise topics that facilitate growth and change (Hart, 1990), empower individuals (Knott, 1987), create the dysjuncture and the questioning that exposes learners to their own dilemmas (Jarvis, 1987), and construct and present information which would help individual adult learners develop to their full potential (Freire, 1970). Additionally, some authors suggest that educators have the responsibility to challenge learners to examine their ways of thinking and to help them to become self-actualizing (Rogers, 1961), become aware of and solve unresolved dilemmas (Boyd, 1989), facilitate learners' development (Whiting, 1988), and implant new ideas while modifying old ones (Wilson, 1989).

Education challenges individuals to reexamine their presuppositions, explore new alternatives, and construe new meaning (Mezirow, 1991). To Mezirow, it is through the
process of dialogue that learners attempt to learn and grow. He sees critical reflection as being concerned not with the how or the how-to, but the why.

Adults are constantly facing challenges in their lives. Sometimes the challenges are brought on by sudden unexpected events which may turn the adult’s life upside down. At other times, the changes occur gradually and insidiously. As adults struggle with these processes, they are faced with inner conflicts and with conflicts from their external environment. At the same time, they are challenged to examine the presuppositions, assumptions, thoughts, and actions that had governed their lives. Unless some form of external source presents alternatives to adult learners, then these learners may continue along their present courses, living with familiar beliefs, values, and behaviors.

In reviewing the literature on human growth and development, one can identify some themes that run through the writings. Most adults go through transitions in their lives. In many instances, these transitions lead to "awakenings," and the adults, in attempting to make meaning from the upheaval or disequilibrium in their lives, and in trying to make sense of their new found levels of consciousness, seek growth and understanding through the educational process. The educational experience helps adults to question the assumptions that they had held previously, and through the
examination of those assumptions and preconceived ideas, learners are better able to make some sense of their lives. The transformation may start with the upheaval, or it may begin with the educational experience, but the educational process helps adults make meaning of their experiences. It helps them to seek answers to the questions that kept them awake at night.

Summary

In reviewing the literature on adult growth and development, one can identify some common themes. Among these is the process of life transitions or changes. Events may determine the time of a transition (Aslanian, 1989), but the transitions invariably do occur. Mezirow (1991) formulates a theory of perspective transformation in which he sees individuals assessing the ways that they had been looking at their world, and then, through the process of reflective thinking, of reformulating new ways of thinking and acting.

Many adults face conflicts at varying times and to varying degrees in their lives. As they deal with these conflicts, some adults sort out the differences between current and past realities (Gould, 1978); and as they shed false assumptions, they move towards new perspectives.

Adults 25 years of age or older are returning to college in ever-increasing numbers (Aslanian, 1989; Solmon, 1981;
Schlossberg, 1989; Hetherington, 1981). Perhaps, as Aslanian (1989) points out, the challenges presented by transitions may be the source of an explanation for the increasing number of adult learners (p. 6). It would seem that education and the educational process may have key roles to play in helping these adults make meaning of their lives as they struggle through their transitions and attempt to make meaning of their lives.
Research Design

Based on the preceding discussion, it seems that the issues addressed and the questions raised require an approach which will emphasize the interaction between data collection, participant observation, data analysis, and writing. For those reasons, the research design was developed along the lines of a case study analysis. The case study approach facilitates the search for patterns and themes within a particular setting, and is useful in organizing and analyzing data by specific cases for in-depth study (Patton, 1980). This approach allows for the inclusion of interviews and observational data, and impressions and statements about the individuals interviewed. It also allows for the gathering of comprehensive, systematic in-depth information about each individual in the study. Additionally, it helps to examine "A bounded system of a population to reveal the properties of the class to which the instance being studied belongs" (Marshall & Rossman, 1989, p. 44). Another reason for employing the case study approach is that it chronicles events in a naturalistic setting (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

In attempting to understand the relationships between transformative experiences and the entry of adult students into the college environment, it is important to examine the
environment and the contexts of the study from the actor's point of view. The case study method provides valuable insight when one needs to examine why things occur as opposed to how they occur (Yin, 1989). May (1953) observes that "Human experience always goes beyond our particular method of understanding it at any given moment..." (p. 91); and thus it becomes necessary to go beyond an empirical assertion supported by description and report on what has been discovered (Smith, 1987).

A major focus of qualitative research is to understand the meanings and experiences of the people being studied (Eisner, 1981). The qualitative research method enables the researcher to notice and describe events from the actor's point of view (Eisner, 1981), to organize data, and compare them with hypotheses as a way of testing them (Smith, 1987), and to use the actor's points of view to study the meaning of their experiences (Marshall & Rossman, 1989). According to Eisner (1981), "The qualitative approach does not aim to control or to produce formal predictive statements. It is after explication". (p. 8).

Qualitative research is context-sensitive (Smith, 1987), and one cannot separate the researcher from the participants in the study. In attempting to understand the relationships between transformation and students' entry into the academic arena, data for the study were collected through in-depth
interviews. Gorman (1993) sees the interview as being "Superior in identifying those events that are truly stressful". (p. 71). He also feels that the data gathered through interviews enable the investigator to make judgements about events that have occurred in the lives of adults. The interview has been described as being the most important data gathering technique (Fetterman, 1989). It explains and puts data into the context of what is experienced, is useful in establishing and maintaining rapport, and offers the most natural situation for data collection and analysis (Fetterman, 1989). Interviews also help to uncover the participant's meaning perspective, allowing for immediate follow-up questions and clarification, and aids in the discovery of complex social relationships (Marshall & Rossman, 1989, p. 82). Additionally, the interview method aids in "...Lessening and ideally closing the gap between interviewees' perception of a situation and their reports of what they have perceived". (Merton, 1990, p. 65).

Since the research is designed to elicit information about the relationship between transformative experiences and entry into college, the research questions, for the most part, were open-ended. The open-endedness of the questions minimizes pre-determined responses from the participants, and gives them the opportunity to present their responses in their own unique way. It allows the participants to interpret the
questions before responding (Fetterman, 1989). This interpretation, followed by a response, helps to increase the likelihood that the answers will be thoughtful and meaningful to both the participants and the researcher.

An important consideration, then, was to allow for the altering of the questions based on the responses from the participants in the study. This unstructuring has some advantages in this particular research setting. It invites spontaneity, can be adapted to elicit depth, and can help the interviewer obtain a wide range of comments (Merton, 1990). It also provides for informal, free response question and answer sessions (Griffin, 1985).

Issues of Validity and Reliability

One of the major tests of validity and reliability is deciding how well the researcher draws logical conclusions from the evidence that has been gathered (Smith, 1987). Another test of validity and reliability addresses the question as to what extent the findings can be duplicated by another researcher working independently and within the same framework (Miles & Huberman, 1984). The researcher starts drawing conclusions and making inferences from the beginning of data collection (Miles & Huberman, 1984), and without standardized criteria the researcher has to rely on completeness and internal consistency (Smith, 1987).
Subjectivity is inevitable in this type of research, and, since ambiguity is an integral part of any type of discourse, it is important that the researcher and the reader understand that there will be "Implicit assumptions and or mutual recognition of contextual factors". (Mishler, 1986, p. 7). In other words, the researcher should make allowances for the participants' and the researcher's biases and subjectivity.

Researchers have suggested different strategies for dealing with these issues in a study of this type. Lincoln & Guba (1985) identify four methods for establishing internal and external validity, reliability and objectivity. They suggest the use of credibility - ensuring that subjects are accurately defined and described; transferability - demonstrating applicability to different contexts; dependability - accounting for changing conditions; and confirmability (p. 290). Smith (1987) believes that external validity can be controlled for by disclosing methods and constructs, and internal validity by using mechanical recording devices. Woods & Catanzaro (1988) control for reliability by explaining the context in which data were generated and comparing the findings with published data. They control for validity by comparing data to theories and models, by recruiting participants who meet the sampling criteria, and by doing validity checks with the participants.

It is important, then, to note that although qualitative
research provides a source of well-grounded rich description and explanation of a process (Miles & Huberman 1984), it requires constant self-examination and criticism of "...The methods and the mistakes made ..." (Smith, 1987, p. 175).

In this study, the issues of validity and reliability were controlled for by the use of the following methods: checking for representativeness (Smith, 1987; Woods & Catanzaro, 1988), comparing the data gathered against established theories and published studies (Woods et al. 1988), ensuring that the study is accurately defined and described (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), using mechanical recording devices to ensure accuracy (Smith, 1987; Merton, 1990), and ensuring accuracy of the data gathered by getting feedback from the participants during and after the interviews (Smith, 1987; Merton, 1990; Fetterman, 1989). The goal of the research was to present the actor's point of view, and thus, after the data were collected and analyzed, each participant was afforded the opportunity to review the final product. This review was designed to ensure accuracy of the data.

Procedures of the Study

The research proposal was reviewed and approved by the Human Subjects Review Committee of Iowa State University. The discussion that follows will describe the sampling method, entry into the study, and the interviewing process.
Sampling

The goal of the study was to examine the relationship between transformative experiences and the entry of adults into colleges and universities. An additional goal was to increase the theory base on adult students and transformation. Thus the sample for the study includes adult students who it is hoped possess those characteristics which would help in identifying and clarifying the issues which are pertinent to adult students and their transformative experiences. The criteria for entry into the study included: freshmen undergraduate students of both sexes who were 25 years of age or older, who have been away from formal schooling for three years or more, are attending college on a full time basis, and are willing to participate in the study.

The study included ten male and ten female students. The literature has suggested that adults of both sexes who are returning to college may have experienced or are experiencing some sort of transformation (Mezirow, 1991; Kaplan, 1982; McGraw, 1982; Gilbert, 1980; Katz, 1976; Aslanian, 1989), and thus it is expected that both groups will aid in corroborating the findings of the study.

Although the criterion for age (25) was an arbitrary one, many researchers have used that age in developing a profile of the adult learner (Solmon, 1981; Arbeiter, 1976; Anderson, 1979; Barton, 1982; Durcholz, 1973, Kuh, 1979). Most of these
adults would have been away from high school for six years or more, and would possess a wealth of life experiences. It was hoped that these adults would help to generate a wealth of information that would assist in identifying and clarifying the roles that transformative experiences play in shaping the directions that adults take when they are making life choices. An upper age limit was not set, since the literature has shown that many adults (some over 65 years of age) are enrolling in colleges and universities (Boaz, 1978; Christman, 1987; Durcholz, 1973; Letchworth, 1970; Solmon, 1981). These adults are expected to possess a great wealth of life experiences.

The researcher consciously excluded international students from the study. This exclusion is not intended to downplay or raise doubts about the rich and complex experiences that international students bring to a college campus. Rather, the educational and cultural experiences of American and international students are expected to be so different that a mixture of the two would raise serious questions about the validity and reliability of the study.

Entry

Entry into the lives of participants was perhaps the most challenging part of the research process. After all, the researcher was asking total strangers to open up their private lives to scrutiny by someone who may or may not be
trustworthy. Furthermore, the process of negotiating entry could have a tremendous influence on the outcome of the interview process. It was important, then, to emphasize to the participants in the study that all of the information that was obtained would be kept in the strictest confidence.

To gain entry, the researcher obtained a list of names of students who had signed up for and attended an adult student orientation workshop which had been held early in the Fall semester of 1993. Using that list as a reference, the researcher sent out letters to all of the attenders of the workshop asking them to volunteer to participate in the study. The letters were followed up in two weeks by telephone calls to all of the adult students. The researcher identified himself, briefly explained the nature of the research, and informed the recipients of the manner in which their names were obtained.

To ensure that the participants met the criteria for being in the study, they were asked to answer the following questions:

Are you 25 years of age or older?
Have you been away from school for three years or more?
Are you an undergraduate student?
When did you enter the university for the first time?
Are you attending the university on a full time basis?
Are you an international exchange student?
Would you be willing to participate in the study?

From the list of students who met the criteria for entry into the study, the researcher set up interview appointments with ten male and ten female students.

**Interviewing**

At the beginning of each interview, the researcher identified himself, explained the rationale for the research, and obtained participants' approval for the researcher to use a tape recording device. After explaining that all tapes would be destroyed after transcription, and that aliases would be used instead of participants' real name to respect and promote privacy, the participants were asked to sign a consent form (Appendix A). The participants were afforded the opportunity of choosing the times and places in which the interviews would be held. The only limitation that was placed on the participants was that they should select a place that would provide privacy, and that they allow at least two hours for the interview.

All interviews were conducted on a one-on-one basis. By using a one-on-one method, the researcher hoped to ensure privacy, promote openness and frankness of discussions, and provide for the flexible scheduling of the interviews. All interviews were tape recorded. The tape recorder allows for lengthy interviews without distractions, and captures long
quotations verbatim (Eisner, 1981). The tape recorder also provides for a complete recording of the interviews, allows for analyses of the information at a later time, increases accuracy, allows for attentiveness to the interviewees, and frees up the researcher to analyze the verbal and non-verbal cues that were provided by the interviewees while they were being interviewed. Non-verbal cues, such as fidgeting, eye contact or lack of it, and facial expressions, help the researcher put together what was said and what was expressed through body motions and actions.

