Ageism and Embodied Stereotypes: A Study of Adult Learners in Community College at Midlife

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AGEISM AND EMBODIED STEREOTYPES:
A STUDY OF ADULT LEARNERS IN COMMUNITY COLLEGE
AT MIDLIFE

A Dissertation
Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

in
The School of Education

by
Marla Jane Erwin
B.A., Louisiana State University, 2003
M.A.L.A, Louisiana State University, 2004
M.A., University of Louisiana Monroe, 2005
May 2020
for janet

for everything you gave

and for everything that you couldn’t

we were together when I took my first breath

and, we were together when you took your last

for everything that life handed to us in between

we found our own way to make it all work out

& in answer to your strange question that

emerged from your dementia about

how do we tell the difference?

which one is marla and

which one is janet,

it no longer

matters

because

we are really both

just travelers on the

the same journey

with the same

beginning

and the

same

end

♥
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Abstract

Adult students are generally classified as a single group for study, yet developmental psychologists recognize separate developmental periods during adulthood that suggest adult students at midlife may experience development within higher education differently than younger adult students, in part due to ageism expressed at individual, institutional and internalized levels. This project applies the concept of lifespan developmental periods to distinguish students at midlife as a focus of inquiry using a mixed method design. Twenty-nine faculty and 205 students responded to the Relating to Older People Evalutation (ROPE; Cherry & Palmore, 2008) to assess self-reports of both positive and negative ageist behaviors within a community college context. Ten students who self-identified as middle-aged were interviewed to answer the main research question:

- How does participation in higher education contribute to renegotiations of identity for students at midlife?

More positive than negative ageist behaviors were reported by both students and faculty. Comments offered by the faculty and students in this project describe mostly positive expectations and views of older students who are actively engaged in their own learning and experiencing nurturing relationships with each other, with younger peers and with faculty both in and outside of the classroom. The individual experiences of ten students were presented. The heterogeneity of this population was illustrated, along with substantial evidence for variations on age norms and atypical life experiences. These students described life experiences far removed from the relatively elite young students who are more often privileged by research attention. The experiences relayed by those students interviewed provide rich details of institutional-level and faculty-level policies that support or hinder their academic progress. Their experiences also point
to areas that need further study to more fully understand how to meet the learning and developmental needs of this specific population of students.
Faculty gathered at a small but thriving community college for the convocation ceremony to start a new semester. The chief academic affairs officer from the systems office approached the podium to tell the story of taking his little girl to a major theme park when she was younger. She was barely tall enough for the ride she most wanted to experience so she had carefully chosen her shoes with the thickest soles and styled her hair with a ponytail on top just to be sure she would measure up when she reached the front of the line. He described the way his daughter screamed throughout the entire ride with her knuckles turning white as she gripped the safety bar across her lap, and then coming to the end of the ride crying so hard that she could not even speak. Concerned that he had allowed her to stretch too far for an experience that she was not quite ready for, he crouched in front of her to see if she was okay. She was able to control her sobs and tears long enough to get just a few words out. “Again, Daddy! Can we please do it again?” (Cintron, 2017).

He shared this story to show similarities with many of our community college students who show up at the beginning of a new semester, just barely qualified, excited and terrified about what they might be getting themselves into, coming through sometimes kicking and screaming, exhilarated and exhausted, and yet most of the time ready for more. They keep coming back semester after semester even when the ride is rough and the wait is long. Many researchers have studied the successes and failures of undergraduate students at community colleges, focusing on motivations and obstacles, cognitive abilities and developmental educational needs, course delivery methods and economic benefits, pedagogical considerations and assessment methods. “The meaning of learning has been so encapsulated in the world of formal education that we tend
to reduce the meaning of adult learning to a cognitive behavior related to the requirements of an educational program” (Dominicé, para. 12).

And yet, learning understood from a developmental perspective is an embodied, lived experience that is impacted by the conditions of the learning context, the individual characteristics of the learner, and the timing across the life course at which the learning occurs. Learning is a biological, psychological, social process that provides an opportunity for learners to explore who they are now and who they are becoming as they transition across the life course. Bingham and Conner (2010) define learning as “the transformative process of taking in information that—when internalized and mixed with what we have experienced—changes what we know and builds on what we do. It’s based on input, process, and reflection. It is what changes us” (p. 6).

A central component of psychosocial development is identity, or self-definition (Whibley & Whitbourne, 2011; Fingerman, 2000). Many complex facets of identity have been studied in college students, leading to established models of ethnic, racial, cognitive, sexual, moral, spiritual, gender, and general psychosocial identity development in college students (Chickering & Reisser, 1993: Helms, 1995: Phinney, 1989, Josselson 1987, Baxter Magolda, 2000). Administrative personnel are expected to understand and thoughtfully apply these models of development to meet the needs of diverse student populations on college campuses today. Many campus support centers successfully incorporate these models into student services delivered through programs such as diversity programs, cultural centers, and women’s centers.

A major limitation of the research and practice in student development is the paucity of information available on the developmental needs and experiences of one important segment of
the college student population, adult learners participating in higher education at midlife. The association between “young adulthood” and “college student” is so strong that some research projects even use the terms interchangeably when discussing identity development (Phillips, 2008; Yip, et al., 2006). Yet developmental psychologists view early and middle adulthood as distinctly different periods of the life course. Models designed around the developmental experiences and needs of younger adults may not be sufficient to understand and support the needs of adult learners at midlife.

This chapter is organized as follows. First, I discuss the importance of understanding development from a lifespan perspective, noting the implications for middle-aged and older adults in educational contexts. Second, I focus on identity as a critical concept in developmental psychology. Third, I cover lifespan development within the context of higher education. This chapter concludes with an overview of why community college students at midlife are important to study.

**Understanding Development from a Lifespan Perspective**

The traditional approach to the study of human development tends to focus on the early years as most important for understanding growth and change. This approach assumes that adult development is relatively stable, therefore unworthy of study. More recently, researchers have accepted the lifespan perspective as more appropriate for understanding human experience (Baltes, Reese, & Lipsitt, 1980). Although this perspective arose within the specialized field of developmental psychology, researchers quickly recognized the value of using this approach in other psychological specialties. Specifically addressing the field of educational psychology, Baltes, et al. discussed “a growing recognition that education goes beyond instructional content and objectives focused on young people in school environments” (p. 98).
According to Gilligan (1982), “the focus on child and adolescent development, where progress can readily be charted by measuring the distance between mother and child” is a limitation that “is most apparent in the absence of women from accounts of adult development” (p. 151). Gilligan describes the traditional focus on early development as framed by attachment and separation. This leads to a missing perspective in current views on adult development, which she refers to as “a failure to describe the progression of relationships toward a maturity of interdependence” (p. 155). The lifespan perspective provides for a deeper exploration of the complexities of adult development as situated within complex relationships and competing social roles.

**Characteristics of lifespan development.** The lifespan perspective is characterized by an interest in all stages of human development from conception to death. Importantly, this perspective asserts that plasticity, or the capacity for change, continues throughout the life course. This approach also views the study of development as multidimensional, multidisciplinary, multidirectional, and contextual. The dimensions of physical, cognitive, and socioemotional factors interact in complex ways to facilitate development. Researchers from many disciplines contribute to the literature on human development. Some aspects of development increase at the same time that other aspects experience decline across the lifespan. And lastly, most theorists agree that human development is always influenced by the context in which it occurs. That is, theoretical accounts that emphasize contextual determinants of development can be found in the literature on early child development (e.g., Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 1979) and well as in the gerontological literature (e.g., Baltes, et al., 1980).

**Developmental periods.** Although age is often considered a social construct that includes elements of biological health, psychological adaptability, and assumption of social
roles, some useful categories based on chronological age have been established in order to study age-related changes across the life course (Moody, 2002). According to developmental psychologist John Santrock, a developmental period is “a time frame in a person’s life that is characterized by certain features” (2019, p. 13). There are eight periods in the most widely used model for organizing and understanding human development (Santrock). This model includes the prenatal period, infancy, early childhood, middle and late childhood, adolescence, early adulthood, middle adulthood, and late adulthood. Adolescence, early adulthood and middle adulthood are the years a person would traditionally be most likely to participate in higher education.

Adolescence is generally considered to last from approximately age 10 or 12 until the transition from childhood to adulthood around 18 to 22 years of age (Santrock, 2019). This period is marked by rapid physical changes, sexual maturation, the pursuit of independence, and advances in cognitive abilities. Identity development is considered a major focus of this developmental period for most individuals. Adolescence also encompasses the early college years for traditional college students. The end of this period is considered a long process rather than a specific event and is referred to as “emerging adulthood” (Arnett, 2004).

Early adulthood extends from the late teens through the thirties. This developmental period encompasses the establishment of personal and economic independence, career development, and often the selection of a mate and beginning of a family (Santrock). Most studies of nontraditional student populations include those who are well into early adulthood. Many theories of identity development focus on the period of emerging adulthood to understand the transition from adolescence into early adulthood.
Middle adulthood is usually considered to be the period between about 40 years of age to
the beginning of older adulthood, which is usually defined as about 60-65 years of age
(Lachman, 2004; Santrock, 2019). However, definitions of this range vary up to
10 years on either side (ages 30-75) (Lachman, 2004). “The use of chronological age as a
determinant of midlife may not be ideal because age norms are less stringent for midlife than for
periods that occur earlier (e.g., school entry or graduation) and later (e.g., retirement) (Lachman,
p. 312). Developmental studies generally focus on this as a time of expanding social involvement
where competent, mature individuals are working to achieve and maintain career satisfaction.
Maintenance of long-term relationships and the pursuit of leisure activities are also recognized as
characteristic of development in middle adulthood. Much less attention has been focused on
middle adulthood as a time for higher educational attainment and renegotiation of previously
held definitions of the self. The purpose of the present research was to address the individual
experiences of adult students at this stage of middle-adulthood. The developmental needs of
students at midlife may be minimized (or even lost), given the current generalized practice of
grouping students in early and middle adulthood into the same category although developmental
psychologists recognize these developmental periods separately.

The Importance of Identity

Identity is a complex concept that refers to our self-definition or who we believe
ourselves to be. Successful identity construction leads us to find meaningful connections with
others and to make meaning in our lives. Identity is a social construct that has been studied from
various perspectives and within various contexts, usually in the framework of adolescent and
early adult development. Both internal and external factors influence the culturally embedded
process of identity development (Baltes, 1987). Astin (1993) and Light (2000) are just two of
many researchers who have devoted years to the study of college experience from the perspective of traditional college students. Racial and gender diversity within student populations have also been the focus of extensive study. However, Fuast and Courtenay (2002), assert that “‘Age’ is commonly treated as an important characteristic of diversity; yet, very little attention has been given to age as it relates to student success in the college experience” (p. 402).

Whitbourne and Whitbourne (2011) assert that we interpret our experiences through the lens of our existing views of the self. We also alter these views in response to our experiences. The physical, cognitive, and social changes involved in the aging process are examples of experiences that may lead to change in our identity. This might suggest that the interpretation and understanding of the experiences of participants in higher education (as with any context) may differ for students of different ages.

Even the very definition of success in college may take on various meanings for students in different age groups. As Eddy and Lester (2008) suggest, “campuses need to collect data through interviews, focus groups, and surveys to assess student identity-specific needs” (p.111). Demographic research suggests that the currently aging midlife cohort has better health, more disposable income and higher levels of education than past cohorts (Kroger, p. 174). Many adults in this cohort are redefining traditional views of aging as they pursue paths of lifelong learning. Career moves, personal growth and changing social roles all motivate this reinvention of the self (Palazesi & Bower, 2006). Understanding what Palazesi and Bower call “the reinvention-self-identity modification phenomenon” may help us to better serve this growing population on college campuses.

**Identity as lifelong developmental issue.** Some aspects of identity are stable across adulthood while other aspects change over time. “Although identity has often been presented as a
key developmental task of adolescence (e.g., Erikson, 1968), its reverberations throughout the years of adulthood have also been attracting increasing research attention over the past two decades” (Kroger, 2007, p. 4). In addition to normative developmental factors (e.g., marriage, parenthood), life changes may also facilitate a renegotiation of identity in adulthood. These life changes include physical and cognitive changes of the aging process; life changes such as divorce, career change, or exposure to trauma; or other issues that may trigger identity distress (Whitbourne & Whitbourne, 2011; Wiley, et al. 2011).

**Identity in childhood.** Identity development is most commonly addressed as the main psychosocial task of adolescence, but this important process begins in childhood. According to Santrock (2019), children’s self-understanding develops in early childhood and involves recognition of the self in physical terms. Concrete, observable features, such as eye color or hair length form the foundation of self-descriptions in early childhood. By middle childhood, self-descriptions evolve to include more psychological and social terms and characteristics, such as being friendly or compassionate. However, the larger questions about who we are, how we differ from others, and what we will do with our lives become central issues during the adolescent years and emerging adulthood.

**Identity in adolescence and early adulthood.** Erickson’s model of psychosocial development views identity exploration and achievement as the main developmental task for adolescents (1968). Biological, psychological and social influences converge to facilitate identity development during adolescence (Kroger, 2007). Rapid physical development and cognitive maturation induce changes in self perceptions as relationships change within the family and the community at large. Physical readjustments and decisions regarding future roles combine to direct attention toward development of individuation from parents. Childhood self-perceptions
grow and change under the contextual influences of family, peers, school, work, and community influences. Adolescents typically transition from identities conferred by others toward personal constructions of the self (Kroger, p. 90).

Educational contexts are commonly the focus of study of identity for adolescents and traditional age college students. “However, virtually all longitudinal studies of identity development both during and beyond adolescence have found that substantial numbers of those leaving tertiary education and entering adult roles do so without having constructed a sense of their own identities” (Kroger, p. 242). The human experiences that fuel identity development include conflict/adversity, exposure to new contexts/ideas, and internal change processes (Kroger & Green, 1996). These experiences are not confined to the adolescent and early adult stages of development. Erikson’s model has been criticized for gendered assumptions that do not fully address issues of relationships, caring and interdependence that may have greater influence on women’s developmental pathways. His model may reflect male development pathways more closely than female pathways as some research suggests that women experience identity and intimacy issues in reverse order (Gilligan, 1982).

**Identity at midlife and beyond.** Researchers have begun to identify midlife as a time of renegotiation of identity issues for many women (Baltes, 1987; Hayes & Flannery, 2002; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). Models of male identity development focus on middle-age as a time of transition and change in understanding of self as well (Levinson, 1978). The Key Model of male identity development considers identity as shaped by “attitudes regarding appropriate displays of manhood” (Scott & Robinson, 2001, p. 418). This model considers the convergence of race, gender and entitlement attitudes, all of which can be modified through experience.
Studies that focus on identity development at midlife have tended to spotlight work, family, social networks and the broader community as contexts facilitating identity development. These studies have not generally considered college attendance as a contextual factor during midlife (Kroger, 2007). Older students may experience ageism from attitudes and behaviors of faculty, staff and younger student peers, however. Unlike traditional students and younger “non-traditional” students, older students may experience more caregiver burden in their personal lives, which can impact their persistence with academic goals. Interactions with others who view us in our preferred identities are important for identity validation (Walker & Lynn, 2013).

Students at midlife may be missing this validation experience as they are less likely to engage in student-related activities outside of required classroom attendance. Consequently, studying students at midlife as a separate group seems warranted to understand their unique experiences that may differ from their younger counterparts in the context of community college participation.

**Lifespan Development Perspective within the Context of Higher Education**

**Typical categories for student development research.** Usual categories for student-development research use arbitrary demarcations of “traditional” and “nontraditional” categories of students that vary among research projects. Much of the research that does focus on the experiences of non-traditional students considers the age of twenty-five as a general boundary between traditional college students and adult students (Justice & Dornan, 2001: Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002: Quinnan, 1997). However, few studies include distinctions between the adult developmental periods recognized by developmental psychologists.

“Non-traditional” has also been used as a label for students based on risk factors for attrition rather than chronological age alone. These factors include delayed entry to college, work
status while enrolled, having dependents other than spouse, and entering college with a GED or other certificate rather than a traditional high school diploma (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018). Students may experience more than one risk factor leading to distinctions between minimally nontraditional, moderately nontraditional, and highly nontraditional students (NCES). The term “post-traditional” learner is used to refer to adults seeking college coursework who are already in the workforce but have not yet earned a postsecondary credential.

Some countries have official definitions of “non-traditional” students, such as Portugal (23 years and older) and Spain (25 years and older). These official definitions are related to laws designed to enable special access to higher education for specific populations of adult students. When used to describe student populations, terms like “adult,” “mature” and “non-traditional” are fluid concepts that change meaning according to context. These terms generally refer to any atypical or underrepresented groups within higher education and can refer to identity categories such as age, gender, disability, socioeconomic status, or ethnicity (Fragoso et al., 2013). These terms are also used to differentiate students who are in a position to prioritize their academic responsibilities from students who must fit their academic duties into schedules that are already packed with other responsibilities of adult life (Bowl, 2001).

**Students at midlife as different.** Identity development is an important issue for all students because perceptions of self have been shown to impact persistence in college (Deci, Ryan & Williams, 1996). Students who first enrolled in college at midlife were members of the baby boom generation, born in the post-World War II baby boom between 1946 and 1964. According to Swank et al (2000), 20 years ago returning baby boomers were more likely to use community colleges for educational services repeatedly over time rather than as a stepping-stone to a 4-year institution. While community college enrollments are currently dropping for all age
groups over 18 years of age, older adult student populations have seen larger decreases in full-time enrollment than in part-time enrollment (AACC, 2019).

There are many reasons students at midlife differ from their younger counterparts. For instance, they may be exposed to ageism, which is discrimination based on chronological age (Cherry & Erwin, 2019). They may also have added family responsibilities, such as caring for aging parents and/or dependent children. These two concerns, ageism and caregiver burden, are discussed more fully in the sections that follow.

**Ageism.** Discriminatory beliefs and practices in connection with chronological age were termed “ageism” by Robert N. Butler in the late 1960’s and have been described today as

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>College Students</th>
<th>Descriptive Terms and Their Associated Chronological Age Markers</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nontraditional Students¹</td>
<td>Aged 22+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nontraditional Students²</td>
<td>Aged 23+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nontraditional Students³</td>
<td>Aged 24+ or 25+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nontraditional Students⁴</td>
<td>Age 50+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adult Students⁵</td>
<td>Aged 25+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Older Adult Students⁶</td>
<td>Aged 55+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mature Students⁷</td>
<td>Aged 19+ or 21+ (UK model)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Younger Mature Students⁸</td>
<td>Aged 21-30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mature Non-traditional Students⁹</td>
<td>Aged 31+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relatively Older Non-traditional Learners¹⁰</td>
<td>Aged 40+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mature Women Carers¹¹</td>
<td>Age 30-50 with childcare or eldercare duty</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

¹ Michie, Glachan, and Bray (2001)
² Fragoso, et al. (2013)
³ Stanescu (2017); Martin and Chen (2015)
⁴ Lanaan (2003); Scott and Lewis (2011)
⁵ Justice and Dornan (2001); Carney, Crompton, and Tan (2002); Quinnan (1997), Keith, et.al. (2006)
⁶ Lanaan (2003)
⁸ McCune, et al. (2010)
⁹ Ibid.
¹⁰ Hollis-Sawyer (2011)
¹¹ Green Lister (2003)
pervasive, pernicious, and challenging to quantify (Butler, 1969; Fullen, 2018). According to Levy (2009), children develop within an environment that repeatedly exposes them to age stereotypes. Negative stereotypes from children’s books, media portrayals, greeting cards, and jokes permeate our culture and become “commonsense reality” (Fullen). Levy suggests that children carry these attitudes with them across the lifespan.

Later in life, age stereotypes become self-relevant for individuals as they encounter environmental cues that suggest they have crossed the threshold into old age. These cues may be formalized by arbitrary and inconsistent dates related to senior discounts, access to social service programs, and discriminatory behaviors from others. “As individuals progress into older adulthood, their negative beliefs about aging become increasingly salient and self-directed” (Fullen, p. 105). While negative stereotypes can lead to discriminatory behavior and detrimental effects on both cognitive and physical functioning, laboratory studies have also recognized that positive stereotypes can have a beneficial effect on cognitive and physical outcomes (Levy, 2009). Perceptions of self-efficacy can be reduced by negative stereotypes, while exposure to positive stereotypes can boost performance (Smith & Johnson, 2006).

**Institutional ageism.** Butler’s concept of ageism has evolved over time to a recognition that we must “understand that it is more than images, words, actions, or attitudes. It is deeply embedded in society in many areas” (2005, p. 86). Ageism occurs at both the individual level, through personal interactions, and at the institutional level, through norms of exclusion (Tornstam, 2006). Gulette (2018, p. 10) reported that ageism “undervalues experience, undermines tenure, and savages the concept of life-course progress” in college and university settings. Students can be affected by ageism through their experiences in the classroom combined with their personal interactions with professors, advisors, and fellow students.
Students at midlife may also experience institutional ageism through policies that were enacted to support younger, more traditional student populations without consideration of the needs of students at midlife.

Given (2000) reports on the persistent discourse of the “traditional (normal) student” even on campuses that profess to recognize lifelong learning as important. While some campuses have special admission processes for mature adult students, once accepted these students often must find their own ways. Institutional policies set faculty office hours, orientation sessions and other important student services at hours that conflict with work schedules and family obligations of older students. Orientation programs often focus on topics such as encouraging responsible drinking practices, sexual activity, and money management skills for students away from parental control for the first time. While recognizing the importance of these topics, Given (2000) points out that no relevant programs exist for the adjustment issues faced by older students, such as daycare issues or family time management strategies. “The discourse of the ‘traditional student’ infuses virtually every aspect of a student’s life, and forms part of the hierarchical hegemony” (p. 84). In the Adult College Completion in the 21st Century report, Erisman and Steele (2015) report evidence of growing awareness among administrators of the needs of older students, but little evidence that faculty have been provided with appropriate training or resources to meet these needs.

**Individual ageism.** Individual attitudes about others are shaped by lived experiences. “Television shows, movies, and advertising depict older people according to stereotypes about aging – or omit them altogether” (North & Fiske, 2012, p. 983). Discriminatory acts and omissions can stem from negative beliefs about older adults. Experts describe this phenomenon as both “understudied” and “surprisingly pervasive” (p. 983). Palmore (2005) reports that ageism
is not met with the same level of social disapproval that is commonly directed toward sexism and racism.

Social psychologists have studied the impact of teachers’ beliefs and expectations on their students’ actual performance since the Rosenthal Effect was first described in 1964. Rosenthal’s study demonstrated the positive impact of teachers’ high expectations on the performance of randomly selected students. Though these findings were controversial, subsequent study of this phenomenon has repeatedly identified correlations between teacher expectations and student performance outcomes (Summarized by Rubie-Davies, Hattie & Hamilton, 2006). Many factors influence teacher expectations for individual students, including “the age of the student” and “relationship between teacher and student background” (p. 430). Given the pervasive nature of both positive and negative aging stereotypes, a teacher’s beliefs about an individual student’s abilities may be shaped by the student’s own age and the student’s membership in the population of middle-aged students.

*Internalized ageism.* Chisler, Barney and Palantino report that “'leaky’ ageist attitudes can be experienced as microaggressions, and physicians’ negative attitudes might make elders hesitate to seek or follow medical advice or even cause them to cancel appointments” (2016, p. 89). Qualitative research has also noted that disrespectful treatment of older patients can suggest to older patients that they are unworthy of care. Embodied stereotype theory suggests that the negative consequences of pervasive ageist stereotypes can follow older adults into multiple contexts, possibility impacting performance in the classroom and perceptions of self both in and outside of the classroom (Levy, 2009).

Levy suggests that attitudes and images embedded in our culture are internalized at a young age very easily because they are projected outward in the general direction of old people
when we are not yet members of that target group. Gullette (1997) describes how cartoons and many other genres “fixed the language and the ideology” of cultural attitudes toward aging (p. 141). Repeated exposure to these unchallenged sociocultural attitudes and images thus become “knowledge” frameworks (Sargent-Cox and Anstey, 2015, p. 654). These beliefs become self-relevant only after years of embeddedness in a culture that has normalized aging stereotypes to the point of both tolerance and endorsement.

**Caregiving.** According to O’Donnell and Tobbell (2007), adult participation in higher education is consistently impacted by commitments outside the university. Middle age has been characterized as a time of increasing responsibilities for many, particularly women, who have been referred to as the “sandwich generation” (Miller, 1981). This term represents the unique position of many adults in middle age who are responsible for the care of both older and younger generations at the same time. Many middle-aged parents still have children at home to care for while also becoming caretakers for their aging parents. The American Psychological Association notes sandwich generation parents, aged 35-54, who are balancing these dual caregiving responsibilities experience higher stress than any other age group in America (2007, Stress in American survey).