In addition to the tape recording, the researcher took notes during the interviews. Notes hold initial impressions and preliminary experiences (Eisner, 1981), help the researcher formulate new questions, and facilitate analysis of the data at a later time. The questions which formed the basis for the interviews can be found in Appendix B.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed by using the following methods:

For each individual
Collection of raw data
Incorporation into a case record
Development of a case study
For the group

Cross-pattern analyses of collected data

Interpretation of the data

Each case is presented as a separate phenomenon. The raw data that were collected from each interview were consolidated into a case record which aided in organizing the data into a comprehensive package. Each case study included interview data, observational data, and impressions and statements about the individuals. The data that were collected from each interview were then cross-referenced and analyzed to uncover common patterns, themes, and categories. The final step in the process was the interpretation of the data. Interpretation allowed the researcher to draw conclusions, make inferences, and attach meaning to both the individual and the group data.
CHAPTER IV. PRESENTATION OF RESULTS

Overview of the Chapter

If you can make one heap of all your winnings and risk it on one turn of pitch-and toss...And - which is more - you'll be a Man, my son!

Rudyard Kipling.

These lines from the poem "If" by Rudyard Kipling seem very appropriate for a research that attempts to understand the reasons why adults enroll in college after the age of twenty-five. What is the connection between the poem and these adults? Perhaps the answer lies in the closing lines which says, "And - which is more - you'll be a Man, my son," because what does becoming a man entail? It means growing up in a physical sense, but it also pertains to more than just physical growth. It also signifies the type of growth in which individuals develop a deeper understanding of themselves and of others around them with whom they interact. Perhaps it means negotiating perspective transformations.

Twenty adults who had recently returned to Iowa State University were interviewed for this study. The discussions focused on the participants' life experiences prior to this entry into college, their experiences in college, and their perspectives of themselves at this time in their lives. The stories of two of the participants will be presented in this
chapter. But, since there were twenty participants in the study, the experiences of those participants will also be shared.

What are the major themes and categories that emerged from the interview data? Were there commonalities of experience before and during college among the participants? Would the interview data support the findings of the literature? To answer these questions, it is necessary to analyze the data and present the participants' experiences in a narrative style so that the reader can understand more fully the intricacies of an adult's search for meaning from his or her life experiences.

The comparisons between experiences prior to entering college and experiences at this time are important because they can provide the keys to understanding what was happening in the participants' lives that made them want to return to college at this stage in their lives. Were they acting on some previously experienced transformations, or were they viewing college as a medium for their transformations? Could it be that they were acting on a combination of the two, that is, were the transformations themselves the catalyst that were driving adults towards college?

This chapter presents case studies of two of the participants. The case study approach is designed to paint a picture of the richness and depth of the experiences that
adults possess: experiences that they bring into the classroom with them. By using this method, the researcher hopes to provide some insights into the lives of the participants, their challenges, failures, and triumphs, and their search for meaning in their life experiences. The questions used in the study are designed to elicit information on participants' meaning schemes. Ultimately, the researcher hopes to provide some answers as to whether adults who return to college are acting on some previously experienced transformation or whether they are viewing college as a medium for their transformation.

The chapter follows a specific format. It begins with a brief description of each participant in the study, giving some observational insights on each of them. This is followed by case studies of two of the participants, and that in turn is followed by interview data from the other participants in the study. The interview data from the other adults should help in uncovering the common themes that run through the lives of adults as they struggle to complete their education.

The Participants

There are ten male and ten female adult students in the study. The participants had very diverse backgrounds, and each possessed unique experiences. However, there seemed to be a great deal of similarities not so much in the experiences
themselves, but in their depth and richness and in their significance to the participants. It is important to note that the names used in the study are not the participants' true names. Every effort had to be made to ensure that the participants remained anonymous since the information that they shared contained personal and sometimes intensely private comments and statements about their lives.

Adam: Adam is 29 years old. He is pursuing a BS degree in Biology, and his goal is to go to medical school. He is single and has never been married. He has no children. Adam was interviewed on campus. The taped portion of the interview lasted for about one and a half hours, but the conversation continued for well over two hours. Adam was relaxed, poised, and self-assured. He showed great interest in the study, and he even volunteered to assist in any way possible to help with further data collection. He answered all the questions with candor, and he was quite willing to share experiences that were quite personal in nature.

Adam had attended college briefly (two semesters) about eleven years ago when he was considering attending medical school. When he was asked why he had dropped out, Adam said: "I was just a cocky little punk out of high school who thought that he knew a lot, but I soon found out in college that I knew very little and I couldn't do much."
Mary: Mary is in her early 40s. She is married and she has three children. She is pursuing a BA degree in English. She lives off campus and commutes to the university. As with the previous interview, the discussions were frank, lively, and revealing. Mary shared a great deal of personal experiences, and her willingness to open up to the researcher was quite refreshing. However, it reinforced the point that one had to be aware of the potential for getting too involved in the participants' lives. Mary's story will be presented as one of the two case studies later on in this chapter.

Fred: Fred is 39 years old. He is married and he has two sons. His older son is a freshman in college, and his younger son is a junior in high school. Fred retired after spending twenty years in the military. He is using his Veterans benefits to pay for his college tuition. He is majoring in History and he wants to be a high school teacher.

Fred had taken some college courses on and off while he was in the military, but the demands of his job and the uncertainty of the hours that he was required to work made it extremely difficult for him to keep up with the course work when he did take an occasional class. Additionally, he faced frequent reassignments (about every four years), and this made it difficult for him to transfer credits or meet the requirements for a degree of any kind.
Irene: Irene is 30 something - late 30 something she said. She is divorced after sixteen and a half years of marriage. She is majoring in Psychology, a field that she said she really enjoyed. Irene was at least thirty minutes early for the interview because she hated to be late for anything. She was a very charming witty person, and she seemed to have a sharp inquisitive mind. She was constantly probing and questioning during the interview, and it seemed at times that she was conducting the interview. She wanted to make sure that she read the consent form before she signed it, and then she wanted to know what the researcher was hoping to learn from the research. It was a constant give-and-take question-answer-question type of interview in the sense that she would answer a question with a question or she would answer a question and then ask one of her own. Irene's story will also be presented as a case study in this chapter.

Nancy: Nancy is about 45 years old. She is divorced, and she has two children. She is attending college on a full-time basis, but she works part time to pay tuition and support herself. Her children have both left home, and so she does not have a family to support (thank God for that she said). Nancy arrived very early, and we talked about our experiences in college, and our hopes and aspirations for the future. She is pursuing a degree in Biology and she wants to become a
physical therapist "if they will accept me at my age". The interview was conducted off campus, and, as the researcher learned during the interview, she had to drive about forty miles to get to the interview. Interestingly enough, it was her choice, but she felt that "It would be easier on the both of us." She did not elaborate on why it would be easier.

Nancy grew up in a small town in Iowa, but she explains:

Nancy: My family's background is Hispanic. Can you imagine what it was like going to high school where you were the only one that was different? I never had a date in high school, never. I had a few friends, but nothing really special. That was not a fun time in my life.

Inez: Inez is widowed, and she has two sons aged six and eight. She is majoring in Social Work, and she indicated that she would like to continue working towards a graduate degree. She is attending school on a full time basis, but she volunteers some time at a local hospital. The interview was conducted at Inez's home (her preference). This was quite a contrast to most of the other interviews because her two children were present during the interview, and mom had to stop occasionally to separate the boys and a friend who was visiting. The setting was unique in that it showed a single mother who was concerned with raising her children while attempting to continue her education.

Susan: Susan is 29 years old. She is married and has no children. She is working on a degree in Design. The
interview was conducted after normal business hours at Susan's place of employment. She works at that particular business on a part-time basis to help with expenses such as tuition.

As with most of the other interviews, the discussion was frank, interesting, and quite revealing. Susan provided insights into her life's experiences, and she shared background information that was quite similar to many of the other participants in the study. She is a very self-assured person, and she seemed to know exactly what she wanted out of life. She indicated that she would like to continue working towards a graduate degree.

Susan started working right after high school, not because she had to, but because she wanted to have her own money and her independence. She confided that she wished that she had listened to her parents and gone to college right out of high school. She has been married for five years, and she has "A wonderful husband."

Heather: Heather is in her 30s. She is married and she has one daughter who is fourteen. She states "My daughter is in the teenage years, the ones where all parents are geeks, and the kids do not want to be seen with their parents because it would embarrass them." Heather was interviewed on campus. Initially, she was relaxed and poised, but as the interview progressed she seemed to tense up quite a bit. She clenched
her fists quite frequently, and she frowned and scowled during some of the discussions. She seemed to be genuinely concerned about her academic standing, and on more than one occasion she talked about dropping out of school. She had not attended college previously. She grew up in a farm community, and to her college was not something that one thought about.

Heather: I grew up in a small town. My father died in a farm accident when I was seven. My older brother dropped out of school and left home when he was sixteen. My second oldest brother joined the military as soon as he turned eighteen. Everyone, I mean every young person with any sense was trying to get out of town.

Ellen: Ellen is 27 years old, and she is divorced. She was married for five years. She has no children. Like most of the other women in the study, Ellen works part time to cover expenses such as rent and food.

She had attended a community college for about two semesters when she was nineteen because she wanted to be a laboratory technician. She dropped out because she was not focused and she wasn’t sure what she really wanted to do after all. She started working in a department store after she dropped out of college, but "It was a dead end job with no benefits, and they were very demanding." Her boss made a pass at her (her words), and when she complained, she was fired.

Ellen: I guess that when you have no education and you’re stuck in a dead-end job everybody thinks that you’re fair game. In a sense I guess they were right because you don’t have too many options.
Dan: Dan is 26 years old. He is single and has never been married. He moved to the midwest from California because he wanted to get into Agriculture Education (Ag Ed) and he had heard that this university had an excellent reputation in that field. He does not have a part-time job because according to him, he didn’t have to work. His parents are paying for most of the cost of his education and he has some Veterans benefits that he is also using. He had enlisted in the Air Force after graduation from high school, something his parents did not like. Two years ago he got out of the military and moved back home. His parents pleaded with him to go to college, and since they were willing to pay his cost, he agreed.

Dan: My parents have money, and my dad always wanted me to go into the business with him. You see, I am the only child, and I guess my parents had my life all laid out for me. But it was not my life, it was theirs, and I had no intention of having them tell me how to run my life. So when I got out of high school, I joined the military. You can say that I was rebelling.

William: William is 26 years old. He is majoring in Computer Science. He is married and he has no children. He expressed a strong desire to help because "This stuff interests me." He graduated from high school with average grades, but he did not attend college until he was 26 years old.

William: After graduation from high school I got a job in a furniture warehouse putting furniture together. I had all intentions of going to college in two to three years, but the job paid well, I had a nice car, an apartment, and lots of girls, so I decided to delay going to college.
He broke his legs in an accident, and after being away from work for six weeks, he lost his position to someone else.

William: When I went back to work, I couldn’t lift anything heavy, so they gave my position to someone else. I know it was not fair, but I figured that I’d better not complain too much. I guess I learned that without education you do get stuck in jobs where you could be there one day and gone the next. I’m sure the same things happen to people with college degrees, but at least they have options.

Ian: Ian introduced himself by saying that "I am the most unorthodox person that you’ll interview, I guarantee you that." He is 28 years old and he has not been married. He claims that he does not have a major in college. He is just taking a few classes to see how he felt about college. He said that he wasn’t sure how long he was going to hang around. Ian did not attend college after high school because:

Ian: I was so bored with high school that when I graduated, with an A average mind you, I thumbed my way to Texas. I wanted to go some place warm and exciting. I got a job on a fishing boat in Corpus Christi and I worked at that job for three years. Who needed college?

He finally made it back to the midwest two years ago after doing odd jobs along the way. Ian feels that he still has the urge to "Blast out of this place."

Tom: Tom is 25 years old. He grew up in a large city and he had just recently moved to this area. He is not married although there is someone who he is seriously considering marrying in the next year or so. His experiences are somewhat
different from the other participants in the study in that he grew up in the inner city, and he was raised by his father. He did not attend college after graduating from high school.

Tom: The area that I grew up in is not what you'd consider a friendly place. I was one of a handful of kids who even knew who his father was. My parents were never married, but my father was a good provider. He had a steady job, and he didn't make a lot of money but my sister and I always had something to eat and we had clean clothes. But college? Hey come on, how many inner city kids you know that make it to college unless they play basketball or football?

Tom saw some of his buddies join the army, and some of them go to jail, but he did not see too many of them make it out without some kind of help.

Hillary: Hillary is 39 years old. Her husband has his own company, and, according to Hillary, he leads a life that is totally separate from hers. She got married right out of high school to "A very ambitious man."

Hillary: We have social gatherings at our house quite frequently and I am the gracious hostess. But underneath it all, I have nothing to show for all the years of being mother and housewife.

Hillary has two children. John is 20 years old and he is away at college "Doing his own thing." Eleanor is 18 and she is getting ready to go away to college too. Hillary is taking a couple of classes "To see if I can do this".

Tracy: Tracy is 32 years old. She is married and she has one daughter who is 12 years old. Tracy wants to be a dietician.
This is her second semester of college. She works part-time and attends school on a full-time basis. It was difficult arranging an interview with Tracy because of her busy schedule. Finally, after three attempts, the interview took place. She was about fifteen minutes late because she had to dash from class to make it. She could not stay too long, because she had to get to work. This is her first attendance at college. After graduation from high school, she got a job as a secretary. She worked at that job until last year, when she'd quit to return to school.