Another term for adults at this stage of life is the “squeeze generation,” again highlighting the increased expectation of responsibility for family that differs from expectations for younger adults in ways that may change the experience of participation in higher education for middle-aged adults. “Institutions of higher education make few concessions to mature students and even less to mothers…Lectures, tutorials and seminars are arranged to suit the logic of the timetable and the convenience of the institution rather than the domestic responsibilities of
the students” (Thompson, 1997, p. 4). Academic progress can be interrupted by factors outside of students’ control, such as family illness and other crises women are routinely expected to handle.

As Hochschild (1989) described, women are routinely expected to work a “double day” or “second shift” where their responsibilities include both work outside the home and traditional responsibilities for childcare. These responsibilities fall more commonly on women than on men. However, shared responsibilities at home, combined with college workload, can interfere with academic progress even in the absence of crises for both men and women. Falling behind on assignments can cause increased stress responses and/or a crisis of confidence. Women with caretaking commitments often withdraw from education due to competing pressures to straddle the two “greedy institutions” of family and education (Edwards, 1993, p. 62). Role strain can lead to identity stress, learned helplessness, a sense of hopelessness and disempowerment. Or more positively, as Gilligan (1982) suggests, “crisis itself may signal a return to missed opportunity for growth” (p. 109).

**Why Do These Experiences Matter?**

Nontraditional students tend to be the norm at community colleges, where many of the students are older adults and many attend part-time (Quinnan, 1997; AACC, 2019). According to Quinnan, “one residual bias still tolerated, albeit quietly, in colleges and universities is that directed against mature students” (p. 3). As life expectancy increases and birth rates continue to decline, the aging face of our general population is reflected in the student body. Understanding the experiences of older students more deeply may help administrative professionals respond appropriately to the needs of a student body that is changing. As early as 2002, Kressley and Huebschmann stated that the number of younger students enrolled in community colleges continues to drop, and the number of older students continues to expand. Since 2010, overall
enrollment at community colleges has declined, including older students as well (NCES, 2019). According to the American Association of Community Colleges (2019), the system cannot be sustained with focus on retention of traditional students alone.

Katz and Marshall (2003) suggest that ideals of aging based on improved health, autonomy, and mobility within our aging consumer society should replace negative stereotypes of the aging process and redefine aging in terms of reinvention. Palazesi and Bower (2006) studied the context of community colleges as a means of modifying identity in baby boomers. This research focused on the importance of a satisfying market relationship between this cohort and community colleges along with factors associated with motivations to attend college rather than an understanding of the experience of identity-modification.

Palazesi and Bower (2006) suggest, “Baby boomers in their retirement years represent a large untapped market and potential revenue for community colleges, especially in the area of community educational services” (p. 46). The current middle-aged cohort has a propensity toward lifelong learning (Simone & Cesena, 2010). They may continue to pursue those goals at community college campuses if the educational environments understand and support their developmental needs. Kressley and Huebschmann (2002) report on rapid technological changes that make some jobs obsolete while creating new jobs at the same time, “With the demise of the ‘one life-one career’ assumption, continuing education for adults is becoming a major enterprise” (2002, p. 838).

To summarize, the present research project applied the lifespan perspective to the study of ageism and identity development in community college students at midlife. With the view of identity construction as lifelong, critically important, and contextual, attention was focused on exploring participation in higher education at midlife to foster understanding of this specific
student population. This exploratory study was informed by the foundational literature reviewed in the next chapter.
Chapter Two. Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

The research literature directly addressing identity development in community college students at mid-life is sparse. This review focuses on related topics including identity development in general, learning and cognition in adulthood, and community colleges as contexts for development. I begin by reviewing the lifespan approach to exploring human development and aging processes as a framework for this study. In addition, I present feminist and critical gerontology theories as frameworks for exploring this topic.

Reviewing the historical understanding of identity development, along with more contemporary approaches, provides a foundation for the study of this important concept. An overview of the research findings on learning and cognition in adulthood illustrates some important differences between older and younger students. These differences are important to consider, in that they may impact performance in the classroom, overall self-understanding, and have implications for teaching older students more effectively. Research focused on understanding and measuring ageist stereotypes and self-reported behaviors is presented as a foundation for exploring the context that both shapes and is shaped by students at midlife.

This chapter is organized as follows. First, I discuss the literature on identity development in general followed by the historical and contemporary viewpoints. The importance of age, gender and changes at midlife is discussed in the next section. Finally, I cover understanding development from a lifespan perspective, noting the implications for middle-aged and older adults in educational contexts.

Identity Development

Identity development as a process has been the focus of keen interest for researchers since Erikson (1968) first highlighted the central importance of this developmental process
(Phillips, 2008). Erikson suggested that identity was a dualistic process characterized by identity diffusion or identity achievement. In the mid-1960s James Marcia expanded Erikson’s work by developing an operational model of identity that focuses more on the process as ongoing over time. For decades, researchers have focused on this identity model developed by Marcia, which considers the presence or absence of two factors in determining where an individual stands regarding identity development. The two factors include a process of exploration of possibilities and a commitment to choices available for each individual. The absence of both factors is referred to as Identity Diffusion. The presence of a commitment without the exploratory process is termed Identity Foreclosure. The ongoing process of exploration without a commitment is known as Identity Moratorium. Identity Achievement results from the completion of both processes, an exploration followed by a commitment to personal goals.

Identity is not static over the lifespan, even if identity achievement status is reached in one or more facets of identity development. More commonly, individuals move between the statuses over and over across their development in a pattern referred to as MAMA cycles: moratorium, achievement, moratorium, achievement (Santrock, 2019). While this model does suggest identity development processes continue well into adulthood, the focus seems to be on the discovery of different aspects of identity rather than a constructive process of identity achievement. Berzonsky (1997) provides an alternative model for understanding identity development by focusing on the different styles people engage to navigate identity issues. This model describes the informational style, the normative style, and the diffuse-avoidant style as three different approaches individuals adopt in constructing identity. These styles are discussed more fully next.
The informational style is characterized by an orientation toward exploration with active involvement in seeking, processing, and evaluating information that may be relevant to the self (Phillips, 2008). A weaker orientation toward exploration is seen in the normative style, along with an external focus upon expectations of significant others and a resistance to information incongruent with personal values and beliefs already adopted by the individual. Procrastination and avoidance of dealing with information relevant to identity development are seen in the diffuse-avoidant style. In this status individuals respond to contextual demands rather than internalized beliefs to guide actions (Berzonsky, 1997).

Many studies that focus on the development of identity in adolescence and young adulthood assume stability across the lifespan. However, more research is needed on the construction of new identities in middle adulthood in order to better understand experiences of identity development in middle-aged college students. Phillips (2008) used a cross-sectional approach to explore age-related differences in identity styles, but the participants included in this study were middle school, high school and traditional-aged college students (with a mean age of less than 22 years). Experiences of older college students were not included in this study.

**Contemporary Approaches to Understanding Identity**

Contemporary research on identity generally focuses on changing historical circumstances, structural stage models, sociocultural perspectives, narrative analysis or psychosocial models (Kroger, 2007). Each approach is characterized by unique strengths and weaknesses, suggesting a combination of approaches may be needed to fully explore identity development in a specific population within a specific context at any moment in history. These five approaches each suggest a relevant impetus for change in identity in adulthood.
According to Kroger, the historical model views identity as a social construct, which defines roles dictated by historical era. Changing historical circumstances would demand identity reconstruction. Structural stage models describe predictable patterns over time of internal structures as filters used to understand life experiences. These models suggest that change would unfold along a predictable sequence as maturation occurs over time. Sociocultural perspectives suggest that individual identity is dictated, facilitated by, and also limited by involvement in multiple relationships embedded in context. From this perspective, a change in context would initiate a change in identity. The narrative approach views identity as the lived enactment of our personal stories, with identities changing and evolving as we live and interpret our own stories. Finally, the psychosocial models bring together the internal structures and the external influence of societal demands. Changes in biological, psychological, and social processes as we age would all induce identity change within this model. Age, gender, and changes at midlife are all factors that impact identity at midlife and beyond. Each of these is discussed in detail next.

**Age matters. Ageism.** The term, ageism, introduced by Butler (1969) has been defined more recently by Erdman B. Palmore as “any prejudice or discrimination against or in favor of an age group” (Palmore, 1999, p. 4). Ageism can include demeaning behaviors and attitudes as well as behaviors that appear to show courtesy and respect for older adults. Palmore noted, however, that both negative and positive examples of ageist behaviors reflect prejudicial assumptions about older adults. Positive and negative ageist behaviors can be accessed by using Cherry and Palmore’s (2008) Relating to Older People Evaluation (ROPE). This assessment tool has been used for more than a decade to measure self-reports of 20 types of ageist behaviors (Cherry & Erwin, 2019).
Research findings based on ROPE assessments across various populations and across contexts have found ageist behaviors to be frequent and prevalent (Cherry, et al., 2016, Allen, Cherry, & Palmore, 2009). Butler (2005) describes ageism as deeply embedded in contemporary society. Individual acts of ageism are carried out within, and shaped by specific cultural contexts and within social institutions. Ageism within colleges and universities may create less welcoming environments for older students. Exposure to ageism may impact older adults’ perceptions of their own abilities and lead to self-directed negative attitudes (Levy, 2001). Conversely, recognizing age diversity in positive ways can encourage older students. As described by Ihme, et al., “emphasizing diversity in terms of students’ age increases perceived person-organization fit through consolidating anticipation of organization-based respect and pride” (2016, p. 100).

Most people generally think in terms of numbers when discussing age. Lifespan researchers conceptualize age in four basic ways: chronological age, biological age, psychological age, and social age (Whitbourne & Whitbourne, 2011). Chronological age is defined by the number of years that have passed since a person was born. Biological age is based on one’s health and wellbeing in physical terms. Psychological age is defined in terms of adaptive capacity and one’s social age is based on roles that are assumed in a social context. These various perspectives on age may be incongruent for an individual when, for example, an individual born 50 years ago remains physically healthy and enjoys a younger biological age as defined by cardiovascular health, strength, endurance, and general physical fitness. Social age is related to roles assumed such as parenthood, career roles, etc. An individual’s social age may be younger than chronological age when assuming the role of student, as traditional social
expectations for behavior in students are often based on the role as defined by the ideal of younger students.

These different conceptualizations of age are evaluated internally by individuals. They help to form an overall age identity, or sense of how old someone is, that may or may not be congruent with age as defined chronologically. The overall sense of where we are in the life course is characterized by individual variations and subjective interpretations (Lachman, 2004). While age is generally discussed in terms of numbers, it is important to keep these other perspectives in mind and expect individual variations to emerge in the experiences of members in the same developmental period.

Researchers have recently begun to turn attention toward developmental issues in middle age because an increasing portion of our population is composed of adults over the age of 40 (Schaie, 2011). The current aging cohort includes adults who have higher levels of education and more affluence when compared to previous cohorts at middle age (Lachman, 2004). Indeed, extended life expectancy makes it difficult to define exactly what researchers mean by the term “middle-aged” and many people construct an age identity that is incongruent with chronological age.

Although middle age may be difficult to define in terms of agreement on specific chronological boundaries of this developmental period, there are many experiences that middle-aged adults share. Middle age is often a time for achieving and maintaining career satisfaction. This period is generally characterized by increasing responsibilities, including financial burdens and increased expectations for caretaking in many cases. Also, a focus on leisure activities is recognized as important at midlife, as this helps adults prepare alternative aspects of their identity to ease the transition away from work at retirement (Santrock, 2019; Whitbourne &
Whitbourne, 2011). For older adults pursuing college educations, these traditional expectations may conflict with new responsibilities for coursework completion and time spent on academic activities.

Various researchers describe midlife as a transitional time of reflection on emerging health problems, and a point when adults begin to experience a desire to give something back to the next generation (Erickson, 1968; Lachman, 2004). It should be noted that this idea has been critiqued as androcentric based on gender socialization for women to spend their entire adult lives on generative behaviors involving the care of others (Gilligan, 1982; Sorrell & Montgomery, 2001). In general, the overall goal of middle-age is “balancing work and relationship responsibilities in the midst of the physical and psychological changes associated with aging” (Lachman, 2004, p. 305). Even though individuals generally experience their age identity as a comprehensive profile involving various functional aspects, some generalities about middle age can be deduced from the literature on adult development. For many adults, middle-age has a negative connotation through associations with retirement and stereotypes of physical and cognitive decline. Gullette (1997) describes middle age as a state of mind and suggests that “the middle years begin when the culture gets you to say they do” (p. 159). The present research was designed to include students who both self-identify as “middle-aged” and whose chronological ages fall within the broader range of 30-75 recognized by developmental psychologists.

**Stereotype threat (and lift).** Claude Steele’s ideas on stereotype threat were first considered and developed in the 1990s (Steele & Aronson, 1995). This work focused on intellectual underperformance that may result when a negative stereotype triggers a psychological threat. Awareness of a negative stereotype can cause a cognitive preoccupation that diverts focus away
from the intended task (Steele, 2010). Early research on this phenomenon focused on the result of stereotype threat on minorities’ academic performance. Early researchers believed the negative impact was limited to short-term effects confined to the immediate testing situation.

Freeman (2017) has expanded this early idea to include a salient appreciation for the pervasive impact of negative stereotypes on performance in everyday contexts. The impact of stereotype threat is now understood to occur on a broader scale and to be more harmful than those short-term effects Steele first identified. Freeman summarized studies that found a spillover effect on memory depletion, overeating, decreased confidence, feelings of doubt and dejection, decreased effort/interest/aspiration, increased anxiety, and measurable health problems such as higher blood pressure, and symptoms of chronic stress. In general, stereotype threat is a social identity threat that can be internalized, causing a negative impact on feelings of self-worth.

Becca Levy suggests that “stereotypes are embodied when their assimilation from the surrounding culture leads to self-definitions that, in turn, influence functioning and health” (2009, p. 332). Once embodied, “the harms that result from suffering [stereotype threat] become a part of one’s identity, and thus a background lens through which one experiences the world” (Freeman, p. 639). Cues related to age stereotypes may be encountered at an individual level (forms of speech, dismissive attitudes) or at an institutional level (denied access, employment discrimination). This cognitive vigilance created by stereotype threat is a pervasive and continual drain on cognitive resources and a chronic threat to perceptions of self.

The impact of negative stereotypes can lead to underperformance, but the reverse is true of positive stereotypes. Conditions leading to the lower performance caused by negative stereotypes may instead lead to increased performance, or lift, for participants who experience positive stereotype exposure (Walton & Cohen, 2003). Enhanced memory performance was
identified by Levy (1996) for older participants who had been exposed to positive aging stereotypes of wisdom. “Choking,” due to increased pressure to perform, has also been associated with the high expectations of positive stereotypes (Beilock & Carr, 2001). “Insofar as (positive and negative) stereotypes disguise a person’s true ability, the educational, community, and workplace implications are clear. Men and women alike may not contribute to their full potential” (Smith & Johnson, 2006, p. 61).

Stereotyped attitudes toward older adults have been shown to impact treatments by physicians who attribute complaints to natural aging. These physicians then withhold or fail to suggest available treatments (Bowling, 2007). Older workers who feel they were subject to ageing stereotypes experience dissatisfaction, unfulfillment, disengagement, and reduced perceptions of their fit in career settings (Whitbourne & Whitbourne, 2011). Counseling professionals who hold negative stereotypes of older adults have expressed less willingness to accept older clients (Fullen, 2018). These examples strongly suggest that the impact of stereotype threat may extend beyond classroom performance.

**Gender Matters. Women as learners.** According to Hayes and Flannery, “identity refers to who women are and how they identify themselves,” and positive or negative evaluations that women apply to their identities are aspects of *self-esteem* (2002, p. 54). Flannery asserts, “Much of women’s learning has to do with women’s identity and self-esteem, even though these concepts are not often treated explicitly in discussions of women’s learning” (p. 54).

According to Merriam and Caffarella (1999), scholars who write about women and development from a psychological perspective, “often speak to the lack of women’s voices in developmental theory and how that theory might differ if those voices were included” (p. 122). Research that attempts to include women’s voices has often produced theories with essentialist
elements that reproduce cultural expectations for women to behave in prescribed ways (Hayes & Flannery, 2002). These prescriptions for behavior are often associated with different age-related behavioral expectations. Cultural expectations for women often focus on household management and a dedication to childrearing during younger adulthood. In contrast to Erickson’s model of adult development, following these gender expectations generally leads to a more varied career pathway for women than for men. Later in adulthood, family constraints often lessen as young children begin school or older children begin independent lives. Returning to school after the easing of traditional domestic constraints has become an expectable transition for some cohorts of American women (Hostetler, Sweet, & Moen, 2007).

Returning to school is a process viewed as a key life course transition (Bradburn et al., 1995) that is experienced within specific contexts. Hayes and Flannery (2002) recognize varying contexts, life situation changes, and changing positions held by women to be among the factors that contribute to changes in identity. Hayes and Flannery suggest that women have agency within the identity development process, which can be influenced by the choices women make. Josselson (1987) defines identity as the interface between an individual and the world, emphasizing the important role of context in identity development.

In the contexts of social and cultural expectations regarding their involvement in roles that require caring for others, women may lose or deny voices of their own (Hayes & Flannery, 2002). Professional and academic exercises in the context of higher education often prompt women to identify and claim a voice of their own in order to express their views and ideas within content areas. Authors writing from a feminist perspective offer a view of “voice” as constantly in process and that this process contributes to the development of identity in women’s learning (Hayes & Flannery, 2002).
Research on non-traditional student populations is dominated by a perspective that considers all students over the age of 25 as a single group. This seldom allows for the emergence of individual differences across different age groups. Carney-Crompton and Tan (2002), however, studied non-traditional female students between the ages of 35 and 44 in comparison with traditional female students, ages 18 to 22. Silverstein, Choi and Bulot (2000) studied over 500 adult learners over the age of 52 and found significant differences when analyzing the data by different age groupings. The group of students who currently considered themselves to be in middle adulthood has seldom been studied apart from inclusion in younger or older cohorts of students. This approach may offer insights specific to this age group or it may reveal individual differences that were overshadowed by generalizations derived from broader age groups. A focus on issues within specific subgroups of older learners is needed to promote improved understanding of experiences within this heterogeneous student population.

Many women at midlife lack positive images of female development. Common stereotypes focus on a medicalization of midlife as defined by menopause, hot flashes, declining bone density, coronary distress, and psychological distress in response to children leaving home (Meyer, 2001; Hogan, 2016). There is a need to shift toward a more positive view of aging and the experiences of women at midlife that looks beyond physical changes to understand how women experience different aspects of their own development. While little research was found on actual experiences of women in midlife, one exception is Apter (1995) who identified the challenge of “integrating the images formed in adolescence of being female with that of being a woman at midlife” and “she found that a woman’s most important insight was that she could at last listen to her own voice” (as quoted in McQuaide, 1998, p. 26).
Women are more likely than men to experience disorderly career paths due to cultural expectations for the timely progression of social roles across the life course. According to Hostetler, Sweet, and Moen (2007), changes in the corporate structuring and need for new skill sets have contributed to normalizing an expectation of variations in timing and sequencing of life role choices. Traditional career templates have become less relevant for both men and women, as “the adult life course becomes more improvisational” (p. 100). With current economic circumstances generally adding an incentive to return to school to increase credentials, more women are choosing a return to higher education during middle-adulthood.

**Masculinity and role strain.** “Recently attention has focused on the reversal of participation in postsecondary education by men” (Eddy & Lester, 2008, p.109). According to the National Center for Education Statistics, males have become a minority presence on community college campuses. Little is known about how role strain contributes to identity development and the impact this may have on academic success. Davis (2002) suggests that male students may experience gender role conflict as the expectations for student behavior in the classroom collide with social expectations for men to behave in prescribed ways. Kivel (2007) asserts that men experience negative consequences when they step out of the box of expected behaviors and are constantly reminded of the following messages: to be in control; do not make mistakes; do not ask directions; and provide for family. These conditioned behaviors that define masculinity may have to be pushed aside or temporarily suspended by a man in order to be successful in the contemporary classroom environment. This may cause role confusion and identity stress for male students. Eddy and Lester (2008) also noted the difficulty experienced by male students related to “negative perceptions of help seeking that are often connected to gender socialization” (111).
While Davis and others focused their research on traditional students, students at midlife may experience some of the same elements of role strain. According to Levinson’s (1978 as cited in Kroger) model of male development, middle age is a time of transition for men. One of the dualities included in his model was resolution of the duality between masculinity and femininity. Male students at midlife may have an easier time with gender conflict if they are already engaged in negotiations of gender identity in other aspects of their lives. These conflicts may be more salient and more difficult for older male students. There is some evidence that gender rigidity diminishes with age (Whitbourne & Whitbourne, 2011), which may suggest that older male students would experience less gender role conflict in the community college classroom. Including the personal narratives of those men experiencing this process would add to our understanding of the interaction of gender and other areas of identity development in older adult students.

**Changes at Midlife Matter.** Many physical and cognitive changes occur during middle age and may provide the basis for some stereotypes of older learners, including internalized stereotypes that can lead to self-doubt in adult students. Reduced blood supply and a general slowing of the central nervous system lead to changes in the ways that environmental stimuli are processed by sensory systems in middle-aged adults. Twitchell, Cherry and Trott (1996) report the most noticeable deficits impact vision and hearing. These changes typically begin to occur around the age of 40, providing another reason to view younger and older adults separately in researching their experiences on campus (Lachman, 2004).

**Adult learners and cognitive decline.** According to Donaldson and Townsend (2007) older learners may be the most heterogeneous group on college campuses due to their broad ranges of ages and experiences. However, negative stereotypes exist about older learners
(Quinnan, 1997). Older students may internalize these stereotypes and set lower expectations for their own performance. Instructors may also view older learners as less capable and fail to challenge students appropriately. Research on stereotype threat in testing situations, shows that labels and lowered expectations can become self-fulfilling prophecies (Quinnan).

Most empirical research on cognitive aging has been focused on age-related declines. The prominence of this approach has resulted in general perceptions of a negative relationship between cognition and age (Salthouse, 1994). Twitchell, et al. summarized changes in performance on divided attention and selective attention tasks. Age-related changes in cognition appear in the tendency to be distracted more easily and reductions in processing speed that impact language processing and reading comprehension for older adults. The ability to remember new information declines with age and these changes in memory begin as early as age 35.

**Adult college students in general.** Twitchell, et al. (p. 169) noted, “Those addressing the educational needs of older adults should understand how older learners differ from younger learners and tailor their educational programs accordingly.” In addition to the physical and cognitive differences noted above, psychological factors related to self-efficacy and motivation may differ as well.

A broad range of benefits from participation in higher education have been identified, including social and individual benefits (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). These researchers describe economic benefits including increased lifetime earnings, and non-monetary benefits such as improved citizenship, and intergenerational increases in educational levels. While these specific benefits may be primary motivating factors for traditional-aged students, the dynamics may not be the same for adult students.
Many adult students have participated in higher education programs in the past, but chose to leave their studies for varied reasons. Many of these adult students have chosen to return to college even though they are currently employed in well paid jobs or have even completed the occupational portion of their life course. Older adult students are generally active citizens who exercise their voting rights and participate in service organizations or community projects (Kroger, 2007). Returning to college is an increasingly common choice for mothers of grown children who are already enrolled in or have completed postsecondary education (Merriam & Cafferella, 1999). In short, the most commonly identified benefits of higher education are already in place for many of these students. They may be returning to the classroom for different reasons than those that motivate traditional-aged students.

Silverstein, Choi and Bulot (2000) studied over 500 adult learners between the ages of 52 and 87 at the University of Massachusetts Boston in order to identify motivations, barriers and expectations of these students. The most common motivational factors identified in this study were “gaining self-confidence,” “meeting new people,” and relief from boredom (p. vii). For the younger learners in this study, between the ages of 50 and 59, a strong correlation emerged between their age and responses that indicating an interest in career advancement. Compared to the older learners in this study, the younger ones were more likely to be working toward goals of increased occupational attainment. The most commonly identified obstacles to class attendance emerging from this study were issues of family obligations, demands of homework assignments, and the timing of course offerings. Students at the younger end of this research sample also identified difficulty in meeting with professors as an obstacle to success because many of them were still employed and their work schedules conflicted with their professors’ office hours. The need for increasing systems of support for older students was also identified by the student
participants in the UMB study. Significant differences were also found when analyzing data by different age groupings in this study, which could be an important approach because many researchers have broadly defined older students as those aged 25 and above. Generalizations made from studies using this broad age range may not be appropriate for all subgroups of age within this category. Carney-Crompton and Tan (2002) studied non-traditional female students, age 35-44 in comparison with traditional female students ranging in age from 18 to 22 years. Results of this study indicated that older female students “performed at a higher academic level than did traditional students and were no different in their psychological functioning” (p. 146). This study contradicted earlier studies that found nontraditional students to be more anxious and doubtful of their abilities, but Carney-Crompton and Tan chose undergraduate seniors rather than the usual population of college freshmen for their sample group. They concluded that there may be a transitional phase of anxiety and doubt experienced by older female students, and that this anxious phase may diminish once students become acclimated to the educational environment. These results may suggest the importance of timing in supportive programs offered early in the reentry process.

Donaldson and Graham (1999) report adult students “have complex and rich mental schemas that might make learning more personally meaningful for them” (p. 27). Other research suggests that adults make connections to existing knowledge in order to integrate new learning and draw on their own extensive personal experiences to make sense of new material and ideas (Merriam & Cafferella, 1999). Donaldson and Graham also assert that adult students “use the classroom differently than do traditional students” (p. 27). They report that older students take the advice of their instructors more seriously and work toward their educational goals with a clearer sense of purpose than many younger students.
According to Justice and Dornan (2001), “there is evidence that older students experience the college classroom environment differently from younger students” (p. 237), and that “To provide effective classroom instruction and appropriate learning assessment, it is important to understand the motivations, learning styles, and strategies of adult students” (p. 236). Twitchell, et al. (p. 169) identify some of the various reasons older adults return to college. Career-related factors include retraining for changing technologies within a current field or preparing for new careers. More personal factors include increasing personal knowledge, opportunities for socializing, developing skills for leisure pursuits, and personal satisfaction. These differences identified between traditional-age learners and older learners, as well as differences identified within the broad category of older learners, point to the need for further inquiry into the experiences of specific student populations to understand their needs and identify possible areas of support that retention coordinators could address.

As noted in the introduction, much of the research on adult college students focuses on reasons for participation, identifying adult learning styles, or barriers to participation and completion (Blaire & McPake, 1995; Brenner, et. al, 2013; Martin & Chen, 2016; Sperling, 1991). “The outcomes of education, as measured in quality assessments and funding council’s audits, are often only considered to be successful if and when the student successfully completes the course” (Walters, 2000, p. 276). This approach focuses on success as the completed delivery of a product rather than focusing on the individual impact of participation in the process of continuing education. Scant attention has focused on the internal developmental processes experienced by older students, referred to by Dominicé as “the vividness of subjectivity” (para. 12).
Feminist Theories

Feminist theories provide a conceptual framework for the proposed research. In this section, I focus on select topics important to feminist theory. These topics include: gender as an important issue in qualitative research; the importance of listening to individual voices; the inclusion of marginalized populations and the value of the view from the margins; as well as a focus on the subjectivity of the researcher and the view of research as context-specific (Gilligan, 1982; hooks, 1984; hooks, 1994; Shank, 2006).

Gilligan asserts that “to have a voice is to be human. To have something to say is to be a person” and voice can be understood as “a powerful psychological instrument and channel, connecting inner and outer worlds” (p. xvi). A research focus on the inner worlds of student experience then, must require what she describes as the “intensely relational act” of listening. This perspective informs the choice for a qualitative approach that positions the researcher as listener.

A feminist perspective supports an understanding of gender as a constructed performance shaped by social expectation and response (Butler, J., 1999). Recent work in feminist theory has criticized the field of gerontology (adult development) as both ageist and sexist. A current focus on “healthy aging” and prescriptions for aging “correctly” seem to illustrate a male-oriented model of development that requires resources more readily available to males, and to those of higher social economic status (Calasanti & Slevin, 2006). However, male advantage held in early developmental periods may not continue in middle and late adulthood. Various researchers have identified the long term costs of behaviors motivated by hegemonic masculinity. These costs include depression, high blood pressure, fatal heart disease, higher rates
of suicide, and bodies debilitated by injury from youthful displays of prowess (Summarized by King, 2006). “Thus, the doing of gender can attenuate men’s accumulation of advantage” (p. 66).

Those who most closely approach social ideals for masculine behavior pay the highest cost in earlier deaths related to neglected social networks and bodily injury. Life expectancy for women currently exceeds that of men. Therefore, the population is increasingly female in middle and late adulthood (Chrisler, Barney, & Palatino, 2016). In spite of this demographic trend, the interaction between the fields of women’s studies and gerontology has been comparatively limited. A double standard of aging has been described by Deutsch, Zalenski, and Clark (1986) in which women with gray hair and facial lines are considered “old” while men with the same physical characteristics are viewed as distinguished, wise, and experienced. Women tend to be judged more harshly for their looks and behavior across the lifespan, but particularly during the aging process. These differences may leave women more vulnerable to age-related microaggressions.

Gullette (1997) asserts that the old double standard of women internalizing deficiency while men accrue superiority at midlife is shifting and many men are now experiencing the same problems that middle-aged women have long faced. Evidence to support this shift includes increased male use of products and services to reduce visible signs of aging such as remedies for thinning hair, skin treatments, and even cosmetic surgery. Gullette describes reports of men at midlife lying about their age and suggests “that the supports for the double standard have been weakening” (p.143).

Chrisler, Barney and Palantino also report that older women may be more readily perceived as old because stereotypes of aging adults often parallel gender stereotypes of women across the lifespan including weakness, passivity, dependence, and frailty. Feminist theories that
shed light on the impact these stereotypes have on women’s lived experiences may be useful in understanding the amplification of these stereotypes in later years where sexism and ageism intersect.

Research on adult development suggests both men and women may move toward more androgynous behavior at midlife. “Midlife requires an early adult rigid or socially appropriate persona to be replaced by a more authentic identity in which there is a greater expression of inner convictions in everyday behavior” (Robinson, 2013). According to Jung (1966), a key part of maturity at midlife involves the exploration of our opposite-gender identity. Levinson’s (1978) research also noted midlife as a time for gender identity issues to come to the forefront of consciousness. Judith Butler explains, “Gender is in no way a stable identity of locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time—an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts” (2003, p. 415).

Feminist theory also brings a focus on the importance of embodied, lived experience performed in larger social contexts.

Feminist theory has sought to understand the way in which systemic or pervasive political and cultural structures are enacted and reproduced through individual acts and practices, and how the analysis of ostensibly personal situations is clarified through situating the issues in a broader and shared cultural context (Butler, J., p. 418).

Feminist objectivity is about limited location and situated knowledge, not about transcendence and splitting of subject and object. It allows us to recognize and acknowledge how our perspectives are shaped (Haraway, 2003). “Situated knowledges require that the object of knowledge be pictured as an actor and agent, not as a screen or a ground or a resource” (Haraway, p. 400).
Calasanti and Slevin (2006) suggest that feminist scholars are beginning to turn their perspectives on the performative nature of gender and difference toward an understanding of age as performative as well. “If instead, age is understood as a continued process of becoming, people can retain agency and humanity throughout the life course” (Marshall, 2015, p. 27). In relation to daughters becoming more like their mothers over time, Woodward describes the performative nature of age in asserting “that we move through various identities as we assume different positions over time” (1991, p. 97). According to author bell hooks, men are also “hurt by rigid sex roles” and can be comrades in the struggle against oppressions of all types (p. 629). Approaches within feminist ideology that reduce the invisibility of women at the margins may be helpful in addressing the issue Whitbourne and Whitbourne (2011) call the invisibility of older adults in general.

**Gerontology Theories**

Neugarten and Neugarten (1996) assert that we now live in society where age is irrelevant and socially approved guidelines for age-related behaviors are more varied. It is much more common today to see older fathers with new infants, younger retirees, or great grandparents in their forties. It is also more common to see adults at midlife pursuing a college education for the first time. “Societal allowance for such diversity among contemporary midlife adults again raises a number of interesting identity issues for consideration” (p. 167).

Lachman (2004) reports on this wide variability as problematic. Although researchers have shown increased interest in understanding midlife development, those busy work and family schedules, denial of exit from early adulthood and the fuzzy boundaries that demarcate middle adulthood can make research subjects difficult to identify and recruit. Much of what we currently know about middle adult development results from spillover in other fields.
Gerontological study yields information on middle-aged caregivers as a byproduct while studying older adults in need of care in much the same way that studies in child development yield results that illustrate issues related to middle-aged parents.

Studies that do focus on development in middle adulthood directly tend to discuss education as an accomplished fact. Education level is often used as variable for the understanding of other issues. From this perspective, educational attainment is seen as an accomplished fact and not an experiential process worthy of study. One exception to this is a study of “young, middle age, and older college-based students” where subjects were identified from a “college community” (Laditka, S., et al, 2004). However, only the younger students were enrolled in traditional college credit classes. The middle age and older participants were actually identified from an Edlerhostel group affiliated with the same Central New York campus.

The field of gerontology also approaches the study of adult development from the biopsychosocial model, with a focus on the multidimensional nature of life changes. A current focus on positive aging within gerontology research references a use-it-or-lose-it hypothesis (Hultsch, Hertzog, Small, & Dixon, 1999). Well practiced behaviors are strengthened through use and may slow age-declines in areas such as physical function and mobility (Rose, 2016), cognitive functions (Schooler, 2007) and sexual functioning (Hogan, 2016) at midlife and beyond. Studying transitions through earlier developmental periods into middle and late adulthood can provide a foundation for understanding adult identity development.

Summary

Kroger (2000, 2007) has published widely about the pressing need for identity research and scholarly attention to be directed to midlife as a relevant developmental period within both social and historical or cultural settings. In her own words “Research is greatly needed into ways
in which midlife adult identity both shapes and is shaped by surrounding social contexts and historical circumstances” (Kroger, 2007, p. 184). The present research is designed as an initial step to address this need, as discussed more fully in Chapter Three.

An interdisciplinary approach to the study of students at midlife may provide insight into the experiences and needs of this growing student population. Literature from fields of Developmental Psychology, Social Psychology, Education, Gerontology, Gender Studies and Aging Studies offer a foundation to understand and explore the experiences of students pursuing an education at midlife in a community college context. Consequently, I borrowed methodological techniques from these diverse literatures to address the research topic of adult learners at midlife negotiating identity issues within the community college environment. My specific research questions and choice of methods to generate evidence informing these questions are presented next.
Chapter Three. Methods

This section begins with a discussion of the rationale for this research approach and design. Next, I describe the methodology for data collection, participant selection procedures, and assessment tools chosen for this project. For confidentiality purposes and to protect anonymity, pseudonyms are used throughout this document for both the research participants and the facilities from which they were recruited and tested. Next, I discuss strategies for data analysis. This section concludes with a summary of the outcomes I had expected to observe and potential limitations associated with this study as designed.

Rationale for the Research Approach

The purpose of the present research is to contribute to an understanding of ageism and identity construction in community college students at midlife, topics that have received scant attention in the higher education research literature to date. Accordingly, I have selected a descriptive approach that capitalizes on the strengths-offered by life history methodology (Flick, 2002; Shank, 2006) According to Shank, “one of the most important kinds of informal narratives are the stories people tell about themselves. These sorts of life histories are an important source of qualitative data” (p. 174). While the life history approach has historically been used in the social sciences, Dominicé (1990) asserts “life history can be used in education as a tool for critical reflection, and the dynamics of this reflection can become for the researcher the real object of his research” (para. 7). In particular, this narrative approach will be applied to explore the meaning, structure, and essence of the lived experiences of the students who participated in this project (Johnson & Christensen, 2004).

Dominicé recognizes the reformulatory nature of education and the role that descriptive narratives play in understanding and constructing a concept of the self. The research reviewed in
Chapter 2 suggests that to fully understand the dynamics of identity development in adult learners, researchers need to account for the expected prevalence of ageism in the educational context. Consequently, ageist behaviors from the perspective of both students and faculty members, were examined here. In particular, I have chosen a sequential mixed model design that includes both a quantitative (survey questionnaire) and a qualitative (open-ended interview questions) assessment to capture the breadth and depth of ageist behaviors that adult learners and faculty observe and experience in the community college environment.

In overview, the educational context selected for the present research was the community college setting, which was chosen based on the well-established preference of non-traditional students to enroll for the first time or return to pursue education in community colleges (Quinnan, 1997; Carlan, 2001; AACC, 2019). A major assumption of this project is that ageism would be prevalent within the community college context as it is prevalent throughout other social institutions. Three sources of data were considered relevant for exploration of this phenomenon: (1) a quantitative measure to assess the prevalence of ageist behaviors among faculty within the educational context, (2) a qualitative measure to assess the students’ own stereotypical behaviors and attitudes toward aging in general, and (3) semi-structured interviews with middle-aged students to allow construction of their individual stories.

To measure the prevalence of ageist behaviors in the community college educational context, the Relating to Old People Evaluation (ROPE, Cherry & Palmore, 2008) was given to both students and faculty members in a community college setting. The ROPE was chosen for inclusion here because it allows inferences on positive and negative ageist behaviors that might occur in the community college setting. Positive ageist behaviors refer to presumed courtesies that are age-based, such as senior citizen discounts or holding the door open for someone
because they are older. Negative ageist behaviors imply prejudicial actions or demeaning behaviors directed toward older adults (Cherry & Erwin, 2019; Palmore, 1999).

Johnson and Christensen assert that data collection in the narrative interview tradition should get “participants to think about the specific experience and to describe it in rich detail” (p.367). Responsibility for specificity lies with the interviewer’s skill in bringing out “the specific elements which determine the impact or meaning of an event for the interviewee, in order to prevent the interview from remaining on the level of general statements” (Flick, p. 76). One way to achieve this criterion of specificity is by explicitly referencing the stimulus situation. Ageism can operate on both the conscious and unconscious level (Levy, 2009). Therefore, the administration of the ROPE questionnaire was thought to stimulate participants to think about ageism in general before they report on their own related behaviors toward others.

In separate sessions, ten middle-age students engaged in the semi-structured interviews designed to help them focus on their current college experience to reflect upon and narrate their lived experiences as students. Flick asserts that questions need to be explicit enough to direct the participants toward responses to specific stimulus situation, yet also general enough to prevent guiding participants toward a specific answer. Open-ended questions were used to allow participants to generate their own narratives about their experiences and how those experiences may shape who they see themselves to be. This qualitative approach has the added benefit of allowing individual differences as well as shared experiences to emerge from the narrative data.

**Participant Selection**

For the faculty assessment, all 45 faculty currently employed at Conveniently Central Community College (CCCC) were asked to complete the ROPE survey (Cherry & Palmore, 2008) and then answer one open-ended question about their general experiences with older adult
students. Research packets were presented to all faculty who attended a required monthly faculty meeting. Packets included a letter of intent explaining the purpose of the study and asking for their voluntary participation, a consent form, a demographic sheet, the ROPE questionnaire and self-addressed envelope for returning completed packets. Packets were distributed through campus mail to those who did not attend the meeting.

A purposive, convenience sampling technique was applied to identify general education courses that could be expected to contain a wide range of students. These courses are required for all students, including those enrolled in technical training programs where older male students could be reached. This approach was suggested by the Chancellor at CCCC and included the selection of history, biology, sociology and psychology courses. ROPE questionnaires were administered to willing students of all ages enrolled in these general education classes. An invitation to participate in the interview process was added to the student copy of the ROPE questionnaire to identify students who met the criteria of community college students in middle adulthood who had completed at least one semester of coursework.

Ten interview participants were sought in an attempt to capture a rich range of views. Two subgroups of participants who met the criteria for middle-aged adult students were identified. Both male and female students enrolled at the community college were included in an attempt to capture possible similarities or differences across gender. Including both subgroups of students was attempted in order to allow their own descriptions of different experiences to emerge from the data collected.

The first subgroup of interest included adult female students who were currently enrolled in an undergraduate program at the community college. The second group of interest included adult male students who were currently enrolled in undergraduate programs at the community
college. The intention was to interview a maximum of seven students from either group in an attempt to gather a wide array of possible responses and to include as many voices as possible within the time limit of this project. Limiting the maximum to seven participants from either group was designed to seek gender balance in responses that might be expected to be weighted toward a female bias, given the higher number of adult females participating in community college classes. However, although four male participants were identified, only two of them actually participated in the interview process. Two participants voluntarily identified other willing students who met these criteria, and the input from those identified in this snowball sampling method was included as well. Table 2.1 provides an introduction to the student participants along with their chronological age, gender, race and major field of study.

Table 2.1. Student Participant Pseudonyms and Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Major</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Glen</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Nursing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ruby</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Social Sciences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kendra</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Social Sciences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mario</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Petro Technology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faith</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sissy</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Criminal Justice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evelyn</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Nursing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hope</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Social Work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Renee</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Social Work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>August</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Business</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Three types of data; the ROPE questionnaire, faculty and student responses to the qualitative question added to the questionnaire, and the narratives constructed by student
interviews, allowed triangulation as an important validation strategy. “Triangulation is the process of converging upon a particular finding by using different sorts of data or data-gathering strategies” (Shank, 2006).

**Materials and Procedure**

**Quantitative assessment: The ROPE.** The ROPE contains 20 types of ageist behaviors: 6 are positive types of ageism (e.g., *Hold doors open for old people because of their age; Vote for an old person because of their age*) and 14 are negative types (e.g., *Send birthday cards to old people that joke about their age; Vote against an old person because of their age*). For each item, the response options are: Never (scored as 0), Sometimes (scored as 1), or Often (scored as 2). Scores are summed within each dimension and expressed as a proportion of the highest score possible for that dimension (Cherry & Palmore, 2008).

ROPE Positive and ROPE Negative scores are summed for each participant and expressed as a proportion of the highest score possible for that dimension. Higher scores indicate greater frequency of positive and negative ageist behaviors. Prior research on the psychometric qualities of the ROPE has demonstrated adequate reliability (Cronbach’s alpha = 0.70; Cherry & Palmore, 2008). Therefore I assume that this measure is suited for estimating the prevalence of ageist behaviors in a community college setting.

**Qualitative assessment: Semi-structured interviews.** Semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant using questions designed to elicit information about constructions of self through narrative. “Generative narrative questions” were given to participants to evoke information regarding their individual ideas about who they are and how that might be changing during their participation in community college at mid-life (Flick, 2002, p. 97). Narrative inquiries and balancing inquiries followed to expand narrative fragments and
distill meaning from participants. This approach was used in order to allow participants to
generate their own narratives about how they view who they are now, who they are becoming
during their educational journeys, as well as what they think their destinations might be.

Individual interviews were scheduled for 45-60 minutes in duration, but participants were
allowed to continue their contributions beyond that length of time if they so desired. Participants
were encouraged to present their narratives through the use of active listening techniques to
allow the narratives to flow with minimal intervention during the process. Interviews were
recorded and transcribed by the interviewer. Narratives were transcribed verbatim, retaining
idiomatic language rather than “correcting” to Standard English to respect each participant’s
authentic voice. An undergraduate research assistant from the Department of Psychology then
audited the transcripts for accuracy. Audited transcripts were offered for review to the individual
participants for further triangulation through member checking. Of the ten students interviewed,
none of them requested any changes to their audited transcripts. Basic demographic questions
were included in order to allow patterns associated with background variables to emerge from
the data where applicable.

Compensation of Participants

Interviews were conducted on the campus location most convenient for the students.
Eight of the interviews were conducted at the main campus and two interviews were conducted
at other campus locations selected by the participants as more convenient and closer to their
homes. Participants who agreed to be interviewed were compensated $30.00 each for their time.
Paying participants for their time was intended to reinforce the belief that their experiences are
valuable and to change the dynamics of the situation to separate it from the usual dynamics of
the student-faculty relationship where students assume faculty will assess their performance.
Payment of research participants, along with the narrative approach (which violates role expectations of the participants by allowing the narrative maximum space and focus in the situation), were designed to minimize the hierarchical nature of the roles that usually exist in the faculty-student relationship, or interviewer-participant relationships.

**Data Analysis**

**Faculty data collected. ROPE.** To examine participant status (student, faculty) and gender-related differences in positive and negative ageist behaviors, these data were analyzed according to the following plan. For each participant, separate responses were calculated for the ROPE positive and negative subscales and submitted to a 2 (Group: Student, Faculty) x 2 (Gender: Male, Female) x 2 (Subscale: Positive, Negative) mixed analysis of variance (ANOVA) with repeated measures on the Subscale variable.

**Qualitative question added.** Faculty also provided a written response to one general question, where they were asked to describe their experiences with older adult students. These responses were assessed with a constant comparative approach to allow themes to emerge. These data were used to triangulate student-reported experiences, and to validate the assumption of positive and negative stereotypes present within the context at this institution (CCCC).

**Students Data Collected.** Student responses to the ROPE assessment were analyzed following the plan just reported. This assessment was intended to prime students to think of ageism in general as a focusing tool before the interviews were conducted. Transcriptions of the interviews were analyzed using a constant comparative approach to allow themes to emerge from the data (Shank, 2006). This approach to analyzing narratives was chosen to gain insights from the process described by Britton and Baxter. They assert people actively construct identities while narrating their stories rather than merely providing description (1999, p. 182). Coding
began with open coding using labels that emerge from the narratives as significant statements. Themes and patterns that emerged from significant statements and clusters of meaning were analyzed to focus on individual and group differences (Johnson & Christensen, 2004; Shank, 2006). Two coders were assigned to each transcript in order to ensure triangulation of results across researchers. Coders included the author and an advanced undergraduate student in the Department of Communication Sciences and Disorders.

Outcomes and Reflexivity

This mixed model sequential approach is designed to assess the context chosen for study and to gather narrative data from individual participants within that context. The ROPE data was used to assess the basic assumption that ageist behaviors and attitudes are present in this educational context, as discussed more fully later on. Next, the qualitative approach was implemented to address the research questions of primary interest and to explore the course of identity development in the individual adult students selected to participate in this project. The intent here is to better understand their experiences. The project is exploratory in nature.

The following general trends emerge clearly from the educational biographies I have heard and analyzed. In their narratives, most adults tell how they struggled to reconcile the expectations of their social environment with their own desire to lead a unique existence. The educational biographies are a testament to how adults have educated themselves by transforming the models, values, and knowledge of their upbringing. These adults tell of the stages of socialization they experienced in order to find their own identities (Dominicé, para. 32).

This project focused on listening to and analyzing the construction of self through narrative to answer the question:

- How does participation in higher education contribute to renegotiations of identity for students at midlife?

Related questions explored through a semi-structured format included the following:
• How is the process of shifting identity experienced and expressed within the community college context by students in middle-adulthood? (Is this context experienced as limiting or facilitating identity processes?)

• How does identity construction shape learning for students at midlife?

• How does the construction of student identity at mid-life impact awareness or understanding of the self in general (interaction with other identities).

The focus on “outcomes” may seem out of place for a qualitative study, yet Malterud writes: “preconceptions are not the same as bias, unless the researcher fails to mention them” (2001, p. 484). All research is shaped by the researcher, whether qualitative or quantitative, laboratory-based or naturalistic. Trustworthiness is approached in qualitative research by reflexivity, or the recognition that the researcher is also being reshaped by the process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). According to Tashakkori and Teddlie (1998) reflexive journaling is a technique that provides important information for trustworthiness (p. 93). The reflexive journal is described by Lincoln and Guba (1985) as a kind of diary where the investigator records a variety of information about self . . . and method. With respect to the self, the reflexive journal might be thought of as providing the same kind of data about the human instrument that is often provided about the paper-and-pencil or brass instruments used in conventional studies. With respect to method, the journal provides information about methodological decisions made and the reasons for making them (p. 327, italics in the original).

Reflexivity was further enhanced through the use of reflective note taking directly after each interview to help the researcher remain aware of overall impressions and the possible impact that the research process may have had on the participants. Van Manen reports that participants may feel a wide range of both positive and negative emotions about the experience, and that it is important that this is expressed immediately after the interviews. There are also
possible effects on the institution chosen as a site for the research as Van Manen has noted. Reflections on that possibility were included in note taking as well.

**Potential Limitations**

Limitations inherent in the use of narrative text as data should be recognized. They include variations in insight and articulation competencies across participants (Flick, 2002). However, limiting participants to those who have already successfully completed at least one semester of coursework should ensure that interviewees have the basic level of literacy and communication skills that would have been required to succeed in the community college classroom. Administration of the ROPE questionnaire prior to scheduling the interview session may have prompted reflection for students and directed their focus to the experiences of interest for this project.