**Henry:** Henry is 28 years old. He wants to be a physician assistant, and so he is majoring in Biology so that "I can pick up all the required science courses." This is his first semester in college. He is single although he was married for two years. His wife died in an apartment fire about three years ago. It was very difficult for Henry to talk about his wife's death, and it would have been easy to reschedule the interview, but Henry insisted that the interview continue, because he wasn't sure that he could do this again. This incident demonstrated that the interview process has the potential for triggering painful memories in participants, and that in this process the researcher has to be constantly alert to and mindful of the need to step back when the situation seems to be getting out of control.
Henry had taken a couple of classes at a community college where he was studying to become a certified Emergency Medical Technician (EMT). However, he had dropped out after his wife had died.

Earl: Earl is 31 years old but "I am gray and bald" he said. He is married and he has "A great wife and two smart-aleck kids." His daughter is 10, and his son is 6. "They keep me young, and that's good for me." His wife is a registered nurse, and Earl wants to be a high school counsellor some day. "But I'm no hurry to get there, I'm having too much fun with this education thing." He had taken a few college classes on a military post years ago, but "To tell you the truth, they were beginning Spanish and American history 101. Of course, I am not sure what good they'll do me now."

Earl had good grades in high school, but after high school he joined the army and signed up for combat arms because the army had a sign-up bonus for those who went into combat arms. "So I became an infantryman." He spent four years on active duty, and then moved back to the midwest.

Scott: Scott is 25 years old. He is in the middle of a bitter divorce dispute right now which involves a 3-year-old daughter. Although he was hesitant to discuss the divorce and its implications, he did admit that having to deal with the
legal issues was quite unsettling and very disruptive.

Scott is currently in his second semester of college. He is considering applying for admission into the College of Business. He had never attended college before this admission. However, he had worked for the cable company laying and burying cable. He still works part time for the company while he attends school.

Edith: Edith is 26 years old, and she is single. She is sharing an apartment with two other female students. This is her first semester of college. She also works part-time to pay her share of expenses for the apartment that she is sharing with the two other students. She is depending on student loans to pay her tuition.

Edith came from a dysfunctional family, and she claims that she abused drugs and alcohol both in high school and for a short while after graduation.

Edith: My father beat my sister and me for every and any reason. If we were thirty minutes late from school we'd better have damn good excuses otherwise we would get our butts whipped. I hated the son of a bitch. If our mom defended or came to our aid, she would get hers, too. He was a bastard. I turned to smoking grass and drinking beer to escape. I guess when you're high you don't care what they do to you.

Paul: Paul was the last adult to be interviewed for the study. He has lived quite an interesting life. He grew up in California, but he moved to Colorado because "My first love
was skiing." He took a job working in carpentry during the summer and fall months, and then he worked for a ski resort during the winter and spring months so that "I could ski to my heart's content." He did this for three years, but he soon grew tired of it so he moved back to California. He did odd jobs, mainly in construction, but then he got tired of that life, too. Paul was always borrowing money from his parents, and they knew that he had no intention of ever paying it back.

Paul: My parents are not wealthy, but I guess they got so tired of hearing me ask for money from them, and making excuses as to why I was not like my brother that they offered to pay my tuition if I went to college.

Interview Data

Mary's Story

Mary is married, and she has three children. She is in her early-to-mid-forties. As was discussed earlier on in this chapter, Mary commutes to campus. She shares the ride to and from school with a close personal friend; and, according to Mary, they solve all the world's problems every time they take the trip to and from the campus. But they also talk about their lives, and the good times and bad times. They talk about their frustrations and anger with school, with the jobs they've had, and with their families.

Mary had attended college right after graduation from high school, but she had problems in handling the stresses that most young adults face when they decide to leave home and
go to college. She had grown up in a small Iowa town, and, according to her, going to college in a large city was almost too much for her to handle. She was scared and lonely, and she had no friends. More importantly, she missed the closeness of her family. There was no mom to run home to, at least not on a regular basis. So after about two semesters, Mary dropped out of college. According to her:

When I first went to college right out of high school, I went through a real serious depression. I did not adjust well to college. I guess you know, since going back to school, I found out about it, and I guess it was a case of culture shock. My folks and I thought it better that I should quit. They did not tell me at the time, but they thought that I was going to have a nervous breakdown. I was home about three months, and my sister was killed in a car accident. We were fifteen months apart. It was traumatic, very traumatic.

There are some important insights that can be gathered from this. Two events occurred in Mary's life that were very significant and very traumatic to her. First, she had dropped out of college, not because she was not bright enough but because of the environment that she found herself in. She felt lost and alienated, culture shock she called it, and her parents advised her to quit. So here she was, a failure in her eyes at eighteen. Then her sister, who Mary considered to be her good friend and confidante, died in a car accident. Mary was devastated by those two events, and perhaps that period in her life was what Mary considered to be a low point.

Mary talked about her life experiences between this entry
into college and her last attendance. She went through a period of severe depression following the death of her sister. She seemed to have lost her zest for life, something she had always prided herself on having. Before her depression, she believed that she was a well-adjusted young woman. She did the usual teenage stuff, but she was a good kid and her parents cared a lot for her. But then she said:

You know, when you get out of high school, it is like you’re in a sail boat, you expect to just go swoosh. I spent the next few years in a dead calm, not going anywhere, not doing anything, not knowing what I was doing. Really bad.

The two events that had occurred - her dropping out of college, and her sister’s death - were very significant to Mary. This was a very difficult time in her life. She was twenty-one, maybe twenty-two years old, and she was home in a dead calm, drifting.

She was in a dead calm and feeling worthless, so what happened to get her over her depression and her low self-esteem? During that period in her life, Mary explained that her family and friends prayed for her quite a lot. One of her friends encouraged her to attend a religious retreat. At this point in the interview, Mary paused, obviously remembering something which was quite significant to her. Then she said that during the retreat:

God stepped in and turned my life around. He gave me a purpose and reason to live. Here I was going this way, and God stepped in and turned me that way. Things have affected me since then,
but nothing has affected me that way before or since. That was a pivotal point in my life. I didn’t have a life plan.

She did not have a life plan, and God turned her around. What did her turning around mean? What did she do then that she had not done before? She decided that life was worth living after all; that her dropping out of college was not the end of the world; that her sister’s death was an accident that she had no control of and couldn’t prevent. Mary’s outlook on life had changed from despair to hope. According to her, she started going to church regularly (which she still does), started dating, and got back into the mainstream of life. She got married and had three children.

But marrying and having children meant staying home and raising the children while her husband worked, because that was what society had decided was what moms should do. Mary recounts that period in her life:

I guess I should say that when I got married, I stayed at home with the kids, which is a kind of nontraditional/traditional thing in this country now. I felt real alone, I felt like the only mommy, the only stay-at-home mommy. Where I lived at the time, there was a handful of us, out of like eighty families, there was five mothers home during the day.

If staying at home was something that society dictated, then the women in her neighborhood were certainly not paying heed to those dictates, because most of the wives had jobs. This seemed to present a paradox to Mary, because here she was doing what she thought was demanded of her, but others were
not playing by the same rules. Perhaps it was not society but instead it was Mary's husband who thought that she should not work. Did her husband object to her working? According to her, he felt that she should stay home until the children were older. So Mary stayed home.

When her children were older and in school, Mary went back to work. This was a time in her life that she was quite excited about. She worked as a secretary for a legal firm, and although she had no prior experience working in that environment, she was quite proud of her accomplishments. After she had accepted the job, she was told by one of her coworkers that the man that she was working for had fired four secretaries, and that she was the fifth one to hold that position. But she did a great job, and stayed with the company for some time. One of the benefits of the job was tuition reimbursement, a feature that Mary liked; and so she decided to attend college on a part time basis. She valued the tuition reimbursement more than the job itself, because according to her, the job paid little more than minimum wages.

It seems that Mary had completely turned her life around. There she was not too many years ago dropping out of college and suffering from depression; and here she was now with a family, a job, and preparing to attend college classes. But, according to her, "Things conspired against me." At about this time, her youngest son started having problems at school.
He was tested for health and learning disabilities, and Mary blamed herself for not staying at home when the children needed her most. Again, here was this dilemma. She wanted to work because it provided her with some independence and freedom, but on the other hand she had these guilty feelings for not being at home with her family. This to Mary, was quite a big hassle, and when the law firm that she worked for relocated to another state, Mary decided to stay at home.

Losing that job gave Mary an easy out from her dilemma. She could say that she did not have a job and therefore she could stay home. Was that what she really wanted to do? To her:

Losing that job was more of a real release. I took a one year sabbatical, and stayed with the family to see what I needed to do. I decided to go back to school and get my degree. I wouldn't mess around and get it in bits and pieces, because I didn't have the time anymore. I wanted a degree before I was eighty years old. I knew eventually that I was going to do this, but I couldn't because I felt I needed to be at home.

Mary was struggling with this dilemma between working and staying at home. She had a job which she found to be demanding but satisfying, and she was building her self confidence because she was able to perform exceptionally well in a position that four others had been unable to hold for any length of time. But she believed that she needed to be at home with her family. So why did she decide to go back to college? Wouldn’t the stress of attending classes and having
homework assignments be as demanding as having a full time job? To Mary, going to school presented her with the perfect opportunity to be both a mother and a student. She could attend classes two or three days a week and still be at home for her children and husband. According to her, her youngest son’s difficulties with school decreased, reinforcing her belief that her not being at home on a full time basis had something to do with her son’s difficulties at school. Going back to school meant more than just being more than a mother and a student. Mary felt that she was getting older and that she needed to do something for herself. She had to get a degree. As she explained:

I am probably under a little more pressure. Then I had lots and lots of time. You know, we talk about the biological clock, and I feel I am under a time limit. If I am going to get a degree and do something, I’ve got to do it right away.

During this period in her life, Mary had accepted a part time position at the local library, working as a children’s artist. But to her, it was a “Treacherous comfort zone.” She thought that she had found the ideal solution to her problem. She could attend college, work at the library on a part time basis, and still be at home. According to her, "I was happy at home and at work, and so I shelved plans to go back to school." So she did not go back to school after all. Again, she was choosing to put her family’s needs before her own. Then an event occurred which precipitated a change in Mary’s
life. A job opened up in the library that "would have been perfect," but it required someone with a degree. That, to Mary, was her trigger. "It was like somebody said, 'wake up, tap, tap, tap, you're going to do it now.' I wouldn't get the job, but I will get my degree."

In spite of all the promises that she had made to herself, it took a lost opportunity, a perfect job, to convince Mary that getting that degree was important to her. Going back to school was something that she was no longer going to delay. Her family's needs were still important, but she was going to act on her own needs this time.

Mary talked about making that difficult decision to return to college. To Mary, going back to school took a "great deal of courage." She had had difficulty with math in the past, and she hated math. Whenever she had nightmares about college, it always seemed to involve math.

In one of my dreams, I remember going to school with all my math problems completed (something that never happened), but then I searched and searched and I couldn't find the classroom. I was in a panic.

Her other problem was that she was concerned about her family's welfare. Would her husband and children support her in her new endeavors? Could she break that stay-at-home trap? Could she handle the classes that she was required to take? As an adult student, would other students and professors accept an older undergraduate student in the classroom? Mary
had confided in her friend that because of her fear of math she would never go back to college. But her friend convinced her that it was not necessarily her fear of math, but the stress and anxiety that was causing her to dread going back to school. She believes that part of her fears is really the fear of failure, but she believes that she is slowly overcoming those fears. She describes an incident where she was sitting in a French class:

I felt like I was in a dream, and I woke up and asked myself, 'where am I? What am I doing here? What do you mean sitting in this French class? What do you think you are doing? You can't do this.' My heart speeds up, my hands clench, but then I think, 'you are doing this, now shut up!'

Mary is still struggling with her fear of failure, but as she said, she is overcoming those fears. She has challenged her fears and behavior, and she is changing her ways of thinking and acting.

Mary talked about her expectations from college when she was considering returning. She had returned to college with one purpose in mind, and that was to get her degree. Her expectations from college was getting that piece of paper.

Mary's return to college was precipitated primarily by that perfect job that she did not get because it required a degree; so for her, getting that degree was of the utmost importance. But she did not return to college strictly because she did not get that perfect job. That incident was
just one of many that prodded her towards doing what she always knew that she was going to do, and that is to get a degree. Losing out on that job was the catalyst that provoked the response.

Now that she is in college, Mary’s expectations have changed. She is still after that piece of paper, but "I’m having lots of fun, having a ball. I do not know how to say this without sounding conceited, but I am a heckuva lot smarter than anybody ever knew, including myself." She concedes that college has broadened her horizons, and her outlook on life in general. She is no longer afraid of failing, although she is still battling her fears. Mary stated that if she won the lottery, she will be spending the rest of her life going to Ames taking classes, because it is so much fun.

Mary was asked to look back over the past five years of her life and to compare herself now with herself then. What changes did she see in herself? If she felt differently, what made her feel that way? The biggest change that she saw in herself was that she has a lot more self-confidence now. She stated that she was more assured of herself and her abilities. She is a lot more adaptable. She always had a great deal of confidence in her ability to handle the challenge of the workplace, but now she has gained self-confidence and confidence in interacting with others. She is "learning a lot more than
I am learning in the classroom. Things that seemed major to me in the past may now seem minor in comparison." Perhaps the best way to explain her new found confidence, she said, is that "I suppose I can do math now, if I applied myself."

In reviewing Mary's case study, one can see a thread running through her adult life. She has had some life events that to her, were quite significant. She was a failure because she had dropped out of college when her parents thought that she was going to have a nervous breakdown. Then her sister died in a car accident. So within a span of a year or less, she had two very traumatic events occur. In addition to this, Mary suffered from severe depression, and it was during this time in her life that she had a religious conversion. To her, God had transformed her life. He turned her around and pointed her in the right direction.