The difficulty inherent in this approach to interviewing should also be recognized, because the researcher must practice active listening skills and not interfere with the narrative under construction. This approach situates the interviewer very differently than more traditional interview methods where the researcher takes a more active role. It is expected that my prior experiences with interviews for life history projects and biographical research will be helpful, along with training for teaching that included becoming comfortable when sitting with silence while waiting for students to process what they want to articulate.

The possibility of cohort effects is another potential limitation inherent in this method. Individuals are shaped by the historical context of their development and adults at middle-age today experienced different influences than other age groups, so their understanding of their experiences may be shaped by historical and social contexts as well as the experience itself. Patterns identified in one age group may not be generalizable due to changing historical
circumstances. However, the present research project focused on the voices of individual members of a specific cohort without expectation that any emerging patterns will be repeated with future cohorts. There is also the danger that grouping individuals by age and binary gender (e.g., male, female) will gloss over differences within these groups while highlighting differences between groups.

Even the boundaries of midlife as a developmental period could be limiting important contributions from some students, because ethnic minorities tend to enter and leave middle adulthood earlier (Robinson, 2013). This tendency relates to trends for earlier marriage, earlier childbearing, and becoming grandparents at earlier ages for some minority groups and the impact of social class differences on health (Lachman, 2004). Allowing students to self-identify as middle aged within the broadest range recognized by developmental psychologists (30-75) is designed to counter this limitation. Also, implicit here is the heteronormative assumption that students will be male or female and that a binary path to development exists (Bergstrom-Borins, 2015). The intersection with other aspects of identity are certainly important to explore, but beyond the scope of literature presented here. Intersecting identities that may arise during data collection were addressed in the discussion section of this project.
Chapter Four. ROPE Findings and Discussion

As noted earlier, the Relating to Older People Evaluation (ROPE; Cherry & Palmore, 2008) is a measure of self-reported ageism designed to measure the frequency with which people admit to positive and negative ageist behaviors in their everyday lives. Table 4.1 presents a summary of previous research using the ROPE with college students, older adults, and senior service providers. As can be seen in Table 4.1, most people admit to positive ageist behaviors. In addition, younger and older adults appear to endorse ageist behaviors at a similar rate (Cherry & Palmore, 2008). Of particular interest to the present discussion are the patterns of gender differences obtained, where women endorsed positive ageist behaviors more often than men did (but see Erwin, Cherry & Allen, 2019). Other evidence has yielded similar findings using the ROPE in educational and clinical settings such as colleges, nursing homes, and mental health settings (Allen, Cherry, & Palmore, 2009). Allen et al. (2009) also found that nursing home social service staff members endorsed more positive and less negative ageist behaviors than mental health system social workers and college students, suggesting that those people with greater exposure to older adults are less likely to take part in negative ageist behaviors than are other groups.

Results

A total of 234 participants were included in the study. There were 205 students enrolled in CCCC and 29 faculty members who worked at the school. The students had an average of 12.23 years of education, whereas the faculty members reported an average of 17.93 years of education. Of the student group, 10 provided in-depth answers to interview questions. They were interviewed between May, 2019 and August, 2019 in a quiet office
Table 4.1. Summary of Published Literature on the ROPE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study</th>
<th>Age range</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Positive</th>
<th>Negative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cherry &amp; Palmore (2008)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Young adults</td>
<td>18-39 years</td>
<td>162</td>
<td>0.54 (0.16)</td>
<td>0.24 (0.11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle-aged adults</td>
<td>40-57 years</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>0.51 (0.17)</td>
<td>0.15 (0.08)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Older adults</td>
<td>60 + years</td>
<td>115</td>
<td>0.54 (0.21)</td>
<td>0.26 (0.13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allen, Cherry, &amp; Palmore (2009)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undergraduate students</td>
<td>18-58 years</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>0.52 (0.15)</td>
<td>0.26 (0.12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate students</td>
<td>22-70 years</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>0.48 (0.19)</td>
<td>0.21 (0.11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nursing home service staff</td>
<td>24-58 years</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>0.63 (0.16)</td>
<td>0.21 (0.12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental health social workers</td>
<td>23-62 years</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>0.54 (0.15)</td>
<td>0.17 (0.10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cherry, Allen, Denver, &amp; Holland (2015)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Study 1</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undergraduate students</td>
<td>19-43 years</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>0.54 (0.17)</td>
<td>0.22 (0.11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate students</td>
<td>22-45 years</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>0.54 (0.16)</td>
<td>0.20 (0.12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community adults</td>
<td>20-91 years</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>0.62 (0.16)</td>
<td>0.25 (0.12)</td>
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<td><strong>Study 2</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Undergraduate students (1)</td>
<td>19-38 years</td>
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<tr>
<td>Undergraduate students (2)</td>
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<td>0.58 (0.18)</td>
<td>0.24 (0.13)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Graduate students</td>
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<td>69</td>
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<td>0.56 (0.18)</td>
<td>0.21 (0.11)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Older adults</td>
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<td>Cherry, Brigman, et al. (2016)</td>
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<td>Adolescents</td>
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<td>0.48 (0.15)</td>
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<td>0.55 (0.13)</td>
<td>0.25 (0.12)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Middle-aged adults</td>
<td>43</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>61</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.49 (0.19)</td>
<td>0.28 (0.14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>72</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.49 (0.19)</td>
<td>0.28 (0.14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Papadaki, Plotnikof, &amp; Papadaki (2012)</td>
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<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students</td>
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<td>224</td>
<td>0.63 (0.16)</td>
<td>0.24 (0.11)</td>
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<td>Academic staff</td>
<td>29-62 years</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>0.61 (0.16)</td>
<td>0.26 (0.12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Erwin, Cherry, &amp; Allen (2019)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Females</td>
<td>18-44 years</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>.57 (.16)</td>
<td>.23 (.11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Males</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>.64 (.13)</td>
<td>.33 (.15)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note:* Entries are means and standard deviations.
or conference room at CCCC main campus or satellite campus locations. Table 4.2 presents a more detailed description of the sample and the procedure is summarized in Chapter 3.

Table 4.2. Demographic Characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age (in years)</th>
<th>Gender</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students</td>
<td>205</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Notes.* Students were recruited in Gen Ed courses at CCCC (Sociology, Psychology, History, Biology)

For each item on the ROPE, participants selected one of three response options: Never (scored as 0), Sometimes (scored as 1), or Often (scored as 2). For each participant, scores were summed within each dimension and expressed as a proportion of the highest score possible for that dimension, the standard scoring protocol for the ROPE (see Cherry & Palmore, 2008). Means by group (students, faculty), gender (female, male) and subscale (positive, negative) appear in Table 4.3.

Table 4.3. Summary of ROPE scores

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group / ROPE subscales</th>
<th>Students</th>
<th>Faculty</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Positive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Females</td>
<td>133</td>
<td>0.60 (0.17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Males</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>0.57 (0.19)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Notes.* Entries are means with standard deviations in parentheses.

A 2 x 2 x 2 mixed analysis of variance (ANOVA) with group (student, faculty) and gender (female, male) as between-group variables and subscale (positive, negative) as a repeated measures variable yielded a significant main effect of group, $F (1, 230) = 8.365, p = 0.004$ with higher mean scores for the students (0.42) than the faculty (0.33). The main effect of question
type was also significant, $F(1, 230) = 215.85, p < 0.001$, with participants endorsing positive items ($M = 0.57$) more often than negative items ($M = 0.24$). The interpretation of these effects was qualified by two significant interactions. The Group x Question Type interaction effect was significant, $F(1, 230) = 4.97, p = 0.027$. As can be seen in Figure 4.1, students endorsed positive and negative items more often than did the faculty (p’s < .03). The magnitude of the difference between students and faculty was larger for positive items (a difference of 0.12) compared to negative items (a difference of 0.06), which accounted for the statistical significance of the interaction.

![Figure 4.1. ROPE Subscale x Group Interaction Effect](image)

The Group x Gender interaction effect was also significant, $F(1, 230) = 4.202, p = 0.042$. As can be seen in Figure 4.2, the magnitude of the difference between positive and negative items was greater for females (a difference of 0.35) than it was for males (a difference of 0.30). There were no other significant main effects or interactions in this analysis.
In summary, these findings indicate that the present sample of community college students and faculty are largely similar in comparison with other college student and community-dwelling adult samples employed in previous research (see Table 4.1). That is, most participants endorsed positive items more than negative items. This analysis also yielded two significant two-way interactions, indicating that the relative magnitude of differences between positive and negative items depended on group (students showed a larger difference between positive and negative items than did faculty; see Fig 4.1) and gender (females showed a larger difference between positive and negative items than did men; see Fig 4.2).

Faculty Comments Summary

Twenty-nine faculty provided written responses to a general question directing them to describe their experiences with older adult students. Their responses covered five specific categories: academic performance, motivation, peer interactions, teacher interactions and technology skills. Supporting examples for each category are provided below, identified by participant number only to protect confidentially for faculty participants. The vast majority of
faculty described their older students in positive terms such as eager, organized, dedicated, responsible, prepared, focused, serious, and sometimes wiser. Only four responses included negative comments and all but one of those was balanced with positive comments in the same response.

**Academic performance.** The most common responses described older students as ready and willing to participate fully in their learning experiences. Support included comments about their willingness to ask more questions in class, taking their work more seriously, contributing more during class discussion, and completing assignments on time. Faculty respondents perceive older students as more comfortable and confident asking questions compared to younger students because they are no longer trying to look “cool.” Older students were also described as “drama-free” with a focus on passing the course and striving for good grades, while taking pride in their accomplishments.

Most faculty noted comfort, confidence and pride displayed by their older students, with fewer faculty describing older students as nervous, anxious, and sometimes impatient. Students just returning to the classroom were described as anxious about gaps in their education, nervous about their performance, impatient at things getting sidetracked in class, and being afraid or ashamed of being the oldest one in their class. The most negative comment suggested that older students “say it’s been years to [elicit] sympathy and allow excuses for lack of academic skill” (7). Other faculty who noted lack of academic skill, particularly math skills, suggested that older students “tend to compensate with effort and perseverance” (16). “Unfortunately, most of my oldest students almost always start the semester with great trepidation and low expectations of how they will do in the course” (16).
Motivation. Another theme in the faculty responses focused on perceived motivation in their older students. Older students where described as “there by choice,” “interested in their own success,” “goal-oriented,” and committed to helping themselves. They were described as having a “better perspective on college” and “better life/school balance”. Comments like “taking pride in their accomplishments” and “wanting to be there to succeed, not just a necessary rite of passage” point to internal motivation for their older students.

Peer interactions. Many faculty addressed peer interactions in their comments about older students. While most faculty described peer interactions as healthy and helpful, behaviors described range from nurturing interactions to lack of patience toward younger students. The older students were described as more reserved and serious, holding back on interactions with younger students until they get to know them better. Connections to peers related more to class issues than to leisure pursuits that might spark common interests in the younger students. A different pattern was reported for interactions with other older students in the same class which faculty described as immediate, noting the older students tend to sit together, gravitate toward each other, and congregate in one area of the classroom (usually the front).

Once older students do build relationships with their younger peers, those roles were described as class mother, class father, class grandmother, class leader, and class mentor. One faculty member stated that “some young ones need someone to look up to” (1) and that role is often filled by older students. Another suggested the presence of older students “can create a calming atmosphere because of life experiences” (7). Other faculty described problems that develop when these relationships lack appropriate boundaries. “Older, female students will sometimes try to ‘mother’ their classmates by giving unsolicited advice or rebukes” (25). Another mentioned giving unsolicited resources, along with lack of patience toward younger
students as sometimes problematic in the classroom. Older students were described as more likely to direct their interactions toward their teachers and other older students, with less interaction initiated toward the younger ones.

**Teacher interactions.** Most teachers reported that their interactions with older students differed in several ways from interactions between teachers and younger students. Faculty described older students as easier to relate to because of similarity in ages and because the older students tend to stay after class to seek help, show more willingness to meet teachers outside of class time, and actively seek help in the form of tutoring or recommendations for additional resources.

While described by one professor as treasures (21) in the classroom, older students were also described as easily frustrated if their work and study does not produce the expected positive results and “more open to feedback even to the point of needing more assessment” (16). One faculty described herself as an older student at midlife, pointing out that as an older student she often had to study harder and it took her longer to write papers. Several faculty noted that their older students start out with low expectations of how they will do in class, but respond with more confidence based on feedback from their professors. The lone negative comment on this topic described older students as engaging in behavior to “suck up to teachers”.

**Technology skills.** The most common skill deficiency addressed in faculty comments was concern about technology skills in older students. Comments included a general lack of technology skills, accompanied by lack of patience with technology use, worries about technology in general, struggling with technology requirements for their coursework and concern about the cost of technology upgrades needed to be successful in class.
However, students were also described as determined to catch up on technology skills. One professor described the need to provide help for older students to overcome their “fear and frustration at use and cost of technology” (7). Another described her admiration for the courage older students display in their willingness to learn the new technologies required for the course in spite of their doubts and frustrations with course requirements related to peer interaction and content delivery via technology.

**Student Comments Summary**

One hundred and forty nine of the 205 students who completed the ROPE questionnaire also provided written comments about their experiences with older students in their classes. Ten of those responses were reports of not having seen any older students in class at all. Thirty of the student respondents said their experiences with older students had been the same as with younger students. The majority did report specific differences which included both positive and negative stereotypes about the performance of older students, differences in peer interactions and teacher interactions, as well.

A few of the comments were offered by older students themselves who filled out the questionnaire and added comments related to feeling out of place in the context of school. Problems reported included too much noise in the environment, too much drama between younger students, no place to study in peace and feeling like a guest in the classroom next to the younger students because “it’s their class, I’m just here for the degree” (254). Supporting quotations are identified by participant number only to protect confidentially for student participants.

**Older students as the same.** Students who reported no difference in having older students in the classroom summed up their experiences in different ways and frequently used
minor qualifiers in their statements. One student reported, “They were just people, it was still just a class” (58), while another noted that “They react and interact just like the common college student, but more knowledge than most students” (119). Another student admitted noticing older students in the classroom but said “most of my experiences are like a normal encounter” (200). One described the middle-aged students as “pretty normal” (59) while another said that “older students basically don’t cause any trouble” (124).

Not causing trouble was a theme for other students such as the one who reported that “they mind their own business” (164) and “honestly don’t bug me” (164). Another student commented that “they do not bother me at all” (145), while another found the older students to be the same even after a contradictory experience with one:

Most older students that I have met have been kind and, really, normal. They act like anyone else in the class, no matter the age. I did come across a rude older lady who yelled at people in the class because they were talking, but I consider her an outlier (238).

**Stereotypes and expectations.** The comments from students who perceived older students as different included many examples of stereotypes and expectations that were both positive and negative. The majority of the comments related to positive traits attributed to the older students who were described as more organized, more mature, more serious, wiser, more motivated, more eager to learn, more focused, more devoted, more driven and willing to go above and beyond to earn higher grades. One student reported that older students are “not here to play games” (82) and “don’t pay attention to gossip” (136) in class, while another commented that “they don’t want any distraction” (252). Another reported they “have their priorities together, take care of business, and have their act together” (232).
According to one student, they “work harder because they are wise enough to know how badly they need this degree” (134). Older students were also reported to be good note takers who rarely miss class and are willing to share their notes with other students. One young student actually reported looking for older students in her classes so that she could sit near them “because they know the topic better” (91) and are willing to help others pass the class. This expectation was echoed in this response:

An older woman in my class sits in the front and seems very willing to talk to other people. As to be expected, she is always up-to-date on current political events and is always ready to discuss them. Very wise and smart; again to be expected (239).

For some students the positive expectations were mixed with negative stereotypes as well. One student reported “they are not all just cranky like many would assume, their advice helped me” (187).

Many older students in my classes are very helpful as they are more mature and can often help with any questions I might have missed. On the other hand, some of the middle aged students think they know everything just because they are older. But it’s overall better to have them there (247).

A few younger students did describe the older students as cranky referring to complaints heard frequently about dependency on technology and wishing to go back to paper and pencil methods of the past or complaining about being too old. Other young students viewed the older students they had met as “self-conscious about school and getting work done” (191), taking a long time to understand, and having “trouble learning because they have been out of school” (78). The most negative comment described older students as “slower and they need more reassurance, seem confused a lot of the time, stuck in their ways and beliefs, very open with their opinions, disturbing, off-track, and contribute with wrong views” (141).
Peer interactions. In describing direct interactions between older and younger students, the comments from students focused more often on positive interactions. Many students described their older peers as nicer, sweet, more polite than younger students and always willing to help and to share their life experiences readily. Younger students reported appreciation for older students who are willing to help each other and younger students as well. One participant reported that older students “don’t discriminate – they talk to everyone” (59), and another thought they “show more respect to everyone” (59). Another student described a similar experience, saying they “hold conversations with other students even if they don’t know them personally, and no matter the age difference” (180).

Many students described these interactions as beneficial because they “give greater feedback on assignments and their suggestions are almost always helpful” and “when I’ve needed help, they have good understanding” (236). One student described a “class ‘mom’ brought snacks and shared life stories – fed wisdom and words of advice to help with situations we were going through” (201). Another student reported that older students had provided encouragement when she was overwhelmed with school responsibilities (211). And a student who had shared a classroom with an older student who worked as a law enforcement officer noted it was “nice to bounce ideas off him due to his maturity” (226). These interactions were described as helpful personally, but also helpful because they lead to learning at a deeper level.

Other students commented on the tendency of older students to remain isolated and gravitate toward each other. They were described as staying in their bubble with interactions that could be “awkward at first until you get to know them” (89). Yet some younger students were not so eager to talk to the older students in their classes. A minority of the student respondents referred to older students as “usually cranky, don’t like when younger students laugh and have a
good time” (68) or described experiences where they “butt in to other’s conversations and give unnecessary opinions” or “talk to us like we are their children and give rude opinions” (83). One student commented that older students tend to “generalize the young as lazy and too much into their phones” which she noted as “not fair to those who are not like that” (92).

The most negative comments regarding peer interactions included a single student who described witnessing another young student refuse to work with an older student when the teacher assigned them to a group project together. The other example of a very negative experience came from a very young student in the Early College Option program who felt harassed by older male students flirting and making female students uncomfortable in the classroom. This same 18-year-old student described some older female students as “controlling, acting as if they know better than younger students due to their age” although she also noted “of course, there are middle-age female students that are easy to get along with since they perceive younger students as equals not as lower life-forms” (244).

**Teacher interactions.** Many reported the perception that older students had closer relationships with the teachers. While this was described in positive terms by more students, several specific comments described this as negative. Among the negative comments, one student reported that older students “believe they are entitled (most times) and deserve same respect as teachers because they are older than me” (184). Another student believed the older students “think they know everything – kiss up to teachers” (65) and several students noted the habits of some older students to dominate classroom discussions, to interrupt the teachers more often and to address most of their attention to the teacher rather than class as a whole.

Other students saw the increased interaction between teachers and older students in more neutral terms. “Every now and then the instructor may have to explain something a little more to
them but it is never bad or super time consuming” (182). Another student suggested that older classmates “always seem to want to add to what teachers say (meaningful commentary) & are willing to help students” (155). Many comments described the real life experiences shared by older adults as supplementary to the class content and serving as a bridge between the course content and student understanding.

Expecting older students to enhance classroom learning with their shared experience was also described by a student who offered the example of sharing a business class with two older women who were themselves business owners and able to provide concrete examples to “connect to topics better” (109). Another student with an older male student in his classroom commented that “his speeches were the most interesting because he had a wealth of experience to pull from” (222). These conversations between teachers and older students connecting class content to life experience were mostly viewed as helpful learning experiences with only a few students reporting this experience as holding others back with too much talking in class.

Discussion

Behavior patterns described by both student and faculty comments support the overall assertion that both positive and negative ageist stereotypes exist in this context. Both the survey data (see Table 4.3) and the comment summaries show that more positive stereotypes are present than negative. Comments by both faculty and students recognize the positive impact of older students in the classroom. Darkenwald and Noval (1997) addressed the academic advantage of mixed-age classrooms, finding that academic performance in college is enhanced as the proportion of adults to young people increases in the classroom. “An unexpected finding was the much greater impact of class age composition on academic performance in the community college as opposed to the university setting” (p. 6). Carlan (2001) reports that the younger
students’ performance improved when older students (30+) were present, and that grades decline for mature students isolated in classes where young students are the majority. Mature students seem to encourage both younger classmates and their instructors to work harder (Carlan, p. 171).

Several student and faculty comments suggested that older students do not interact with younger students much and that behavior pattern supported the earlier work by Kasworn and Pike (1994). However, more recent research has separated mixed-age interactions that are social in nature from those related to academics (Lundburg, 2003). This approach has shown that older students engage in academic-based discussions more frequently than do younger students. In the current study, the reported tendency of older students to help younger students was noted as beneficial by the younger students. This help was described in terms of bridging classroom content from the teacher to the younger students and providing real world examples to help younger students understand class concepts. While recognizing the benefit to the younger students, it should also be noted that Lundberg (2003) found peer discussions related to learning and peer teaching were both strong predictors of positive learning outcomes for the older students in her study. Lundberg also identified quality of relationships with administrators and faculty as strong predictors of learning for older students as well.

Faculty comments described older students as more willing to engage outside of class and student comments reported the same. While both faculty and students viewed this behavior as dedicated and driven, a report of the 2005 Community College Survey of Student Engagement suggested that this behavior may actually be compensatory rather than demonstrating a willingness to go above and beyond.

High risk students simply might have to try harder to reach goals that other students can reach with less effort. For instance, a student who is academically underprepared might
need to work outside of class with an instructor to pass a course, while a more thoroughly
prepared student might be able to pass by attending class only (CCSE, 2005, p.3).

This study found that “high-risk students are more likely than lower-risk students to come to
class prepared, interact with faculty outside of class, and use the support services available on
campus,” which may actually illustrate “how large of a disadvantage some students must
overcome to remain enrolled” (p. 3).

Summary

Comments offered by the faculty and students in this project describe mostly positive
expectations and views of older students who are actively engaged in their own learning and
experiencing nurturing relationships with each other, with younger peers and with faculty both in
and outside of the classroom. This would seem to support Walters (2000) description of higher
education as providing a space, and nurturing relationships to enable adult students “to
reconstruct their self-concept, their self-esteem, their meaning perspective, their frame of
reference, their life and other skills, to regenerate their self” (277). These results support the
choice of context for this study of identity construction in community college students at midlife.
Chapter Five. Narrative Interview Findings and Discussion

The concept of plasticity reflects an amazing capacity of humans to change and adapt and is well illustrated in the narratives constructed by students interviewed for this project. Walters (2000) summarizes adult development theories as transitions from one stage to another posing challenges that create stress, but also provide opportunities for growth. “Transitions challenge adults and require them to grow; learning may be one of the ways in which adults facilitate the necessary growth” (p. 271). Addressing the heterogeneity of adult learners and the subjectivity of their educational narratives, Dominicé asserts, “They will never learn the same thing in the same way” as their younger counterparts. Further, their stories show “the complexity of adult learning when it was not related to the planning of a program but to the activity of the learner” (para. 12).

It was this heterogeneity, the continual adaptation to change, and the determination to survive and even thrive that was most evident in the narratives collected for this project. To anticipate, the themes presented here include their experience of and participation in ageist behaviors and attitudes, common deviations from age norms, focus on important relationships in their lives, and encounters with exceptional teachers. Finding meaning in it all requires changes in self-concept and identity construction across middle adulthood.

Ageism as Pervasive

Donaldson and Townsend (2007) reviewed discourse about adult students by focusing on articles published in academic journals. The amount of attention paid to the topic by academic journals in general was described as “slight” and their study reinforced “earlier observations about the marginalization of adult students in the higher education literature” (p. 44), such as those by Quinnan (1997). Donaldson and Townsend identified four categories of discourse about
older students; invisible, acknowledged but devalued, accepted and embraced. Students in the present study reported experiences that cover the same span of responses in stories of their current community college experiences. As noted earlier and elsewhere, ageism exists at both the individual and institutional levels in our society, and internalized ageism also occurs as internal perceptions of our own ability (cf. Cherry & Erwin, 2019). All three levels of ageism were apparent in the data collected from student interviews, as discussed more fully next.

**Internalized ageism.** Internalized feelings of being too old or feeling that others will perceive you as old were expressed in some form by virtually all participants. Even those who had been very good students earlier in life expressed doubts about their current performance in the classroom or their chances of getting hired in a new career field. For instance, Hope described this concern even though she had done very well in school as a younger student, “my thing was, I was kind of nervous, I was like, I’m gonna feel so stupid if I can’t do it.” Faith had already completed one degree as a nontraditional student in her thirties, and was now pursuing another degree in her fifties. She reported “I was more scared walking into a school after twenty years.” August also described her fear at coming back to school in her fifties, “It was scary when I first came. I was like, I don’t know if I can do this.” The most common source of fear and doubt about meeting requirements was reported in relation to math courses, followed by English courses, but Ruby was most afraid of the science courses required in her chosen field.

Most students reported abatement of those initial doubts after completing a semester successfully, but Kendra had mixed results during her first semester back.

I did fairly well with one of my classes and then another class I didn’t do so well with; it was the English course. So I would talk to the teacher and she just was not a fairly friendly teacher, whatever, which it kinda discouraged me a little bit. Like hey, you know what, I been out of school ‘cause I graduated from high school . . . a long time ago. You know, I’ve been out of school for so long, maybe this is just not my thing.
Sissy also expressed age-related doubts about her decision to enroll. “There’s times, I’m not gonna lie, I’m like, man, why am I doing this? I’m almost 50 years old. I’m gonna be 52, 53 by the time I’m gonna get out.” Sissy reported that common concern over her ability to pass the required math courses and described herself crying during her first day in math class while again asking herself, “What am I doing in here?” She ended up dropping the course with plans to take it another semester when her remaining course load is lighter, but still insisted, “I don’t like math; I think it’s absolutely evil.”

Sissy expressed interest in pursuing a teaching degree but considered it out of reach once she realized the number of math and English courses required for that program of study. August also described her doubts about her ability to perform well in English and math. “That’s the two that’s scary.” Glen described wanting to be a doctor when he was younger, but rationalized that he was “too old” to start that now. Nursing “just really seemed like a good fit for me as far as what was achievable for my age.” Faith described experiencing a calling from God to return to school following surgery during a major flood in her area. She reported her initial response as “I’m not going to school, Lord: I’m sorry. I’m fifty-something years old. I’m not going back to school. I’m done.” She also reported her daughter asking, “Why don’t you go back to school for teaching?” Faith’s initial response to her daughter was equally adamant, “Girl, please. I ain’t going back to school, no way.”

Mario lost his train of thought momentarily during our interview and responded with another example of internalized ageism. “There was something else I was about to say and I forgot. Oh my goodness, I think I may be getting old.” Mario also expressed an expectation that he would be the oldest one participating in the graduation ceremony and felt that others
perceived him differently because of his age. “I think the teachers kind of feel sorry for you when you’re older.”

**Individual ageism.** Mario enrolled in a process technology apprenticeship program that included both class time and on-the-job experience within a local petrochemical plant. He viewed this as a way to avoid the individual ageism he anticipated in the hiring process.

I took the apprenticeship because I felt like just trying to get in directly, I felt like it would have been hard. I felt they would have held it against me with my age. [Petrochemical] Plants I was eyeing- I was applying at, like they would have been like, this guy is 37, we won’t get many years out of him . . . With me being there and they seeing what I can do, they’re seeing who I am. Then it’ll probably help me better than just a piece of paper with my age on it.

He also encountered individual ageism from a student during his classroom experience. “I had one instance where a guy, a young guy, called me ‘old school’ and I kind of nipped that in the bud. I was like, hey, my name ain’t Old School”. Evelyn recounted taking a computer class and being the only student without internet access at home. She described the situation as a running joke between other students and the teacher, but didn’t feel like she needed it since she had internet access at school and at her job. She was also concerned about the cost of monthly service, but finally had it installed at home near the end of the semester. She mentioned that she now had home internet access at the next class meeting and her teacher responded by stopping the class to make everyone aware and to announce his “welcome to the 21st century” in front of the entire class. She laughed with them, but reported feeling embarrassed and singled out as “old school” for being the last one connected to the internet at home.

While Evelyn stood out from her peers for general reasons related to technology, Hope reported a very specific problem that she struggled with in her web-based courses. She described
her difficulty uploading her answers from Google Docs or Word documents into the text boxes on the institution’s learning platform.

It looks like it should go like it looks, but when I submit it, the sentence is starting way over here and I don’t know how to format how to do it. I can format it like APA and all that; I can do that. But I don’t know how to use the, to look on the screen like it should. She described actually buying a newer computer in case it was caused by incompatibility with her older model, but the problem persisted. She wished that faculty would:

please answer our questions because even though they may seem like really easy questions to you, we’ve been out of school a long time and we don’t know . . .like something simple: how to cut and paste. I asked a teacher and she kind of treated me like I was an idiot and I don’t know how to cut and paste and put things, but now I’m afraid to ask her when I have to do it so I’m just going blind and I’m getting points taken off.

Sissy also reported feeling like she was treated differently compared to other students although she did not have a specific example to provide. “I’ve had one teacher that was a thorn, man. I will not take him.” “The way he treated me . . . because I wasn’t a little teen-boppy . . you could tell, it was just different.” Sissy also reported experiences with teachers that were helpful and affirming. Her best experiences were with teachers who had been older students themselves at some point along their own career paths. Teachers with a more traditional career path seemed more likely to have classroom policies that did not mesh well with the caregiving or career obligations of their older students. Ruby described losing participation points every day “because the class was from 2:30 and my kids were getting off the bus at 2:25. I would have to go home and then double back and come right back… the points were being docked every time.” She felt that a grace period of at least ten minutes should be allowed, but the policy stated that “If you were late, even if you came, but you were late, you got nothing for the points that way.”

Faith worked part-time in the student services office of the institution while also enrolled as a student. She reported watching ageist behaviors among her coworkers at the sight of older
students even walking in to the office for help. “I’ve seen a lot of times when the older students come . . . their [staff member’s] facial expression be like, here she come again. No.” These older student experiences do not convey a feeling of being accepted or embraced in this context.

Another form of individual ageism was clearly evident in the interviews as well. The older students commonly reported their own ageist attitudes about the younger students in their classes. Although most reported having good relationships with all of their classmates, it was common for frustrations to be reported as well. According to Glen,

they play on their phone, they kind of just, they don’t really ask questions . . . they’re just there because I feel like it’s expected of them to be there. So it’s not that want or that need. . . The younger crowd is there because probably parents are making them go to college. Oh you need a degree and they’re probably burnt out.

August also referred to younger students with stereotypical language. “A lot of young people don’t come to class. And the older ones do. And like I say, a lot of them just don’t do their work, the younger ones don’t.”

As noted in the last chapter, young students had complained about feeling stereotyped and talked to as if they were children by some of the older students. Faith provided a clear example of that behavior in her story. She admitted telling students repeatedly throughout the semester to close their mouths and listen, along with asking them “How you gonna learn anything if you can’t-if you don’t keep your mouth closed?”. Over the course of the semester her patience dissipated:

You could hear ‘em before you open the door, just a yapping. I walked in there; I was just fed up. It was the end of the semester and I was fed up. I turned around, I said, ‘Would ya’ll shut up? Look, I don’t want to hear your sex life. Nobody wanna hear what ya’ll did the night before. Half of ya’ll can’t spell sex in here and wanna talk about what ya’ll did. Nobody wanna hear that; keep it to yourself. Half of ya’ll didn’t brush ya’ll teeth and ya’ll breath in somebody’s face. Keep your mouth closed. I have tolerated ya’ll the whole semester. Today is a day I’m fed up with ya’ll. Enough is enough. Professor
come in class and ya’ll still talking. He gotta tell ya’ll hide ya’ll phones. He ain’t stupid; they know how you be under the desk hiding your phone. Give [them] some more credit’.

In addition to her attempts to correct their classroom behavior, she also described greeting younger student in the lounge area. “Hey baby, how are you? Get off the table.” She went on to describe her disbelief at what she perceived as a lack of respect when she sees “kids hanging out in student lounge and I’ll come in there and tell ‘em, I say, ‘Get off the table.’ ‘Watch your mouth.’ ‘This is not at your house.’”.

Kendra also admitted to asking the younger students to be quiet in her math class when “we sat behind some guys and they were running their mouth.” “I’m like, ‘Ya’ll supposed to be listening!’ and they just yabba yabba yabba”. In the previous chapter both faculty and students reported noticing the tendency of older students to sit in the front of the classroom. Kendra described the importance of her seating preference:

Sometimes the younger students, they talk too much so it’s like, like for psychology, I know I have to be on time so I can get [air quotes] MY seat. You know, in the front. I like to sit in the front. But yesterday, I sat next to these guys, they just on their computers talking about some video game. So, I’m like, “Please be quiet. I’m trying to listen to myself.”

Mario described feeling a desire to tell younger students to be quiet, “I’m in the front like, I wish they would shut up.” However, he resisted the urge because he felt like it was “their classroom” and “at one time that was me in the back of the class talking.”

In addition to experiencing individual ageism within the college, some students reported receiving ageist responses to their enrollment decision at home as well. Evelyn described a conversation with her father who asked, “Why are you going to school at 52 years old? You only gonna work for like, what, 10 years as a nurse?” After responding that she might like it and want to work longer than that he asked her, “What are you gonna do, have a walker in the hall?”
She does not see her age as a deterrent and also described three contacts in her intended field that have all offered variations on this reported response: “Go to school, get your license. Get your LPN license and when you get your LPN license, call me.” She reported one such offer in hospice care, another from a director of a wound care facility, and a third from a supervisor at a skilled care facility.

Glen also described the response of his father. “I feel like my dad didn’t get it at first. Really, he kind of thought it was a mistake”. Renée cried while describing the response she received from a cousin who questioned her judgment in enrolling, “Oh you going back to school, again?” Her cousin had responded that way many years earlier during another attempt at pursuing her college dreams, yet years later it still stung enough to make her cry while reporting it during our interview.

**Institutional ageism.** Institutional ageism can occur without intention by acts of commission or omission (Palmore, 1999). Design of learning environments and creation of institutional policies that fail to consider the needs of older learners can create barriers and hassles for some students even when that was not the specific intention of the designers or policy makers. Students interviewed for this project described problems encountered with climate, space, furniture, computers, and policies created with younger students in mind.

Faith addressed the design and structure of the student lounge on campus through a lens of personal experience with age-related changes in physical performance. The student lounge is furnished with stylish contemporary taller, bar-height tables and chairs that typical younger students mount and dismount with ease. Faith described the furniture with disdain, mentioning her severe arthritis and related mobility issues, along with the ten minute break scheduled between classes. She rolled her eyes, saying, “It’s not like I can get way up there then hop down
and run to class in ten minutes.” A similar observation was made in reference to the student scheduling computers that line the wall on a tall standing-desk-height ledge along the wall in the main student services office. Younger students can easily walk up to the computers and sign themselves up for classes or testing sessions. Older adults with more health issues, who may also need more time to compensate for lack of computer skills, experience discomfort at the standing desks and would prefer an arrangement that would allow them to sit while scheduling. The option to schedule sitting down is provided a few doors down the hall at computers set up in the disability services office, but this arrangement further reinforces the tendency to equate normal aging processes with disability.

Along with furniture clearly designed for young students, the student lounge also poses a problem with lack of quiet spaces for serious students who actually want to study while they lounge between classes. Faith described the problem: “You hear a lot of profanity, cussing, sitting on tables, they done pulled all the tables together.” Sissy also reported a similar experience:

I don’t feel comfortable going in there because eyes are on me . . . You hear kids talking about what they did for the weekend, or this one broke up with this one, or she likes she or he and he fought, just totally different, you know? I wish they had a lounge for the older students, who can go in and sit down and study. You know, you can’t go study in there. I’ve tried that; you can’t do that. I mean it’s just—it’s hard. It would be nice to have a little spot for the older students, because when you see an older student coming back, to me, they’re serious.”

After giving up on the idea of studying in the student lounge, Sissy described her attempt to study in the library:

I went into the library because I thought, that’s a place where there’s quiet. I go in there and they got teenagers talking about what they did for the weekend. I wanted to get up and I’m like “What?!” So I just kind of looked over at ‘em, I didn’t do anything and I just was like, “Come on, man!” And they finally was quiet. That’s a rule, Ok, you don’t talk in the library! It’s a place where you can study; even there it was kind of hard.
When asked about whether the library staff was helpful in enforcing the quiet zone, she responded: “No they were pretty loud too. Yeah, let’s go eat tonight at the – whatever it was. Yeah, I couldn’t really . . . when I study I like to be quiet.”

Training for advisors and student support personnel was also identified as a source of frustration by many of the students interviewed. According to Glen, advisors assume all students have been prepared like high school kids coming straight from their school counselors’ offices.

. . . to me there wasn’t enough guidance for somebody that’s never done this before . . . I guess [ ] a lot of the colleges and community colleges – really bank on the high schools kind of helping and guiding the students towards what they need to do. So as somebody’s that’s never gone to college and never had that opportunity, I was absolutely lost.

He went on to describe what he felt older students need in the advising office. “Especially if it’s a first time older student, I would say detail, detail, detail. Don’t just assume that they’re gonna put two and two together.”

While working in the student services office between classes, Faith saw this same problem over and over with older students. The information that is provided to students often assumes a basic level of understanding that is not necessarily in place for all students. She suggested the instructions need be to more user friendly for older students. “You know, you tell them that you have the website, the username and the password is there, but you don’t tell them how to log on to, okay; you once you do that, go to this, go to that.” She described the confusion caused by the lack of step-by-step instructions as compounded for older students because of the difference in the ways the website loads on cell phones compared to desktop computers. “Some of the older people have not even had computer-they’re not computer savvy. It’s different on your phone as opposed to a human-sized computer.” With more and more services now being offered exclusively in web format, she described the school website as hard to navigate. “You’d
be amazed how many phone calls I’m getting” asking for help with navigation to services like placement testing.

Sissy suggested navigational tools in written format should be provided for older students, “Pamphlets! Pamphlets. Do you need help with financial aid? Do you need tutors and where can you find them? Do you just need a hug? Do you need some encouragement?” In describing her coworkers’ impatience at helping confused older students, Faith said:

Just because you sit down and have computer savvy and technology all day, some of us don’t have that luxury. Some of us don’t have a laptop; some of us don’t have a computer. We have our phones and that’s it. So I think the school needs to invest in more self-sufficient, step-by-step protocol to help the elderly students to where they don’t have to be ashamed to say, “I don’t understand.” . . . take the time and show them. . . what might be common sense to some, the older generation don’t think of it.

August described completing her placement test only to be directed to a required but confusing process of self-tutoring to prepare for retesting.

They told me when I started, because I didn’t pass the math Accuplacer test, that I had to go to the back, and go to the class, pay for tutoring back there . . . I paid and I went but back there it’s like you’re on your own anyways. They give you sheets to do and I was like, ‘well, I don’t know how to do this’, . . . and they were like, ‘Well, you just Google it online.’ . . . she just gave me a website to go to and look at a video online and try to learn it on my own with the people online.

Luckily for August, she eventually found a human tutor available in the TRIO office. This office administers federal outreach programs that provide support services for individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds. These federal programs identify and assist students who are first generation college students, low-income individuals, or students with disabilities (US Dept. of Ed.). Many of the students interviewed for this project noted the importance of the TRIO office in supporting their efforts but design limitations were noted there as well. As Faith described, “If you gonna tutor me in math, I need a cubicle by myself. I need a designated spot for tutoring, not
just one big ole open space because the tutoring—everybody comes in there to type their paper, to print up something—it’s a distraction.”

Many students also report first hearing about support services by accident from other students, rather than from college personnel. August reported hearing about TRIO from other students in a class, finding out about a financial support option from another student in line at a food truck in the school parking lot, and hearing about another essay scholarship option from a different student in another class. Suggesting that this information should be readily available and centralized, August stated, “When you first come to school I thought maybe they should do a class and say if you need help with this since you’ve been out of school longer, we have this that could help you or that.” Glen reported seeking advice from friends who had returned to school as older students because they were better equipped to understand the obstacles he faced compared to the advisors on campus.

Another example of institutional policies that seem to lack consideration for older students was related to the timing of course offerings. Both Hope and Kendra described enrolling in two institutions at the same time to get the courses they needed, a patterned referred to as “swirl” enrollment (CCSE, 2005). Attendance at multiple institutions may be necessary for older students to find specific courses available at the times they need. Kendra used dual enrollment as a tool to exceed the maximum credit limit allowed per semester so she could accelerate her progression through the degree program. Course cycling schedules can also be problematic for students who may need to wait a full year for a course to be offered again or for students who find themselves missing a required course when they apply for transfer to another institution or professional training program.
Glen described the problem he encountered when a required course was cancelled at the last minute during his summer semester. Referring to his fall schedule, “I have English, College English, um, College Algebra, I want to say Music Appreciation and Intro to Biology. So it’s a pretty meaty schedule.” He described having the Music Appreciation class originally planned for his summer schedule, but moving it to fall after he was told he needed to take a College Skills course required of all freshmen. The College Skills course was then cancelled, leaving him short on class credits going forward. “So they kind of messed me up. ‘Cause I was originally planning to take three and now I only got two, so now I’m kind of worried I might miss that cut off for the nursing application”. Having to make up the missed credits for one class could leave him off cycle for his transfer plans.

[I am worried] that I won’t have the required courses in order to apply because it’s only for once a year. Because I’m doing a transfer to [a larger community college] for their ASN program so it looks like they only have it during the spring so if I don’t have the required courses when they’re doing it, then I’m sitting on my hands for a year.

**Age Norms**

The very terms used to describe older students such as ‘mature student’ and ‘nontraditional student’ imply their enrollment fails to conform to age norms (Walters, 2000). Neugarten (1968) used the term “social clock” to refer a social framework that is based on expectations for timing specific life events, such as completing one’s education, marrying, becoming a parent, establishing a career and retiring.

Men and women are not only aware of the social clocks that operate in various areas of their lives but they are also aware of their own timing and readily describe themselves as *early* or *late* or *on time* with regard to family and occupational events (p. 144).

While there is considerably less agreement today compared to the past on the correct age or sequence for these milestones, age norms are still internalized as social conventions and those
whose lives are not in sync with those norms experience more stress according to Neugarten (1986).

Students interviewed for this project recounted many instances of life experiences out of sync with common age norms. As mentioned in Chapter Two and reviewed here, midlife has been described by developmental psychologists as a time for peak career achievement, increased marital satisfaction, complex caregiving responsibilities, changes in gender roles, and increased religiosity. It has been recognized as a time for focusing on generativity or leaving behind a legacy for the next generation (Erikson, 1968; Santrock, 2019; Whitbourne & Whitbourne, 2011). All students in this project described atypical patterns for at least one of these areas, and most identified more than one.

**Marriage or partner relationships.** Only one participant in this study reported a long-term successful relationship as part of their experience in middle adulthood. Most participants described their current relationships as second or third marriages or partnerships based on understandings outside of traditional legal marriage. While many of the participants described their current partners as supportive, several described past relationships that were anything but healthy and supportive. Faith reported her 32-year marriage at the very beginning of her narrative, describing her husband as part of her biggest support group and one of her biggest fans. Kendra described herself as a single-parent “because my guy-friend, he plays basketball overseas. So he’s away for nine months out of the year and so during those nine months, I’m here and it’s, you know, school time. He’s only really here for the summer.” She described that arrangement as helpful to have him gone during the main semesters so she can focus on her schoolwork.
That helps unless I take summer school because he’s here over the summer so it’s kinda
difficult when he’s here because he’s wanting attention, he’s wanting to go do this, he’s
wanting to take this trip here, “let’s take the kids here, let’s do this,” like he’s wanting to
do all these things, but well I’m like, “Hey, I got a midterm. I can’t really go, you know?”

Hope described her relationship with her current partner as stressed by school
responsibilities as well.

When I was in school last year, my fiancé ended up cheating on me because I didn’t have
any time for him. Well, my grandson got kidnapped by his real dad for a month and then
I was busy with that and school. And I left him lonely; no I’m not blaming myself, that’s
a crock of crap. [Laughs] I know who did it. I know who’s wrong, but um, yeah, so we’ll
figure out what we’re doing, yeah. You know, sometimes I don’t get supper done like I
should and the house might not be clean, but you know, this is only two years or three or
four years total of my life, you know, I really don’t see the big deal if the kitchen’s dirty,
you know? We have a camp we go to also, well he wants me to every weekend and
sometimes I just don’t have the time.

Despite his infidelity, she reported her efforts to maintain the relationship by looking for some
sort of portable wi-fi access device. This would allow her to accompany him weekly to the camp
yet keep up with her homework assignments in her web courses, even though the location of the
camp is so far out in the wilderness that it can only be reached by boat. “I mean, I need every
moment I can, you know, with those books. I’m taking four classes.”

Mario described his new marriage of just a few years in very positive terms. “I’ve got the best
wife in the world, so she was like real understanding.” After a dozen years as a single father
Mario had recently remarried and was interviewed at the completion of his degree program with
the risks and sacrifices already behind him. Glen also described his marriage as supportive, but
like Mario, this was not a long-term first marriage maturing at midlife, but a relatively new union
into a blended family situation. For Glen, the struggle to find a good balance between
relationship, family and school responsibilities had “caused some tension and some fights, but
she understands. It’s just frustrating for her.” He also credited his wife’s support and willingness
to tutor him as the reason he tested well in English (even though he failed every English class he took in high school) and tested just below college algebra on his placement exams (even though he struggled with math throughout high school). Although their marriage is young, he explained his wife’s willingness to support his educational goal as a reaction to her own negative experience with her abusive ex-husband. Glen’s new wife had attended a nursing program as a single parent before they met and made it through in spite of her ex-husband’s attempts to sabotage her efforts.

He did everything he could to try to keep her from succeeding, like he would show up the day she had to go to school and it was supposed to be his day to watch the baby and he would just drop the baby off with her at school just so she would kind of be stuck in a rock and hard place.

Sissy also described her current relationship as supportive. “My husband is real good in math so that’s a blessing; my husband’s a school teacher and a football and basketball coach.” However this is also a newer relationship and she described an earlier marriage that ended in a difficult divorce. She had started college at the age of 30 and I had gone probably three or four semesters and my son was still in diapers. My daughter [name] was probably nine years old, ten years old when my husband started having an affair with his coworker. She was married and had two little boys. She left her husband, her two little boys for my husband and it really broke me; I couldn’t function, I couldn’t do it. I couldn’t go to school and my dreams were set on hold.

Evelyn described her relationship experience through tears, “It’s been a long road for me . . . a long, long, long, long, long, road. Um, I’m at a good place, I’m at a real good place. Been many, many dark times.” Those “dark times” included 17 years spent in an abusive relationship, being left as a single mom of one child followed by being left again five years later as a single mother of three. She reported suffering “really bad mentally” for a specific four year period that included being hospitalized 12 times within two years. However, she did find the help that she
needed to put those “dark times” behind her and reported that she is currently in a relationship that has lasted nine years with a man who does not raise his voice, ever. “There’s not a mean bone in his body. I have never heard him holler, I’ve never heard him lose his cool. I’ve never heard anything like that.” She also reports that he helps her with her English assignments and after she writes out her papers by hand, “he types them up ‘cause I’m not computer savvy. In fact, he helped me with my computer class, too. I’m not computer savvy. Some things I get, some things I don’t get.”

August reported a long term relationship earlier in life when she and her husband were both attending college as traditional students until she got pregnant. Their plan was for her to work since she had the better job and raise the baby while her husband finished school and then she would return to school while he worked. However, that did not work out because “he was playing around, wasn’t doing what he was supposed to be doing. He went to [two universities] and still didn’t get a degree; he didn’t finish.” By the time he eventually quit going to college, they had four children and it didn’t seem possible for August to return to school even though her husband did accept a full-time job.

Eventually they divorced and August moved out of state to put her children in a better public school system. She had just recently moved back home so her youngest daughter could attend her preferred university. August would like to transfer and continue her education at that same state institution her daughter is currently attending, but the cost puts that dream out of reach for her. “I know I can’t go there and send my daughter. . . I wish I could, if I had help far as finances, if I had a mate, somebody else just to help with the bills then I would go and do my Bachelor’s.”
For the remaining two participants, romantic relationships were barely mentioned in their stories at all. Ruby described her attempts to attend school earlier in comparison to her current enrollment, “Now, I don’t have the stress of the bad relationship that I was in throughout all of that schooling.” She expressed relief that “I don’t have anybody that’s pressuring me to worry about what they have going on, and it’s just, everything is better now that I’m older.” She reported having “a supportive mate now” and described attending college with four older children like a breeze for me. It’s very comfortable for me: I feel like I can focus more. I don’t have that heavy duty of changing a diaper, going to get this and this and that, or an ex-fiancé fussing with me because of a bad day at work or something like that, that’s throwing me off of my schoolwork.