As her story unfolded, Mary got married and had three children, but she continued to entertain the idea of returning to college. However, she felt obligated to stay at home and raise the children. She entered her "treacherous zone" of working part time and staying at home, but her catalyst was not getting that "perfect job" which required a degree. Finally, she returned to college to work on that degree.

How does Mary's life experiences compare with other adults in this study? Is her life so unique that the experiences of others cannot be compared to hers? Although
this research is not concerned with comparisons, it is very useful to look for the common themes in the lives of these adults who have returned to college. One of the interests of this study is to seek answers as to why adults decided to return to college as this stage in their lives, and the story that follows will continue to probe for those significant life experiences which initiate or precipitate adults return to college. The following case study will focus on Irene.

Irene's story

To review briefly, Irene is in her 30s. She was married for sixteen and a half years, but she is now single and living alone. She is majoring in psychology.

Irene had not attended college previously, something that she blamed her husband, his family, and her family for. Irene stated:

I was married for sixteen and a half years, and whenever I tried to go to school, a lot of pressure was put on me by my family, and my spouse, and his family, that what do you want to go to school for? You're always reading books. Doesn't do you any good. They always made my life more difficult.

This bitterness towards others seemed to set the pattern for the rest of the interview, and as the story develops, one can see this theme appearing again. As with Mary, Irene was able to recall life events which she felt impacted significantly on her. One of these painful events revolved around her divorce. As has already been mentioned, her
marriage lasted for just over sixteen years, but then it ended in a very bitter divorce. Irene recounted what happened after the divorce was final, and the impact that it had on her.

It had a big impact. I mean after the divorce was final, I did not, I mean I got settled in another house, but I went to, I changed jobs. I went to work and home, that's it. Very often I did not go out with people. The telephone rang, if I felt like it I'd answer it, but I mainly wanted to be alone. I was trying to figure out why did this have to happen, and what does it mean. You feel horrible, guilty over it.

Shortly after her divorce, she was involved in a car accident, and according to her, it took her eight months before she could walk again. "That really was devastating because you know I am going Jesus, I have no one to depend on, no family here. The expense, it was horrible."

Two very significant and traumatic events in Irene's life, and yet she continues to strive. The significance of these events was quite obvious as Irene feverishly drummed a pencil against the table during this period of the interview. This mannerism, the drumming, was noted whenever Irene recounted events which seemed to hold some significance for her.

After the recovery from the accident, Irene started working for a computer company. Her job entailed programming computers, but according to her, she could not get ahead because she did not have a degree and she could not hold a full time job and go to school. She was very bitter towards
the company because, according to her, they kept promising to
schedule her working hours in such a way that she could attend
college. But it did not happen because:

You keep hearing them tell you that they are going
to promote you, but they don’t because you haven’t
got a degree. Or they give you the spiel that we’ll back you, we’ll help you get your degree,
you can work around your college hours; and then all of a sudden, oh I’m sorry, we’re gonna have
to change your hours and so you’ll just have to
forget school.

Irene considered many factors when she was considering
returning to college. She chose to attend college at this
time because:

I am part of humanity, and if I think that all
of humanity is sick, then I am sick, too. I want
to know what can I do about it, what can I do to
correct this. Plus, it’s only me. I don’t have
the responsibility like others with a family,
and I decided that now is as good a time as any.

Now is as good a time as any. What does that mean to an
adult such as Irene? Why was her time not last year or five
years ago or five years in the future? What is it that pushes
adults to go into college when they do? Dufresne-Tasse (1985)
proposes that many adults who return to college are acting on
transitions that were either in progress or were anticipated.
So perhaps Irene was responding to a transition in her life.
She had been through a divorce and a debilitating and life
threatening injury, but she was going to college because she
wanted to know what she could do about humanity’s and her own
sickness.
She chose psychology as her major, because it was what interested her. She was not so much concerned with whether she would be able to find a job in that particular field or not, she was more interested in doing something that she enjoyed. To her, it was just "more luck if you learn what interests you, and you find a job in that area." To Irene, college represented a chance to continue learning the things that she enjoyed while it helped her to get the degree that would validate her knowledge, experience, and abilities.

Irene found it very difficult to return to school. She knew that she wanted to go to college, but "After twenty years, it was very scary. The thought of putting up with all those kids who were brain dead was very scary." She considered the benefits versus the risks. In other words, how much could she make now as opposed to going to school? But, according to her, she was doing school for herself, so "I threw up all my fears at once and I looked to see how many landed." She was willing to challenge all her fears, and take a chance on her abilities to overcome and persevere in the face of difficulties.

As the interview progressed, Irene was asked to discuss her expectations from college, and to explain what she saw college doing for her when she was considering entering. She replied in part:

I think that if it was allowed, I would be a full time life long student because we are that way
anyway. The people that do not see how learning affects their lives are the ones that stagnate. They get locked in this hole and just get by in life. To the best of my knowledge, this is the only shot I've got, and I want to do everything, see everything, learn everything.

Irene is learning for the sake of learning. She was entering college because she saw it helping her to do, see, and learn things that she had not done, seen, or learned. But more importantly, she viewed college as a place where she could finally free herself from a job where she could not advance to her full potential. This desire to learn and grow, this craving to satisfy an inner need, was an important consideration for her.

Irene was asked to talk about her expectations from college now that she was enrolled. Had her expectations changed, and if so, how had they changed? The drumming of the pencil on the desk signaled that her experiences were quite significant to her. She conceded that if adult students applied themselves, that education could help them make connections; not just finding jobs, but growing up. "It could help adults figure out why they are getting an education, and what they were going to do beyond college." But the drumming of the pencil on the desk continued, and so she was asked to discuss what it meant to her as an individual. Her reply was quite unexpected, since she had seemed to think that education could help adult students make connections in their lives.

What do I see college doing for me? I see it
draining and sucking a lot of my money. You know, I do look at it like that. But I am going to have to disagree with them that they seem to categorize everybody; that without the degree, you’re just not going to do it. I think college should be more up front with students and tell them, hey, that degree is not going to guarantee that you are not gonna end up as a car mechanic.

She does not see the degree creating success, and in fact, she does not see her educational experiences helping her. She sees obstacles that she has to surmount before she lets herself go; obstacles such as getting through school, finding a decent place to stay, and paying her bills. She ended by saying, "Perhaps in a year or so, I might look at my educational experiences in a different light, and I may feel differently about my experiences then."

When the discussion turned to her perspective on her life at this time, there was a visible change in her expression. She smiled and said, "I have a subtle quiet strength now. It takes a lot more to push my buttons, but I pity the poor fool that does that. I assert myself more in more situations." She sees adults facing the same fears and the same emotions as young people, so perhaps she feels that she has not changed that much.

Two adults, both back in school after many years away from a formal educational setting. What do their stories tell us about adults who return to school? How do their stories compare with the other adults who were interviewed for this
study? Can we make inferences from Mary and Irene to Nancy, and Fred, and Tom, and all the others? Some of the insights that were gained from the interviews with the other participants will be reported in the section that follows.

Participants' significant events

What were some of the significant events that had occurred in the lives of the other participants in the study? With very few exceptions, participants in the study were able to describe profound, and in many instances extremely painful experiences in their lives that they felt had impacted on their well-being significantly. This common theme of a critical life event acting as a catalyst for a transformation has been discussed previously in the review of literature. In every instance where the participants described these catalytic experiences, they were also able to describe the changes that they had made or had attempted to make in their lives.

Some of the participants revealed that someone who had been very close to them had died. The deaths included parents, siblings, and spouses. In some cases, some participants had lost more than one family member within a one year period. Although the death of a family member or members was certainly not the only critical event, it seemed to be one of the most devastating. Ultimately, that event seemed to
create the greatest impetus for change.

Adam had lost a brother in a car accident about a year ago. According to Adam, his brother’s death had left a void in his life. Adam had been involved in two relationships both of which had very unpleasant endings. Adam had been devastated over the break ups, and he had vowed then that he would change his behavior and do something differently. When his brother died, he decided that he had to make the changes that he had vowed to make years before. His brother’s death provided the catalyst for the change that Adam knew should have been made before. Adam noted:

I lost my brother in a car accident about a year ago. We were very close. I told myself, you have to change something. I realized that I had the ability to become a better person, not just to be more financially stable, but to be a better person. I had to do something, so I sat down one day, and I decided to quit my job and pursue that medical degree.

Fred had lost “good buddies” in Vietnam. He was still very bitter about the experiences. At that time, he thought that he had lost faith in humanity. He is still carrying around a great deal of anger and hurt inside of him over his friends’ useless death as he called it, and the way that many veterans were treated on their return to the United States.

Inez, Heather, and Henry had lost someone close to them at some point in their lives. They believed that the death of a significant person had left them devastated, and that, for
most of them, those deaths were instrumental in helping them question and then attempting to make changes in their lives.

Heather had lost a brother in Vietnam, and then her mother had died. To her, both events were quite significant. When she was asked about them, she noted:

My brother died in Vietnam. His death hit me hard, but mom, oh God, she was totally devastated! Then my mother’s death made me realize that life is so fragile that we shouldn’t waste our time.

Henry’s wife had died in an apartment fire. He has had a very difficult time dealing with the stress and hurt that her death produced. He has had counselling, but he still recalls:

Then my wife died in an apartment fire. You know the sad thing is, here I was a paramedic, and I could not do a damn thing. I will never forget that. God, it hurts!

Other participants had experienced problems in their marriages. This seemed especially true for some of the female adult students, although a few males were also involved in divorces. It would be safe to assume that the events leading up to separation and eventually divorces must have been devastating to those involved.

Nancy’s divorce had left her feeling very shaky, and to her, "That was the most devastating thing that ever happened to me." She had always had a man around, and when her marriage ended, she was left without male support. That to her, was a very significant event in her life.

Even when my marriage was shaky, I had a man around to take care of me. I always had a man
around, first my father, then my husband. My divorce left me without male support, and I was devastated.

Ellen was involved in an abusive relationship, and at one point her spouse had hit her in the face with his fist. As she explained:

I believe that he (her husband) was fooling around on me. One day, I accused him of cheating, and he punched me, wham, right in the face. Just about knocked me out. And you know, here I was, stuck in this awful marriage, just like my old job. Still with no skills, and now with an abusive husband. I certainly wasn't going back to my parents, so I stayed...I think that that was the first time in my entire life that I decided I had to change something in my life. I did not know what, but I had to change something.

That event had prompted her to attend a seminar on spouses in abusive relationships, and because of that seminar, she realized that she did not have to stay in a "lousy marriage." So she moved out, and filed for a divorce.

Some of the female students who had children stated that they either felt obligated to stay home with their young children or else they felt pressured to do so. This seemed particularly true for those mothers who either had no job skills or were in the lower paying jobs. Many of the women had talked about going back to school, but in most cases they stated that they believed that it was their responsibility to stay at home with the children.

Hillary's husband owned his own business, and Hilary was always a gracious hostess at the frequent social gatherings at
her home, but she was "Just a housewife and mother" with nothing to show for all the years of marriage. Heather had travelled all over Europe and the United States, but to her, she was "only a housewife."

Being just a housewife seemed to have such a stigma attached to it, that many of these women had decided that being just a housewife was not what they wanted out of life. Here is what some of the women in the study had to say about staying at home:

Nancy: I wanted to go back to school, but my husband refused to support my decision; and since I had no financial or moral support, I decided that I had to wait.

Inez: My husband and I talked about me taking classes at the community college, but I felt that it was my responsibility to stay at home with the boys until they were older.

For some of the participants in the study, the use of drugs and alcohol affected either the participants themselves or close family members. Tom grew up in a dysfunctional family. His mother was using something, which to Tom, rendered her useless as a parent. Edith used drugs to help her escape an abusive father, and William turned to alcohol to deal with stress.

Tom: My father raised my sister and I because my mother was always wasted. I don't know what she was using, but she was out of it most of the time.

Edith: My father beat my sister and I for every and any reason...I turned to smoking grass and drinking beer to escape. I guess when you're high you don't care what they do to you.
William: After my accident, I started drinking heavily; I mean really heavily. I was drinking a lot of beer every day. I started neglecting my wife, but she hung in there with me. Finally, she talked into going to an Alcohol Anonymous meeting.

In discussing other events that they felt were significant to them, participants mentioned religious convictions, illnesses in the family, and attendance at seminars or counselling sessions. As was mentioned in Mary’s case study, Mary had a very strong religious conviction that she believed was instrumental in helping her to turn her life around. Edith’s religious experience came when she attended church with a friend. Edith had developed a drug and alcohol abuse problem while she was still in high school, because, according to her, it was her escape from an abusive father. She had been working in a convenience store when she ran into an old high school friend at her place of employment.

According to Edith:

I ran into an old friend of mine. She was married and going to college. She was still very religious. She invited me to attend church with her. I went with her just to get her off my back. Boy, am I glad I went. It was one of those experiences that you never expect will happen to you. Anyhow, when they asked if anyone wanted to be saved, I stood up. God came over me that day.

But not all of the participants had experienced significant events in their lives. One was adamant in his belief that nothing significant had happened to her, while another did not consider his life event to be significant at
all. Ian's life has been easy. According to him, no one has
died on him, and since he had never been married, he did not
have marital problems. He added, "I'm sorry to disappoint
you, but no, nothing significant has happened to me." Paul
had just "bummed around." He could not think of anything
significant that had happened to him.