For Renée, her reference to romantic relationships filled less than one line of text in a 12-page transcript of her life story. She described her experience with completing a training program for medical assistants at a small medical training college. Although she had successfully completed all of the course requirements, she was unable to pass the certification exam. “That’s when I started back to work and then I was dating a guy. That’s a whole other story; it’s not even about school.”

**Family and caregiving responsibilities.** In addition to romantic relationships, respondents also discussed their relationships with children, siblings, parents, and extended family members. As noted earlier, developmental psychologists often refer to middle-aged adults as the ‘sandwich’ or ‘squeeze’ generation. This is a reflection of the complex caregiving responsibilities commonly associated with being sandwiched or squeezed between expectations of caring for both the younger and older generation at the same time. While age norms generally assume childcare duties begin in early adulthood, and elder care duties begin in middle
adulthood, many of these narratives described extensive variation in timing of these life events. Variations included very early unplanned pregnancies, infant care later in life as the result of new marriages, responsibilities for adult family members during early adulthood and even assuming responsibility for the care of an older family member during childhood.

Hope described one of the most atypical variations on age norms when she discussed growing up with her grandmother. Because of chronic health issues, Hope assumed responsibility for her grandmother’s physical care starting at the age of nine. “I lived there; I took care of her, I cooked for her, I got in the bathtub and bathed her, you know, I did everything for her.” Her grandmother passed away when Hope was 14 and she was given a choice of living with her biological parents whom she did not know or going into the foster care system. Choosing to live with her parents, she moved to the city where they lived and experienced what she referred to as a “very big culture shock.”

Evelyn described an early start on independent adulthood after her dad kicked her out of the house when she was 16 years old. She has moved a total of 21 times during her 52 years so far, but also describes her father as helping with many of those moves. They have successfully reconciled since her teenage years when she was banished from his home. She explained

He had a reason. He had a reason according to his standards, I guess you could say. He regrets it to a certain extent because it didn’t end well. It didn’t end well, you know, the marriage didn’t end well, and what I went through from the time he kicked me out to the time I divorced that person, it wasn’t good. And he blames himself, but I don’t blame him. I say, ‘Don’t blame yourself’.

She described her father as currently very supportive of her educational plans and “just happy now that he doesn’t have to worry about me as far as my mental state.” In addition to the period she described earlier as “dark times,” Evelyn admitted that she went several years without being
able to care for her own children and cried as she described the years she can’t get back with them.

Being a mom, you know like an everyday, waking-up-to-my-kids mom. I was in their life those years, but not as an everyday mom. They all three- I have one son with the first marriage and I have two children out of another relationship. So my oldest son went [ ] to live with his grandmother. And my other two sons went to live with their father during the dark time. That’s years I can’t get back. [Crying].

She has reconciled her relationship with all three children at this point in life but they do not all speak to each other which is a source of stress and concern. As Evelyn explained, her children’s differences lie in difficulty accepting the gender transition of one sibling who now identifies as non-binary and prefers the pronoun “they.” Evelyn reported struggling to understand this child’s transformation and to learn to pronounce the new self-proclaimed name. She also discussed traveling to another state to visit and work at maintaining a relationship with that child, while protecting their choices and their privacy from other family members who do not accept the changes. “It was hard to go from looking at your child with blond hair and blue eyes, your son with hair pulled back in a ponytail, who now wears makeup. Um, boots, high heels, Spandex, leggings, dresses-that was hard and I didn’t tell my family.” In addition to working on her relationship with her grown children, working full time and attending school full time, Evelyn also reported helping to care of her grandchildren. “I have grandbabies here that I take care of on Sunday nights and part of Monday to give my daughter-in-law a break.”

Renée reported being her mother’s only child although she does have siblings on her father’s side who reside in another state. She lives with her young daughter and her mother, who is a college graduate. Renée reported both of them as inspiration for pursuing a degree since her mother has always pushed her to go to school. Renée has actually attended school many times, but now sees her daughter as inspiration to work at completing a degree.
I want to be able to provide for her. I don’t want to work two or three jobs and not be able to be in her life. Or just to be struggling to pay rent and working and having her here and there for somebody to watch her. So while she’s young she’s three, I wanna—you know, I want to graduate with my Bachelor’s and possible Master’s and my PhD, along down the line.

Trying to arrange quiet time for homework is a struggle for Renée but she reported a unique solution to balancing her relationship with her family and her need to complete her coursework for school. With her daughter now enrolled in preschool, she leaves her college campus early in the afternoon after her tutoring sessions and goes directly to her daughter’s school even when dismissal time is hours away. “I’ll just sit there in my car for about two hours and do my psychology homework. So I’m kind of multitasking so it’s just that I have that gap.” After picking up her daughter, they go home, have a snack, take their baths, prepare supper, read, write or color together before washing dishes and picking up toys. She generally falls asleep when she puts her daughter to bed at 8:00, but sets her alarm for midnight to get up and finish her homework.

Saving the “easy work, like English and psychology” for the afternoon carpool study time, Renée works on math at night when she needs the quiet time with no distractions. She reported working for a couple of hours each night. “My body kind of shuts down around 2:00. So I just close the laptop, close my book, go to sleep and wake up [at 5:00] and start over again.” She also reported drinking Red Bull, taking multi-vitamins, and thanking God that she doesn’t get sleepy while driving on the road, “because I don’t want to crash or have a breakdown.”

Ruby reported finding it easier to focus on school now that her four children are older after leaving school earlier in life to care for her children.

If I would’ve stayed in school or tried to stay in school, I wouldn’t have been the parent that I am. I would have been too focused on trying to complete the work, complete the work, complete the work when I wouldn’t have, I would’ve lacked in one or the other, so
I choose to do the children over the schooling. [ ] The only thing that I kind of battle with for school is just their football, volleyball, or track . . . all of their extra things that I may have to stop in the middle of homework to go and take them.

Ruby’s oldest child will start high school at the Early College Option program beginning in the fall semester on the same campus where her mother is currently enrolled. While her daughter is reportedly a little unsure about sharing a campus with her mother, Ruby is excited to have her daughter nearby. She is proud of her daughter’s choice to enter the program that will culminate in earning both a traditional high school diploma and a two-year Associate’s degree during the four year course of attending the high school.

While Ruby expressed comfort in her choice to focus on school now that her children are older, she also admitted feeling like she is neglecting them at the same time.

My children do kind of “Hey, Mom, we’re here. Can we go somewhere?” You know, I’m kind of lacking in that area, but I told them that once I did graduate, I would take a little time with them. They won’t even have me for the summer because I’m going to school in the summer.

Glen described himself as the primary caregiver for his 10-month-old daughter after he left his job to become a full-time student. He routinely cares for his daughter while his wife works as a nurse and only leaves the baby to attend class or to drive for hire late at night when his wife is home sleeping. He described feeling guilty “about just shuttling the baby off to a family member” when he is home studying, so he devotes as much time as he can to her care while keeping up with his course load.

It’s been very hard because to do this, I had to leave my job because it wasn’t a flexible schedule. So, I left a job that was paying me over a hundred thousand dollars a year to now I’m doing Uber and Lyft and I’m struggling to make ends meet. It’s very stressful. It’s hard finding somebody to watch my daughter while I do this. And it’s very stressful: like I broke down Friday night because it’s just, it’s a lot on my shoulders.
He described a fear that he might not be around to watch his daughter grow up as the precipitating factor in his decision to return to school. The inherent danger of his previous career did not bother him before becoming a father. “I kind of just had this daredevil kind of attitude to my life, like if it happens it happens. Like, oh ok, I get shocked or I get injured on a job, oh well, you know, it is what it is; it’s part of the job.” He described a complete change in that attitude once his daughter arrived. “I just can’t imagine her growing up without a father. I can’t imagine not seeing her grow up.”

In addition to the danger of that profession, he also described the work schedule as incompatible with the type of parent he wanted to be for his daughter. Glen noted that his father had built a career at the same company.

Phone company did great bringing us up, but I never saw my dad. You know, it was a lot of overtime to make good money and you don’t really have much of a home life. The divorce rate is incredibly high for that company because of it.

Glen described his father’s choice as “chasing the dollar” and reported “which is great, I mean, we had everything growing up, but I didn’t have that close bond with my dad.” He expressed a desire for a different type of relationship with his own daughter, “I don’t want to be like my dad where I don’t have any memories of my dad really playing with me.”

Glen had dropped out of high school during his senior year and also desires a different path for his young stepson who reportedly hates school. Glen reported concern that his stepson may be old enough to see their current financial struggle even though his infant daughter will still be too young to remember it by the time he finishes school and begins his nursing career. Hoping to be a good example for the second grader, Glen tries to explain to him in simple terms why school is so important. “I tell [him] all the time, ‘Do your homework. This video game . . . it’s not gonna matter in ten years, but this homework that you’re learning right now is gonna be
with you forever.” Wishing someone had given him the same speech before he dropped out of high school, Glen realized that he had probably disappointed his parents when he dropped out. However, he reported that they had never pushed him or talked to him about the importance of his education.

Sissy also recounted dropping out of high school, but did so at the urging of her father who reportedly told his kids they didn’t need school because he made eighty thousand dollars a year without it.

This may sound strange, but my dad always encouraged me to quit school. My dad left us when I was around 13. He was very abusive; he beat us unmercifully all the time, and we were often told as kids that we would never amount to shit, and when you hear that enough, you start to believe it.

She eventually followed his advice and quit school in the 11th grade, reportedly breaking her mother’s heart in the process. “And the reason why, come to find out, he wanted me to quit school is because he didn’t have to pay child support for me anymore.”

At the age of 23, after securing her Graduate Equivalency Diploma and enrolling in Beauty School, Sissy struggled with transportation issues that interfered with her ability to attend the classes. She approached her father for help with new tires for her car only to be told that she should be asking her boyfriend for assistance instead. After explaining to her father that she was not dating anyone and not interested in dating anyone because she was working hard to focus on completing the requirements of her training program, she reported receiving the following response, “I don’t care who you have to fuck to get your tires, that’s how it’s done.”

Despite this lack of parental support, Sissy eventually completed her training program and began her career as a hair dresser. As described in the last section of this report, she quit college to focus on her children and worked two jobs to support their care after her husband left
when she was thirty. Now that her children are grown and she has a new marriage partner, she has returned to school. At the age of 49 she plans to pursue her dream of working with underprivileged children “because I know what it’s like to be beat and put down and [told] you’re never gonna be anybody.” She also described her close relationship with two brothers. One brother has an Associate’s Degree and she reported telling her mother, “You know I’m a have to out-do [my brother], you know, that’s just how it is.” Her other sibling has a job that pays well, but she reported that he is too smart to not be in school and she frequently encourages him to pursue his own educational dreams.

Faith reported mostly healthy relationships with her parents growing up and happy interactions with her grandmother. She reported starting an in-home nursery watching other people’s kids when her own daughter was a single mother and needed childcare assistance in order to work. Setting strict limits on childcare assistance when Faith became a mother earlier in life, Faith’s own mother said, “I’ll only watch the baby for two reasons. Go to school and work. Anything else, I’m not doing it.” Faith set the same limits on childcare help with her daughter adding the stipulation that she would consider other requests for help, but only if the request was given two weeks in advance. “I’ll say, ‘Okay, I’m not saying yes, I’m not saying no; I’ll let you know.’ And they know don’t ask me every day. If you worry me about it my answer is gonna be no.”

Kendra described herself as a “spoiled brat coming out of high school” who enrolled in college to keep her parents happy. “The only thing I knew was that I did not want my allowance to stop.” She admitted that those early years were filled with more partying than studying.

Then of course, I was in a relationship with a guy that I had been dating since high school I wound up getting pregnant and I’ve always been that person that if I create a problem I gotta fix that problem. You know, not calling my baby a problem you know, but she’s my
responsibility. So I was like, no more school for me, I guess it’s to work so here goes. And then I didn’t want my parents to take care of me and a child that I created, so I started working full time.

That first baby was followed soon after with another and the second baby was very sick with respiratory issues. After losing her job due to repeated absences, Kendra vowed to work only for herself moving forward. “I am never working for a company again that don’t understand that you gotta take care of your babies.” She started her own commercial cleaning business, with the help of her godmother, whom she had worked for occasionally as a teenager. “I took my whole [tax refund] check and invested it into myself. My first project I got was the new courthouse they built downtown, [District #] Judicial Courthouse. I made $102,000 on that project.” This provided the flexibility in scheduling that she needed to care for her children while providing the income that she needed to support them as well.

While the business grew very successful and one more child joined the family, Kendra described feeling burnt out after years of physical labor and too much time away from her children; “Then my kids, ‘Mommy, you know we know that you work hard to provide us all these things, but we just want you.’ And whenever you hear that you’re like, ‘You know what? I want you too, a little bit more’ So that’s where it’s at.” Returning to school also allowed Kendra more time to help her son who has dysgraphia. It also helped her to be available to her children when they pass childhood illnesses back and forth to each other, which she described as a common occurrence. Kendra also reported early responsibilities for the care of adult family members. “I have a brother who has mental issues. . . I was 18 when he first moved in with me . . . he’s still there. So, I can’t do that math right now, but it’s a lot of years.” She can usually handle him on her own, but when he gets off his medication she knows how to file an Order of
Protective Custody to get him the institutionalized care he needs until he can “get back on track to be able to live out in the real world freely.”

Mario also reported family responsibilities as his main motivation for returning to school. After many years as a single father of one son, he had recently married a woman with two daughters of her own. He now had three additional people to provide for and a new baby on the way. “It was a financial decision for me and the family. We could’ve made it but I wouldn’t be comfortable the way I was used to living.” With the older children, Mario felt a responsibility to include them in the family financial decisions to prepare them for the short-term changes and for their own future.

I had a talk with him, and the girls, but I figure with him being a man in the future, he’ll need to know this kind of stuff. Look at the things we did while I was making this. We gonna take a step back, but once I finish, we gonna be making three or four times this. So think of the things we’re gonna be able to do in the future.

Mario also reported grilling his kids often about their own educational plans. “What do you plan on doing after school? You don’t want to be like me 37 and just going back to school. So I would kind of throw that out there all the time.” He was laughing when he reported that their oldest daughter “wants to go into nursing” and that his son is interested in engineering as a second choice. “He wants to go to the NFL. Yeah, I’m like, ‘Man, you need a backup plan ‘cause you not that good.”

When it came time to actually experience that “step back,” Mario said he was proud for not making them suffer too much. “It was nothing that they understood, so they were kind of like a trip that we would have taken, we just didn’t mention it to them or something like that.” He could only think of one direct example that may have made an impression on his son when his son called saying “Dad, I need you to buy me a TV. My TV went out, I need you to buy me a
TV while you’re in [Big City].” Mario responded, “[Son’s name], it’s not a pair of socks, some underwear. I can’t just go and get you a TV.” Mario also reported that he did not originally plan to walk in the graduation ceremony, but changed his mind because he “felt like with the two oldest- 16 and 14- that’ll be something good for them to see.” Mario described his parents as very supportive. “My parents played a big role so it was kinda like they knew what I was doing, so if it came to a point where I needed some help, they were there for me a lot.”

August also reported early support from extended family. Her grandfather had saved money from when she was a baby for her to go to the college of her choice and she chose a “Stewardess College” in a neighboring state. However, before she could begin the program, “He paid for it and I got pregnant so I couldn’t go. And they gave them some of the money back, but not all of it. And he said, ‘So, since you’re not going to college, this is my money.’ And he took it and spent it.” August had a total of four children and three of them had recurring medical issues. One daughter had asthma, her youngest had sickle cell disease, and a middle child developed a seizure disorder after playing football in middle school. She chose to attend college once her youngest child asked to move back to their home state to attend a university there. August has recently experienced the death of her father and two siblings, one from a combination of chronic health conditions and the other from an unexpected accident. She said the move back to her home state positioned her to help more with her mother’s care now that her brothers are gone. She also reported that one of her sons lives with her along with his infant daughter and the baby’s mother. August assumes care of the baby on Sunday nights and Mondays because the work schedules of her son and his partner overlap so they need help with the baby.

Previous research has focused on caregiver burden or the stress related to long term care of older adults that is most commonly experienced by adults at middle age and more commonly
by women (Riley & Bowen, 2005). Parker, Maier, and Wojciak (2018) suggest that many middle-aged adults will feel a duty to care for parents even when those parents had been abusive or neglectful to their children. Those who do accept the responsibility of caring for parents who treated them with physical, psychological, or emotional abuse or neglect will experience higher levels of stress. Hope described recently moving to a new city to get away from her own biological parents whom she described as involved in illegal activities that she did not want to be involved in. “I don’t really have any family... I’m am only child and my mom and dad had, I’m sorry. I needed to live. I needed to get away, you know. Just be me.” Sissy’s reports of her childhood experiences with her father suggest that she may also experience heightened stress levels when the time comes to make caregiving decisions about her own parents.

Evelyn described her determination to finish school even though she acknowledged the possibility of more elder care duties in her future.

This time, I’m not quitting. There ain’t nothing in my life that’s more important that I gotta stop for. You know, even if say for instance, even if my Dad would fall ill. I would still be there to help my sister with my Dad, you know? I did with my mom.

Evelyn’s mom had passed away two years earlier and was described as a strong influence on Evelyn’s decision to return to school again. “She always said I was going to do it, but it just so happens she’s not here. . . . so I’m even more determined.” Kendra’s experience with the loss of her grandmother influenced her decision to return to school to earn a degree in social work and start her own eldercare facility in partnership with Ruby.

**Career achievement.** Although middle adulthood is commonly recognized as a time for peak career achievement, many of the students interviewed for this project were just starting new careers. A few of them, including Mario, Glen, Kendra and Sissy had considered themselves very successful in their earlier careers and knew they were taking big risks to start over. Their
decisions to change career paths were motivated by both external circumstances beyond their control and internal reflection on the type of future they wanted or felt they deserved.

Mario’s early career included working at a fast food restaurant, the post office and active duty in the military. He enjoyed his job at the sheriff’s department where he had worked for years.

Once I got on at the sheriff’s department, I did twelve years there. I was doing real good with just me and [my son]. But uh, once I got married, I added three more people—now four—to my family, so I made the decision that I need to make some more money, so I started taking classes.

Mario recognized the risk he was taking, but was willing to start over to provide the lifestyle he wanted for his rapidly growing family. “I’m scared to take risk so, leaving a job, taking a pay cut and taking your retirement, and now I’m starting all over. It was something, I was like, “Oooohh” [Laughs] but I knew it would pan out. I knew it would pan out eventually.”

Glen reported early work in computer programming just after leaving high school early and earning his GED. He eventually accepted a position at the same utility company where his father worked and reported high earnings for many years. However, as Glen approached midlife his family status changed, his health status changed and he reported impending changes in his career field as a whole. “I got here because I decided to do a career change. I was a lineman for the phone company and I got injured on the job. As a lineman, it’s ranked as one of the most dangerous jobs in America, and I just became a first time father.” Glen was not just worried about potential catastrophic injury, but was already suffering from the results of years in the field.

Not only was it a more dangerous career, but it was very taxing on my body. Um, I have a lot of back problems because of what I did. It required a lot of stretching backwards with a very small point of contact on my body, so it really strained my back not only lifting backwards and reaching backwards, but also lifting something that is 120 pounds
over my head up to 20 to 30 times a day. So it was just more of, I want my body to last so I can enjoy my children’s childhood and retirement at some point and just kind of be there more for my kids, so I decided to do a complete 180 and shoot for nursing.

In addition to the physical wear and tear that Glen was experiencing, he also expressed the problem of operating below his full potential cognitively. “I left like being a lineman, I was kind of putting my wit on a shelf because it was kind of mind-numbingly simple.” Since his wife was a nurse he felt like he had a good understanding of that field and viewed it as a good fit for him. “I feel like I’ll be very good at critical thinking in a very fast-paced environment so I feel like that will be more my pace.” He also viewed nursing duties as more important. “They make more of a difference in people’s lives than me hanging a cable in the air, and to me that matters more. So I just feel like I have a greater purpose than just doing monotonous, simple-minded work.”

In addition to the risk of catastrophic and chronic injury, along with the monotony of working as a lineman, Glen also believed the jobs for utility workers were in danger of disappearing in the near future. “With the phone company you can do the best that you can, but technology’s changing so you could be the best worker, the hardest worker there is, but the work’s running out.” In contrast, he viewed nursing skills as equivalent to job security since there will always be a demand for nurses and his skills would transfer from one nursing position to another.

Kendra’s commercial cleaning service had grown steadily over the years, but eventually took a toll on her physical health as well.

I just burned out on it. That’s probably a lot of reasons why I have the flare ups with the sinuses because when you’re in those post-construction businesses, um, it’s newly built buildings so it’s full of dust, full of chemicals, full of paint, full of all kind of stuff and it just wears and tears at your body.
Kendra described her appreciation for the work, but hoped for something easier in the future. “It made me a good bit of money. I was able to take care of the kids and everything.” But now, “I want something that’s easier! I want to get me a nine to five [job], but in order to get a good nine to five that pays well . . . I need to go back to school.”

Kendra’s long-term plan is to open an adult care facility in partnership with Ruby. Ruby reported coming back to school “because my career wasn’t complete. I didn’t complete what I wanted to do from when I first started school.” Although her career goals have changed from her earlier years in college, she has clearly defined goals now. Her path forward includes working in her new field while she completes her education and eventually owns her own business with Kendra. They are pursuing different degrees to match with the different roles they expect to take responsibility for in her their future company.

Sissy enjoyed her 25-year career as a hair dresser and continues in that work while attending school. She reported feeling terrible about leaving behind those credits she had earned at a regional university when she was 30. “I can’t stand that. I cannot. It’s a waste. I mean I’m gonna have all these classes just sitting there and never do anything with it? Uh huh, I don’t think so.” Having left that regional university when she found herself unexpectedly becoming a single parent, she took a second job and focused on the care for her children.

Fast forward, everybody is grown now. Now I’m 49 and I decided to come back to school. . . It’s my dream to finish up, to put a cap on it. So my kids are gown and so I said, “Ok, it’s my turn.” So I came back.

Evelyn has worked as a caregiver for nearly twenty years and reported being drawn to that work from an early age.

I didn’t play and hang out with kids my own age down my street. I’d go to the older people’s houses and talk to them and say, “Hey, can I help you fold your clothes today?
Can I cut your grass? Or can I do this? Or can I do that?” so it started from there when I was like eight or nine years old, and I just always had a knack for older people.

Evelyn has no desire to change career fields, but knows that a nursing degree would allow her to do the same work while earning more money and enjoying benefits that are not available to her currently. “I’m ready to get my nursing degree so I can get . . . the money.” She described enjoying her current work, but without the credentials

you don’t get what you’re really worth. You’re doing it in-home, like I do. Plus what I’m doing, self-employed, I don’t have any benefits. So, I’m 52 years old, so five to ten years or more down the line, you know, if something happened and, wow, I’m stuck. I don’t have anything to fall back on.

Evelyn described herself as very independent and determined to maintain her independence throughout her life course. “My thing is, I don’t want my children to have to bear anything that has to do with my wellbeing when I’m older.” She described herself as being self-sufficient since leaving home at 16 and “still to this day, 2019” self-sufficient.

I don’t want them having to worry about my funeral expenses, my care, not that my daughter-in-law wouldn’t care for me. . . I just wanna make sure all that’s taken care of so I don’t have to worry about my kids doing it, you know? And, um, hopefully I can put my own self in a nice retirement home.

Renée reported holding many part-time and full-time jobs during her early career, but just wasn’t satisfied with the low hourly wages. She worked several temporary positions in state offices that she really enjoyed but recognized the need to earn a degree before she would be eligible for full-time employment in that type of position. “If I don’t get it now, I’m gonna be stuck working at Walmart or Kohl’s and miserable.” August also described a temporary position she thoroughly enjoyed but could not be considered for permanent hire because of her lack of a degree. “The supervisor wanted to hire me permanent . . . but they couldn’t hire me permanent for the position without an Associate’s degree.”
Most of the majors chosen by those interviewed also fit Erikson’s concept of generativity or wanting to give something back to the next generations. As noted in the chart introducing these participants, their new career fields include several students interested in nursing, several pursuing careers in social work, along with one each in teaching and juvenile justice services.

**Gender Roles.** According to Whitbourne (1999), research on gender and aging suggests that adults begin to move away from rigid gender roles at midlife and toward more androgynous behaviors. Glen summarized his changing attitudes toward gender in his description of how he sees himself differently as a lineman compared to being a nurse.

Um, as a lineman, I guess I really always viewed that job as a typical macho-man job. You know you’re out in the heat all day, you’re doing like really physical labor and it’s dangerous... As a lineman I used to knock male nurses all the time. I’m like, it’s a woman’s job, that why they do it. But really it’s not. And I knew this, it was just the guy in me talking I guess.