Effects of significant events

How did these events affect the participants? Many of
the adults felt that their experiences had helped to create
significant changes in their lives. Some of the changes that
participants felt that they had made included making positive
changes, satisfying a hunger, gaining control of one's life,
or doing something for oneself.

After Adam's brother's death, he woke up to the
realization that he had the ability to become a better person,
and so, he quit his job and decided to pursue the medical
degree that he had been dreaming about. Inez's husband's
death was the catalyst for her to do something. For her, "I
had to get that degree for me and my children." She returned
to school, and she is now working on obtaining a degree in
social work. Hillary told her husband that it was time for
her to strike out on her own. As she said:

I meant I had to do something for myself. I've had a
pretty easy life, but now I realize that I never
satisfied my own needs. I sat down and asked myself
"What do you want out of life? How do you intend to get
there? What are you going to do with it?" I don't know where I am now, but at least I am on my way to somewhere that I had not been to before.

Nancy needed to satisfy a hunger. Her marriage was failing, and her father had admonished her to get an education so that she could take care of her children. She was angry at her dad at the time, but Nancy realized that he was right, and so she decided to do something about it.

Nancy: The realization of my plight scared me, but it motivated me to take some action...now that my kids are grown and gone, I decided that it was my time. I had this hunger that I could finally satisfy.

Many of the participants indicated that the desire to return to college was fueled, to a great extent, by the significant events that had occurred in their lives. But the participants were using their new perspectives to set new goals for themselves. For many, this was the first opportunity to return to college; children had left home, financing was available, there were changes in family situations, or there was pressure from family and friends.

Nancy, Inez, and Hillary either had children that had left home or were old enough that mom felt that it was okay to return to college.

Nancy: Now that my kids are grown and gone, I decided that it was my time.

Inez: My boys are old enough, so I'm able to go to college and do something for my kids and I.

Hillary: With my daughter getting ready to go away to college, I decided that it was time for me.
For some participants, the availability of financial resources made it easier to return to school on a full time basis without having to worry about finding part time employment. For others, there were time pressures to get a degree before it was too late and do something with it.

Inez: I have some money from my husband’s life insurance, and I get some help for the kids from the government. So financially, I’m OK.

Susan: With his salary (her husband’s), and my part time job, we are doing well financially.

Both Mary and Tracy had concerns about their ability to complete the requirements for degrees and then do something with their degrees before they were "too old."

Mary: I want to get a degree before I am eighty years old...I’m under a lot more pressure. Then I had lots and lots of time. You know, we talk about the biological clock, and I feel I’m under a time limit. If I’m going to get a degree and do something, I have to do it now.

Tracy: I had to do something with my life before it was too late for me.

Expectations from college

Participants’ expectations from college ran the gamut from just getting a degree, to having a good time, to validating their knowledge, to becoming empowered. Adult students saw college helping them fulfill many dreams when they were considering entering.

Almost without exception, adults stated that they expected to earn a degree. Some students expressed the desire
to continue on to graduate school on completion of their undergraduate degree. Adam saw college providing a good foundation and nothing else. According to him, all he wanted from the university was a piece of paper that he could use to get into medical school. He did not expect to get anything else from the university because he just did not see the university doing anything for him on a personal or social level. Mary saw college giving her a piece of paper. She had to get that degree. Fred knew the importance of the degree, and so all he wanted, just as Adam and Mary, was a history degree so that he could teach.

Many of the participants saw college preparing them to get new jobs, or increase their potentials for promotion. Adults saw college helping them to become gainfully employed.

Nancy: I saw college giving me job skills and people skills. I saw it freeing me up from the chains that I had around me.

Ellen: Well, if you put it that way, I guess I wanted job skills so that I could get a decent job. People say money can't buy happiness, but I think that I deserve some happiness. Nice clothes, a nice car, a decent place of my own, those sorts of things. Without a college degree, I can't see myself getting those things.

Tom: I was looking for something that would give me job skills and would also give me a sense of accomplishment.

Edith: If I could get some job skills so that I could find a decent job, I think that I will never ask God for anything again. I've asked for many things from him, but this is the one thing that I want more than anything else.
Another important role that adults saw education playing, was helping them in validating their experiences, knowledge, and value. Both Irene and Susan were convinced that they had the knowledge and ability to be successful at whatever task they undertook. However, they felt that a college degree would give them a stamp of approval so that society would accept them for what they were worth.

Irene: College represents a chance to continue learning the things that I enjoy, while it helps me to get the degree that will validate my knowledge, experience, and abilities.

Susan: I see college giving me the validation, and the degree is the validation.

There were other expectations that adults had from college. They saw college providing them with the opportunity to increase their self esteem, and to learn to help others. Many of the participants hoped to increase their sense of self worth during their stay in college, and they hoped that college would provide them with the opportunity to do so.

Inez: I saw education giving me not only that degree, but helping me to become self sufficient, and helping me to build my self esteem.

Heather: I needed some sort of pat on the back; you know, "Yes Heather, you're okay, and we'll make sure the world knows that too."

Edith: I have never had any confidence in my ability to do anything. I hope college will help me build my sense of self worth. I need some positive strokes.

Tracy: Initially, I wanted to learn about myself. Who I was, that sort of thing. I think my mother's illness pushed me over the edge.
Tracy's mother had been diagnosed with Alzheimer disease, and her thoughts about being pushed over the edge was a reference to the difficulties that she was experiencing watching her mother deteriorate from her condition.

But there are always the exceptions, and not all of the participants had expectations from their college years. A few of the participants conceded that their primary concern while they were in college was to have a good time, and enjoy themselves. They did not see college providing them with anything that was worthwhile, and so, they were content to go along for the ride.

Dan: All I wanted to do was party and have fun for four or five years. Maybe get a degree. As far as I was concerned, college was a joke anyway.

Paul: I'm in college for the free ride. This is such a big joke anyway. All I'm doing is wasting my parent's money.

Expectations since enrollment

Had the participants' expectations from college changed since their enrollment? Although the number one reason given for returning to college was job-related (getting a degree to increase or improve job skills), many adults hoped that college would assist them in increasing their self-esteem, or in validating their knowledge. Adults who are now in college feel that completing their degree requirements and getting jobs is still their number-one priority. However, many of
these adults now see college providing more than just a diploma. They see college helping them broaden their horizons, assisting them in making decisions about the course that they should follow, increasing their self-worth, and expanding their awareness of other people and other cultures.

But not all of the participants in the study feel positive about their experiences while they are in college. Some see the educational system as stifling, especially to the adult students who had returned. They believe that college is either not helpful in meeting their expectations, or else they had negative feelings about their college experiences. Adam sees the university as being extremely impersonal. He sees the classes as "Not being the idealistic dream that I expected. The classes are not realistic, but I am playing their game." When he was asked to describe how he saw college helping him, Adam replied:

It all depends on how you define college. If you define college as a place of learning, this institution is excellent. If you see it as providing for growth and maturity, it has not been much help.

Fred expressed a very strong dislike for the university. He was actually quite bitter about his experiences with "A system that does not seem to care for students, especially adult students." Irene saw college "Draining and sucking a lot of my money." Ian also felt that his college experience left him with a bad taste in his mouth. He felt that adults
were being treated as children, and he could not understand how they could put up with that kind of treatment.

Ian: Now I know why I was so bored with high school. Here I am, thirty-four years old, and they put me in this chair, third row, fifth column. Do I have to put up my hand and say, "Teacher, can I go do number one?" I think that it is just a terrible situation.

Not all adults have such negative feelings about their college experiences, and many of them believe that their experiences have been positive. Some participants suggested that their college experience had helped them or is helping them as they work to increase their sense of well-being and self-worth. Nancy sees education helping her make better decisions in her life; not just economic ones, but political and social ones, too. Additionally, adults saw their educational experiences helping to broaden their perspectives of themselves and others. Inez saw education as empowering. According to her, the more you get the more you want. "Education has opened my eyes to the plight of women in this country and throughout the world." Susan had read the papers and looked at the newscasts, but the problems that she saw were not hers and they did not bother her. Now, she sees international students struggling with the language and with the culture and she realizes how difficult it must be for them. She sees college giving her a new perspective on life, a broader global outlook.

Susan: I guess that I am so used to having
things my way, that I never noticed the people around me who were struggling. I mean, I looked at the news and I read the papers, but the problems that I saw were not mine, and they did not bother me. Now I guess that I look at some of the foreign students on campus and I see them struggling with the language and with the culture, and I think, "Boy, how do they do it?" I see college giving me a new perspective on life, a broader global outlook.

Adults also have higher expectations of themselves. They have made changes that they feel will help them to look at many things from a different perspective. Dan is being supported by his parents while he is in school, and so he does not have to work. He had always seen himself as being better than others less fortunate. Now that he is in college, Dan seems to have softened his stance on many issues. He explains that when he sees students who are carrying full loads and working, he understands how good his life has been. He seems to be bothered by his selfishness, and he feels that he should apply himself more to understanding others.

Dan: I think about different things now. For example, I am more accepting of others who are less fortunate. When you have money, sometimes you don’t understand things such as homelessness and hunger. School has opened my eyes to those sorts of things.

A very crucial element in the lives of many of the female participants in this study was having other students (especially other women) who had shared very similar experiences. Knowing that others had struggled with similar problems, and realizing that they, too, were continuing to improve their educational skills, these adult students
continued to work towards increasing their sense of self-worth and self-esteem.

Hillary was not getting any answers from the classroom. Perhaps as she said, she had to find her own answers in her own way and in her own time. However, the interaction with other adults on campus was very stimulating to her because she said she shared so many common experiences with the women who had come back to school. For Edith, other women on campus have opened her eyes to the strengths that women do possess. She has changed her perspectives on her own strengths, and on her roles in relationships. She states:

Being around other women, especially female professors, have helped me to understand that women do not have to depend on men, because women can do anything that they want.

Although college is helping adults in their search for growth, there are those adults who feel that the university is not doing nearly enough to meet the needs of adults who have returned to school. Many of these adults believe that the system is geared towards the younger students who are in their first and second years of college. "They treat us like kids," one echoed. Fred was very bitter at the system, which he said did not care for adult students. Nancy sees the university as a cold place, and she does not think that they understand the sacrifices that adults have to make to be there. She wishes that they would consider the needs of adults, and that they would be more flexible about scheduling classes. Tracy is a
little disillusioned with college. She is learning the book stuff, but "I am not learning people skills or growth skills".  

**Participants' self perspectives**

All of the participants in this study stated that they had made changes in their lives over the past five years or more. Most of them reported that they had broadened their perspectives, and that they were now looking at most things from different angles. They listen to the points of view of others, are more aware of the needs of those who may be less fortunate, and are more tolerant of people whose views may not be the same as theirs. They believe that their exposure to students from other cultures has been helpful in that it makes them more aware of the need for cooperation among governments even when political agendas may be at different ends of the spectrum.

Mary: I am learning a lot more than I am learning in the classroom. Things that seemed major to others and to me in the past now seem minor in comparison. College has broadened my horizon.

Fred: When I was younger, especially in the military, I was brash, cocky, and full of pep. Now I look at things from different angles, and I listen a lot more closely to different opinions.

Susan: I guess I see college giving me a new perspective on life, a broader global outlook on how close we really are to each other. I have begun to question my own agenda a lot more this past six months. I think that it is very important for us to become more aware of those around us. We can't keep going through life thinking that we are better than everyone else.

Heather: I believe that my exposure to different
ideas and opinions (even the ones that I totally disagree with) will help to broaden my outlook on life and on the way that I see and think about myself and others. At least it will help me to look at who I am from a different angle. If I do that, then I can’t help but look at others differently, too.

Increasing one’s self-confidence is a part of the process of an individual’s growth, and many of the participants in this study believed that they had increased their self-confidence as part of their personal advancement to adulthood. In doing so, they felt that they were much more able to deal with conflicts, and to continue with the search for meaning in their lives. Mary had had a difficult time with math in the past. Her nightmares about school always seemed to involve problems with math. But now Mary says, "I suppose I can do math now if I applied myself."

Together with an increased self-confidence, some adults were more self assured. That included dealing with their own problems and anxieties, and with conflicts from their environment. Irene now has "a subtle, quiet strength." For the first time Nancy feels that she has control of her life. She is a lot more relaxed and easier to get along with, and her children and parents have commented on how good she looks. Tracy feels good about herself because she has chosen to challenge a lot of the things that she had always believed. "Now I question almost everything. I want to know how and why. Don’t just tell me, explain it to me. Help me to understand why it has to be this way and not that way. That
to me is what it's all about. We have to start questioning or elsewhere we'll never grow."

Many of these adults find themselves questioning the values and beliefs that they had held to for so many years. By asking those difficult questions of themselves and others, they are learning more about themselves.

Susan: In my short time on campus, I can see that college can be liberating; liberating in the sense that it gives you the opportunity to explore, to question, and to grow as an individual. I hope that during the next three years or more, I will continue to grow and become a much broader, open-minded person.

Hillary: Asking myself those questions when I realized that my daughter was about ready to leave to go to school started me on my way; and you know, I have never looked back. I have nowhere to go but up. Of course, I can see myself slipping every now and then, but I most certainly will keep going up.

Earl: I keep asking, why does it have to be this way? Why can't we do it that way? Who said that this is the only answer? I have to, because I need to know where I am going, and how I am going to get there.

Summary

Twenty adult students were interviewed about their life experiences before and during college, and the changes that they saw in themselves as they matured as adults. The focus of the interview questions was to provide some insights into the relationship between the transformative process and the return of adult students to college.

The key to answering the research question may lie in the
understanding of the participants' beliefs about the way they saw themselves before returning to college, their experiences while in college, and their beliefs and values at this time in their lives. Participants came from diverse backgrounds, and their responses to the research questions were varied. However, their experiences were strikingly similar, not so much in the experiences themselves, but in their richness and depth, and in their commonalities of experiences. Many of the adult students in the study had experienced stressful life events, and those events had had significant impacts on the lives of the participants. For some, it was the death of family members; while for others, it was divorces, illnesses in the family, or difficult personal relationships.

In attempting to get a handle on their lives, many of these adults had returned to college. They had entered college with different expectations, but, for many of them, the college experience had in itself created changes in their lives.

In the following chapter, data from the interviews will be analyzed. This analysis will be useful in helping to provide answers to the research question.
CHAPTER V. DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

Overview of the Chapter

The purpose of this study was to attempt to explain the reasons why adults decide to return to or enter college at this time is their lives. More specifically, the question is: Are adults who return to college acting on some previously experienced transformation, or are they viewing college as a medium for their transformation?

Jack Mezirow (1991) asserts that a crucial ingredient in the transformative process is the ability of adults to make meaning of their experiences. Mezirow uses a ten-step model to explain the dynamics of the transformative process. The process begins with the posing of a problem, and continues through to the taking of some action. To make the meaning transformative, individuals need to remove themselves from the picture and consciously and critically examine the reasons for their behavior. Mezirow calls this reflective action, which he considers to be a key element in the advancement through transitions to a transformative experience. These meaning perspectives can be seen as templates that adults use in their interpretation and evaluation of new experiences.

Reflective thinking requires individuals to question the preconceived notions, beliefs, values, and ways of thinking and acting that had governed their lives; while perspective transformation requires that individuals reformulate new ways
of thinking and acting if the original values prove to be false. In that way, individuals can negate their previously-held assumptions, and replace them with the new ones that they had developed. That is the crucial ingredient in the transformative process.

As part of the examination of the research question, twenty adult freshman students were interviewed. There were ten male and ten female students, and all were at least twenty-five years old. The adult participants in the study were questioned about their life experiences prior to this entry into college, their experiences in college, and the way that they view themselves now as opposed to five years or more ago.

By comparing the experiences, beliefs, and attitudes of the participants prior to enrolling in college to their beliefs and values at this time in their lives, the researcher hopes to be able to add some insights in an attempt to answer the research question.

Discussion of Findings

The findings of the study are presented and discussed in this chapter. Participants' views are used throughout the discussion primarily to illustrate specific points in the discussion.
Transformation Before College

Based on the interview data, it seems safe to assume that many of the adults in the study were acting on previously experienced transformations. In negotiating a meaning scheme, adults attempt to examine the how and what aspects of their reflective thinking that Mezirow (1991) describes. These two, the how and the what, are integral parts of the triad of content reflection, process reflection, and premise reflection. Content reflection is concerned with the asking of the "what" question. "What does this mean to me? What am I to learn from this?" On the other hand, process reflection is concerned with the "how" question. "How am I going to learn this? Now that I know what I want out of this, how do I advance beyond this?" Individuals negotiate a meaning scheme when they have asked themselves the how and the what of a given situation.

Meaning perspective requires that individuals ask the "why" question. "Why do I feel this way about a particular ethnic group, or individual, or myself? Why do I believe that this is so and the other is not?" This is premise reflection, the questioning of the beliefs, values, and ideas that one has always held to firmly. When an individual negotiates all three - content, process, and premise reflection - then that individual has moved beyond the transformation of a meaning scheme to the transformation of a meaning perspective.
To equate this process to learning, it may be necessary to examine the four domains of learning that Mezirow (1991) espouses. Mezirow calls these: learning through meaning schemes, learning new meaning schemes, learning through the transformation of meaning schemes, and learning through perspective transformation (Mezirow, 1991; p. 93). The two that this research is focusing on are learning through transformation of meaning schemes, and learning through perspective transformations. Learning through transformation of meaning schemes involves the process through which individuals realize that specific beliefs and values that they once held are incompatible with what things ought to be or really are. This leads to feelings of "...The inadequacy of our old ways of seeing and understanding meaning" (Mezirow, 1991, p. 94). These feelings of inadequacy may lead to the fourth kind of learning; learning through perspective transformation. This kind of learning builds on the previous forms of learning, especially learning through the transformation of meaning schemes. Individuals not only become aware of the distorted views that they were holding on to, but now these individuals are transforming their beliefs and perspectives into new ways of thinking, acting, and behaving.

Adam was engaged to be married, but when his girl friend broke off the engagement, Adam was devastated, and he had "a
great deal of difficulty dealing with life in general and relationships in particular." He reflected on the way that he had lived his life, and, as he explained:

There were two things that I wanted out of life; a relationship and eventually a family, and a job that was interesting and fulfilling. After the break up, I took a look and realized that what I was doing was leading me to neither of those two goals. I needed to do something differently.

Based on Mezirow's model, Adam had negotiated a meaning scheme. He had reflected on the dysfunctions and inadequacies of the way that he was living his life, and he stated that he needed to do something differently. His views of what things were and what they ought to be had collided, and he sensed the need to change his distorted views. He had negotiated a meaning scheme, but not a perspective transformation since there was no evidence that he had changed his behavior. Adam felt that he needed to change something in his life, but what? Was he going to adopt new ways of viewing and dealing with women, or would he attempt to change the way that he saw himself?

Mary had quit college because her parents thought that she was going to have a nervous breakdown. Later on, after she had children of her own, Mary was convinced that she had to stay home because her family needed her there. Added to the above, Mary had a difficult time with mathematics and many of her nightmares involved school and math; and she had vowed that she would never return to school, primarily because of
that. What were Mary’s beliefs and values based on? First, her parents thought that she was going to have a nervous breakdown and so she’d quit college. Second, she believed that she had to stay home with her children. Third, she had some bad experiences with math, and so she decided that she would not return to college because of her problems with math. But then Mary had two experiences that made her question her earlier held values. She had lost her job with a company that had relocated to another state. Further, she didn’t qualify for a job at the library that would have been perfect for her. She finally understood that she had to live up to her own expectations, and not the expectations of others. She had been a housewife, and she had been accepting jobs that made it easier for her to work part-time and be home most of the time. But then when she did not get the job at the library, "It was like somebody said, wake up, tap, tap, tap; you’re going to do it now. I wouldn’t get the job, but I will get my degree."

I decided to go back to school and get my degree. I wouldn’t mess around and get it in bits and pieces because I didn’t have the time anymore. I knew eventually that I was going to do this, but I couldn’t because I felt I needed to be at home.

That sentence sums up the transformations of meaning schemes and the perspective transformation that Mary had negotiated. Before, she felt that she couldn’t go to school because she was needed at home, but then she decided to go back to school to get that degree. Didn’t her family still
need her at home? But now she was validating her own needs and values. She had questioned the assumptions that she had lived her life by, she had found that there were conflicts between her current and past realities, and she had taken some action to modify or transform her behavior.

Mary’s other experience involved her fear of math. Now that she is back in college, she described her own transformations:

One day while I was sitting in French class, I felt like I woke up from a dream and I asked myself, "Where am I? What do you mean sitting in this French class? What do you think you’re doing? You can’t do this." My heart speeds up, my hand clenches; but then I think, "You are doing this, now shut up."

Again, Mary had negotiated a meaning scheme and a perspective transformation. She had overcome her fear of failure, and she had developed a new way of thinking and acting. Mary made two very important statements which reinforced her transformative experiences. First, she said that if she won the lottery, she would be taking classes for the rest of her life. Second, she confided that "I suppose I can do math now, if I applied myself."

Heather was "just a housewife" when she decided to enroll in college. Three events had occurred in Heather’s life. First, her mother had died; second, her child was born; and third, Heather had serious misgivings about her ability to be a fit mother. During a program on well-baby care, Heather began to question her assumptions about her unfitness.
Heather: When I was growing up, I remember my mom was always saying that she was a bad mother, because my brothers were so terrible. They were disobedient, and just made my mom miserable. Maybe I always thought that I would be like my mom and be a terrible mother, too.

Heather started to ask herself some questions. She began to question these beliefs and values that she had been holding on to. Heather stated:

You know, in some ways I think its ironic because now I know that my mom was a darn good mother. All these years I've been carrying these guilty feelings inside of me, and I guess that I figured I'd grow up and fail like my mom. But she was not a failure! I think I finally understand that, and I know that I can be a good mother too.

Heather had advanced to a perspective transformation before she had returned to college.

Henry's wife had died in an apartment fire. He was a paramedic at the time and he blamed himself for her death, on the basis that he was a paramedic and yet "he couldn't do a damn thing about it," leaving him severely depressed for about a year over her death. Finally, Henry started getting professional counselling. During the counselling sessions, Henry started to question his belief that he was responsible for his wife's death. He realized that he could not have saved her because she had chosen to return to the burning building. Over the past two years Henry has continued to work on his transformation. He has questioned his preconceived belief, and he is advancing beyond the questioning to a new perspective, but he still has difficulty dealing with his
wife's death, and according to him:

I'm still a little angry with the world and with God for taking my wife, but I think that I am slowly getting over the hurt...Maybe I am finally getting to the point of accepting things the way they are and learning to deal with them on a one-on-one basis, rather than lumping them all together and over-whelming myself.

It would seem that Henry is working through his disequilibrium, and that he has negotiated a perspective transformation.

William got injured on the job, and because he could not lift heavy objects, he lost his job to someone else. He knew that was not fair, but, as he said, "I guess I learned that without education, you do get stuck in jobs where you could be there one day and gone the next." He was also an alcoholic.

William attended counselling sessions to deal with his alcoholism, and during the sessions he questioned his motives for drinking. He realized that he was exhibiting the same symptoms that his alcoholic father had demonstrated. Through his questioning and his becoming aware of this dysfunction, William was able to negotiate a perspective transformation. As he said, "I did not like that side of me and I was going to change." He has stopped drinking, and he has returned to college to get the degree that would give him job security.

Many participants had negotiated perspective transformations, but not all of the adults in the study could demonstrate that they had advanced beyond content and process reflection. They never seemed to progress towards the premise
reflection, the "why" of their ways of thinking, acting, and of questioning their assumptions, values, and beliefs. According to Gould (1978), advancing towards a transformation is comparable to a trap door that individuals would slowly open, peek over the edge, and close the door again. Over a period of time, some of those individuals would open that trap door again and go through, while others will choose to remain behind. They, too, may advance beyond the trap door at some time in their lives.

Fred has spent twenty years in the armed forces, and he had entered college with a very specific goal in mind, and that was to get a degree in history so that he could teach. He had some painful experiences from Vietnam, but he seemed reluctant to let go and question the why, why did he have such a difficult time dealing with his feelings? In fact, he had "lost faith in humanity." He felt very bitter about his experiences in college, and he couldn't wait to get out "as quickly as possible."

Irene was divorced after sixteen and a half years of marriage and after her divorce she changed jobs, went from work to home, hardly answered her telephone, and did not socialize with her friends. But she wanted to figure out "Why did this have to happen, and what does it mean?" Irene, like many of the other participants, had been challenged both physically and mentally as she faced the transitions in her
life; and like many adults, her transitions were filled with doubts and misgivings. She had recognized that there was a dysfunction in her life, and she had questioned her behavior, but did she change her behavior? It does not seem that she did, because she stated:

Some things that I do have control over, I did not know what to do with them and I have to accept them for what they are.

Irene still accepts things for what they are. She has not questioned the assumptions, values and behaviors that had governed her life.

Many other adults were able to describe events that were meaningful to them, and then through the actions that they took, they were able to demonstrate that they had negotiated perspective transformations. For some of those adults, returning to college and completing degree requirements equated to getting job skills and improving their chances of obtaining employment on graduation. But getting degrees and obtaining jobs were not the only reasons why adults returned to school. For some of them, college was seen as providing validation for their knowledge, thoughts, and values; and for helping them as they attempted to increase their sense of belonging, of self worth, and of self esteem. To them, getting an education meant that they could look at themselves in the mirror and feel good about themselves and their accomplishments. For Mary, it meant the fulfillment of a life
long dream - "I always knew that I was going to do it;" or for Heather, "See mom, I am not a loser anymore."

Dan, Henry, and a few of the other participants could not relate any experiences that would indicate that they had negotiated perspective transformation. This is not to imply that they did not experience profound changes in their lives, but they did not or could not demonstrate that quality during the interviews.

The role of significant events

An important aspect of these transformative experiences is the role that significant life events play in initiating and/or precipitating transformative learning among adults (Mezirow, 1991; Ferguson, 1980; Gould, 1978; Sheehy, 1976). Participants in this study attributed many of the significant changes in their lives to specific life events. For many of these adults, the events created fear, anxiety, uncertainty, and dilemmas. But life events are not necessarily negative in nature. Many events in which the outcomes are very positive create a great deal of uncertainty and anxiety. A woman's pregnancy, and the joys associated with adding a new member to the family, can in itself be a catalyst for changes in behavior and action. For example, in this study, Heather's child was born shortly before her mother had died. Heather had been planning her pregnancy for some time, but before the
baby arrived, Heather had serious self doubts about her ability to be a "fit mother." Her anxiety was creating enough of a dilemma that she enrolled in a hospital-sponsored program on well baby care. Heather voiced her concerns to the program instructor who reassured her that her fears were probably unfounded. As the program proceeded, and as Heather learned more about her unborn child's needs and about her own fears, she started to question the assumptions that she had previously held. She realized that many of her assumptions were indeed false, and that the perspectives that she had held since childhood might have been distorted. The importance of this discovery to Heather was that she had reached the point where she was asking the "why" of premise reflection. "Why did I believe that I would not be a good mother? Was there something about me that made me feel that way?" Perhaps she found the answer when she noted:

When I was growing up, I remember my mom was always saying that she was a bad mother...Maybe I always thought that I would be like my mom and I will be a terrible mother, too.