He described his own contributions to family and household responsibilities as 50/50 in his house with his new wife. He also described his current attempts to push his young stepson to understand the importance of school while also expressing his intention to do the same for his infant daughter when she gets older. “And I’m gonna push my daughter because I realize the importance of it.”

Many of the female students interviewed discussed leaving college earlier in life due to pregnancy. All of them assumed traditional feminine gender roles in relation to childcare, even those who had husbands or partners at the time. According to Ruby, after graduating from high school “I started at [State University] in Billing and Coding. I got pregnant to where I couldn’t focus as much and more so I dropped out: I stopped there and then went to [Private Religious Medical College]. I got pregnant; I stopped again.” With two more children to follow right behind those first two, she gave up taking classes again until her children were much older.
Hope reported starting college in a neighboring state at a traditional age with an athletic scholarship. “I played there for about two months and coming back down home I got into a car accident and tore up my muscles in my legs; I couldn’t play anymore . . . I ended up coming home and getting pregnant.” Hope’s narrative expressed dissatisfaction with the traditional feminine gender role expectations in her current relationship when she challenged the importance of putting household tasks like cooking and washing dishes ahead of her desire to study and do well in her classes. Kendra and August also reported leaving college at an early age because of pregnancies, and both assumed the traditional expectation for mothers to become caretakers rather than follow their career dreams. Kendra’s story of building her own business in the commercial cleaning field and her reported dream of owning an adult care center in the future seem to suggest a move away from a traditional feminine gender role. She also runs her household as a single parent for nine months out of the year while her partner is overseas.

Glen also described an earlier point in his life when he faced a choice between going to college and becoming a parent.

I was married before and I talked to my ex-wife at the time. I always was interested in science and medicine. I actually wanted to become a doctor. But this was in my early 20’s. I talked to my parents, they were supportive of it, and my wife at the time wasn’t. She said, if you do that, we can’t start a family, and I always want a family so . . . I stayed where I was at and then I never had the family with her.

He chose the possibility of fatherhood over pursuing his own dream of going to college. In making that choice, he was expected to stay employed full time and assume the traditional masculine role of provider. Glen is now approaching his late thirties with an infant at home, a full semester of class responsibilities and guilt about his ability to provide for his family in the short term.
I went from being able to provide for my family to everything being in the air. And part of the reason why I did the career change also is because the phone company’s downsizing. I would have been laid off within, by the year’s end. So my thinking was start now rather than later and I would already have a six month jump on it.

Both his career choice earlier in life and his choice to now pursue a degree at midlife share the goal of becoming a good provider for his family. Now, he pursues that goal while also assuming responsibility as his infant daughter’s primary caregiver.

**Religiosity.** While religion has little or no importance in the lives of some adults, others, especially at middle age, place great importance on the influence of religious beliefs (Hayward & Krause, 2016). Developmental psychologists have noted gender differences in religiosity for middle-aged adults (Wink & Dillon, 2002). Compared with men, women tend to participate in both personal and organized religious activities more often. Women also more commonly report religion as important in their lives. In the small sample of only two male participants in the interview portion of this project, religion was not mentioned at all. For more than half of the female participants, the opposite was true. Both Faith and August reported returning to college as a calling from a higher power and both women described the choice of programs as divinely dictated as well.

August admitted a longstanding desire to go to school for medical billing and coding that was overridden by divine direction.

But when I would go to sleep, I would have dreams saying, “No, go to school for business.” The Lord kept saying, “Business, Business.’ I was like “Why business?” I said, “Okay, Lord. Okay, okay, alright. If I apply for school now, if I get the funds and I get in the classes with the job that I have, then I’ll go to school.” And it worked out.

Faith reported initial resistance to the idea of returning to school at the age of 52. “It wasn’t my plan to come back to school; it was God’s plan.” Faith described physical symptoms she believed she suffered due to her disobedience to the divine plan. These physical symptoms abated when
she finally enrolled in school more than a year after initially receiving her calling. She attributed her better health to obedience and reported feeling like a huge weight had been lifted from her chest once she complied.

Kendra also credited divine intervention for correcting problems with her financial aid when she was enrolled at two institutions during the same semester. “God just put it – just lined it all up for me, really, because they didn’t have to put those classes on hold. They could have made me pay that thousand and ninety-five dollars out of pocket, but they put it on hold for me waiting for my refund check to come.” Kendra noted that when she was struggling in one class during her first semester, she started to believe “maybe this is just not my thing. God gave me the ability to open up this cleaning service; I just need to be grateful for this, you know, and just keep pushing in that area.” Encouragement from her partner changed her mind and her academic success the next semester convinced her that she was on the path she was supposed to be on. In describing advice she would give to other older students she mentioned setting your own pace, asking teachers for the help you need, “And, I mean, just stay prayed up of course; put God first with everything that you do in your life.”

Evelyn’s stance on religion was a little more complicated even though her narrative suggested that religion was important to her. In discussing the trouble she was having accepting the new name of her son who now identifies as non-binary, she suggested the name change was motivated in part because she had given her son a saint name for his middle name at birth and now they do not practice any religion. “In fact, he’s an atheist. That’s hard too.” She reported growing up in a religious tradition that she had stopped practicing because she felt singled out, as if the pastor had been directing messages toward her personally in his sermons. Referencing her choice to live in a domestic relationship that has not been sanctioned by legal marriage she
admitted, “I know I sin awful. I mean it feels like an awful sin, I guess.” She also described a longing for religious acceptance, “I wish I could find my place in a church, because it would probably help me heal a lot more there, than I’ve done healing on my own.” In spite of that longing, it seems the risk is just too great for Evelyn.

My sister tries to invite me to her church every week. [Laughs] And I tell her the same thing, I tell her every time, “I don’t want to go to church, the roof gonna fall on me.” [Laughs] She said, “If the roof ain’t fell on a whole bunch of people you and I know, it sure in the hell ain’t gonna fall on you!”

Even though her reluctance to attend a religious institution continues, she described her situation as better in comparison to the stories some other older students have shared with her. “I always thought I had it bad, but I really don’t I’m blessed beyond – I’m blessed a lot.” Religious coping has been identified as one factor that “ameliorates some of the untoward effects of stress” and it can “support and strengthen us when we are feeling at our weakest” (Anderson, 2003, p. 220).

**Self-Concept, Identity and Meaning Making at Midlife**

It is important to note that students’ self-perception issues impact their educational performance, persistence, and completion rates. Also, “educational experiences transfer to their participation in the workplace, their feelings of personal self-efficacy, and their willingness to engage in life-long learning” (Hollis-Sawyer, 2011, p. 294). According to Whitbourne (1999) identity is theorized to form “an organizing schema through which the individual’s experiences are interpreted” (p. 125). Our experience of the self arises from our “multiple identities that characterize a person’s moment-to-moment response to environmental demands” (Papa & Lancaster, 2016, p. 47). In our experiences of aging, as “further becoming,” our sense of self changes over time in response to actions, experiences, and relationships with others within social contexts.
All of the students in this study narrated their stories of themselves in past, present and future tense describing a shifting and changing understanding of who they were, who they are now and who they see themselves becoming in the future. As Hope noted in her narrative, “I think everything that’s happened to me made me who I am.” Hope struggled with drug addiction between the ages of 30 and 38, and as a recovering addict entering her late 40s she expressed a strong desire to move beyond the label of her past and become something different.

When I was younger, I was a teacher; I was a Cub Scout leader, Boy Scout leader. You know, I did the whole nine yards and I was like super mom. But for the years that I messed up, you know, they just condemn me for them and they never let me move on. They keep me the person, they want to keep me that person, and um, I don’t understand that.

She described the challenge of returning to school as something positive that helps to keep the negative thoughts away. “I wanted to go out there and find something that would better my life, you know? I got tired of ‘drug addict’ being my label. I wanted to find something, to have something to describe me instead of that.”

Glen described himself as a student in high school, “Um, I slacked in school, um, saying I had a .5 GPA in high school was probably being very generous.” He reported giving up after realizing that class scheduling errors would require him to attend another year and a half beyond the usual four years if he wanted to graduate. Although he had dreams of being a writer, director or a doctor, he entered the workforce instead and settled in the same career that his father had excelled in. He described himself as a college student in much different terms.

It took a lot out of me to do this, and it was something I never thought I would do because I hated school, but now that I’m back in it, I love it. I feel like I’m thriving in it and I like the challenge. I want to be the first in my family to have a degree, you know? I want to be the first in my family to finish college. [ ] And I love my sister, but I don’t want to be like her, she started school multiple times, but never finished because she always found a reason not to go back.
As noted earlier, Glen’s decision to return to school also reflected his desire to use his full potential that he felt like he was wasting in his earlier career. He also saw himself in different terms once he became a father, which motivated him to think more about the future in terms of responsibilities toward his children. Glen also described himself as a nurse when he finishes his training. “Because of job security. I don’t feel easily replaced being a nurse.”

Ruby described herself as a serious student with the ability to prioritize and focus in a way that did not work for her younger self. She reported her early attempts at college as filled with “rukus”.

Everything around me, home situations, children, family, everything around me bothered me. I didn’t have the ability to block it out. I let a lot of things bother me. Now, I don’t. [ ] You have to be able to block out negative vibes and people; I wasn’t able to do that back then. I wasn’t. Now that I’m older, I know how to cut my phone off and not worry. I know how to shut my door and not have to worry about a baby hurting himself or herself or things like that because they’re bigger, and I just feel like it’s better being older coming to school than younger just trying to rush and get it out the way. Like I feel like I take my time; I really understand what I’m doing. If I don’t, I’ll try to figure it out more or ask more questions than what I did back then because I don’t want to make the same mistakes, on nothing I did younger.

She described her changing view of herself, “I was a child with a child. Now I am an adult, of course, with four children.” She reflected on her earlier choice to leave school and her current self as “more in tune with school.” “And just me as a person, I don’t feel as if I made a mistake, me myself, for not finishing back then. I just feel like I have a lot of people now that help me if I do need help.”

Ruby also described doubting her abilities in science, because she hated science when she was younger. After reporting her current success in her science courses, she also described how she has grown as a person through mastering those courses.

I guess it’s the knowledge: I can talk about things with people now that’s stuff that I knew nothing about before I started, now, like, my conversation topics are broader.
Things that me and my friends talk about are different because I can include myself with
the stuff that they have going on now.

Faith also described her educational pursuits in terms of creating a better version of her
younger self *for herself*.

You find out who you are. You find out more than they make you be, that you
don’t have to be so-and-so’s little sister, so-and-so’s big sister. You’re finding your own
identity, you own self. I am here to learn for *me*, not to show anyone I can do this. I’m
not a troubled child as they said I am. I’m not hard to teach. I’m not easy to learn—I’m not
difficult, but I want to learn. I want to pursue it. I don’t have to be a follower; I can be a
leader. I can be. It’s okay to stand out on your own.

Mario described himself as a young man adrift during his earlier college days, first
deciding to join the army, then changing his mind when they moved his sign-up date. He decided
to go to a regional university instead where he changed his major three times and joined the
Army Reserves to help pay for school. After eight months of active duty in Iraq, he again signed
up for classes with a focus in yet another major field at a local community college. “When I
showed up [for class] either I was in the wrong place or my teacher didn’t show up, but I took
that as a sign and didn’t go back.” He continued,

I was young so I didn’t realize, you know. I should’ve stuck with it. And I was also
coming straight from Iraq and I wanted some time to-, I , maybe it was-it was kinda, a
lazy thing too, I think, so it was like, I don’t really want to do anything, but it was like I
was forced to do something.

A few years later he signed up yet again for classes through a VA program, at yet another
academic institution in yet another field of study. He described his academic plans as “I was all
over the board” and “I’ve been everywhere.” He described his shifting plans as just looking for a
way out of one situation rather than focusing forward toward a goal. Having completed his
degree last semester, he now describes himself in different terms. “I think, I’m stable, I guess. I
keep kicking myself in the behind because I should have done it a long time ago, but you never know what you’d be if you’d done it.”

Kendra described her earlier self as a spoiled brat who enrolled in college to keep her parents happy and to avoid the alternative of starting work.

I was so lost, so displaced, because I really didn’t want to be there, but it was like, my parents’ rule: you stay here, you get a job, or you go to school. So I was like, you know what, I ain’t really ready to take care of myself yet either so let me go enroll into school, you know. But it was just such a huge campus. It was something totally different from high school and mentally, I just wasn’t there.

She now describes herself as a serious student pursuing a dream of owning her own adult care facility. She actively researched the degree requirements for the career she envisions for herself and sees her future career as a good fit for her personality. She spoke extensively about her plans to open her business and hire others from her community to fill the positions she will create.

I have a goal now, you know? Then, I was just going just to say I was going, didn’t really, really care that I was really going. And it’s sad, but um, now I have a goal and I appreciate the opportunity that I’m afforded now to actually be in school.

Students interviewed for this project all mentioned specific teachers they appreciated for supporting their transition back to the classroom at midlife. The same professors were mentioned over and over by the students when describing their best learning experiences. Lundberg (2003) found that quality of relationships with faculty and administrators was an important predictor of positive learning outcomes for students of all ages. Faculty interaction was a stronger predictor of gains for older students [30 years of age and older] than it was for younger students (p. 679).

**Exceptional Teachers, Teachers Who Make Exceptions**

The term “exceptional” is often used with positive connotation. That is, exceptional means unusually good, or outstanding. Many of the students who participated in this project described their teachers in these terms. The same word, when used with the word “student” or
“learner,” generally refers to those who deviate from the norm, often because of a physical or cognitive disability. According to the Individuals with Disabilities Educational Act, “exceptional students” are those who fall outside of the normal range of development. The students interviewed for this project constantly encounter situations where they could not be successful unless an exception could be made for them regarding some course-level or institutional-level policy. The teachers, staff and administrators who made those exceptions were enthusiastically praised in the student narratives.

Renée named four teachers that she considered particularly supportive, and reported the story of her final exam day last semester with tears in her eyes. She had two final exams scheduled on the same day and her daughter’s daycare would not allow her to attend because of a mild viral infection that is common in toddlers. Despite a campus policy that prohibits children in the classroom, both of Renée’s teachers agreed to allow her to come to the exams with her toddler in tow. “So the day of the test, I went to the Dollar Store, I bought her some headphones so she could watch her video and she did good. I had two tests that day.” During the first test, the instructor gave Renée’s toddler paper and pencils to keep her distracted with doodling and they sat in the back to avoid bothering other students in the testing session.

She was kind of restless. She was excited about coming, but a two year old . . . she’s just so active. She was doodling and she wanted to get up. I was like, Oh my God, let me hurry up and take this test! So I hurried up, I still passed the class. Well, I feel like I could have did better, but I didn’t want her to disturb the other kids and get her rowdied up and start crying.

After the first test, Renée had a gap before her second exam so she went home to give her toddler a break and a snack. When they got back to campus, the second class had already begun their exam.
So I got my Scantron and gave her her little headphones; she didn’t want the headphones, then she wanted to turn it up, the YouTube. So, I still passed her class too, but like I said, I could have done better. . . honestly, I just started bubbling in, hurrying. I was just scanning through it. So, thank God, I did study, but I could have done better on the test.

Ruby told a similar story of finding herself without daycare for her night class. “I came to school with my son for three weeks this semester – three weeks.” Ruby was enrolled in a class with one of the same professors who helped Renée on final exam day of the previous fall semester.

It was hard because I was scared because my timeframe wasn’t early in the morning; it was my evening class. So, I was scared, and my evening class is my harder class. So I was scared that I would have to focus with him fidgeting and everything and it actually worked out good.

Ruby reported seeing other students in class with a child in tow and also knew students who had skipped classes because of problems with their daycare arrangements, because not all professors were willing to make those exceptions.

Kendra described the different reactions of faculty when she missed several weeks of class due to the repeated hospitalization of one of her three children. Two professors in particular stood out in her recollection. “They understood me because they have children; they get it.” Those two helped her to catch up her work and ensure success in their courses. However, the other two instructors she was enrolled with that semester did not respond favorably even though she reported bringing them her paperwork from the doctors and the hospital.

And I had all of my documentation, you know, but I understand she’s not obligated to believe me or obligated to feel sorry for me, give me sympathy or anything like that. . . It was hard. I had to wind up dropping her class ‘cause I had four, so I’m only leaving now with three.
Although she only dropped one of her courses, she reported that she was still struggling to catch up in her third course and expected she would need to repeat it unless she could ace the final exam.

August also reported receiving exceptions from several teachers and praised them for working with her. “I love my teachers. It’s like every teacher I get, I love them, especially when I first started.” Citing problems with the distribution of her financial aid at the start of her first semester, all of her classes were dropped.

I tried to get them back, but a lot of people was in school and it was hard. So, two of my classes I wasn’t in that class, but I knew the schedule that I had and I went to those teachers and I talked to them to see if I could sit in their classes. And they said, “Well, a lot of people always drop, so you can come to class every day and do your lesson, you just won’t be on my role.” So I did and I went to class every day, and sat in the class and people dropped and I was able to get on the role.

Her biggest attendance issue occurred when she developed pneumonia while enrolled in a speech class with a teacher who allowed only a set number of absences and one make up for missed speeches. “So I worried a lot when I was sick and I kept emailing her. And so when she didn’t answer I came to the school.” Making the trip while she was still sick, August reported finding her teacher in her office and receiving the following response:

And she said, “Well you didn’t have to come, I know you’re sick and I can see you’re sick . . . I’m glad you’re worried about your grades . . . but you don’t need to worry about it, I’m gonna let you make all of your speeches up.” And I was like “Thank you so much!” and she said, “You know what, I don’t normally do this, but the Lord wanted me to pray for you. Can I pray for you?” and I was like “yes, m’am.” And she closed the door and she prayed for me. And I thought that was so sweet. [Laughs]. And she said, “Just go home and get some rest and you can come back.”

As she recovered from her illness, August wrote the three speeches she had missed. Once she was able to return to school she delivered one on the make-up day allowed for all students who missed a speech and gave the other ones directly to the teacher in her office to catch up.
Renée reported receiving a grace period for daily attendance after talking to her teacher about the policy of no attendance points given for students who arrive late. Because of a conflict with her children’s bus schedule, the teacher allowed her to arrive late and still receive attendance points as long as she did show up for class. Several students reported exceptions made to allow credit for previous coursework. Mario described an exception granted that allowed him to move from the apprenticeship program into full-time employment a year short of the usual schedule. Most of the apprenticeship applicants come straight out of high school and start from scratch, but he had both prior college credits and an excellent work history.

They made an exception for me through the apprenticeship because you was supposed to be in the program for two years before you could be hired. So, with me, I had so many credits and I finished school within a year of being in the program. They were like, “Why make this man suffer and not give him a job when he’s completed the program, you now, the way that we needed him to? So why not let him have a job?” So they kind of made that exception for me that I was able to get a job within a year.

Most of these exceptions help atypical students stay on track and make progress through their programs, even though faculty are bending rules that could negatively impact their own careers. Kendra told a story of a course load exception that was worked out by cross enrolling at another institution with the help of an advisor at her own institution. She reported asking for an override that would have allowed her to carry 26 hours of credit in one semester only to be turned down. “He’s like, ‘You trying to get me and you fired? [ ] No, I can’t give you that.” But then the advisor helped her to enroll at a neighboring community college as a visiting student to sign up for the additional courses. He also worked with the advisors at the other institution to keep the courses from being purged while Kendra waited for her financial aid funds to clear so she could pay her tuition bills at both schools.
Evelyn described one teacher whom she felt was personally supportive in a way that really helped her to keep going. “You got some teachers that don’t go personal and then you have some teachers that do go personal. Understand what I’m saying?” She described the advantage of connecting with a teacher beyond the level of the coursework, especially for students who don’t have a lot of confidence yet.

I know it’s not for every teacher to be like that, I guess, but it feels good. It really, I mean it really does feel good when a teacher can go- uh, know you on a personal level. I know some teachers have a lot of stuff going on, but I find it’s nice to have some teachers on a personal level, not personal like some sort of, not some business outside of this college, you know, not being chummy, chummy friends with you outside of this college, but being your friend here, on a personal level. [ ] Because, if they know you need that little extra push or shove or however you want to say it, then knowing you on a personal level, them knowing your story helps.

Evelyn described one teacher in particular providing that level of support for her since her most recent enrollment.

Sissy discussed the importance of building relationships with her teachers and in her case, those friendships do extend outside of the institution. She counts one of her teachers among her clients at her beauty shop since meeting through her coursework. One of the teachers who helped Renée on the final exam day, was also a favorite for Sissy who vividly remembered the greeting she received from this teacher when she first came back to school. The teacher introduced herself, told Sissy she was glad to see her there and shared that she had been an older student herself in the past. Sissy reported,

So she really encouraged me a lot. I really love her. I’m taking her this semester; she’s retiring, which kind of bites. I told her I’m gonna come see her at her farm and she said, “Okay.” So, I mean, I wish that we had a little bit more of that.

Sissy also described two other faculty by name whom she considered very supportive to her as a returning student.
Mario noted the importance of friendly, personal relationships with teachers and with the administrator over his assistantship program. He described them checking in with him when he missed class, and appreciating the extra layer of accountability. “Not necessarily saying that I needed a baby sitter, but it’s kind of good to have that person, you know?” Faith, on the other hand would have appreciated a little more personal attention in her experience. “I’m not asking you to baby me, but if I haven’t been in school in twenty years, or five years, or ten years, or none at all and I’m coming back, what’s wrong with you taking my hand and walking me step-by-step?” She reported dismissive attitudes encountered in some professors.

You be scared to look at ‘em and you see ‘em coming and you like. [Makes a face]. And that’s sad when you have to to . . . you my instructor why I can’t come to you? Why I can’t get time with you? Why I got to find somebody else in your department to help me?”

Suggesting that some teachers are just there for a paycheck, she proposed they should treat older students the way they would want their own parents treated if they were coming to school.

It is not surprising that many of the students were naming the same faculty members over and over in their narratives. Several students reported discussing schedules with each other and any older students they meet to warn about which faculty will be flexible and which faculty to avoid. Advice for choice of teachers was not related to how easy the coursework may be since these students were not looking for shortcuts. Faith reported chiding younger students for rating professors on ease of coursework or physical characteristics.

I don’t agree on ‘rate the professor’ because what might be hard for you might be easy for me. If you’re doing it with your feelings, you mad because you made a C on the paper and you think you deserve an A, so you go in and you rate her on your feelings instead of her knowledge and understanding. . . . I’ve learned ya’ll don’t want nothing but A’s and B’s, but I would take a hard C over an easy A any day.

Faith’s narrative mentions several teachers by name that she considered great teachers because she was pushed to learn a lot “I appreciate it; I didn’t take it for granted because I’m not gonna
get a second chance.” The professors these students singled out on their lists of faculty to avoid were identified because of their lack of understanding about family responsibilities and for enforcing rules that were perceived to be punitive and biased against older students.

In addition to academic personnel, many students described the importance of their relationship with the support staff in the TRIO office, which was mentioned above in the institutional ageism section. Many of the students interviewed reported receiving tutoring services, scheduling assistance, financial aid advising, and free access to computers and printing services that are charged by the page to students through other campus computer labs. The TRIO staff were referred to as “a Godsend” by two students and others reported the staff as wonderful, great, and supportive. In Kendra’s words, “I became a member of TRIO and inside TRIO I got help from every last one of those administrators in there.”

Examples of support received from the TRIO program also included distribution of information about funding resources such as scholarships or grants, recommendation letters for scholarships or grants, transfer applications, transfer advising, financial planning seminars, study skills workshops, help with scheduling, grade monitoring, and just a place to hang out when needed. Students in this study were not qualified for state tuition payments routinely available for graduating high school seniors and most were covering their tuition with federal financial aid. Some students had received small awards directly through institutional foundation accounts. Only one student reported negative experiences in the TRIO office due to tutors she felt were underqualified in the subject areas they were working in and too many distractions in the tutoring center.

Not all of these students receive the exceptions they need to be successful. Hope’s narrative included a description of events that left her unable to complete her final exams last
semester. Her grades before the final week of school were very good and she could have qualified for grades of “incomplete” to allow her to return later in the summer to complete the missing exams. However, she reported that she had never heard of an incomplete grade and did not know there was any such policy in place. She had just finished the semester with grades lowered by missing exams and was struggling to get her financial aid approved for the next semester because she did not earn enough credits due to the missing exam scores. She had not contacted her teachers, because she did not know that exceptions could be made for the events she had experienced. Hope reported that she had heard of the TRIO program office, but she did not have reliable transportation and was taking only web-based classes at the time of our interview.