Does that imply that Heather had solved the dysfunction in her life simply because she had recalled that incident in her past? Perhaps she had. However, what she clearly had done was to raise her awareness and to question the assumptions and preconceived beliefs that she had been living with. By asking the "how, what, and why" questions of content, process, and premise reflection, and by changing her
behavior, she had transformed her distorted meaning scheme into a perspective transformation. "...Now I know that my mom was a darn good mother...I think I finally understand that, and by understanding that, I can be a good mother, too."

Ellen had problems with her self-confidence, both growing up at home and in her personal relationships. Ellen's parents believed that she was a "loser," and when she was fired from her job and moved back home, she said:

Can you imagine a twenty-one-year old with no job skill and no self-confidence moving back home? Talk about the pits! My parents always considered me to be a loser, and I guess that I was living up to their expectations.

Ellen was involved in an abusive relationship, but at some point she had attended a seminar on spouses in abusive relationships. During the seminar, she realized that she had been reacting to the dictates of others. In spite of her lack of job skills, Ellen decided that she did not have to stay in "that lousy marriage!" That event changed her life forever. But she had to overcome the loser image, and when she was asked how she saw herself now, as opposed to five years or more ago, Ellen replied:

This may sound corny, but you know, I don't know how to say this. Five, six years ago, I was in a cocoon all cramped up and ugly. Now I have shed that skin and I feel like a butterfly embarking on a journey.

So Ellen had indeed changed her perspective. She had gone from being a loser with no skills, to a bright, articulate college student who was working towards a degree.
She had escaped a marriage that was abusive, and she was transforming her life into something different. It will seem then, that Ellen had negotiated a perspective transformation.

Mary had a part time job, which she said had put her in "a treacherous comfort zone." She was working part time and staying at home, but then a job came open which she felt would have been perfect. However, the job required someone with a degree. Mary said, "It was like somebody said wake up, tap, tap, tap, you are going to do it now." Mary had experienced a significant sorting out of the differences between what she was doing with her life, and what she needed to do to advance beyond her current status. To her, going back to school was the beginning of a transformation.

Nancy was devastated by a difficult marriage which ended in divorce. When she was confronted by her dad, she was forced to admit to herself that she needed to re-evaluate her way of thinking and acting. She could not continue living under those conditions. She said:

Well, as I mentioned, my marriage was falling apart. I had two children to take care of, and I was going nowhere. My father, who I cared very much for, said something to me that struck a raw nerve. He told me that I had better get an education because I'd be raising my kids by myself. I was angry and hurt, but I realized that my father was right.

That realization had brought fear, but it also motivated her to take some action. She needed to ask herself some tough questions, and then she needed to act on those new choices.
that she had made. She needed to get a divorce and get her life in order.

As with Heather, the question is, did Nancy’s experience facilitate significant transformative changes? She had questioned her way of thinking, and she had taken some action to change her behavior and to redefine a new way of thinking and acting. So it seems quite likely that Nancy had indeed used her critical life event to facilitate a transformation.

Hillary has had a pretty easy life. Her husband owned his own business, and she had most of the material amenities, but she felt that she had not satisfied her own needs. She was unfulfilled. With her son away at college, and her daughter preparing to do the same, Hillary explained:

It was incredible. It was as if someone had hit me in the head with a hammer - bing, lights flashed. It was like a religious conversion. I think I sat down and asked myself some hard questions - what do you want out of life? How do you intend to get it? What are you going to do with it?

For Hillary, as for many of the adults in this study, the awareness that her own needs had never been met woke her up to her reality. She realized that she needed to renegotiate her meaning schemes and redefine her beliefs and values.

**Self-doubts and returning to college**

When adults are considering entering college, they are faced with serious self-doubts: doubts about their ability to
handle the class load, about the financial burden that attending college entails, about abdicating their family responsibilities because of the time involved in attending to homework assignments, and doubts about being accepted by professors and younger students. Adults face many barriers in their quest for education (Christman, 1987; Durcholz, 1973; Le Fevre, 1972), and the participants in this study certainly had to face their own self-doubts and institutional barriers.

Mary stated that it was really hard going back to school. She still has a difficult time forgetting the problems that she had when she first entered college right after high school. She believes that she is slowly overcoming her fears. To Irene, going back was "scary, very scary. The thought of putting up with all those kids who were all brain dead was very scary." She considered the benefits versus the risks; would the degree help her to get a job that was better than the one that she had? She explained that, "I threw up all my fears at once and looked to see how many landed."

Nancy second-guessed herself. Could she afford to quit her job and go back to school? What if she was a failure? What would her children think? Was it worth the hassles, and frustrations, and anxiety? It was difficult for Inez, too. She did not do well in high school, she did not have good study habits, and she wasn't sure if she was going to be accepted by her younger classmates and the professors.
For Tom, the decision to enter college was one of the most difficult ones that he has had to make. He had grown up in a large city and attending college in the Midwest seemed almost as foreign as being in another country. Tom had to struggle with his decisions.

Are College Experiences Transformative?

As was discussed in the previous chapter, and in the review of the literature, many of the adults who return to college do so because they are interested in increasing their chances of getting skills that would improve their marketability. With few exceptions, the adult participants in the study stated that they saw college providing them with "a piece of paper." Some, like Nancy, saw college "...Providing a way out of my miserable existence. I saw it giving me job skills and people skills." Susan did not have any other agendas, "Just get my degree and carry on with my life and work." Heather needed reassurance from college that "Yes Heather, you're okay...I wanted to see if I could do it." So although education is seen as providing for more than just job skills, many adults seem to be seeking just that - job skills. Most adults were quite focused, and they had entered college with clear-cut goals. For some, the chronological clock was ticking and they had to get the degree and do something with it before it was too late. For others, it was a means to an
end – going to medical school, continuing to graduate school, or getting into some other professional program. So these adults were not floundering around, wasting their time.

**The role of education**

For education to help these and other adults make meaning of their experiences, it has to be able to provoke thoughts which will enable adults to raise questions and concerns about things that they had believed. Adults have to question ideas that may be distorted, but, at the same time, those adults must be ready to engage in critical thinking and reflection. It is important to remember that one cannot force an individual to learn what that individual does not want to learn, or to rethink things or thoughts that that individual refuses to or is not ready to reconsider. Each individual ultimately is responsible for his or her own learning, and for examining and adjusting his or her own meaning perspectives.

But education does have an important role to play in this process of perspective transformation. Both Habermas (1973) and Mezirow (1991) believe that through discourse, adults are able to reflect on previously-held beliefs, and, through this reflection, to question those beliefs. The discourse that takes place in and out of the classroom can initiate or precipitate the questioning which will lead to changes in behavior. For adults, the transformations that occur are tied
to their own personal growth, and to the discussions and interactions with other students. This discourse can provoke debate and critical thinking which could lead to critical self-examination, questioning, and change.

But if the primary focus of many adults is to get job skills, then how can their college experiences help them to negotiate perspective transformations? Perhaps the key to understanding this seemingly paradoxical situation lies in looking at the context rather than the content of the educational process. In other words, perhaps it is not so much the classroom presentations and lectures (content), as much as it is the combination of classroom instructions and discussions and interactions among participants and professors (contexts) which are the crucial ingredients that precipitate changes among the participants.

Adults in the study consistently referred to the role that interaction and discussions play in helping them to see themselves and others in different lights.

Mary: College has broadened my horizon and my outlook on life in general. I am learning more than I am learning in the classroom. Things that seemed major to me in the past now seem minor in comparison.

Irene, who complained that college was "draining and sucking a lot of my money" pointed out that education could help adult students make connections, not just in getting jobs, but in growing up.

Nancy thinks that college is "a cold place" that doesn't
understand the needs of adults, but she sees education as empowering. She "feels better about herself, where she is going, what she is doing."

Heather’s exposure to the other women in her classes "just floored her," because she realized that her opinions did count.

Heather: My exposure to different ideas and opinions will help to broaden my outlook on life and on the way that I see and think about myself and others. I have to believe that it will help me to look at who I am from a different angle.

William attributes his intellectual and social growth to discussing issues such as homosexuality, religion, politics, and those sorts of things. "Sure, I talked about those things before, but now I am getting different angles."

Hillary is not getting answers from the classroom. In contrast, she was stimulated by her interaction with other adults on campus because they shared so many common experiences. Tracy expressed the feeling that she was disillusioned with college, probably because classes were geared to "Eighteen-year-old kids, and they seemed to overlook the needs of adult students." Here, again, the interaction with other adults was the key to the changes that Tracy saw in herself. She said, "I think we learn more from each other (other adults) than from the classes." Henry spends a lot of time studying because of his challenging science courses, but he socialized with other adult students as much as he could.
Non-classroom experiences

An important consideration, then, is that a great deal of learning takes place in and out of the classroom. Many of the adult participants did not enter college to make meaning of their transformative experiences. Rather, the making of the meaning took place as an unplanned part of adult growth and development. Exposure to others from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds, and even from similar backgrounds, can and do lead to profound changes in one's behavior and one's way of thinking and acting.

Susan had always considered herself to be a very focused person who knew exactly what she wanted, and her expectation from college was "simply to get that degree." However, her exposure to international students made her re-evaluate the way that she had viewed them and herself.

Susan: Now that I am here (in college), I see that there is more to college than just a piece of paper. I guess that I am so used to having things my way that I never noticed the people around me who were struggling. I mean, I looked at the news and I read the papers, but the problems that I saw there were not mine and they did not bother me. Now, I guess that I look at some of the foreign students on campus and I see them struggling with the language and with our system, and I think, "Boy, how do they do it?" I see college giving me a new perspective on life, a global outlook on how close we are to each other. I have begun to question my own agenda a lot more this past six months...

This exposure has helped Susan to question her beliefs and she is now reevaluating her way of thinking and acting. She is questioning her own agenda now, while before, that same
agenda was perfectly acceptable to her. According to Susan, the biggest change that she sees in herself is her willingness to listen to other points of view and think more about others. She sees herself as a totally different person now.

Dan comes from a well-to-do family and so he never had to struggle with problems such as hunger and homelessness. In fact, according to him, he never thought much about people who were less fortunate. But now that he is in college, does he feel differently?

Dan: I see students who are carrying full loads and working too and I think how well I have it. That bothers me some. So maybe I should apply myself more...When you’re well off, sometimes you don’t understand things like homelessness and hunger. School has opened my eyes to those sorts of things.

Dan’s awareness of his environment has been broadened. His exposure to others around him has made him reassess his long-held beliefs. Tom grew up in the inner city and he has had a difficult time dealing with others who were not like him because they did not understand each other. Now that he is in college, he sees that people of different races can get along.

College experiences and self-esteem

Most of the participants in the study reported that they felt better about themselves now than they had five years ago. They attributed this increased self esteem to their college experience. This supports the finding of Le Fvre (1972), Durcholz (1973), and Kaplan (1982), showing that women had
improved their sense of self-worth while they were enrolled in college. Inez has a lot more self-confidence in her abilities to deal with relationships, and she feels better about herself as a person. Nancy is growing as an individual. Ellen feels like a butterfly embarking on a journey, and Hillary is a lot happier with herself. Some of the male participants also felt better about themselves. Earl is more at ease with himself, and Scott has an increased sense of having done something worthwhile. College, it would seem, has a major role to play in helping adult students increase their feeling of well-being, and thus may contribute to those students' achievement of self-worth, self-esteem, and personal growth.

Summary

A key ingredient in the transformative process is the ability of individuals to make meaning of their experience, to step outside of their beliefs and values and critically examine their assumptions about themselves and others, and then of correcting those assumptions if they are convinced that those beliefs and values are distorted and do not fit into their new paradigm.

Many of the adult participants in this study had experienced life events which they considered to be very significant and meaningful. Some of these events created emotional upheavals in the lives of the participants, and many
of them had experienced a sorting out of the differences between current and past realities.

Some of the critical events that adult participants in the study reported were death of family members, difficult marriages, divorce, difficulties with job, staying home, drug and alcohol problems, and dysfunctional family situations. Critical life events have been known to precipitate changes in behavior and ways of acting, thinking, and believing among adults (Mezirow, 1991; Gould, 1978; Shainberg, 1973; Brown, 1989; Gilbert, 1980; and Loder, 1981).

For many adults in the study, the stressful events created fear, anxiety, uncertainty, and dilemmas. As they searched for answers to the dilemmas that confronted them, many of them questioned the preconceived ideas, values, and beliefs that had governed their ways of thinking and acting. Doubts about being a fit mother led Heather to enroll in a program on well-baby care. As she learned more about herself, she reassessed her previously-held assumption and realized that some of those assumptions were distorted. Many others had used their stressful life events to help them negotiate either transformation of meaning schemes or perspective transformations.

Some adults did not seem to achieve either transformation of meaning schemes or perspective transformations. Others in the study did negotiate perspective transformations, moving
through successive stages of dealing with things that appeared to be contrary to expectation, questioning the preconceived beliefs and assumptions, reassessing the old values, and changing the assumptions that were distorted and did not fit into the new paradigms.