Summary

The complexity of the individual lives of students attending community college at midlife, and the complexity within those time commitments away from campus contribute to the heterogeneity of this population. Donaldson and Townsend (2007) suggested that it may be these basic characteristics that lead to less research focus in this area. “It may be that researchers do not study adults because it is difficult to reach them and control for their heterogeneity” (p. 45). It may be that the factors that make these students so unique are also making them difficult to study.
Chapter Six. Summary, Implications, Directions for Future Research

This study was sparked by observing that information on the experiences of learners at midlife is difficult to find and often consolidated within research on younger adult students. Donaldson & Townsend (2007) suggested that the relative lack of journal articles on adult students may be related to both context and opportunity, noting that most research occurs on the campuses of major universities were researchers generally work and where traditional-age students abound. This approach of convenience reflects power dynamics at universities and at conservative publishers where mainstream discourse is privileged.

Further, research on large research campuses privileges knowledge about a relatively elite group of young people while disregarding knowledge that we need to gain about the increasingly diverse students represented on many commuter campuses, community colleges, and other institutions (p. 45).

This project addresses that need by highlighting the experiences of students at midlife in a community college context.

Chapter One presented an overview of understanding development from a lifespan perspective, the importance of identity across the lifespan, and the lifespan perspective within the context of higher education. The concept of ageism as institutional, individual and internalized was described. Specific age norms for experiences at midlife were presented in the first chapter as well. The lack of research focused specifically on older learners in community college at midlife was noted along with justifications for filling this void. As noted earlier, community college enrollments have been dropping since 2010 and schools “cannot maintain gradually declining enrollments by looking at only younger traditional students” (AACC, 2019).

Whitbourne (1999) described various domains or aspects of identity in adulthood including; physical appearance, perceptions of competence, subjective health, intellectual skills, memory
self-efficacy and the ability to learn new information (pp. 125-127). Our identities are also shaped by our interactions with others in our social networks, including our relationships with partners, family, teachers, and coworkers. Our experiences in these domains impact our understanding and experience of the self. The participants in this study described their educational journeys across adulthood and how their current participation in community college programs shapes who they are.

Contextual factors also impact our identity across middle adulthood, including experiences of ageism in various forms such as individual, institutional and internalized ageism. Internalized ageism can prevent women from accurately assessing their own abilities and prevent them from challenging unfair assessment by others (Hogan, 2016). These assessments by the self and others can lead to performance decrements in the form of stereotype threat (Steele, 1995). While the impact of stereotype threat was originally understood as temporary and context-based, Hogan asserts that consequences “are in fact more wide reaching and harmful than assumed. This is the case insofar as the harms that result from suffering ST [Stereotype Threat] become a part of one’s identity, and thus a background lens through which one experiences the world” (p. 639).

Summary of Findings

Chapter Four presented the results of both faculty and students’ self-reports of ageist behaviors in general, along with highlights of their experiences with older adult students in the classroom. Taken together, scores on the ROPE questionnaire and the responses to the open-end question about experiences with adult students at midlife in the classroom setting endorse the presence of both positive and negative ageist attitudes and behaviors in the context studied. As
noted in Chapter Four, more positive ageist behaviors than negative ageist behaviors were
identified.

It is important to note that although positive stereotypes were identified from faculty and
student responses presented in Chapter Four, Freeman (2017) asserts that positive stereotypes
can also have a negative impact on perceptions of self. Stereotypes are accompanied by related
expectations and failure to meet these expectations can lead to negative appraisals. For example,
if older students are expected to be wiser, harder working and more experienced than younger
students, then older students who do not exhibit these expected behaviors may be judged as
inferior.

In Chapter Five, the individual experiences of ten students were presented. Their
narratives were analyzed and interpreted to develop themes and commonalities that highlight the
way their unique experiences fit developmental expectations. The heterogeneity of this
population was illustrated, along with substantial evidence for variations on age norms and
atypical life experiences. These students described life experiences far removed from the
relatively elite young students who are more often privileged by research attention. The
experiences relayed by those students interviewed provide rich details of institutional-level and
faculty-level policies that support or hinder their academic progress. Their experiences also point
to areas that need further study to more fully understand how to meet the learning and
developmental needs of this specific population of students.

A developmental lens was used throughout Chapters Four and Five to explore students’
experiences from an embodied feminist viewpoint. This approach allows an understanding of
ageism and age identity to emerge through the voices of individual students and highlights the
heterogeneity of student experiences in community college at midlife. This study of ageism and
students at midlife further illustrates the complexity of their experiences and how a formal educational context may facilitate development. Overall, the students in this project reported experiences that impact their age identity, stress, subjective aging and generativity. These issues are detailed below.

**Age identity, stress and subjective aging.** Building on the earlier work of social gerontologist, Bernice Neugarten (the “social clock” discussed earlier), Schaffer and Shippee (2010) describe age identity as an internalized clock that slows down or speeds up in relation to past and current contextual influences. Just as scientists have identified biological processes related to stress that speed up aging on the cellular level, stress can also impact our social and psychological sense of aging. We don’t just exhibit physical signs of biological ageing, we actively construct our identity within a situated, embodied aging process across time. “Health decline is expected to hasten age identity to the extent that it wears down psychosocial resources” (p. 250). Also, building additional psychosocial resources relates to less rapid subjective aging. Role changes that occur off-time with age norms were also identified as producing the experience of aging faster. “Turbulence within intimate social networks (i.e., spouses, parents, children)” leads to a wearing down of psychosocial resources, speeding up the subjective experience of aging for those individuals with more turbulence within their networks (p. 259).

Returning to school to bolster credentials for career advancement or to move toward a career that better fits life goals may lead to an increase in psychosocial resources over time. However, the process of attaining those credentials may increase stress for older students who may already be experiencing role strain from competing family and career responsibilities. The stress of pursuing an education in an environment designed for those with less experience across
the life course may lead to at least a temporary feeling of being subjectively older than one’s chronological age.

It is a central, yet often unacknowledged and overlooked privilege to be able to move through the world without having to take stock of your body; that is, without having your body made salient to you in ways that problematize how you exist in the world and whether you are able to navigate that world safely (Freeman, 2017, p. 647).

Creating a diversity climate where students at midlife can anticipate respect and pride could reduce stress and build confidence in students who perceive their institution as offering “a social environment where personal and social characteristics are not a threat to personal success” (Ihme, et al., 2016, p. 1025).

**Generativity.** Generativity has been defined “as concern and activity dedicated to contributing to the welfare of others” (Grossman & Gruenewald, 2017, p. 436). Many of the participants described their experiences of generativity through providing a good life for their children and caring for other relatives as well. Caregiving in adulthood is often studied in terms of stress and “caregiver burden” because of the strain that caregiving can place on financial, psychological and physical resources, yet caregiving has also been identified as a source of positive generativity (Grossman & Gruenewald; Pope, Baldwin & Lee, 2018). Caregiving can also be a source of personal satisfaction and fulfillment of filial, religious, or social duties that align with one’s view of the self as a good person. “Generative adults develop a positive legacy of the self and then offer it as a gift to the next generation (Santrock, 2019, p. 487).

Positive generativity was one reward associate with caregiving, but researchers have identified other positive aspects as well (Zarit, 2012; Grossman & Gruenewald, 2017; Cohen, Caolantonio, and Vernich, 2002). According to Pope, Baldwin and Lee (2018), other positive aspect include; stronger family relationships, growth of personal character, personal satisfaction
and material benefits. Participants in Pope and Baldwin’s study of caregivers under that age of forty described benefits derived from learning “to perform activities that exceeded . . . existing knowledge and life experience” (p. 192). Material benefits identified included free or reduced cost housing for caregivers who moved in with older relatives to provide care. In some cases the reduced cost of housing allowed caregivers to begin or continue educational pursuits that would not have been possible without the caregiving arrangement.

Adult responsibilities linked to child care, family care, working full time, commuting to campus and other activities that draw student attention away from campus have been generally linked to a negative impact on learning. (Astin, 1984, 1993; Light, 2001). Most adult student at midlife have time limitations related to these other responsibilities, yet Lundberg (2003) found that “Students 30 and older were not affected negatively by working many hours or commuting, but they were affected positively by social and academic integration variables” (p. 679). Given the benefit of additional social resources and the positive benefits that can be associated with caregiving, “caring for loved ones may be more complex than previously characterized by the literature” (Pope, Baldwin & Lee, 2018, p. 436). Stiener and Fletcher (2017) reported that “When a role is unexpected, it may be perceived as more challenging and therefore cause more stress. Further perhaps the unexpectedness of caregiving influences the burden experienced by caregivers” (p. 143).

We tend to assess the success of both students and institutions according to completion and retention rates. Merrill asserts that both institutions and governments measure the economic cost of withdrawal and consistently view it negatively. Further, Merrill reminds us that “the student who leaves is viewed as a failure” (p. 1859). However, “What adults learn in the context of formal education does not necessarily come from the content of a program: It often includes
several other dimensions, such as social interaction outside the classroom and cultural experiences. Sometimes adults learn more about themselves by dropping out of a program than by staying in it” (Dominicé, para. 17).

In conclusion, participation in higher education changes people in complex ways that are difficult to assess and fully understand. As contexts for human development, institutions of higher education provide a unique opportunity to study student development across the lifespan. This approach to the study of human development needs to expand further to research diverse populations at a wider variety of campus locations outside of major research institutions.

**Implications for Practice**

Dominice asserts, “It is what we do with our education that gives learning its meaning” (para. 31). Researchers hold the power to choose where they focus the privilege of research attention (Donaldson and Townsend) and this state currently has 653,000 adults with some college credit but no degree (Guidry, 2019). New state-funded programs are turning their attention toward encouraging these adults to return to the classroom with financial aid assistance, personal coaches, new formats for course content delivery, and attention to the needs of older adult learners. Training programs for faculty, advisor, and campus designers may contribute to the success rates for this diverse population of students.

**Implications for faculty training.** In this particular study, a few of the youngest faculty on campus who chose not to participate in this project were consistently identified by name as hard to work with by the older students interviewed. Suggestions for working in age appropriate ways with older learners in the classroom have been available for more than 25 years (Twitchell, et al., 1996) yet students are still reporting regular encounters with age bias.
In order to better understand older students in the classroom, training programs could be developed to help faculty better understanding how students experience and express ageist behaviors and attitudes. An awareness of stereotype threat, how it operates to increase anxiety and reduce performance, as well as how to defuse stereotype threat in an academic environment would increase faculty ability to provide support for a student population that is becoming increasingly age diverse. Professional development programs could include training on ways that teachers can encourage students to perceive themselves as successful learners in order to lessen stereotype threat.

**Implications for advising.** Training on age diversity for college advisors may help them respond in age appropriate way to the needs of adult students at midlife. As noted in Glen’s story earlier, not all students arrive on campus with the benefit of high school guidance counselor’s advising them on college procedures and requirements. An increased awareness of social capital and the role it plays in successful navigation of a college degree would be useful in creating a student services office that welcomes and embraces older students returning to campus.

While considering their past experiences is necessary to define a starting point for current advising, encouraging older students to envision their futures is also helpful. As described by Sparks (2015) in *Fighting Subtle Bias*,

At Northwestern University, first-generation college students became more likely to ask for help and more comfortable discussing academic challenge with a professor after completing a five-minute writing assignment about who they would be after college and how people would think of them. By contrast, students who wrote about who they were and how they were perceived before attending college became more anxious and less comfortable asking a professor for help (p. 7).

Research on outcome trajectories for community college students in development classes suggests that utilization of tutoring services early in their college careers is associated with
higher GPAs and better retention rates (Brenner et al., 2013). Many returning adult students are placed in developmental classes after prolonged absences from academic work and advisors could be trained to provide better support than August reported in Chapter Five when she was directed to Google help for math tutoring.

**Implications for the design of campus resources.** Creating an appropriate campus climate for older students would need to include both the design of physical spaces that students inhabit and the design of media and visual resources that are age inclusive and easy to navigate. Students feel welcome and appreciated on campus when they are included positively in campus discourse, represented in campus advertisements and considered in campus design.

**Directions for Future Research**

Issues raised here that warrant further exploration include the possibility of identifying and addressing more subtle forms of age bias and microaggressions that may pervade the campus climate but not be detectable using the measures of self-reported behaviors used here. A review of campus print materials, web presentations and recruiting resources of all types to assess representation of age diversity would also be warranted. Although rich data was collected from the students in this project, the sample was small and not representative of all forms of diversity. Exploring the experiences of more students, especially more male students, students who identify as nonbinary or other gender or racial minorities would provide a more inclusive representation of student experiences at midlife. Because of the high rates of attrition in this student population, a study that tracks those who leave for follow up would be informative as well.

As a reflection of the sparsity of literature on the experiences of students in community college at midlife, much of the literature reviewed here comes from fields outside of education and from institutional research outside of the United States as well. Conducting similar studies
on adult development within the context of American educational institutions would add significantly to the field.
References


Brill, C. (2013). We can do more to support mature students. Adults Learning, 25(2), 14-15.


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Rose, D. J. (2016). The future of aging research: Should the focus be on not growing old or growing old better? *Kinesiology Review, 5*, 65-74.


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Appendix A. IRB Approval

ACTION ON PROTOCOL APPROVAL REQUEST

TO: Katie Cherry
Psychology

FROM: Dennis Landin
Chair, Institutional Review Board

DATE: December 12, 2018

RE: IRB# 2468

TITLE: Relating to Older People: Role of Knowledge of Aging

New Protocol/Modification/Continuation: Modification

Brief Modification Description: Add Marla Erwin to the study.

Review type: Full ___ Expedited ___ X Review date: 12/12/2018

Risk Factor: Minimal ___ X ___ Uncertain ________ Greater Than Minimal______

Approved ___ X Disapproved ____________

Approval Date: 12/12/2018 Approval Expiration Date: N/A

Re-review frequency: (annual unless otherwise stated)

Number of subjects approved: 2000

LSU Proposal Number (if applicable):________

By: Dennis Landin, Chairman

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: PLEASE READ THE FOLLOWING – Continuing approval is CONDITIONAL on:

1. Adherence to the approved protocol, familiarity with, and adherence to the ethical standards of the Belmont Report, and LSU’s Assurance of Compliance with DHHS regulations for the protection of human subjects.
2. Prior approval of any changes in protocol, including revision of the consent documents or an increase in the number of subjects over that approved.
3. Obtaining renewed approval (or submittal of a termination report), prior to the approval expiration date, upon request by the IRB office, even if the project actually begins; notification of project termination.
4. Retention of documentation of informed consent and study records for at least 5 years after the study ends.
5. Continuing attention to the physical and psychological well-being and informed consent of the individual participants, including notification of new information that might affect consent.
6. A prompt report to the IRB of any adverse event affecting a participant potentially arising from the study.
8. SPECIAL NOTE: Make sure you use both when emailing more than one recipient.

*All investigators and support staff have access to copies of the Belmont Report, LSU’s Assurance with DHHS, DHHS (45 CFR 46) and FDA regulations governing use of human subjects, and other relevant documents in print in this office or on our World Wide Web site at http://www.lsu.edu/irb
## Appendix B. ROPE Assessment

Relating to Old People Evaluation (ROPE)*

Please put a check in the box that indicates how often you relate to old people (those over age 60) in these ways:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Never / Sometimes / Often</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Compliment old people on how well they look, despite their age.</td>
<td>/ / /</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Send birthday cards to old people that joke about their age.</td>
<td>/ / /</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Enjoy conversations with old people because of their age.</td>
<td>/ / /</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Tell old people jokes about old age.</td>
<td>/ / /</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Hold doors open for old people because of their age.</td>
<td>/ / /</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Tell an old person, “You’re too old for that.”</td>
<td>/ / /</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Offer to help an old person across the street because of their age.</td>
<td>/ / /</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. When I find out an old person’s age, I may say, “You don’t look that old.”</td>
<td>/ / /</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Ask an old person for advice because of their age.</td>
<td>/ / /</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. When an old person has an ailment, I may say, “That’s normal at your age.”</td>
<td>/ / /</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. When an old person can’t remember something, I may say, “That’s what they call a ‘Senior Moment’”.</td>
<td>/ / /</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Talk louder or slower to old people because of their age.</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Use simple words when talking to old people.</td>
<td>/ / /</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Ignore old people because of their age.</td>
<td>/ / /</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Vote for an old person because of their age.</td>
<td>/ / /</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. Vote against an old person because of their age.</td>
<td>/ / /</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. Avoid old people because of their age.</td>
<td>/ / /</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
18. Avoid old people because they are cranky.

19. When a slow driver is in front of me, I may think, “It must be an old person.”

20. Call an old woman, “young lady,” or call an old man, “young man.”

What is your age? __________

What is your gender? M__ F__

How many years of education? _________________

Any comments? __________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________________________

© Copyright by Palmore & Cherry, 2004.
We want to learn about older adult students at midlife. Please tell us about your experience with middle-aged students in your classes or other campus operation centers (without naming any specific students). Be sure to include your perceptions of their classroom contributions, interactions with peers, classroom performance or any other topic that you think may be relevant. (If you are middle-aged student, please write about other older students you have observed, and see below for an opportunity to tell us about your experiences).

If you are an older student taking classes at midlife who might be interested in participating in a 45-minute interview to help us learn more about your experiences, please include your email address here:
Appendix C. Interview Protocol

Generative narrative question:

I would like to understand your experiences as a community college student and how you see yourself in this process. Please begin your story at some point before you started college and then tell about your decision to become a student and the consequences you have experienced from that point to present. You can take your time and provide as much detail you wish because I am interested in all aspects of the experience that may be important from your perspective.

Narrative inquiries:

These questions will be defined as they arise, focusing on generative narrative questions to elaborate details that may have been vague or fragmented in the original narrative.

Balancing inquiries:

“How?” questions followed by “why?” questions to distill common meaning from details provided in the narrative.
Appendix D. Consent Forms

School Administrator Form

1. Study Title: Relating to Older People Evaluation

2. The purpose of this research project is to identify ways people relate to older adults (defined as persons over age 60), determine whether one’s perceptions of cognition and adult development influence how we relate to older people, and to learn about older students at midlife.

3. Risks: There are no known risks.

4. Benefits: an opportunity to learn about ways we relate to older adults and knowledge of the aging process, and an opportunity to contribute to scientific research.

5. Investigators: The following investigators are available for questions, M-F, 10:00 a.m. - 4:00 p.m.; Marla Erwin, School of Education, LSU, 225-578-8745 and Dr. Katie E. Cherry, Psychology Dept., LSU, 225-578-4099.

6. Performance Site: River Parishes Community College

7. Number of participants: 80

8. Inclusion Criteria: 16 years of age or older; visually and auditorily capable

9. Exclusion Criteria: adult dementia, or other neurological impairment

10. Right to Refuse: Participation in this project is entirely voluntary. I can withdraw my consent at any time and have the results of the participation returned to me, removed from the experimental records, or destroyed.

11. Privacy: All response forms will be kept in a secure location housed within a limited access, locked research room. Results of the study may be published; however, we will keep your name and other identifying information private. Your identity will remain confidential unless law requires disclosure.

12. Financial Information: There is no cost for participation in the study, nor is there any compensation to the faculty or staff for participation. A modest honorarium will be provided to older students who participate in this study.
13. Signatures:
   The study has been discussed with me and all my questions have been answered. I may
direct additional questions regarding study specifics to the investigator. If I have
questions about subjects' rights or other concerns, I can contact Dennis Landin,
Chairman, Institutional Review Board, (225) 578-8692, irb@lsu.edu, or
www.lsu.edu/research. I will allow faculty, staff and students to participate in the
study described above and acknowledge the investigator's obligation to provide me
with a signed copy of this consent form.

   School Administrator Signature: ___________________ Date: _________

14. The following section appears on the participant consent forms. It appears here
only for your information and your signature is not needed.

   Your information collected as part of the research, even if identifiers are removed,
may be used or distributed for future research

   Yes, I give permission________________________________________________

   Signature

   No, I do not give

   permission___________________________________________________________

   Signature
CONSENT FORM

1. **Study Title:** Relating to Older People Evaluation

2. **Purpose of the Study:** The investigators seek to identify ways people relate to older adults (defined as persons over age 60), determine whether one’s perceptions of cognition and adult development influence how we relate to older people, and to learn about older students at midlife.

3. **Study Procedures:** The study will be conducted in one session where I will be asked to complete a paper questionnaire that asks about how I relate to older people, background characteristics about me, and my experiences with older adult students in my classes or other campus operation centers. Students will be asked to describe their experiences.

4. **Performance Sites:** The Adult Development Lab on the LSU campus, Baton Rouge, LA., local schools, public libraries, and participants’ homes

5. **Contacts:** *(available Monday through Friday between 10:00am and 4:00pm)* The following investigators are available for questions; Marla Erwin, School of Education, LSU, 225-578-8745 and Dr. Katie E. Cherry, Psychology Dept., LSU, 225-578-4099.

6. **Subjects:**
   - **Inclusion Criteria:** 15 years of age or older; visually and auditorily capable
   - **Exclusion Criteria:** adult dementia, or other neurological impairment
   - **Maximum number of subjects:** 3000 persons

7. **Benefits:** The benefits I may expect from participating in this project include: an opportunity to learn about ways we relate to older adults and knowledge of the aging process, and an opportunity to contribute to scientific research.

8. **Risks/Discomforts:** There are no anticipated risks/discomforts during participation in this project. If signs of minor stress are apparent, the session will be discontinued immediately.

9. **Measures taken to reduce risk:** The investigators will be well trained in administering the surveys and will be vigilant to potential signs of risk/distress. Participants’ data sheets will be coded by number to preserve complete anonymity.

10. **Right to Refuse:** Participation in this project is entirely voluntary. I can withdraw my consent at any time and have the results of the participation returned to me, removed from the experimental records, or destroyed.

11. **Privacy:** All response forms will be kept in a secure location housed within a limited access, locked research room. Results of the study may be published; however, we will keep your name and other identifying information private. Your identity will remain confidential unless law requires disclosure.

12. **Financial Information:** There is no cost for participation in the study, nor is there any compensation to faculty or staff for participation. A modest honorarium will be provided to students who participate in this study.
13. **Withdrawal/Removal:** There are no consequences of withdrawing from the project. I may discontinue my participation at any time by informing the investigator. I will not be removed from the study without my consent.

14. **Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA):** Records that you give us permission to keep, and that identify you, will be kept confidential as required by law. Federal Privacy Regulations provide safeguards for privacy, security, and authorized access. Except when required by law, you will not be identified by name, social security number, address, telephone number, or any other direct personal identifier in screening records disclosed outside of Louisiana State University (LSU) and kept in study archives.

The study has been discussed with me and all my questions have been answered. I may direct additional questions regarding study specifics to Dr. Katie Cherry, LSU Department of Psychology (225) 578-4099. If I have questions about subjects' rights or other concerns, I can contact Dr. Dennis Landin, Chairman, LSU Institutional Review Board, (225) 578-8692. I agree to participate in the study described above and acknowledge that I have been given a copy of the consent form.

_______________________________________________________________________
Signature of Participant __________________________ Date __________________________

_______________________________________________________________________
Signature of Parent or Legal Guardian (if under age 18) __________________________ Date __________________________

_______________________________________________________________________
Signature of Investigator __________________________ Date __________________________

**For Subjects Unable to Read**
The study subject has indicated to me that he/she is unable to read. I certify that I have read this consent form to the subject and explained that by completing the signature line above, the subject has agreed to participate.

_______________________________________________________________________
Signature of Reader __________________________ Date __________________________

**2019 Provision - Future Research Usage**
Your information collected as part of this research project, even if identifiers are removed, may be used or distributed for future research.

Yes, I give permission: __________________________________________________________
Signature of Participant __________________________ Date __________________________

No, I do not give permission: __________________________________________________
Signature of Participant __________________________ Date __________________________

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VITA

Marla Erwin, a native of Indiana, first attended Louisiana State University as a dual enrolled high school student. She received her bachelor’s degree from Louisiana State University in 2003 with dual majors in Religious Studies and Women’s and Gender Studies. In 2004, she received her Master’s Degree in Liberal Arts degree from Louisiana State University with concentrations in Women’s and Gender Studies and Higher Education Administration. She received a Master’s Degree in Gerontology with a concentration in Aging Research from the University of Louisiana at Monroe in 2005.

She anticipates completing degree requirements for her doctoral program in Higher Education Leadership and Research with minors in Psychology and in Women’s and Gender Studies by December of 2019. She plans to continue teaching undergraduate psychology courses at River Parishes Community College and Louisiana State University where she has taught for the past 14 years.