It seems quite clear that educational experiences play major roles in precipitating perspective transformations among adults. What is not as clear, however, is determining the role that classroom instructions play as opposed to the roles of interactions and discussions.

The educational experience precipitates perspective transformation, but many adults emphasized the importance of non-educational experiences in helping them in their quest of growth and understanding. Through their exposure to other ideas and the way that others around them viewed their world, many adults revised their beliefs and reformulated their ways of thinking and acting.

Returning to college meant that adults had to make many sacrifices, sacrifices that involved draining the family's financial resources, leaving the security of jobs, facing the uncertainty and stresses of class loads and homework, and questioning their own abilities to make it through four years or more of college. But college has helped many adults to increase their self-esteem and, and, more importantly, it has helped them to advance towards perspective transformations.
CHAPTER VI. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusions of the study

In the previous two chapters, the focus was on examining the experiences of twenty adult students who had returned to school. These participants had very diverse backgrounds, but there were commonalities of experiences. Many of them had indicated that there had been significant events in their lives, and that those events had significant impacts on them. They had returned to college with the primary objective of getting their degrees which, for most of them, meant better jobs. However, they now believe that their educational experiences are also helping them in their personal growth and transformation.

In the sections that follow, the study will focus on examining the following questions: Were adults who returned to college acting on some previously-experienced transformations or were they viewing college as a medium for their transformations? Is Mezirow's theory pertinent to the adults in this study?

Relationship between Returning to College and Transformation

Many of the adults in this study had negotiated perspective transformations before they had entered college. They had been confronted by significant life events which, in some cases, had precipitated the questioning of the how, what,
and why of process, content, and premise reflections; and then they had reformulated new ways of thinking and acting. For those adults, their return to school was part of their on-going process of growth and development, and their continued search for meaning in their lives. Perhaps, as Dufresne-Tasse (1985) asserts, these adults were working on transitions that were either in progress, or were anticipated; or, as Christman (1987) suggests, their decisions to attend college were not single events but were parts of progression throughout adulthood. Other adults in the study had entered college at different stages of the four domains of transformative learning that Mezirow (1991) describes. For them, the educational contexts - classroom instructions, discussions, and interacting - were keys to their transformations. Through discourse, they were able to question their values and beliefs, and in some cases, to reformulate new ways of thinking and acting. As in McGraw’s study (1982), some of these adults were experiencing identity crises, and they were suffering from low self-esteem and confidence. Those adults saw college providing them with the tools which they needed to help them to increase their self worth, and to build their self-esteem. LeFevre (1972), Katz (1976), and Kaplan (1982) point out that many of these adults had increased their self-esteem while they were in college.

It would seem that most adults in this study did not
enroll in college with the expectations that their educational experiences would facilitate perspective transformations. Rather, adults were interested primarily in obtaining job skills. However, during their college years, educational and non-educational experiences were instrumental in helping adults to question and challenge their presuppositions and assumptions, and through classroom instructions, discussions, and interactions, some of these adults were able to modify their assumptions and reintegrate them into something new.

Does this study tell us anything about adult development? As adults face the challenges of life, they continue to inch constantly towards the understanding that Gould (1978), Boyd and Myers (1988), and Mezirow (1991) have described. Many of these adults faced disorienting dilemmas, but through the process of questioning those long held beliefs, many of them are continuing to progress through their transitions towards personal growth and development.

For many adults, transitional periods are filled with doubts and misgivings, and with the questioning of self and others, but the challenging of one’s fears is a key element in the negotiation of perspective transformations that Mezirow describes. For some, returning to school represents a major step in their advancement through the stages of transformation. Their advancement can be compared to the slow insidious process that Gould (1978) and Daloz (1986) describe.
For others, the process seemed to move at a much faster rate. They had experienced dysjunctures in their lives, and they had managed to correct what to them were distorted views.

Adults are returning to college in ever-increasing numbers (Boaz, 1978). For some, it was not a single event, but an on-going process that Christman (1987) says may be tied to developmental progression through adulthood. Some adults may have entered college as part of an identity crisis, or mid-life transition (McGraw, 1982); for others, it was a way to increase their self esteem as Katz (1976) reports. Kaplan (1982) asserts that most women use college as "...A means to change their identity, or to develop a previously neglected part of themselves, whether intellectually or vocational" (p. 9). This study supports those findings.

Many of the women in the study who had stayed at home felt stigmatized by the label "housewife", and education was helping them to break free of that label. Women such as Mary, Inez, and Nancy, felt obligated to stay at home with their children either because of the dictates of society, or the dictates of their families (especially spouses). Here, again, their educational experiences were helping them not only to question their beliefs and values, but to change those values.

Adult students are faced with not only institutional barriers to learning, but also financial restraints and social barriers (Gilbert, 1980; Houle, 1985; Kuh, 1979). They are
afraid of failing in the classrooms, they are full of fears as to whether they will be accepted by younger students (who are usually a large majority of the student body), and by professors, who these adults believe wield a great deal of power. So an important consideration for returning adult students is making it through the barriers that they face just because they see themselves as non-traditional students.

Mezirow's Theory and this Study

Mezirow's theory of perspective transformation provides a solid base on which further research on adult education can be built. He provides a theory which "is complex and expansive in its attempt to situate multiple levels of learning within an integrated system of knowledge". (Clark & Wilson, 1991, p. 75). His theory seeks to examine and explain the process through which adults are able to free themselves of the bonds which had bound them to the passive methods of learning that they had grown up with. He presents alternatives to this passive learning, alternatives where adults actively question the preconceived values and assumptions that had governed their lives, and of reformulating new ways of thinking and acting if the old assumptions are found to be distorted.

Through the process of critical self-reflection, Mezirow believes that adults are capable of negotiating meaning perspectives. To him, the achievement of perspective
transformation should be the goal of adults. There are ten elements in Mezirow's process of perspective transformation. It begins with a disorienting dilemma, and progresses to a reintegration with new ways of acting and behaving (Mezirow, 1991, p. 169).

The interview data that were gathered from the study lend strong credence to Mezirow's theory. With few exceptions, adult students had experienced events that were outside the familiar modes of acting and behaving. These experiences included death of family members, illnesses, and marriage and divorces. These incidents acted as catalysts for changes in behavior, and many of the participants believed that because of these significant events, their lives had not been the same. There is no going back to the ways things were after a divorce, a life-threatening accident, or a death in the family; and, just as there is no going back to the old ways, so there is no going back for adults who have embarked on their educational journeys. Some of them may drop out of college, but even then, their lives will never be the same.

In many respects, the adults who participated in this study demonstrated that as they go through life's transitions, they are faced with dilemmas and unexpected occurrences which require them to justify their ways of looking at themselves and others around them. These requirements to justify one's way of acting and behaving lead some individuals to question
preconceived values and beliefs, and to change and reformulate new ways of thinking and acting when the old ways can no longer be justified.

One of the criticisms of Mézirow’s theory is that it fails to acknowledge that learning does not take place under ideal conditions (Collard & Law, 1989). Additionally, Clark & Wilson (1991) argue that to make meaning from experiences, individuals must be willing to engage in the kind of discourse which incorporates the diversity and complexity of participants’ experiences. Both Collard & Law, and Clark & Wilson propose that Mezirow’s theory does not account for the inequalities of society and for the complexity of individuals in a community.

Clark & Wilson (1991) maintain that Mezirow’s theory has an individualistic focus, and that as such, it does not account for the social context in which individuals function. They argue that there may be indeed "multiple valid viewpoints" as opposed to Mezirow’s rational discourse in which there is an intentional effort to arrive at a single consensual point of view. By ignoring the social context, Mezirow’s theory fails to emphasize the fact that individuals are, for the most part, products of their society, and that most of the learning that takes place occurs within the context of this society. Thus individuals who are within the mainstream of society may have a much easier time advancing
towards a perspective transformation, while those on the fringes (minorities) may find it difficult to negotiate this transformation.

Mezirow responds to Collard & Law in, *Transformation theory and social action: A response to Collard and Law* (1989); and to Clark & Wilson in, *Transformation theory and cultural context: A reply to Clark and Wilson* (1991). Mezirow acknowledges that our culture is full of inequalities and injustice, and that, as such, learning does not take place under ideal conditions; but he stresses that the ideal he describes may be useful is assessing the environment in which the educational and social practices occur. To Mezirow, one's meaning perspective may be influenced by socio-economic and cultural norms and codes, and he asserts that when these norms and codes impede adult learners' free participation in rational discourse, then they should be changed.

An important consideration is that when those learners who function within the cultural mainstream interact and identify with those who are outside the cultural mainstream, then it is possible that, as Mezirow states, social action may develop. To Mezirow, "There is no question but that critical self-reflective learning can be enhanced on a large scale in the context of a social movement..." (Mezirow, 1989, p. 172).

It will seem that diversity and complexity are essential components that individuals need as they seek to make meaning
of their experiences. In this study, many of the participants acknowledged that the interactions and discussions with other students, both in and out of the classroom, were essential parts of their personal growth. This contextual view of education, with its classroom participation and discussions, was both stimulating and transforming for adults. The diversity of racial, social, economical, and cultural experiences that adults bring to the classroom, and the complexity of experiences that these adults possess were certainly very beneficial to the adult participants in this study. It seems that Mezirow’s theory of perspective transformation is quite pertinent and applicable to the adult students who participated in this study.

Recommendations

The theory of perspective transformation as espoused by Mezirow has provided a base for further research in the area of adult learning, and this study is but one of many that has emerged. However, there are many areas that still need to be explored. The following recommendations for further studies are made:

This study was conducted at a large midwestern university in the U.S. which has a very small minority population. A similar study in a more diverse setting will add a great deal of data to our understanding of perspective transformation and
its impact on adults from diverse ethnic, cultural, economical and social backgrounds.

Since only twenty adult students were interviewed for this study, a similar study using a larger population should produce further insights into the life experiences of adult undergraduates who are in their first year of studies.

A comparative study of male and female adult students may help us to understand if there are differences in adult students' perspectives based strictly on gender.

Researchers must explore and develop methods to deal with the problems that adults encounter when they enter college. Problems such as institutional barriers must be understood and eliminated if possible.

Finally, a longitudinal study will provide a great deal of new data on the roles that educational and noneducational experiences play in helping adults to negotiate perspective transformation. Such a study could include the interviewing of incoming adult freshmen followed by interviews and observations through their undergraduate studies.
REFERENCES


I wish to acknowledge the many people who have played important roles in helping me to complete the requirements for this degree. I am most indebted to my major professor and mentor Dr. John Wilson who has constantly challenged me while at the same time has helped me to develop an appreciation and understanding of the multifaceted dimensions of adult education. Dr. Wilson has the ability to bring out the best in all of his students, and I feel very privileged to have had the opportunity to have him as my advisor and teacher.

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Finally, I would like to thank my wife Donna for being so very supportive of me during the many times when I was struggling to find my way through the research process. Her constructive criticism and her positive attitude were greatly appreciated.
APPENDIX A: INFORMED CONSENT

TITLE: Transformative experiences and the search for meaning among adult reentry students.

NAME OF INVESTIGATOR: Wilber M. Rapier
PHONE: Evenings (515) 224-4308 - Days: (515) 247-4490

NAME OF RESPONDENT:
ADDRESS OF RESPONDENT:

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY: To understand the influence of significant life experiences on adult students who have reentered college.

Your participation in this study is strictly voluntary, and you may withdraw from the study at any time without fear of reprisals. Some of the questions that you may be asked during the interview may be highly personal in nature, and you may refuse to answer any questions that you feel uncomfortable sharing with me. Neither your name nor any other identification will be used in the research, and you can be assured that your privacy will be maintained throughout the entire research process. It is expected that the interview will last about two hours and that it will be conducted over one session. I am willing to arrange a time and place that it is most convenient for you.

I would like to employ a tape recording device during the interview so that I may be sure that I am gathering accurate information. The tapes and all handwritten notes will be destroyed after the research has been completed and has been approved by the university for the requirement of my dissertation. At no time will the tapes or the notes be out of my possession.

The researcher has explained the purpose of the study to me, and has informed me of the requirements to be in the study and of my rights to withdraw from the study at any time. By signing this informed consent form, I agree to voluntarily participate in the research.

DATE: NAME:

SIGNATURE:
APPENDIX B: DATA GATHERING INSTRUMENT

1. What was the highest level of education that you achieved prior to returning to college?

2. What was the time span between graduation from high school and attendance at college?

3. If you had entered college previously, how long has it been between this entry and the last one?

4. Can you tell me why you did not attend college right after high school?

5. Describe your experiences between this entry and your last attendance at college or your graduation from high school?

6. What are you specializing in, and why that particular area?

7. Think back over the last five years. Tell me about any thing that occurred in your life that you think had a significant impact on you?

8. Did the event(s) change your life? How has it changed?

9. Tell me how you arrived at the decision to return to school? What did you consider in making that decision? Was it a difficult or easy decision to make?

10. Did you consider other options? If you did, what were they, and why did you not choose them?

11. Tell me about your expectations from college? How did you see college helping you when you were considering returning?

12. Now that you are in college, how do you see college helping you? Have your expectations changed? How have they changed?

13. Look back over the past five years or so. How do you see yourself now as opposed to then? What changes do you see in yourself? Tell me about how you feel about yourself now as opposed to then?

14. If you feel differently about yourself now, what makes you feel or think that way?